

# Marvelous Memories

Writers on psychology and philosophy have cited many examples of prodigious memory. No doubt some of these are exaggerations. Others are fabulous; and only a comparative few admit of verification.

Three cases are so well authenticated that they may be used to illustrate the wonderful power of a well cultivated memory in a mind of strong native endowment. In each instance, too, this remarkable retentiveness seems in no way to have retarded the fullest development of other mental powers.

Probably the most remarkable of the three was the memory of Leonard Euler. Euler was a native of Basle, but most of his life was spent in St. Petersburg. He was born in 1707 and died in 1783. He was a teacher of great power and a most prolific writer. More than half of the forty-six quarto volumes of mathematics published by the St. Petersburg academy between 1727 and 1783 were from his pen. At his death he left more than 200 manuscript treatises.

In the later years of his life he was totally blind. Then, and probably earlier, too, he carried in his memory a table of the first six powers of the "series of natural numbers up to 100." It is related that on one occasion two of Euler's students attempted to calculate a converging series. As they progressed they found there was a disagreement in their results. The results differed by a unit at the fifteenth figure. The question was referred to Euler, who decided to make the calculation. He did this mentally, and his result was found to be correct.

The seventeenth century furnishes the other two instances to which attention is called. The first is that of the Italian scholar, Antonio Da Marco Magliabechi. Magliabechi was the literary prodigy of his time. Royalty and other distinguished personages paid tribute to his wonderful learning. His contemporaries have said that his memory was prodigious; that he was also able to retain verbatim most of the contents of his "multitudinous books."

A comparatively recent writer has declared that Magliabechi "could name all the authors who had written upon any subject, the words, and often the page." This is doubtless exaggeration. But, on the other hand, it should be remembered that the number of books on any subject were much fewer than at the present time. Besides this there are two stories

that have come down from Magliabechi's time to ours that give color to its truth. On one occasion a gentleman of Florence desired to test Magliabechi's memory and ascertain for himself whether the wonderful stories were truth or fiction. He gave him a manuscript to read, then some days after its return, pretending to have lost it, he asked Magliabechi to recall it, which, it is said, he did with remarkable exactness.

At another time the grand duke of Florence asked him if he could procure a certain book for him. Immediately came the response: "No, sir; it is impossible; there is but one in the world; that is in the grand seigneur's library at Constantinople, and is the seventh book on the seventh shelf on the right hand as you go in."

The other instance in the seventeenth century is that of Dr. John Wallis. It is not as a theologian, however, that Wallis' name is permanently enrolled in the temple of fame, but as a mathematician. His great work is the "Arithmetica Infinitorum." In this he makes the successful attempt to solve a number of the more simpler problems of the calculus by the summation of series of infinity. His power of concentration and memory were so strong that "while in the bed in the dark he extracted the square root of a number of fifty-three places in twenty-seven terms and repeated the result twenty days afterward."

These examples of retentive memory are quite well authenticated and give plausibility to the possible truth of others frequently cited. Pliny tells us that Cyrus the Great knew all his soldiers by name, and Cicero in his "De Senectute," says that Themistocles could call the 20,000 citizens of Athens by name. It is related that both Horace and Vernet and Gustave Dore could paint a portrait from memory.

There is a story that is more than tradition that Wolfgang Mozart, "set down the whole of the Sistine Miserere from memory," and that, too, from hearing it but twice. Sir William Hamilton, in his "Lectures on Metaphysics and Logic," gives Muræus as authority for the statement that a young Corsican could repeat in either direct or reverse order, or begin at any point and repeat both ways, a list of 36,000 names.

Seneca, the rhetorician; Pascal, Ben Jonson, Scaliger, Niebuhr, and Macaulay all were men of marvelous memories. Pascal says he never forgot anything that he read. Ben Jonson tells us that he could repeat all he had ever written "and whole books" that he had read. The same feat, too, is credited to Niebuhr, the historian.

It is also told of Niebuhr that in his youth he was employed in one of the public offices of Denmark. Part of a book of accounts having been destroyed, he was able to restore it completely through his recollection.

Joseph Justus Scaliger in his youth was a student of the famous Turebus. There is a tradition that he became dissatisfied with his progress in Greek, and to make more rapid progress he closeted himself with his Homer. Then with the aid of a Latin translation he read the whole of the Iliad and committed it to memory in twenty-one days. Whether this was an actual occurrence or not, it is certain that his mind was one of great retentiveness. He spoke thirteen languages and was one of the most erudite men of the sixteenth century. Casaubon says of him: "He read nothing (and what did he not read?) which he did not forthwith remember."

The many stories told of Macaulay's almost portentous memory have been related too often to bear repetition. Not a few of them are on seem-

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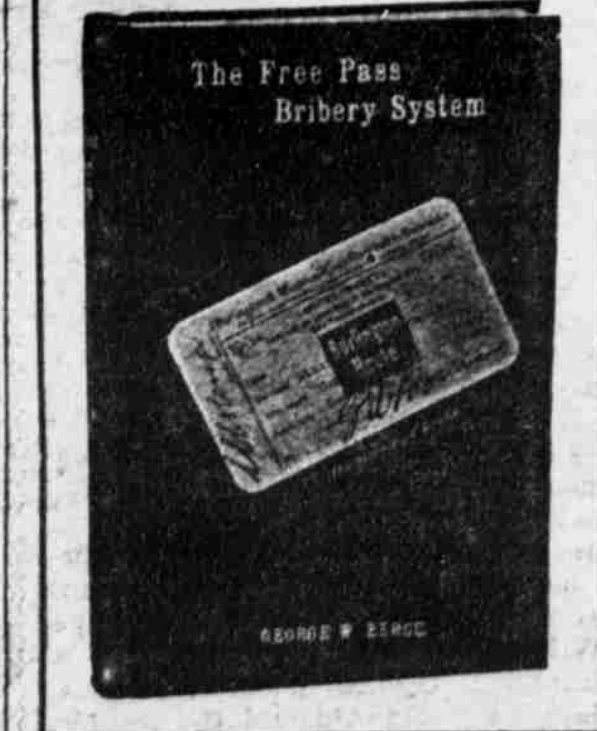
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