

Flaws in the Time Scheme

I

An Effect of Reincarnation

By J. D. Beresford

“The argument applies with equal force to the past,” declaimed Mallett, in his autocratic way. “If we have lived before, it is part of the essential scheme of things that we should have no recollection of past lives, the memory of them would be unendurable.”

Someone had to counter Mallett’s dogmatism, and I looked at Graves, who nobly responded. “I don’t agree,” he said. “It has always seemed to me a final argument against reincarnation, this oblivion of the past. If we progress we must progress by the accumulation of knowledge. What good is it to me to have suffered for faults in the past, if I have no consciousness left of the penalty paid; or what good to punish me in this life for the long forgotten faults of the past? Do you wait till next week to punish a child or a dog for its misdemeanours?”

Mallett cocked his legs on to the mantelpiece.

“Yours is the common confusion, my dear Graves,” he said, “the confusion between memory and consciousness. The first we can define for ordinary purposes, the second we cannot; but it is surely clear that the two concepts are not interdependent. At least it is demonstrable that consciousness can survive loss of memory. Wherefore it seems to me quite possible that temperament may be moulded through consciousness. As to your second instance, I admit that the laws of Karma are outside my scope, but as regards your first, I say it is conceivable to account by this moulding of temperament through suffering or pleasure, for the strange characteristics that are born with us. . . .”

He had much more to say, and Graves and I combined to oppose him. Birch, like the dear fellow he is, said nothing. One could see how he wavered to the side of the last speaker. There is “nothing in Birch,” we all say, but everyone likes him. Mallett is cursedly clever, and we put up with him.

“Well, Tommy,” Mallett said at last, turning to Birch. “You’ve been the silent listener. Let’s hear your judgment.”

“It’s frightfully difficult, of course,” was Tommy’s characteristic answer, and we all laughed. Tommy laughed with us; he was content to be popular, he did not strive to emulate the cleverness of Mallett, or even of Graves and myself. . . .

I walked home with Birch and he asked me if I did not think that one ought to take more interest in the subject we had been discussing that evening. I thought he seemed strangely impressed by our superficial generalisations. But Birch is always asking advice and trying to act upon it, so I told him to join the Theosophical Society. I did not think he would take me literally, but he said at once:

“I suppose they know a lot about that sort of thing.”

“Oh! yes,” I replied. “They know everything about that sort of thing. I believe they can even give you some information as to your past incarnations.”

I did not see Birch again for nearly a month, and then he came to my rooms one evening. He was looking perplexed and uncertain. I had never before seen him look anything but amiable or wistfully reverential, and I was surprised.

“What’s up, Tommy?” I asked.

To my astonishment he sat down deliberately in my one decent arm-chair, and then blushed a little and edged forward on the seat as if to demonstrate that he did not intend to make himself too comfortable.

I sat down in the basket-chair which I hate, but which had always seemed to suit Tommy so admirably.

“What’s up, Tommy?” I repeated.

“It’s frightfully difficult,” he said. I had heard that remark from him many times.

“What, in particular?” I asked.

“I’ve learnt who I was in my last incarnation,” said Tommy solemnly. “It makes a big difference to one.”

“Great snakes,” I ejaculated.

He looked at me doubtfully. “It’s serious,” he said.

“Well, who were you, old chap?” I asked. One never took Birch seriously.

“Thomas Bilney,” he said.

“So you stuck to the Tommy?” I interpolated. “It’s very wonderful,” he went on, without noticing my facetiousness. “I didn’t believe it quite, when the psychometrist first told me. I didn’t think I could ever have been a martyr. But I got hold of Gairdner’s History, and it began to come to me.”

“How? Come to you?” I asked. He was so intensely earnest that I felt a little thrill of superstition run through me. The most practical man has something of the mystic in him.

“It explained things,” said Birch. “You know how I have always dreaded fire.”

“Have you?” I said. “But how is that explained?”

“Bilney was burnt,” returned Tommy. He tried to say it impressively, but it was a bad sentence for oratorical effect.

“Oh! bad luck,” I said. “How?”

“You’re not very well up in English history, are you?” he remarked. Even with the weak ending, such a comment from Tommy was enough to take one’s breath away.

“I don’t think I got as far as Bilney’s burning,” I said.

“He was an English martyr,” said Tommy solemnly, “a licensed preacher in the reign of Henry the Eighth, and although he was always a sound Catholic on most points, he didn’t believe in pilgrimages and relic worship. He was imprisoned in the Tower, and recanted, but afterwards he was ashamed of himself for having gone back on his principles and started preaching again in the fields, and he was burnt at the stake in London.”

“Look here, Tommy,” I said when he had got this off, “it doesn’t sound a bit like you.”

“That’s because you don’t understand me,” replied Tommy.

I looked at him in wonder. If this new development of his had always been inherent in him, I was compelled to admit that I had never understood him.

“You surely don’t believe . . .?” I began.

Tommy interrupted me. “I didn’t at first,” he said. “I thought it was all Tommy . . . I thought it was all foolishness. But so many things have turned up since. I can understand so much, now, which was incomprehensible before; things in myself, things I felt impelled to do—and never

did. And now it's all been made plain, I've got to alter my life. I—I've got to be more definite, you know."

"How?" I put in succinctly.

"Well, I've often disagreed with you and Mallett and Graves and all of them, inside; but I've been afraid to speak out, because I've always felt you'd think me such a silly ass. Now I see that that was all wrong—I'm not going to deny my own opinions any more. It's—it isn't right."

A man suddenly attacked by a mild old rabbit might feel somewhat as I felt when Tommy Birch made this announcement. Yet, despite his still obvious feebleness, and his new phrases—borrowed, I suspect, from his Theosophical friends—I was impressed. The man's perfect belief in the revelation which had been made to him, had a curiously convincing quality.

I have been an agnostic on intellectual grounds for many years, but sometimes the fierce sincerity of a preacher has given me a sudden twinge of doubt. I have wondered whether such perfect faith were possible if there be no foundation for it. I had a precisely similar twinge, now. After all, this theory of reincarnation was as sane as any other theory. It might be possible for a man to learn something of a previous existence. And here was Birch, so completely convinced and honest; so altered, moreover, by his conviction. .

We all thought he was altered,—not by any means for the better. Mallett tried to laugh him out of it; argued with him, was,—I admit,—quite brilliant in his attack.

But Tommy was immovable. He opposed, finally, the one insuperable reply of the believer.

"All very well for you fellows to argue and all that," he said, "but you see *I know*. It isn't a question of evidence with me, now, I just feel sure about it."

Our combined efforts—we combined for once—were childishly feeble in opposition to this convinced "I know" of Birch's. He sat there smiling, his round, stupid face expressing a fatuous obstinacy; something, also, of the complacent spiritual pride of the enlightened. Our bullying merely afforded him cause for satisfaction. He was being martyred for his principles once more; and this time he had no intention of making any recantation.

After two or three evenings we decided to leave him alone, but he had become an insufferable nuisance. Before his conversion he agreed with us all in turn; now he disagreed, with equal catholicity. In his foolish, halting way he would come in at the end of one's argument with, "I don't know that I agree with you." He seldom got further than that, because he never had any intelligent reason for his difference of opinion.

I think he was eager to stimulate a further attack upon his position. In that, he was not successful, for we were all determined not to reopen that subject. He got some satisfaction, perhaps, from our unanimous avoidance of his case—it was another aspect of martyrdom.

He soon lost his popularity, but we should probably have put up with him for the sake of old times and in the hope that the phase would pass, had he not tried to start propaganda. That was too much. We could not put up with his incessant, irrelevant, nervous interpolations of Theosophic principles.

We turned him out one evening; it was a physical expulsion but gently conducted. Afterwards we steadfastly refused to admit him to our rooms. He went on trying for some time; but when we gave him a choice between coming in and keeping quiet, or going away, he would retreat meekly with the air of a martyr dying for his faith.

I lost sight of him for two years, and then I met him in the Strand one afternoon. He was wearing semi-clerical garb and told me that he was going out as a kind of lay missionary to China.

He was more foolish than ever, and his belief in the revelation that had been made to him was still unshaken.

No doubt he would make a good average missionary.

Mallett said that we needn't be anxious about him, that it wasn't in the scheme of things that he would be killed twice for the same offence. . . .

And, curiously enough, Mallett was right in this particular, for Tommy was the only member of a certain up-country station who escaped death in the last Boxer rising.