

The Blindman's World.

The narrative to which this note is introductory was found among the papers of the late Professor S. Erastus Larrabee, and, as an acquaintance of the gentleman to whom they were bequeathed, I was requested to prepare it for publication. This turned out to be a very easy task, for the document proved to be of extraordinary character, that it published at all, it should obviously be without change. It appears that the professor did really, at one time in his life, have an attack of vertigo, or something of the sort, under circumstances similar to those described by him, and to that extent his narrative may be founded on fact. How soon it shifts from that foundation, or whether it does at all, the reader must conclude for himself. It appears certain that the professor never related to any one while living the stranger features of the experience here narrated, but this might have been merely from fear that his standing as a man of science would be thereby injured.

Edward Bellamy.

THE PROFESSOR'S NARRATIVE.

At the time of the experience of which I am about to write, I was professor of astronomy and higher mathematics at Abercrombie College. Most astronomers have a speciality, and mine was the study of the planet Mars, our nearest neighbor but one in the Sun's little family. When no important celestial phenomena in other quarters demanded attention, it was on the ruddy disc of Mars that my telescope was most often focused. I was never weary of tracing the outlines of its continents and seas, its capes and islands, its bays and straits, its lakes and mountains. With intense interest I watched from week to week of the Martial winter the advance of the polar ice-cap toward the equator, and its corresponding retreat in the summer; testifying across the gulf of space as plainly as written words to the existence on that orb of a climate like our own. A speciality is always in danger of becoming an infatuation, and my interest in Mars, at the time of which I write, had grown to be more than strictly scientific. The impression of the nearness of this planet, heightened by the wonderful distinctness of its geography as seen through a telescope, appeals strongly to the imagination of the astronomer. On fine evenings I used to spend hours, not so much critically observing as brooding over its radiant surface, till I could almost persuade myself that I saw the breakers dashing on the bold shore of Kelper land, and heard the muffled thunder of avalanches descending the snow-clad mountains of Mitchell. No earthly landscape had the charm to hold my gaze of that far-off planet, whose oceans, to the unpracticed eye, seem but darker, and its continents lighter spots and bands.

Astronomers have agreed in declaring that Mars is undoubtedly habitable by beings like ourselves, but as may be supposed, I was not in a mood to be satisfied with considering it merely habitable. I allowed no sort of question that it was habitable. What manner of beings these inhabitants might be I found a fascinating speculation. The variety of types appearing in mankind even on this small Earth makes it most presumptuous to assume that the citizens of different planets may not be characterized by diversities far profounder. Wherein such diversities, coupled with a general resemblance to man, might consist, whether in mere physical differences or in different mental laws, in the lack of certain of the great passive motors of men or the possession of quite other, were weird themes of never-failing attractions for my mind. The El Dorado visions with which the virgin mystery of the New World inspired the early Spanish explorers were tame and prosaic compared with the speculations which it was perfectly legitimate to indulge, when the problem was the conditions of life on another planet.

It was the time of the year when Mars is most favorably situated for observation, and, anxious not to lose an hour of the precious season, I had spent the greater part of several successive nights in the observatory. I believed that I had some original observations to the trend of the coast of Kepler Land between Lagrange Peninsula and Christie Bay, and it was to this spot that my observations were partially directed.

On the fourth night other work detained me from the observing-chair till after midnight. When I had adjusted the instrument and took my first look at Mars, I remember being unable to restrain a cry of admiration. The planet was fairly dazzling. It seemed nearer and larger than I had ever seen it before, and its peculiar ruddiness more striking. In thirty years of observation, I recall, in fact, no occasion when the absence of exhalations in our atmosphere has coincided with such cloudlessness in that of Mars as on that night. I could plainly make out the white masses of vapour at the opposite edges of the lighted disc, which are the mists of its dawn and evening. The snowy mass of Mount Hall over against Kepler Land stood out with wonderful clearness, and I could unmistakably detect the blue tint of the ocean of De La Rue, which washes its base,—a feat of vision often, indeed, accomplished by star-gazers, though I had never done it to my complete satisfaction before.

I was impressed with the idea that if I ever made an original discovery in regard to Mars, it would be on that evening, and I believed that I should do it. I trembled with mingled exultation and anxiety, and was obliged to pause to recover my self-control. Finally, I placed my eye to the eye-piece, and directed my gaze upon the portion of the planet in which I was specially interested. My attention soon became fixed and absorbed much beyond my wont, when observing, and that implied no ordinary degree of abstraction. To all mental intents and purposes I was on Mars. Every faculty, every susceptibility of sense and intellect, seemed gradually to pass into the eye, and become concentrated in the act of gazing. Every atom of nerve and will power combined in the strain to see a little, and yet a little, clearer, farther, deeper.

The next thing I knew I was on the bed that stood in a corner of the observing-room, half raised on an elbow, and gazing intently at the door. It was broad daylight. Half a dozen men, including several of the professors and a doctor from the village, were around me. Some were trying to make me lie down, others were asking me what I wanted, while the doctor was urging me to drink some whiskey. Mechanically spelling their offices, I pointed to the door and ejaculated, "President Byxbee—coming," giving expression to the one idea which my dazed mind at that moment contained.

And sure enough, even as I spoke the door opened, and the president, with a look of surprise, somewhat blown with climbing the steep stairway, stood on the threshold. With a sensation of prodigious relief, I fell back on my pillow.

"It appeared that I had swooned while in the observing-chair, the light before me, and had been found by the janitor in the morning, my head fallen forward on the telescope, as if still observing, but my body cold, rigid, pulseless, and unresponsive." In a couple of days I was back to my bed, and should soon have forgotten the episode but for a very interesting conjecture which had suggested itself in connection with it. This was nothing less than that, while I lay in that swoon, I was in a conscious state outside and independent of the body, and in that state received impressions and exercised perceptive powers. For this extraordinary theory I had no other evidence than the fact of my knowledge in the moment of awaking that President Byxbee was coming up the stairs. But slight as this clue was, it seemed to me unmistakable in its significance. That knowledge was certainly on my mind on the instant of arousing from the swoon. It certainly could not have been there before I fell into the swoon. I must therefore have gained it in the meantime; that is to say, I must have been in a conscious percipient state while my body was insensible.

If such had been the case, I reasoned that it was altogether unlikely that the trivial impression as to President Byxbee had been the only one which I had received in that state. It was far more probable that it had remained over in my mind, on waking from the swoon, merely because it was the latest of a series of impressions received while outside the body. That these impressions were of a kind most strange and startling, seeing that they were those of a disembodied soul exercising faculties more spiritual than those of the body, I could not doubt. The desire to know what they had been grew upon me, till it became a longing which left me no repose. It seemed intolerable that I should have secrets from myself, that my soul should withhold its experiences from my intellect. I would gladly have consented that the acquisitions of half my waking lifetime should be blotted out, if it exchanged I might be shown the record of what I had seen and known during those hours of which my waking memory showed no trace. None the less for the conviction of its hopelessness, but rather all the more, as the perversity of our human nature will have it, the longing for this forbidden lore grew on me, till the hunger of Eve in the Garden was mine.

Constantly brooding over a desire that I felt to be vain, tantalized by the possession of a clue which only mocked me, my physical condition became at length affected. My health was disturbed and my rest at night was broken. A habit of walking in my sleep, from which I had not suffered since childhood, recurred, and caused me frequent inconvenience. Such had been, in general, my condition for some time, when I awoke one morning with the strangely weary sensation by which my body usually betrayed the secret of the imposition put upon it in sleep, of which otherwise I should have suspected nothing. In going into the study connected with my chamber, I found a number of freshly written sheets on the desk. Astonished that any one should have been in my rooms while I slept, I was astonished, on looking more closely, to observe that the handwriting was my own. How much more than astonished I was on reading the matter that had been set down, the reader may judge if he shall pursue. For these written sheets apparently contained the longed-for but despaired-of record of those hours when I was absent from the body. They were the lost chapter of my life; or rather not lost at all, for it had been no part of my waking life, but stolen from that sleep-memory on which mysterious tablets may well be inscribed tales as much more marvellous than this as this is stranger than most stories.

It will be remembered that my last recollection before awaking in my bed, on the morning after the swoon, was of contemplating the coast of Kepler Land with an unusual concentration of attention. As well as I can judge,—and that is no better than any one else,—it is with the moment that my bodily power succumbed and I became unconscious that the narrative which I found on my desk begins.

THE DOCUMENT FOUND ON MY DESK.

Even had I not come as straight and swift as the beam of light that made my path, a glance about would have told me to what part of the universe I had fared. No earthly landscape could have been more familiar. I stood on the high coast of Kepler Land where it trends southward. A brisk westerly wind was blowing and the waves of the ocean of De La Rue were thundering at my feet, while the broad blue waters of Christie Bay stretched away to the southwest. Against the northern horizon, rising out of the ocean like a summer thunder-head, for which at first I mistook it, towered the far-distant, snowy summit of Mount Hall.

Even had the configuration of land and sea been less familiar, I should none the less have known that I stood on the planet whose ruddy hue is at once the admiration and puzzle of astronomers. Its explanation I now recognized in the tint of the atmosphere, a coloring comparable to the haze of Indian summer, except that its hue was a faint rose instead of purple. Like the Indian summer haze, it was impalpable, and without impeding the view bathed all objects near and far in a glamour not to be described. As the gaze turned upward, however, the deep blue of space so far overcame the roseate tint that one might fancy he were still on Earth.

As I looked about me I saw many men, women, and children. They were in no respect dissimilar, so far as I can see, to the men, women, and children of the Earth, save for something almost childlike in the untroubled serenity of their faces, unfurrowed as they were by any trace of care, of fear, or of anxiety. This extraordinary youthfulness of aspect made it difficult, indeed, save by careful scrutiny, to distinguish the young from the middle-aged, maturity from advanced years. Time seemed to have no tooth on Mars.

I was gazing about me, admiring the crimson-lighted world, and these people who appeared to hold happiness by a tenure so much firmer than men's when I heard the words, "You are welcome," and, turning, saw that I had been accosted by a man with the stature and bearing of middle age, though his countenance, like the other faces which I had noted, wonderfully combined the strength of a man's with the serenity of a child's. I thanked him and said,

"You do not seem surprised to see me." "Amazed, not at all," he answered, "of course, that I was to meet you to-day. And not only that, but I may say I am already in a sense acquainted with you through a mutual friend, Professor Edgerly. He was here last month, and I met him at that time. We talked of you and your interests in our planet. I told him I expected you." "Edgerly?" I exclaimed. "It is strange that he has said nothing of this to me. I met him, every day, and he reminded me that it was in a dream that Edgerly, like myself, had visited Mars, and on awaking had recalled nothing of his experience, just as I should recall nothing of mine. When will men learn to interrogate the dream soul of the marvels it sees in its wanderings? Then he will no longer need to improve his telescope to find out the secrets of the universe. 'Do you people visit the Earth in the same manner?' I asked my companion. 'Certainly,' he replied; 'but there we find no one able to recognize us and converse with us as I am conversing with you, although myself in the waking state. You, as yet, lack the knowledge we possess of the spiritual side of the human nature which we share with you.' 'That knowledge must have enabled you to learn much more of the Earth than we know of you,' I said. 'Indeed it has,' he replied. 'From visitors such as you, of whom we entertain a concourse constantly, we have acquired familiarity with your civilization, your history, your manners, and even your literature and languages. Have you not noticed that I am talking with you in English, which is certainly not a tongue indigenous to this planet?' 'Among so many wonders I scarcely observed that,' I answered. 'For ages,' pursued my companion, 'we have been waiting for you to improve your telescopes so as to approximate the power of ours, after which communication between the planets would be easily established. The progress which you make is, however, so slow that we expect to wait ages yet.' 'Indeed, I fear you will have to,' I replied. 'Our opticians already talk of having reached the limits of their art.' 'Do not imagine that I spoke in any spirit of petulance,' my companion resumed. 'The slowness of your progress is not so remarkable to us as that you make any at all, burdened as you are by a disability so crushing that if we were in your place I fear we would sit down in utter despair.' 'To what disability do you refer?' I asked. 'You seem to be men like us.' 'And so we are,' was the reply, 'save in one particular, but the difference is tremendous. Endowed otherwise like us, you are destitute of the faculty of foresight, without which we should think our other faculties well-nigh valueless.' 'Foresight?' I repeated. 'Certainly you cannot mean that it is given you to know the future?' 'It is given not only to us,' was the answer, 'but so far as we know, to all other intelligent beings of the universe except yourselves. Our positive knowledge extends only to our system of moons and planets and some of the nearer foreign systems, and it is conceivable that the remoter parts of the universe may harbor other blind races like your own; but it certainly seems unlikely that so strange and lamentable a spectacle should be duplicated. One such illustration of the extraordinary deprivations under which a rational existence may still be possible ought to suffice for the universe.' 'But no one can know the future except by inspiration of God,' I said. 'All our faculties are inspirations of God,' was the reply, 'but there is surely nothing in foresight to cause it to be so regarded more than any other. Think a moment of the physical analogy of the case. Your eyes are placed in the front of your heads. You would deem it an odd mistake if they were placed behind. That would appear to you an arrangement calculated to defeat their purpose. Does it not seem equally rational that the mental vision should range forward, as it does with us, illuminating the path one is to take, rather than backward, as with you, revealing only the course you have already trodden, and therefore have no more concern with? But it is no doubt a merciful provision of Providence that renders you unable to realize the grotesqueness of your predicament, as it appears to us.

"But the future is eternal!" I exclaimed. "How can a finite mind grasp it?" "Our foreknowledge implies only human faculties," was the reply. "It is limited to our individual careers on this planet. Each of us foresees the course of his own life, but not that of other lives, except so far as they are involved with his." "That such a power as you describe could be combined with merely human faculties is more than our philosophers have ever dared to dream," I said. "And yet who shall say, after all, that it is not in mercy that God has denied it to us? If it is a happiness, as it must be, to foresee one's happiness, it must be most depressing to foresee one's sorrow, failures, yea, and even one's death. For if you foresee your lives to the end, you must anticipate the hour and manner of your death,—is it not so?" "Most assuredly," was the reply. "Living would be a very precarious business, were we uninformed of its limit. Your ignorance of the time of your death impresses us as one of the saddest features of your condition." "And by us," I answered, "it is held to be one of the most merciful." "Foreknowledge of your death would not, indeed, prevent your dying once," continued my companion, "but it would deliver you from the thousand deaths you suffer through the uncertainty whether you can safely count on the passing day. It is not the death you die, but these many deaths you do not die, which shadow your existence."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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