

THE POETRY OF SLEEP.

BY A SKEPTIC.

I DO not believe in telepathy, mind reading or revelation of things unknown, through any of the automatic and occult processes for which so much is claimed and so much accepted in our time. And yet, I have had numerous experiences, waking and sleeping, which seem to indicate the working of sub-conscious faculties and to make it seem probable that many delusions and frauds begin in experiences that are mysterious and wonderful. Omitting the mental and optical surprises which have come in my waking hours and are exceedingly interesting, I would record some of the phenomena of dreams.

All my life I have had wonderful dreams. Events unroll themselves in a continuous procession, or I compose stories of great length and with wonderful skill, as it seems, until I wake and find the fading remnants of the experience, or the narrative, to be absurd and impossible. I have often dreamed of speaking in public and occasionally have flattered myself that I was exceedingly eloquent. But I have never succeeded in carrying through any discourse to a fitting conclusion or in having the exercises carried out according to program. What ought to be a solid platform in a hall may turn out to be a miscellaneous collection of packing cases, and the books from which quotations are to be made always turn out to be something strange and for the purpose useless.

During my waking hours I have no skill as a poet and have not in my life attempted more than half a dozen times to write poetry in any form. But in my sleep I often make the attempt with great satisfaction to myself, which is always followed by disappointment when I find either that I cannot capture the fleeting creations of my fancy or that so far as I can remember they are pretentious nonsense. This habit of dreaming began when I was passing my examinations for entrance at college. The night before my examina-

tion in Latin I wearied myself in my sleep with attempts to write Latin poetry. Not a word remained in the morning to show whether I had succeeded or not, but a framework of Latin forms which I had been trying to fill out with intelligible language did remain to haunt me for days.

The prairie and the desert have always impressed my imagination and excited me more than any other forms of natural scenery. My first view of the prairie came on a journey from Toledo over the Wabash Road to St. Louis. While daylight lasted I was charmed with the changing aspects of the land and especially with the gorgeous cloud scenery accompanying the sunset, which is one of the many compensations which those who live on the plains have for the lack of mountain scenery. In my sleep the visions of the day glided into dreams, and in the night I awoke filled with the idea that I had caught the very spirit of the land and sky and was able to interpret it as no other person had ever done. But I was chagrined to find that my fine imaginations were rapidly failing and that of all the eloquent descriptions I could recall only the words "the long and infinite prairie." Hearing music, when I am awake or in my dreams, I sometimes seem to know things without the aid of my senses. I do not merely hear with my ears and see with my eyes, but I am a part of that which I hear and see. I know it because I am in it and of it, as if I were a disembodied presence without dimensions, conscious of that of which I am a part. To take one example of the effect of music. Once I fell into a reverie while a friend was playing on the piano and as I mused I seemed to become a conscious part of the world. The earth was a living being—an organism, living as we live, and especially I was conscious that it was breathing, the whole earth was breathing, as we breathe, and I was a conscious part of the process. When I started from my reverie, I told the musician what I had been thinking of. He said, "The words which go to the music which I was playing are 'Let everything that hath breath praise the Lord.'"

I once made a partially successful effort to rescue a poem composed in sleep. I fell asleep sitting in a chair with broad arms, on which a pad of paper was lying. In my dream I seemed to be, not floating in the air, but intermingled and interfused with it, and yet preserving my identity. Suddenly all the air about me seemed to be vocal. I did not hear in an ordinary sense any sound and yet all the air seemed to be thrilling with an anthem. I suddenly became conscious that I was hearing the hymn of humanity, the whole history of its struggles; and the meaning of all its joy and sorrow and

triumph and pain were disclosed in this wonderful symphony. While the song was in full flow I suddenly awoke, having at first the feeling that I was in full possession of that which had been flowing through my being in the form of a magnificent poem. Then with a start I realized that here was a chance such as had so many times escaped me through the failure of any memory. Already the vision began to fade, but I seized a pencil and as fast as I could write, put down the following fragment. I did not stop to supply the missing lines or words because I feared it would all escape. There was much more than I had written, but suddenly with a snap my ordinary consciousness was restored, the dream faded and I was left with this relic which to me means more than it can to anyone else, because although it is mere doggerel it recalls the magnificent reverberation of fancy of which it is a reminiscence.

A VOICE.

I heard a voice on the empty air
 It rang out full and free,
 It spoke of joy and freedom from care
 Like the waves of a flowing sea.

Again it was low and its strain
 Was the wail of a heart
 In travail of sorrow and pain.

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Loud and long was its peal
 Like laughter rolling along,
 'Twas the song of the glowing ideal
 The peal of humanity's song.

Low and tender it stole
 Like a fancy, a mist of desire,
 Into the fibre and sense of the soul,
 A warmth of Olympian fire.

Low and soft and sweet
 A song to remember apart
 A song of love . . .
 'Twas the song of the human heart.

It rang out again on the air,
 A burden of woes it conveyed,
 A burden of grief and despair

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Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes seems to have had similar experiences, for in his essay on "Mechanism in Thought and Morals,"

he says: "I remember in my youth, reading verses in a dream, written, as I thought, by a rival fledgling of the Muse. They were so far beyond my powers, that I despaired of equalling them; yet I must have made them unconsciously as I read them. Could I only have remembered them waking!"

We hear much about the subconscious mind, and the statement is often made that the very best work of which one is capable may be done while the conscious mind is asleep. Stevenson, Tennyson, and Coleridge are quoted as witnesses to this fact. But my own experience has led me to believe that we are the victims of a subtle deception, often of self-deception in this matter. *Kubla Khan* was a wonderful poem and the contrast between that and the fragment given above may measure the difference between the poetic ability of Coleridge and the present writer. But after all *Kubla Khan* is the one splendid exception in literature and even that we may suspect owes its charm to the skill of the writer, exercised it may be both before and after the dream out of which the poem issued. It is a splendid example, also, perhaps the supreme illustration, of the grandiosity which marks the dream-made poem. Of all this the lesson is that the deliverances of the subconscious mind are vague, incoherent, rhapsodical, useless, for the most part, until they are submitted to the severer process of the conscious intellect.

N. B. When I sent in the above article I had not read the interesting communication by Sanders McIvor entitled "Subconscious Poetry."