

RECOLLECTIONS

*THE REMINISCENCES OF THE BUSY LIFE OF ONE
WHO HAS PLAYED THE VARIED PARTS OF
SAILOR, AUTHOR & LECTURER*

BY
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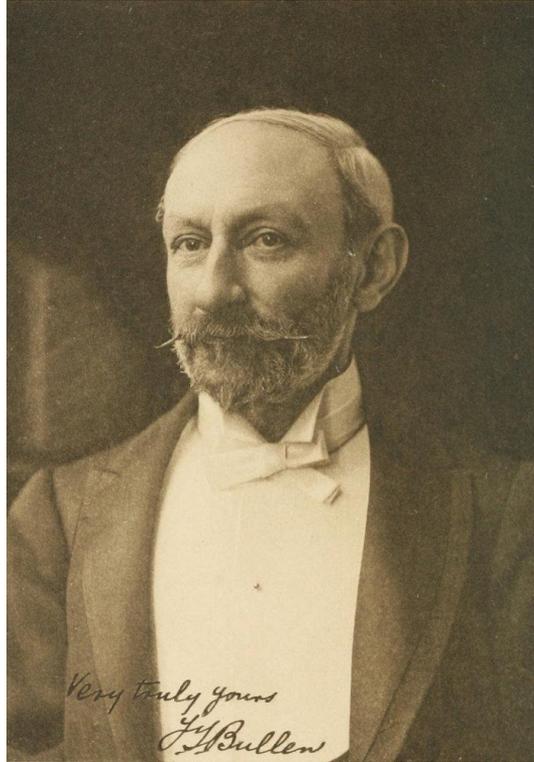
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RECOLLECTIONS



INTRODUCTION

It may very well be that I am doing something now which is totally unnecessary, indeed that is a foregone conclusion as far as many omnivorous readers are concerned, for they never by any chance read a Preface or an Introduction. But only the other day I was reading an interesting volume of reminiscences, and the writer said that after the publisher had received the manuscript he wrote sternly demanding the reason why there was no Introduction. More, he said that one must be written forthwith, and it was so.

Now I cannot honestly say that I, like that writer whom I have quoted, am a novice at book writing, or have much to learn concerning the ways of publishers, since this book will make about the thirty-sixth that has been perpetrated by me during the last seventeen years. Too many, far too many, I know (this to forestall the obvious remark), but what I want to say is that in no case have I ever been asked for an Introduction, or questioned why I had written one. Follows inevitably the remark, "Why this one, then? Can't you let your book tell its own tale?"

And yet I feel very strongly that an Introduction to this book is needed, if ever a book needed such a thing. For I really believe that it may be my last; I dare not be more definite than that, though I would dearly love to emulate those giants of literature who can calmly announce that they have written their last page for publication, that for good or ill their message has been

delivered and they will say no more. Ah no, fate has not dealt kindly enough with me for that, and because the snarl of the proverbial wolf is never out of my ears and the spoor of his stealthy footfall is but too clearly traceable near my door, I must still be ready to take up my pen. This Introduction may serve as my valedictory, if, as it is most reasonable to expect, this book happens to be my last.

And now for the Introduction. For a good many years I have been telling the stories that I have gathered here. It may very well be, of course, that, as Kipling says, all that seemed so definite and amusing in the spoken word has escaped when committed to paper. But I hope not, because I have often been asked why I did not write my reminiscences of the lecture platform, and I have always made some excuse, so that now when I have done it at last, it would be a great pity for it to be a failure.

Of course, the thing has been done before; it would be strange if it hadn't; but I have not had the pleasure of reading even the very entertaining book written on the subject by the late Paul Blouet (Max O'Rell), a veritable prince of humorists. I am inclined to think that in one sense at any rate this is an advantage in that I cannot consciously or unconsciously have copied any of their sayings, or told of any of their doings, however interesting or funny. For the same reason there cannot be any "chestnuts" in this book. Everything told in it, except where the contrary has been expressly stated, is an experience of my own. I am rather pleased about this, for I have recently been more than a little disgusted to find how many oft-told stories have been repeated in costly books of

memoirs, the names of whose writers should have been guarantee enough that they had sufficient good stories of their own to tell without drawing upon antiquities.

I hope I shall be given due credit for the fact that many really good stories (as I think) have been omitted by me simply because the point of them demanded that the actors should be known, and I would not give those good people pain. Other stories I have had to leave out because I was not looking for trouble and because I was somewhat doubtful of the far-reaching operations of the law of libel. And that, I think, is all I can say by way of Introduction to my book.

FRANK T. BULLEN.

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CHAPTER I

MY EARLIEST RECOLLECTIONS

A few years ago I was in the breakfast-room of the beautiful Hotel Frontenac at Quebec awaiting my meal at a sunny table, when I caught sight of the head waiter. He was so strikingly like the comedian W. H. Berry, to whom I can never be sufficiently grateful for his mirth-compelling performances, that I sent a waiter to request his attendance. He came on the instant, and I immediately asked him if he were any relation to Mr. Berry, although as I could not then recall that gentleman's name, it took me some time to explain whom I meant. Smilingly the head waiter disclaimed the relationship, saying:

"There was never an actor in our family that I know of. I come from a suburb of London called Paddington." ("So do I," I interjected.) "I was born in a little turning off Jonson Place, Harrow Road, called Alfred Road." ("So was I," I interrupted again.) "At number —." "Ah," I said, "my number was next door."

Why this chronicling of the smallest of small beer? Because I have never seen anybody more delighted than that bright and able man at meeting some one who was born in the same street as himself. We have no choice in the matter, but I doubt very much whether any tie draws men tighter when they meet abroad than that their place of birth was near each other—even in the same town is often enough to set up a friendship almost masonic in its intensity. Wherefore I recall the fact that

I first saw the light in that poor street off Jonson Place, but have no recollection of its amenities. For before even I, precocious as I undoubtedly was, grew old enough to know intelligently, or say at eighteen months old, my father and mother quarrelled, the weaker vessel was thrown out, and myself, as well as an elder sister of whom I know nothing except that she did exist, were consigned to the care of a maiden aunt by my father, with a promise, never redeemed, to pay something towards the expense of keeping us.

That shadowy sister very wisely took the earliest opportunity of becoming a shade, so I remember nothing of her but what I have been told. I may say here that I have often, in the terrible years since, had occasion to wish that I too might then have saved myself all further trouble; but alas! a tenaciousness of purpose and a stock of vitality which has not yet all gone have so far hindered me that, although I am physically a very wreck and was twelve years ago given at the outside three years to live, I am still topside. Well, as a cynical American friend once told me, "That's only one more mistake you've made, I guess." I cannot contradict him.

Thus it came about that my earliest recollections centre on a quaint little house, No. 15 Desboro' Terrace, now called Marlborough Street. By careful comparison and enquiry I have no doubt that I do remember as far back as 1859-60, when I would be 2½ years old. At the end of Desboro' Terrace, remote from the Harrow Road, ran the main line of the Great Western Railway, and turning sharply to the right when you had reached the blank wall that closed the terrace, you came into a row of little houses called Desboro' Place which fronted the

line and were only divided therefrom by a narrow roadway and a line of tall rails. My aunt kept a maid—not, God knows, because she had any pride of that sort, but because she was a dressmaker and could not do the housework and attend to her business too, and also, I am ashamed to say, because she usually had some of her brothers sponging upon her. How well I remember once saying to her:

“Auntie, you used to have quite a lot of people to dinner. I can remember Grandfather, Uncle John, Uncle George, Uncle Tom, Uncle Ted, and Aunt Kitty.”

“Ah,” she replied, “yes, but you never knew that my poor fingers were working for them all, except Aunt Kitty—she always worked hard enough for her keep.”

So I said no more. And now I must return to one of my earliest recollections. The maid, her work done, was permitted to take me out, and she used to take me down Desboro’ Place and stand me on the coping clutching the rails and looking down at the puff-puffs. There I saw the wonderful engines of that day, the “Charles Dickens,” the “Robin Hood,” and once the Queen’s special engine, the stately “Lord of the Isles,” with the big gilt crown on the front. I knew the names of many engines and never wanted to go and see the shops, the puff-puffs supplied all my needs, until one day, in an evil moment for her, she took me over the little wooden foot-bridge that still spans the line there. And a passing engine sent a cloud of steam up through the crevices of the planks of the bridge floor, passing up my little bare legs even unto my waist under my frock. The sensation was a novel one, and thenceforward I clamoured to be led thither. I did not know nor did I care if she, my guardian,

approved of it. I have since felt that I might have been exacting, but peace be unto her whoever she was, she never made complaint that I heard of.

Up till last year I often made journeys from Paddington, but never without glancing up at the railings as we passed Desboro' Place (if that is what it is called now) and at once recalling those dim days. They seem to belong to another life, but they had a quiet charm all their own, entirely due to the good influence of my poor aunt, who, amidst all her worries, always kept a cosy corner for me. My education was her chief care, and happily for me we lived next door to a dame-school kept by three maiden ladies. Of my experiences there I have told at length elsewhere, so I will only say here that my principal recollection of next door is of the ladies' father, a nasty old man whose chief delight seemed to be to get me on his knee in the summer-house and puff strong tobacco smoke in my face. It was of no use struggling or screaming, though I did both, he seemed to have no mercy. I was taught by those gentle ladies that it was a deadly sin to hate anybody, but I came as near hating that old man as made very little odds.

Another curious fact emerges about this time when I would be between four and five years old. I could read—indeed I do not know when I learned, so easy did reading always seem—and from the kind of books to the reading of which I was confined, I had a large and extensive vocabulary, the use of which at inopportune moments often made some of my uncles very angry and brought down upon my head many sarcastic comments. But having no one to whom I could talk or play, I used to march in stately fashion round the small garden,

holding the grand old Tom cat's tail, as he paced majestically before me, and declaim as if to gaping congregations my addresses upon—ah, I don't remember what! Of course, the themes were religious, could hardly be otherwise remembering my reading, but I would like to know what I used to say aloud then, and the neighbours' opinions thereupon. As I never heard the latter I must assume that I did not make much noise, not even when, as it were, smitten by sudden madness, I varied my sermons with yells of Murder! Fire! Thieves! No, it could not have been noisy, because I remember that it never scared old Dick, the faithful cat. He was my constant companion, so by that I know that I can never have been cruel.

Indeed the whole environment was as pure and cloistered as could be imagined. A worse preparation for a rough-and-tumble with the world could hardly be imagined, but my poor auntie did her best, the best she knew for me, and kept me, as far as in her lay, unspotted from the world. Of course there were, there always must be, occasions when the primitive man comes to the surface, and I was no exception to the rule. As, for instance, we once had visitors and I was ousted from my aunt's bed where I had always slept and put with a Mrs. Rawlins, a large lady whom I had taken a vivid dislike to, for no reason, very early in her visit. To please this person the sheets were taken off and my tender skin was excoriated by the coarse blankets. And she wasn't a nice person. She took up most of the bed; she snored astoundingly, and—well, it doesn't matter now—but I did not sleep a wink all night, and at the earliest opportunity besought my auntie not to let me sleep with that old woman any more. I don't know what was done, but I do

know that I was restored to my auntie's bed the next night and said my prayers twice through in sheer gratitude for the relief.

There was a wedding at our house; my Aunt Kitty was married and my prospective uncle endeavoured to ingratiate himself with me. To no purpose. I didn't like him, and I wouldn't be cajoled by him. I was not a bit surprised to find in later years that all my childish aversions were justified. But of that great upheaval one fact stands saliently forward: I had a new muslin Garibaldi with bishops' sleeves and round pearl buttons, a bright plaid skirt, strap shoes and white socks. I was then nearly six years old, but nobody so much as dreamed of a masculine dress for me, and certainly I thought nothing of the matter. But shortly after the wedding at Holy Trinity Church, Paddington, the child of one of my uncles needed baptism, and my wedding garments being fresh, it was deemed a good opportunity for me to be baptised too. Some doubt existed as to whether I had ever been baptised at all, but my poor mother was a Catholic, and I have since learned that, however low she may have sunk, the priest would have insisted upon her child being baptised in the Faith.

Auntie did not know that; she belonged, as she put it, to the "Angelical" Church of England, and so I was baptised at Holy Trinity Church with my infant cousin, and very well do I remember the whole scene. The great empty echoing church and the little group of godfathers and godmothers, the nervous young curate whose cool hand shook so as he placed it on my head and made the sign on my forehead, the clumsy, blundering way in which everybody seemed to behave, except the baby who squalled lustily in the curate's arms and made

him go crimson—ah yes—it is all so vividly present to me now. As is also the astounding thought in my small brain that I could do the whole thing so much better than any of them, conscious, mind you, that I was the most self-possessed person in the little crowd. And that night, when as usual I mounted to the top of the house and went to bed alone, for auntie did not come till one a.m. sometimes, I felt singularly defiant as I knelt to say my prayers. The hole in the palliasses made by their being turned end for end, as sailors say, and the corners cut out for the bedposts coming together, quite lost their power to frighten me by the possibility of some evil thing coming out and doing me some mysterious harm; nor did I any longer fear old Joe, Miss Moore's great macaw, with which she used to threaten us when we were naughty, though he had hitherto always seemed to be lurking under the bed every night.

No; like the 'Badian and Jamaican nigger who considers that going to church on the occasion of his marriage (though there is often a long family by that time) gives him a clean bill of spiritual health for all past and future soul-sicknesses, I had some dim idea that from henceforth I was immune from the terror that walketh by night. I did not put it that way, of course, but that certainly was the immediate effect of my baptism. But it was a clean little soul, after all. Lack of opportunity had prevented sin, and I did not even know the joy of an occasional theft of jam or sugar. Then came an episode which I am sure most people will find difficult of belief, and no one more so than myself, for a reason presently to be given.

One of my uncles was a gentleman's groom, and through lying in a damp bed he had contracted some disease of the throat

which made him an invalid for five long years. All that time he lived with auntie, but I believe his sweetheart, who was lady's maid at the big house where he had been employed, remained faithful to him and paid auntie for his keep. He attended Dr. Sieveking at St. Mary's Hospital, and always took me with him on the days when he went. My recollections of those days are all grey. He never joked, never even talked to me, and as for giving me a penn'orth of sweets—I doubt if the idea ever occurred to him. At last he died, and I, who did not know anything about death, of course was banished from all the discussions which took place. Of course, being a secretive and very quiet child, I asked no questions; but I bided my time. It came. He was laid in his coffin in the next room to ours—the bedroom which auntie and I occupied.

They sent me up to bed as usual and I went through all the usual formulæ of retiring. And then I got up, crept out upon the landing, listened intently, and, hearing nothing, fled into the death room. There lay the coffin on its trestles covered with a sheet. The moon shone through the white blinds as if they had not been there. I drew the sheet back and looked upon that face. I do not believe I should have been terrified at all, but a handkerchief was tied under his jaw and over his head and it gave him an appearance that I cannot describe. And one of his eyes was half open. I drew the sheet rapidly back, I slid to the door, passed through it, closed it behind me, listened again—no sound—crept into bed and covered my head with the bedclothes. I lay for over an hour with thumping heart and panting breath, but I slept at last. And I have never been able to look upon the dead without terrible sensations since—indeed,

I have not seen a dead face since I lost my youngest boy fifteen years ago.

But I notice that I am lingering too long over those earliest days. Yet I must just pause a moment over the change from my much-loved and comfortable petticoats to trousers. My poor old grandfather had died and been buried by my auntie, and from a pair of his best trousers she made me my initial pair. Poor lady, she knew rather less than most people of the make of masculine garments, but she did her best, and presently, in the midst of a little group of giggling work-girls I was endued with the tubes. That's what they were, just tubes, and my little legs felt as forlorn and distant in them as if they had no connection with me. I draw a veil over other details as not being seemly, but as I forlornly surveyed myself standing there, with those tubes nearly reaching to my shoulders, the giggling of the girls burst into unquenchable laughter and I nearly died with shame. No child likes to be an object of laughter, but that I certainly was then, and all my aunt's well-meant efforts to stay the yells of laughter were fruitless.

They were taken off me then, but I wore them; oh yes, I wore them, and what I endured from the street urchins who saw me in them I can never tell—the trouble was too great. But as all those troubles were soon to be merged in a much greater trouble, I must pass them over and get on. Once and once only I had seen my mother. A heap of old clothing like a pile of autumn leaves was shown me, and I was told that *that* was my mother who had come to see me but had been taken ill. I was frightened, and ran to hide myself. And I never saw her again. It was not long after this that my poor auntie died, and I having

no one, for my father being a British workman with a strong desire to back horses and play billiards, could not be expected to want me, I was flung upon the streets.

I have told the story of that time fairly fully in different books, but I may perhaps just pause here to point out that the position was not common. For I had been brought up in a sheltered home without even the faintest knowledge of evil, brought up more like a tender little girl than a boy, and then suddenly, at the age of nine, I was flung into a veritable maelstrom of vice. I don't comment upon this; I just state the fact that this happened in 1866, when I was barely nine years old.

CHAPTER II

RANDOM MEMORIES

So very minutely have I detailed in four different books the various happenings in my life that I am confined to two periods for recollections, but those two embrace what to me at any rate were full of interest. The first of these was my officer time at sea, and the second the period since my emancipation from the desk until now. It is true that I have touched upon events in the first period in *With Christ at Sea*, but very lightly, and there are many reminiscences unconnected with that book which rush to the mind now.

For instance, there is a little matter connected with my visit to Noumea, New Caledonia, when I was mate of a colonial barque, that for some queer reason has been persistent in my memory lately. I'm sure I wonder that I haven't used it before, for it has all the elements of a good story in it. It must be remembered that Noumea is a French convict settlement, and while I say nothing about the treatment of the convicts, I need not labour the point that any attempt to escape means the shortest possible shrift to the escapee if caught in the act. Now at the time of which I write there were five warships in the harbour, a few schooners, my own barque and a French convict ship. I had been ashore and found on coming down to the beach that I had, as we say, "lost my passage," i.e. my boat had gone without me.

Now I had a great dread of staying ashore at night in a foreign port (oh, yes, I know that proves me to have been any

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