Two Novels

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CHAPTER VI

VISUAL IMAGINATION

THERE is existence. There is life. Existence is transient. Life is eternal. Existence begins with birth and ends with death. Life is immortality touched and tasted—the gift of a rare moment. Existence is earth. Life is the root and leaf—flower of dream opening from the calyx of reality.

The aim of the artist is expression. The expression of life is art.

But no art is possible without freedom; fear and ignorance are the negation of life. To be free is to choose a world and dwell in it uninfluenced by sentiment or circumstance.

There is doom of days of fear and emptiness. There is beauty, wise and young and with the eyes of sleep. And between them there is a bridge—the bridge of visual imagination.

The eyes look outward on to an actual world, the world of existence. The eyes look inward and see a world as vital and as clear, the world of dream.
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When the world of existence merges into the world of dream, the eyes look on the world of life.

Illusion is to reflect, for the point of a second, the world of dream upon the world of existence. Vision is to project the world of dream beyond the eyes until the actual world is obscured.

To dream is to draw pictures across the black curtain of the mind. A thought occurs, a wish, and is immediately translated into a picture. Wish joins wish—picture fits into picture. The result, whether experienced in a sleeping or a waking state, forms a dream.

Life is a constant effort to dwell in the actual world familiar to these pictures. Dreams are the hieroglyphics by which the mind expresses its true thoughts.

All roots open from childhood—beauty, knowledge, adventure—but they are useless to the artist until they are blended with experience. Experience is personal contact with the elements of life.

An artist must be rough to brutality, sensitive as a poppy leaf is to light, for to know the precise moment in which to pass from coarseness into beauty is the root of art. He must be free of the literature of all nations. He must see the same problems, the same thoughts, through the eyes of each different race.

The desire of the spirit is immortality. Cessation of growth means cessation of life.

Visual imagination is a gift of the child and the artist. It is the root of the creative impulse, the vitality
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of appreciation, a half of the ingredients of dream. It gives the power to live not one life but many lives, a share in the immortal beauty of the past life of the earth.

It is rare to find children who are not able to see “pictures,” though with maturity these tend to fade and to disappear. Yet in a few cases their colour deepens with each month, grows hard of outline. They become the shells from which poet or painter pours the eventual expression of his mind.

A photograph is the impression formed on the mind of the actual world. A picture is the image traced by imagination or by accident on the brain.

The inside of the head seems as a row of cells—a hive, open in the middle and dark. A line of a poem, an adventure, a new thought, opens one cell, many cells, and frees the pictures they contain. The liberated impressions drift across the head.

Pictures are of three kinds. Unconscious—when they pass through the mind without conscious effort to evoke or to retain them. Conscious—when by effort of will these pictures are retained and made clear to the point of reality. Visual—when images unconnected with the imagination appear for a moment, vivid with light and movement, as if centred in the lids of the eyes.

A figure seen in a conscious picture could be recognised at any future period. A figure seen in an unconscious picture would be definite in outline, but the
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details (colour of eyes and hair) might not be very clear.

Colour and line are dependent in an unconscious picture on association, in a conscious picture on choice.

The pictures of a child are usually unconscious or visual. Only an artist of some degree of development has the gift of conscious vision.

In actual life thousands of photographs are impressed upon the mind. Some are retained, some are thrown away. During some process of selection (imperfectly understood at present) certain details from many pictures slip back towards the eyes. The result is a visual picture.

“A bright blue sea beats against an island of brown rocks. Foam is flung high between the sharp points of pinnacles. Sea-birds—gulls and cormorants—fly overhead or perch on the flatter stones. It is no island known in actual life, but the shape is too vivid ever to be forgotten. The sea surges and withdraws again with shrill, incessant movement. The light on the waves is visible as the sun catches them, and again they darken as they surge forward into hollows.”

Such was an image which occurred after a day had been spent fishing between many small islands. A changing series of impressions had passed before the eyes which had retained at will certain photographs which the mind desired to keep. But of the many rejected impressions some had silted away from forget-
FULNESS AND RE-LIVED A MOMENT IN THE CENTRE OF THE EYELIDS.

IN DURATION A VISUAL PICTURE COMES MIDWAY BETWEEN CONSCIOUS AND UNCONSCIOUS IMAGINES. IT MAY LAST FROM A SECOND TO SEVERAL SECONDS. IT MAY APPEAR, VANISH, AND APPEAR AGAIN. IT IS COMMON IN CHILDHOOD AND DETACHED BOTH FROM IMAGINATION AND FROM THOUGHT. USUALLY IT OCCURS JUST BEFORE SLEEP (NOT INVARIABLY), AND OF ALL THREE KINDS IS BY FAR THE MOST INTENSE IN COLOUR AND IN MOVEMENT.

UNCONSCIOUS PICTURES ARE THE IMAGES, VAGUE IN OUTLINE BUT DEFINITE TO THE MIND, THAT A CHILD SEES, TURNING THE PAGES OF A STORY-BOOK, OR THAT MAKE SOME LINE OF A PICTURE OR A POEM THE GATE TO THE ARTIST OF ANOTHER WORLD. THEY ARE AS SWIFT AND AS NATURAL AS BREATH, AND TO SOME MINDS THE INEVITABLE ACCOMPANIMENT OF EACH THOUGHT.

A CONSCIOUS PICTURE CAN LAST AS LONG AS THE MIND AND EYES CAN ENDURE THE RIGID CONCENTRATION. IT IS THE IMAGE BUILT BY AN ARTIST, EAGER TO CREATE A DESIRED WORLD.

"THE SEA—BLUE AND INTENSE AS A WOOD HYACINTH—SWEEPS BEYOND CARTHAGE TO THE SOUTH. A SHIP MOVES OUT OF THE HARBOUR, HER PROW POINTED TOWARD THE SUNSET, A DARK LIBYAN PULLING AT THE ROPES THAT FREE HER PURPLE SAIL. A STRING OF CAMELS PRINT THE DUST WITH SILENT FOOTSTEP; A WAR ELEPHANT WITH SLOW, DEFIANT MOVEMENT STRIPS THE LEAVES FROM A WAYSIDE SHRUB. ANOTHER SHIP, LOW IN THE WATER WITH SICILIAN GRAIN, BREAKS INTO THE
circle of the bay. A Numidian gallops past toward the
date-palms and the desert; the rich African sunlight
burns the city to a flame of gold.”

The mirage of antiquity grows sharp until the body
almost feels the sun and the eyes, so hungry for colour
in a grey land, are appeased. But the strain across the
eyelids is so painful that the image, with a few minutes,
is allowed to slip from sight.

It is only when a picture is “felt” as well as “seen”
that artistic expression results.

There are days that are immortal; hours the bird-
heart of freedom deigns to shelter an instant in a hu-
man mind. That these be untainted of any evil exis-
tence—night upon flowers—scatters over the memory
leaves of sleep. But let some poem be read or some
adventure be achieved. As the light falls they open out
of the darkness—for the wind dies and the sunset; it
is only these hours that live.

There was existence; there was also life. But in
this present time it was hard to capture the reality of
dream. Modernity was evil with weakness and repres-
sion; a swamp that sucked breath back out of the light.
The intellect of modern France had lost its sharpness,
exhausted by half a century of expression. What was
England but a wallpaper of rigid pattern in art, in edu-
cation, and in life? It was true a convention of revolt
existed, but with the first test the rebels slunk back
into the horde. They made an artificiality of freedom.
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False realities were stamped—pink buds or decayed leaves—upon the acquiescent paper of their minds. Even Downwood, even the schools, were but loose bolts in an engine rusted to breaking-point. Fresh paint only made the corruption seem more hideous. And trying to face truth, trying to grasp it, Nancy knew that there was strife about her and ahead of her—a fight, with death as the prize. But she must know and write. She must achieve and express freedom. There must be no pity for an ugly world; pity that was so easy and so wrong. It was better to die for beauty than to exist for lies. And the horde—so ready to stab at any unguarded moment—could not plunder her of Carthage, could not blur the islands from her mind. As long as winds breathed and dawn flowered there was her own South to welcome her, the South itself to answer her “Beauty lives.”

THE END

The author has in preparation a second volume to be entitled *Adventure*, in which the story of *Development* will be continued.