

First Meetings with the Soul of "Dyahbolism"

By Sir Max Beerboom

ALMOST forty years ago I wrote, but didn't publish, a few little essays about meetings with interesting contemporaries of mine. One of these was about my first meetings with W.B. Yeats.

At that time Yeats had not begun to develop his great gifts in the manner in which he ultimately did. Of the fullness and richness of his later self there was yet, for me, no token.

At Charterhouse, one morning, a small boy construed thus a rather difficult line of Euripides: "And a tear shall lead the blind man." "Hm," said his form master, "clever tear!" Thereat we all laughed. But

ought we to have laughed? Granted, the translation was hopelessly inaccurate. But in itself was not the image beautiful, and expressed in terms simple and sensuous, if not passionate? I am led to ask this because in after years, when first I read some of the poems of W. B. Yeats, those words came back to my memory, and seem to have been inspired by his own Muse. "And a tear shall lead the blind man"... how easily, how well (though I, and still think), might some poem of this distinguished and true poet end just like that!

From the lone hills where
Fergus strays

Down the long vales of
Coonahan
Comes a white wind through
the unquiet ways,
And a tear shall lead the
blind man.

But does not this levity jar on me? Yes, it does, I always want to be on the side of the angels. My wretchedly frequent failure to find definite meanings in the faint and lovely things of Yeats — my perception of nothing but some sort of mood enclosed in a vacuum far away — has always worried me very much. I have repeated sternly and many times to myself what the initiate have told me: that through the mouth of Yeats the ancient and authentic voice of Ireland is uttered. Often I have taken my atlas from the shelf and looked up Ireland in search of revelation. And it has seemed to me that if Ireland were indeed what I there behold, thing in two dimensions, a design on paper, and if her counties were not pink and yellow and green, but all a silvery gray, and if her whole shape were very much more tenuous and graceful than it is, then might she be supposed to have some such voice as Yeats utters. But the fact is that Ireland, so far from being more rarefied, is grosser than she appears in my atlas. There may be in that land fairies and phantoms, and whispering reeds, and

eternal twilight, and wan women—men, observe! There it is! From time immemorial Ireland has been harboring human beings. Poetry that hasn't the human knot can no more be truly Celtic than it can be truly Saxon or Mongolian or Slav. One is taught to despise Tom Moore nowadays. But I cannot help feeling that in "Believe me, if all those endearing young charms" or "No longer, dear Vessey, feel hurt and uneasy" the ancient spirit of Ireland was more authentically breathed than it is by Yeats. I struggle against this feeling. But in vain.

I often had the pleasure of meeting Yeats, and I liked him. But merely to like so remarkable, so mystic and intense, a creature, to be not utterly under his spell whenever one was in his presence, seemed to argue a lack in oneself and to imply an insult to that presence. Thus the pleasure of meeting Yeats was not for me an unmixed one. I felt always rather uncomfortable, as though I had submitted myself to a mesmerist who somehow didn't mesmerize me. I hoped against hope that I should feel my volition slipping away from me — my cheap little independence fading into a drowsy enchantment where visions would come thronging presently. Nothing of the sort happened.

Perhaps because I had

formed no expectations, my first sight of Yeats was the deepest impression I had of him. That was in the winter of 1893. Aubrey Beardsley had done a poster for the Avenue Theatre and had received two stalls for the first night of Dr. Todhunter's play *The Black Cat*, and he had asked me to go with him. Before the main play there was to be a "curtain raiser"—*The Land of Heart's Desire*. Yeats was not more than a name to us then; nor were we sure that it beseeemed us, as men of the world, to hurry over our dinner. We did so, however, and arrived in good time. The beautiful little play was acted in a very nerveless and inaudible manner, casting rather a gloom over the house. When at length the two curtains of the proscenium swept down and met in the middle of the stage, the applause was fainter than it would be nowadays. There were, however, a few sporadic and compatriotic cries for "Author." I saw a slight convulsion of the curtains where they joined each other, and then I saw a long fissure, revealing (as I for a moment supposed) unlit blackness behind the curtains. But lo! there were two streaks of white in the upper portion of this blackness—a white streak of shirt front, and above that a

white streak of face; and I was aware that what I had thought to be insubstantial murk was a dress suit, with the Author in it. And the streak of Author's face was partly bisected by a lesser black streak, which was a lock of Author's raven hair. It was all very eerie and memorable.

MORE THAN a year passed before this vision was materialized for me in private life. A new publication, entitled *The Savoy*, was afoot, with Arthur Symons for literary editor and Beardsley for art editor. The publisher was a strange and rather depressing person, a north-countryman, known to have been engaged in the sale of disreputable books. To celebrate the first numbers of the magazine, he invited the contributors to supper in a room at the New Lyric Club. Besides Symons and Beardsley, there were present Yeats, Rudolf Dircks, myself, and one or two other writers, whom I forget. Also there was one lady: the publisher's wife. She had not previously been heard of by anyone. She was a surprise. She was touching—dreadfully touching. It was so evident that she had been brought out from some far suburb for this occasion only. One knew that the dress she wore had been ordered special-

ly; and one felt that it might never be worn again. She was small, buxom, and self-possessed. She did the honors. She dropped little remarks. It did not seem that she was nervous; one only knew that she was nervous. She knew that she did not matter, but she would not give in; she was brave and good.

Perhaps, if I had not been so preoccupied by the pity of her, I would have been more susceptible to Yeats's magic. I wished that I, not he, had been placed next to her at the table. I could have helped her more than he. The walls of the little room in which we supped were lined with bamboo instead of wallpaper. "Quite original, is it not?" she said to Yeats. But Yeats had no reply ready for that; only a courteous, lugubrious murmur. He had been staying in Paris, and was much engrossed in the cult of Diabolism, or Devil worship, which appeared to have a vogue there. He had made a profound study of it, and he evidently guessed that Beardsley, whom he met now for the first time, was a confirmed worshiper, in that time. So to Beardsley he talked, in deep, vibrant tones across the table, of the lore and rites of Diabolism—"Dyahbolism" he called it, thereby making it sound the more fearful.

I daresay that Beardsley, who always seemed to know by instinctive erudition all about everything, knew all about Dyahbolism. Anyhow, I could see that he, with that stony common sense which always came upmost when anyone canvassed the fantastic in him, thought Dyahbolism rather silly. He was too polite not to go on saying at intervals, in his hard, quick voice, "Oh really? How perfectly entrancing!" and "Oh really? How perfectly sweet!" But had I been Yeats, I would have dropped the subject sooner than he did.

At the other end of the table, Arthur Symons was talking of some foreign city, carrying in his waistcoat pocket, as it were, the *genius loci*, anon to be embalmed in Pateresque prose. I forget whether this time it was Rome or Seville or Moscow or what; but I remember that the hostess said she had never been there. I liked Symons' feigning some surprise at this, and for saying that she really ought to go. Presently I heard him saying he thought the nomadic life was the best of all lives for an artist. Yeats, in a pause of his own music, heard this too, and seemed a little pained by it. Shaking back the lock from his brow, he turned to Symons and declared that an artist

worked best among his own folk and in the land of his fathers. Symons seemed rather daunted, but he stuck to his point. He argued that new sights and sounds and odors braced the whole intelligence of a man and quickened his powers of creation. Yeats, gently but firmly, would have none of this. His own arguments may not have been better than Symon's; but in voice and manner and countenance, Symons was not match for him at all. And it was with a humane impulse that the hostess interposed. "Mr. Symons," she said, "is like myself. He likes a little change."

This bathos was so sharp that it was like an actual and visible chasm: one could have sworn to a glimpse of Symons' heels, a faint cry, a thud. Yeats stood for an instant on the brink, stroking his chin enigmatically, and then turned to resume the dropped thread of Dyabolism. I could not help wishing that he, not poor Symons, had been the victim. He would somehow have fallen on his feet; and his voice, issuing uninterruptedly from the depth of the chasm, would have been as impressive as ever.

I have said that my first and merely visual impression of Yeats was my deepest. Do not suppose that at other times he did not impress me with a

feeling that I, had I been of finer clay, must have been more deeply impressed than I was. I always did feel that here was *une ame auguste*, if ever there was one. His benign aloofness from whatever company I saw him in, whether he was inspired with language or with silence, made everyone else seem rather cheap. Often, at great receptions in great houses, with colonnaded rooms full of beautiful women in all their jewels, and of eminent men ribanded and starred, it must have seemed to the quietly observant. Nobody knew that the scene had its final note of distinction in the sober purple soutane of Monsignor So-and-so, yonder. Monsignor So-and-so himself may happen to be as worldly as you will; but nominally, officially by hierarchic intention, he is apart from the rest. That is the secret of his effect. Something like that was for me the secret of Yeat's effect anywhere. He, not indeed in any nominal or official way, but by reason of himself, was apart from the rest. That was his strength. He was not primarily of this world.

But confound it! So soon as ever one has elaborated a theory, always there is some wretched flaw staring one in the face. Didn't Yeats' management of the Celtic Renaissance prove him a practical

man? The birth may not have been effected. But there the indefatigable accoucheur was. Pamphlets, letters to newspapers, lectures in America, speeches — that speech which I heard him deliver at the Shelbourne Hotel, Dublin; that fighting speech of which George Moore has gasped in *Ave* some slight record for posterity. Yes, it made Moore gasp. Perhaps posterity will be equally stirred. At the Shelbourne Hotel it sounded very beautiful. But not dons of Trinity, nor any of the Catholics either, were any more offended by it than they would have been by a nocturne of Chopin. Mournfully, very beautifully, Yeats bombinated in the void, never for an instant in any vital relation to the audience. Moore likens

him to Demosthenes. But I take it that Demosthenes swayed Moore. My memory of that speech does somewhat patch the flaw in my theory.

As years went by, the visual aspect of Yeats changed a little. His face grew gradually fuller in outline, and the sharp angles of his figure were smoothed away. And his hands — those hands which in his silences lay folded downward across his breast, but left each other and came forth and, as it were, stroked the air to and fro while he talked — those very long, fine hands did seem to have lost something of their insubstantiality. His dignity and his charm were as they had always been. But I found it less easy to draw caricatures of him. He seemed to have become subtly less like himself.

* * *

Yes, Sir

Each member of the third grade class was assigned the names of three foreign countries and told to indicate what we in this country import from each.

One youngster reported on his assignment as follows:

Belgium: Lace. Brazil: Nuts. Burma: Shave.

*