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978-1-108-07422-3 - Passages of a Working Life During Half a Century: With a Prelude of Early Reminiscences: Volume 1

Charles Knight

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Passages of a Working Life during Half a Century

Charles Knight (1791–1873), the son of a Windsor bookseller, was apprenticed to his father at fourteen. He read widely and systematically, and began to buy, collect and sell rare books. He also worked as a journalist, and, on moving to London, set up as a publisher, then took to freelance writing, and acted as manager of the publications of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge. In 1832, he launched the *Penny Magazine*, offering the working classes useful information, within a moral context of thrift and self-discipline. Knight continued to write – on Shakespeare, on Caxton, on English history – while at the same time being at the centre of the British publishing industry. His 1864–5 three-volume autobiography (reissued here in its posthumous 1873 edition) provides insights into the economics as well as the personalities of the mid-Victorian publishing world. Volume 1 covers Knight's life up to 1826.

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With a Prelude of Early Reminiscences

VOLUME 1

CHARLES KNIGHT



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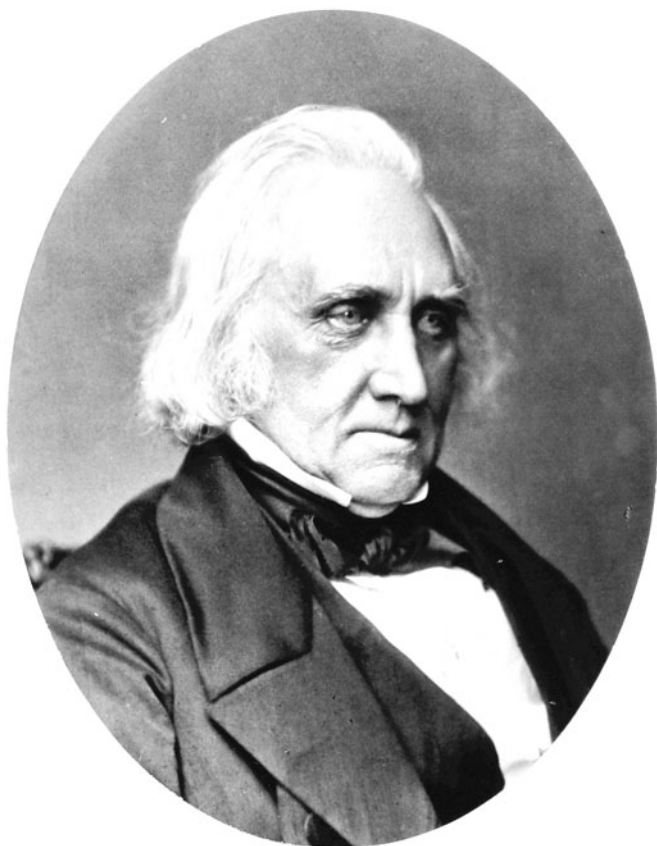
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"AUTOTYPE" FROM A PHOTOGRAPH TAKEN BY WILLIAMS & MAYLAND"

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PASSAGES OF A WORKING LIFE

DURING HALF A CENTURY:

With a Prelude of Early Reminiscences.

BY

CHARLES KNIGHT.

“ Let us be content in work
To do the thing we can, and not presume
To fret because it's little.”

ELIZABETH BROWNING. *Aurora Leigh.*

RE-ISSUE, WITH INTRODUCTORY NOTE

BY

JAMES THORNE, F.S.A.

VOLUME I.

LONDON:

KNIGHT & CO., 90, FLEET STREET.

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INTRODUCTORY.



THE book, for the new issue of which I have undertaken to write an Introductory Note, is strictly what its title indicates—the record of ‘Passages of a Working Life during Half a Century.’ The Worker has ceased from his labours and entered upon his rest. But it is too soon yet to add the final chapter to his ‘Passages.’ All that will be attempted here will be to carry on the record till the goal was reached. I have called the note Introductory, but its more fitting place would, perhaps, be at the end rather than at the beginning of the book, and the reader may, if he please, defer the reading of it till he has read the ‘Passages.’

In the Preface Mr. Knight tells us that it was in the August of 1812 his “working life really commenced;” but nowhere, I think, has he mentioned the year when life itself began, though, from various incidental references, it may readily be inferred.

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But in considering the closing years of his working life it is well to keep in mind his actual age.

He was born at Windsor on the 15th of March, 1791. The Dedication, which terminates the 'Passages' (vol. iii. p. 328), is dated January 16, 1865. He had thus, as we see, nearly completed his seventy-fourth year when he wrote the last pages of his book: he had quite completed it when the book was published. To pass in review half a century of such varied and active occupation, and to produce his 'Memorials of Men and Books, of Social Progress and Changing Manners,' was a toilsome and arduous undertaking at such an age; and it might have been thought that its author would feel that, having accomplished it, he had at length fairly earned repose. But old habits could not be so easily cast off. Work had long been necessary to his enjoyment of life. The love of literature had coloured his business transactions when he was most active as a publisher: when he withdrew from direct participation in trade, the pursuit of literature became his chief occupation. As he wrote in the Preface to the volume now in the reader's hand, he "had still to look for happiness in work." Before he had completed the present book, he had, in fact, been laying down the lines of a new one.

The subject of this lay close to his hand, and the research it involved was a congenial and pleasant labour. Various references in the 'Passages' had

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vidly recalled the images of one and another of the bygone generations of booksellers — many of them writers, printers, publishers, as well as booksellers. Dryden's quaint old publisher, "left-legged Jacob," Pope's "huge Lintott," and "dauntless Curll," Johnson's first London friend, Edward Cave, and folio-smitten Osborne, Grandison-Richardson, and the philanthropic old curmudgeon, Thomas Guy, sitting in his odd little shop at the corner of Lombard Street, "over against the Stocks Market," were more than mere names to him; and, as one and another of their shadows crossed his path, there recurred an old, half-formed fancy that a pleasant gossiping volume might be written about them, their doings, and their associates, such as years before had led him to collect books and prints that served to illustrate the history of the Trade. More than once we had talked the subject over, and having often had occasion, during the quarter of a century we had worked together, to admire how quickly performance followed on conception, I was little surprised at receiving, a month or so after the publication of the third volume of the 'Passages,' the first proof-sheets of a Memoir of the Founder of Guy's Hospital, and learning that it was to form the opening chapter of a volume to be entitled 'Shadows of the Old Booksellers.' On some of the more out-of-the-way points of a topographical and antiquarian kind, respecting which he was unsatisfied, and which he

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was, of course, unable personally to investigate, I was able to throw a little additional light, and to indicate some collateral sources of information which he had overlooked. The new materials entailed fresh toil, but he at once cheerfully engaged on it, recast the memoir, and made it the best, the most interesting, and the most appreciative biography that had been written of one well entitled to commemoration.

Once fairly started, the work advanced smoothly and rapidly. With his life-long acquaintance with the theme in all its parts and bearings, his knowledge of the men, his fondness for picturesque details, and tact in selecting and grouping them, and his never-failing facility of expression, the mere writing was comparatively easy, and printing, as was his custom, chapter by chapter as each was written, by the end of the year the volume was finished.

The Old Booksellers had been a congenial theme, and he parted from them unwillingly. He had told the story, more or less fully, of a goodly number of them—from Thomas Guy to James Lackington—and thus traversed, in a desultory but not unconnected manner, the history of bookselling and publishing during the entire eighteenth century, at the same time illustrating on the way many a by-path of literary and social life. But then, how many had he been forced to exclude whose claims to a place

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seemed scarcely inferior to those he had admitted, and of whom, as representatives of special phases of art or literature, of the trade or of the times, so much might have been told that would have given life and freshness to the book, and amused and interested the reader! Lingering thus over their memories, he, in the Introduction to the volume, enumerates and characterises many of those he has omitted, and, noting some of the associations evoked by their names, observes that the more prominent among them might “fitly form the subject of a separate series,” and, “without pledging himself to such an attempt,” states that he “may probably employ his leisure in collecting some of the necessary materials, which, like those upon which the present volume has been based, have to be sought for in odd corners, as well as in open spaces accessible to all.”

Research such as this was, however, more than could be entered upon immediately, and, as a lighter exercise, he undertook the preparation of a volume entitled ‘Half-hours with the best Letter-Writers and Autobiographers,’ a selection of short but always interesting extracts, with introductory notices of the writers, and usually some apt comments. ‘Shadows of the Old Booksellers’ was completed in October 1865; the ‘Half-hours’ occupied him till November 1866. But already he had a new work on the anvil. Sight was fast failing; the fingers could not guide

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the pen ; the memory no longer responded as of old to the calls made upon it. But there was the old craving for work, and, as the readiest means of satisfying it, he set about the composition of an historical romance, led thereto, probably, by the circumstance that he had been once again reading through Scott's novels—or, rather, had listened to them, for his eyes no longer permitted him to read for himself. The story was, however, suggested by a passage in a letter from the Rev. George Garrard to Sir Thomas Wentworth, Lord-Deputy of Ireland, dated January 8th, 1635-6, telling how a man of mean estate, succeeding unexpectedly to a large fortune, "was so overjoyed that he fell mad," when, under the vicious action of the Court of Wards, "instantly he was begged at Court," but died two days after. 'Begg'd at Court,' as the novel was called, is the story of this "poor rich man's" daughter, who, in place of her father, has been given as a ward to a certain Captain Blackman. It is "a Legend of Westminster," and referring to the Commonwealth period, affords room for some interesting local historical gossip. The story is told in a single volume, and a reader old-fashioned enough to enjoy a plain unsensational historical novelette will peruse it with pleasure ; but its chief interest will probably be found in the time and the circumstances in which it was composed. The last lines of it were written on the 15th of March, 1867, the author's seventy-sixth birthday.

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The story itself, owing to the failure of sight, was “dictated to a kind helper.” It would not be easy to find a parallel to this in literary history.

The novel finished, his thoughts were still of work. As lying within the compass of his now limited means of research, he undertook a second series of ‘Half-hours with the best Letter-Writers and Auto-biographers;’ and I see by the dates on the proof-sheets now lying before me, that he had completed it by the beginning of June 1868. But his vigour was by this time greatly abated, and he acknowledges in the Preface the help for which he had been indebted to a member of his family. Still, as in the earlier series, the examples are well selected; the introductions and interchapters are written in a cheerful and kindly spirit; there is shrewd characterisation, genial criticism, a healthy moral tone; and, as in the sketch of Sir John Dinely, some pleasant personal reminiscences.

With these Half-hours ended his career as an author. His career as editor continued a few months longer. In the second volume of the ‘Passages’ (pp. 58–64) he narrates at length the circumstances which led him to originate in 1827 the ‘British Almanac,’ and the associated volume, the ‘Companion to the Almanac,’ and he remarks with evident, and very justifiable, satisfaction that “the pair have travelled on together for thirty-seven years under my direction, through many changes of

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times and men," while "the general features of these publications have undergone very little change during this long period." For yet five years more he continued to edit the pair, and he brought his literary labours to a close by preparing during the last autumn days of 1868 the volume of the 'Companion to the Almanac' for 1869. This was the forty-second of the annual series, each volume of which had been produced under his direct supervision. He could not have undertaken the labour another year, and the work was transferred, with its high character unimpaired, to other hands. Mr. Knight's latest literary contribution to the 'Companion' was a lively and interesting paper in the volume for 1867 on 'Mural Records of Pedestrian Tourists'—the pedestrian tourists being the professional tramps who infest the country workhouses, and the mural records the scribblings they leave behind them on the walls of the "Tramp-wards" in which they make their temporary abode.

For a while longer he continued to select, or to talk of selecting, books to be read to him with a view to some new work; but day by day it became more and more clear to those who watched so tenderly over him, that at length his working days were past, and gradually, but tacitly, he seemed himself to acquiesce in that conviction. When, however, he ceased to read, or be read to, with a view to writing, he remained as eager as ever in acquisition. At this time,

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and indeed as long as his strength held out, he was an almost insatiable listener. Still, as of old, he watched with unfailing interest the course of public events, still liked to know what new books were published, and in his general reading, whilst following the current literature, mingled therewith the good old favourites, alternating with the lighter works, whether old or new, those of a higher and graver purpose. Thus, for example, in these last years he found in the *Life*, but still more in the *Sermons*, of the Rev. W. F. Robertson, of Brighton, a perennial source of pleasure, refreshment and support.

And so, becoming constantly feebler, more and more entirely dependent on those around him, slowly wore away these later days. For change of air and scene, and brighter skies and warmer winter climate, Ventnor, St. Boniface, with its pleasant grounds, and Bonchurch, were successively chosen for residence (1869-71); and when it was thought advisable to be nearer London, Esher, Weybridge, and finally Addlestone in Surrey (1871-73). But he had become indifferent now to place or scene; the days of his fourscore years were in "their strength but labour and sorrow," and fast "coming to an end, as it were a tale that is told."

The end came gently, solemnly. About half-past two in the afternoon of Sunday, the 9th of March, 1873, tended and supported still, as ever, by Her to whom, eight years before, he had dedicated these

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‘Passages,’ and by the Daughters who constantly shared in the pious duty, he passed away peacefully, and, as it seemed to those who watched by him, painlessly, to his rest. He was laid in the family vault in the old burial-ground at Windsor on the following Friday: the morrow would have been his eighty-second birthday.

This is neither the place nor the occasion to consider the rank of Charles Knight as a writer, or to attempt to estimate the work which he undertook and that which he achieved. What he did is told in the following pages. These few supplementary lines are simply a notice of the occupations of his last years. What he aimed to bring about, and what he more than any one else aided in effecting, was, “the *general* diffusion of sound popular literature.” He from the first longed to see “the wide fields of knowledge become the inheritance of all;” or, as he expressed it in one of the last pages which he wrote with his own hand,* in the outset of life he formed the “desire to make knowledge a common possession instead of an exclusive privilege,” and to the end, through good and evil fortune, he steadily prosecuted his purpose.

JAMES THORNE.

April, 1873.

* Dedication to ‘Shadows of the Old Booksellers,’ October, 1865.

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N 1862 I received an intimation from the proprietor of the "Windsor and Eton Express," that, on the following first of August, the newspaper so called would have completed the fiftieth year of its publication. The fact was an interesting one to me. That newspaper was established by my father and myself; my proprietary interest in it lasted for fourteen years; and I continued to be its editor till the end of 1826, as I had been from its commencement.

Looking back upon the August of 1812, at which time my working life really commenced, it occurred to me that there were passages of that working life of fifty years which might have an interest for a wider circle than that of my family and my immediate friends, if presented without the tedious egotism of a formal Auto-Biography. During that period my social position has not materially altered, and I have not had the advantage of seeing "life in many lands." I have therefore no startling incidents to relate, and no great variety of scenes to describe. My occupation has

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been that of a publisher and a writer. But, in the course of my long connection with the Press (I use this word in its most extended meaning), I have been brought into communication with many eminent persons, and have been somewhat extensively mixed up with vast changes in the social condition of the people, in the progress of which elementary education and popular literature have been amongst the most efficient instruments of amelioration.

But before I start upon a long journey—broken, however, into several stages,—it may give a completeness to my narrative if I put together some earlier Reminiscences of circumstances by which I was surrounded, from the beginning of the century, in my childhood and my advance to manhood. The first steps of self-formation are, I think, always interesting to follow, however uneventful may be the subsequent career of an individual. But my early days at Windsor have a wider interest, as they made me familiar with the outward manifestations of the simple life of George the Third and his Court—an old-fashioned life of publicity, which wholly passed away in the seclusion of the next reign, when the King was seldom seen by his people, much less living among them in a sort of family intimacy, such as I had looked upon from my humble point of observation. In 1810, the regal aspect of Windsor was wholly changed by the illness of the King. In 1812, when I put on the

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responsibilities of full age, the Regent was invested with unrestricted power. There never was a more eventful period in the history of our country than the first twelve years of the Nineteenth Century. They were calculated to produce a strong and abiding impression upon the mind of a thoughtful youth, whose local associations were suggestive of past dangers and triumphs—of the Blenheim of Anne and the Crecy of Edward. Moreover, as I advanced towards manhood, there was an outburst of literature, which stirred my spirit with a new power. If, in recording my impressions of this memorable era, I should be able to recal some of the enthusiasm of the passing time, I may not be without the hope of imparting an interest to the Reminiscences of a solitary boy and an obscure young man.

The half-century of active employment which I look back upon is divided, in my retrospection, into three epochs. I shall regard them as stages in my journey of life; not always caring thus to measure my progress by any extreme nicety of dates; and not suddenly halting when the interest of a subject carries me forward to its natural close.

I. From 1812 to the end of 1822, my chief occupation was that of a journalist at Windsor. But my duties were not wholly limited to that narrow range, although in tracing my course as the editor of a local paper I may regard some circumstances as of peculiar interest. The political aspects of that

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period are not pleasant to review; when the thoughtful man saw as much to be apprehended from an unsympathising Government as from a discontented people. In 1820 I made my first attempt in publishing a Cheap Miscellany; and I have to estimate what Popular Literature was, at a period when the majority looked upon Books for the Many as a very dangerous experiment in giving a direction to the newly-diffused art of reading. At this period, also, of strong political excitement, I was induced to accept the editorship of a London Weekly Newspaper. My area of observation was thus somewhat enlarged. My aim was to make "The Guardian" as much a literary as a political paper; and I thus incidentally acquired a familiarity with the Periodical Literature of a time when Magazines were becoming more original and more influential. I also gained some insight into the general commerce of books in that closing era of high prices. During this period one of the pleasantest occupations of my Windsor life opened to me, as the printer and publisher of "The Etonian." This circumstance led to my intercourse with that most remarkable knot of Cambridge students who became the chief contributors to "Knight's Quarterly Magazine." It may be sufficient to mention the names of Macaulay, Praed, Sidney Walker, Henry Nelson Coleridge (of these I may, unhappily, speak without reserve), and add those of Derwent Coleridge, Henry Malden, and John Moultrie, to give an abiding interest to such

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remembrances. "The Quarterly Magazine" chiefly led to my establishment as a London publisher in the season of 1823. Through this year, and in 1824, I was occupied in the literary and commercial management of that work, which was concluded after the publication of six numbers. A second series was subsequently undertaken; but this attempt at a revival was of too solid a character fitly to succeed its brilliant predecessor.

II. I had been gradually extending my field of business as a publisher of Miscellaneous Books, and was not without the support of persons of reputation and influence. Yet my experience of the risk of miscellaneous publishing became in a year or two somewhat discouraging. In 1826, I had to struggle, in common with many others of my craft, against the depression in value of all literary property. But in this period of difficulty I was endeavouring to mature several plans for wholly and systematically devoting myself to cheap Popular Literature. Some of the seed thus prepared was ultimately sown.

In 1827 I became connected with the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge; and soon after edited and published "The British Almanac" and "Companion," and "The Library of Entertaining Knowledge." Through twenty years—until, indeed, the Society thought that the time was come when individual enterprise would accomplish all that they had attempted—I was more or less connected with this memorable Association. My remembrances will

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embrace whatever, without violation of confidence, may be related of this connection. I need not here particularise the eminent persons with whom I was brought into contact, in carrying forward the works which were entrusted to my care as Publisher, and in several cases as Editor. Other important works were undertaken by me without the support of the Society's reputation. I availed myself—perhaps more than most of the publishers of that period—of the revived process of wood-engraving, to diffuse popular Art as well as popular Literature. In this species of enterprise “The Penny Magazine” led the way. “The Pictorial Bible” was the most successful of the more permanent class of such publications; the “Thousand and one Nights” was the most beautiful. The “Pictorial History of England” was followed by the “Pictorial Shakspeare,” which was the most congenial undertaking of my literary life; and then by the “London.” This series of years, which brought with them unabated literary labour and most anxious commercial responsibility, were not without their enjoyments of pleasant and remunerating work. They afforded me the consolation that I was performing a public good, when I bore up, unaided, under the heavy load of “The Penny Cyclopædia,” overweighted by taxation. This was the most busy and the most interesting period of my working life; and its interest is heightened beyond measure to myself by the consideration that this epoch was the great turning-point in our poli-

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tical and social history; that it was a period of wonderful progress; and that many of the distinguished men with whom I was associated can never be separated, by the future historian, from the course of that peaceful revolution which has made the institutions of the country in harmony with the advance of intelligence, and has identified the interests and the wishes of the rulers and of the nation. In this period, also, I became officially connected, as a Publisher, with those who originated and carried forward the Amendment of the Poor-Law and other cognate reforms; and I was thus necessarily called upon to give a close attention to the principles and practical working of measures which have so materially improved the Condition of the People.

III. My third epoch is one of comparative repose. I edited and published the extensive series of the "Weekly Volume." I had opportunities of seeing much of the actual condition of the country in editing "The Land we Live in," during the transition period of Free Trade. I assisted as Publisher in the great sanitary measures which had assumed fresh importance. Gradually I withdrew from any novel undertakings involving considerable risk; for I found that the new competition of excessive cheapness, without regard to the quality of the reading made cheap, was not suited to the habits in which I had been so long trained. But I had still to look for happiness in work. I had to become more

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a writer and editor than a publisher. A few separate volumes were published for me by Mr. Murray. Larger undertakings, connected with copyrights which I had retained, or was to create, were published by Messrs. Bradbury & Evans. I was thus relieved from the minor cares of business, and, having a just confidence in those to whom my interests were committed, I could work more efficiently at my responsible duties as author and conductor. The nature of my writings was such that I had to look upon the various phases of Society in the Past, and so, by comparison, to estimate the Present more accurately and impartially than a view mainly directed to current things might attain. Whilst engaged in writing the History of my Country, I had also to keep a steady eye upon the general characteristics of its progress—political, social, scientific, and literary; for I was occupied in reproducing, with large additions, that Cyclopædia of which I had been the proprietor and publisher under the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge. In this evening of my life I had the happiness to become intimate with many who were eminent in the imaginative walks of Literature; and I learnt, more completely than I knew before, that it is not only the scientific and the philosophical who are advancing, by their writings, the moral and intellectual developments of a nation.

In thus producing my memorials of Men and Books, of Social Progress and Changing Manners, I

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may be considered as risking the indulgence of the garrulous egotism of advanced years. I hope that the form of "Passages" will keep me from many of the usual faults of Auto-Biography. I shall prefer to speak of others rather than of myself. I shall endeavour to deal with public realities rather than with transient moods of my own mind. I have undertaken a survey of a "long tract of time," and, having often to rely upon my memory, may have to ask the indulgence of the reader if he discover any mistakes in dates, or any confusion in the relation of one circumstance to another. I never kept a diary. I am not sure that I should have had a clearer view of the leading Passages of my life if I had done so. I was not always careful in preserving letters. Yet somehow I feel as if I could find my way through labyrinths which might be impenetrable in their obscurity, were it not for associations which conduct me onward, even as the Indian can see his road by old footmarks which he alone can recognise.

CHARLES KNIGHT.

November 11, 1863.

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