

MEMORIES OF JAMES SETH

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ON a warm, sunny afternoon in the autumn of 1889, two men walked slowly down Young Avenue to the entrance of Point Pleasant Park, which Halifax children call in their childish way the Golden Gates. One was an old man, slight, and bent, and strengthless; his companion, a young man with a thick brown beard and wearing glasses, accommodated his pace to the elder's feeble steps. They were deep in conversation, discussing no doubt the Object and the Subject, or threading some Socratic dream; for the old man was William Lyall, Professor of Philosophy at Dalhousie, and the young man was James Seth, fresh from Edinburgh, who was to take his place. The old man had four months to live; his young companion, thirty-five years. One need not be a mystic to see a parable here, the progress of two philosophers to Gates of Gold.

Other and intimate memories come crowding. How kindly and sincerely he welcomed a new colleague to the Little College! At once began a friendship which was to be unaffected by removal, distance, and the lapse of years. There were long walks together about the environs of the city, and exploration of the romantic neighborhood. One walk to Herring Cove stands out from the rest for the discovery of a Mount of Temptation, whence the glory of the distant city was strangely revealed in the westering light, while on the wrinkled blue water, below the cliff, a little schooner tacked to and fro. From their eyrie the two friends could look down upon her deck.

Pleasant indoor scenes also return to mind. A little drawing-room in a quiet street, newly furnished for a new-made bride, found Seth a frequent visitor. Sunday afternoon was a good meeting time beside the tea-table. The hostess was flattered by his requests for yet another cup, for he had a Johnsonian affection for the Chinese herb. He was a friend of both husband and wife, and when the baby came, he included her in the triple bond. A baby is always an object of deepest interest to a philosopher, the cornerstone of the old-fashioned psychology. For none of the three did he ever lose his interest, even when the baby grew up and had babies of her own. At Christmas time, there were presents for all the

family,—a book for the man, a case of claret for the delicate wife, toys and a wonderful collapsible high-chair for H. R. H. Baby. A man who hath friends must show himself friendly; and Seth was not content to let his friendship be taken for granted. In other and more substantial ways he was a true friend to that household.

Other Halifax interiors are remembered for his illuminating presence,—the dining-room of the old Fricker House, a dinner party in his Inglis Street lodgings, a philosophical evening in his well lighted rooms in South Park Street, Seth discoursing pure reason with a favourite pupil, two other budding Platos in deep converse by themselves, and an unphilosophical fifth person between, giving an ear to each group and striving to translate to himself the high astounding terms as the speakers went along. Always Seth is the figure that stands out in these meetings, the figure of a gentleman, dignified without stiffness, courteous, friendly.

His stay at Halifax was darkened by the sad death of his young and beautiful sister in the first year of marriage, one of the every day tragedies. I saw him come out of the house of mourning, supporting the stricken husband down the steps to take their place behind the hearse. That was a day of sorrow for him and for many others. Not long after the husband died also.

Memory is a parti-coloured web. Humour is not absent, brightening the more serious-coloured stuff. Our icy Halifax sidewalks presented difficulties to the Scot from Edinburgh. Once when he was escorting a lady home from a party, she slipped on the ice, and he was "powerless" in his own uncertain footing to help her,—to his distress and her amusement. Once, in the old Library now covered with dental chairs, he was heckled by two eager, young black-eyed Unitarians on the fundamentals of the Christian faith. The Library should remember Seth, for in the day of small things he gave a series of public lectures on psychology for the benefit of his department and spent the proceeds in books on his subject. The college calendar used to contain an appreciative note on the Seth Collection. Few remember it; but the book labels tell the fact to the curious.

Then, just as he seemed about to become an integral part of Dalhousie, he migrated, first to Brown University in 1892, then in 1896 to Cornell, and finally to the goal of his ambition, Edinburgh. Here he did his greatest work, here he lived beloved and honoured, and here he died. *Emigravit.*

I had a glimpse of Seth in his new environment in May, 1893, when I went prospecting among the American universities. At supper, in his boarding-house in Providence, I met two young

academic persons who have become very well known, John Matthews Manly, now head of the department of English at Chicago, and William Lyon Phelps of Yale. That was a joyous symposium, prolonged far into the night, for the four young men who had much to say to one another. It is pleasant to recall, in passing, the American hospitality of Phelps. On learning that the Canadian professor was on his way to New Haven to visit Yale, he said he would like to entertain him there; and he did. Neither at Brown nor at Cornell was Seth entirely at home. He longed for Edinburgh.

The Christmas of 1894 brought a presentation copy of *A Study of Ethical Principles*, and Seth's visiting card inscribed "With the compliments of the season". This was his first book, the book that made his reputation in the republic of letters and the little dorp of the good. It has been reprinted many times, so a copy of the *editio princeps*, apart from its personal associations, is something of a treasure. That Seth's best book should be a study of ethics was meet and right, for his life exemplified his ideals. The *Study* enjoys a distinction rare among philosophical works, of being eminently readable. Critics who cared nothing for its philosophy praised the book for its style. As a specimen of the printer's art, it is also noteworthy, for Seth regarded the details of appearance as important. On Jan. 7, 1894, he wrote:

Xmas was to me a time of harder work than usual. I am hoping to get my book ready for publication in the autumn. And I dislike American printing, paper, etc., so much that I mean to try to have it printed in England while I am across, and then publish it in both countries.

It was printed by the historic firm of Blackwood in Edinburgh.

In 1892, Seth left Halifax; in 1919, he returned, to attend the Dalhousie Centenary. The years between were bridged by letters, which, according to the Reverend John Donne, join friends closer than kisses. Seth's friendship was precious in the sight of not a few, who—even in this headlong age—took some pains to keep it in repair. A Christmas greeting, the sending of some remembrancer always drew from him courteous and affectionate replies. His closing formula was "Yours ever"; it meant much, coming from him. That he ever wrote to anyone except in courtesy and kindness is incredible, though he was not without strong dislikes. Even if brief and always restrained, *more Scotorum*, his letters were never abrupt or commonplace in phrasing. Familiar letters are familiar letters, intended for the friendly eye alone, and not for the public. Letters of the dead are doubly sacred and doubly precious, not to be given to the world without the best of reasons. But James

Seth was not an obscure man. He filled a famous chair in an old and famous university; he was well known to the world of scholars. Ordinary rules may be broken in the public interest. How the man regarded his well-earned promotion from one post to a higher concerns more than his immediate friends. On March 26, 1896, in reply to a letter of congratulation on his step from Brown to Cornell, he wrote:

It was very kind of you to write me a word of congratulation and well-wishing in view of my "call". You know how much it adds to the cup of one's happiness when it is shared and rejoiced in by one's friends.

The thing came to me quite unexpectedly, as I found myself the "accepted" of the Sage School within two days of my hearing of the thing at all. Schurman summoned me by telegram, and I spent a day at Ithaca, sandwiched between two nights in the train going and coming. Schurman and Mr. Sage were too much for me; and in truth they had a good deal to offer. The "living wage" is \$3,500 *vs.* \$3,000 here (latterly). So I hope to make ends meet. As you say, Cornell is strong in Dalhousians. It is also pretty well stocked with "Britishers," and will be more so when I go. For the Venezuelan business has given a distinct set-back to any process of Americanization that might subtly have been taking place in my character.

Extracts from other letters throw light on Seth's literary preferences. Under date of Sept. 10th, 1921, he writes:

I always re-read the Waverley Novels, as I do Miss Austen, with renewed pleasure and admiration; and, in general, I go back with fresh interest to their earlier works after the modern, up-to-date fiction of our day. I re-read George Eliot lately—and I have been enjoying Dickens this summer. I contemplate a course in Meredith whom I have not read for many years.

Seth was no hermit or recluse. He lived in the present world; and he felt keenly the agonies of the Great War. Writing his thanks for a Christmas greeting referring to the peace, he says (Jan. 12, 1920):

Somehow one doesn't quite feel, as one had expected, the sense of relief—the anguish has been too bitter to leave us the full sense and joy of victory—and the peace is so sadly marred by conflict at home that we are miserably disappointed even of the sense of gain which we had thought would somehow take the place of the sense of loss. Surely, surely the world has had enough of war.

The action or inaction of the United States is another bitter disappointment. But it is just possible that the idealism with which we had credited that people may yet re-assert itself, and the great President be finally vindicated.

One feature of the Dalhousie Centenary of 1919 was the special Convocation in the reading-room of the Macdonald Memorial Library. Never since the college held Convocation in the Council Chamber of the Province House, had this academic function such an appropriate setting. Seth came to Halifax to attend it, and receive his honorary degree. Dalhousians present will remember his appearance on the dais. The brown hair and beard had turned gray; but the slight figure and the dignified bearing were unchanged. Once more he repeated, with all his characteristic sincerity, his conviction that Dalhousie students were unsurpassed by either Americans or Scots. Seth enjoyed his last visit to Halifax. After returning to Edinburgh, he wrote:

I hope you and yours are well. It was a great joy and refreshment to see you and Mrs.—once more, and to find that we met as if we had just parted the other day. And what a joy and satisfaction it was to me to be with you, and other old and tried friends at the celebration of Dalhousie's Centenary. I tried to say so, in halting and insufficient words, at the time.

To him who had so many gifts was not denied the supreme gift, coveted by all, the rare boon of euthanasia. He had been ill, so ill that he found it necessary to resign his chair, but he was a good patient, as a sister testifies, and made an excellent recovery. The end came without warning, and he crowned a happy life with a fair death. His last day on earth was typical. It was like many other days of a good man's life, the usual round of duties and cares, yet with leisure for little unremembered acts of kindness and of love. *Venit summa dies et ineluctabile tempus.* It was Friday, July 25, 1924. He spent the morning writing letters, the last of the many he had written. In the afternoon, he dropped into his club for tea. Then he made two visits. He called on the widow of a colleague who had died about a fortnight before, and whose death he felt keenly. He next went to see his minister, who is a complete invalid. After these acts of charity, he went home, and death took him swiftly. There was no long apprehension, none of the usual indignities and tortures of the sick chamber, no agony of parting, no sadness of farewell.

His life was gentle. Let his own words from his own book stand as epitaph:

The good man dies only to live again: his death is no defeat, it is perfect victory—victory signed and sealed. From such a death there must needs be a glorious resurrection to that new life which has been purchased by the death of the old.