

A LAST DIARY

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A last diary by W. N. P. Barbellion & Arthur J. Cummings

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W. N. P. BARBELLION & ARTHUR J. CUMMINGS

A LAST DIARY

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A Last Diary

BY W. N. P. BARBELLION
WITH A PREFACE BY
ARTHUR J. CUMMINGS

"We are in the power of no calamity while
Death is in our own."—*Religio Medici*.

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THE LIFE AND CHARACTER OF BARBELLION

THE opening entry in *A Last Diary* was made on March 21, 1918; the closing sentence was written on June 3, 1919. In *The Journal of a Disappointed Man* the record ended on October 21, 1917, with the one word "Self-disgust." An important difference between the first diary and that now published lies in the fact that the first embodies a carefully selected series of extracts from twenty post-quarto volumes of manuscript in which Barbellion had recorded his thoughts and his observations from the age of thirteen without any clearly defined intention, except towards the end of his life, of discovering them to any but one or two of his intimate friends. He often hinted to me that some parts of his diary would "make good reading" if they could be printed in essay form, and I think he then had in mind chiefly those passages which

supplied the inspiration of *Enjoying Life*, the volume of essays that revealed him more distinctively in the character of "a naturalist and a man of letters." Still, the diary was primarily written for himself. It was his means of self-expression, the secret chamber of his soul into which no other person, however deep in his love and confidence, might penetrate. More than once I asked him to let me look at those parts which he thought suitable for publication, but shyly he turned aside the suggestion with the remark: "Some day, perhaps, but not now." All I ever saw was a part of the first essay in *Enjoying Life*, and an account of his wanderings "in a spirit of burning exultation" over the great stretch of sandy "burrows" at the estuary of that beautiful Devonshire river, the Taw, where in long days of solitude he first taught himself with the zeal and patience of the born naturalist the ways of birds and fish and insects, and learnt to love the sweet harmony of the sunlight and the flowers; where, too, as a mere boy he first meditated upon the mysteries of life and death.

The earlier *Journal*, then, was, generally speaking, spontaneous, not calculated for effect, a part of himself. He wrote down instinctively and by habit his inmost thoughts, his lightest impression of the doings of the day, a careless jest that amused him, an irritating encounter with a foolish or a stupid person, something newly seen in the structure of a bird's wing, a sunset effect. It was only on rare occasions that he deliberately experimented with forms of expression. But I cannot help thinking that the diary contained in the present volume, though in one sense equally a part of himself, has a somewhat different quality. It appears to bear internal evidence of having been written with an eye to the reader because of his settled intention that it should be published in a book. He has drawn upon the memories of his youth for many of the most interesting passages. He has smoothed the rough edges of his style with the loving care of an author anticipating criticism, and anxious to do his best. Whether the last diary will be found less attractive on that account is not for me

to say. The circumstances in which it was written explain the difference, if, as I suppose, it is easy to detect. In the earlier period covered by *A Last Diary* the original *Journal* was actually in the press; in the later period it had been published and received with general goodwill. Barbellion certainly did not expect to live to see the *Journal* in print, and that is why he inserted at the end its single false entry, "Barbellion died on December 31"—1917. A few of the later reviewers, whose sense of propriety was offended by this "twisting of the truth for the sake of an artistic finish," rebuked him for the trick played upon his readers. But he refused to take the rebuke seriously. "The fact is," he said with a whimsical smile, "no man dare remain alive after writing such a book."

A further difference between the present book and its two predecessors is that both the *Journal* and *Enjoying Life* were prepared by himself for publication, though the latter appeared after his death, whereas *A Last Diary* was still in manuscript when

he died. He left carefully written instructions as to the details of publication, and he was extremely anxious that there should be no "bowdlerising" of any part of the text. He desired that at the end should be written "The rest is silence." Nearly the whole of the diary is in his own handwriting, which in the last entries became a scarcely legible scrawl, though in moments of exceptional physical weakness he dictated to his wife and sister. Up to the last his mind retained its extraordinary strength and vigour. His eyes never lost their curiously pathetic look of questioning "liveness." In that feeble form—"a badly articulated skeleton" he had called himself long before—his eyes were indeed the only feature left by which those who loved him could still keep recognition of his physical presence. His body was a gaunt, white framework of skin and bone, enclosing a spirit still so passionately alive that it threatened to burst asunder the frail bonds that imprisoned it. I think those who read the diary will agree that while it is mellow and more delicate in tone it