The Expedition to Hell

James Hogg

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There is no phenomenon in nature less understood, and about which greater nonsense is written than dreaming. It is a strange thing. For my part I do not understand it, nor have I any desire to do so; and I firmly believe that no philosopher that ever wrote knows a particle more about it than I do, however elaborate and subtle the theories he may advance concerning it. He knows nor even what sleep is, nor can he define its nature, so as to enable any common mind to comprehend him; and how then, can he define that ethereal part of it, wherein the soul holds intercourse with the external world? how, in that stare of abstraction, some ideas force themselves upon us, in spite of all our efforts to get rid of them; while others, which we have resolved to bear about with us by night as well as by day, refuse us their fellowship, even at periods when we most require their aid?

No, no; the philosopher knows nothing about either; and if he says he does; I entreat you not to believe him. He does not know what mind is; even his own mind, to which one would think he has the most direct access: far less can he estimate the operations and powers of that of any other intelligent being. He does not even know, with all his subtlety, whether it be a power distinct from his body, or essentially the same, and only incidentally and temporarily endowed with different qualities. He sets himself to discover at what period of his existence the union was established. He is baffled; for Consciousness refuses the intelligence, declaring, that she cannot carry him far enough back to ascertain it. He tries to discover the precise moment when it is dissolved, but on this Consciousness is altogether silent; and all is darkness and mystery: for the origin, the manner of continuance, and the time and mode of breaking up of the union between soul and body, are in reality undiscoverable by our natural faculties are not patent, beyond the possibility of mistake: but whosoever can read his Bible, and solve a dream, can do either, without being subjected to any material error.

It is on this ground that I like to contemplate, not the theory of dreams, but the dreams themselves; because they prove to the unlettered man, in a very forcible manner, a distinct existence of the soul, and its lively and rapid intelligence with external nature, as well as with a world of spirits with which it has no acquaintance, when the body is lying dormant, and the same to the soul as if sleeping in death.

I account nothing of any dream that relates to the actions of the day; the person is not sound asleep who dreams about these things; there is no division between matter and mind, but they are mingled together in a sort of chaos what a farmer would call compost fermenting and disturbing one another. I find that in all dreams of that kind, men of every profession have dreams peculiar to their own occupations; and, in the country, at least, their import is generally understood. Every man's body is a barometer. A thing made up of the elements must be affected by their various changes and convulsions; and so the body assuredly is. When I was a shepherd, and all the comforts of my life depended so much on good or bad weather, the first thing I did every morning was strictly to overhaul the dreams of the night; and I found that I could calculate better from them than from the appearance and changes of the sky. I know a keen sportsman who pretends that his dreams never deceive him. If the dream is of angling, or pursuing salmon in deep waters, he is sure of rain; but if fishing on dry ground, or in waters so low that the fish cannot get from him, it forebodes drought; hunting or shooting hares is snow, and moorfowl.wind, But the most extraordinary professional dream on record is, without all doubt, that well−known one of George Dobson, coach−driver in Edinburgh, which I shall here relate; for though it did nor happen in the shepherd's cot, it has often been recited there.

George was part proprietor and driver of a hackneycoach in Edinburgh, when such vehicles were scarce; and one day a gentleman, whom he knew, came to him and said: 'George, you must drive me and my son here out to , a certain place that he named, somewhere in the vicinity of Edinburgh.

'Sir,' said George, 'I never heard tell of such a place, and I cannot drive you to it unless you give me very particular directions.'

'It is false,' returned the gentleman; 'there is no man in Scotland who knows the road to that place better than you do. You have never driven on any other road all your life; and I insist on you taking us.'

'Very well, sir,' said George, 'I'll drive you to hell, if you have a mind; only you are to direct me on the road.'

'Mount and drive on, then,' said the other; 'and no fear of the road.'

George did so, and never in his life did he see his horses go at such a noble rate; they snorted, they pranced, and they flew on; and as the whole road appeared to lie down−hill, he deemed that he should soon come to his journey's end. Still he drove on at the same rate, far, far down hill and so fine an open road he never travelled till by degrees it grew so dark that he could not see to drive any farther. He called to the gentleman, inquiring what he should do; who answered that this was the place they were bound to, so he might draw up, dismiss them, and return. He did so, alighted from the dickie, wondered at his foaming horses, and forthwith opened the coach−door, held the rim of his hat with the one hand and with the other demanded his fare.

'You have driven us in fine style, George,' said the elder gentleman, 'and deserve to be remembered; but it is needless for us to settle just now, as you must meet us here again tomorrow precisely at twelve o'clock.'

'Very well, sir,' said George; 'there is likewise an old account, you know, and some toll−money; ' which indeed there was.

'It shall be all settled tomorrow, George, and moreover, I fear there will be some toll−money today.'

'I perceived no tolls today, your honour,' said George.

'But I perceived one, and not very far back neither, which I suspect you will have difficulty in repassing without a regular ticket. What a pity I have no change on me!'

'I never saw it otherwise with your honour,' said George, jocularly; 'what a pity it is you should always suffer yourself to run short of change!'

'I will give you that which is as good, George,' said the gentleman; and he gave him a ticket written with red ink, which the honest coachman could not read. He, however, put it into his sleeve, and inquired of his employer where that same toll was which he had not observed, and how it was that they did not ask from him as he came through? The gentleman replied, by informing George that there was no road out of that domain, and that whoever entered it must either remain in it, or return by the same path; so they never asked any toll till the person's return, when they were at times highly capricious; but that the ticket he had given him would answer his turn. And he then asked George if he did not perceive a gate, with a number of men in black standing about it.

'Oho! Is yon the spot?' says George; 'then, I assure your honour, yon is no toll−gate, but a private entrance into a great man's mansion; for do not I know two or three of the persons yonder to be gentlemen of the law, whom I have driven often and often? and as good fellows they are too as any I know men who never let themselves run short of change! Good day Twelve o'clock tomorrow?'

'Yes, twelve o'clock noon, precisely;' and with that, George's employer vanished in the gloom, and left him to wind his way out of that dreary labyrinth the best way he could. He found it no easy matter, for his lamps were not lighted, and he could not see a yard before him he could nor even perceive his horses' ears; and what was worse, there was a rushing sound, like that of a town on fire, all around him, that stunned his senses, so that he could not tell whether his horses were moving or standing still. George was in the greatest distress imaginable, and was glad when he perceived the gate before him, with his two identical friends, men of the law, still standing. George drove boldly up, accosted them by their names, and asked what they were doing there; they made him no answer, but pointed to the gate and the keeper. George was terrified to look at this latter personage, who now came up and seized his horses by the reins, refusing to let him pass. In order to introduce himself, in some degree, to this austere toll−man, George asked him, in a jocular manner, how he came to employ his two eminent friends as assistant gate−keepers?

'Because they are among the last comers,' replied the ruffian, churlishly. 'You will be an assistant here tomorrow.'

'The devil I will, sir.'

'Yes, the devil you will, sir.'

'I'll be d d if I do then that I will!'

'Yes, you'll be d d if you do that you will.'

'Let my horses go in the meantime, then, sir, that I may proceed on my journey.

'Nay.'

'Nay! Dare you say nay to me, sir? My name is George Dobson of the Pleasance, Edinburgh, coach−driver, and coach−proprietor too; and no man shall say nay to me, as long as I can pay my way. I have his Majesty's licence, and I'll go and come as I choose and that I will. Let go my horses there, and tell me what is your demand.'

'Well, then, I'll let your horses go,' said the keeper: 'But I'll keep yourself for a pledge.' And with that he let go the horses, and seized honest George by the throat, who struggled in vain to disengage himself, and swore, and threatened, according to his own confession, most bloodily.

His horses flew off like the wind so swiftly, that the coach seemed flying in the air and scarcely bounding on the earth once in a quarter of a mile. George was in furious wrath, for he saw that his grand coach and harness would all be broken to pieces, and his gallant pair of horses maimed or destroyed; and how was his family's bread now to be won! He struggled, threatened, and prayed in vain; the intolerable toll man was deaf to all remonstrances. He once more appealed to his two genteel acquaintances of the law, reminding them how he had of late driven them to Roslin on a Sunday, along with two ladies, who he supposed, were their sisters, from their familiarity, when not another coachman in town would engage with them. But the gentlemen, very ungenerously, only shook their heads, and pointed to the gate. George's circumstances now became desperate, and again he asked the hideous toll−man what right he had to detain him, and what were his charges.

'What right have I to detain you, sir, say you? Who are you that make such a demand here? Do you know where you are, sir?'.'No, faith, I do not,' returned George; 'I wish I did. But I shall know, and make you repent your insolence too. My name, I told you, is George Dobson, licensed coach−hirer in Pleasance, Edinburgh; and to get full redress of you for this unlawful interruption, I only desire to know where I am.'

'Then, sir, if it can give you so much satisfaction to know where you are,' said the keeper, with a malicious grin, 'you shall know, and you may take instruments by the hands of your two friends there instituting a legal

prosecution. Your redress, you may be assured, will be most ample, when I inform you that you are in HELL! and out at this gate you pass no more.

This was rather a damper to George, and he began to perceive that nothing would be gained in such a place by the strong hand, so he addressed the inexorable toll−man, whom he now dreaded more than ever, in the following terms: 'But I must go home at all events, you know, sir, to unyoke my two horses, and put them up, and to inform Chirsty Halliday my wife, of my engagement. And, bless me! I never recollected till this moment, that I am engaged to be back here tomorrow at twelve o'clock, and see, here is a free ticket for my passage this way.

The keeper took the ticket with one hand, but still held George with the other. 'Oho! were you in with our honourable friend, Mr R of L y?' said he. 'He has been on our books for a long while; however, this will do, only you must put your name to it likewise; and the engagement is this You, by this instrument, engage your soul, that you will return here by tomorrow at noon.'

'Catch me there, billy!' says George. 'I'll engage no such thing, depend on it; that I will not.'

'Then remain where you are,' said the keeper, 'for there is no other alternative. We like best for people to come here in their own way in the way of their business;' and with that he flung George backwards, heels−over−head down hill, and closed the gate.

George finding all remonstrance vain, and being desirous once more to see the open day, and breathe the fresh air, and likewise to see Chirsty Halliday, his wife, and set his house and stable in some order, came up again, and in utter desperation signed the bond, and was suffered to depart. He then bounded away on the track of his horses with more than ordinary swiftness, in hopes to overtake them; and always now and then uttered a loud Wo! in hopes they might hear and obey, though he could not come in sight of them. But George's grief was but beginning; for at a well−known and dangerous spot, where there was a ran−yard on the one hand, and a quarry on the other, he came to his gallant steeds overturned, the coach smashed to pieces, Dawtie with two of her legs broken, and Duncan dead. This was more than the worthy coachman could bear, and many degrees worse than being in hell. There, his pride and manly spirit bore him up against the worst of treatment; but here his heart entirely failed him, and he laid himself down, with his face on his two hands, and wept bitterly, bewailing, in the most deplorable terms, his two gallant horses, Dawtie and Duncan.

While lying in this inconsolable state, some one took hold of his shoulder, and shook it; and a well−known voice said to him, 'Geordie! what is the matter wi' ye, Geordie?' George was provoked beyond measure at the insolence of the question, for he knew the voice to be that of Chirsty Halliday, his wife. 'I think you needna ask that, seeing what you see,' said George. 'O, my poor Dawtie, where are a' your jinkings and prancings now, your moopings and your wincings? I'll ne'er be a proud man again bereaved o' my bonny pair!'

'Get up, George; get up, and bestir yourself,' said Chirsty Halliday, his wife. 'You are wanted directly to bring the Lord President to the Parliament House. It is a great storm, and he must be there by nine o clock Get up rouse yourself, and make ready his servant is waiting for you.

'Woman, you are demented!' cried George. 'How can I go and bring in the Lord President, when my coach is broken in pieces, my poor Dawtie lying with twa of her legs broken, and Duncan dead? And, moreover, I have a previous engagement, for I am obliged to be in hell before twelve o clock.'

Chirsty Halliday now laughed outright, and continued long in a fit of laughter; but George never moved his head from the pillow, but lay and groaned for, in fact, he was all this while lying snug in his bed; while the tempest without was roaring with great violence, and which circumstance may perhaps account for the rushing and deafening sound which astounded him so much in hell. But so deeply was he impressed with the idea of the reality of his dream, that he would do nothing but lie and moan, persisting and believing in the truth of all he had

seen. His wife now went and informed her neighbours of her husband's plight, and of his singular engagement with Mr R of L y at twelve o'clock. She persuaded one friend to harness the horses, and go for the Lord President; but all the rest laughed immoderately at poor coachy's predicament. It was, however, no laughing matter to him; he never raised his head, and his wife becoming uneasy about the frenzied state of his mind, made him repeat every circumstance of his adventure to her (for he would never believe or admit that it was a dream), which he did in the terms above narrated; and she perceived or dreaded that he was becoming somewhat feverish.

She went out, and told Dr Wood of her husband's malady, and of his solemn engagement to be in hell at twelve o'clock.

'He maunna keep it, deane. He maunna keep that engagement at no rate,' said Dr Wood. 'Set back the clock an hour or twa, to drive him past the time, and I'll ca' in the course of my rounds.

Are ye sure he hasna been drinking hard?' She assured him he had not. 'Weel, weel, ye maun tell him that he maunna keep that engagement at no rate. Set back the clock, and I'll come and see him. It is a frenzy that maunna be trifled with. Ye mauna laugh at it, deane maunna laugh at it.

Maybe a nervish fever, wha kens.'

The Doctor and Chirsty left the house together, and as their road lay the same way for a space, she fell a telling him of the two young lawyers whom George saw standing at the gate of hell, and whom the porter had described as two of the last comers. When the Doctor heard this, he stayed his hurried, stooping pace in one moment, turned full round on the woman, and fixing his eyes on her, that gleamed with a deep unstable lustre, he said, 'What's that ye were saying, deane? What's that ye were saying? Repeat it again to me, every word.' She did so. On which the Doctor held up his hands, as if palsied with astonishment, and uttered some fervent ejaculations. 'I'll go with you straight,' said he, 'Before I visit another patient. This is wonderfu'! it is terrible! The young gentlemen are both at rest both lying corpses at this time!

Fine young men I attended them both died of the same exterminating disease Oh, this is wonderful; this is wonderful!'

The Doctor kept Chirsty half running all the way down the High Street and St Mary's Wynd, at such a pace did he walk, never lifting his eyes from the pavement, but always exclaiming now and then, 'It is wonderfu' most wonderfu'!' At length, prompted by woman's natural curiosity, Chirsty inquired at the Doctor if he knew any thing of their friend Mr R of L y. But he shook his head, and replied, 'Na, na, deane ken naething about him. He and his son are baith in London ken naething about him; but the tither is awfu' it is perfectly awfu'!'

When Dr Wood reached his patient he found him very low, but only a little feverish; so he made all haste to wash his head with vinegar and cold water, and then he covered the crown with a treacle plaster, and made the same application to the soles of his feet, awaiting the issue.

George revived a little, when the Doctor tried to cheer him up by joking him about his dream;.but on mention of that he groaned, and shook his head. 'So you are convinced, dearie, that it is nae dream?' said the Doctor.

'Dear sir, how could it be a dream?' said the patient. 'I was there in person, with Mr R and his son; and see, here are the marks of the porter's fingers on my throat.' Dr Wood looked, and distinctly saw two or three red spots on one side of his throat, which confounded him not a little.

'I assure you, sir,' continued George, 'it was no dream, which I know to my sad experience. I have lost my coach and horses and what more have I? signed the bond with my own hand, and in person entered into the most solemn and terrible engagement.

But ye're no to keep it, I tell ye,' said Dr Wood; 'ye're no to keep it at no rate. It is a sin to enter into a compact wi' the deil, but it is a far greater ane to keep it. Sae let Mr R and his son bide where they are yonder, for ye sanna stir a foot to bring them out the day.'

'Oh, oh, Doctor!' groaned the poor fellow, 'this is not a thing to be made a jest o'! I feel that it is an engagement that I cannot break. Go I must, and that very shortly. Yes, yes, go I must, and go I will, although I should borrow David Barclay's pair.' With that he turned his face towards the wall, groaned deeply, and fell into a lethargy, while Dr Wood caused them to let him alone, thinking if he would sleep out the appointed time, which was at hand, he would be safe; but all the time he kept feeling his pulse and by degrees showed symptoms of uneasiness. His wife ran for a clergyman of famed abilities, to pray and converse with her husband, in hopes by that means to bring him to his senses; but after his arrival, George never spoke more, save calling to his horses, as if encouraging them to run with great speed; and thus in imagination driving at full career to keep his appointment, he went off in a paroxysm, after a terrible struggle, precisely within a few minutes of twelve o'clock.

A circumstance not known at the time of George's death made this singular professional dream the more remarkable and unique in all its parts. It was a terrible storm on the night of the dream, as has been already mentioned, and during the time of the hurricane, a London smack went down off Wearmouth about three in the morning. Among the sufferers were the Hon. Mr R of L y, and his son! George could not know aught of this at break of day, for it was nor known in Scotland till the day of his interment; and as little knew he of the deaths of the two young lawyers, who both died of the small−pox the evening before.