

## "MEN THAT WERE BOYS."

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**I**T is a long cry to 1901, the year I started work with the body which was the forerunner of what in 1906 became the Glasgow Orpheus Choir. At odd times I meet elderly men and women who tell me they used to sing under me in the early days, birds of passage who blew in and blew out. The stayers I never forget.

Whenever I meet one of the old hands I cannot help feeling that the years have dealt rather harshly with them. Why should they be so old? The plump cheeks of long ago seem drawn and careworn; the light of youth has faded from their eyes; the spring has gone out of their step; they are no longer young. And then it comes to my mind that they are probably saying the same kind of thing about me.

Growing old! The thought is terrifying until you get used to it. It must be nearly twenty years since I had my first premonitory signal. I was dodging a spring van in Eglinton Street. The driver drew up and addressed me in these kindly words: "Whit are ye daein' doderin' aboot there, ye auld geezer?" I walked home a humbled man.

For many years after this incident I seemed to be immune from such insults. It was a lady in a tram-car who started it again. The car was crowded. She rose and offered me her seat. I took it sitting down, if not lying down. Since that time, incident has followed incident with ever increasing frequency until now

I am jack-easy about the business. Tramcars seem to be my bogey. It was a female conductor initiating another female into the technique of ticket-punching who said (*sotto voce*): "See if that auld yin up there has a ticket!" After that, of course, it was no use attempting to put up a fight. There is a time to fight and there is a time to capitulate. Not so many years ago, being forty-eight at the time, I was one of a company round a tea table, engaged in the pleasant game of guessing ages. One lady guessed mine at fifty-eight. I told her she was just ten years out. "Why," she said, "you're never sixty-eight, are you?"

The other day I met an old school chum. In his youth he was what was known as a bit of a "blood," wore his brown bowler at a rakish angle, suffered tight shoes, and affected spats when spats were spats. He was toddling into Queen's Park, leaning more heavily on a stick than a stick deserves. "Whither away?" I said. "Just taking my afternoon stroll," he replied, "I'm retired, you know." Retired! The word shocked me. I had hitherto regarded retired people as in a class by themselves. They have so often reminded me of meek unindustrious cows who raised their heads slowly towards the busy road, looking out with blank, opaque and expressionless eyes. Now that my friends are going into the pasture to join them, I must needs readjust my ideas.

At a concert recently, one of our singers had a double encore. The audience was to blame, but that is beside the point. One old lady turned to another and said: "Ah, weel, it's a guid thing; it'll gie the auld bodie an extra rest." There's no escaping it.

Even in the country where the old men have rosy

cheeks, and the maidens quiet eyes (or something of that sort) we are not safe. Walking along one day last summer at what I took to be a five-mile-to-the-hour pace, the air like wine, I met a group of female field workers home-returning from their labours. They were singing. But when they passed me they stopped and what I heard from their lips (I say it with pain and regret) was an unmistakable, lamblike "MEH-EH-EH-EH." Wolves in sheep's clothing! I bear them no ill will. As a matter of fact, we parted good friends; I asked them if they wanted to find the way to the cattle market.

These little incidents may be disquieting; they are certainly reminders. There are other reminders, however. For instance, I have been astonished at the frequency with which "I remember" bobs up in these articles. Which reminds me that the furthest-back thing of importance I do remember is the Tay Bridge Disaster (1879). By the way, here is a curious thing, hardly relevant but perhaps interesting: my four grandparents were all born in the *eighteenth* century. Is it any wonder that I am prone to look back? After this digression let me return to the main stream.

In my young days the great Sunday night walk was by Victoria Road, over Queen's Park, along Millbrae Road and back again. There all the youth and beauty of the South Side paraded. Where are they now—the old familiar faces? Years ago I used to meet them here and there, sometimes slightly tashed, sometimes wheeling perambulators. Wonderful how those giddy girls and gilded youths settle down to the jog-trot of life. I have also met them away west on the Canadian prairie, in busy New York, in Vancouver. Strange to

meet, after an absence of nearly forty years, the "men that were boys when I was a boy." They speak, although in those far-off days we may never have spoken.

"You used to live in Abbotsford Place?"

"Yes."

"Don't you remember me?" And then slowly, like a print coming up, a former picture appears. Somehow too, one is glad to see them, to know them, to shake them by the hand. But they are all reminders of the relentless march of time.

I really do not know why I have written this article unless it be that there are moments when we are specially inclined to be retrospective. Such a moment is a birthday, and this happens to be my fifty-sixth. Verily, *tempus* becomes more and more *fugitty* as the years go on.