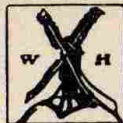

MY LIFE

HAVELOCK ELLIS

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frequently told me, to conduct myself skilfully at a dinner table—though I believe I have improved under her training—or even to eat with becoming propriety, and although as a boy I played cricket and the ordinary school games, I never achieved any real skill in them, and football suited me best. This awkwardness can scarcely be the result of defective training; it seems rooted in an organic inborn lack of nervous stability. Many of my larger muscles, especially of the leg, are in frequent fibrillar activity. (I have just now, at the age of sixty-eight, found it possible to verify this observation, though the movement has become less frequent.) I first observed this at about the age of twenty-three, when I was perhaps working too hard at my medical studies. There is also a slight unsteadiness of the smaller muscles, which is not visible but makes finer movements of any kind difficult. My handwriting has always been lacking in backbone and is frequently illegible, though as a small boy, and even now, I could always write a clear and orderly hand by taking the requisite trouble. My first schoolmaster used to say, aptly enough, that I kept a tame spider to write for me, and Grover would remark with an air of resignation: "You will have a hand of your own, my boy." In this matter I inherit to some extent from my father, but his handwriting, though invertebrate, was uniform and legible. Although I am right-handed except in the single action of throwing a stone or ball, I am inclined to think that congenitally I may be left-handed, and that my right-handedness is the artificial result of training, the spontaneous tendency only showing itself in the untrained act of throwing. So much for the anatomical and physiological characters, in such degree as I consider them significant, on which my psychic characteristics have arisen.

To complete the picture I should add something as regards my health during this early period of life. Though a healthy breast-fed baby, at some period in childhood it seems that I ailed somewhat and was taken by my mother from time to time to see London physicians, occasionally to a noted homœopathist who had been recommended to her. I cannot recall in the slightest degree what my symptoms were; they were certainly not severe, and I gather that the physician sometimes thought that, as is probable, my mother was unduly nervous about me. It is possible, though this I doubt, that the beginning had taken place of a recurrent malady which tortured me

at intervals in later boyhood and during the whole of adolescence.

I cannot remember when this disorder appeared; it certainly occurred at fairly frequent intervals soon after the age of twelve; it would come on rather suddenly with intense pain and tenderness in (if I remember rightly) the right side of the abdomen, the region of the cæcum, a dull sickening unintermittent pain; at its worst I could only lie on my back with thighs flexed, so as to relieve the pressure of the abdominal walls. Vomiting always occurred. Eating and sleeping, any mental or physical activity, were alike impossible. Sometimes the attack lasted for hours, sometimes for days, and recovery was always slow, tenderness remaining for some time. The doctors I was taken to could evidently make nothing of the case (Dr. Carpenter, I remember, on a second visit to him, mistakenly recalled the seat of pain as being on the opposite side), and they did nothing to relieve it. Nowadays, I feel certain, it would be regarded as a recurrent form of appendicitis. (Half a century later, and long after this narrative was first written, one day when staying at my third sister's house at Tunbridge Wells, in robust health, after a rapid two-mile walk to catch a train I had a sudden attack of duodenal ulcer, the presence of which I had not detected, and a night of excruciating agony, followed by several weeks in bed, the first severe illness of my life. Appendicitis is regarded as a frequent precursor of duodenal ulcer, and this tends to confirm my diagnosis.) As to the cause, I can only suggest that it was connected with indigestion. My digestion was never vigorous; in that I resembled my mother; my father's had always been perfect, like all his functions. The attacks occurred most usually when I was at home, and our midday dinner was a simple and copious meal, of, most usually, a solid joint of meat, potatoes and cabbage, suet pudding or fruit pie, with a little English ale until my mother became a total abstainer. It was an excellent meal for a plough-boy, but for me such a combination, as I now recognise, is very like a poison, especially if eaten without care and deliberation. And unfortunately I was, if I do not indeed still remain, an incurably rapid eater.

These attacks gradually died down and had almost or quite disappeared by the time I was twenty; but they merged into a chronic tendency to dyspepsia which has more or less seriously incapacitated me and greatly contributed to render me inapt

for social functions. If I am leading a healthy and leisurely existence, much out in the open air, free from mental strain, able to control the conditions of my daily life and my meals—which should consist, if possible, of several small dainty dishes, served at fairly long intervals, and with rest after the meal—then I am usually able to escape my demon of dyspepsia. But any slight aberration may nullify other favourable conditions, and then a feeling of gastric swelling and discomfort slowly increases and tends to become paroxysmal in character; I grow more and more wretched, stupid, silent, absorbed in the consciousness of visceral conditions, and unless I am free by a voluntary effort of pseudo-vomiting to relieve the stomach of gas, pressure on the heart causes faintness, and once or twice, in a theatre and in a restaurant, I have actually fainted for a few moments from this cause, the only occasions in my life that I ever have fainted. When the condition becomes intolerable I usually invent an excuse to escape, but I expect that my unexplained stupidity has sometimes left an ineffaceably bad impression on kind hosts. I am inclined to suspect that, like Nietzsche, I have some dilatation of stomach, but the suspicion remains unverified. It was this constantly recurring dyspepsia which caused me to overlook the symptoms of duodenal ulcer until actual hæmorrhage occurred. (With the approach of old age, after the attack of duodenal ulcer, when dieting became imperative and self-control easier, and especially when I had learnt the benefit of avoiding much fluid at meals, the condition improved and seldom caused more than minor inconvenience.)

On the whole, though not robust, I was a fairly healthy boy. As a child I had none of the usual childish fevers, except a slight attack of chicken-pox. I have never throughout life had any long or dangerous illness. (Needless to say, the duodenal attack occurred many years after this was written.) When I was about thirteen I had a slight feverish illness which the family doctor seems to have thought was possibly a touch of typhoid, and he declared that I had "no stamina" and that I was "threatened with consumption." The threat was never realised—though my eldest sister afterwards developed this disease—but the observation about the absence of stamina probably contained an element of truth. I mean to say that there are some persons whose nervous systems seem to be of such tough fibre that they can stand prolonged strain without

apparently feeling it, and can work at high tension during long periods, the resulting collapse, when at last it appears, being, however, serious and leaving often a life-long nervous weakness. I am not of that type; I am sensitive to the earliest signs of nervous stress; rest or, rather, change, speedily becomes a necessity; I bend and so I never break. This kind of temperament is associated with the fact that, for me, all work must be of the nature of play. If it is work, as work is usually understood, I find it arduous. So that when people tell me they wonder at the amount of work I get through, I honestly, if not truthfully, answer: "Work? Why, I never work at all; I only play." If I had not always been sensitive to the signs of nervous strain, and almost instinctively careful to guard against them, I might have become a nervous wreck. When I was about twenty-one, living at home at the beginning of my medical studies, while at the same time my literary activity began to develop, my brain became very active, full of ideas I wanted to work out; I began to suffer from sleeplessness which I treated myself by occasional doses of bromide or chloral. I quickly realised the necessity of good hygiene; I made it a rule not to work late at night, and never to occupy myself with any literary work in the evening or to read any exciting book. This rule I have seldom broken; I like to read before going to sleep, but always an unexciting book; an architectural book or magazine just now I find best, for it is always interesting and yet soothing to me. The result is that I have never again suffered seriously from sleeplessness and never again been tempted to take any soporific drug.

This kind of nervous temperament has been allied, happily, no doubt, with that instinctive temperance which, as I have already said, I inherit from my father's family. It is the English form of that quality which the Greeks praised, whether or not they possessed it. Not only is every kind of excess repugnant to me, both mentally and emotionally, but I have not the organisation which would lend itself to excess. This seems to me a fundamental characteristic. I think it has coloured the whole of my moral ideal. I am on the side of freedom and nature. I look for the coming of Thelema and I accept its ethical rule: "Fais ce que voudras." I know that, so far as I am concerned, while I am living a free and healthy life I am not likely to hurt either myself or others by doing what I like, and it seems to me that this is more or less true of most people.

But there are some persons—a minority, I feel sure, and perhaps a congenitally abnormal minority—of whom this is not true. These people have the temperament of excess; they seem to crave for the hard bit and the tight rein; there may well be some doubt as to whether my code of morals would suit them. I can only say that if these people are, as I believe, a minority—though, as I well know, often very fascinating, very lovable—we must make our moral rules to suit our majority. The main point, certainly, is to find the law of one's own nature.

I left school at the age of sixteen, and for a time lived at home (now at Wandsworth Common), making myself useful by acting as tutor to my two elder sisters, both younger than I was. What my occupation was to be, how I was to earn my living, I had not the slightest idea. My formal education was over, and though it had been a little above my parents' means, I had not been educated for any profession or employment. Nor, though full of eager interests, was there any career that I wanted to enter. Like the youthful Diderot, I wanted to be nothing, absolutely nothing, though, as for him, "nothing" for me meant something not very far removed from "everything." By inborn temperament I was, and have remained, an English amateur; I have never been able to pursue any aim that no passionate instinct has drawn me towards. At this period I was at the beginning of adolescence. My thoughts were much occupied with ideal dreams of women and love; my attitude towards life was embodied in an "Ode to Death," in which I implored Death to bear me away from the world on gentle wings, although at the same time I had no thought of taking any steps to aid Death in this task. Yet the lack of vocation on earth troubled me much, and also caused some mild concern to my parents, though they never put any pressure on me to bring this uncertainty to an end. My father was too easy-natured for that, and my mother had too much faith in God, and too much faith in her son's abilities. "Do not worry about Harry," she said to my father, probably about this time, and with a confidence which impressed him, for he told me of it many years later. She was right in her insight, but I have taken a great many years to realise that she was right. It seems likely that if literature could have presented itself to me as a possible career, that would have been the career to appeal to me. I loved reading; I had been writing

verse and prose, out of the love of doing so, for some years. I had even sent letters to religious and other newspapers and seen my letters printed. But literature never presented itself to me as a means of livelihood, and, if it had, I lacked the ambition and self-confidence to believe that I could succeed in it; when, more than ten years later, I actually turned to literature as a vocation, it was as an editor rather than as a writer that I sought my living; I have never written for a living, only out of inner compulsion. Ambition I have never had—it is not a matter either for pride or for shame but merely of temperament—and the belief that I could win a position in the world never came until, late in life, the position was won. I have a certain dogged persistence in quietly keeping on my own path and working out my own nature; this obstinacy alone has brought me what success I have achieved, and the success thus gained was preceded by no enjoyment in imagination. The only possible career that wavered before my mind was that of religion. My mother, religious as she was, had never suggested it to me, and I was quite ignorant of the perhaps significant fact that many of my ancestors had been parsons. At least four years earlier I had fallen into the habit of carrying a little Testament in my pocket. Moreover, I had been stirred by the preaching of the Rev. Erck, the vicar of Merton, whose church my mother attended. I was at Merton Church every Sunday from the age of twelve to fifteen, when we left Wimbledon. I have already mentioned Erck, who only died last year (1910), as an extraordinarily eloquent and typically “Celtic” Irishman, shy and silent in private life, but a lion in the pulpit. I vaguely proposed to myself to become a minister but was not quite sure what Church I would enter (my friend Mackay at that time was more closely associated with the Congregationalists than with the Anglican Church, in which later he became a priest), and I still have a letter from Erck urging me to choose the Church of England on account of the greater “liberty of prophesying” that Church offered. I was destined to need an indeed large liberty of prophesying. Even when I received that letter (at the age of fifteen) it is probable that my own faith was already being subtly undermined, and my vague notion of entering the ministry was rapidly dissipated.

It was in the course of my reading that I slid almost imperceptibly off the foundation of Christian belief. No personal

influence entered. I had never talked with an unbeliever on religious matters, indeed, I scarcely knew one, though I was aware that my uncle Joe, my father's youngest brother, was—although he had a special regard for my mother and she for him—a “free-thinker.”* While still at school I had bought a cheap reprint of the English translation of Renan's *Life of Jesus*. It was probably the first “infidel” book I ever read. I read it carefully, with considerable admiration, though still from the Christian point of view, and the notes that I made on the margins of its pages were critical. But it served to familiarise me with the non-Christian standpoint. At the age of sixteen, when I left school, and was about to accompany my father on his ship, I purchased among other books for the voyage a second-hand copy of Swinburne's *Songs Before Sunrise*, and at the same time, or soon after reaching Sydney, the notorious *Elements of Social Science* (by George Drysdale), which I had somehow heard of. They both had an influence in stimulating the course of my thought away from Christianity, though the tone of the *Elements* was thoroughly uncongenial to me. To these I should probably add, as a subtler but deeper influence, the volume of Shelley's poems which at this age, and for two years later, was a greatly loved companion, read and often re-read. I now reach the great formative period of my life, when my destiny was finally sealed.

My father was soon to sail for Sydney, in the ship *Surrey* which he then commanded, with a large batch of government emigrants. I had just left school, and though in fairly good health and free from definite disease, I was not, as I perhaps never have been, robust. My parents doubtless bore in mind the report of the family doctor, as well as my recurring attacks of disabling abdominal pain. It occurred to them that the vigour of my health would probably be established, and the way prepared for my settlement in life, by a voyage round the world—before I began to earn my living. It was an idea that does credit to the fundamental wisdom of my parents, though they could not know how my whole life may be said to have

* When this was written, in 1911, he was still alive, the affectionate father of a large family, brought up away from the churches, to which they returned with avidity. He died of influenza and bronchitis in 1915, a few months after my father, whose death was a great shock to him, but he remained sprightly and alert to the last, a remarkable figure in old age; I sometimes met him at concerts, for he was musical, playing the cello and singing in the chorus at Handel Festivals.

hinged on this decision of theirs. I cannot recall that I greeted the plan with enthusiasm, for such a voyage was no novelty to me. But I certainly accepted it without demur, for at least it enabled me to postpone that melancholy problem of a money-earning occupation which lay so heavily on my thoughts. The *Surrey* was carrying emigrants, and no ordinary passengers are allowed on an emigrant ship, but the difficulty was overcome by putting me on the ship's articles as "captain's clerk," with the consent of the emigration officials, though one of them remarked at Plymouth, more or less jokingly, that I was a good size for my age and might cause havoc among the single girls. My father afterwards bantered me on the exemplary way in which I proved the groundlessness of that official's fear. Woman occupied an enormous place in my ideal life, but it never occurred to me to identify her with any one of the crowd of emigrant girls on board the *Surrey*.

My preparation for the voyage consisted mainly in a supply of books chosen by myself and bought with the aid of money supplied by my parents. They were mostly literary works of good quality in English and French, with a few in German. Some of the books I took with me I still possess, notably Spenser, Rabelais, and *Faust*. There were no real scientific books, except a few text-books procured with the object of working for matriculation at London University.

My father added a harmonium to my equipment, at least as much for his own sake as mine, for he sang and, like all his family, had a simple taste for music. I had been taught the piano some years earlier, chiefly by Miss Johnston, my mother's old friend (once a teacher in my grandmother's school), and I specially delighted in strumming some of Beethoven's sonatas, fragments of Schubert and Mendelssohn's *Songs Without Words*, though the last I outgrew; I never played well, but it was a useful method of emotional relief until the age of eighteen; since that age (when I left Carcoar) I believe I never touched the piano again. I said to myself that what I could not do well was not worth doing. Perhaps, also, I ceased to find emotional relief in the piano since my emotions were ceasing to be diffuse and taking on more definite forms. The harmonium, however, was not a sympathetic instrument to me, and the career of this particular instrument was brief. When we had only been a few weeks at sea a tremendous and

abnormal wave struck the stern cabin, my father's and mine—fortunately when we were at breakfast—burst through the ports, swamped the saloon, injured the chronometers, and with much other destruction ruined the harmonium. I seem to have accepted this catastrophe with characteristic coolness, for years afterwards my father used to tell smilingly that my only remark was: "Does this often happen?" He himself had been perfectly cool, as indeed sailors have to be, for they live habitually in an atmosphere of impending catastrophe.

The *Surrey* left London on April 19th, 1875. From this date, and during the four years I spent in Australia, I kept a diary in a solid manuscript book purchased to this end, so that for the approaching formation period, when nearly all the seeds of my life's activities were sown, I could if I please—though I have not done so—check my recollection by the entries in this intimate contemporary record.

Except Olive Schreiner, none has ever read this diary, not even my wife, though it contains nothing I had any wish to hide from her; but to Olive, with her large tolerance and her active intellectual receptivity, it seemed in 1884 easy and natural to me to bare my inner self. I sometimes think that with increasing years and ill health she has become less tolerant, less receptive, but we have long been separated by all the waves of the Atlantic.*

We proceeded from London to Plymouth to take on board the emigrants. During the few days here I recall that we stayed at Lucey's Hotel (a house which, many years later, I have looked around for in vain), and that one night my father took me to the theatre. I do not remember what we saw, but it was my first visit to the theatre. My mother possessed the moral objections of the Evangelical training to the theatre (though she had once taken me to a play at the Crystal Palace), and my father when at home adapted himself to her scruples, but at other times he shared the love of amusement natural to the sailor on shore. More vividly than the theatre I recall a visit to a lady at Devonport who had a charming daughter and a buxom girl friend, both a little over my own age. On

* A few years later when she came again to live in England I clearly realised how changed she had become in this respect. I remember how a young woman friend of hers once came to me and in a first interview told me of herself what, she said, one could not tell to Olive because one knew she would not be sympathetic.

the following day they visited the ship. The mother, who had evidently noticed my shy awkwardness, remarked that I needed "some jolly girl friends." That remark stayed in my memory. It was certainly true. I had never had girl friends of my own age; my sisters were much younger and still children; girl comrades might have despiritualised my ideas of women but would have wholesomely harmonised them.

My definite memories of the voyage are few. For the most part they are fused with all my memories of voyages on the sea, with the magic of a sailing-ship—so exquisitely responsive to Nature, sometimes idly calm on a glassy ocean, sometimes swiftly driven onwards, furling and unfurling her canvas wings to the breeze—of the vast blue foam-crested rhythmic waves of the South Atlantic, of the wild free birds of the sea, above all the albatross and the gull. I most clearly picture myself laboriously struggling with the first pages of *Faust*, for it was not until a year or two later that I really gained some mastery of German through becoming absorbed in Heine. My chief interest during the voyage was certainly in the adolescent impulse to write verse. I had written verses from time to time since I first fell in love at the age of twelve. But now I vaguely had in mind the scheme of a whole drama. So far, although I had read much poetry, only three poets had deeply stirred me: first, of course, Longfellow, the supreme poetic evangelist to boyhood, at all events for my time, and, after that, Mrs. Browning's *Aurora Leigh* and Alexander Smith's *Life Drama*, two volumes that Mackay had lent me a year or so before I left England. Passages in *Aurora Leigh* had aroused my idealistic emotions to the highest point. But the *Life Drama*, with its extravagant Elizabethan imagery and its unrestrained emotionalism, probably made the most intimate appeal to my adolescent soul. The outline and the tone of the drama I proposed to write—so far as it had any definite outline and tone—were due to Alexander Smith's romantic poems, though I may also have been influenced by Bailey's *Festus*, which I had bought a little before and carefully read, with interest though no excitement. A number of fragments in blank verse were written during the voyage, and after that—nothing. I quickly realised that I had no strong native impulse in this direction. I confined myself henceforth in verse to translation and the sonnet, with an occasional lyric.

In prose I wrote almost nothing until my last year in Australia; my early crude efforts had ceased before I left England. I learnt how to write verse before I seriously drew near prose. I think now it is the right course and that my instinct was sound.

When the ship entered Sydney Harbour and the Port Medical Officer came on board, he was informed by our ship's surgeon, Dr. Sheridan Hughes, that there were cases of chicken-pox among the emigrants. Hughes had discreetly kept this to himself, so it was a surprise as much to the captain as to everyone to find the *Surrey* ordered to the quarantine station, at a beautiful and solitary cove, in charge of an Irishman called Carroll. Hughes was Irish, too, a genial man and capable, but one to whom the writing of the simplest letter presented almost insuperable difficulties. So in the official correspondence which quarantine involved the "captain's clerk" was at last found useful. We were delayed at Spring Cove three weeks.

I have little recollection of the first weeks in Sydney, scarcely more than of my earlier visit to the same city ten years before. I remember that we continued, as was usual, to live on board while the ship was unloading at the Circular Quay which remains familiar to my memory. I remember that very soon after our arrival my father took me to a concert which was largely a recital by some famous violinist whose name I forget; it was the first time I had heard the solo violin and what a few years later was to become for me the most exquisite music in the world seemed at this first hearing to be really just the scraping of horsehair against catgut and so ludicrous that I could scarcely refrain from laughing. And I remember a visit to the theatre which produced an altogether different effect; Ristori was in Sydney and my father took me to see her in *Pia de Tolomei* and (in English) the sleep-walking scene in *Macbeth*; more than fifty years later (as I re-write these lines) I can see her still in both parts; for classic simplicity, for concentrated intensity with extreme economy of movement, I have never seen her acting excelled. I remember, again, that we used to go to dinner on Sundays to the house of the ship's agent, the Hon. G. A. Lloyd, a member of the Legislative Assembly and formerly Treasurer of the Colony; he had a tall and numerous family and after dinner we would all solemnly sing hymns round the piano. Of more significance for my

fate was another acquaintance of my father's, Alfred Morris. He had been first mate when my father once took emigrants to Australia many years earlier, had married one of the girls on board, thrown up his post, and settled in Australia, where he had practised a number of employments, being a clever and versatile Welshman, well spoken and of good presence, but superficial and unstable, never able to persevere in the tasks he was fitted for, and, naturally, always failing in the others. At this moment he had just joined forces with another man also living on his wits, one Frederick Beville, a baronet's son, born in France and lately from Japan, still youthful but enormously fat and correspondingly good-natured. They had taken a little office between Pitt Street and George Street and under a pompous name set up an educational agency. Now it happened that the *Surrey* was to proceed from Sydney to Calcutta, and Dr. Hughes had told my father that the Indian climate would be unsuitable for me. At this point Morris put in a suggestion and proposed that the General Educational Registration Association (that, I think, is what he called his little agency) should find me a post as assistant master at some Sydney school. This proposal was accepted, on my part, it seems, as easily as on my father's. Morris made no attempt to investigate my aptitude for such a position, but in one of his former functions as headmaster of a little school in Melbourne he wrote a glowing testimonial to my abilities, and therewith (since his name happened to be also that of a distinguished and better known headmaster in Melbourne) he was able in his function as agent to secure for me at once the post of assistant master at a good salary to Mr. Hole who had a private school, Fontlands, at Burwood near Sydney. Here I was settled without delay to the apparent satisfaction of everyone.

Therewith the first stage of my life ends. I now entered the world. I entered it indeed very thoroughly, without a single friend (except in so far as I can so count Morris), without anyone who cared for me in the whole southern hemisphere I had been dropped into. I am sure that I never myself realised how important a moment it was; I could not know how my whole fate in life hung on it. A little sign indeed I recall which at the outset indicated a new stage of mental development. For it was then, as I have already told, that I read *The Pirate*, brought with me from England, one of the few of Scott's novels I had never read, and that, for the first time, I found

Scott wearisome. The inner world of my boyhood had imperceptibly slipped away. I realised with a pang that I should never open a volume of Scott's again. I never have. But I was about to open a book which held greater revelations than Scott could bring, and in Australia to find my own soul.



From a photograph taken by his friend Marjorie Ross

SPARKES CREEK

AN ENLARGEMENT OF THIS PHOTOGRAPH ALWAYS STOOD BY ELLIS'S BEDSIDE DURING HIS LAST YEARS