SOME MUSINGS OF AN IDLE MAN.

BY COLONEL R. H. FIRTH.

I write these notes in the congenial surroundings of a wood in France,¹ where all around I see daffodils, primroses, anemones, violets and all the characteristics of spring. The air seems alive with the music of Nature's overture, preluding the great opera and spectacle of summer. All about is Nature's peace, and yet the intermittent shriek-like moan of a shell, the vicious barking of an adjacent battery and the more distant staccato notes of a machine gun bring home the thought and realization that not far away there is no peace but only evidence of man's insensate cruelty to man with all its associated misery and suffering, made yet so wonderful by man's own silent heroism. Of what that silent heroism is, my morning's round of advanced dressing stations and field ambulances has given me only too true a picture; but here in the late afternoon I want to forget and for awhile do forget, lulling myself into a false belief that things are as they ought to be.

It is difficult to suppress serious and sad thought, but as I look around me it is only too obvious that Nature is not at all interested in man's grief. She seems to be indifferent, but yet she is not callous, for, even here, I am conscious of a welcome indicative that, to those who seek her, Nature is willing to extend the hand of fellowship. The indifference of Nature to our woe is largely due to the fact that she is too busy, and the combination of the evidence of her toil and beauty holds attention and entrances. As I sit here I note poplars with catkins in full bloom all powdered with roan, alders tinted with a pale and duller red, and hazel bushes at a distance all dusted with a greenish yellow, while peeping out from some moss-covered

¹ Near Gorre. April, 1917.
stones three blooms of gentian giint as little stars, whose blue seems to be an expression of their eager but somewhat cramped life. But what appeals to me is the multiplicity of this eager life, suggesting a choir of clear voices singing together a song that no one had taught them.

With idle thoughtless whim, I pluck a bud from a tree branch within reach. A glance upward shows it to be from a chestnut tree. The bud-case within my hand reveals the leaves and flower buds of the horse-chestnut packed and folded with a precision beyond the ability of the most human handicraft. The more I look at it, the stronger appears the difference between any human craftsmanship and the natural growth of the bud. I do not merely feel that the fashioning of the leaves, the soft down in which they are compressed, and the sticky scales which enclose them are beyond the skill of the most deft human hand, but I know that no human hand can make a bud which expands day by day into the fuller bloom. Not only is it a matter of man’s inability to make or originate such a living thing but also his inability for dealing with it. The tree above me indicates that Nature must have taken thirty years to raise it from nut to seedling and then on to its present maturity. True, the same stream of life is in man, but in dealing with human affairs we forget that the mature character which we desire can only be obtained by cultivating it fitly from the beginning. We cannot shape a living thing to our liking by any summary methods of craftsmanship such as we apply to a lock or boot. Unless the desired character is already in man and been developed by a long train of circumstances it is as hopeless to expect it to burst its wrappings at a liberating touch as it is to expect the production of the bud in my hand apart from the tree from which I plucked it. In both cases, the imitation would be a thing without life.

Again, as I sit face to face with the serene and secluded beauty of the place the question crops up, not so much why it should exist as why I or mankind exist. As contrasted with the perfections of the flowers, the grasses and the trees around me, the deficiencies of our own unsatisfied nature are emphasized. The superiority of human life over that of the flowers, trees and grasses lies assuredly in no achieved perfection but in the possession of a will to act and a moral consciousness which makes perfection inaccessible and disaster an ever-present contingency. By our mental process, I and other men are freed largely from an obedience to a settled order of times and seasons such as controls the natural world. It is this partial emancipation from natural law which distinguishes us from the other animals and makes us human. But this freedom from natural restrictions has its penalty and that penalty is our capacity for excess. The very sounds in my ears of not-far-distant war are an eloquent reminder of how men perish of their own excess. Because our life is better and fuller than that of the trees, flowers and grasses it can become unspeakably worse. The serene and soulless world is incapable of the degradation to which the possession of an intellect and will can lead man, if the dictates of morality
become obscured: and the very flowers, trees and grasses around me warn us to take care lest the qualities by which we excel in Nature become its greatest profanation. On this matter, I recall the words of Wordsworth and am tempted to say:

"One impulse from the vernal wood
Can teach us more of man,
Of moral evil and of good,
Than all the sages can."

II.

When on recent leave, I found time one day hanging somewhat heavily, so took a stroll along the more crowded thoroughfares of London. While doing so, it occurred to me to note the complexions of passers by. Excluding those of obviously foreign origin, I soon noted what a small proportion of fair complexioned people passed me. I use the term "fair" as meaning flaxen or yellow hair with grey, green or blue eyes. My wanderings took me through the western half of Oxford Street, Bond Street, Piccadilly, the Strand, Fleet Street, through the City and back by Moorgate Street, Newgate Street, Holborn and the eastern half of Oxford Street. The conclusion I reached was, that rather more than one-third of the persons I met in those thoroughfares had black or nearly black hair, one half had dark brown hair and about one-seventh light brown. The percentage of really fair-complexioned people I found to be comparatively small. The results as noted gave cause for thought, as we still assume that our natural complexion is fair. So impressed was I with the observed facts, that a few days later I devoted a week-end to making corresponding observations in portions of Yorkshire. While the totals observed in that rural area were less, a very definite increase in the proportion of people who could be classed "fair" was noted.

Now the question arises, what do the facts indicate? The answer lies in the appreciation of another fact, and that is that a like increase of dark complexioned people is observable everywhere. Central Europe, now occupied mostly by short-headed, dark-haired people, was once the home of a pure long-headed, tall and fair stock. I write without reference to exact literature, but I believe the last figures for the whole German army gave 30 per cent. blonde conscripts, while in Prussia proper the blondes were about 70 per cent. In Sweden and Norway, the fair type constitutes 76 per cent. But in each of these countries the proportion of "fair" is falling. The well-marked long-head is characteristic of the early Teuton stock to which our forefathers belonged. We still claim the lineage but with a diminishing right. Correlative with the long skull are tall stature, yellow or flaxen hair and grey or blue eyes. The Norwegians and Swedes come nearest to this type in these days. By a long-head is meant that type of skull which anthropologists call dolichocephalic: that is, its length
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exceeds the breadth by a quarter or so. A short-headed individual means a person known as a brachycephalic, or in whom the length of skull exceeds the breadth by only a fifth or an eighth.

If history be any guide, we may infer that restless energy is the special attribute of the dolichocephalic races. Certainly, the record of the Scandinavian nations supports the view that they were adventurous. Above all, the long-headed or dolichocephalic is a man of action and ideas, restless, fond of his home but easily tempted to leave it, greedy but Thoughtless, better qualified to gain than to hold property, impatient of regular work, kind and good tempered, but subject to fits of ferocity. In truth, the long-headed or blonde race has been the disruptive element in European history, if not elsewhere. There is much to suggest that it came into the world late, possibly representing a late stage of evolution, and destined to break up or reform the established order of things when it grew powerful enough. On the other hand, the short-headed peoples are abhorrent of change. Laborious, economical, submissive, temperate, they are content with little and save upon it. Distrustful by nature, they do not move willingly. War has no charm for them, though they do not lack courage. Adventure would seem to repel them as a race-stock, preferring to till their fields, thrive and multiply.

Unless some unrecognized fallacy underlies these thoughts, complexion is a mark of race and a visible token of character. Nearly all the conquering and colonizing nations have been fair. The Assyrians seem to have been the one exception or, at least, we have no definite record that they were fair. The Athenians and Macedonians were certainly fair. There is no dark hero to be found in the “Iliad,” and all the women and goddesses of Homer were fair. The early Romans were fair and tall, though dark and small in Julius Caesar’s day. Yet Caesar himself was fair and Cato red-headed. Persians, Medes, Greeks, Gauls, Teutons, Slavs, Norsemen, Venetians, British and the Berbers, who conquered Spain, were all fair complexioned. In each and every case, as the times settled down a darker, short-headed race pushed to the front and the restless energy of the fair long-headed type ceased to be formidable. I have heard it said that we ourselves conquered India while we were fair but that we are doing our best to lose it as we darken. Absit omen, but one’s musings lead to the thought that the gradual change in our national complexion denotes a reconquest of our islands; and that after the incursions of the Norsemen, Saxons, Danes and fair Normans, the ancient Briton is coming to his own again.

There is ever a danger in generalizations, but it is only too apparent that the conditions of modern life do not favour the roving adventurous spirit. Its day is past, and with its departure its physical type of man is going. Men so endowed obey their instinct unconsciously as evidenced by the deeds and initiative of our race in this war. But it comes to this, that the small, dark, short-headed race is better fitted for industrialism
which is the stamp and object of our civilization. It is for this reason that
we find our old-time national type growing scarcer in the streets, less so in
the country lanes or fields, but doubtless to become more scarce there later
on. Certainly many factors are at work in bringing about this change of
complexion. More than one observer has remarked how town life is
obnoxious to persons of the fair complexion. When conditions are favour­
able, the blondes seem nearly to hold their own. It is a pity that we have
not more exact statistical facts as to complexities, supported by reliable
cranial measurements. Perhaps some day they will be forthcoming, and
we shall then know how far the old fair dolichocephalic survives in our
midst. If physiognomies can be trusted the type is rapidly disappearing,
but what will that matter so long as the bold adventurous spirit remains?
The theme is well worth developing on a basis of exact data and perhaps
these musings of an idle man may stimulate some industrious man to
collate the facts, if only to show that these ideas of the idler were based on
a misconception.

III.

Have just finished reading two autobiographies, in neither of which
does the writer make any attempt to gloss over or hide his mistakes or the
follies of earlier days. The books have been amusing reading, but raise the
thought, how much the world prefers pasts to presents, and how few
people would care to read books concerning what So and So is and what he
hopes to become. Such volumes would be merely books of good intentions
and no one cares about good intentions, especially as a certain road is said
to be paved with them. It has often occurred to me, what funny books
they would be if we kept diaries, on one side of which we entered what we
intended to do and upon the other what we actually did. Most of us in our
youth have set out to remove mountains and, as we look back on our lives,
we realize only too clearly that the sum total of our efforts has been to kick
over a molehill. Very few of us can go straight along the road which we
feel our lives ought to follow; pity, love, hatred, health or the influence of
others have so often turned us from our intentions. It would appear as if
our good intentions go without reward and our bad intentions unpunished.
It seems a mystery, and very suggestive of a scheme wherein the weak
suffer for the strong, the good for the bad and those of good intentions for
those who never had any at all.

But what of the past, be it our own or that of those who write auto­biographies? The cynic will say that the wise will keep the past to them­selves, unless an honest penny can be made by revealing it to a curious
world. The well-advised will not be tempted to earn that so-called honest
penny. The world consists of those who have been and those who have
not been found out, and there is always an unexpressed sympathy in the
hearts of the latter for the former and less fortunate. It suffices that we
are what we are, and presumably fortified by the hope to be what we have
always desired to become; so, let us take ourselves as we wish to be taken, and take others as we wish they would take us. It is a false philosophy to assume that the foolishness of yesterday or the evil we have thought or done can be any help either for the present or the future, so far as it affects others. As affecting ourselves, any merit associated with such past pecadilloes can only accrue by virtue of our present real sorrow and shame as to them. It goes too far to say that if a man never fall be can never rise; but it is true that the person whose temperament and character never lead him into temptation will never reach any great heights; he may not fall but he certainly will not rise, which means that he who has lived upon one dead-level can rarely have learnt a real lesson from life. In many cases, it is a lack of inclination or opportunity alone which separates the virtuous from the wicked.

Very few of us have gone through life without making mistakes, but having made mistakes we understand all the better the mistakes of others and so more readily forgive them. If a man fails of his best, the fault and the punishment are his alone. As I review my past years, I regret little that I have done. Certainly, I regret some things which I have done, but through regret, shame and sorrow we purge our hearts of much dross. Perhaps, in these events is born the soul's awakening.

"But, whatever our faults, the purging
Has cleansed us and purified;
With heart and with brain we must build again
Things of proof that shall abide."

"Each soul that strips it of one evil thing
Lifts all the world towards God's good purposing."

IV.

Few of us who have served in France in the present war can have failed to be impressed by the high state to which agriculture has been raised in that country, and also to be impressed by the marvellous industry of the French peasantry. Often riding over the fields of the much maligned Low Countries, has it occurred to me how much agriculture is an art which appeals to the intellect as well as to the heart. A moment's reflection reminds one that the tilling of the fields has a traditional association with men's brains as well as with their hands, and those of us who can remember reading the Georgics must readily admit that, even from before the time of Virgil, agriculture has commanded the respect of the learned as well as of the unlettered. And why? Because the forces of Nature require all the wit of man to mould them to his own advantage, and on this simple fact the connexion between brains and mother earth is indisputable.

This thought acquires an additional interest now, for our daily paper is
full of allotment culture and other schemes to reinforce homegrown food. One wonders whether the awakening interest of the people at home in the oldest of the arts will serve to deepen and emphasize the happy union of brains and land, and that the educated classes may yet find in agriculture an Alma Mater which now they but little realize. There is nothing revolutionary in the thought, for the history of agriculture is full of instances of the keenness and delight which some intellectuals have found in husbandry, not merely as a refuge from the cares of town, but health, peace and means of livelihood.

The sceptic may quote the old rhyme, "He who by the plough would thrive, himself must hold the plough or drive," and argue that it is not a calling for amateurs. But is the objection valid? One is tempted to say, no, and that, like converts to a new religion, enthusiastic amateurs have more zeal and more application; in short, have fewer prejudices to surmount and more enthusiasm for the calling than those who have been brought up to it from infancy. Zeal and application are more than a set off against a want of detailed knowledge, and the value of the study of the principles which underlie farming or agriculture was recognized by educated men long before the days of agricultural colleges. Probably there exists no art of any magnitude, save agriculture, in which so much empirical and localized opinion, haphazard conclusion and superstitious reverence for tradition or precedent gains currency and secures a following. Freedom from prejudice is not the least asset which education brings and to be free from it all in farming is to start fair.

The State now recognizes the husbandman so lavishly that the game is worth trying. True, agriculture is the most variable and fortuitous of the arts, but she is a kindly mother to the children who trust her, and many of the war-shattered may find peace in her bosom. One cannot but wonder if and hope that the lesson may be taken to heart.

V.

The casual remark by a friend that "So-and-So must be a rich man," prompted the questioning thought "Why?" To say that a man is rich implies of course the fact that he is effectively wealthy. It so happens that the person of whom we were talking is a man credited with considerable financial resources, but one who does not spend much money and, owing to this failure on his part to exchange his wealth for something else, is regarded as being doubtfully rich by some of his acquaintances. The question arises, who is a rich man? A variety of definitions suggest themselves. Thus, a frivolous friend says a rich man is one who cannot enter the kingdom of heaven, or another may say he is a man who has to pay supertax. Perhaps a better and more obvious answer is, "He that has the means to get what he wants without thought or worry." If this be correct, presuming that So-and-So gets all he wants, then he may be
accounted to be a rich man in spite of his not spending all or the greater part of his income. Putting myself in the position of a man who has great financial resources, I am confronted with the possible difficulty that I may not know what I want. That is precisely the trouble which must and doubtless does worry many who are deemed rich and who have wealth. Again there are men, well endowed with money, who seek and desire power or patronage. It is questionable whether they can attain or exercise it by money alone; the essential of personality may be lacking and if so then such men may buy power but someone else will use it. This brings us up against the basic fact that, in spite of great financial resources, a man is more often than not baulked in the employment of them simply because he cannot want genuinely as much as he has the means to buy. Or, if he does genuinely desire or want so much, his conscience will not allow him to keep it. If we think a moment, we realize that the things which the majority of sane people want are not, in the Croesus-sense, dear. I have an uxorious relative who would at once say that children are the only things sane people want, and certainly they are not dear in the millionaire sense. Hence, the man with great financial resources cannot necessarily make the full use of those resources and the mere possession of money does not make a man really a rich man.

I remember well being told as a boy that the only way to get rich was to earn a shilling and to spend but elevenpence. To me that was a policy of perfection and, in the light of present reflections, I can see that had I displayed such thrifty habits there might have come a day when if I earned more than a certain number of shillings I should not be able effectively perhaps to spend elevenpence out of each of those shillings. It was very good advice but presented a serious check on ambitions and no negligible premium upon making me a man of small ideas and restricted outlook. Doubtless there are many who have gone through their best years actuated by such a policy. But, what has been their gain? Something saved against a rainy day perhaps, but, since they neither think rich nor act rich, we cannot call them rich. Not only that, they have not the merit of being overtly poor. The best that can be said of them is, they are or have been cautious, self-denying and probably covertly envious. Therefore, these are not they who are rich and we must look for the rich man elsewhere.

The question is, where are we to find him? Perhaps near at home. It certainly is not a fellow messmate whom I know to have a good wife, a moderate fortune, a good conscience, but unfortunately a bad digestion and a pessimistic outlook on life which makes him see so much vanity and weakness in all his fellow-creatures that he believes neither in them nor in himself. I often look at him across the table and say to myself, “poor beggar,” and that about sums it up; he is not rich but really poor. I contrast him often with myself, by kindly Providence endowed with what he has lacked, a good digestion and a confident belief in myself and in the world. Dare I say, “Eureka”? for, if so, then surely it is a princely find
and the very basis of riches. To a great extent, yes, but not wholly so, because a mere mental outlook on the world will not in itself constitute riches. Many a man owns a good picture, but, unless he appreciate it, he does not possess it. So, as in regard to other and greater things, riches may give ownership, but without knowledge, experience and sympathy there is no real possession. The fact is no one can possess the whole world, but all can possess some one phase or aspect of it, and it is to those who have money and the leisure to use it that is given the ability to possess the world sympathetically and comprehendingly at many parts or in many phases. The danger is lest we forget that money can be used for good and useful purposes, and that too often the man who is greedy for money does not want to use it for such purposes. His greed has become abstract and is a greed for a mere symbol and forgetful of what the symbol implies. The conclusion, therefore, is that the mere possession of money, without a corresponding ability to appreciate and enjoy what that money can buy, does not make a man truly rich, and it follows from this that the man who devotes all his time to getting money has often no time left for getting rich.

VI.

With somewhat mixed feelings, I have just thrown down the daily paper. Its dominant theme was that industry, finance and the public services demand the leadership of the young. To me, as a man nearer 60 than 50, such a view suggests certain reflections. Doubtless, the cannibalistic propensities of modern industrial life have given rise in some quarters to the belief that the world's progress is dependent upon the number of funerals conducted for those who sit in high places. The explanation is that modern industry wears out brains in the office as speedily as it does hands in the workshops. The exigencies of the process hurry much good metal to the slag dump and our competition methods demand young men for the reckless driving. The same arguments or reasons operate in the public services, notably in the Army and the Navy, especially under conditions of modern war.

Inquiry into the question of "meridian" in the sphere of war gives 31 as the average age of such great commanders as Xenophon, Hannibal, Scipio, Pompey, Cesar, Drake, Turenne, Blake, Eugene, Rodney, Columbus, Nelson, Napoleon and Wellington. But these are types of men seldom available after long years of peace, during which the profession of arms fails to attract ambitious young men with habits of industry. Hence, when a great war comes "out of the blue," we find the higher ranks filled by men representative of a leisured class, few of whom are fit to take up exhausting strenuous work. It follows that the first phases of such a war must be carried on by them, but gradually they cannot stand the pace, and are more profitably replaced by brilliant men of half their age. On the other hand, in literature and art some of the finest work has
been done by the old as by the young men. Take William de Morgan. Throughout a busy life other interests engaged his powers, but at 65 he began to turn out a marvellous series of books, starting with "Joseph Vance" and ending with "Ghost meets Ghost," written when he was well in the seventies. Similarly, Sidney Cooper reached the mature age of 99, and yet in our galleries are to be seen his wonderful paintings of sheep, done when he was 83. Likewise, the celebrated altar-piece picture, "SS. Jerome, Christopher, and Augustine" in a beautiful mountain landscape by Giovanni Bellini, and destroyed by the Austrians with the church of San Crisostomo in an air raid over Venice, was painted by the artist in 1513 when he was in his eighty-fifth year. But we need to be cautious how far we carry our generalizations. One is tempted to admit that industrially one demands the lash, but the forces of social progress require light and gentle hands upon the reins. As we pass from our national immersion in the floods of industrialism or war activities to a wider vision of administrative or of social aims and ideals, we recognize that knowledge, character and experience have priority over raw strength and the purely acquisitive powers.

I am reminded here of a passage I read not long ago in Morley's Life of Gladstone. In the midst of the late Irish crisis, some one asked the old statesman whether he did not find it hard to give up the years which should be devoted to rest and leisure to such ardent service of his country. The reply was, "My vision is clearer and more inspiring than ever before. The burning enthusiasms of youth cannot be compared with the calm assurance which I now feel that the right must eventually triumph. It would be quite impossible for me to deny myself the ineffable joy of a part of the conflict." To me, that is a very remarkable and suggestive sentiment and must be illustrative of the view that old age should bring to every one something more than mere leisure or peace of mind. It must be productive of actual results or peace will not be possible to a vital personality. The words of Browning seem apt:

"Grow old along with me
The best is yet to be,
The last of life, for which the first was made;
Our times are in His hand
Who saith, "A whole I planned,
Youth shows but half." "Trust God, see all nor be afraid."

Again, while the experienced among us can inspire, they cannot find new ways, yet who will deny to each ancient that the future always looms above the past? The heart-beats of the old and experienced are very present facts and factors in the world's evolution toward better things. Therein is the fundamental secret of a life worth living after one has been in the world for over fifty years; everything done in the past multiplies the effectiveness of each renewed effort. I have no doubt but that between
20 and 40 a man accumulates more goods and knowledge than he will acquire between 50 and 70, but when it comes to wielding a positive influence in the largest things, the later period is easily pre-eminent. In the heyday of youth we cannot help but waste a great deal of time experimenting. We try ten ways before we hit on the right road, and the world doubts us more than we doubt ourselves. Another factor making for the effectiveness of the older men is the great load of luggage which time has caused them to discard. The world of thirty is naturally the home and added to it that restricted sphere of effort which the support of home involves. It is the time for economic things, not philosophic and social problems. A man at 30 can rarely be really sure of anything beyond the fact that he is alive and at work. I am inclined to think that the experience of the thirties is not even comprehended in the fullest sense until after 50.

At forty one fights with men of forty, but at sixty one walks again with the lad of fifteen. This is no trait of senility but only the wisdom of sixty asserting its knowledge that the most satisfying of present experiences is companionship unharried, and free from the need to grind at the expense of the eternal verities. While age can fight as hard as youth, it can also enjoy more keenly the victories long deferred. It can appreciate the chances of a cause and feel even more deeply than those whose social philosophies must necessarily be untried of experiences. Therefore, though the times demand more of our young men, it is difficult to admit that the sphere of utility of the old men is removed. There is room for both, for the social consciousness expresses itself more completely through minds mellowed and tempered by long service, and the social hope anchors its grappling irons most seriously in hearts and minds tried by long service to ideals. Youth may be absorbed by and be better suited to the striving, but the heart of age appraises better the value of the results. The drama of life is too complex and its staging is too vast for the principal parts of its comedies and tragedies to be played by only one group of actors. Let us never forget that even though history is made by men, yet men are the products of history and experience.

VII.

Circumstances permit me to enjoy a short stay in Wiltshire and, in leisure hours, the primitive man within me asserts himself by compelling me to wander over the chalk hills and downs so characteristic of the district. With comforting pipe and lying in some sheltered spot, one can then forget all the arts and panoplies of man's war and contemplate the various phases of Nature's war as well as those of her peace. In truth, it all has a charm of its own. What fascinates me most is the wonderful great sea of green billowy hills, extending bare against the wide sky to the horizon, clothed with an elastic turf and, here and there, topped by a clump or grove of trees which is a sure and certain sign of more primitive times when the groves were God's first temples. It is no far-fetched simile, for I see before me now
a clump of trees most temple-like in form emphasized by a huge prehistoric earthwork, ring within ring, enclosing the grove on the space within.

As I pen these notes in the shade of such an hallowed grove on a hot and windless summer day, I see the air near the surface of a distant down appearing as a silvery mist wavering, dancing and producing an illusion of motion in all distant objects. Then, as I withdraw my eyes from the distance and look closer around me, the grove becomes as a small island of animal life, dumped down on the ocean-like smooth green waste, all vacant as the sea. It is the sight of the wild life all about which refreshes more than the leafy shade, for without this life the grove would indeed be a melancholy place. The ear catches the crooning sound of doves and in the higher trees some wood-pigeons have their nests. On a thorn bush near by sits a magpie. A little farther off, a quaint family of owls sit side by side on a dead branch in the hollow of a furze-bush. As I watch them, the sun shows up their colouring and their long black narrow ears stand erect in astonishment, while five pairs of round orange-yellow eyes stare back at me. In a clearing, strut and chatter a small cluster of starlings, finches and linnets busy in search of food. Suddenly, the whole air of calm is gone, for across the clearing swoops a sparrow-hawk. Possibly, there is no more fascinating spectacle in wild life than the chase of its quarry by a hawk. Such sights are not common in these days, as the gamekeeper has extirpated ruthlessly all the more interesting specimens of bird life, especially the predatory birds, from our woods. What can be more depressing than a keeper’s gibbet? where hang stoats, weasels, moles, crows and rooks, to say nothing of jays, magpies, kestrels and sparrow-hawks. Such a keeper’s gibbet is decorated after the manner of a modern woman with wings and carcases of birds and heads and tails of little beasts, making the wood in which it stands a travesty of what it was meant to be, that is, at once Nature’s playground, her school and example to man. Curse and degradation are written only too clearly on such places, and the pity of it all is that the writing is by the hand of man, Nature’s greatest child.

It is sad to reflect that the groves and woods which form bird refuges or small sanctuaries for wild life are getting rarer every day. A few years of kindly toleration or love of birds on the owner’s or tenant’s part would serve to people a grove or wood with great Nature’s happy commoners; but the newer fashion of sport has made those who had been and should now be the preservers of our country’s wild life, its systematic destroyers. Our noblest species of birds are going or gone, such as the raven and buzzard, the goshawk, kite, peregrine, kestrel and sparrow-hawk; and in their place remain only the finches, sparrows and semi-domestic poultry such as pheasants and partridges. The gradual extinction of the soaring birds is all the more regrettable as they were and should be still a feature in our landscape, making it seem vaster, the clouds higher and the sky so much farther away. Indeed, they were something more; for the sight of them and the sound of their shrill cries completed and intensified the whole effect of Nature’s wildness and majesty.
Alas! all seems changed now and it is rare to be able to find a wood, grove or copse truly peopled by normal bird life. To the natural man, the woods and their feathered inhabitants have another call. Like the ocean and the desert they revive a sense of which we are too often unconscious, but which is always with us; it is the sense which comes down to us from the time when the principal activities of our race were in woods and deserts. Given the right conditions it springs to renewed life and to me and many it is that which gives life's best savour, and not one to be replaced by the objects which civilized dwellers in towns have invented as substitutes. On the downs and in the groves we are able to forget the artificialities. In such moods and in these green shades, we are ready to echo every grateful word spoken of those who have preserved for us so much of Nature's freshness. Doubtless they did it for their own pleasure, but incidentally the good was for all. Requiescat in pace.

VIII.

At times, I have been twitted by my friends as being somewhat of a "solitary bird." Whether to take it as a reproof or not I do not know, but I do know this, that there come moments into the lives of all of us when we long to get away from everything and everybody, that is away from everyday life or the irritations of the trivial. When I was a boy, I knew an old man who was a shepherd. He was an oddity in his way but almost a chum of mine. He used to interest me not so much by what he told me as because of his taciturnity; he seemed ever to be watching, observing and thinking. I remember asking him once whether he was not dull. This he would not admit, and now, as I recall his grim rugged face and slow drawn speech, I realize that though he would tell me little about the truth of many things, yet he felt it. The clamouring of the crowd did not reach him, but thoughts came to him which were real individual thoughts, often quaintly expressed and in those days wasted on my unappreciative ear. Now, my view is that I am all the better for living the life of a shepherd occasionally, or even for a short time each day.

In claiming this privilege, I am actuated by no desire to be unsociable but rather to assert the principle that if you cannot get away from your surroundings from time to time, you can never get outside them, and so develop a sense of criticism. The desire for solitude is no modern symptom, for in ancient times there are said to have been as many anchorites in the deserts of Egypt as there were men in her cities, and in the Middle Ages we know that monachism was a fashionable cult. However, the craving for thoughts that bring light need not drive us into the waste places of the earth or to the hermit's cell. As against these devices for clearing up things in our minds, it may be affirmed that our capacity for thought is independent of environment, or that the only real necessity is a sufficient intensity of desire within ourselves. Given this
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desire, the prosaic difficulty arises for the greater number of us that the moment we try to get away from our conventional duties or responsibilities and show signs of restiveness our friends and relations begin to comment. Even so, we cannot get away from the fact that we all need to retreat occasionally, to seek some quiet sanctuary far from the turmoil of life and the agitating society of our fellows. Some quiet place where all the world is sexless is necessary to every man if he does not wish to decay of too much animation. It has often struck me that the majority of people live far too much in view. Emerson, I think, has said that no man or woman is really his or her true self except when they are alone; and this is true because most things in this world have become a pretenoe and the moment we find ourselves in the company of others, we instinctively assume a mask. True, the mask which we put on may be sometimes more beautiful than the mood which lies behind it or conversely it may be more unkindly, yet still a mask is always a mask, and frequently none too comfortable to wear. Hence arises our longing to get away by ourselves. Apart from this, to be ever with others involves a constant emission of ideas which results ultimately in a sense of staleness or void. If we are ever talking we can never be thinking, and if we never think our heads become empty. The chance to fill that emptiness or need to restock our minds comes best and often only when we get alone by ourselves and are able to think things out. This explains why people who are always with other people, and are never happy unless they are with others, are so frequently dull. These are the people who never realize that a too great propinquity, though it may breed love, will as surely kill it. Small talk may make an interesting letter but it is fatal to real reposeful friendship, and it is the small talk of our friends that lines the nest wherein so many “solitary birds” are hatched.

IX.

A small boy friend of mine celebrated recently his birthday. Among the gifts which that day brought him was a set of drawing instruments, and it happened that I devoted an hour to his amusement by helping him to draw geometric figures, for which he appeared to have a great liking. Circles and figures which included arcs or curves seemed especially fascinating to him. Whilst drawing these rings or circles for the child, certain thoughts presented themselves; true, they were thoughts which I could not develop to so young a lad, still they reasserted themselves in later hours of idleness and their theme takes the following form. Just as around every circle another can be drawn, so in nature and to our human efforts there is no end, for every end is a beginning and every action admits of being outdone. This fact, at once the inspiration and condemnation of every success, is the symbol of the unattainable, and finds its illustration in many phases of human life.

It has been well said that the key to every man is his thought, which
means that all his actions are orientated to or dominated by his soul or personal idea, and that he can only be changed by showing him an idea which commands his own. The personal idea is but the centre of a ring, and the whole life of man is a self-evolving circle expanding outwards to new and larger circles ad infinitum, and the extent to which this making of circle outside circle depends on the force of the individual soul. If we reflect a moment, we see that each apparent ultimate fact is but the first of a new series and that there is no circumference to us. A man makes his mark in his day but another arises and draws a circle outside the ring which but a short time before was regarded as the spherical limit. In this manner, the hero of to-day may be and often is the hot potato of to-morrow, and that the results and principles established or discovered and regarded in our time as the last word become in the next generation abridged into a phrase or merely quoted as one example of a bolder concept. From this it becomes apparent that we men but stage the world as prophecies of the next age, and that each one of us is not a workman in the world, but rather a suggestion of what he should be. It is like some mysterious ladder of which the steps are actions or results, each being judged by that which follows. We all know how we dislike new statements or ideas, but we soon get accustomed to them and gradually the objections dwindle before the revelations of the new hour. Even in our purely personal affairs it is the same; each of us supposes himself not to be fully understood and that he has a greater possibility, hence man's continual effort to raise himself. Yesterday my mind was a void, yet to-day I may be full of thoughts and in a mood of self-conceit put them on paper, but in a week or a month's time I may wonder how I came to write or think such banalities. It is all comparable to a vast ebb and flow, periodically heaping itself on a containing wall, there to solidify and hem itself in, then bursting over that boundary and expanding another stage only to create a fresh high wave which attempts again to stop and enclose.

I am reminded here of the old saying, "Tell me who are a man's friends and I will tell you what he is." This is but another way of formulating the axiom that a man's growth is seen in the successive circles of his friends, and that friends cease to interest us when we find their limitations. Think of the friends and loves of the past. Alluring and attractive they doubtless were, metaphorically a lake in which to swim, but gradually we found their limits and what seemed a lake became a puddle and we cherish no regrets that we got out of it and see those friends no more. The metaphor holds good in respect of the higher things because each new step in thought reconciles many apparently discordant facts as expressions of one law. Even our virtues are not final, for the virtues of society are vices of the saint, and our faults or sins may be the living stones out of which we shall construct the temple of God. All our hopes, thoughts, religion and morals are at the mercy of some new generalization because our instinct presses ever onward to the impersonal
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and illimitable, and extinguishes each virtue in the light of a better. Similarly, if we look at the natural world we can conceive it as a system of concentric rings and presenting a condition which is never stable but ever moving onward. And yet this incessant movement and progressive generation of ever widening circles involves the recognition of some principle of stability at the centre and within us. What that is, it is hard to say, but it evidently is something which contains and impels all its enlarging rings or circles, and by virtue of that is superior to knowledge and thought. Its labour seems in vain, for that which is made suggests ever how to make a better. So it goes on, and there remains only for us to forget ourselves and to do something without knowing how or why; in fact, to draw a new circle outside that in which we happen to be. Never ending, still beginning.