

### "MIGHT HAVE BEEN."

If, of all words of tongue and pen  
The saddest are—"It might have been";  
More sad are those we daily see:  
"It is, but hadn't ought to be."

With the natural philosophy of the American mind (die Philosophie des Unbewunten) the writer of the above lines completes Whittier's sentimental truism and brings us back to solid fact. For if all our "might have beens" had translated themselves into "had beens" we should certainly not cherish their recollection with the same tender sentiment we now do; they would simply have fallen into line as events that had happened, and there would have been an end of their dreamy uncertainty. But which of us does not cherish tender longings for what might have been in our lives? If we had turned to the right instead of the left, we should have opened the wonderful door of bliss, so we dream, instead of that dull left-hand door which led us to such a prosaic future. Well—it is over and done with—the right-hand door is closed to us for ever, but we can still dream of all the good things the gods had stored behind it for us. What chances, what possibilities lay behind that door!—the development of our best and noblest faculties which have rusted and decayed, so we firmly believe, because of our unfortunate mistake, the fulfilment of our sweetest desires, and, best of all to the modern mind, what dazzling success awaited us there. Oh! "Might have been" is a potent source of daydreams with the hardest and most matter-of-fact of mortals: it stirs the vein of fancy that slumbers in the most prosaic human being.

Now, I often like to imagine what would have happened to me, for instance, if Mrs. Wardroper, of St. Thomas's, had not, after a pleasant and agreeable chat, advised me to go home and get married, but had accepted my humble application, and I, as a logical sequence, had been a St. Thomas's instead of a Bart's Probationer. Should I have championed State Registration in season and out of season and developed on the nursing lines I did? I wonder. And when the Johannesburg Nursing Home turned out a failure twenty years ago and I literally tossed as to whether I should come home to England or go on to Chinde, which was a pestilential hole in those days, much given over to fever: if Kruger's head had come uppermost instead of the Transvaal arms, what then? If I had received leave from my committee at Southampton to go with that

West African expedition I longed to join, should I have returned safely to the Royal South Hants and gathered up the threads of my work there again? Who can tell?

Life, even the most humdrum, gives one plenty of scope for speculation if the "might have beens" are taken into account. It is a fascinating employment for our weaker moments, that habit of imagining the other life we might have led had we just not turned to the left instead of to the right.

In the old days people frankly owned they were quite unable to judge whether a certain course of action or a certain time for action would be for the best, so they consulted soothsayers, augurs, witches, magicians, priests and such-like: anyone who would give them a hint as to what the gods thought of the matter in hand; and I have not the slightest doubt but that their affairs were on the whole arranged quite as satisfactorily as ours. Mistakes were neither more frequent nor more appalling than now, when we consult our own judgment and make up our own minds. Anyhow, it was good to have a line of action settled for you, from which you might on no account deviate.

There are other "Might have beens" that sound a more tragic note, that have a sadder ring in them. It is the thought of failure in kindness, in consideration, in understanding for those who are now beyond the rectifying of any mistakes. "I might have been kinder, more thoughtful; I didn't mean all I said, I didn't say all I meant." Who has not thought that when it was too late to put things straight, when the door was irrevocably closed. Oh! "Might have been" is more than, than a tender emotion.

And yet—you live in a live world, with living work and living duties around you, and the harder philosopher is right: "It is, but hadn't ought to be," and you dare not enfeeble your actions and the work to your hand by hopeless or useless regrets. The thing that is, but hadn't ought to be, is what you have to tackle. Let memory be a spur, not a drag. It is the world's wrong and the world's misery, the little patch that is yours to till that claims your life and your mind:

"No chains more unworthy to bind you  
Than those of a vain regret."

So, at any and every cost, you must bury your dead. "Bury it and go thy way. It may chance that, one day, long hence, thou shalt come suddenly upon the grave of it—and, behold! it is dewy green."

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[previous page](#)

[next page](#)