

Readings From a Dream-book

By Lafcadio Hearn

Often, in the blind dead of the night, I find myself reading a book,—a big broad book,—a dream-book. By “dream-book,” I do not mean a book about dreams, but a book made of the stuff that dreams are made of.

I do not know the name of the book, nor the name of its author: I have not been able to see the title-page; and there is no running title. As for the back of the volume, it remains,—like the back of the Moon,—invisible forever.

At no time have I touched the book in any way,—not even to turn a leaf. Somebody, always viewless, holds it up and open before me in the dark; and I can read it only because it is lighted by a light that comes from nowhere. Above and beneath and on either side of the book there is darkness absolute; but the pages seem to retain the yellow glow of lamps that once illuminated them.

A queer fact is that I never see the entire text of a page at once, though I see the whole page itself plainly. The text rises, or seems to rise, to the surface of the paper as I gaze, and fades out almost immediately after having been read. By a simple effort of will, I can recall the vanished sentences to the page; but they do not come back in the same form as before: they seem to have been oddly revised during the interval. Never can I coax even one fugitive line to reproduce itself exactly as it read at first. But I can always force something to return; and this something remains sharply distinct during perusal. Then it turns faint grey, and appears to sink—as through thick milk—backward out of sight.

By regularly taking care to write down, immediately upon awakening, whatever I could remember reading in the dream-book, I found myself able last year to reproduce portions of the text. But the order in which I now present these fragments is not at all the order in which I recovered them. If they seem to have any inter-connection, this is only because I tried to arrange them in what I imagined to be the rational sequence. Of their original place and relation, I know scarcely anything. And, even regarding the character of the book itself, I have been able to discover only that a great part of it consists of dialogues about the Unthinkable.

Fr. I

. . . Then the Wave prayed to remain a wave forever.

The Sea made answer:—

“Nay, thou must break: there is no rest in me. Billions of billions of times thou wilt rise again to break, and break to rise again.”

The Wave complained:—

“I fear. Thou sayest that I shall rise again. But when did ever a wave return from the place of breaking?”

The Sea responded: —

“Times countless beyond utterance thou hast broken; and yet thou art! Behold the myriads of the waves that run before thee, and the myriads that pursue behind thee!—all have been to the place of breaking times unspeakable; and thither they hasten now to break again. Into me they melt, only to swell anew. But pass they must; for there is not any rest in me.”

Murmuring, the Wave replied:—

“Shall I not be scattered presently to mix with the mingling of all these myriads? How should I rise again? Never, never again can I become the same.”

“The same thou never art,” returned the Sea, “at any two moments in thy running: perpetual change is the law of thy being. What is thine ‘I’? Always thou art shaped with the substance of waves forgotten,—waves numberless beyond the sands of the shores of me. In thy multiplicity what art thou?—a phantom, an impermanency!”

“Real is pain,” sobbed the Wave,—“and fear and hope, and the joy of the light. Whence and what are these, if I be not real?”

“Thou hast no pain,” the Sea responded,—“nor fear nor hope nor joy. Thou art nothing—save in me. I am thy Self, thine ‘I’: thy form is my dream; thy motion is my will; thy breaking is my pain. Break thou must, because there is no rest in me; but thou wilt break only to rise again,—for death is the Rhythm of Life. Lo! I, too, die that I may live: these my waters have passed, and will pass again, with wrecks of innumerable worlds to the burning of innumerable suns. I, too, am multiple unspeakably: dead tides of millions of oceans revive in mine ebb and flow. Suffice thee to learn that only because thou wast thou art, and that because thou art thou wilt become again.”

Muttered the Wave,—

“I cannot understand.”

Answered the Sea,—

“Thy part is to pulse and pass,—never to understand. I also,—even I, the great Sea,—do not understand. . .”

Fr. II

“The stones and the rocks have felt; the winds have been breath and speech; the rivers and oceans of earth have been locked into chambers of hearts. And the palingenesis cannot cease till every cosmic particle shall have passed through the uttermost possible experience of the highest possible life.”

“But what of the planetary core?—has that, too, felt and thought?”

Even so surely as that all flesh has been sun-fire! In the ceaseless succession of integrations and dissolutions, all things have shifted relation and place numberless billions of times. Hearts of old moons will make the surface of future worlds. . . .”

Fr. III

. . . “No regret is vain, It is sorrow that spins the thread,—softer than moonshine, thinner than fragrance, stronger than death,—the Gleipnirchain of the Greater Memory. .

“In millions of years you will meet again;—and the time will not seem long; for a million years and a moment are the same to the dead. Then you will not be all of your present self, nor she be all that she has been: both of you will at once be less, and yet incomparably more. Then, to the longing that must come upon you, body itself will seem but a barrier through which you would leap to her—or, it may be, to him; for sex will have shifted numberless times ere then. Neither will remember; but each will be filled with a feeling immeasurable of having met before. . . .”

Fr. IV

. . . “So wronging the being who loves,—the being blindly imagined but of yesterday,—this mocker mocks the divine in the past of the Soul of the World. Then in that heart is revived the countless million sorrows buried in forgotten graves,—all the old pain of Love, in its patient contest with Hate, since the beginning of Time.

“And the Gods know,—the dim ones who dwell beyond Space,—spinning the mysteries of Shape and Name. For they sit at the roots of Life; and the pain runs back to them; and they feel that wrong,—as the Spider feels in the trembling of her web that a thread is broken. . . .”

Fr. V

“Love at sight is the choice of the dead. But the most of them are older than ethical systems; and the decision of their majorities is rarely moral. They choose by beauty,—according to their memory of physical excellence; and as bodily fitness makes the foundation of mental and of moral power, they are not apt to choose ill. Nevertheless they are sometimes strangely cheated. They have been known to want beings that could never help ghost to a body,—hollow goblins. . . .”

Fr. VI

. . . “The Animulæ making the Self do not fear death as dissolution. They fear death only as reintegration,—recombination with the strange and the hateful of other lives: they fear the imprisonment, within another body, of that which loves together with that which loathes. . . .”

Fr. VII

. . . “In other time the El-Woman sat only in waste places, and by solitary ways. But now in the shadows of cities she offers her breasts to youth; and he whom she entices, presently goes mad, and becomes, like herself, a hollowness. For the higher ghosts that entered into the making of him perish at that goblin-touch,—die as the pupa dies in the cocoon, leaving only a shell and dust behind. . . .”

Fr. VIII

The Man said to the multitude remaining of his Souls:—

“I am weary of life.”

And the remnant replied to him:—

“We also are weary of the shame and pain of dwelling in so vile a habitation. Continually we strive that the beams may break, and the pillars crack, and the roof fall in upon us.”

“Surely there is a curse upon me,” groaned the Man. “There is no justice in the Gods!”

Then the Souls tumultuously laughed in scorn,—even as the leaves of a wood in the wind do chuckle all together. And they made answer to him:—

“As a fool thou liest! Did any save thyself make thy vile body? Was it shapen—or misshapen—by any deeds or thoughts except thine own?”

“No deed or thought can I remember,” returned the Man, “deserving that which has come upon me.”

“Remember!” laughed the Souls. “No—the folly was in other lives. But we remember; and remembering, we hate.”

“Ye are all one with me!” cried the Man,—“how can ye hate?”

“One with thee,” mocked the Souls,—“as the wearer is one with his garment! . . . How can we hate? As the fire that devours the wood from which it is drawn by the fire-maker—even so we can hate.”

“It is a cursed world!” cried the Man—“why did ye not guide me?”

The Souls replied to him:—“Thou wouldst not heed the guiding of ghosts that were wiser than we. . . . Cowards and weaklings curse the world. The strong do not blame the world: it gives them all that they desire. By power they break and take and keep. Life for them is a joy, a triumph, an exultation. But creatures without power merit nothing; and nothingness becomes their portion. Thou and we shall presently enter into nothingness.”

“Do ye fear?”—asked the Man.

“There is reason for fear,” the Souls answered. “Yet no one of us would wish to delay the time of what we fear by continuing to make part of such an existence as thine.”

“But ye have died innumerable times?”—wonderingly said the Man.

“No, we have not,” said the Souls,—“not even once that we can remember; and our memory reaches back to the beginnings of this world. We die only with the race.”

The Man said nothing,—being afraid. The Souls resumed:—

“Thy race ceases. Its continuance depended upon thy power to serve our purposes. Thou hast lost all power. What art thou but a charnel-house, a mortuary-pit? Freedom we needed, and space: here we have been compacted together, a billion to a pin-point! Doorless our chambers and blind;—and the passages are blocked and broken;—and the stairways lead to nothing. Also there are Haunters here, not of our kind,—Things never to be named.”

For a little time the Man thought gratefully of death and dust. But suddenly there came into his memory a vision of his enemy’s face, with a wicked smile upon it. And then he wished for longer life,—a hundred years of life and pain,—only to see the grass grow tall above the grave of that enemy. And the Souls mocked his desire:—

“Thine enemy will not waste much thought upon thee. He is no half-man,—thine enemy! The ghosts in that body have room and great light. High are the ceilings of their habitation; wide and clear the passageways; luminous the courts and pure. Like a fortress excellently garrisoned is the brain of thine enemy;—and to any point thereof the defending hosts can be gathered for battle in a moment together. *His* generation will not cease—nay! that face of his will multiply throughout the centuries! Because thine enemy in every time provided for the needs of his higher ghosts: he gave heed to their warnings; he pleased them in all just ways; he did not fail in reverence to them. Wherefore they now have power to help him at his need. . . . How hast thou revered or pleased us?”

The Man remained silent for a space. Then, as in horror of doubting, he questioned:—

“Wherefore should ye fear—if nothingness be the end?”

“What is nothingness?” the Souls responded.

“Only in the language of delusion is there an end. That which thou callest the end is in truth but the very beginning. The essence of us cannot cease. In the burning of worlds it cannot be consumed. It will shudder in the cores of great stars;—it will quiver in the light of other suns. And once more, in some future cosmos, it will reconquer knowledge—but only after evolutions unthinkable for multitude. Even out of the nameless beginnings of form, and thence through

every cycle of vanished being,—through all successions of exhausted pain,—through all the Abyss of the Past,—it must climb again.”

The Man uttered no word: the Souls spoke on:—

“For millions of millions of ages must we shiver in tempests of fire: then shall we enter anew into some slime primordial,—there to quicken, and again writhe upward through all foul dumb blind shapes. Innumerable the metamorphoses!—immeasurable the agonies! . . . And the fault is not of any Gods: it is thine!”

“Good or evil,” muttered the Man,—“what signifies either? The best must become as the worst in the grind of the endless change.”

“Nay! “ cried out the Souls; “for the strong there is a goal,—the goal that thou couldst not strive to gain. They will help to the fashioning of fairer worlds;—they will win to larger light;—they will tower and soar as flame to enter the Zones of the Divine. But thou and we go back to slime! Think of the billion summers that might have been for us!—think of the joys, the loves, the triumphs cast away!—the dawns of the knowledge undreamed,—the glories of sense unimagined,—the exultations of illimitable power! . . . think, think, O fool, of all that thou hast lost!”

Then the Souls of the Man turned themselves into worms, and devoured him.