

Tucholsky Wagner Zola Scott
Turgenev Wallace Fonatne Sydon Freud Schlegel
Twain Walther von der Vogelweide Fouqué Friedrich II. von Preußen
Weber Freiligrath Frey
Fechner Fichte Weiße Rose von Fallersleben Kant Ernst Richthofen Frommel
Engels Fielding Hölderlin Eichendorff Tacitus Dumas
Fehrs Faber Flaubert Eliasberg Eliot Zweig Ebner Eschenbach
Feuerbach Maximilian I. von Habsburg Fock Ewald Vergil
Goethe Elisabeth von Österreich London
Mendelssohn Balzac Shakespeare Rathenau Dostojewski Ganghofer
Trackl Stevenson Lichtenberg Doyle Gjellerup
Mommssen Thoma Tolstoi Lenz Hambruch Droste-Hülshoff
Dach Thoma von Arnim Hägele Hanrieder Hauptmann Humboldt
Karrillon Reuter Verne Rousseau Hagen Hauff Baudelaire Gautier
Garschin Defoe Hebbel Hegel Kussmaul Herder
Damaschke Descartes Schopenhauer George
Wolfram von Eschenbach Darwin Dickens Grimm Jerome Rilke Bebel Proust
Bronner Campe Horváth Aristoteles Voltaire Federer Herodot
Bismarck Vigny Gengenbach Barlach Heine Grillparzer Georgy
Storm Casanova Lessing Tersteegen Gilm Gryphius
Chamberlain Langbein Lafontaine Iffland Sokrates
Brentano Strachwitz Claudius Schiller Bellamy Schilling Kralik Gibbon Tschchow
Katharina II. von Rußland Gerstäcker Raabe Gleim Vulpius
Löns Hesse Hoffmann Gogol Morgenstern Goedicke
Luther Heym Hofmannsthal Klee Hölty Kleist
Roth Heyse Klopstock Puschkin Homer Mörike Musil
Luxemburg La Roche Horaz Kraus
Machiavelli Kierkegaard Kraft Kraus Moltke
Navarra Aurel Musset Lamprecht Kind Kirchhoff Hugo
Nestroy Marie de France Laotse Ipsen Liebknecht
Nietzsche Nansen Lassalle Gorki Klett Leibniz Ringelntz
von Ossietzky Marx vom Stein Lawrence Irving
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My Reminiscences

Rabindranath Tagore

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TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

These Reminiscences were written and published by the Author in his fiftieth year, shortly before he started on a trip to Europe and America for his failing health in 1912. It was in the course of this trip that he wrote for the first time in the English language for publication.

In these memory pictures, so lightly, even casually presented by the author there is, nevertheless, revealed a connected history of his inner life together with that of the varying literary forms in which his growing self found successive expression, up to the point at which both his soul and poetry attained maturity.

This lightness of manner and importance of matter form a combination the translation of which into a different language is naturally a matter of considerable difficulty. It was, in any case, a task which the present Translator, not being an original writer in the English language, would hardly have ventured to undertake, had there not been other considerations. The translator's familiarity, however, with the persons, vi scenes, and events herein depicted made it a temptation difficult for him to resist, as well as a responsibility which he did not care to leave to others not possessing these advantages, and therefore more liable to miss a point, or give a wrong impression.

The Translator, moreover, had the author's permission and advice to make a free translation, a portion of which was completed and approved by the latter before he left India on his recent tour to Japan and America.

In regard to the nature of the freedom taken for the purposes of the translation, it may be mentioned that those suggestions which might not have been as clear to the foreign as to the Bengali reader have been brought out in a slightly more elaborate manner than in the original text; while again, in rare cases, others which depend on allusions entirely unfamiliar to the non-Indian reader, have been omitted rather than spoil by an over-elaboration the simplicity and naturalness which is the great feature of the original.

There are no footnotes in the original. All the footnotes here given have been added by the Translator in the hope that they may be of further assistance to the foreign reader. vii

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PART I

1

MY REMINISCENCES

(1)

I know not who paints the pictures on memory's canvas; but whoever he may be, what he is painting are pictures; by which I mean that he is not there with his brush simply to make a faithful copy of all that is happening. He takes in and leaves out according to his taste. He makes many a big thing small and small thing big. He has no compunction in putting into the background that which was to the fore, or bringing to the front that which was behind. In short he is painting pictures, and not writing history.

Thus, over Life's outward aspect passes the series of events, and within is being painted a set of pictures. The two correspond but are not one.

We do not get the leisure to view thoroughly this studio within us. Portions of it now and then catch our eye, but the greater part remains out of sight in the darkness. Why the ever-busy painter is painting; when he will have done; for what gallery his pictures are destined – who can tell? 2

Some years ago, on being questioned as to the events of my past life, I had occasion to pry into this picture-chamber. I had thought to be content with selecting some few materials for my Life's story. I then discovered, as I opened the door, that Life's memories are not Life's history, but the original work of an unseen Artist. The variegated colours scattered about are not reflections of outside lights, but belong to the painter himself, and come passion-tinged from his heart; thereby unfitting the record on the canvas for use as evidence in a court of law.

But though the attempt to gather precise history from memory's storehouse may be fruitless, there is a fascination in looking over the pictures, a fascination which cast its spell on me.

The road over which we journey, the wayside shelter in which we pause, are not pictures while yet we travel—they are too necessary, too obvious. When, however, before turning into the evening rest-house, we look back upon the cities, fields, rivers and hills which we have been through in Life's morning, then, in the light of the passing day, are they pictures indeed. Thus, when my opportunity came, did I look back, and was engrossed.

Was this interest aroused within me solely by a natural affection for my own past? Some personal feeling, of course, there must have been, but the pictures had also an independent artistic value of their own. There is no event in my reminiscences worthy of being preserved for all time. But the quality of the subject is not the only justification for a record. What one has truly felt, if only it can be made sensible to others, is always of importance to one's fellow men. If pictures which have taken shape in memory can be brought out in words, they are worth a place in literature.

It is as literary material that I offer my memory pictures. To take them as an attempt at autobiography would be a mistake. In such a view these reminiscences would appear useless as well as incomplete.

(2) *Teaching Begins*

We three boys were being brought up together. Both my companions were two years older than I. When they were placed under their tutor, my teaching also began, but of what I learnt nothing remains in my memory.

What constantly recurs to me is "The rain patters, the leaf quivers." [1] I am just come to 4 anchor after crossing the stormy region of the *kara, khala* [2] series; and I am reading "The rain patters, the leaf quivers," for me the first poem of the Arch Poet. Whenever the joy of that day comes back to me, even now, I realise why rhyme is so needful in poetry. Because of it the words come to an end, and yet end not; the utterance is over, but not its ring; and the ear and the mind can go on and on with their game of tossing the rhyme to each other. Thus did the rain patter and the leaves quiver again and again, the live-long day in my consciousness.

Another episode of this period of my early boyhood is held fast in my mind.

We had an old cashier, Kailash by name, who was like one of the family. He was a great wit, and would be constantly cracking jokes with everybody, old and young; recently married sons-in-law, new comers into the family circle, being his special butts. There was room for the suspicion that his humour had not deserted him even after death. Once my elders were engaged in an attempt to start a postal service with the other world by means of a planchette. At one of the sittings the pencil scrawled out the name of Kailash. He was asked as to the sort of life one led where he was. Not a bit of it, was the 5 reply. "Why should you get so cheap what I had to die to learn?"

This Kailash used to rattle off for my special delectation a doggerel ballad of his own composition. The hero was myself and there was a glowing anticipation of the arrival of a heroine. And as I listened my interest would wax intense at the picture of this world-charming bride illuminating the lap of the future in which she sat enthroned. The list of the jewellery with which she was bedecked from head to foot, and the unheard of splendour of the preparations for the bridal, might have turned older and wiser heads; but what moved the boy, and set wonderful joy pictures flitting before his vision, was the rapid jingle of the frequent rhymes and the swing of the rhythm.

These two literary delights still linger in my memory – and there is the other, the infants' classic: "The rain falls pit-a-pat, the tide comes up the river."

The next thing I remember is the beginning of my school-life. One day I saw my elder brother, and my sister's son Satya, also a little older than myself, starting off to school, leaving me behind, accounted unfit. I had never before ridden in a carriage nor even been out of the house. So when Satya came back, full of unduly glowing accounts of his adventures on the way, I felt I simply could not stay at home. Our tutor tried to dispel my illusion with sound advice and a resounding slap: "You're crying to go to school now, you'll have to cry a lot more to be let off later on." I have no recollection of the name, features or disposition of this tutor of ours, but the

impression of his weighty advice and weightier hand has not yet faded. Never in my life have I heard a truer prophecy.

My crying drove me prematurely into the Oriental Seminary. What I learnt there I have no idea, but one of its methods of punishment I still bear in mind. The boy who was unable to repeat his lessons was made to stand on a bench with arms extended, and on his upturned palms were piled a number of slates. It is for psychologists to debate how far this method is likely to conduce to a better grasp of things. I thus began my schooling at an extremely tender age.

My initiation into literature had its origin, at the same time, in the books which were in vogue in the servants' quarters. Chief among these were a Bengali translation of Chanakya's aphorisms, and the Ramayana of Krittivasa.

A picture of one day's reading of the Ramayana comes clearly back to me.



Rabindranath Tagore in 1877

The day was a cloudy one. I was playing 7 about in the long verandah [3] overlooking the road. All of a sudden Satya, for some reason I do not remember, wanted to frighten me by shouting, "Policeman! Policeman!" My ideas of the duties of policemen were of an extremely vague description. One thing I was certain about, that a person charged with crime once placed in a policeman's hands would, as sure as the wretch caught in a crocodile's serrated grip, go under and be seen no more. Not knowing how an innocent boy could escape this relentless penal code, I bolted towards the inner apartments, with shudders running down my back for blind fear of pursuing policemen. I broke to my mother the news of my impending doom, but it did not seem to disturb her much. However, not

deeming it safe to venture out again, I sat down on the sill of my mother's door to read the dog-eared Ramayana, with a marbled paper cover, which belonged to her old aunt. Alongside stretched the verandah running round the four sides of the open inner quadrangle, on which had fallen the faint afternoon glow of the clouded sky, and finding me weeping over one of its sorrowful situations my great-aunt came and took away the book from me.

(3) *Within and Without*

Luxury was a thing almost unknown in the days of my infancy. The standard of living was then, as a whole, much more simple than it is now. Apart from that, the children of our household were entirely free from the fuss of being too much looked after. The fact is that, while the process of looking after may be an occasional treat for the guardians, to the children it is always an unmitigated nuisance.

We used to be under the rule of the servants. To save themselves trouble they had almost suppressed our right of free movement. But the freedom of not being petted made up even for the harshness of this bondage, for our minds were left clear of the toils of constant coddling, pampering and dressing-up.

Our food had nothing to do with delicacies. A list of our articles of clothing would only invite the modern boy's scorn. On no pretext did we wear socks or shoes till we had passed our tenth year. In the cold weather a second cotton tunic over the first one sufficed. It never entered our heads to consider ourselves ill-off for that reason. It was only when old Niyamat, the tailor, would forget to put a pocket into one of our tunics that we complained, for no boy has yet been born so poor as not to have the wherewithal to stuff his pockets; nor, by a merciful dispensation of providence, is there much difference between the wealth of boys of rich and of poor parentage. We used to have a pair of slippers each, but not always where we had our feet. Our habit of kicking the slippers on ahead, and catching them up again, made them work none the less hard, through effectually defeating at every step the reason of their being.

Our elders were in every way at a great distance from us, in their dress and food, living and doing, conversation and amusement. We

caught glimpses of these, but they were beyond our reach. Elders have become cheap to modern children; they are too readily accessible, and so are all objects of desire. Nothing ever came so easily to us. Many a trivial thing was for us a rarity, and we lived mostly in the hope of attaining, when we were old enough, the things which the distant future held in trust for us. The result was that what little we did get we enjoyed to the utmost; from skin to core nothing was thrown away. The modern child of a well-to-do family nibbles at only half the things he gets; the greater part of his world is wasted on him. 10

Our days were spent in the servants' quarters in the south-east corner of the outer apartments. One of our servants was Shyam, a dark chubby boy with curly locks, hailing from the District of Khulna. He would put me into a selected spot and, tracing a chalk line all round, warn me with solemn face and uplifted finger of the perils of transgressing this ring. Whether the threatened danger was material or spiritual I never fully understood, but a great fear used to possess me. I had read in the Ramayana of the tribulations of Sita for having left the ring drawn by Lakshman, so it was not possible for me to be sceptical of its potency.

Just below the window of this room was a tank with a flight of masonry steps leading down into the water; on its west bank, along the garden wall, an immense banyan tree; to the south a fringe of cocoanut palms. Ringed round as I was near this window I would spend the whole day peering through the drawn Venetian shutters, gazing and gazing on this scene as on a picture book. From early morning our neighbours would drop in one by one to have their bath. I knew the time for each one to arrive. I was familiar with the peculiarities of each one's toilet. One would stop up his ears with his fingers as he took his regulation number of dips, after which he would depart. Another would not venture on a complete immersion but be content with only squeezing his wet towel repeatedly over his head. A third would carefully drive the surface impurities away from him with a rapid play of his arms, and then on a sudden impulse take his plunge. There was one who jumped in from the top steps without any preliminaries at all. Another would walk slowly in, step by step, muttering his morning prayers the while. One was always in a hurry, hastening home as soon as he was

through with his dip. Another was in no sort of hurry at all, taking his bath leisurely, followed with a good rub-down, and a change from wet bathing clothes into clean ones, including a careful adjustment of the folds of his waist cloth, ending with a turn or two in the outer [4] garden, and the gathering of flowers, with which he would finally saunter slowly homewards, radiating the cool comfort of his refreshed body, as he went. This would go on till it was past noon. Then the bathing places would be deserted and become silent. Only the ducks remained, paddling about after water snails, or busy preening their feathers, the live-long day.

When solitude thus reigned over the water, my whole attention would be drawn to the shadows 12 under the banyan tree. Some of its aerial roots, creeping down along its trunk, had formed a dark complication of coils at its base. It seemed as if into this mysterious region the laws of the universe had not found entrance; as if some old-world dream-land had escaped the divine vigilance and lingered on into the light of modern day. Whom I used to see there, and what those beings did, it is not possible to express in intelligible language. It was about this banyan tree that I wrote later:

With tangled roots hanging down from your branches, O ancient banyan tree,
You stand still day and night, like an ascetic at his penances,
Do you ever remember the child whose fancy played with
your shadows?

Alas! that banyan tree is no more, nor the piece of water which served to mirror the majestic forest-lord! Many of those who used to bathe there have also followed into oblivion the shade of the banyan tree. And that boy, grown older, is counting the alternations of light and darkness which penetrate the complexities with which the roots he has thrown off on all sides have encircled him.

Going out of the house was forbidden to us, in fact we had not even the freedom of all its 13 parts. We perforce took our peeps at nature from behind the barriers. Beyond my reach there was this limitless thing called the Outside, of which flashes and sounds and