

FINDING THE TRAIL OF LIFE

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FINDING THE TRAIL OF LIFE

By

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"I have not so far left the coasts of life
To travel inland, that I cannot hear
That murmur of the outer Infinite,
Which unweaned babies smile at
in their sleep
When wondered at for smiling."

MRS. BROWNING *in Aurora Leigh.*

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DEDICATION

To the undimmed memory of the little boy who lived by my side here on earth for eleven happy years and who showed me what an ideal and perfect childhood could be.

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INTRODUCTION

Some years ago I wrote a little book entitled *A Boy's Religion from Memory*. It was many times reprinted and was in its day widely read. I had the pleasure of knowing that William James loved it, and I had plenty of evidence too that boys and girls enjoyed it. Summer after summer in recent years I have been going back to my old birth-place and many memories have come to life there which were below the threshold when the little book was written a quarter of a century ago. Instead of reprinting it, therefore, as I have been asked to do, I have decided to write a new book covering a somewhat longer period of boyhood and youth. I have preserved what was quick and vital in the old narrative, but there is so much that is new and fresh, or entirely retold, that it is a new book and deserves a new title.

I do not want it to be read as an autobiography or a book of "confessions." It is written to interpret the religion of a boy and to show the boy in his struggle to get through the jungle and to find the trail of life. There is nothing ideal about the boy who figures in these pages. He was country born

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and bred, and there is much wild flavor apparent in him. He had all the battles to fight with temptations that any real boy is familiar with, but religion was always one of the main factors of his early drama. In this particular, I believe, the boy of this book is like the average boy. He is more concerned over his spiritual condition than he is over anything else, though nobody knows it or suspects it. He may be easily turned against religion by unwise handling, but if the atmosphere about him is right, and he finds the right group-guidance, he will come into religion as naturally as he comes into the other great inheritances of the race.

I am convinced, too, by my own life and by wide observation of children that mystical experience is much more common than is usually supposed. Children are not so absorbed as we are with things and with problems. They are not so completely organized for dealing with the outside world as we older persons are. They do not live by cut-and-dried theories. They have more room for surprise and wonder. They are more sensitive to intimations, flashes, openings. The invisible impinges on their souls and they *feel* its reality as something quite natural. Wordsworth was no doubt a rare and unusual child, but many a boy, who was never to be a poet, has felt as he did. "I was

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often unable," he says, in the preface to his great "Ode," "to think of external things as having external existence, and I communed with all that I saw as something not apart from, but inherent in, my own immaterial nature. Many times while going to school have I grasped at a wall or tree to recall myself from this abyss of idealism to the reality." The world within is just as real as the world without until events force us to become mainly occupied with the outside one.

Some of my readers will no doubt question my powers of memory. They will suspect that what I call memory is really imagination. It is notoriously difficult to draw a sharp line between these two processes of the mind. I know how easy it is to color a story with the hue that comes from mature experience. I will not assert that I have always spoken, as in the solemn witness box, "the whole truth and *nothing but* the truth." But I have done my honest best to tell what verily happened to me; what I saw, and felt. I have with restraint refused to beautify and adorn, or to introduce many a narrative which I felt had too much imaginative color to be hand-on-the-heart truth. I used to know an old Friend, who was so exact in his statements that he always said, "I think, or at least I think that I think!" Once when he had sciatica he was asked how he felt and he cautiously remarked,

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"I have a feeling that is akin to pain." I may not have kept as close to the underside of truth as my ancient Friend did, but what I have told is pretty near the line of real events. It can be taken quite safely as the real *experience* of the boy I myself once was—*quorum pars fui*.

These chapters will, however, be in vain if they fail to indicate how difficult is the task of discovering what goes on within the boy, or if they fail to show what delicate treatment is required to bring him through his budding periods and his shifting ideals to a clear and well-defined life purpose. If boys are better than they seem to be, as this book maintains, they are also much more difficult to understand than is generally believed, and their lives are in more unstable equilibrium. The parents' responsibility is most assuredly a solemn one, for in the days of boyhood the invisible structure of a self is silently being woven, and the social environment is a tremendous factor in the final product. Here is the modest effort to tell how one boy's life formed itself, and what the environment was.

The secondary purpose of the writer has been to preserve a little longer the memory of a form of religious life and of a set of customs which one must confess are either passing away or have already passed away. Quakerism is still a living force.

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It is a present faith, and it has a great potential future. But the Quakerism which was the atmosphere of this boy's life has in a large measure already ceased from the earth. It was a unique type of religious life, and it kept its peculiar form only as long as it existed apart from the currents of the larger social whole. The movements of modern complex life have forced it either to die out or undergo transformation. It was a beautiful faith, and it produced rare types of personal sainthood whose story is not yet written. In this simple way some impressions of this spiritual atmosphere, with its local color, are caught and preserved, though it is only a thumb-nail sketch.

A little child, who had seen the wonderful cathedral windows of England with their saints in glorious color, described a saint as "a person who lets the light come through." That is just what happens. The saint lets the light come through.

"Through such souls alone
God stooping shows sufficient of His light
For us in the dark to rise by."

But my "saints" not only let the light through for me in the dark to rise by, but they were also always pulling me upward and forward by invisible cords, somewhat as the moon lifts the ocean. Our many visitors used to tell me much about the tides in

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the Bay of Fundy, which was not so very far away from my home. It seemed amazing that the moon with no tackle and no derrick could lift all this mass of water high above the surrounding sea and then let it swirl sixty feet high into this funnel of a bay. But it is even more wonderful how somebody's life, without the attachment of string or rope, will raise a boy from low level to high and change all his goings. It is as fine a miracle as there is, and when it happens it is worth telling about.

Homer's *Odyssey* is no doubt more romantic, and is told with much more verve and marching power than falls to the lot of my simple narrative of a country boy's life. But in one point, by no means a negligible one, my story strikes a note which his misses. He portrays, with unsurpassed epic grandeur, the heroic deeds, the hazardous wanderings, the marvelous escapes and the final home-coming of a man who never grows old, who moves about the world with an immortal youth. But the ancient bard's interest terminates with his hero's *deeds*. He turns no searchlight in to reveal the inner drama of his soul. His narrative follows the paths which a man walks with his feet or covers with his boat. My story, however trivial in comparison, has to do all the time with the labyrinthine ways of the soul. The feet go somewhere in this story and so does the boat, but always

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the real drama is concerned with the shaping of a viewless and invisible life within a crude and half-formed body. The hero here, too, like Homer's hero, is immortal and is on a strange pilgrimage in quest of a country and a home beyond the voices and the wanderings.

