Aug 67-1

ON THE TIDES OF TIME

A CAUSERIE ON EVENTS AND OCCASIONS

THE LURE OF THE ELIXIR

THE scientist of Azerbaijan who is currently engaged in inventing an elixir for rejuvenation, must have been led by the same inspiration which had made Shakespeare exclaim, "Age ! I do abhor thee ; Youth ! I do adore thee !"

The lure of the elixir for rejuvenation is one of those foremost pristine fascinations of men—and certainly prevailed long before the days of King Yayati. Magicians and alchemists of yore had their reassuring prescriptions though nothing seems to have arrested man's corporal plight. History however records how an ambitious monarch of China, Wu ti (2nd Century B.C.) devoted almost all his time and resources to make it possible to realise tangibly the efficacy of such an elixir. Once while riding by the countryside, the monarch saw a man with some unusual features. On being questioned the men narrated how when he was eighty-five years of age, and was on the verge of death, he came across a Taoist who passed over to him his alchemic secrets. "I practised this regimen, and lo ! my age was turned to youth ; black hair grew again on my head, new teeth filled the place of those that had gone....Your servant has now reached the age of 180" (*A Gallery of Chinese Immortals* by Lionel Giles, John Murray, London, 1948).

The eagerness for the perpetuation of youth has naturally assumed a challenging temper in our era as man knows so much about so many things today. Researches in the field by well-known scientists like C. E. Brown-Sequard, Jurgen W. Harm, Steinach and Voronoff, etc. have created sensations from time to time.

All this reminds one of a very significant story by Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864), *Dr. Heidegger's Experiment*. Dr. Heidegger, an old, wise scientist and philosopher whom people believed to be only a magician, once gathered a vaseful of water from the Fountain of Youth. He invited four of his old aquaintances—one retired army man, one retired business man, one retired politician, and an old lady. All the four guests were notorious in their youth in their own ways. The doctor wanted them to drink the strange water; but he too warned them that if, becoming young again, they repeated their forgotten follies, it would be too embarrassing. Rather, with the experience of a lifetime to guide them, they should become "patterns of virtue and wisdom to all the young people of the age". At this, the venerable guests laughed, indicating that it was simply ridiculous to think that they would repeat their follies, "knowing how closely repentance treads behind the steps of error".

So, they drank the water. "We are young ! We are young !" they cried with excitement, and then,

Aug 67-2

"'Dance with me, Clara !' cried Colonel Killigrew.
'No, no, I will be her partner !' shouted Mr. Gascoigne.
'She promised me her hand, fifty years ago!' exclaimed Mr. Medbourne."

This was followed by a riotous scene during which the vase overturned, and again they became old. Dr. Heidegger observed, "Yes, friends, ye are old again, and lo ! the Water of Youth is all lavished on the ground. Well, I bemoan it not; for if the fountain gushed at my door steps, I would not stoop to bathe my lips in it—no, though its deliriums were for years instead of moments. Such is the lesson ye have taught me !"

Thus, Nathaniel Hawthorne anticipates what will happen with a physical rejuvenation—unaccompanied by a change in consciousness—even the semblance of prudence and restraint that age effects would disappear too and that would destroy altogether whatever harmony is there in the present order of human existence—a harmony which the best of human eyes can discern, and of which Browning sang thus :

Grow old along with me !
The best is yet to be,
The last of life, for which the first was made :
Our times are in His hand,
Who saith, "A whole I planned,
Youth shows but half; trust God : see all nor be afraid !"
(*Rabbi Ben Ezra*)

So, let us hope that by the time a successful formula of rejuvenation is there—all efforts at which we greet with the most sincere good-will—there will be a plasticity of consciousness to deserve it.

CHARLES BAUDELAIRE

—August 31, 1967 is the first centenary day of his death.

If you remember the young David Copperfield—who has lost his father and has suddenly encountered an unkind step-father and is soon thrown away from his near and dear ones—you have a picture much resembling the young Baudelaire. Of course, his mother did not die; she only moved away from him to accompany his step-father —an ambassador abroad.

Baudelaire, born on 9th April, 1821 of his father François' second marriage (at the age of sixty) to Caroline, lost his father when six years of age and was expelled from his school in his late teens as his impact on his classmates was deemed undesirable. He had to combat his step-father's plan to make him an administrative officer, in order to fulfil his own urge to become a poet. To help him to develop a little common sense in regard to his career, his guardians arranged for him a trip to India. He

Aug 67-3

slipped off the ship and after enjoying a stay in the bright tropical isle of Mauritius returned to Paris and resumed his reckless living.

Often resigned to melancholy and solitary confinement, Baudelaire too had strong desire for gaining social prestige. He craved for the *Legion d'Honneur*. Though he lived the most part of his life in not too bright a fashion, we find sudden outbursts of a radically different nature in him. He had, with exemplary courage, participated in saving the ship, which was carrying him to India, when it faced some danger. Later, he worked with the revolutionaries in the forties of the last century.

Baudelaire's main collection of poems, *The Flowers of Evil* (*Les Fleurs du mal*) was published in 1857. The conflict within him, between spirit and flesh, has become a phenomenon of bareness in his expressions. In his poems stark naked passion is mixed with an awe-inspiring sense of guilt. There are sweet images knit around his tender enchantress walking and sweeping the air with her ample skirt which appears to him as a "handsome ship setting out to sea with all the canvas spread", and "swinging away, keeping a gentle, languid, slow rhythm", and shocks of expression such as "a choir of worms upon a corpse", which he experiences around the same kind of object.

Baudelaire's theme, his treatment of it, and his own life intimately intertwined with them remind one of Ahab in Melville's *Moby Dick*. Ahab was revengeful—and that was deadly to himself—and he was almost deliberate in his own destruction while striving to destroy the white whale. And says T. S. Eliot of Baudelaire : "He was one of those who have great strength, but strength merely to suffer. He could not escape suffering and could not transcend it, so he attracted pain to himself."

Many things troubled him, affairs in regard to his inheritance, and his love affairs too. Then there was the tumult around his *Flowers of Evil*, which "says everything, is clothed... in a sinister and cold beauty", as he wrote in a letter. He was brought to trial and was condemned for having violated the maxims of morality.

Naturally, he had said, "The poet is like the prince of the clouds who rides the tempest and scorns the archer. Exiled on the ground, amidst boos and insults, his giant's wings prevent his walking."

So, upon this earth, the existence of our poet, the prince of the clouds, had become cloudy. He had become an admirer of De Quincy, experimenting with the efficacy of opium upon himself. His exploration of evil had lured him into a dark passage leading towards self-destruction. He likened life to a hospital. "Anywhere, anywhere, as long as it be out of this world," said he. He went out of his immediate world, France, in 1864, to Belgium. He conducted an unsuccessful lecture tour, drank excessively and soon suffered from paralysis. He returned to Paris, to die there on August 31, 1867.

Posterity has acknowledged him as a great poet. One wonders how only a century ago it was not so simple a thing to understand that the horror of an image isolated from its setting was not sufficient to brand a poem as immoral or vulgar. Baudelaire's poems may appear tragic or even awful, but his was a sensibility far

Ag 67-4

above anything vulgar. Of him says Sri Aurovbindo : "Baudelaire was never vulgar —he was too refined and perfect an artist to be that. He chose the evil of life as his frequent subject and tried to extract poetic beauty out of it, as a painter may deal with a subject that to the ordinary eye may be ugly and repellent and extract artistic beauty from it. But that is not the only stuff of his poetry."

MANOJ DAS