

The Vulture's Eye

by F.W. Boreham

I

I spent some time this afternoon in admiring a picture that powerfully appealed to me. It is the work of Mr. Charles Whymper, R.I. It represents the gloomy valley in which Lord Carnarvon found the tomb of King Tutankhamen with all its hoarded treasure. Mr. Whymper's canvas depicts a fearsome and awe-inspiring scene. In every direction are towering summits with their splintered peaks and jagged pinnacles, their scarped crags and beetling cliffs. The whole valley is a place of melancholy recesses, narrow defiles, and dark ravines. Everything about it is wild, weird, precipitous, desolate, and grand. On the loftiest eminence a vulture stands poised, with wings outspread in readiness for flight. And, remembering the incalculable wealth that was discovered in the mysterious depths of that cavernous valley, Mr. Whymper has entitled his picture "What the Vulture's Eye Hath Not Seen!" However great may be the artistic merits of the picture, Mr. Whymper has certainly enhanced his claims upon our admiration by the touch of genius which dictated so suggestive and appropriate a title.

The Vulture's Eye! The eye of the vulture is the most powerful telescope in the universe. Taking into consideration its diminutive size and amazing compactness, the gigantic instruments in our great observatories are mere blunderbusses in comparison. The Vulture has no sense of smell to guide him; he relies altogether upon his eye; but that eye is one of Nature's masterpieces. By means of that marvelous mechanism he is able to detect the most insignificant object at the most incredible distance. He may be flying so high as to be invisible to the human sight, but he can see, with ease, the wounded rabbit on the hillside or the dying bird upon the bough. After some fierce fight on the prairie, the weaker combatant is left to nurse its wound in solitude. But scarcely has the blood begun to trickle from the gash when a vulture circles round the wretched creature's head. And, by the time

that the doomed beast staggers to his fall, the air is black with pinions. They come as if by magic. They seem to burst out of the air. It is the vulture's wonder-working eye that does it.

And yet, as Mr. Whympers so pointedly suggests, the vulture misses the best. Hundreds of times, thousands of times, perhaps millions of time, a vulture's eye swept that bleak and gloomy valley without descrying the hoarded treasure that Lord Car Narvon found there. The vulture sees the surface of things, that is all. And, at this point, Mr. Whympers has accurately caught the argument of that ancient thinker whose words he has borrowed for the title of his picture. Job describes the miner as he sinks his shafts and constructs his galleries in order that he may wrest from the bowels of the earth the gems that are held in so tight a clutch. He pictures him descending in his cage, swinging to and fro, and hazarding his life for the sake of the sapphires, the diamonds, and the gold that he hopes to tear from the flinty rocks below. And, speaking of the dark and dangerous subterranean caverns along which the miner crawls in search of treasure, Job says that here we have "the path that no fowl knoweth and which the vulture's eye hath not seen." The vulture is wonderfully quick to descry the dead hare lying under the hedge, and the wounded deer panting out its life in the shelter of the brushwood; but the shining gems that lie beneath the surface elude its most vigilant observation.

I wonder what this old-world thinker meant by contrasting the vulture with the miner! As I contemplate the two, side by side, I find a series of propositions starting to my mind. Let me jot them down!

II

The *first* is that, obviously, *Appetite is the basis of Character.*

The vulture, having an appetite for carrion and for the nothing else, looks for the gruesome, the ghastly, the revolting, the dead. That is what makes the vulture a vulture.

The man, on the other hand, has an appetite for everything that is rich and rare upon the earth. He does not mind how high he has to climb, nor

how deep he has to delve, nor how far he has to traipse, if only he can acquire the treasure on which his heart is set. That is what makes a man a man.

Appetite is the basis of *Character*. I have heard it said that you can tell a man's character by the bumps on his head, by the marks on his hands, by the peculiarities of his stride, and by the idiosyncrasies of his handwriting. It may be; I don't know. But I do know that a man reveals his character when he betrays his appetites. Tell me what a man secretly hankers for, and I will tell you the kind of man he is.

Life consists, very largely, of the selection and elimination of appetites. A little child has an appetite for everything. He puts out his hand to grasp every object that he sees. A dahlia and a dandelion are all the same to him. The years teach him to eliminate. He loses his appetite for something everyday. By the operation of this law, he may lose his appetite for good things, or he may lose his appetite for bad things; but he will certainly lose his appetite for some things. By the time that the silver is creeping into his hair, the range of things that will interest him will be extremely limited. And, in old age, only one or two master-passions will survive. But by those master-passions he must stand or fall. By the appetites that then remain you may know him for what he is; for *Appetite*, as we have seen, is the basis of *Character*.

III

The *second* of the proposition suggested to me by Job's contrast between the vulture and the miner is that *Character is the basis of Vision*.

Because the vulture is a vulture, it *sees* only what appeals to the vulture appetite.

Because a man *is* a man, he *sees* the things that are precious in his sight, even though they lie far down beneath the surface. "Keen and wonderful as are the instincts of the bird and beast," says Dr. Samuel Cox, "no hawk nor eagle is so quick to detect its prey as man to detect the gold or gems for which he searches. He takes a path inaccessible, and even

imperceptible, to hawks and eagles in his quest for earth's most precious things."

Character is the basis of *Vision*, as *Appetite* is the basis of *Character*. Tell me what a man craves for, and I will tell you what a man is; tell me what a man *is*, and I will tell you what he *sees*. For we all see what it is in us to see. I recall a couple of stories that are treasured among the traditions of one of our great art galleries.

- (I) A visitor, it is said, stood before one of Turner's incomparable triumphs. After surveying it for some time in silence, he turned to his friend, an artist standing by, and said: "I can't see anything in that!" "Don't you wish you could?" his companion retorted.
- (II) The curator was one day irritated beyond measure by the supercilious and contemptuous behavior of a gentleman who commented adversely on almost all the famous paintings in the gallery. At the last point of endurance was overstepped. The curator could stand it no longer. "Sir," he remarked, approaching the offender, "it is not the *pictures* that are on their trial; it is the *visitors*!"

The law holds at every turn. Two men go for a walk through the forest. To the eyes of the one, every tuft of fern, every wisp of grass, every fluttering leaf, and every flower that twinkles in the bracken suggest thought that awaken his curiosity and enthusiasm. To the other—

A primrose by the river's brim
A yellow primrose is to him
And it is nothing more.

To the man in whose soul there is no music, the thrush and the nightingale will sing in vain. To the man in whose soul there is no beauty, the fairest bowers will be drab and commonplace. You need electric eyes, as Tyndall used to see electric wonders.

It is at this point that we touch the most tragic of all tragedies. It is a tragedy of the sight; but it is only a tragedy of *sight* because it is, first of all, a tragedy of the *soul*. In his *Voltaire*, Lord Morley deplores a certain moral obliquity in the great Frenchman, an obliquity which incapacitated him from appreciating the loftiest elements in human character. He utterly failed, Lord Morley observes, to recognize the beauty and holiness of Christ, and had no ear for the finer vibrations of the Spiritual Voice. *That*, as coming from Lord Morley, is very striking. And *that* is precisely what the greatest of the Hebrew prophets meant when, in his most sublime outburst of inspiration, he warned his people of the possibility that, when Messiah came, they might have no eyes for Him. "When we shall see Him," he said, "*there is no beauty that we should desire Him.*" It is the pathos of the unseeing eye—the eye that stares vacantly at the beauty's crown of beauty, yet has no conception that there is any beauty there.

IV

The *third* of the propositions suggested to me by Job's contrast between the vulture and the miner is that *Vision is the basis of Achievement*.

Because the miner does not *want* dead beast in the brushwood, he does not *see* it, and does not *get* it.

Because the vulture has no appetite for silver and gold and sapphires and diamonds, he does not *see* them and does not *get* them.

Barney Barnato had the eye to see that, down beneath the exploited and abandoned diamond mines of South Africa, there were richer and rarer gems than had ever been brought to the surface; and, buying for a song those worked-out claims, he made himself rich beyond the dreams of avarice.

It is always so. The people who *see* most in us *get* most from us. I was reading, only yesterday, of a poor little woman, of bent form and furrowed face and shabby dress, who stood, shivering in the cold, in the yard of the police station, waiting to see her boy. The Prison-van was standing ready to carry off the men upon whom long sentences had been pronounced. Presently they appeared, under police escort. The crowd outside the gates

were amused and excited; but she had no eyes for the crowd. She was thinking only of that boy of hers: he was the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. He looked such a lad! The two were allowed to converse for just a moment before the van drove off. She had no word of rebuke or reproach. A wan smile played over her pinched face, and she talked of old friends and old times. A policeman nudged him and pointed to the van. She threw her arms about him in farewell.

"I always knew," she exclaimed, through her tears; "I always knew that you'd grow up to be a good man, George. And you will, yet; I know you will"

The crowd jostling against the gates saw only something that was to ride in a prison-van, something that was to rot in a prison-cell, something that, for aught they cared, was to rest at last in a prison grave. The crowd saw things as the vulture sees them, viewing only the surface. But she saw things as a miner sees them; she saw the gold underneath.

"I always knew," she exclaimed, through her tears; "I always knew that you'd grow up to be a good man, George; and you will. I know you will"

Appetite is the basis of *Character*: *Character* is the basis of *Vision*: *Vision* is the basis of *Achievement*. The people who have hearts to hunger for the goodness in us have eyes that are wonderfully quick to see any glimmerings of it that may lie latent there. And those who have eyes to see the best in us soon get the best from us. It is not only the law of mine: it is the law of mankind.

V

But I have left the best for the last. *Appetite*, we have seen, determines *Character*: *Character* determines *Vision*: and *Vision* determines *Achievement*. Everything, therefore, hinges upon *Appetite*. But what of the man whose appetites are formed and whose character has, in consequence, taken shape? Happily, appetite is never indelible. Even Nature gives the most astonishing hints of the possibility of some modification of appetite and of character. In his *Darwinism*, Dr. Alfred Russel Wallace speaks of the New Zealand kea. For centuries the kea lived on berries, seeds, insects, and the

like. But when the white men came to the country, bringing their sheep with them, the kea changed its habits. "It began by picking the sheepskins hung out to dry, or the meat in process of being cured. About 1868 it was first observed to attack living sheep, burrowing into their backs and tearing out their vital organs. As a natural consequence, the bird is being destroyed as rapidly as possible; and one of the most rare and curious members of the New Zealand fauna will soon cease to exist." Here is a modification of *Appetite*, effecting, first, a modification of *Character*, then a modification of *Achievement*. In this friend becomes the farmer's foe. But if *Appetite* is capable of modification in one direction, it is surely capable of modification in another. What else can the prophet have meant when he said that "*the cow and the bear shall feed together, and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.*" If Dr. Wallace's illustration points to a modification downward, Isaiah's illustration points to a modification upward.

And what did Jesus mean by saying that *we must be born again*? He can only have contemplated a change of *Appetite*, of *Character*, of *Vision* and of *Achievement* so radical that the modification becomes regeneration. I may become a *new creature in Christ Jesus*. There is a stage in a man's life, Emerson says, when he takes great care that his neighbor shall cheat him. "But a day comes when he begins to care that he does not cheat his neighbor. Then all goes well. He has changed his market-cart into a chariot of the sun" Let no man fancy, therefore, that, because his appetites and achievements are low, they must always be. If the Savior's words mean anything, they mean that he may drop his market-cart at any moment: the chariot of the sun stands waiting!

[*For where a man's treasure is there his heart is also.*]