

# THE JOYS OF FORGETTING



*BY THE SAME AUTHOR*

THE HARVEST OF A  
QUIET EYE

ODELL SHEPARD  
THE JOYS OF FORGETTING  
*A BOOK OF BAGATELLES*

*With a Foreword by*  
WALTER DE LA MARE

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TO  
ROBERT HILLYER  
FRIEND POET FORGETTER

## FOREWORD

“ALL the world,” says Montaigne, “may know me by my book, and my book by me.” So saying he set limitless bounds to the most elastic of all literary forms—the essay.

If a sermon contain good doctrine, the preacher need not be apparent in his printed word. The lyrics of *Anon.* flourish only in a rarer air because they appear to have been written by Everyman—with a touch of genius. When the man of science takes up his pen he endeavours to use it self-obliteratingly, though if by the grace of Heaven he be a Charles Darwin or a Francis Galton he need not always succeed in so doing. So, too, with history. So with fiction; the less the novelist obviously intrudes the better.

But in an essay the (inexhaustible) writer of it is its all but all. When, then, Mr. Shepard inquires: “What is an essayist after all but a sort of clergyman or professor who has lost, perhaps only for a time, the courage of his convictions? . . .” we listen not to what he says, but to how he is saying it. Nothing could be less true of him. He never preaches or attempts to proselytize. There is no trace of a we in

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his I. He teaches nothing but how to learn, and even as a lecturer he confesses that he sits in spirit among his own audience, and smiles at both. Though, too, it would be an easy task to compile from these pages a fairly long list of his convictions, the process would not resemble that of extracting quills from the fretful porpentine. They are here, but chiefly in diffusion. They are distillable from his state of mind.

Like one of the "candle-holders" who have his inmost sympathy, he has looked on at men and things, intent on seeing them in proportion. He chooses his points of vantage: now battlemented about with his folios, those "stained and lop-eared bescribbled veterans" so disposed in his book-room as to be within easy reach; now from a railway-carriage window, and anon from the topmost deck of a steamer in mid-ocean.

Of the four selves into which he analyses man on page 124, the second, we are soon assured, has had little share in this book; and the fourth probably far more than its owner himself surmises. Its oubliette was not so deep but that its occupant could catch strains less intimidating and final than those of the Last Trump.

Browse where we may in this book, then,

we share the author's company, candid, serene, detached, amused, yet profoundly concerned with what he has loved in life so well and so faithfully that his positives need no superlatives.

And his prose keeps pace with him—a prose “strictly meditated,” yet unlaboured, and at ease. How indeed (for those who still value it) can the pleasure be computed of reading what has been written with loving but “incessant care,” concealing its art and at the same time revealing the artist? The mere handling of words betrays the poet and the devotee of these seemingly man-made marvels—more elusive than the humming-bird, mightier than Behemoth, more potent than mandragora, and strange as snow.

But whatever the pains—and who can exaggerate them?—of weaving words together, Mr. Shepard seems to have been happy in the act of writing, and that is not only exceedingly rare, but irresistible in the reading. He knows where to begin; better still, he knows when it is time to end; and for the rest he is intent on all that lies between.

He delights in marginalia, as indeed he should, being the owner of his exquisitely enviable copy of the *Chronicles of England*.



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He is a bookworm, that is, but one long since out of its chrysalis, and his wings are dyed with the colours hidden in rare tomes in unusual libraries. But to love books as he does needs a lot of life. And though his courage may not be revealed by the convictions he positively expresses, it shows itself in his choice of themes. Not so much when he explores the haunts of the unicorn or the hobby-horse, as when he writes of childhood and of toys—if that can be called courage which manifests no fear of danger. And even if he had shared with us no more of the objective universe than the three cornelian marbles (on page 87), or Dido, or the Oxford pigs and ducks, or the little Egyptian mummy, or Waldo's rocking-horse, or the little old man with the telescope, we should have had our full reward.

One can judge of a book by asking what particular readers, and especially among those who have gone their way, would most enjoy reading it. That being so, Mr. Shepard is happy in his ghosts. Scholars, it is true, are "an unaccountable lot," but here is a pen that has not lost its intuition in gaining grace. Its wisdom is none the less wisdom for not wagging a long grey beard on its chin. Its humour is like the bloom on the

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grape called patience, having been ripened,  
it may be, through a good many storms.  
The wit is somewhere between sweet and  
dry, and leaves that smack of irony on the  
palate which is a wonderful preservative  
both in life and in literature.

And last: of his courtesy Mr. Shepard has  
refrained (as yet) from attempting any  
definition of the writer of introductions—  
a strange creature, resembling that peculiar  
kind of vandal who scratches his initials on  
the alabaster monuments of sage or crusader;  
in the hope, it may be, of snatching a shred  
of vicarious immortality. E.g.,

W. d. I. M.

*September, 1928*

## PREFACE

ONE hundred and eighty years of book-making have gone by since Dr. Johnson decided that all the good titles had been used up, and things have now come to such a pass that the naming of a book often seems as much a task as the writing of it. Authors are put to such strange shifts already that we may foresee the time when they will simply number their books as musicians do their compositions and as the great American cities do their streets. Meanwhile, this difficulty of christening, most apparent in a volume of miscellaneous contents, is sometimes evaded by using for a whole collection the title of one of its items. Thus I might have called the present book "Adventures in the Dictionary" or even "Cui Bono?" if those titles did not lie so obviously open to sarcastic comment from the reviewers. The fact is, however, that the contents of the book are not quite miscellaneous. Unless I have erred in selection and arrangement, they illustrate various aspects of the mood and intention of the first essay. And so, since I must find a name, why should it not be **THE JOYS OF FORGETTING?**

*Boars Hill, near Oxford*  
*June 1, 1928*

O. S.

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