

Notches on The Stick

The Youth of S. T. Coleridge.

You will see Coleridge; he who sits obscure
In the exceeding lustre and the pure
Intense irradiation of a mind
Which, with its own internal lightning blind,
Flings wearily through darkness and despair—
A cloud encircled meteor of the air,
A hooded eagle among blinking owls.—Shelley.

What an appreciation of value was that, when a new found book was better, for the thrill it awoke, than if the sea had cast up a pearl at our feet, or we had stumbled on a wedge of gold, can we ever forget, or remember without a return of the old pleasure, that summer evening, when from the library of Acadia college we had liberty to bear away the select works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in our privacy and leisure to peruse them till the solitude was haunted with the supernatural images evoked! The old Acadia office became an University in itself, as we leaned over the marble slab on which we locked our forms for the press, and turned the stainless leaves of that bright new leather-colored volume. "The Biographia Literaria," "The Friends," "The Aids to Reflection," were not without their influence then; but that wonderful poetry it was which enchaind us,—held us, as the "Ancient Mariner" held the wedding guest, till the story was ended,—and then, would not let him go the same that he had been before. Reading the Alice day, our friend, George Martin's, experience with a different poet, it seemed the parallel of our own with the bard of "Christabel."

"Some chance blown verse had visited my ear
And careless eye, once in some sliding year,
Like some fair plumed bird one rarely meets.
And when it came that o'er thy page I bent,
A sudden gladness smote upon my blood;
Wonder and joy, an aromatic flood,
Distilled from an enchanted firmament.
And on this flood I floated hours and hours,
Unconscious of the world's perplexing din,
Its blackened crust of misery and sin,
Rocked in a ship of elysian flowers."

The spell of Coleridge was found to be something peculiar. That splendid multi-form genius, moving about "in worlds half realised," losing himself and his reader now, in a melodious maze; then reappearing with luminous distinctness, amid ghostly action, and a mingling of beautiful and terrible phantoms; reigning supreme master,—since Shakespeare ceased,—in a land—

"Where the cock never crew,
Where the rain never fell, and the wind never blew,
Where it seemed as the harp of the sky had rung,
While the airs of heaven played round his tongue,"
would not relax his grasp; and however the bridal train of fashion or folly may go into the lighted hall, we are willing to stay in this beautiful twilight, outside with him.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge,—the brightest name of a race illustrious in literature, philosophy and jurisprudence,—was born on the 21st of October, 1772, at the vicarage of Ottery St. Mary's, Devonshire, then occupied by his father. The Rev. John Coleridge is described as a learned man, of scholarly habits, yet simple, affectionate manners; who as headmaster in the free grammar school at Ottery, had manifested a deep and tender interest in his pupils. We may be in doubt whence the poet derived some of his characteristics; but we are assured as to the origin of one, at least, when we read, concerning his father, that "passing events were little heeded by him, and therefore he was usually characterized as the 'silent man.'" His mother, Anne Bowden—the vicar's second wife,—though unlettered, was a sensible woman, and good housewife, looking well to the ways of her household, ever anxious and careful for the welfare of her children. She wanted to see them well placed in the world, and well married; always advising them "to look after good substantial sensible women, and not after fine harpichord ladies." And well she had need of good housewifery, and amazing thrift, for Samuel was the youngest of thirteen; nine of whom were sons; but of all these sons there were none who in mental traits so resembled his father as that one of whom all the world should hear.

Several amusing stories are told, illustrative of the good vicar's forgetfulness of minor matters. He was under the barber's hands one morning, when the clock struck nine, and he instantly remembered that he was expected to dine with his bishop. Roused from a reverie to the consciousness that he was already late, he left the shop hastily and made his appearance at the table where the expectant party were assembled. A look of amused surprise was followed by a playful request from the bishop that he would step into the adjoining room and inspect a new mirror that had recently been placed there; which revealed to him the fact that he was minus his wig,—that having been, in his haste, left behind at the barber's.

Coleridge relates how his father "had to take a journey on some professional business which would detain him from home for

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three or four days; his good wife, in her care and watchfulness had packed a few things in a small trunk, and gave them in charge to her husband, with strong injunctions that he was to put on a clean shirt every day. On his return home, his wife went to search for his linen, when to her dismay it was rot in the trunk. A close search, however, discovered that the vicar had strictly obeyed her injunctions, and had put on a daily clean shirt, but had forgotten to remove the one underneath." This might have been the pleasantest and most portable mode of carrying half a dozen shirts in winter, but not so in the dog-days.

But what of these oddities? They are often accompaniments of a good and generous nature. A thorough going knave is punctiliously recollective: Reynard is not apt to forget himself. A mind rich in brooding thought can hardly escape this foible. But John Coleridge's heart was right; he commanded the love and respect of a simple people, who flocked to hear him talk piety and good sense in clear English; and, who, when death had taken him, found it hard to adjust themselves to his successor.

A younger child of delicate mould and timid disposition, he felt the solitude of such a nature, and lacked the physical hardihood that much activity gives. "I was," he says, "in earliest childhood, huffed away from the enjoyment of muscular activity in play, to take refuge at my mother's side, or on my little stool to read my book, and to listen to the talk of my elders. I was driven from life in motion, to life in thought and sensation. I never played except by myself, and then only acting over what I had been reading or fancying; or half one, half the other, with a stick cutting down weeds and nettles, as one of the seven champions of Christendom. Alas! I had all the simplicity all the docility of a child, but none of the child's habits. I never thought as a child, never had the language of a child. I forget whether it was in my fifth or sixth year but I believe the latter, in consequence of some quarrel between me and my brother, in the first week in October, I ran away from fear of being whipped, and passed the whole night, a night of rain and storm, on a bleak side of a hill on the Otter, and was there found at daybreak without the power of my limbs, about six yards from the naked bank of the river." This is not just as Cottle tells the story about "Little Sammy," but we are content with the version given by the fugitive from domestic correction.

The worthy father died when his child of dreams was but seven years old; and the embryo poet's educational interests were superintended by Judge Buller, who had been a former pupil of John Coleridge, and by whom the son was placed in Christ's Hospital, London. Of the eight years spent here one cannot think pleasantly. An English charity school of that date must not be supposed elysian; but a poet might, perhaps, gild it with his light. The gentle "Elia" was also there, a fellow victim of that system of brutality and starvation; and has, in his famous essay, given us one of most bewitching picture's of Coleridge's youth; "Come back into memory, like as thou wert in the dayspring of the fancies, with hope like a fiery column before thee—the dark pillar not yet turned—Samuel Taylor Coleridge—Logician, Metaphysician, Bard!—How have I seen the casual passer through the cloisters stand still, entranced with admiration (while he weighed the disproportion between the speech and the garb of the young Mirandula), to hear thee unfold, in thy deep and sweet intonations the mysteries of Tamblichus, or Plotinus (for even in those years thou waxedst not pale at such philosophic draughts), or reciting Homer in his Greek, or Pindar—while the walls of the old Grey Friars re-echoed to the accents of the inspired charity-boy! Many were the 'wit combats,' (to dally awhile with the words of old Fuller), between him and C. V. Le G.—'which two I behold like a Spanish great galleon, and an English man of war; Master Coleridge, like the former, was built far higher in learning, solid, but slow in his performances, C. V. with the English man of war, lesser in bulk, but lighter in sailing, could turn with all tides, tack about, and take advantage of all

winds, by the quickness of his wit and invention."

But of home like comfort or amenity there was little. In those cold cloisters and harsh hearts there was a boding wretchedness and deprivation, lighted by the occasional flashes of youthful spirit and the dreams of light that could fill such a spirit as that of Coleridge. There neglect and abuse were the tender mercies shown the children that had come from homes where domestic gentleness and comfort had been like the reflex of a fire-lit hearth. Crusty, unsympathetic manners, so much of lagging and caning, to be administered daily, aside from the occasional cruelty of individual masters, were parts of the educational regimen of the time. It was the era of frost and not sun; which has been happily superseded by one in which kindness and encouragement may be at least incentives to true obedience and self-respect. It was against the head of such abuses that Charles Dickens hurled the full force of one of his most powerful novels; but at a much later date than the events we record, a popular English author wrote as follows: "Riding the other day on the top of an omnibus through London; we could, from that popular eminence, see the master of a naval and military school exercising his vocation with the cane on one of his unhappy scholars. This I presume is a part of what the boys are systematically taught there. The preparatory initiations into the floggings they are likely to get in the army or navy. That is bad and brutalizing enough, but that we are not yet advanced beyond the absurd idea of driving learning into the gentlemen with the cudgel and birch, says very little indeed for our advance in true social philosophy." Cowper in his "Tirocinium," and Southey, in his "The Retrospect," and his "Hymn to the Penates," allow us a vision of childish sorrow at the change from a kind home to a harsh school. The later poet writes:

"When first a little one I left my home,
I can remember the first grief I felt,
And the first painful smile that clothed my front
With feelings not its own. Sadly at night
I sat me down beside a stranger's hearth,
And when the lingering hour of rest was come,
First wet with tears my pillow."

There "strangers" spoke pleasantly to him on that wretched day," when his father was leaving him," but he adds significantly,—

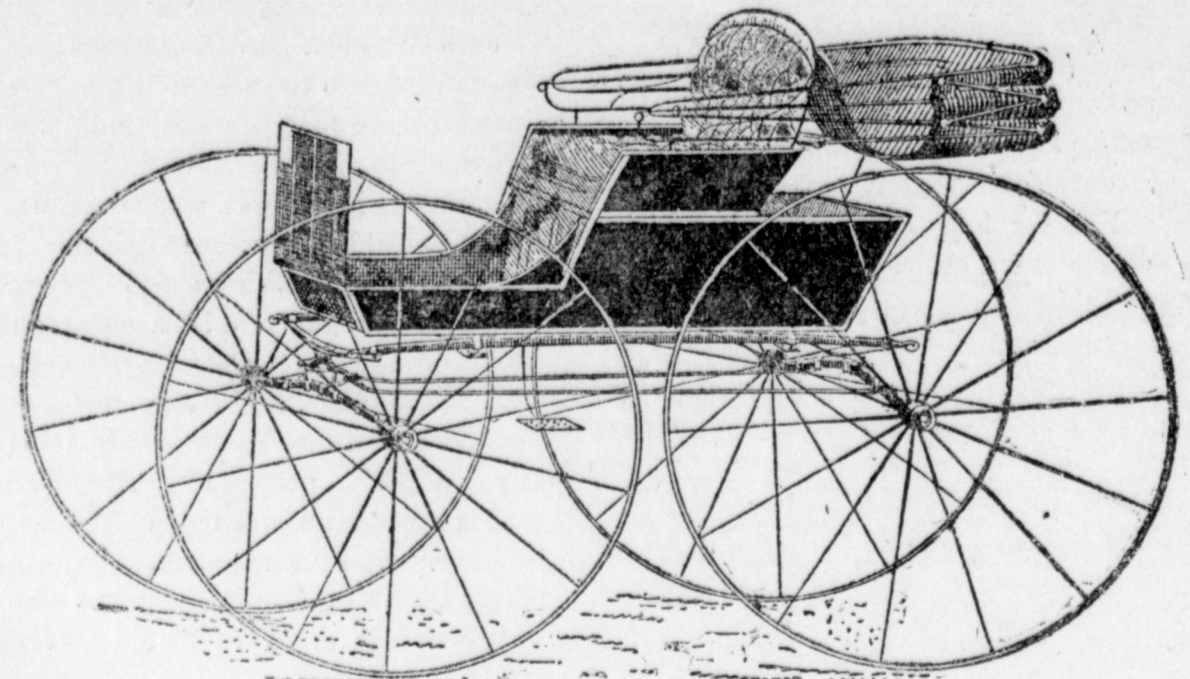
"They never spoke so civilly again."

Of this change Coleridge speaks as of a plucking up, a transplanting. "Oh, what a change!" he exclaims. "I was a depressed, moping, friendless orphan, half-starved;—at that time the portion of food to the blue coats was cruelly insufficient for those who had no friends to supply them." With pity and indignation we think of these poverty-stricken children looking wistfully on while their better provided companions ate their rations beside them. Ah, Charity,—heavenly word! how art thou defamed! She who should come a merciful and plentiful angel, comes as a haggard fiend to dole with penurious fingers the bread of needy children,—and these the children of learning! How can they study without suitable nourishment? Lamb, whose friends lived in town could make the orphans envious with luncheons from the maternal larder. Whoever has read Elia will remember this passage; "I remember Lamb at school; and can well recollect that he had some peculiar advantages, which I and others of his school-fellows had not. . . . He had his tea and hot rolls in a morning, while we were fattening upon our quarter of a penny loaf our crumb moistened with attenuated small beer, in wooden piggings, smacking of the pitched leathern jack it was poured from. Our Monday's milk porridge, blue and tasteless, and the peace set up of Saturday, coarse and choking, were enriched for him with a slice of extraordinary bread and butter," from the hot-loaf of the Temple. The Wednesday's mess of Millet, somewhat less repugnant—(we had three banyan to four meat days in the week,—was endeared to his palate with a lump of double refined, and a smack of ginger (to make it go down the more glibly) or the fragrant cinnamon. In lieu of our half-pickled Sundays, or quite fresh boiled beef on Thursdays (strong as caro quina), with detestable marigolds floating in the pail to poison the broth—our scanty mutton scrags on Fridays—and rather more savory, but grudging, portions of the same flesh, rotten roasted or rare, on Tuesdays (the only dish which excited our appetites, and disappointed our stomachs, in almost equal proportion)—he had his hot plate of roast veal, or the more tempting griskin, (exotics unknown to our palates), cooked in the paternal kitchen. Wretched fare! wretched cookery! But bravo, Lamb! It is good to hear of any one feasting in that chamber of hunger. Let it be hoped that the "inspired charity-boy" had many a tempting tit-bit out of Elia's basket. But ah, with all the pity in his generous breast

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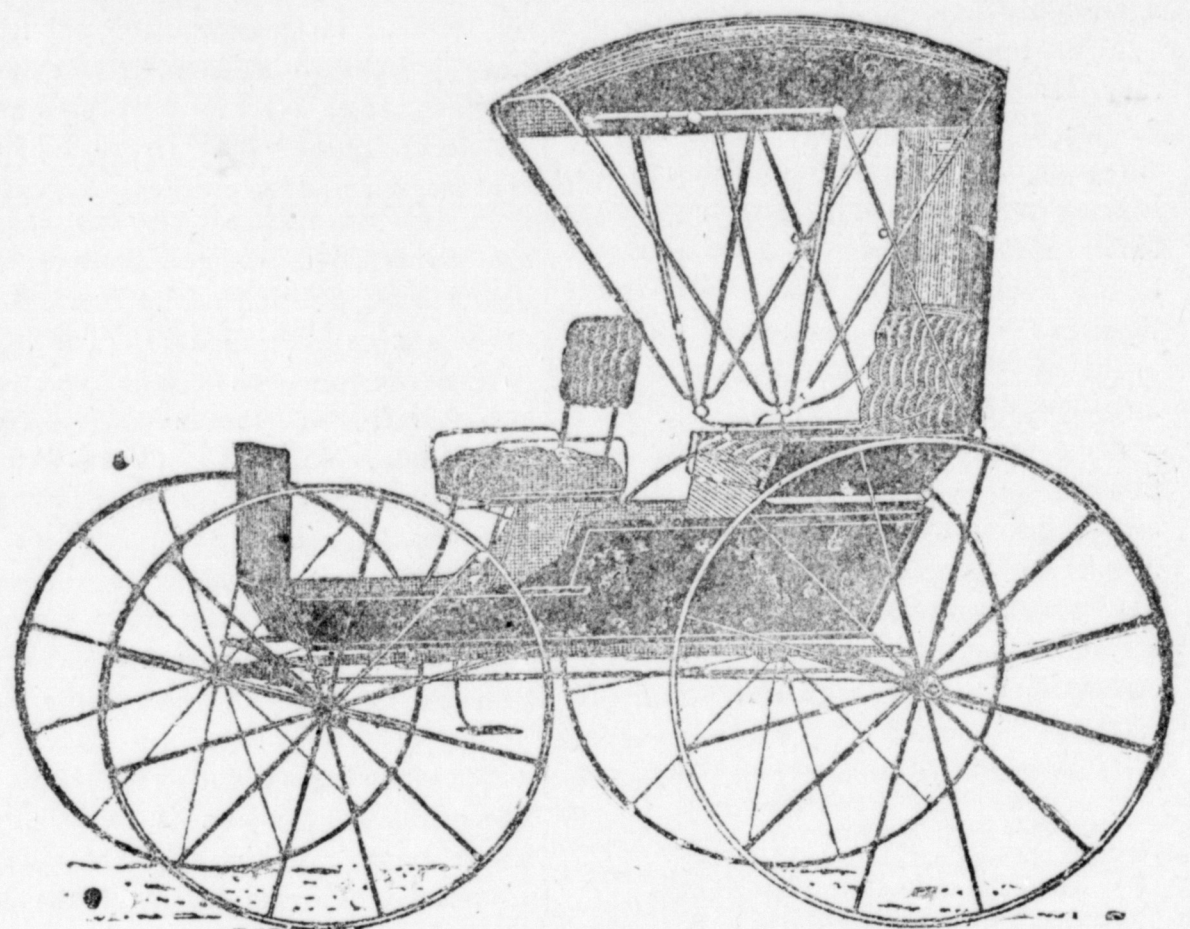
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there would not be so much as a taste if shared among the many!

Read this delightful essay again. "I," he makes Coleridge say, "was a poor friendless boy. My parents, and those who should care for me, were far away. Those few acquaintances of theirs, which they could reckon on being kind to me in the great city, after a little forced notice, which they had the grace to take of me on my arrival in town, some grew tired of my holiday visits. They seemed to them to recur too often, though I thought them few enough; and, one after another, they all failed me, and I felt myself alone among six hundred playmates. O! the cruelty of separating a poor lad from his early home-stead! The yearnings which I used to have towards it in those untutored years! How, in my dreams, would my native town (far in the west) come back, with its church, and trees, and faces! How I would wake weeping, and in the anguish of my heart exclaim upon sweet Celae in Wiltshire!

"To this late hour of my life, I trace impressions left by the recollection of those friendless holidays. The long warm days of summer never return but they bring with them a gloom from the haunting memory of those whole-day leaves, when, by some strange arrangement, we were turned out for the live-long day, upon our own hands, whether we had friends to go to, or none. I remember those bathing excursions to the New River, which Lamb recalls with such relish, better, I think than he can—for he was a home-seeking lad, and did not much care for such water-pastimes.—How merrily we would sally forth into the fields; and strip under the first warmth of the sun; and wanton like young does in the streams; getting us appetites for noon, which those of us that were penniless (our scanty morning crust long since exhausted) had not the means of allaying, while the cattle and the birds, and the fishes, were at feed about us, and

we had nothing to satisfy our craving—the very beauty of the day, and the exercise of the pastime, and the sense of liberty, settling a keener edge upon them! How faint and languid finally, we would return towards night-fall, to our desired morsel, half-rejoicing, half-reluctant, that the hours of uneasy liberty had expired!

"It was worse in the days of winter, to go prowling about the streets objectless—shivering at cold windows of print-shops, to extract a little amusement; or haply, as a last resort in hopes of a little novelty, to pay a fifty-times repeated visit to the Lions in the Tower,—to whose levee, by courtesy immemorial, we had a prescriptive title to admission." Could this cruelty and meanness, reduced to a system, and so a matter of course, have suspected its perpetuity in the literature most imperishable? We cannot say; but these are the words of Charles Lamb, and these were the experiences of the child, Coleridge. PASTOR FELIX.

Under one Umbrella.

The Philadelphia Times has a pretty little street picture from New Orleans:

On a quiet thoroughfare off St. Charles Avenue there might have been seen during the heavy rain yesterday afternoon a shaggy Newfoundland dog carrying a spread umbrella in his mouth, his dripping tail sticking out from under and wagging complacently. Investigation revealed the fact that there was a little girl under the umbrella with the dog, her tiny arm thrown around his neck, and the two tripping along most amicably.

"My name is Marie," said the little maid, upon being questioned, "and this is Beauregard, my very own dog. Yes, Beauregard goes to school with me. I go to the Kindergarten, you know, and he always carries the umbrella if it's raining, because I can't you see, and he can."

And the big umbrella sheltering the two friends passed on.

"Eagles" said one of our lawgivers, get their teeth into everything they can lay their hands on."