

THE POWER OF MEMORY.

BY PROF. F. MAX-MULLER.

(Author of "Chips from a German Workshop.")

While my eyes were rapidly and almost unconsciously running over the pages of the *Youth's Companion*, my attention was suddenly arrested by some lines which seemed familiar to me.

Surely I know these lines, I said to myself. I had for a time the same puzzled feeling which in a crowded street makes us stare at a face that reminds us of some half-forgotten, half-remembered picture in the old photograph-book of our memory. At last I recovered from my wonderment.

These lines were my own. I had written them long ago, and I was glad to meet them again. It is really one of the great delights of authorship to find what one has thought and published years ago, not exactly quoted and stuck up between inverted commas, but kneaded, as it were, into the daily bread of literature, and accepted without further questioning.

The article to which I refer bore the same title which I have selected for my own, though its object was totally different. Possibly the writer of it may never have seen any of my books, but for all that, I feel perfectly certain that by some of the many subterranean and submarine telegraphic wires which now traverse every province of our intellectual commonwealth, the very words which I had made use of must have reached him, and impressed themselves firmly on his memory.

Let no one suppose that I complain of this. On the contrary, I rejoice in it. It would be dreadful if we had to remember the first entry of all knowledge that comes from abroad, or the spontaneous generation of every one of our own thoughts. Every one of us has his memory crowded with words and ideas which have no longer any passports. They are our own as much as anything in this life is our own, and we may treat them as our own with perfect honesty.

The object of the writer of the article to which I refer was to prove that we need not distrust the accuracy of ancient books, although we know now that, before the invention of writing and the manufacture of writing materials, they had to be handed down for centuries by memory or oral tradition only.

The writer calls memory a rude instrument in comparison with writing and the printing-press. I doubt whether it should be called a rude instrument, and I know that in many cases the tablets of the memory have been far more trustworthy guardians of the past, even in matters of literal accuracy, than sheepskin, papyrus, or linen-paper.

We have no longer any idea of what we could make of our memory, if we chose. We not only neglect to cultivate its innate strength, but we do everything to ruin it. In ancient times memory was what libraries are now, the treasure-house of human knowledge. It is so even at the present day among tribes unacquainted with the art of writing. But when the art of writing had once been discovered the art of memory became extinct, and its achievements were so completely forgotten that in cases where tradition tells us of the great feats of memory performed by our distant ancestors, we feel inclined to assign them to the realm of fable.

The Greeks knew that the *Titaneos Mnemosyne* (Memory) was the mother of all the Muses, that is, of all branches of knowledge, and they never thought of their blind Homer as a writer. Yet when Plato wrote his fierce attack on the art of writing, we can clearly perceive from the tone of his invective that those whom he addressed had long forgotten that wonderful age in which *Mnemosyne* and her daughters ruled supreme. Though it is a well-known passage in the *Phaedrus*, some of your younger readers may like to hear it.

"This invention of yours," says one of the characters, referring to the art of writing, "will create forgetfulness in the learners' souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust to the external written characters, and not remember of themselves. You have found a specific, not for memory, but for reminiscence, and you give your disciples only the pretence of wisdom; they will be hearers of many things, and will have learned nothing; they will appear to be omniscient, and

will generally know nothing; they will be tiresome company, having the show of wisdom without the reality.

In the teaching of children more particularly, the good old system of learning by heart may still have survived at the time of Plato. Though we are told that in the time of Alcibiades every schoolmaster had his *Iliad*, we also know from Xenophon that clever boys at school had to learn the whole of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* by heart. There were besides the *Rhapsodes*, who travelled from town to town, repeating the Homeric poems by heart; though, as Xenophon tells us, they were so stupid a race that they hardly understood the meaning of what they repeated in public every day.

I well remember being told all this at school, when we grumbled about the large number of lines which we had to learn and to repeat. I also well remember, when reading for the first time my father's book, "*Die Homerische Vorschule*," in which he explained and defended the Wolfian theory, that I was very incredulous as to the ability of any human being to compose so long and perfect a poem without paper, pen and ink, or to repeat the whole of it by heart.

It is true that when we came to read *Cæsar*, the same story met us again, of the Druids knowing the whole of their literature by heart. But we did not know then how trustworthy a writer *Cæsar* really was, and there was always the chance of his being deceived by those wily old priests, the Druids.



VEDIC STUDENTS.

It was not till I came to prepare the materials for my edition of the *Rig-Veda*, the most ancient book of the Brâhmins in India, in fact, of the whole Aryan race, that my eyes were opened as to the real powers of memory, as a most perfect and trustworthy vehicle of ancient literature.

I was struck, first of all, by the wonderful correctness of all Vedic manuscripts. While the manuscripts of Greek and Roman classics, and more particularly of the New Testament in Greek, literally swarm with various readings, the manuscript of the *Rig-Veda*, the sacred hymns of the Brâhmins, were almost without any various readings in the true sense of the word. They may contain a clerical error here and there, but these clerical errors had never become traditional; they were never copied from one manuscript into another; or, if they were, they had some kind of birth-right, and belonged to an ancient Vedic family, the members of which had their peculiar text from the very beginning.

I then asked my friends among the native scholars in India, and they told me what I ought to have known from their ancient literature, that they themselves ascribed little or no value to their manuscripts, and that to the present day the only proper way to learn the *Veda* was to learn it by heart, from the mouth of a teacher who had himself learnt it by heart from his teacher; and so on *ad infinitum*. Manuscripts might be used now and then, but if there should ever be a real doubt about the right wording of a passage, it would be settled in India not by a colla-

tion of manuscripts, but by an appeal to a living manuscript; that is, to a *Srotriya Brâhman*, who had been taught in the proper way.

The *Rig-Veda* consists of one thousand and seventeen or one thousand and twenty-eight hymns, each on an average of ten verses. I have not counted the number of words, though I have made a complete index of them; but if we may trust native scholars, the number of words in the *Rig-Veda* amounts to one hundred and fifty-three thousand eight hundred and twenty-six.

The editor of the "*Indian Antiquary*" assures us that there are still thousands of Brâhmins who know the whole of the *Rig-Veda* by heart. I have myself had visits from native scholars who could repeat large portions of it, and I have been in correspondence with others who assured me that they could do the same when they were only twelve or fifteen years old.

A native scholar, who is a professor at the Government college in Poona, R. G. Bhandarkar, M. A., when writing in the "*Indian Antiquary*," 1874, of the same class of students of the *Veda*, says, "Learning the Vedas by heart, and repeating them in a manner never to make a single mistake, even in the accents, is the occupation of their life."

There are several different arrangements of the text, and the ablest students know them all, the object of these different arrangements being simply the most accurate preservation of the sacred text. Nor

ture. Brâhmins who devote themselves to the study of law learn the law-books by heart, and even commentaries upon these law-books, nay, commentaries on commentaries. A grammarian learns the great grammar of Panini or other grammatical treatises, a philosopher the rules of the various systems of philosophy, a student of general literature the masterpieces of Kâlidâsa and others.

It is quite the exception for sisters to be admitted to the lessons of their brothers. But I have lately received several visits from a highly cultivated Indian lady, about whom I may, perhaps, have something to write on another occasion, and who knows by heart a whole Sanskrit dictionary, the *Amâra-Kosha*, the *Bhâgavata-purâna*, and the *Bhagavad-gîtâ*.

Far be it from me to recommend this exaggerated learning by heart for imitation in our schools. But I cannot help regretting that learning by heart should have almost gone out of fashion with our children. Old men like myself know how precious a treasure for life are the few poems, aye, even the few lines are, which remain indelibly engraved on our memory from our earliest school-days. Whatever else we forget and lose, they remain, and they remind us by their very sound of happy days, of happy faces, of happy hearts.—*Youth's Companion*.

BEAMS TO BE PLUCKED OUT.

Scene: a street car in a large American city. Time: noon.

Two young women enter, each carrying a huge bundle of the coarsest kind of men's jackets. They are on their way with them to a slop-shop, where they will be paid a few cents for the making of each. The women are thin and haggard from loss of sleep and insufficient food, their fingers blue with cold, and their hungry, eager faces tell how hard has been the fight they have waged against starvation; but around their necks hang pinchbeck chains; rhinestones dangle in their ears, and their gowns are sleazy silks, bought second-hand from an old clothes' dealer.

Two shop-girls, out for their luncheon, scan the tawdry creatures with contempt. "Did you ever see anything so absurd?" one of them says, when the women, dragging their heavy burdens, leave the car. "Silk dresses, when they earn fifty cents a day!"

A few minutes later the shop-girls are standing behind the counter, ready to wait on customers. They are dressed in showy gowns, made in the extreme of the fashion. One wears a brooch of diamonds—or paste; the fingers of the other sparkle with rings, real or imitation, sapphires, rubies and emeralds.

The daughters of one of the most influential men in the city are seated on the other side of the counter, turning over the goods. They glance at each other with a smile of amusement as they go out of the shop.

"Why does not some one tell those poor creatures how to dress appropriately?" the younger girl says. "Everybody knows that no woman who has to work for wages of six dollars a week can afford to wear silk and sapphires."

The gown of this critic of the shop-girls' attire is extremely plain and quiet. She has too much taste and knowledge of fitness to wear a showy dress on the street; but the tailor-made gown is costly, nevertheless. Its wearer has her own coupe and her French maid; her dresses are made in Paris; she paid for the bull pup which is waiting in the carriage a sum which would support for weeks in something like comfort any one of these working people around her.

Yet her father is not a millionaire, but a professional man, dependent on his yearly earnings. If he were to die tomorrow, his daughter would have no means to support one of the luxurious tastes which she indulges now without stint.

This is a true description of an actual scene which occurred during the past winter.

We hear from the pulpit and the press that there is a growing want of honesty, of purity and of truthfulness in our social and domestic life. Can our readers find in this incident any clue to the cause?—*Youth's Companion*.