Failure

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THE stranger and I had that lofty chamber of the British Museum to ourselves, as well as I could see. I could not see far, except upwards to the skylight. The full extent of the room's spacious pallor was screened by two enormous Assyrian bulls. That room looked and smelt like antiquity, dead, meaningless, and now harmless, as well as one knew. There was no sound, except an occasional sepulchral rumble, which might have been an echo out of Nineveh. The echo got lost, perhaps, when Sennacherib's army began to march cheering to another conquest, and those awful bulls hadn't warned it the cheering was all over, long, long ago.

I stopped at that particular cabinet where the stranger stood, by chance. My curiosity was not strong. This was only the first case in the room. That grave echo from the past depressed me more than the exhibits; though I was amused to see at once a familiar name, quoted as an authority in the description of a singular object under my nose. The name was homely, and of London, not of Nineveh, and was the only thing I recognized under the glass. I used to know a Thomas Tyrrhitt, but I did not remember that my Tyrrhitt was ever an influential authority of any sort.

He was but the headmaster of an elementary school, and the boys were of poor folk. In the years when he was busy, I imagine next week's bread and rent were of more importance to him than all the myths of Asia. That schoolmaster's ghost came to my mind, for an instant, as I contemplated an Assyrian brickbat, and then vanished again. It had no place there. Since the war, it has had no place anywhere.

The elderly and donnish figure near me remained still, and bent closely, as if short−sighted, over the cabinet. He did not look the kind of man who in loneliness would venture an affable approach. He would not so much as notice you were there. His fixed intent was not that of a visitor's idle curiosity; therefore, when ignorance casually intruded, as mine did, among the cryptic exhibits of antiquity, it would be of less importance, compared to a precious lump of baked clay, than the chance of wet weather.

I was about to wander on. Nothing could be gained in that room, except a peep into a vista of old time insignificant to the common eye. It gave me only a dreary notion of the depth of the ages, and of the fugitive nature of human achievements. Strange, that those vast man−headed, winged bulls once caused devotion in a patriotic multitude!

As I moved, so did the stranger, abruptly. He stood up and adjusted his spectacles. He rubbed his nose with a yellow silk bandanna, as if he had suddenly and successfully concluded a matter. He also noticed I was next to him, and with a hand still holding his gaudy handkerchief indicated one of the exhibits. My existence was admitted; more than that, I was promoted to share a trifle of knowledge with him.

The object he indicated meant nothing to me. I looked at it, and then inquiringly up at him. His eyes were still regarding a lump of inscribed brick in the case. His expression would have been altogether sad, but for a faint ironic smile.

"Well, that's all that's left of him," he said. "His sole memorial."

I gave the object a closer inspection. There the name of Tyrrhitt was again. "I'm not an archaeologist," I said. "These things mean little to me. But are you referring to the authority quoted here and there?"

It was evident that this stranger was really moved by his inspection of the nondescript fragments; and it is right and proper in ordinary mortals to respect the emotion of a scholar as he detects the important meaning of shapeless facts that not only appear to us to be without relationship, but without value in human affairs. He spoke of this Tyrrhitt in a way that surprised me. I began to have a suspicion. The authority quoted among the exhibits seemed on the point of identification; if that were so, it but added a greater wonder to a museum full of wonders.

Since I had been reminded of my one−time neighbour, the schoolmaster, I could recall him with sufficient distinction. He had been long absent from the daily scene, but I could see him well enough beyond the debris of the years. The Tyrrhitt I used to see about the streets of an obscure parish was, indeed, a respectworthy man. His boys, I remember, called him The Nabob. They did that, I believe, not only because of his authority, which they could not question, but because now and then he was requested to reduce a matter to common sense when an Oriental seaman was at variance with the local magistrates. I had heard a rumour that in his young days he had lived in China; or somewhere in the Far East.

It was my turn for a word or two. The stranger, as I related something of what I remembered of a neighbour, began to regard me incredulously. "But," he said at last, "that's the man. That's the very man. What, you knew Tyrrhitt?"

His tone was as if I merited some of the respect due to a fellow I had had the extraordinary good fortune to know, even if I was unaware, as it seemed I was, of the nature of my luck. It began to be clear that scholars once paid homage to Tyrrhitt, if to his neighbours he had never seemed of much more importance than a likeable oddity. Nobody that I knew in the past had ever suspected him of a secret passion for Cathay or Mesopotamia. To this stranger, however, the man I remembered was an eccentric pundit whose learning had compelled other scholars to change their minds. I remarked this baffling disparity. "Why," I exclaimed, "he was so very retiring and reserved!"

"Yes, that was his trouble. He never thought much of himself. He was as meek as Moses, though I've heard he could be very offensive, when he felt like it, to the Board of Education, and much good that ever did him. But I never met him. I wish I had."

So we established the fact, while granitic Assyrian bulls looked down at us, that there were two Tyrrhitts, perhaps more, but that they were all one man. "It will hardly bear thinking about," mused the stranger. "To sink himself as he did, of choice! Teacher in an elementary school!" His amusement was disconsolate.

I heard more. I was told that my one−time neighbour had been honoured by universities, but disregarded honours; that he could have had a professional chair at what would have been, for him, a princely reward. He could have gone up into the world of the elect. He refused to go. He preferred his mean streets. When he was wanted for an opinion, then they knew where to find him.

The question was, did he fear responsibility, and so went into the background for safety, doing work there that was really proper to lesser men? "What he understood of the conundrums used to make some of us look like only good triers. Still, he couldn't be persuaded to abandon his urchins. And I wonder. Did one of the little devils to whose slates and pencils this original wit was given, ever guess he had been favoured?"

He remained for a moment in meditation. "It was in my mind for years to go along to see him, as he would not come to us, but I left it too late. I never came to the right day for the pilgrimage, and then he died. I felt that at last out of respect for my own work I should be present at his passing. Others who knew what he was would certainly be there.

"They were not. Nobody was there but a group of his assistants and some boys. And it rained. How it rained! That dark cemetery left you in no doubt about the end. I have never in my life seen such a picture of finality. It was enough to take out of a young man all excelsior activity."

"Well," I said, "never mind the wet day. You understood, and you were there. Can't we call that enough? For my part, I didn't know he had left that school, and why, till it was very old news."

"Then we'll let it go," said the stranger, pretending to cheer up. He glanced round at the enigmatic relics of the past. The bulls were still listening to us. "If we talk any more about him in this place we shall confuse reason and our wits. It doesn't do to get mesmerized by the relativity of all things. It is better to say that Tyrrhitt did leave us something, and call it very good. If it seems a waste of knowledge because he chose to live and die as he did, let us admit that is only our silly way of looking at it."

We went out together leisurely down the steps of that severe storehouse of antiquity's relics, into London's present tumult. We paused, still talking freely, for I felt as if this chance visit had set back the horizon. The past had been quickened, and it had been brightened anyhow, I had a feeling that it was not altogether as extinct as its stoniness suggested. Haltingly, for one is shy of an unasked confession, I said something of this sort to my companion; I suggested that if the life that has been is now no more than as the flints in the earth, then how account for the way things turn out as they do, and for the sort of people we are?

The tall scholarly figure bowed over me politely, patiently considering this idea, as we were about to part, while I ventured further the hopeful but fearful notion that the little things each of us do, that perhaps our very thoughts, have a continuance which the shadows that pass with daylight have not. We are, I suggested, in both the past and future, as well as in the present.

He nodded speculatively, without comment, shifting his spectacles as if to get this idea into better focus, but did not say he had succeeded. Then he lifted his hand in salute, and in another minute had turned a corner, still without a name, and was lost as deeply in the noisy confusion of London as was the man we had been talking about in the silence of the backward years.

That long pause, while I had turned and peered back to forgotten occasions, had lifted up again so much that had been sunk out of sight, that next week I was drawn towards some once familiar streets. I had not been there for years; and I did not know the place. I found my way about with difficulty. Nothing was left of the school to which Tyrrhitt had devoted his life, and not much of its neighbourhood. Explosions had disposed of all that life and labour. The earth where a school had been was raising weeds.

So I began, by degrees, as I wandered about, to lose the freshness of a hope in continuity. I was lost again in time and place. The promise of a clue had gone. The shocks of these later years, removing landmarks, and the blustering changes in the winds of doctrine, tend to weaken faith in everlastingness; it appeared instead that all lights can be put out.

I did not, in truth, recognize that once friendly and acceptable parish, and I did not meet a ghost. Less remained there of Tyrrhitt's endeavours than was in the museum. His name was preserved, and only for a few specialists, because of his association with an odd Mesopotamian brick or two.

One old tavern sign that I used to know well enough remained upright in the desert, and I went in, but did not, of course, see its remembered host. His son was there instead, who did support me with a slight hold on once upon a time, that vague and romantic period.

After a little gossip of the recent days and nights of bumps and flames, I told him I had been looking for St. Bernard's School, but found only rubbish. He smiled grimly, and said that school was done in by a fly−bomb, all

in a moment. Luckily, nobody was in it at the time.

"And there's nobody there now," I remarked. "Thistles instead!"

"Thistles?" he questioned, a little puzzled. "O, I see," he went on. "You think that ended it. No, it didn't, The school carries on. It's in a makeshift place. My kid goes to it. Usually about this time the headmaster comes in here for lunch. He'd tell you and here he comes . . ."

The landlord left me, to conduct his guest to an upper room. I followed them up, without invitation, and the inn−keeper turned to look at me in faint disapproval as I arrived.

I explained to the present head of St. Bernard's the innocence of my intrusion. "Come along," he said. "Let's lunch together. We shall have this room to ourselves. I come here," he explained, "because my house went with the school, and home is too far off between business hours. We're living a provisional sort of existence; but the wheels go round." He waited while he settled himself, and then added, "and so they'd better."

I should say he was a man who could be trusted to keep wheels in his care going as they were meant to go. All the same, he was nothing like the master of other days. With that firm blue jowl, his alert grey eyes, and crisp grizzled hair, he could have been an energetic engineer. Apparatus in his care would move as required. I related, in the midst of the reminiscences, my recent little adventure in the museum. He continued in abstraction on his plate, without a remark, as if not fully attentive. At length he sat up, and glanced through the window to the ruins beyond, reflectively.

"Yes," he said, "it was a wet day, that day of Tyrrhitt's funeral, since you've been told so. I know quite well it soaked us, but I don't remember a stranger there . . . you see, I was only one of the elder boys. You can call me one of the larger little devils, just as your friend did. Yet if I ever felt shall we say respectful? I did that afternoon. There was the wind and rain, old Nabob going, and the quiet." He considered his tankard.

"It would have made anybody glum. Besides, we young devils had been properly afraid of Mr. Tyrrhitt. Don't mistake me. It was only because we could never dodge him. He knew what we were going to say before we said it. Sometimes he said it first. While his eye was on you you didn't dare change your mind; that wouldn't do. He'd see the change coming. As you know, when you are the weaker party in a dispute, it is never easy to keep strictly to the cold truth. Tyrrhitt made us face it though, like it or lump it. For idiotic blunders we'd get the stick, but not for lies. You'd hear something then worse than the swish of a cane. He wouldn't waste a good stick on an imposter.

"The fact is, I suppose, he woke us up to the importance of words, ordinary words. If words didn't fit the facts then they were bad. They might lead people astray. I believe what he was after was to make a fellow choose for himself he wanted a kid to know that it was up to him. He kept to that. You were somebody. You had to bear that in mind. He kept us up to the mark. But he was a jolly old boy in between whiles. If you came out with it like a man he would only screw his eyes and wag his finger in your face. You were warned. He had a laugh quite his own, a rich booming one. It could take the weight off what appeared to be a task he'd given you too heavy to lift."

We discussed that learning of his which had the approbation of the dons. "There was that, of course," the new head admitted, "but I only heard of it after I took charge. Some people did not know he was dead, and continued to write. I went to a little trouble to find out how much I did not know of my old chief. He'd been gone some time then, too.

"Naturally, as youngsters we had taken it for granted he knew everything Sanskrit, if it came to that, and hieroglyphics. Why not? Anything. I'd bet, all the same, that the old man never attached all that importance to it. I remember he boomed out at my form master once that an overweight of knowledge would be the death of us; and

my teacher, quite surprised, answered him boldly. They argued before us. Boys will remember a show like that. It was jam. 'Very well, Mr. Jones,' said old Tyrrhitt, as he stumped out, 'have it your way, but don't forget Lucifer knew more than you ever will, and remember what happened to him.'

"He was more concerned with a fellow himself than with his attainments. If he saw quality in a youngster he'd take care it wasn't lost in the mangling. Scholars from his school won names for themselves while he was a nobody, yet he wasn't one to make a fuss over cleverness. He said to me once, when I was a teacher, that we weren't training dogs.

"There was Hassell, a boy I remember at the school, and never near the top, but Tyrrhitt saw in him what we did not. That fellow managed somehow to reach a medical degree, which is rather beyond the usual mark with us, and then threw it away, as I thought, to go as a missionary to Upper Burma. When I regretted this move to Tyrrhitt, as not unlike waste, he simply sighed, and said he would like to go there himself.

"A year came when the Japanese invaded that land. Hassell, so we heard, had taken to the hills and forests with his savages, and was safe. Not till after the end of it did we hear the rest. Hassell, it seems, when he heard of the miserable state of the prisoners in Japanese hands, went down to be a prisoner himself, to help the sick. He had to pay for it, and could have escaped again, but held on.

"A wireless set was discovered, and a crisis blew up. Hassell had nothing to do with it, though he must have known very well who had. The Japs picked on him, for no doubt he stood out from the rest, to squeeze him for what he knew. They wasted their time on him, naturally, but they squeezed him too hard, and for too long. They killed him, but he did not break.

"There, I think, you see how it is. Tell me how to get that sort of thing into a curriculum."