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IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

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The Landscape Garden

The garden like a lady fair was cut
That lay as if she slumbered in delight,
And to the open skies her eyes did shut;
The azure fields of heaven were 'sembled right
In a large round set with flow'rs of light:
The flowers de luce and the round sparks of dew
That hung upon their azure leaves, did show
Like twinkling stars that sparkle in the ev'ning blue.

—GILES FLETCHER

No more remarkable man ever lived than my friend, the young Ellison. He was remarkable in the entire and continuous profusion of good gifts ever lavished upon him by fortune. From his cradle to his grave, a gale of the blandest prosperity bore him along. Nor do I use the word Prosperity in its mere wordly or external sense. I mean it as synonymous with happiness. The person of whom I speak, seemed born for the purpose of foreshadowing the wild doctrines of Turgot, Price, Priestley, and Condorcet—of exemplifying, by individual instance, what has been deemed the mere chimera of the perfectionists. In the brief existence of Ellison, I fancy, that I have seen refuted the dogma—that in man's physical and spiritual nature, lies some hidden principle, the antagonist of Bliss. An intimate and anxious examination of his career, has taught me to understand that, in general, from the violation of a few simple laws

of Humanity, arises the Wretchedness of mankind; that, as a species, we have in our possession the as yet unwrought elements of Content,—and that even now, in the present blindness and darkness of all idea on the great question of the Social Condition, it is not impossible that Man, the individual, under certain unusual and highly fortuitous conditions, may be happy. With opinions such as these was my young friend fully imbued; and thus is it especially worthy of observation that the uninterrupted enjoyment which distinguished his life was in great part the result of preconcert. It is, indeed evident, that with less of the instinctive philosophy which, now and then, stands so well in the stead of experience, Mr. Ellison would have found himself precipitated, by the very extraordinary successes of his life, into the common vortex of Unhappiness which yawns for those of preeminent endowments. But it is by no means my present object to pen an essay on Happiness. The ideas of my friend may be summed up in a few words. He admitted but four unvarying laws, or rather elementary principles, of Bliss. That which he considered chief, was (strange to say!) the simple and purely physical one of free exercise in the open air. “The health,” he said, “attainable by other means than this is scarcely worth the name.” He pointed to the tillers of the earth—the only people who, as a class, are proverbially more happy than others—and then he instanced the high ecstasies of the fox-hunter. His second principle was the love of woman. His third was the contempt of ambition. His fourth was an object of unceasing pursuit; and he held that, other things

being equal, the extent of happiness was proportioned to the spirituality of this object.

I have said that Ellison was remarkable in the continuous profusion of good gifts lavished upon him by Fortune. In personal grace and beauty he exceeded all men. His intellect was of that order to which the attainment of knowledge is less a labor than a necessity and an intuition. His family was one of the most illustrious of the empire. His bride was the loveliest and most devoted of women. His possessions had been always ample; but, upon the attainment of his one and twentieth year, it was discovered that one of those extraordinary freaks of Fate had been played in his behalf which startle the whole social world amid which they occur, and seldom fail radically to alter the entire moral constitution of those who are their objects. It appears that about one hundred years prior to Mr. Ellison's attainment of his majority, there had died, in a remote province, one Mr. Seabright Ellison. This gentleman had amassed a princely fortune, and, having no very immediate connexions, conceived the whim of suffering his wealth to accumulate for a century after his decease. Minutely and sagaciously directing the various modes of investment, he bequeathed the aggregate amount to the nearest of blood, bearing the name Ellison, who should be alive at the end of the hundred years. Many futile attempts had been made to set aside this singular bequest; their ex post facto character rendered them abortive; but the attention of a jealous government was aroused, and a decree finally obtained, forbidding all similar accumulations. This act

did not prevent young Ellison, upon his twenty-first birth-day, from entering into possession, as the heir of his ancestor, Seabright, of a fortune of four hundred and fifty millions of dollars. {*1}

When it had become definitely known that such was the enormous wealth inherited, there were, of course, many speculations as to the mode of its disposal. The gigantic magnitude and the immediately available nature of the sum, dazzled and bewildered all who thought upon the topic. The possessor of any appreciable amount of money might have been imagined to perform any one of a thousand things. With riches merely surpassing those of any citizen, it would have been easy to suppose him engaging to supreme excess in the fashionable extravagances of his time; or busying himself with political intrigues; or aiming at ministerial power; or purchasing increase of nobility, or devising gorgeous architectural piles; or collecting large specimens of Virtu; or playing the munificent patron of Letters and Art; or endowing and bestowing his name upon extensive institutions of charity. But, for the inconceivable wealth in the actual possession of the young heir, these objects and all ordinary objects were felt to be inadequate. Recourse was had to figures; and figures but sufficed to confound. It was seen, that even at three per cent, the annual income of the inheritance amounted to no less than thirteen millions and five hundred thousand dollars; which was one million and one hundred and twenty-five thousand per month; or thirty-six thousand, nine hundred and eighty-six per day, or one thousand five hundred and forty-one per

hour, or six and twenty dollars for every minute that flew. Thus the usual track of supposition was thoroughly broken up. Men knew not what to imagine. There were some who even conceived that Mr. Ellison would divest himself forthwith of at least two-thirds of his fortune as of utterly superfluous opulence; enriching whole troops of his relatives by division of his superabundance.

I was not surprised, however, to perceive that he had long made up his mind upon a topic which had occasioned so much of discussion to his friends. Nor was I greatly astonished at the nature of his decision. In the widest and noblest sense, he was a poet. He comprehended, moreover, the true character, the august aims, the supreme majesty and dignity of the poetic sentiment. The proper gratification of the sentiment he instinctively felt to lie in the creation of novel forms of Beauty. Some peculiarities, either in his early education, or in the nature of his intellect, had tinged with what is termed materialism the whole cast of his ethical speculations; and it was this bias, perhaps, which imperceptibly led him to perceive that the most advantageous, if not the sole legitimate field for the exercise of the poetic sentiment, was to be found in the creation of novel moods of purely physical loveliness. Thus it happened that he became neither musician nor poet; if we use this latter term in its every-day acceptation. Or it might have been that he became neither the one nor the other, in pursuance of an idea of his which I have already mentioned—the idea, that in the contempt of ambition lay one of the essential

principles of happiness on earth. Is it not, indeed, possible that while a high order of genius is necessarily ambitious, the highest is invariably above that which is termed ambition? And may it not thus happen that many far greater than Milton, have contentedly remained "mute and inglorious?" I believe the world has never yet seen, and that, unless through some series of accidents goading the noblest order of mind into distasteful exertion, the world will never behold, that full extent of triumphant execution, in the richer productions of Art, of which the human nature is absolutely capable.

Mr. Ellison became neither musician nor poet; although no man lived more profoundly enamored both of Music and the Muse. Under other circumstances than those which invested him, it is not impossible that he would have become a painter. The field of sculpture, although in its nature rigidly poetical, was too limited in its extent and in its consequences, to have occupied, at any time, much of his attention. And I have now mentioned all the provinces in which even the most liberal understanding of the poetic sentiment has declared this sentiment capable of expatiating. I mean the most liberal public or recognized conception of the idea involved in the phrase "poetic sentiment." But Mr. Ellison imagined that the richest, and altogether the most natural and most suitable province, had been blindly neglected. No definition had spoken of the Landscape-Gardener, as of the poet; yet my friend could not fail to perceive that the creation of the Landscape-Garden offered to the true muse the most magnificent of

opportunities. Here was, indeed, the fairest field for the display of invention, or imagination, in the endless combining of forms of novel Beauty; the elements which should enter into combination being, at all times, and by a vast superiority, the most glorious which the earth could afford. In the multiform of the tree, and in the multicolor of the flower, he recognized the most direct and the most energetic efforts of Nature at physical loveliness. And in the direction or concentration of this effort, or, still more properly, in its adaption to the eyes which were to behold it upon earth, he perceived that he should be employing the best means—laboring to the greatest advantage—in the fulfilment of his destiny as Poet.

“Its adaptation to the eyes which were to behold it upon earth.” In his explanation of this phraseology, Mr. Ellison did much towards solving what has always seemed to me an enigma. I mean the fact (which none but the ignorant dispute) that no such combinations of scenery exist in Nature as the painter of genius has in his power to produce. No such Paradises are to be found in reality as have glowed upon the canvass of Claude. In the most enchanting of natural landscapes, there will always be found a defect or an excess—many excesses and defects. While the component parts may exceed, individually, the highest skill of the artist, the arrangement of the parts will always be susceptible of improvement. In short, no position can be attained, from which an artistical eye, looking steadily, will not find matter of offence, in what is technically termed the composition of a natural landscape. And yet how

unintelligible is this! In all other matters we are justly instructed to regard Nature as supreme. With her details we shrink from competition. Who shall presume to imitate the colors of the tulip, or to improve the proportions of the lily of the valley? The criticism which says, of sculpture or of portraiture, that "Nature is to be exalted rather than imitated," is in error. No pictorial or sculptural combinations of points of human loveliness, do more than approach the living and breathing human beauty as it gladdens our daily path. Byron, who often erred, erred not in saying, I've seen more living beauty, ripe and real, than all the nonsense of their stone ideal. In landscape alone is the principle of the critic true; and, having felt its truth here, it is but the headlong spirit of generalization which has induced him to pronounce it true throughout all the domains of Art. Having, I say, felt its truth here. For the feeling is no affectation or chimera. The mathematics afford no more absolute demonstrations, than the sentiment of his Art yields to the artist. He not only believes, but positively knows, that such and such apparently arbitrary arrangements of matter, or form, constitute, and alone constitute, the true Beauty. Yet his reasons have not yet been matured into expression. It remains for a more profound analysis than the world has yet seen, fully to investigate and express them. Nevertheless is he confirmed in his instinctive opinions, by the concurrence of all his compeers. Let a composition be defective; let an emendation be wrought in its mere arrangement of form; let this emendation be submitted to every artist in the world; by each will its necessity be admitted. And

even far more than this, in remedy of the defective composition, each insulated member of the fraternity will suggest the identical emendation.

I repeat that in landscape arrangements, or collocations alone, is the physical Nature susceptible of "exaltation" and that, therefore, her susceptibility of improvement at this one point, was a mystery which, hitherto I had been unable to solve. It was Mr. Ellison who first suggested the idea that what we regarded as improvement or exaltation of the natural beauty, was really such, as respected only the mortal or human point of view; that each alteration or disturbance of the primitive scenery might possibly effect a blemish in the picture, if we could suppose this picture viewed at large from some remote point in the heavens. "It is easily understood," says Mr. Ellison, "that what might improve a closely scrutinized detail, might, at the same time, injure a general and more distantly observed effect." He spoke upon this topic with warmth: regarding not so much its immediate or obvious importance (which is little), as the character of the conclusions to which it might lead, or of the collateral propositions which it might serve to corroborate or sustain. There might be a class of beings, human once, but now to humanity invisible, for whose scrutiny and for whose refined appreciation of the beautiful, more especially than for our own, had been set in order by God the great landscape-garden of the whole earth.

In the course of our discussion, my young friend took occasion to quote some passages from a writer who has been supposed to have well treated this theme.

“There are, properly,” he writes, “but two styles of landscape-gardening, the natural and the artificial. One seeks to recall the original beauty of the country, by adapting its means to the surrounding scenery; cultivating trees in harmony with the hills or plain of the neighboring land; detecting and bringing into practice those nice relations of size, proportion and color which, hid from the common observer, are revealed everywhere to the experienced student of nature. The result of the natural style of gardening, is seen rather in the absence of all defects and incongruities—in the prevalence of a beautiful harmony and order, than in the creation of any special wonders or miracles. The artificial style has as many varieties as there are different tastes to gratify. It has a certain general relation to the various styles of building. There are the stately avenues and retirements of Versailles; Italian terraces; and a various mixed old English style, which bears some relation to the domestic Gothic or English Elizabethan architecture. Whatever may be said against the abuses of the artificial landscape-gardening, a mixture of pure art in a garden scene, adds to it a great beauty. This is partly pleasing to the eye, by the show of order and design, and partly moral. A terrace, with an old moss-covered balustrade, calls up at once to the eye, the fair forms that have passed there in other days. The slightest exhibition of art is an evidence of care and human interest.”

“From what I have already observed,” said Mr. Ellison, “you will understand that I reject the idea, here expressed, of ‘recalling the original beauty of the

country.' The original beauty is never so great as that which may be introduced. Of course, much depends upon the selection of a spot with capabilities. What is said in respect to the 'detecting and bringing into practice those nice relations of size, proportion and color,' is a mere vagueness of speech, which may mean much, or little, or nothing, and which guides in no degree. That the true 'result of the natural style of gardening is seen rather in the absence of all defects and incongruities, than in the creation of any special wonders or miracles,' is a proposition better suited to the grovelling apprehension of the herd, than to the fervid dreams of the man of genius. The merit suggested is, at best, negative, and appertains to that hobbling criticism which, in letters, would elevate Addison into apotheosis. In truth, while that merit which consists in the mere avoiding demerit, appeals directly to the understanding, and can thus be foreshadowed in Rule, the loftier merit, which breathes and flames in invention or creation, can be apprehended solely in its results. Rule applies but to the excellences of avoidance—to the virtues which deny or refrain. Beyond these the critical art can but suggest. We may be instructed to build an *Odyssey*, but it is in vain that we are told how to conceive a '*Tempest*,' an '*Inferno*,' a '*Prometheus Bound*,' a '*Nightingale*,' such as that of Keats, or the '*Sensitive Plant*' of Shelley. But, the thing done, the wonder accomplished, and the capacity for apprehension becomes universal. The sophists of the negative school, who, through inability to create, have scoffed at creation, are now found the loudest in applause. What,

in its chrysalis condition of principle, affronted their demure reason, never fails, in its maturity of accomplishment, to extort admiration from their instinct of the beautiful or of the sublime.

"Our author's observations on the artificial style of gardening," continued Mr. Ellison, "are less objectionable. 'A mixture of pure art in a garden scene, adds to it a great beauty.' This is just, and the reference to the sense of human interest is equally so. I repeat that the principle here expressed, is incontrovertible; but there may be something even beyond it. There may be an object in full keeping with the principle suggested—an object unattainable by the means ordinarily in possession of mankind, yet which, if attained, would lend a charm to the landscape-garden immeasurably surpassing that which a merely human interest could bestow. The true poet possessed of very unusual pecuniary resources, might possibly, while retaining the necessary idea of art or interest or culture, so imbue his designs at once with extent and novelty of Beauty, as to convey the sentiment of spiritual interference. It will be seen that, in bringing about such result, he secures all the advantages of interest or design, while relieving his work of all the harshness and technicality of Art. In the most rugged of wildernesses—in the most savage of the scenes of pure Nature—there is apparent the art of a Creator; yet is this art apparent only to reflection; in no respect has it the obvious force of a feeling. Now, if we imagine this sense of the Almighty Design to be harmonized in a measurable degree, if we suppose a landscape whose combined strangeness,

vastness, definitiveness, and magnificence, shall inspire the idea of culture, or care, or superintendence, on the part of intelligences superior yet akin to humanity—then the sentiment of interest is preserved, while the Art is made to assume the air of an intermediate or secondary Nature—a Nature which is not God, nor an emanation of God, but which still is Nature, in the sense that it is the handiwork of the angels that hover between man and God.”

It was in devoting his gigantic wealth to the practical embodiment of a vision such as this—in the free exercise in the open air, which resulted from personal direction of his plans—in the continuous and unceasing object which these plans afforded—in the high spirituality of the object itself—in the contempt of ambition which it enabled him more to feel than to affect—and, lastly, it was in the companionship and sympathy of a devoted wife, that Ellison thought to find, and found, an exemption from the ordinary cares of Humanity, with a far greater amount of positive happiness than ever glowed in the rapt day-dreams of De Staël.

