

The Iniquity of Oblivion

By Kenneth Grahame

A MAN I know is fond of asking the irritating question—and in putting it he regards neither age nor sex, neither ancient friendship nor the rawest nodding acquaintance—“Did you ever forget an invitation to dinner?”

Of course the denial is prompt, passionate, and invariable. There are few crimes of which one would not rather be accused than this. He who cannot summon up the faintest blush at the recollection of having once said “Season,” when no money had passed between him and the Railway Company whose guest he was for the moment—of having under-stated his income for purposes of taxation—or of having told his wife he was going to church, and then furtively picked up a fishing-rod as he passed through the hall—will colour angrily at the most innocent suggestion of a single possible lapse of memory regarding an invitation to dinner. But, none the less, every one finds it a little difficult to meet the natural rejoinder: “How do you know?”

Indeed, no other reply but painful silence is possible. To say, “Because I do,” is natural enough, and frequently quite conclusive of further argument; still, it can hardly be called a reasoned refutation. The fact is, you *don't* know, and you cannot know. Your conviction that you do is based, first, on some sort of idea
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that you are bound to recollect, sooner or later, anything that you may have forgotten : an argument that only requires to be stated to display its fallacy ; secondly, on a vague belief that a defection of so flagrant a character must inevitably be brought home to you by an incensed host or hostess—a theory that makes no allowance for the blissful sense of injury and offended pride, the joy of brooding over a wrong, which is one of the chief pleasures left to humanity. No : one doesn't know, and one can't know : and the past career of the most self-satisfied of us is doubtless littered with the débris of forgotten invitations.

Of course invitations, being but a small part of life, and not—as some would imply by their practice—its chief end, must be taken to stand here for much besides. One has only to think of the appalling amount of book-lore one has “crammed” in days gone by, and of the pitiful fragments that survive, to realise that facts, deeds, achievements, experiences numberless, may just as well have been hurried along the dusty track to oblivion. And once it has been fairly brought home to us that we have entirely forgotten any one thing—why, the gate is open. It is clear we may just as easily have forgotten hundreds.

This lamentable position of things was specially forced upon me, some time ago, by a certain persistent dream that used to wing its way to my bedside, not once or twice, but coming a dozen times, and always (I felt sure at the time) from out the Ivory Portal. First, there would be a sense of snugness, of cushioned comfort, of home-coming. Next, a gradual awakening to consciousness in a certain little room, very dear and familiar, sequestered in some corner of the more populous and roaring part of London : solitary, the world walled out, but full of a brooding sense of peace and of possession. At times I would make my way there, unerringly, through the wet and windy streets, climb the
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well-known staircase, open the ever-welcoming door. More often I was there already, ensconced in the most comfortable chair in the world, the lamp lit, the fire glowing ruddily. But always the same feeling of a home-coming, of the world shut out, of the ideal encasement. On the shelves were a few books—a very few—but just the editions I had sighed for, the editions which refuse to turn up, or which poverty glowers at on alien shelves. On the walls were a print or two, a woodcut, an etching—not many. Old loves, all of them, apparitions that had flashed across the field of view in sale-rooms and vanished again in a blaze of three figures; but never possessed—until now. All was modest—O, so very modest! But all was my very own, and, what was more, everything in that room was exactly right.

After three or four visits, the uncanniness of the repetition set me thinking. Could it possibly be, that this was no dream at all? Had this chamber, perhaps, a real existence, and was I all the time leading, somewhere, another life—a life within a life—a life that I constantly forgot, within the life that I happened to remember? I tried my best to bring the thing to absolute proof. First, there was that frequent sense of extreme physical weariness with which I was wont to confront the inevitable up-rising of the morning—might not that afford a clue? Alas, no: I traced my mornings back, far behind the beginnings of the dream. I could not remember a day, since those rare white ones at school when it was a whole holiday, and summer was boon and young, when I had faced the problem of getting up with anything but a full sense of disgust. Next I thought, I will consult my accounts. Rooms must be paid for in London, however modest they may be; and the blessed figures can't lie. Then I recollected that I did not keep any accounts—never *had* kept any accounts—never intended to keep any beastly accounts—and, on the whole, I confess

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I was rather glad. Statistics would have been a mean prosaic way of plucking out the heart of this mystery. My only chance seemed to lie in coming across the place by accident. Then perhaps the extinguished torch would re-ignite, the darkened garret of memory would be re-illuminated, and it would be in my power at last to handle those rare editions, not capriciously as now, but at any hour I pleased. So I haunted Gray's Inn, Staple Inn, Clifford's Inn ; hung about by-streets in Bloomsbury, even backwaters in Chelsea ; but all to no result. It waits, that sequestered chamber, it waits for the serene moment when the brain is in just the apt condition, and ready to switch on the other memory even as one switches on the electric light with a turn of the wrist. Fantasy ? well—perhaps. But the worst of it is, one never can feel quite sure. Only a dream, of course. And yet—the enchanting possibility !

And this possibility, which (one feels convinced) the wilful brain could make reality in a moment if it were only in the right humour, might be easily brought about by some accidental physical cause, some touch, scent, sound, gifted with the magic power of recall. Could my fingers but pass over the smooth surface of those oak balustrades so familiar to me, in a trice I would stand at the enchanted door. Could I even see in some casual shop-window one of those prints my other existence hoards so safe and sure—but that is unlikely indeed. Those prints of the dim land of dreams, “they never are sold in the merchant's mart !” Still, if one were only to turn up, in twopenny box or dusty portfolio, down in Southwark, off the roaring Strand, or somewhere along the quaint unclassified Brompton Road, in a flash the darkness would be day, the crooked would be made straight, and no policeman would be called upon to point out the joyous way.

If I have special faith in this sort of divining-rod, it is because of a certain strange case I once encountered and never quite elucidated. There was a certain man, respectable enough in every particular; wore drab spats all the year round, lived in a suburb, and did daily business on the "Baltic." When the weather was fine, and a halcyon calm brooded o'er the surface of the Baltic, instead of taking his suburban train at Cannon Street, he used to walk as far as Charing Cross: and before departing, if time allowed, he would turn into the National Gallery. Of a catholic mind, for he had never strayed down the tortuous byways of Art, he only went in to be amused, and was prepared to take his entertainment from all schools alike, without any of the narrow preferences of the cultured. From the very first, however, the Early Tuscans gripped him with a strange fascination, so that he rarely penetrated any further. What it was precisely that so detained him could never be ascertained. The man was not apt in the expression of subtle emotion, and never succeeded in defining the strong "possession"—for such it seemed to be—by which he was caught and held. The next phase in the case was, that he took to disappearing. He disappeared literally and absolutely—sometimes for a few days, sometimes for a fortnight or more; and on his return could tell nothing, explain nothing. Indeed, he did not seem to be really conscious of any absence. It was noted in time that his disappearances always coincided with his visits to the National Gallery. Thither he could be tracked; there all trace of him would cease. His female relations—an unimaginative, uneducated crew—surmised the unkindest things in their narrow way. Still, even they found it difficult to fling a stone at the Early Tuscans. For myself, I like to think that there was some bit of another life hidden away in him—some tranced memory of another far-away existence on Apennine slopes
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—which some quality in these pictures, and in these alone, had power to evoke. And I love to think that, transformed by this magic touch back into the other man of him, he passed, dream-possessed, forth from the portico, through Trafalgar Square, and into Charing Cross Station. That there, oblivious of all suburbs, he purchased one of those little books of coupons so much more romantic than your vulgar inland slip of pasteboard, and in due course sped Southwards—irresistibly drawn,—took the Alps in a series of whorls, burrowings, and breathless flights o'er torrent and fall—till he basked at last, still speeding South, in the full sunlight that steeps the Lombard plain. Arrived in time, where his destiny (which was also his past) awaited him, I could see him, avoiding clamour of piazza, shunning prim airlessness of Galleria and Accademia, climbing the white road to where, in some little village or red-tiled convent, lurked the creation, madonna or saint, that held the other end of the subtle thread. The boy-lover, had he been, of this prim-tressed model? Or the St. George or homely St. Roch who guarded her? Or himself the very painter? Whatever the bond, here I could imagine him to linger, steeping his soul in the picture and in the surroundings so native both to it and to the man whose life for a brief minute he lived again, till such time as that sullen devil within him—the later memory of the man he also was—began to stir drowsily and to urge him homewards, even as the other had urged him out. Once back, old sights and sounds would develop the later man into full being and consciousness, and as before he would tread the floor of the Baltic, while oblivion swallowed the Tuscan existence—until the next time!

These instances, it is true, are but “sports” in oblivion-lore. But, putting aside such puzzle-fragments of memory, it is impossible not to realise, in sad seriousness, that of all our recollection
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has once held, by far the larger part must be by this time in the realm of the forgot; and that every day some fresh delightful little entity pales, sickens, and passes over to the majority. Sir Thomas Browne has quaintly written concerning the first days of the young world, "when the living might exceed the dead, and to depart this world could not be properly said, to go unto the greater number"; but in these days of crowded thought, of the mind cultured and sensitised to receive such a swarm of impressions, no memory that sighs its life out but joins a host far exceeding what it leaves behind. 'Tis but a scanty wallet that each of us carries at his back. Few, indeed, and of a sorry mintage, the thin coins that jingle therein. Our gold, lightly won, has been as lightly scattered, along waysides left far behind. Oblivion, slowly but surely stalking us, gathers it with a full arm, and on the floor of his vast treasure-house stacks it in shining piles.

And if it is the larger part that has passed from us, why not also the better part? Indeed, logic almost requires it; for to select and eliminate, to hold fast and let go at will, is not given to us. As we jog along life's highroad, the knowledge of this inability dogs each conscious enjoyment, till with every pleasant experience comes also the annoying reflection, that it is a sheer toss-up whether this is going to be a gain, a solid profit to carry along with us, or fairy gold that shall turn to dust and nothingness in a few short mornings at best. As we realise our helplessness in the matter, we are almost ready to stamp and to swear. Will no one discover the chemical which shall fix the fleeting hue? That other recollection, now—that humiliating, that disgusting experience of ten years ago—*that* is safe enough, permanent, indestructible, warranted not to fade. If in this rag-fair we were only allowed to exchange and barter, to pick and choose! Oblivion, looking on, smiles grimly. It is he that shall select,
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not we ; our part is but to look on helplessly, while—though he may condescend to leave us a pearl or two—the bulk of our jewels is swept into his pocket.

One hope alone remains to us, by way of consolation. These memories whose passing we lament, they are torpid only, not dead. They lie in a charmed sleep, whence a chance may awaken them, a touch make the dry bones live ; though at present we know not the waking spell. Like Arthur, they have not perished, but only passed, and like him they may come again from the Avalon where they slumber. The chance is small, indeed. But the Merlin who controls these particular brain-cells, fitful and capricious though he be, after the manner of magicians, has powers to which we dare not assign limits. At any moment the stop may be pulled out, the switch pressed, the key turned, the Princess kissed. Then shall the spell-bound spring to life, the floodgates rise, the baked arid canals gleam with the silver tide ; and once more we shall be fulfilled of the old joys, the old thrills, the old tears and laughter.

Better still—perhaps best of all—as those joyous old memories, hale and fresh once more, troop out of the catacombs into the light, these insistent ones of the present, this sullen host that beleaguers us day and night with such threatening obsession, may vanish, may pass, may flee away utterly, gone in their turn to lodge with Oblivion—and a good riddance !