

## A Lesson of Horace

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It happened, it happened occasionally, and whenever it happened it was unforgettable. I speak of days gone, long years old by this time; and I speak of a school, what we call a “private” school, that flourished once in a big white house among lawns and trees, facing the North Sea from the coast of Kent; and I speak of the good man who ruled the school, and of his attendant ushers, and how they tried to quicken the mind of a small, and not very soaring, human boy. And what happened occasionally was that they succeeded, not often, I think, but now and then, and always – does n’t it seem? – at times when they forgot to try. For so it is; the imagination that will not bestir itself for any word of command or instruction is aroused unfailingly by the sight of the preacher or teacher who forgets – forgets where he is, forgets the small boy, forgets himself, lost in the contemplation of something of his own, an emotion apart, a secret. I remember the sight forever when I have seen it; and here it is now, a pretty possession, as good as new after many years.

It may seem hopeless to exhort and to preach to us, bidding us use our eyes and our wits; and in general it is hopeless, for whatever we are told by the old man and his ushers will have an inherent weakness and taint. It is what they *would* tell us, it is what we should expect of them. Their teaching has always to reckon with the shrewd and skeptical spirit in which I meet it. They may be right – I am not concerned to deny it; but there is this to remember from the first about their doctrine, that right or wrong it is the regular thing and the natural order. Everybody knows that when we sit in school for the daily task, or when we are lectured and found fault with, or when we are addressed with kindly and paternal suasion – everybody knows from the beginning that it could n’t be otherwise, that this is the appointed style; it is to be counted on with confidence, for it is simply the way of the world. I don’t disbelieve absolutely in what I am told and taught; I often find it curious and entertaining; but I meet it inevitably with a doubt and a shade of reserve. Our teachers are part of the great established scheme and they voice its ordinances; and for this reason it is difficult to take them as seriously as perhaps they deserve to be taken.

But it does happen now and then that they forget themselves. In these moments there is no mistaking the new tone of the old man’s voice, the absent

stare of his eye or the suddenly thoughtful tilt of his head; we know his ordinary ways so well that the least departure from them catches our attention in a flash. This is a glimpse of the real thing, a sight of the old man as he is when no one is looking. Sometimes he thus betrays himself in the middle of a lesson in school, lapsing away into his private mind, dropping the familiar mask; at such a moment I instantly begin to notice and to wonder. I am not thinking of the common and well-known occasions when we start one of our pastors off on some ridiculous topic that he never can resist, some foolish fancy that he can always be made to chatter about with a little encouragement; this is a simple game – he babbles contentedly, the strain is relaxed, we take our ease. No, the real glimpse of him off his guard is a quite different matter. It is rare and unexpected and accidental; its virtue is in the fact that it is incalculable. Years afterward I remember it, a luminous point in the gray desert of routine; and I begin to see how potently it wrought upon the shooting of a very young idea.

Look at this, for example – look at the little scene. The old man on this occasion was standing in front of the big blackboard, facing his class for a lesson in the *Odes* of Horace; and we sat at our desks before him, waiting for the proceedings to begin in the time-honored style. A lesson of Horace is “construing,” and somebody is “put on to construe” – which means that he stands up in his place and opens the ball by reading a stanza aloud in Latin. Then he pauses and looks back, picks out a likely word, – it should be something we term a “nom’ative,” – repeats it, translates it into English; and that accounts for the “nom’ative,” and the first step is accomplished. He casts about again and finds a “verb,” and so far it is n’t really difficult; but doubts begin to gather very quickly, the track is lost, the featureless words stare from the page without a sign. The pauses lengthen, the old man grows impatient, till the construer desperately plunges, is pulled back, is shoved forward; and gradually word after word is dealt with and put behind him, a meaning has been provided for each of them, and the construing of the stanza is achieved.

Now we look up, waiting to learn who is to tackle the next lines; and when he is named the rest of us feel relieved, and we sit patient while he settles the business of the second stanza: and I discover with a jump that he has finished it, and that I myself am being called upon for the third. Well, one does what one can. There is peace for the construer when he resumes his seat, peace until the end of the hour; and at last the entire lesson is disposed of and the old man satisfied on the whole. We have construed an ode of Horace.

That is the time-honored everyday style. But one morning the old man, standing before the blackboard, his hands clutching his coat, – picture him with a mild and venerable and kindly face, spectacled, his big domed head scholastically bald above a fringe of close gray curls; clerically dressed in black, low-collared, white-tied; his eyes rather dim and vague behind his glasses, gazing peacefully: there he is! – one morning he stood in front of us at the beginning of the lesson, and instead of putting somebody on to construe he waited, he stared over our heads; and then he broke out in a gentle mournful chant upon the opening words of our ode. He seemed to be saying them to himself – he knew them by heart. *Eheu fugaces, Postume, Postume* – he had a tuneful and flexible voice, and he threw into it a pensive lament as he dwelt upon the repeated name. *Postume – Postume* – oh, how time flies, how helplessly we see it vanish, how soon we are faced by the assault of age! He chanted the words very musically and appealingly – yet not quite seriously either, not sentimentally, but rather as if he liked to join company with an old friend, old popular Horace, in a plaintive strain that *he* did n't mean very seriously; for these regrets and laments, they belong to the smooth philosophy of an honest poet, comfortable enough in his worldly wisdom —and a companionable old poet, so life-seasoned, so familiar to a scholar who has known him by heart for fifty years. There is a touch of humor in their relation; Horace does n't pretend to be perfectly solemn, and the scholar drops easily into his mood; though after all it is true, sadly true, that time is fleeting and death is tameless – quite true enough to set an old man agreeably musing and mooning as he chants the words. He had forgotten our presence; he repeated the whole ode through to the end.

I suppose we then proceeded to construe it as usual, to provide meanings for the blind mouths of the blank words on the page. Of that I remember nothing; all I know is that the echo of the scholar's meditative singsong is still as clear as yesterday in the brain of one of his listeners. I did n't understand a word of it, doubtless; but even on the spot I understood something better than the sense of a not very remarkable poem. I was distinctly impressed – not by Horace, but by the pleasing emotion of our fine old master; for he seemed to be carried off into the unknown, and I gazed intently with an obscure idea that our desks and ink-pots and daily constringings were far beneath him, that he had slipped away, forgetful of himself and of us, to a brighter and richer region, one that he naturally preferred. It appeared to me that his own level was really up there; and I don't know that I thought it out, but I certainly felt in a manner that he possessed a secret, an interesting secret aloof from our common round. That

notion of his falling into half-humorous companionship with the easy-minded poet is of course a later finding – perhaps even of to-day, as I listen once more to the musical echo I describe; yet whatever I find there now is only the fullness and the completion of that which began at the moment, on the spot, when the gaze of the young spectator followed him into the unknown. Moreover I had my own reflection on the matter, even then. The world of light, so far removed from our daily inky task, was the world of noble and exquisite and distinguished things of some sort: the right word failed me, no doubt, but I was on the track of it.

He did n't often give himself away so felicitously as this; he held us to the routine of our task, and he had long ago – for he really was rather old – fixed the lines and forms of his teaching, and he seldom broke out of them into unexpected flights. We knew mainly what to look for in the quiet and gentlemanly hours that we spent at our little desks, under his eye. He belonged to an “old school”; he used no frivolous modern arts to cajole us into consenting to be taught, to caress our difficult attention. He was kind, and we liked to please him; and on the whole it was n't hard to please him, for his rule was easy and consistent. He was paternal without taking liberties; he treated us neither as children to be played with nor as fine young lads to be trounced and flattered and tamed. And indeed we never were either in his presence; we were people of politeness, decently observing the forms of a civilized society, respecting and respected. So at least I felt for my part, and it was refreshing to find how the desperate problems of ordinary life were put aside in his company; I seemed to be nearly always responsible and dignified when I was with the old man. There was an explosion occasionally, and he could be rather terrible in his wrath; but in general it was a smooth and reassuring tenor of a way, where one could forget the common perplexities of one's station and degree. We talked like sensible beings, we discussed and reasoned and compared opinions; he struck me at the time as a well-informed and level-headed man of the world.

He struck me particularly by contrast with his assistants, the under-masters. There were several of these, and they varied from time to time, and I liked them all; two or three of them were very amusing and attaching in their ways. But I never doubted that, compared with the old man, they were raw, they were uninformed and inexperienced; their behavior lacked the repose and their humor had n't the mannerly dryness that mark the man of the world. Before I reached the courteous culture of the top class I had passed through the hands of more than one of these underlings; and I don't deny that things were livelier

under their direction – for there were shocks and jerks in their teaching, sudden storms, jeers of sarcasm, roaring jests, that often brisked up the school hours surprisingly. But with all credit to the spirits and talents of these good souls we must admit that they somehow *lowered* life, cheapening and popularizing it, where the old man kept it always high and handsome. I must allow that the commoner part of myself, which is also the larger, exceedingly enjoys the less elevated style; I relish the unconventional sprawling and bawling of the creatures, the freedom they permit themselves, the smartness of their retorts. Sometimes they make me laugh so much that vital organs seem to crack within me; and when there are storms and squalls it is really exciting, glorious at times, so long as they don't actually burst on my head. All this I grant; but none the less I can't help seeing that the way of the old man is truly superior, and I know that when he passes and glances, not disapprovingly, at these more animated scenes we all feel a trifle rude and babyish, including the cheerful sprawler himself.

And furthermore there are certain things for which I shall never to the end forgive the attendant ushers, one or two of them. They may deride and attack me during school hours and in the way of discipline; it is unpleasant while it lasts, but it is natural, it may happen to anybody, and I bear no malice. Not for any professional malignity in school, but for their shameful treatment of me, now and then, in hours of freedom – for this I blast them. If it weren't beneath me to avenge myself I could name the odious wretch, here and now, who once made a public fool of me at a very ticklish crisis in my career – at a moment when I had all but succeeded in gaining foothold in the best society.

The more fashionable circle at my private school was very properly exclusive, and I may have deceived myself at the moment I speak of, but I did think I saw a chance of winning its favor, its toleration at any rate; and I was proceeding so carefully, so artfully, when all in a minute my hope was shattered, my labor undone, by a scene so painful that even to satisfy my rancor I could n't now describe it. If it had happened in school it would have mattered little; nobody thinks the worse of you for being pilloried, even very ignominiously, for an official indiscretion or offense. But one has the right, I must believe, to demand that out of school, in society, a mere usher should respect the social decencies, should n't wantonly add to the difficulties of the much-enduring social climber. On his own ground we fully allow the usher's claim – let him make the most of it; but if he wishes to join us in society he should humble himself, drop his privilege, consider our feelings without unjust discrimination. I am not asking the impossible; I don't in the least object to what we call "favoring," which is a

human weakness. Brilliance and charm will always have their victories – I think it only natural. But I do expect that the man who favors my comely rival shall do so at no expense to me, shall refrain from taking sides with him against my own inelegance.

I must say, however, that miserable episodes of this sort were rare; it was only one or two of the ushers who fell so low. As for the old man, our chief, – and him I presently *shall* name, with ceremony and respect, – it was utterly unthinkable that *he* should presume, should trifle with our legitimate rights and claims. I justly valued the tone of his unofficial conversation. On certain afternoons he used to walk with us in the country; he led the way, a large and straggling company streamed behind him; and many and many a time I have been one of the pair who hung to his side for an admirable talk. We touched upon politics, literature, science – not heavily, not pedantically, but in the easy style of cultivated men. Our friend was widely read on all sorts of subjects, he had a scholarly taste; but I never thought him a mere bookworm – he was a man of affairs as well as learning. He knew the world, he sat on a weekly board that met in the neighboring town; and at the same time he was n't an ordinary party-man, for I always felt that he treated practical questions with a certain philosophic calm. He was also a good country gentleman; he owned a small farmyard, close to the school, and we used to join him in watching the fattening of his pigs, not without pride. Over all these matters of thought and action we ranged as we walked; we were liberal and broad in our views, without falling into crude extremes. I stored up dozens of mellow and humorous anecdotes, many of which still figure in my talk. And then there was his reading aloud – an hour every evening after school, before prayers and bedtime. At seven o'clock the last lesson was finished, and he marched away from the big school-room, clasping an armful of papers – off to his study upstairs, where a select circle immediately followed him. I was never one of those who find it tedious or frumpish to read books to themselves; I was rather a gallant though plodding reader; but I could n't pretend that by myself I ever brought my books to life as our friend so splendidly brought them. He made a book really live – that is the word. The story rose up and opened out and closed about you, the people of the story seemed to be talking in the room – only that the room was forgotten; you sat and watched the drama in its own surroundings.

There were evenings when I was positively transformed. While I sat and listened I became far more capable of reckless generosity and shining bravery and proud self-sacrifice than I was at other times; it was my true self that

rose to the surface. These are deep experiences. Or again we returned, we constantly returned and never too often, to the prodigious gorgeous world of Dickens, where experience is wide, illimitably spacious, rather than mysteriously deep; with Dickens I forgot my higher nature, I lost myself in the breathing, thronging, entrancing crowd. But I was wrong in saying that I forgot the room, our friend's rather dull little study, into which we packed for these beautiful sessions; for I find that room, with its bookshelves and great writing-table and scattered chairs, still inextricably tangled in memory with the vision of Mrs. Nickleby and the Blimbers and the sinister convict in the churchyard. Oh, he did make them live – his reading was superbly dramatic. The very earth, when the hour was at an end and we trooped down to prayers, was the larger for it.

But with all this I am not getting on with my studies in school, and I wanted to see whether our kind old friend ever dropped into poetry over our prosaic construals save in that single curious episode of *Eheu fugaces*. I fear not. I could n't have forgotten it if he had, and I recall nothing else of quite that charming effect. It is something at any rate to feel that in three years there was one incident, five minutes long, which gave me the inkling of a hint of a suspicion that the books of the ancients had a meaning. I don't wish to blacken the darkness of my ignorance in this matter; I knew that the words in these books had each its meaning, it you could remember or guess the right one; I knew that the whole ode of Horace or page of Xenophon would "make sense" if you managed to get the right meanings in the right order; and with these convictions I considered myself – on fortunate occasions I was even considered – a rather promising scholar.

It is true that scholarship is a queer touch-and-go accomplishment; for on some mornings all my inspiration seemed to fail, my guesses were rejected; I never discovered the infallible sign, whatever it is, that distinguishes the right guess from the wrong. But this is n't essential; on the whole I could trust my luck, and more often than not I could make the ancients make the expected sense. It was therefore particularly striking and surprising to receive a hint, once in three years, that Horace might be made to do more, might even affect a man as a writer of poetry. Of course I knew that Horace is a great poet; I could have told you so at any time. But there remains the old deep difference between knowing a thing and believing it; and the hint that I received began to work obscurely, starting a little train of speculation that might end – who can say where? It was n't only the classics that we studied, to be sure; all learning was our province, from Greek Testament in the early morning to equations

after breakfast, from Smith's *Rome* at noon to science at dusk; and if there was anything left over it was swept into a general-knowledge paper once a week. For my part I never liked the great vague talkative subjects, like Divinity or English History, where one gets lost in an aimless drift of information on which the memory can nowhere bite. I always preferred my learning crisp and short, with nice little dictated notes that could be got by heart, honest answers to plain questions. I should have made a laudable young Pharisee in the schools of Judea; I could far more easily have become word-perfect in the Pentateuch than I could learn to "discuss the bearing" or "trace the development" of things; such phrases dried me up at once. I toiled in the wake of those to whom discussing and tracing came more readily; but I caught up again in Latin verses, and I even became quite skillful in fitting together the neat mosaic of "sense" and "epithets" that results in elegiacs.

Our old friend wrote beautiful verses himself – not that I could well savor their style, but I admired the suavely flowing and graceful hand in which he copied them out; from his handwriting alone he could be esteemed a poet. And however far we might be carried in the quest of other studies, back we came again, day in, day out, to the humaner letters, to the declension and the paradigm; and there was the old scholar standing before the blackboard, book in hand, with his gold spectacles and his fringe of iron-gray curls – the very paragon of a man of culture, nourished for a lifetime upon the sages and poets of antiquity.

And what he really did for us, I now perceive, was simply that he looked like that, *was* that; he taught us, and taught us more than I can measure, by merely living and moving in the perfume of noble letters. Nothing in the world is more catching, when the sensitive young are exposed to it; stealing into the mind, insidiously clinging there, it spreads into the furthest corners, into unsuspected crannies. I may or may not be a budding poet, one who greedily absorbs the stuff that feeds a young imagination, one who is to flower on his own account in due season; but in any case the lingering perfume, caught from another when I was ten years old, hangs on and on in the recesses of my stiffening, narrowing mind, and a few sweet traces of it will remain when my mind is at length set fast in the solemnity or the triviality of the prime of life.

It is n't much, you may think, to show for the long labors of my education; I agree that it is n't much, and I maintain that it might have been more. But it was n't my fault if our pastors held too scrupulously to their antique tradition; and at least they gave me this, even if they largely gave it by accident and



oversight – this, that I still remember the delicate dry fragrance which is about the path of an elegantly quoting and versifying scholar. It may not be my line; I may often declare that all that rubbish of Greek and Latin was a sheer waste of time in a stern competitive world. But you must n't in that case listen only to my language; for it still happens to me as to Bishop Blougram – there comes a “sunset-touch, a fancy from a flower-bell,” and I recall the scholar's absentminded chant of the far-away music with a singular stirring of envy. Tagging to and fro at my business in a competitive world, do I find the world so lovely that I need n't envy the old man that refreshment, those resources? For an occasional moment in my dusty prime, as I stare at the headlines of the evening paper in the train, the mournful lament returns to me sweetly and tenderly – *Postume, Postume!* It is better than nothing, if it is n't much.

But what, I dream! – for I fared better than this, my budding fancy blossomed in the liberal air, I was duly a poet. I was an inferior poet to some of my friends, one or two of whom had a splendid abundant free-flowering genius – mine was always painfully forced. But in one fashion or another we responded, not a few of us, to the boon of great literature that was revealed in the old man's looks and ways. Not in entire uncomeliness and not in utter clownishness we passed out of his hands; we had a standard, we knew the tone of the man who frequents the Muses. We may presently have thought it very mild, very dim and antiquated; for if one is classic and austere at ten or twelve, be sure that one is faint with exquisite languors at fifteen. Yet the memory stayed, the gift of this old man. We left him and passed on our journeys; he let us depart with a quiet benediction, and perhaps none of us saw much of him ever after.

To be demonstrative in his care of us, to be insistent in his influence, to follow us on our journeys with open solicitude – these were not his ways; there was a grave gleam of emotion and good will as he said good-bye, and then he turned to his books, humming a tuneful air, and was ready for the new young plants confided to his keeping. I left him seated at the big writing-table in his study, whence he looked out over a sloping lawn and an ilex grove to the blue line of the summer sea. We did n't miss each other after we had parted; neither at twelve nor at sixty is the parting of friends any great agitation of the inner man. The time when a friend can trouble our feelings hadn't yet arrived for me; it had long passed for him. But we parted in mutual kindness, and he gave me a little volume of his own poems for a token. *Dorica*, it was called – by Edward

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This to his memory.