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ALPHA OF THE PLOUGH

‘W. G.’

From PEBBLES ON THE SHORE

THE worst of spending week-ends in the country in these anxious days is the difficulty of getting news. About six o'clock on Saturday evening I am seized with a furious hunger. What has happened on the East front? What on the West? What in Serbia? Has Greece made up its heroic mind? Is Rumania still trembling on the brink? What does the French communiqué say? These and a hundred other questions descend on me with frightful insistence. Clearly I can't go to bed without having them answered. But there is not an evening paper to be got nearer than the little railway station in the valley two miles away, and there is no way of getting it except by Shanks's mare. And so, unable to resist the glamour of *The Star*, I start out across the fields for the station.

As I stood on the platform last Saturday evening devouring the latest war news under the dim oil lamp, a voice behind me said, in broad rural accent, ‘Bill, I say, W. G. is dead.’ At the word I turned hastily to another column and found the news that had stirred him. And even in the midst of world-shaking events it stirred me too. For a brief moment I forgot the war and was back in that cheerful world where we used to be happy, where we greeted the rising sun with light hearts and saw its setting without fear. In that cheerful world I can hardly recall a time when a big man with a black beard was not my King.

I first saw him in the 'seventies. I was a small boy then, and I did him the honour of playing truant—'playing wag' we called it. I felt that the occasion demanded it. To have the god of my idolatry in my own little town and not to pay him my devotions—why, the idea was almost like blasphemy. A half-dozen, or even a dozen, from my easily infuriated master would be a small price to pay. I should take the stripes as a homage to the hero. He would never know, but I should be proud to suffer in his honour. Unfortunately, there was a canvas round the field where the hero played, and as the mark of the Mint was absent from my pockets I was on the wrong side of the canvas. But I knew a spot where by lying flat on your stomach and keeping your head very low you could see under the canvas and get a view of the wicket. It was not a comfortable position, but I saw the King. I think I was a little disappointed that there was nothing supernatural about his appearance and that there were no portents in the heavens to announce his coming. It didn't seem quite right somehow. In a general way I knew he was only a man, but I was quite prepared to see something tremendous happen, the sun to dance or the earth to heave, when he appeared. I never felt the indifference of Nature to the affairs of men so acutely.

I saw him many times afterwards, and I suppose I owe more undiluted happiness to him than to any man that ever lived. For he was the genial tyrant in a world that was all sunshine. There are other games, no doubt, which will give you as much exercise and pleasure in playing them as cricket, but there is no game that fills the mind with such memories and seems enveloped in such a gracious and kindly atmosphere. If you have

once loved it and played it, you will find talk in it enough 'for the wearing out of six fashions' as Falstaff says. I like a man who has cricket in his soul. I find I am prejudiced in his favour, and am disposed to disbelieve any ill about him. I think my affection for Jorkins began with the discovery that he, like myself, saw that astounding catch with which Ulyett dismissed Bonnor in the Australian match at Lord's in 1883—or was it 1884? And when to this mutual and immortal memory we added the discovery that we were both at the Oval at the memorable match when Crossland rattled Surrey out like ninepins and the crowd mobbed him, and Key and Roller miraculously pulled the game out of the fire, our friendship was sealed. 1883/84

The fine thing about a wrangle on cricket is that there is no bitterness in it. When you talk about politicians you are always on the brink of bad temper. When you disagree about the relative merits of W. B. Yeats or Francis Thompson you are afflicted with scorn for the other's lack of perception. But you may quarrel about cricketers and love each other all the time. For example, I am prepared to stand up in a truly Christian spirit to the bowling of anybody in defence of my belief that—next to him of the black beard—Lohmann was the most naturally gifted all-round cricketer there has ever been. What grace of action he had, what an instinct for the weak spot of his opponent, what a sense for fitting the action to the moment; above all, what a gallant spirit he played the game in! And that, after all, is the real test of the great cricketer. It is the man who brings the spirit of adventure into the game that I want. Of the Quaifes and the Scottons and the Barlows I have nothing but dreary memories. They do not mean cricket to me.

And even Shrewsbury and Hayward left me cold. They were too faultily faultless, too icily regular for my taste. They played cricket not as though it was a game, but as though it was a proposition in Euclid. And I don't like Euclid.

It was the hearty joyousness that 'W. G.' shed around him that made him so dear to us youngsters of all ages. I will admit, if you like, that Ranjitsinhji at his best was more of a magician with the bat, that Johnny Briggs made you laugh more with his wonderful antics and comic genius, that A. P. Lucas had more finish, Palairet more grace, and so on. But it was the abundance of the old man with the black beard that was so wonderful. You never came to the end of him. He was like a generous roast of beef—you could cut and come again, and go on coming. Other men flitted across our sky like meteors, but he shone on like the sun in the heavens, and like the sun in the heavens he scattered largesse over the land. He did not seem so much a man as an institution, a symbol of summer and all its joys, a sort of Father Christmas clothed in flannels and sunshine. It did you good merely to look at him. It made you feel happy to see such a huge capacity for enjoyment, such mighty subtlety, such ponderous gaiety. It was as though Jove, or Vulcan, or some other god of antiquity had come down to play games with the mortals. You would not have been much surprised if, when the shadows lengthened across the greensward and the umpire signalled that the day's play was done, he had wrapped himself in a cloud of glory and floated away to Olympus.

And now he is gone indeed, and it seems as though a part, and that a very happy part, of life has gone with

him. When sanity returns to the earth there will arise other deities of the cricket field, but not for me. Never again shall I recapture the unsullied joy that came with the vision of the yellow cap flaming above the black beard, of the Herculean frame and the mighty bared arms, and all the godlike apparition of the master. As I turned out of the little station and passed through the fields and climbed the hill I felt that the darkness that has come upon the earth in these days had taken a deeper shade of gloom, for even the lights of the happy past were being quenched.

MAURICE BARING

Eton

From LOST LECTURES

BISMARCK once said that, however much the Germans might profess to dislike and to despise the English, there was not a German that would not be secretly pleased to be taken for an Englishman.

I believe it to be also true that there is not an Englishman who would be annoyed to be taken for an Etonian, however deep his conviction may be that Eton is a nursery of snobs or half-wits, that Rugby is more clever, and Harrow more tunefully vociferous.

I knew one boy who disliked Eton when he was there, and said so. I have known several who said they had disliked it afterwards. I know some who dislike it now. I have read and heard denunciations of Eton, attacks on Eton, abuse of Eton, satires on Eton, laughter at Eton, and kind patronizing of Eton, striking the note of—

Eton, with all thy faults I love thee still.

It was the faults I liked best. These attacks and arraignments, and this condescending approval, have always struck me as being of the same kind as those made upon other memorable institutions, and I have no doubt that Eton, which has weathered so much violent disapproval and so much intolerable patronage, will even survive the unflinching satire of these younger critics who no doubt feel that they are obeying the stern call of duty when casting a blot, as a former Headmaster would have said, on the fair fame of their *Alma Mater*.

I cannot deal with the experiences of others. I can only deal with my own. I haven't the slightest pretence of impartiality, nor the slightest desire to see the question steadily, and, seeing it whole, I am a violent, an unblushing, an unrepentant partisan. About my own experiences and my own feelings with regard to Eton I have no doubt ^{at all} whatsoever. I enjoyed Eton wholeheartedly and unreservedly: I enjoyed it all from the first to the last moment. If I had my life to live over again, I should like all that piece back with nothing left out; not even failing twice to pass in swimming; not even my one white ticket for cheeking Mr. Ploetz; nor my row with Mr. Cockshott about carving my name on the desk with somebody else's knife—on the desk of the schoolroom—and denying it in the face of all evidence and sticking to my denial, unshaken by cross-examination: nor my anxiety when Dunglass and I were told that in fun we had broken W——'s leg, and that he might die.

My partiality on the subject of Eton is as sharp as my impartiality on the subject of the Universities is serene and unbounded. I do not want Harrow to win the Eton and Harrow match either this year, next year or ever. I do not believe that any other school is as good as Eton—not nearly as good. I do not believe that Eton is quite different now from what it used to be, I believe that Eton is just the same; but even if she is not, even if she has changed for the worse, I believe her to be better than any other school. But I repeat I do not believe Eton has changed: I believe that Eton has been and always will be the best school, and that there is none like her, none.

I do not deny that Eton affords infinite scope for an idle boy to be idle and wide opportunity for a bad boy to be bad; but is this untrue of other schools?

In one respect I happen by circumstance, and not by inclination, to be an impartial judge. This needs some explanation which touches the core and kernel of Eton life.

They toil at games, they play with books:
They love the winner of the race,

wrote an Eton poet.

It was true. It is true. Quite true. Games at Eton are all-important. The boys like games: and both boys and masters think that games are more important than anything else. There are exceptions, but they, as usual, prove that there is no rule without exceptions. A boy would be thought more important for making a hundred at Lord's than for winning the Newcastle scholarship; for stroking the Eight at Henley than for being Captain of the Oppidans and winning all the prizes that are to be won, including the senior drawing prize. Reams of paper have been written about this, and oceans of ink have been wasted over the topic: many have deplored the fact, and still deplore the fact; they call it snobbish. The spirit of games has been spoilt, they say, and made professional. Moralists have pointed out the sad fact that on Sundays in chapel the boys are taught to turn the other cheek, not to compete, to like the lowest place best. On Monday morning until Saturday evening they are told to strain every nerve to take the highest place, to compete with every nerve in their bodies, to aim at the highest place for the House, for the school, and for themselves, in every direction and in every respect, all day and in every way. This may be sad, this may be paradoxical, this may be deplorable, but it is a fact, and the boys pay no heed to what is said on Sunday, and a great deal of attention to what is being done during the

week. To deplore this contradiction is to miss the point, which is this: Is it or is it not a mistake that the standard of excellence and success at Eton is athletic and not intellectual or aesthetic, seeing that it has to inspire and control the ideals of boys? I say emphatically that it is not a mistake. Imagine it otherwise. Imagine what would happen if the contrary were true.

Supposing the standard of success among the boys were intellectual and aesthetic; supposing the winners of the Hervey prize for English verse, and the Jelf prize for Latin verse, were hoisted, and that the winner of the Brinkman divinity prize could go into stick-ups without further ado, and that the winner of the drawing prize could wear a white waistcoat on Sundays and walk the wrong side of the street, and turn down the collar of his greatcoat, whereas the Captain of the Eleven could only wear a scug's cap, and a Captain of the Boats would not be allowed to wear white flannels; what would be the result? Insufferable priggishness on the part of the few, unutterable boredom on the part of the many, and universal slackness. Can any one doubt it?

The beauty of the existing system is that the worship and importance of games gives those who do not excel in games, or who are fond, if not of study, of books, the leisure and the opportunity to cultivate their own tastes. They are allowed to go their own way unobserved and undisturbed: they are not interfered with. They do as they like, where they like. A boy can spend hours in the school library reading *Monte Cristo* if he wants to. Nobody cares. But supposing every one cared and thought it a disgrace not to like Pindar, nobody would be allowed to read *Monte Cristo* or Sherlock Holmes. The tyranny of the intellect is the worst of all. The rule of the intellectuals

is far severer than that of the athletes. It is better, as Ecclesiastes says, to endure the chastisement of the pop-cane than the sharpness of a clever highbrow's tongue. M. Renan said that if there were not forty thousand people going to the races every Sunday he would not have had enough leisure to study Hebrew in his attic, and, as he often pointed out, there is no tyranny so great as intellectual tyranny; nothing is more intolerant than the rule of the advanced and of the 'free-thinker', for he insists on his fads being universally obeyed. And if the unwritten laws of Eton, which are so much more powerful than the written laws, were devised and enforced by a committee of intellectuals, I venture to think that the life of the average boy would be intolerable.

These standards being what they are, memorable Etonians—one need hardly say it—have been those who have won distinction on the playing fields and on the river, those who play against Winchester, and at Lord's against Harrow, who row in the Eight at Henley, or who take part in the procession of the Boats. There are also those who acquire merit and respect by winning scholarships and other rewards of academic distinction; these, too, are respected, because it would be a great mistake to say that the Eton boy despises the prizes awarded to the achievements of the intellect. He knows they count for something, but something much less than getting your House colours or playing in Sixpenny. Nevertheless, to get the Newcastle is known to be difficult and worth while: none of the other prizes count for much, and the Hervey prize (for English verse) does not create a ripple of envy or of excitement.

But to be in Sixth Form and to recite a long speech from Thucydides in the original Greek, in black knee-

breeches, is something; and no boy disliked being sent up for good for verses. This meant that a copy of Latin verses was so good that you had to copy it out in your own handwriting on a clean sheet of paper. What happened to it afterwards I have forgotten. But if you were sent up for good three times I imagine something else happened: I think you got a prize.

I am now coming to the point.

The boys who win these distinctions in play and at work, those who play at Lord's or against Winchester, or at the Wall on St. Andrew's Day, or row at Henley, or get the Newcastle, are the vast minority; the majority of the boys win no such triumphs, sometimes they only just scrape into the first hundred and wear a scug cap all their days: and of that obscure majority I was a part — *pars minima fui*. That is why I said I was an impartial judge of what Eton life was like to the average boy. And I can now tell the world that we enjoyed our obscurity as much as those their triumphs. We admired the triumphant but we did not envy what we knew we could not emulate.

MAX BEERBOHM

The Golden Drugget

From AND EVEN NOW (1918)

PRIMITIVE and essential things have great power to touch the heart of the beholder. I mean such things as a man ploughing a field, or sowing or reaping; a girl filling a pitcher from a spring; a young mother with her child; a fisherman mending his nets; a light from a lonely hut on a dark night.

Things such as these are the best themes for poets and painters, and appeal to aught that there may be of painter or poet in any one of us. Strictly, they are not so old as the hills, but they are more significant and eloquent than hills. Hills will outlast them; but hills glacially surviving the life of man on this planet are of as little account as hills tremulous and hot in ages before the life of man had its beginning. Nature is interesting only because of *us*. And the best symbols of us are such sights as I have just mentioned—sights unalterable by fashion of time or place, sights that in all countries always were and never will not be.

It is true that in many districts nowadays there are elaborate new kinds of machinery for ploughing the fields and reaping the corn. In the most progressive districts of all, I daresay, the very sowing of the grain is done by means of some engine, with better results than could be got by hand. For aught I know, there is a patented invention for catching fish by electricity. It is natural that we should, in some degree, pride ourselves on such triumphs. It is well that we should have poems

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