



Коллектив авторов
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75 лучших рассказов / 75 Best Short Stories
Серия «Иностранный язык: учимся у классиков»

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Аннотация

«Иностранный язык: учимся у классиков» – это только оригинальные тексты лучших произведений мировой литературы. Эти книги станут эффективным и увлекательным пособием для изучающих иностранный язык на хорошем «продолжающем» и «продвинутом» уровне. Они помогут эффективно расширить словарный запас, подскажут, где и как правильно употреблять устойчивые выражения и грамматические конструкции, просто подарят радость от чтения. В конце книги дана краткая информация о культуроведческих, страноведческих, исторических и географических реалиях описываемого периода, которая поможет лучше ориентироваться в текстах произведений.

Серия «Иностранный язык: учимся у классиков» адресована широкому кругу читателей, хорошо владеющих английским языком и стремящихся к его совершенствованию.

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Артур Дойль

75 лучших рассказов = 75 Best Short Stories (Сборник рассказов)

My Adventure in Norfolk (A.J. Alan)

I don't know how it is with you, but during February *my* wife generally says to me: 'Have you thought at all about what we are going to do for August?' And, of course, I say, 'No,' and then she begins looking through the advertisements of bungalows¹ to let.

Well, this happened last year, as usual, and she eventually produced one that looked possible. It said: 'Norfolk² – Hickling Broad – Furnished Bungalow – Garden – Garage, Boathouse,' and all the rest of it – Oh – *and* plate and linen. It also mentioned an exorbitant rent. I pointed out the bit about the rent, but my wife said: 'Yes, you'll have to go down and see the landlord, and get him to come down. They always do.' As a matter of fact, they always don't, but that's a detail.

Anyway, I wrote off to the landlord and asked if he could arrange for me to stay the night in the place to see what it was really like. He wrote back and said: 'Certainly,' and that he was engaging Mrs. So-and-So to come in and 'oblige me,' and make up the beds and so forth.

I tell you, we do things thoroughly – in our family – I have to sleep in all the beds, and when I come home my wife counts the bruises and decides whether they will do or not.

At any rate, I arrived, in a blinding snowstorm, at about *the* most desolate spot on God's earth. I'd come to Potter Heigham by train, and been driven on (it was a good five miles from the station). Fortunately, Mrs. Selston, the old lady who was going to 'do' for me, was there, and she'd lighted a fire, and cooked me a steak, for which I was truly thankful.

I somehow think the cow, or whatever they get steaks off, had only died that morning. It was very – er – obstinate. While I dined, she talked to me. She *would* tell me all about an operation her husband had just had. *All* about it. It was almost a lecture on surgery. The steak was rather underdone, and it sort of made me feel I was illustrating her lecture. Anyway, she put me clean off my dinner, and then departed for the night.

I explored the bungalow and just had a look outside. It was, of course, very dark, but not snowing quite so hard. The garage stood about fifteen yards from the back door. I walked round it, but didn't go in. I also went down to the edge of the broad, and verified the boathouse. The whole place looked as though it might be all right in the summertime, but just then it made one wonder why people ever wanted to go to the North Pole.

Anyhow, I went indoors, and settled down by the fire. You've no idea how quiet it was; even the waterfowl had taken a night off – at least, they weren't working.

At a few minutes to eleven I heard the first noise there'd been since Mrs. What's-her-name – Selston – had cleared out. It was the sound of a car. If it had gone straight by I probably shouldn't have noticed it at all, only it didn't go straight by; it seemed to stop farther up the road, before it got to the house. Even that didn't make much impression. After all, cars *do* stop.

It must have been five or ten minutes before it was borne in on me that it hadn't gone on again. So I got up and looked out of the window. It had left off snowing, and there was a glare through the gate that showed that there were headlamps somewhere just out of sight. I thought I might as well stroll out and investigate.

¹ **bungalows** – a *bungalow* is a small one-storied house with a veranda

² **Norfolk** – a historic county on the North Sea coast in eastern England

I found a fair-sized limousine pulled up in the middle of the road about twenty yards short of my gate. The light was rather blinding, but when I got close to it I found a girl with the bonnet open, tinkering with the engine. Quite an attractive young female, from what one could see, but she was so muffled up in furs that it was rather hard to tell.

I said:

‘Er – good evening – anything I can do.’

She said she didn’t know what was the matter. The engine had just stopped, and wouldn’t start again. And it *had*! It wouldn’t even turn, either with the self-starter or the handle. The whole thing was awfully hot, and I asked her whether there was any water in the radiator. She didn’t see why there shouldn’t be, there always had been. This didn’t strike me as entirely conclusive. I said, we’d better put some in, and see what happened. She said, why not use snow? But I thought not. There was an idea at the back of my mind that there was some reason why it was unwise to use melted snow, and it wasn’t until I arrived back with a bucketful that I remembered what it was. Of course – goitre.

When I got back to her she’d got the radiator cap off, and inserted what a Danish friend of mine calls a ‘funeral.’ We poured a little water in.... Luckily I’d warned her to stand clear. The first tablespoonful that went in came straight out again, red hot, and blew the ‘funeral’ sky-high. We waited a few minutes until things had cooled down a bit, but it was no go. As fast as we poured water in it simply ran out again into the road underneath. It was quite evident that she’d been driving with the radiator bone dry and that her engine had seized right up.

I told her so. She said:

‘Does that mean I’ve got to stop here all night?’

I explained that it wasn’t as bad as all that; that is, if she cared to accept the hospitality of my poor roof (and it *was* a poor roof – it let the wet in). But she wouldn’t hear of it. By the by, she didn’t know the – er – circumstances, so it wasn’t that. No, she wanted to leave the car where it was and go on on foot.

I said:

‘Don’t be silly, it’s miles to anywhere.’

However, at that moment we heard a car coming along the road, the same way as she’d come. We could see its lights, too, although it was a very long way off. You know how flat Norfolk is – you can see a terrific distance.

I said:

‘There’s the way out of all your troubles. This thing, whatever it is, will give you a tow to the nearest garage, or at any rate a lift to some hotel.’

One would have expected her to show some relief, but she didn’t. I began to wonder what she jolly well *did* want. She wouldn’t let me help her to stop where she was, and she didn’t seem anxious for anyone to help her to go anywhere else.

She was quite peculiar about it. She gripped hold of my arm, and said:

‘What do you think this is that’s coming?’

I said:

‘I’m sure I don’t know, being a stranger in these parts, but it sounds like a lorry full of milk cans.’

I offered to lay her sixpence about it (this was before the betting-tax came in). She’d have had to pay, too, because it *was* a lorry full of milk cans. The driver had to pull up because there wasn’t room to get by.

He got down and asked if there was anything he could do to help. We explained the situation. He said he was going to Norwich³, and was quite ready to give her a tow if she wanted it. However,

³ **Norwich** – a city in Norfolk; the first settlement was founded in Saxon times; in the 12th century, in the times of the Danes,

she wouldn't do that, and it was finally decided to shove her car into my garage for the night, to be sent for next day, and the lorry was to take her along to Norwich.

Well, I managed to find the key of the garage, and the lorry-driver – Williams, his name was – and I ran the car in and locked the door. This having been done – (ablative absolute) – I suggested that it was a very cold night. Williams agreed, and said he didn't mind if he did. So I took them both indoors and mixed them a stiff whisky and water each. There wasn't any soda. And, naturally, the whole thing had left *me* very cold, too. I hadn't an overcoat on.

Up to now I hadn't seriously considered the young woman. For one thing it had been dark, *and* there had been a seized engine to look at. Er – I'm afraid that's not a very gallant remark. What I mean is that to anyone with a mechanical mind a motor-car in that condition is much more interesting than – er – well, it *is* very interesting – but why labour the point? However, in the sitting-room, in the lamplight, it was possible to get more of an idea. She was a little older than I'd thought, and her eyes were too close together.

Of course, she wasn't a – how shall I put it? Her manners weren't quite easy and she was careful with her English. *You* know. But that wasn't it. She treated us with a lack of friendliness which was – well, we'd done nothing to deserve it. There was a sort of vague hostility and suspicion, which seemed rather hard lines, considering. Also, she was so anxious to keep in the shadow that if I hadn't moved the lamp away she'd never have got near the fire at all.

And the way she hurried the wretched Williams over his drink was quite distressing; and foolish, too, as *he* was going to drive, but that was her – funnel. When he'd gone out to start up his engine I asked her if she was all right for money, and she apparently was. Then they started off, and I shut up the place and went upstairs.

There happened to be a local guide-book in my bedroom, with maps in it. I looked at these and couldn't help wondering where the girl in the car had come from; I mean my road seemed so very unimportant. The sort of road one might use if one wanted to avoid people. If one were driving a stolen car, for instance. This was quite a thrilling idea. I thought it might be worth while having another look at the car. So I once more unhooked the key from the kitchen dresser and sallied forth into the snow. It was as black as pitch, and so still that my candle hardly flickered. It wasn't a large garage, and the car nearly filled it. By the by, we'd backed it in so as to make it easier to tow it out again.

The engine I'd already seen, so I squeezed past along the wall and opened the door in the body part of the car. At least, I only turned the handle, and the door was pushed open from the inside and – something – fell out on me. It pushed me quite hard, and wedged me against the wall. It also knocked the candle out of my hand and left me in the dark – which was a bit of a nuisance. I wondered what on earth the thing was – barging into me like that – so I felt it, rather gingerly, and found it was a man – a dead man – with a moustache. He'd evidently been sitting propped up against the door. I managed to put him back, as decorously as possible, and shut the door again.

After a lot of grovelling about under the car I found the candle and lighted it, and opened the opposite door and switched on the little lamp in the roof – and then – oo-er!

Of course, I had to make some sort of examination. He was an extremely tall and thin individual. He must have been well over six feet three. He was dark and very cadaverous-looking. In fact, I don't suppose he'd ever looked so cadaverous in his life. He was wearing a trench coat.

It wasn't difficult to tell what he'd died of. He'd been shot through the back. I found the hole just under the right scrofula, or scalpel – what is shoulder-blade, anyway? Oh, clavicle – stupid of me – well, that's where it was, and the bullet had evidently gone through into the lung. I say 'evidently,' and leave it at that.

There were no papers in his pockets, and no tailor's name on his clothes, but there was a note-case, with nine pounds in it. Altogether a most unpleasant business. Of course, it doesn't do to question the workings of Providence, but one couldn't help wishing it hadn't happened. It was just a little mysterious, too – er – who had killed him. It wasn't likely that the girl had or she wouldn't have been joy-riding about the country with him; and if someone else had murdered him why hadn't she mentioned it? Anyway, she hadn't and she'd gone, so one couldn't do anything for the time being. No telephone, of course. I just locked up the garage and went to bed. That was two o'clock.

Next morning I woke early, for some reason or other, and it occurred to me as a good idea to go and have a look at things – by daylight, and before Mrs. Selston turned up. So I did. The first thing that struck me was that it had snowed heavily during the night, because there were no wheel tracks or footprints, and the second was that I'd left the key in the garage door. I opened it and went in. The place was completely empty. No car, no body, no nothing. There was a patch of grease on the floor where I'd dropped the candle, otherwise there was nothing to show I'd been there before. One of two things must have happened: either some people had come along during the night and taken the car away, or else I'd fallen asleep in front of the fire and dreamt the whole thing.

Then I remembered the whisky glasses.

They should still be in the sitting-room. I went back to look, and they were, all three of them. So it *hadn't* been a dream and the car *had* been fetched away, but they must have been jolly quiet over it.

The girl had left her glass on the mantel-piece, and it showed several very clearly defined finger-marks. Some were mine, naturally, because I'd fetched the glass from the kitchen and poured out the drink for her, but hers, her finger-marks, were clean, and mine were oily, so it was quite easy to tell them apart. It isn't necessary to point out that this glass was very important. There'd evidently been a murder, or something of that kind, and the girl must have known all about it, even if she hadn't actually done it herself, so anything she had left in the way of evidence ought to be handed over to the police; and this was all she *had* left. So I packed it up with meticulous care in an old biscuit-box out of the larder.

When Mrs. Selston came I settled up with her and came back to Town. Oh, I called on the landlord on the way and told him I'd 'let him know' about the bungalow. Then I caught my train, and in due course drove straight to Scotland Yard. I went up and saw my friend there. I produced the glass and asked him if his people could identify the marks. He said: 'Probably not,' but he sent it down to the fingerprint department and asked me where it came from. I said: 'Never you mind; let's have the identification first.' He said: 'All right.'

They're awfully quick, these people – the clerk was back in three minutes with a file of papers. They knew the girl all right. They told me her name and showed me her photograph; not flattering. Quite an adventurous lady, from all accounts. In the early part of her career she'd done time twice for shop-lifting, chiefly in the book department. Then she'd what they call 'taken up with' a member of one of those race-gangs one sometimes hears about.

My pal went on to say that there'd been a fight between two of these gangs, in the course of which her friend had got shot. She'd managed to get him away in a car, but it had broken down somewhere in Norfolk. So she'd left it and the dead man in someone's garage, and had started off for Norwich in a lorry. Only she never got there. On the way the lorry had skidded, and both she and the driver – a fellow called Williams – had been thrown out, and they'd rammed their heads against a brick wall, which everyone knows is a fatal thing to do. At least, it was in their case.

I said: 'Look here, it's all very well, but you simply can't know all this; there hasn't been time – it only happened last night.'

He said: 'Last night be blowed! It all happened in February, nineteen nineteen. The people you've described have been dead for years.'

I said: 'Oh!'

And to think that I might have stuck to that nine pounds!

Marjorie's Three Gifts (Louisa May Alcott)

Marjorie sat on the door-step, shelling peas, quite unconscious what a pretty picture she made, with the roses peeping at her through the lattice work of the porch, the wind playing hide-and-seek in her curly hair, while the sunshine with its silent magic changed her faded gingham to a golden gown, and shimmered on the bright tin pan as if it were a silver shield. Old Rover lay at her feet, the white kitten purred on her shoulder, and friendly robins hopped about her in the grass, chirping 'A happy birthday, Marjorie!'

But the little maid neither saw nor heard, for her eyes were fixed on the green pods, and her thoughts were far away. She was recalling the fairy-tale granny told her last night, and wishing with all her heart that such things happened nowadays. For in this story, as a poor girl like herself sat spinning before the door, a Brownie⁴ came by, and gave the child a good-luck penny; then a fairy passed, and left a talisman⁵ which would keep her always happy; and last of all, the prince rolled up in his chariot⁶, and took her away to reign with him over a lovely kingdom, as a reward for her many kindnesses to others.

When Marjorie imagined this part of the story, it was impossible to help giving one little sigh, and for a minute she forgot her work, so busy was she thinking what beautiful presents she would give to all the poor children in her realm when THEY had birthdays. Five impatient young peas took this opportunity to escape from the half-open pod in her hand and skip down the steps, to be immediately gobbled up by an audacious robin, who gave thanks in such a shrill chirp that Marjorie woke up, laughed, and fell to work again. She was just finishing, when a voice called out from the lane, —

'Hi, there! come here a minute, child!' and looking up, she saw a little old man in a queer little carriage drawn by a fat little pony.

Running down to the gate, Marjorie dropped a curtsy, saying pleasantly, —

'What did you wish, sir?'

'Just undo that check-rein for me. I am lame, and Jack wants to drink at your brook,' answered the old man, nodding at her till his spectacles danced on his nose.

Marjorie was rather afraid of the fat pony who tossed his head, whisked his tail, and stamped his feet as if he was of a peppery temper. But she liked to be useful, and just then felt as if there were few things she could NOT do if she tried, because it was her birthday. So she proudly let down the rein, and when Jack went splashing into the brook, she stood on the bridge, waiting to check him up again after he had drunk his fill of the clear, cool water.

The old gentleman sat in his place, looking up at the little girl, who was smiling to herself as she watched the blue dragon-flies dance among the ferns, a blackbird tilt on the alder boughs, and listened to the babble of the brook.

'How old are you, child?' asked the old man, as if he rather envied this rosy creature her youth and health.

'Twelve to-day, sir;' and Marjorie stood up straight and tall, as if mindful of her years.

'Had any presents?' asked the old man, peering up with an odd smile.

'One, sir, — here it is;' and she pulled out of her pocket a tin savings-bank in the shape of a desirable family mansion, painted red, with a green door and black chimney. Proudly displaying it on the rude railing of the bridge, she added, with a happy face, —

'Granny gave it to me, and all the money in it is going to be mine.'

⁴ **Brownie** — in English and Scottish folklore, a small fairy, a mythical being that inhabited houses and barns

⁵ **talisman** — an object acting as a charm to bring good fortune and avert evil

⁶ **chariot** — an open vehicle of ancient times with two or four wheels; it originated in about 3000 BC in Mesopotamia.

‘How much have you got?’ asked the old gentleman, who appeared to like to sit there in the middle of the brook, while Jack bathed his feet and leisurely gurgled and sneezed.

‘Not a penny yet, but I’m going to earn some,’ answered Marjorie, patting the little bank with an air of resolution pretty to see.

‘How will you do it?’ continued the inquisitive old man.

‘Oh, I’m going to pick berries and dig dandelions, and weed, and drive cows, and do chores. It is vacation, and I can work all the time, and earn ever so much.’

‘But vacation is play-time, – how about that?’

‘Why, that sort of work IS play, and I get bits of fun all along. I always have a good swing when I go for the cows, and pick flowers with the dandelions. Weeding isn’t so nice, but berrying is very pleasant, and we have good times all together.’

‘What shall you do with your money when you get it?’

‘Oh, lots of things! Buy books and clothes for school, and, if I get a great deal, give some to granny. I’d love to do that, for she takes care of me, and I’d be so proud to help her!’

‘Good little lass!’ said the old gentleman, as he put his hand in his pocket. ‘Would you now?’ he added, apparently addressing himself to a large frog who sat upon a stone, looking so wise and grandfatherly that it really did seem quite proper to consult him. At all events, he gave his opinion in the most decided manner, for, with a loud croak, he turned an undignified somersault into the brook, splashing up the water at a great rate. ‘Well, perhaps it wouldn’t be best on the whole. Industry is a good teacher, and money cannot buy happiness, as I know to my sorrow.’

The old gentleman still seemed to be talking to the frog, and as he spoke he took his hand out of his pocket with less in it than he had at first intended.

‘What a very queer person!’ thought Marjorie, for she had not heard a word, and wondered what he was thinking about down there.

Jack walked out of the brook just then, and she ran to check him up; not an easy task for little hands, as he preferred to nibble the grass on the bank. But she did it cleverly, smoothed the ruffled mane, and, dropping another curtsy, stood aside to let the little carriage pass.

‘Thank you, child – thank you. Here is something for your bank, and good luck to it.’

As he spoke, the old man laid a bright gold dollar in her hand, patted the rosy cheek, and vanished in a cloud of dust, leaving Marjorie so astonished at the grandeur of the gift, that she stood looking at it as if it had been a fortune. It was to her; and visions of pink calico⁷ gowns, new grammars, and fresh hat-ribbons danced through her head in delightful confusion, as her eyes rested on the shining coin in her palm.

Then, with a solemn air, she invested her first money by popping it down the chimney of the scarlet mansion, and peeping in with one eye to see if it landed safely on the ground-floor. This done, she took a long breath, and looked over the railing to be sure it was not all a dream. No; the wheel marks were still there, the brown water was not yet clear, and, if a witness was needed, there sat the big frog again, looking so like the old gentleman, with his bottle-green coat, speckled trousers, and twinkling eyes, that Marjorie burst out laughing, and clapped her hands, saying aloud, –

‘I’ll play he was the Brownie, and this is the good-luck penny he gave me. Oh, what fun!’ and away she skipped, rattling the dear new bank like a castanet⁸.

When she had told granny all about it, she got knife and basket, and went out to dig dandelions; for the desire to increase her fortune was so strong, she could not rest a minute. Up and down she went, so busily peering and digging, that she never lifted up her eyes till something

⁷ **calico** – a cotton fabric with simple design, first made in Calicut, India, in the 11th century

⁸ **castanet** – a musical instrument of a clapper type consisting of two pieces hinged by a cord, usually held in the hand and used by dancers in Spain and some parts of Italy

like a great white bird skimmed by so low she could not help seeing it. A pleasant laugh sounded behind her as she started up, and, looking round, she nearly sat down again in sheer surprise, for there close by was a slender little lady, comfortably established under a big umbrella.

‘If there *were* any fairies, I’d be sure that was one,’ thought Marjorie, staring with all her might, for her mind was still full of the old story; and curious things do happen on birthdays, as every one knows.

It really did seem rather elfish⁹ to look up suddenly and see a lovely lady all in white, with shining hair and a wand in her hand, sitting under what looked very like a large yellow mushroom in the middle of a meadow, where, till now, nothing but cows and grasshoppers had been seen. Before Marjorie could decide the question, the pleasant laugh came again, and the stranger said, pointing to the white thing that was still fluttering over the grass like a little cloud, —

‘Would you kindly catch my hat for me, before it blows quite away?’

Down went basket and knife, and away ran Marjorie, entirely satisfied now that there was no magic about the new-comer; for if she had been an elf, couldn’t she have got her hat without any help from a mortal child? Presently, however, it did begin to seem as if that hat was bewitched, for it led the nimble-footed Marjorie such a chase that the cows stopped feeding to look on in placid wonder; the grasshoppers vainly tried to keep up, and every ox-eye daisy did its best to catch the runaway, but failed entirely, for the wind liked a game of romps, and had it that day. As she ran, Marjorie heard the lady singing, like the princess in the story of the Goose-Girl, —

‘Blow, breezes, blow!
Let Curdkin’s hat go!
Blow, breezes, blow!
Let him after it go!
O’er hills, dales and rocks,
Away be it whirled,
Till the silvery locks
Are all combed and curled.’

This made her laugh so that she tumbled into a clover-bed, and lay there a minute to get her breath. Just then, as if the playful wind repented of its frolic, the long veil fastened to the hat caught in a blackberry-vine nearby, and held the truant fast till Marjorie secured it.

‘Now come and see what I am doing,’ said the lady, when she had thanked the child.

Marjorie drew near confidently, and looked down at the wide-spread book before her. She gave a start, and laughed out with surprise and delight; for there was a lovely picture of her own little home, and her own little self on the door-step, all so delicate, and beautiful, and true, it seemed as if done by magic.

‘Oh, how pretty! There is Rover, and Kitty and the robins, and me! How could you ever do it, ma’am?’ said Marjorie, with a wondering glance at the long paint-brush, which had wrought what seemed a miracle to her childish eyes.

‘I’ll show you presently; but tell me, first, if it looks quite right and natural to you. Children sometimes spy out faults that no one else can see,’ answered the lady, evidently pleased with the artless praise her work received.

‘It looks just like our house, only more beautiful. Perhaps that is because I know how shabby it really is. That moss looks lovely on the shingles, but the roof leaks. The porch is broken, only the roses hide the place; and my gown is all faded, though it once was as bright as you have made it. I wish the house and everything would stay pretty forever, as they will in the picture.’

⁹ **elfish** – in Germanic folklore, an elf is a spirit in a tiny human form; it usually causes disease and brings mischief.

While Marjorie spoke, the lady had been adding more color to the sketch, and when she looked up, something warmer and brighter than sunshine shone in her face, as she said, so cheerily, it was like a bird's song to hear her, —

‘It can't be summer always, dear, but we can make fair weather for ourselves if we try. The moss, the roses, and soft shadows show the little house and the little girl at their best, and that is what we all should do; for it is amazing how lovely common things become, if one only knows how to look at them.’

‘I wish *I* did,’ said Marjorie, half to herself, remembering how often she was discontented, and how hard it was to get on, sometimes.

‘So do I,’ said the lady, in her happy voice. ‘Just believe that there is a sunny side to everything, and try to find it, and you will be surprised to see how bright the world will seem, and how cheerful you will be able to keep your little self.’

‘I guess granny has found that out, for she never frets. I do, but I'm going to stop it, because I'm twelve today, and that is too old for such things,’ said Marjorie, recollecting the good resolutions she had made that morning when she woke.

‘I am twice twelve, and not entirely cured yet; but I try, and don't mean to wear blue spectacles if I can help it,’ answered the lady, laughing so blithely that Marjorie was sure she would not have to try much longer. ‘Birthdays were made for presents, and I should like to give you one. Would it please you to have this little picture?’ she added, lifting it out of the book.

‘Truly my own? Oh, yes, indeed!’ cried Marjorie, coloring with pleasure, for she had never owned so beautiful a thing before.

‘Then you shall have it, dear. Hang it where you can see it often, and when you look, remember that it is the sunny side of home, and help to keep it so.’

Marjorie had nothing but a kiss to offer by way of thanks, as the lovely sketch was put into her hand; but the giver seemed quite satisfied, for it was a very grateful little kiss. Then the child took up her basket and went away, not dancing and singing now, but slowly and silently; for this gift made her thoughtful as well as glad. As she climbed the wall, she looked back to nod good-by to the pretty lady; but the meadow was empty, and all she saw was the grass blowing in the wind.

‘Now, deary, run out and play, for birthdays come but once a year, and we must make them as merry as we can,’ said granny, as she settled herself for her afternoon nap, when the Saturday cleaning was all done, and the little house as neat as wax.

So Marjorie put on a white apron in honor of the occasion, and, taking Kitty in her arms, went out to enjoy herself. Three swings on the gate seemed to be a good way of beginning the festivities; but she only got two, for when the gate creaked back the second time, it stayed shut, and Marjorie hung over the pickets, arrested by the sound of music.

‘It's soldiers,’ she said, as the fife and drum drew nearer, and flags were seen waving over the barberry-bushes at the corner.

‘No; it's a picnic,’ she added in a moment; for she saw hats with wreaths about them bobbing up and down, as a gaily-trimmed hay-cart full of children came rumbling down the lane.

‘What a nice time they are going to have!’ thought Marjorie, sadly contrasting that merry-making with the quiet party she was having all by herself.

Suddenly her face shone, and Kitty was waved over her head like a banner, as she flew out of the gate, crying, rapturously, —

‘It's Billy! and I know he's come for me!’

It certainly WAS Billy, proudly driving the old horse, and beaming at his little friend from the bower of flags and chestnut-boughs, where he sat in state, with a crown of daisies on his sailor-hat and a spray of blooming sweetbrier in his hand. Waving his rustic sceptre, he led off the shout of ‘Happy birthday, Marjorie!’ which was set up as the wagon stopped at the gate, and the green

boughs suddenly blossomed with familiar faces, all smiling on the little damsel, who stood in the lane quite overpowered with delight.

‘It’s a s’prise¹⁰ party!’ cried one small lad, tumbling out behind.

‘We are going up the mountain to have fun!’ added a chorus of voices, as a dozen hands beckoned wildly.

‘We got it up on purpose for you, so tie your hat and come away,’ said a pretty girl, leaning down to kiss Marjorie, who had dropped Kitty, and stood ready for any splendid enterprise.

A word to granny, and away went the happy child, sitting up beside Billy, under the flags that waved over a happier load than any royal chariot ever bore.

It would be vain to try and tell all the plays and pleasures of happy children on a Saturday afternoon, but we may briefly say that Marjorie found a mossy stone all ready for her throne, and Billy crowned her with a garland like his own. That a fine banquet was spread, and eaten with a relish many a Lord Mayor’s¹¹ feast has lacked. Then how the whole court danced and played together afterward! The lords climbed trees and turned somersaults, the ladies gathered flowers and told secrets under the sweetfern-bushes, the queen lost her shoe jumping over the waterfall, and the king paddled into the pool below and rescued it. A happy little kingdom, full of summer sunshine, innocent delights, and loyal hearts; for love ruled, and the only war that disturbed the peaceful land was waged by the mosquitoes as night came on.

Marjorie stood on her throne watching the sunset while her maids of honor packed up the remains of the banquet, and her knights prepared the chariot. All the sky was gold and purple, all the world bathed in a soft, red light, and the little girl was very happy as she looked down at the subjects who had served her so faithfully that day.

‘Have you had a good time, Marjy?’ asked King William; who stood below, with his royal nose on a level with her majesty’s two dusty little shoes.

‘Oh, Billy, it has been just splendid! But I don’t see why you should all be so kind to me,’ answered Marjorie, with such a look of innocent wonder, that Billy laughed to see it.

‘Because you are so sweet and good, we can’t help loving you, – that’s why,’ he said, as if this simple fact was reason enough.

‘I’m going to be the best girl that ever was, and love everybody in the world,’ cried the child, stretching out her arms as if ready, in the fullness of her happy heart, to embrace all creation.

‘Don’t turn into an angel and fly away just yet, but come home, or granny will never lend you to us any more.’

With that, Billy jumped her down, and away they ran, to ride gaily back through the twilight, singing like a flock of nightingales.

As she went to bed that night, Marjorie looked at the red bank, the pretty picture, and the daisy crown, saying to herself, —

‘It has been a *very* nice birthday, and I am something like the girl in the story, after all, for the old man gave me a good-luck penny, the kind lady told me how to keep happy, and Billy came for me like the prince. The girl didn’t go back to the poor house again, but I’m glad *I* did, for *my* granny isn’t a cross one, and my little home is the dearest in the world.’

Then she tied her night-cap, said her prayers, and fell asleep; but the moon, looking in to kiss the blooming face upon the pillow, knew that three good spirits had come to help little Marjorie from that day forth, and their names were Industry, Cheerfulness, and Love.

¹⁰ s’prise = surprise

¹¹ Lord Mayor – the title given to the mayor of London or some other large city

An Awakening (Sherwood Anderson)

Belle Carpenter had a dark skin, grey eyes and thick lips. She was tall and strong. When black thoughts visited her she grew angry and wished she were a man and could fight someone with her fists. She worked in the millinery shop kept by Mrs. Nate McHugh and during the day sat trimming hats by a window at the rear of the store. She was the daughter of Henry Carpenter, bookkeeper in the First National Bank of Winesburg, Ohio¹², and lived with him in a gloomy old house far out at the end of Buckeye Street. The house was surrounded by pine trees and there was no grass beneath the trees. A rusty tin eaves-trough had slipped from its fastenings at the back of the house and when the wind blew it beat against the roof of a small shed, making a dismal drumming noise that sometimes persisted all through the night.

When she was a young girl Henry Carpenter made life almost unbearable for his daughter, but as she emerged from girlhood into womanhood he lost his power over her. The bookkeeper's life was made up of innumerable little pettinesses. When he went to the bank in the morning he stepped into a closet and put on a black alpaca coat that had become shabby with age. At night when he returned to his home he donned another black alpaca coat. Every evening he pressed the clothes worn in the streets. He had invented an arrangement of boards for the purpose. The trousers to his street suit were placed between the boards and the boards were clamped together with heavy screws. In the morning he wiped the boards with a damp cloth and stood them upright behind the dining room door. If they were moved during the day he was speechless with anger and did not recover his equilibrium for a week.

The bank cashier was a little bully and was afraid of his daughter. She, he realized, knew the story of his brutal treatment of the girl's mother and hated him for it. One day she went home at noon and carried a handful of soft mud, taken from the road, into the house. With the mud she smeared the face of the boards used for the pressing of trousers and then went back to her work feeling relieved and happy.

Belle Carpenter occasionally walked out in the evening with George Willard, a reporter on the Winesburg Eagle. Secretly she loved another man, but her love affair, about which no one knew, caused her much anxiety. She was in love with Ed Handby, bartender in Ed Griffith's Saloon, and went about with the young reporter as a kind of relief to her feelings. She did not think that her station in life would permit her to be seen in the company of the bartender, and she walked about under the trees with George Willard and let him kiss her to relieve a longing that was very insistent in her nature. She felt that she could keep the younger man within bounds. About Ed Handby she was somewhat uncertain.

Handby, the bartender, was a tall broad-shouldered man of thirty who lived in a room upstairs above Griffith's saloon. His fists were large and his eyes unusually small but his voice, as though striving to conceal the power back of his fists, was soft and quiet.

At twenty-five the bartender had inherited a large farm from an uncle in Indiana¹³. When sold the farm brought in eight thousand dollars which Ed spent in six months. Going to Sandusky¹⁴, on Lake Erie¹⁵, he began an orgy of dissipation, the story of which afterward filled his home town with awe. Here and there he went throwing the money about, driving carriages through the streets, giving wine parties to crowds of men and women, playing cards for high stakes and keeping mistresses whose wardrobes cost him hundreds of dollars. One night at a resort called Cedar Point he got into

¹² **Ohio** – the US state in the Midwest (106 125 sq. km), joined the USA after the American Revolutionary War in 1783

¹³ **Indiana** – the US state in the Midwest (93 491 sq. km), joined the USA after the American Revolutionary War

¹⁴ **Sandusky** – a city on Lake Erie in northern Ohio, founded by the British in 1745

¹⁵ **Lake Erie** – one of the five Great Lakes on the USA-Canadian border

a fight and ran amuck like a wild thing. With his fist he broke a large mirror in the wash-room of a hotel and later went about smashing windows and breaking chairs in dance halls for the joy of hearing the glass rattle on the floor and seeing the terror in the eyes of clerks, who had come from Sandusky to spend the evening at the resort with their sweethearts.

The affair between Ed Handby and Belle Carpenter on the surface amounted to nothing. He had succeeded in spending but one evening in her company. On that evening he hired a horse and buggy at Wesley Moyer's livery barn and took her for a drive. The conviction that she was the woman his nature demanded and that he must get her, settled upon him and he told her of his desires. The bartender was ready to marry and to begin trying to earn money for the support of his wife, but so simple was his nature that he found it difficult to explain his intentions. His body ached with physical longing and with his body he expressed himself. Taking the milliner into his arms and holding her tightly, in spite of her struggles, he kissed her until she became helpless. Then he brought her back to town and let her out of the buggy. 'When I get hold of you again I'll not let you go. You can't play with me,' he declared as he turned to drive away. Then, jumping out of the buggy, he gripped her shoulders with his strong hands. 'I'll keep you for good the next time,' he said. 'You might as well make up your mind to that. It's you and me for it and I'm going to have you before I get through.'

One night in January when there was a new moon George Willard, who was, in Ed Handby's mind, the only obstacle to his getting Belle Carpenter, went for a walk. Early that evening George went into Ransom Surbeck's pool room with Seth Richmond and Art Wilson, son of the town butcher. Seth Richmond stood with his back against the wall and remained silent, but George Willard talked. The pool room was filled with Winesburg boys and they talked of women. The young reporter got into that vein. He said that women should look out for themselves that the fellow who went out with a girl was not responsible for what happened. As he talked he looked about, eager for attention. He held the floor for five minutes and then Art Wilson began to talk. Art was learning the barber's trade in Cal Prouse's shop and already began to consider himself an authority in such matters as baseball, horse racing, drinking and going about with women. He began to tell of a night when he with two men from Winesburg went into a house of prostitution at the County Seat. The butcher's son held a cigar in the side of his mouth and as he talked spat on the floor. 'The women in the place couldn't embarrass me although they tried hard enough,' he boasted. 'One of the girls in the house tried to get fresh but I fooled her. As soon as she began to talk I went and sat in her lap. Everyone in the room laughed when I kissed her. I taught her to let me alone.'

George Willard went out of the pool room and into Main Street. For days the weather had been bitter cold with a high wind blowing down on the town from Lake Erie, eighteen miles to the north, but on that night the wind had died away and a new moon made the night unusually lovely. Without thinking where he was going or what he wanted to do George went out of Main Street and began walking in dimly lighted streets filled with frame houses.

Out of doors under the black sky filled with stars he forgot his companions of the pool room. Because it was dark and he was alone he began to talk aloud. In a spirit of play he reeled along the street imitating a drunken man and then imagined himself a soldier clad in shining boots that reached to the knees and wearing a sword that jingled as he walked. As a soldier he pictured himself as an inspector, passing before a long line of men who stood at attention. He began to examine the accoutrements of the men. Before a tree he stopped and began to scold. 'Your pack is not in order,' he said sharply. 'How many times will I have to speak of this matter? Everything must be in order here. We have a difficult task before us and no difficult task can be done without order.'

Hypnotized by his own words the young man stumbled along the board sidewalk saying more words. 'There is a law for armies and for men too,' he muttered, lost in reflection. 'The law begins with little things and spreads out until it covers everything. In every little thing there must be order, in the place where men work, in their clothes, in their thoughts. I myself must be orderly. I must

learn that law. I must get myself into touch with something orderly and big that swings through the night like a star. In my little way I must begin to learn something, to give and swing and work with life, with the law.'

George Willard stopped by a picket fence near a street lamp and his body began to tremble. He had never before thought such thoughts as had just come into his head and he wondered where they had come from. For the moment it seemed to him that some voice outside of himself had been talking as he walked. He was amazed and delighted with his own mind and when he walked on again spoke of the matter with fervor. 'To come out of Ransom Surbeck's pool room and think things like that,' he whispered. 'It is better to be alone. If I talked like Art Wilson the boys would understand me but they wouldn't understand what I have been thinking down here.'

In Winesburg, as in all Ohio towns of twenty years ago, there was a section in which lived day laborers. As the time of factories had not yet come the laborers worked in the fields or were section hands on the railroads. They worked twelve hours a day and received one dollar for the long day of toil. The houses in which they lived were small cheaply constructed wooden affairs with a garden at the back. The more comfortable among them kept cows and perhaps a pig, housed in a little shed at the rear of the garden.

With his head filled with resounding thoughts George Willard walked into such a street on the clear January night. The street was dimly lighted and in places there was no sidewalk. In the scene that lay about him there was something that excited his already aroused fancy. For a year he had been devoting all of his odd moments to the reading of books and now some tale he had read concerning life in old world towns of the middle ages came sharply back to his mind so that he stumbled forward with the curious feeling of one revisiting a place that had been a part of some former existence. On an impulse he turned out of the street and went into a little dark alleyway behind the sheds in which lived the cows and pigs.

For a half hour he stayed in the alleyway, smelling the strong smell of animals too closely housed and letting his mind play with the strange new thoughts that came to him. The very rankness of the smell of manure in the clear sweet air awoke something heady in his brain. The poor little houses lighted by kerosene lamps, the smoke from the chimneys mounting straight up into the clear air, the grunting of pigs, the women clad in cheap calico dresses and washing dishes in the kitchens, the footsteps of men coming out of the houses and going off to the stores and saloons of Main Street, the dogs barking and the children crying – all these things made him seem, as he lurked in the darkness, oddly detached and apart from all life.

The excited young man, unable to bear the weight of his own thoughts, began to move cautiously along the alleyway. A dog attacked him and had to be driven away with stones and a man appeared at the door of one of the houses and began to swear at the dog. George went into a vacant lot and throwing back his head looked up at the sky. He felt unutterably big and re-made by the simple experience through which he had been passing and in a kind of fervor of emotion put up his hands, thrusting them into the darkness above his head and muttering words. The desire to say words overcame him and he said words without meaning, rolling them over on his tongue and saying them because they were brave words, full of meaning. 'Death,' he muttered, 'night, the sea, fear, loneliness.' George Willard came out of the vacant lot and stood again on the sidewalk facing the houses. He felt that all of the people in the little street must be brothers and sisters to him and he wished he had the courage to call them out of their houses and to shake their hands. 'If there were only a woman here I would take hold of her hand and we would run until we were both tired out,' he thought. 'That would make me feel better.' With the thought of a woman in his mind he walked out of the street and went toward the house where Belle Carpenter lived. He thought she would understand his mood and that he would achieve in her presence a position he had long been wanting to achieve. In the past when he had been with her and had kissed her lips he had come

away filled with anger at himself. He had felt like one being used for some obscure purpose and had not enjoyed the feeling. Now he thought he had suddenly become too big to be used.

When George Willard got to Belle Carpenter's house there had already been a visitor there before him. Ed Handby had come to the door and calling Belle out of the house had tried to talk to her. He had wanted to ask the woman to come away with him and to be his wife, but when she came and stood by the door he lost his self-assurance and became sullen. 'You stay away from that kid,' he growled, thinking of George Willard, and then, not knowing what else to say, turned to go away. 'If I catch you together I will break your bones and his too,' he added. The bartender had come to woo, not to threaten, and was angry with himself because of his failure.

When her lover had departed Belle went indoors and ran hurriedly upstairs. From a window at the upper part of the house she saw Ed Handby cross the street and sit down on a horse block before the house of a neighbor. In the dim light the man sat motionless holding his head in his hands. She was made happy by the sight and when George Willard came to the door she greeted him effusively and hurriedly put on her hat. She thought that as she walked through the streets with young Willard, Ed Handby would follow and she wanted to make him suffer.

For an hour Belle Carpenter and the young reporter walked about under the trees in the sweet night air. George Willard was full of big words. The sense of power that had come to him during the hour in the darkness of the alleyway remained with him and he talked boldly, swaggering along and swinging his arms about. He wanted to make Belle Carpenter realize that he was aware of his former weakness and that he had changed. 'You will find me different,' he declared, thrusting his hands into his pockets and looking boldly into her eyes. 'I don't know why but it is so. You have got to take me for a man or let me alone. That's how it is.'

Up and down the quiet streets under the new moon went the woman and the boy. When George had finished talking they turned down a side street and went across a bridge into a path that ran up the side of a hill. The hill began at Waterworks Pond and climbed upwards to the Winesburg Fair Grounds. On the hillside grew dense bushes and small trees and among the bushes were little open spaces carpeted with long grass, now stiff and frozen.

As he walked behind the woman up the hill George Willard's heart began to beat rapidly and his shoulders straightened. Suddenly he decided that Belle Carpenter was about to surrender herself to him. The new force that had manifested itself in him had he felt been at work upon her and had led to her conquest. The thought made him half drunk with the sense of masculine power. Although he had been annoyed that as they walked about she had not seemed to be listening to his words, the fact that she had accompanied him to this place took all his doubts away. 'It is different. Everything has become different,' he thought and taking hold of her shoulder turned her about and stood looking at her, his eyes shining with pride.

Belle Carpenter did not resist. When he kissed her upon the lips she leaned heavily against him and looked over his shoulder into the darkness. In her whole attitude there was a suggestion of waiting. Again, as in the alleyway, George Willard's mind ran off into words and, holding the woman tightly, he whispered the words into the still night. 'Lust,' he whispered, 'lust and night and women.'

George Willard did not understand what happened to him that night on the hillside. Later, when he got to his own room, he wanted to weep and then grew half insane with anger and hate. He hated Belle Carpenter and was sure that all his life he would continue to hate her. On the hillside he had led the woman to one of the little open spaces among the bushes and had dropped to his knees beside her. As in the vacant lot, by the laborers' houses, he had put up his hands in gratitude for the new power in himself and was waiting for the woman to speak when Ed Handby appeared.

The bartender did not want to beat the boy, who he thought had tried to take his woman away. He knew that beating was unnecessary, that he had power within himself to accomplish his purpose without that. Gripping George by the shoulder and pulling him to his feet he held him with one

hand while he looked at Belle Carpenter seated on the grass. Then with a quick wide movement of his arm he sent the younger man sprawling away into the bushes and began to bully the woman, who had risen to her feet. 'You're no good,' he said roughly. 'I've half a mind not to bother with you. I'd let you alone if I didn't want you so much.'

On his hands and knees in the bushes George Willard stared at the scene before him and tried hard to think. He prepared to spring at the man who had humiliated him. To be beaten seemed infinitely better than to be thus hurled ignominiously aside.

Three times the young reporter sprang at Ed Handby and each time the bartender, catching him by the shoulder, hurled him back into the bushes. The older man seemed prepared to keep the exercise going indefinitely but George Willard's head struck the root of a tree and he lay still. Then Ed Handby took Belle Carpenter by the arm and marched her away.

George heard the man and woman making their way through the bushes. As he crept down the hillside his heart was sick within him. He hated himself and he hated the fate that had brought about his humiliation. When his mind went back to the hour alone in the alleyway he was puzzled, and stopping in the darkness, listened, hoping to hear again the voice, outside himself, that had so short a time before put new courage into his heart. When his way homeward led him again into the street of frame houses he could not bear the sight and began to run, wanting to get quickly out of the neighborhood that now seemed to him utterly squalid and commonplace.

Where Was Wych Street? (Stacy Aumonier)

In the public bar of the Wagtail, in Wapping¹⁶, four men and a woman were drinking beer and discussing diseases. It was not a pretty subject, and the company was certainly not a handsome one. It was a dark November evening, and the dingy lighting of the bar seemed but to emphasize the bleak exterior. Drifts of fog and damp from without mingled with the smoke of shag. The sanded floor was kicked into a muddy morass not unlike the surface of the pavement. An old lady down the street had died from pneumonia the previous evening, and the event supplied a fruitful topic of conversation. The things that one could get! Everywhere were germs eager to destroy one. At any minute the symptoms might break out. And so – one foregathered in a cheerful spot amidst friends, and drank forgetfulness.

Prominent in this little group was Baldwin Meadows, a sallow-faced villain with battered features and prominent cheek-bones, his face cut and scarred by a hundred fights. Ex-seaman, ex-boxer, ex-fish-porter – indeed, to every one's knowledge, ex-everything. No one knew how he lived. By his side lurched an enormous coloured man who went by the name of Harry Jones. Grinning above a tankard sat a pimply-faced young man who was known as The Agent. Silver rings adorned his fingers. He had no other name, and most emphatically no address, but he 'arranged things' for people, and appeared to thrive upon it in a scrambling, fugitive manner. The other two people were Mr. and Mrs. Dawes. Mr. Dawes was an entirely negative person, but Mrs. Dawes shone by virtue of a high, whining, insistent voice, keyed to within half a note of hysteria.

Then, at one point, the conversation suddenly took a peculiar turn. It came about through Mrs. Dawes mentioning that her aunt, who died from eating tinned lobster, used to work in a corset shop in Wych Street. When she said that, The Agent, whose right eye appeared to survey the ceiling, whilst his left eye looked over the other side of his tankard, remarked:

'Where was Wych Street, ma?'

'Lord!' exclaimed Mrs. Dawes. 'Don't you know, dearie? You must be a young 'un, you must. Why, when I was a gal every one knew Wych Street. It was just down there where they built the Kingsway, like.'

Baldwin Meadows cleared his throat, and said:

'Wych Street used to be a turnin' runnin' from Long Acre into Wellington Street.'

'Oh, no, old boy,' chipped in Mr. Dawes, who always treated the ex-man with great deference. 'If you'll excuse me, Wych Street was a narrow lane at the back of the old Globe Theatre¹⁷ that used to pass by the church.'

'I know what I'm talkin' about,' growled Meadows. Mrs. Dawes's high nasal whine broke in:

'Hi, Mr. Booth, you used ter know yer wye abaht. Where was Wych Street?'

Mr. Booth, the proprietor, was polishing a tap. He looked up.

'Wych Street? Yus, of course I knoo Wych Street. Used to go there with some of the boys – when I was Covent Garden¹⁸ way. It was at right angles to the Strand¹⁹, just east of Wellington Street.'

'No, it warn't. It were alongside the Strand, before yer come to Wellington Street.'

¹⁶ **Wapping** – an area in eastern London

¹⁷ **the old Globe Theatre** – a theatre built in 1599 on the south bank of the Thames and famous for the performance of the greatest Shakespeare's plays; it remained in use until 1644.

¹⁸ **Covent Garden** – 1) London's wholesale flower, fruit and vegetable market in central London at the time when the story was written; 2) the Royal Opera House which is near the place where the market used to be.

¹⁹ **the Strand** – the street in central London linking the West End and the City of London

The coloured man took no part in the discussion, one street and one city being alike to him, provided he could obtain the material comforts dear to his heart; but the others carried it on with a certain amount of acerbity.

Before any agreement had been arrived at three other men entered the bar. The quick eye of Meadows recognized them at once as three of what was known at that time as 'The Gallows Ring.' Every member of 'The Gallows Ring' had done time, but they still carried on a lucrative industry devoted to blackmail, intimidation, shoplifting, and some of the clumsier recreations. Their leader, Ben Orming, had served seven years for bashing a Chinaman down at Rotherhithe.

'The Gallows Ring' was not popular in Wapping, for the reason that many of their depredations had been inflicted upon their own class. When Meadows and Harry Jones took it into their heads to do a little wild prancing they took the trouble to go up into the West-end. They considered 'The Gallows Ring' an ungentlemanly set; nevertheless, they always treated them with a certain external deference – an unpleasant crowd to quarrel with.

Ben Orming ordered beer for the three of them, and they leant against the bar and whispered in sullen accents. Something had evidently miscarried with the Ring. Mrs. Dawes continued to whine above the general drone of the bar. Suddenly she said:

'Ben, you're a hot old devil, you are. We was just 'aving a discussion like. Where was Wych Street?'

Ben scowled at her, and she continued:

'Some sez it was one place, some sez it was another. I *know* where it was, 'cors my aunt what died from blood p'ison, after eatin' tinned lobster, used to work at a corset shop—'

'Yus,' barked Ben, emphatically. 'I know where Wych Street was – it was just sarth of the river, afore yer come to Waterloo Station²⁰.'

It was then that the coloured man, who up to that point had taken no part in the discussion, thought fit to intervene.

'Nope. You's all wrong, cap'n. Wych Street were alongside de church, way over where the Strand takes a side-line up west.'

Ben turned on him fiercely.

'What the blazes does a blanketty nigger know abaht it? I've told yer where Wych Street was.'

'Yus, and I know where it was,' interposed Meadows.

'Yer both wrong. Wych Street was a turning running from Long Acre into Wellington Street.'

'I didn't ask yer what *you* thought,' growled Ben.

'Well, I suppose I've a right to an opinion?'

'You always think you know everything, you do.'

'You can just keep yer mouth shut.'

'It 'ud take more'n you to shut it.'

Mr. Booth thought it advisable at this juncture to bawl across the bar: 'Now, gentlemen, no quarrelling – please.'

The affair might have been subsided at that point, but for Mrs. Dawes. Her emotions over the death of the old lady in the street had been so stirred that she had been, almost unconsciously, drinking too much gin. She suddenly screamed out:

'Don't you take no lip from 'im, Mr. Medders. The dirty, thieving devil, 'e always thinks 'e's goin' to come it over every one.'

She stood up threateningly, and one of Ben's supporters gave her a gentle push backwards. In three minutes the bar was in a complete state of pandemonium. The three members of 'The Gallows Ring' fought two men and a woman, for Mr. Dawes merely stood in a corner and screamed out:

'Don't! Don't!'

²⁰ **Waterloo Station** – a main line railway station in London

Mrs. Dawes stabbed the man who had pushed her through the wrist with a hatpin. Meadows and Ben Orming closed on each other and fought savagely with the naked fists. A lucky blow early in the encounter sent Meadows reeling against the wall, with blood streaming down his temple. Then the coloured man hurled a pewter tankard straight at Ben and it hit him on the knuckles. The pain maddened him to a frenzy. His other supporter had immediately got to grips with Harry Jones, and picked up one of the high stools and, seizing an opportunity, brought it down crash on to the coloured man's skull.

The whole affair was a matter of minutes. Mr. Booth was bawling out in the street. A whistle sounded. People were running in all directions.

'Beat it! Beat it for God's sake!' called the man who had been stabbed through the wrist. His face was very white, and he was obviously about to faint.

Ben and the other man, whose name was Toller, dashed to the door. On the pavement there was a confused scramble. Blows were struck indiscriminately. Two policemen appeared. One was laid hors de combat²¹ by a kick on the knee-cap from Toller. The two men fled into the darkness, followed by a hue-and-cry. Born and bred in the locality, they took every advantage of their knowledge. They tacked through alleys and raced down dark mews, and clambered over walls. Fortunately for them, the people they passed, who might have tripped them up or aided in the pursuit, merely fled indoors. The people in Wapping are not always on the side of the pursuer. But the police held on. At last Ben and Toller slipped through the door of an empty house in Aztec Street barely ten yards ahead of their nearest pursuer. Blows rained on the door, but they slipped the bolts, and then fell panting to the floor. When Ben could speak, he said:

'If they cop us, it means swinging.'

'Was the nigger done in?'

'I think so. But even if 'e wasn't, there was that other affair the night before last. The game's up.'

The ground-floor rooms were shuttered and bolted, but they knew that the police would probably force the front door. At the back there was no escape, only a narrow stable yard, where lanterns were already flashing. The roof only extended thirty yards either way and the police would probably take possession of it. They made a round of the house, which was sketchily furnished. There was a loaf, a small piece of mutton, and a bottle of pickles, and – the most precious possession – three bottles of whisky. Each man drank half a glass of neat whisky; then Ben said: 'We'll be able to keep 'em quiet for a bit, anyway,' and he went and fetched an old twelve-bore gun and a case of cartridges. Toller was opposed to this last desperate resort, but Ben continued to murmur, 'It means swinging, anyway.'

And thus began the notorious siege of Aztec Street. It lasted three days and four nights. You may remember that, on forcing a panel of the front door, Sub-Inspector Wraithe, of the V Division, was shot through the chest. The police then tried other methods. A hose was brought into play without effect. Two policemen were killed and four wounded. The military was requisitioned. The street was picketed. Snipers occupied windows of the houses opposite. A distinguished member of the Cabinet drove down in a motor-car, and directed operations in a top-hat. It was the introduction of poison-gas which was the ultimate cause of the downfall of the citadel. The body of Ben Orming was never found, but that of Toller was discovered near the front door with a bullet through his heart. The medical officer to the Court pronounced that the man had been dead three days, but whether killed by a chance bullet from a sniper or whether killed deliberately by his fellow-criminal was never revealed. For when the end came Orming had apparently planned a final act of venom. It was known that in the basement a considerable quantity of petrol had been stored. The contents had probably been carefully distributed over the most inflammable materials in the top rooms. The

²¹ **hors de combat** – disabled due to the wound or injury

fire broke out, as one witness described it, ‘almost like an explosion.’ Orming must have perished in this. The roof blazed up, and the sparks carried across the yard and started a stack of light timber in the annexe of Messrs. Morrel’s piano-factory. The factory and two blocks of tenement buildings were burnt to the ground. The estimated cost of the destruction was one hundred and eighty thousand pounds. The casualties amounted to seven killed and fifteen wounded.

At the inquiry held under Chief Justice Pengammon various odd interesting facts were revealed. Mr. Lowes-Parlby, the brilliant young K.C.²², distinguished himself by his searching cross-examination of many witnesses. At one point a certain Mrs. Dawes was put in the box. ‘Now,’ said Mr. Lowes-Parlby, ‘I understand that on the evening in question, Mrs. Dawes, you, and the victims, and these other people who have been mentioned, were all seated in the public bar of the Wagtail, enjoying its no doubt excellent hospitality and indulging in a friendly discussion. Is that so?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Now, will you tell his lordship what you were discussing?’

‘Diseases, sir.’

‘Diseases! And did the argument become acrimonious?’

‘Pardon?’

‘Was there a serious dispute about diseases?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Well, what was the subject of the dispute?’

‘We was arguin’ as to where Wych Street was, sir.’

‘What’s that?’ said his lordship.

‘The witness states, my lord, that they were arguing as to where Wych Street was.’

‘Wych Street? Do you mean W-Y-C-H?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘You mean the narrow old street that used to run across the site of what is now the Gaiety Theatre?’

Mr. Lowes-Parlby smiled in his most charming manner.

‘Yes, my lord, I believe the witness refers to the same street you mention, though, if I may be allowed to qualify your lordship’s description of the locality, may I suggest that it was a little further east – at the side of the old Globe Theatre, which was adjacent to St. Martin’s in the Strand? That is the street you were all arguing about, isn’t it, Mrs. Dawes?’

‘Well, sir, my aunt who died from eating tinned lobster used to work at a corset-shop. I ought to know.’

His lordship ignored the witness. He turned to the counsel rather peevishly.

‘Mr. Lowes-Parlby, when I was your age I used to pass through Wych Street every day of my life. I did so for nearly twelve years. I think it hardly necessary for you to contradict me.’

The counsel bowed. It was not his place to dispute with a chief justice, although that chief justice be a hopeless old fool; but another eminent K.C., an elderly man with a tawny beard, rose in the body of the court, and said:

‘If I may be allowed to interpose, your lordship, I also spent a great deal of my youth passing through Wych Street. I have gone into the matter, comparing past and present ordnance survey maps. If I am not mistaken, the street the witness was referring to began near the hoarding at the entrance to Kingsway²³ and ended at the back of what is now the Aldwych Theatre²⁴.’

‘Oh, no, Mr. Backer!’ exclaimed Lowes-Parlby.

²² K. C. – King’s Counsel

²³ Kingsway – a street in central London where companies’ offices are located

²⁴ the Aldwych Theatre – a theatre on the corner of Drury Lane in the West End, built in 1905

His lordship removed his glasses and snapped out:

‘The matter is entirely irrelevant to the case.’

It certainly was, but the brief passage-of-arms left an unpleasant tang of bitterness behind. It was observed that Mr. Lowes-Parlby never again quite got the prehensile grip upon his cross-examination that he had shown in his treatment of the earlier witnesses. The coloured man, Harry Jones, had died in hospital, but Mr. Booth, the proprietor of the Wagtail, Baldwin Meadows, Mr. Dawes, and the man who was stabbed in the wrist, all gave evidence of a rather nugatory character. Lowes-Parlby could do nothing with it. The findings of this Special Inquiry do not concern us. It is sufficient to say that the witnesses already mentioned all returned to Wapping. The man who had received the thrust of a hatpin through his wrist did not think it advisable to take any action against Mrs. Dawes. He was pleasantly relieved to find that he was only required as a witness of an abortive discussion.

* * * * *

In a few weeks’ time the great Aztec Street siege remained only a romantic memory to the majority of Londoners. To Lowes-Parlby the little dispute with Chief Justice Pengammon rankled unreasonably. It is annoying to be publicly snubbed for making a statement which you know to be absolutely true, and which you have even taken pains to verify. And Lowes-Parlby was a young man accustomed to score. He made a point of looking everything up, of being prepared for an adversary thoroughly. He liked to give the appearance of knowing everything. The brilliant career just ahead of him at times dazzled him. He was one of the darlings of the gods. Everything came to Lowes-Parlby. His father had distinguished himself at the bar before him, and had amassed a modest fortune. He was an only son. At Oxford he had carried off every possible degree. He was already being spoken of for very high political honours. But the most sparkling jewel in the crown of his successes was Lady Adela Charters, the daughter of Lord Vermeer, the Minister for Foreign Affairs. She was his fiancée, and it was considered the most brilliant match of the season. She was young and almost pretty, and Lord Vermeer was immensely wealthy and one of the most influential men in Great Britain. Such a combination was irresistible. There seemed to be nothing missing in the life of Francis Lowes-Parlby, K.C.

* * * * *

One of the most regular and absorbed spectators at the Aztec Street inquiry was old Stephen Garrit. Stephen Garrit held a unique but quite inconspicuous position in the legal world at that time. He was a friend of judges, a specialist at various abstruse legal rulings, a man of remarkable memory, and yet – an amateur. He had never taken sick, never eaten the requisite dinners, never passed an examination in his life; but the law of evidence was meat and drink to him. He passed his life in the Temple, where he had chambers. Some of the most eminent counsel in the world would take his opinion, or come to him for advice. He was very old, very silent, and very absorbed. He attended every meeting of the Aztec Street inquiry, but from beginning to end he never volunteered an opinion.

After the inquiry was over he went and visited an old friend at the London Survey Office. He spent two mornings examining maps. After that he spent two mornings pottering about the Strand, Kingsway, and Aldwych; then he worked out some careful calculations on a ruled chart. He entered the particulars in a little book which he kept for purposes of that kind, and then retired to his chambers to study other matters. But before doing so, he entered a little apophthegm in another book. It was apparently a book in which he intended to compile a summary of his legal experiences. The sentence ran:

‘The basic trouble is that people make statements without sufficient data.’

Old Stephen need not have appeared in this story at all, except for the fact that he was present at the dinner at Lord Vermeer’s, where a rather deplorable incident occurred. And you must acknowledge that in the circumstances it is useful to have such a valuable and efficient witness.

Lord Vermeer was a competent, forceful man, a little quick-tempered and autocratic. He came from Lancashire²⁵, and before entering politics had made an enormous fortune out of borax, artificial manure, and starch.

It was a small dinner-party, with a motive behind it. His principal guest was Mr. Sandeman, the London agent of the Ameer of Bakkan²⁶. Lord Vermeer was very anxious to impress Mr. Sandeman and to be very friendly with him: the reasons will appear later. Mr. Sandeman was a self-confessed cosmopolitan. He spoke seven languages and professed to be equally at home in any capital in Europe. London had been his headquarters for over twenty years. Lord Vermeer also invited Mr. Arthur Toombs, a colleague in the Cabinet, his prospective son-in-law, Lowes-Parlby, K.C., James Trolley, a very tame Socialist M.P.²⁷, and Sir Henry and Lady Breyd, the two latter being invited, not because Sir Henry was of any use, but because Lady Breyd was a pretty and brilliant woman who might amuse his principal guest. The sixth guest was Stephen Garrit.

The dinner was a great success. When the succession of courses eventually came to a stop, and the ladies had retired, Lord Vermeer conducted his male guests into another room for a ten minutes’ smoke before rejoining them. It was then that the unfortunate incident occurred. There was no love lost between Lowes-Parlby and Mr. Sandeman. It is difficult to ascribe the real reason of their mutual animosity, but on the several occasions when they had met there had invariably passed a certain sardonic by-play. They were both clever, both comparatively young, each a little suspect and jealous of the other; moreover, it was said in some quarters that Mr. Sandeman had had intentions himself with regard to Lord Vermeer’s daughter, that he had been on the point of a proposal when Lowes-Parlby had butted in and forestalled him. Mr. Sandeman had dined well, and he was in the mood to dazzle with a display of his varied knowledge and experiences. The conversation drifted from a discussion of the rival claims of great cities to the slow, inevitable removal of old landmarks. There had been a slightly acrimonious disagreement between Lowes-Parlby and Mr. Sandeman as to the claims of Budapest and Lisbon, and Mr. Sandeman had scored because he extracted from his rival a confession that, though he had spent two months in Budapest, he had only spent two days in Lisbon. Mr. Sandeman had lived for four years in either city. Lowes-Parlby changed the subject abruptly.

‘Talking of landmarks,’ he said, ‘we had a queer point arise in that Aztec Street inquiry. The original dispute arose owing to a discussion between a crowd of people in a pub as to where Wych Street was.’

‘I remember,’ said Lord Vermeer. ‘A perfectly absurd discussion. Why, I should have thought that any man over forty would remember exactly where it was.’

‘Where would you say it was, sir?’ asked Lowes-Parlby.

‘Why to be sure, it ran from the corner of Chancery Lane²⁸ and ended at the second turning after the Law Courts²⁹, going west.’

Lowes-Parlby was about to reply, when Mr. Sandeman cleared his throat and said, in his supercilious, oily voice:

²⁵ **Lancashire** – a county in northwestern England

²⁶ **Bakkan** – a province and city in Vietnam

²⁷ **M. P.** – Member of Parliament

²⁸ **Chancery Lane** – a street in central London where lawyers’ offices are located

²⁹ **the Law Courts** – the main building of the House of Justice where all important judicial decisions are adopted

‘Excuse me, my lord. I know my Paris, and Vienna, and Lisbon, every brick and stone, but I look upon London as my home. I know my London even better. I have a perfectly clear recollection of Wych Street. When I was a student I used to visit there to buy books. It ran parallel to New Oxford Street³⁰ on the south side, just between it and Lincoln’s Inn Fields³¹.’

There was something about this assertion that infuriated Lowes-Parlby. In the first place, it was so hopelessly wrong and so insufferably asserted. In the second place, he was already smarting under the indignity of being shown up about Lisbon. And then there suddenly flashed through his mind the wretched incident when he had been publicly snubbed by Justice Pengammon about the very same point; and he knew that he was right each time. Damn Wych Street! He turned on Mr. Sandeman.

‘Oh, nonsense! You may know something about these eastern cities; you certainly know nothing about London if you make a statement like that. Wych Street was a little further east of what is now the Gaiety Theatre. It used to run by the side of the old Globe Theatre, parallel to the Strand.’

The dark moustache of Mr. Sandeman shot upwards, revealing a narrow line of yellow teeth. He uttered a sound that was a mingling of contempt and derision; then he drawled out: ‘Really? How wonderful – to have such comprehensive knowledge!’

He laughed, and his small eyes fixed his rival. Lowes-Parlby flushed a deep red. He gulped down half a glass of port and muttered just above a whisper: ‘Damned impudence!’ Then, in the rudest manner he could display, he turned his back deliberately on Sandeman and walked out of the room.

* * * * *

In the company of Adela he tried to forget the little contretemps. The whole thing was so absurd – so utterly undignified. As though *he* didn’t know! It was the little accumulation of pin-pricks all arising out of that one argument. The result had suddenly goaded him to – well, being rude, to say the least of it. It wasn’t that Sandeman mattered. To the devil with Sandeman! But what would his future father-in-law think? He had never before given way to any show of ill-temper before him. He forced himself into a mood of rather fatuous jocularly. Adela was at her best in those moods. They would have lots of fun together in the days to come. Her almost pretty, not too clever face was dimpled with kittenish glee. Life was a tremendous rag to her. They were expecting Toccata, the famous opera-singer. She had been engaged at a very high fee to come on from Covent Garden. Mr. Sandeman was very fond of music. Adela was laughing, and discussing which was the most honourable position for the great Sandeman to occupy. There came to Lowes-Parlby a sudden abrupt misgiving. What sort of wife would this be to him when they were not just fooling? He immediately dismissed the curious, furtive little stab of doubt. The splendid proportions of the room calmed his senses. A huge bowl of dark red roses quickened his perceptions. His career... The door opened. But it was not La Toccata. It was one of the household flunkies. Lowes-Parlby turned again to his innamorata³².

‘Excuse me, sir. His lordship says will you kindly go and see him in the library?’

Lowes-Parlby regarded the messenger, and his heart beat quickly. An uncontrollable presage of evil racked his nerve-centres. Something had gone wrong; and yet the whole thing was so absurd, trivial. In a crisis – well, he could always apologize. He smiled confidently at Adela, and said:

‘Why, of course; with pleasure. Please excuse me, dear.’ He followed the impressive servant out of the room. His foot had barely touched the carpet of the library when he realized that his

³⁰ **New Oxford Street** – a street in central London, the shopping centre of the city

³¹ **Lincoln’s Inn Fields** – a street in central London

³² **innamorata** = sweetheart, beloved (*Italian*)

worst apprehensions were to be plumbed to the depths. For a moment he thought Lord Vermeer was alone, then he observed old Stephen Garrit, lying in an easy-chair in the corner like a piece of crumpled parchment. Lord Vermeer did not beat about the bush. When the door was closed, he bawled out, savagely:

‘What the devil have you done?’

‘Excuse me, sir. I’m afraid I don’t understand. Is it Sandeman—?’

‘Sandeman has gone.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry.’

‘Sorry! By God, I should think you might be sorry! You insulted him. My prospective son-in-law insulted him in my own house!’

‘I’m awfully sorry. I didn’t realize—’

‘Realize! Sit down, and don’t assume for one moment that you continue to be my prospective son-in-law. Your insult was a most intolerable piece of effrontery, not only to him, but to me.’

‘But I—’

‘Listen to me. Do you know that the government were on the verge of concluding a most far-reaching treaty with that man? Do you know that the position was just touch-and-go? The concessions we were prepared to make would have cost the State thirty million pounds, and it would have been cheap. Do you hear that? It would have been cheap! Bakkan is one of the most vulnerable outposts of the Empire. It is a terrible danger-zone. If certain powers can usurp our authority – and, mark you, the whole blamed place is already riddled with this new pernicious doctrine – you know what I mean – before we know where we are the whole East will be in a blaze. India! My God! This contract we were negotiating would have countered this outward thrust. And you, you blockhead, you come here and insult the man upon whose word the whole thing depends.’

‘I really can’t see, sir, how I should know all this.’

‘You can’t see it! But, you fool, you seemed to go out of your way. You insulted him about the merest quibble – in my house!’

‘He said he knew where Wych Street was. He was quite wrong. I corrected him.’

‘Wych Street! Wych Street be damned! If he said Wych Street was in the moon, you should have agreed with him. There was no call to act in the way you did. And you – you think of going into politics!’

The somewhat cynical inference of this remark went unnoticed. Lowes-Parlby was too unnerved. He mumbled:

‘I’m very sorry.’

‘I don’t want your sorrow. I want something more practical.’

‘What’s that, sir?’

‘You will drive straight to Mr. Sandeman’s, find him, and apologize. Tell him you find that he was right about Wych Street after all. If you can’t find him to-night, you must find him to-morrow morning. I give you till midday to-morrow. If by that time you have not offered a handsome apology to Mr. Sandeman, you do not enter this house again, you do not see my daughter again. Moreover, all the power I possess will be devoted to hounding you out of that profession you have dishonoured. Now you can go.’

Dazed and shaken, Lowes-Parlby drove back to his flat at Knightsbridge³³. Before acting he must have time to think. Lord Vermeer had given him till to-morrow midday. Any apologizing that was done should be done after a night’s reflection. The fundamental purposes of his being were to be tested. He knew that. He was at a great crossing. Some deep instinct within him was grossly outraged. Is it that a point comes when success demands that a man shall sell his soul? It was all so

³³ **Knightsbridge** – an area in west-central London with expensive jewellers’ and antique shops

absurdly trivial – a mere argument about the position of a street that had ceased to exist. As Lord Vermeer said, what did it matter about Wych Street?

Of course he should apologize. It would hurt horribly to do so, but would a man sacrifice everything on account of some footling argument about a street?

In his own rooms, Lowes-Parlby put on a dressing-gown, and, lighting a pipe, he sat before the fire. He would have given anything for companionship at such a moment – the right companionship. How lovely it would be to have – a woman, just the right woman, to talk this all over with; some one who understood and sympathized. A sudden vision came to him of Adela's face grinning about the prospective visit of La Toccata, and again the low voice of misgiving whispered in his ears. Would Adela be – just the right woman? In very truth, did he really love Adela? Or was it all – a rag? Was life a rag – a game played by lawyers, politicians, and people?

The fire burned low, but still he continued to sit thinking, his mind principally occupied with the dazzling visions of the future. It was past midnight when he suddenly muttered a low 'Damn!' and walked to the bureau. He took up a pen and wrote:

'Dear Mr. Sandeman, –

I must apologize for acting so rudely to you last night. It was quite unpardonable of me, especially as I since find, on going into the matter, that you were quite right about the position of Wych Street. I can't think how I made the mistake. Please forgive me.

'Yours cordially,

'FRANCIS LOWES-PARLBY.'

Having written this, he sighed and went to bed. One might have imagined at that point that the matter was finished. But there are certain little greedy demons of conscience that require a lot of stilling, and they kept Lowes-Parlby awake more than half the night. He kept on repeating to himself, 'It's all positively absurd!' But the little greedy demons pranced around the bed, and they began to group things into two definite issues. On the one side, the great appearances; on the other, something at the back of it all, something deep, fundamental, something that could only be expressed by one word – truth. If he had *really* loved Adela – if he weren't so absolutely certain that Sandeman was wrong and he was right – why should he have to say that Wych Street was where it wasn't? 'Isn't there, after all,' said one of the little demons, 'something which makes for greater happiness than success? Confess this, and we'll let you sleep.'

Perhaps that is one of the most potent weapons the little demons possess. However full our lives may be, we ever long for moments of tranquillity. And conscience holds before our eyes some mirror of an ultimate tranquillity. Lowes-Parlby was certainly not himself. The gay, debonair, and brilliant egoist was tortured, and tortured almost beyond control; and it had all apparently risen through the ridiculous discussion about a street. At a quarter past three in the morning he arose from his bed with a groan, and, going into the other room, he tore the letter to Mr. Sandeman to pieces.

* * * * *

Three weeks later old Stephen Garrit was lunching with the Lord Chief Justice. They were old friends, and they never found it incumbent to be very conversational. The lunch was an excellent, but frugal, meal. They both ate slowly and thoughtfully, and their drink was water. It was not till they reached the dessert stage that his lordship indulged in any very informative comment, and then he recounted to Stephen the details of a recent case in which he considered that the presiding judge had, by an unprecedented paralogy, misinterpreted the law of evidence. Stephen listened with absorbed attention. He took two cob-nuts from the silver dish, and turned them over meditatively,

without cracking them. When his lordship had completely stated his opinion and peeled a pear, Stephen mumbled:

‘I have been impressed, very impressed indeed. Even in my own field of limited observation – the opinion of an outsider, you may say – so often it happens – the trouble caused by an affirmation without sufficiently established data. I have seen lives lost, ruin brought about, endless suffering. Only last week, a young man – a brilliant career – almost shattered. People make statements without —’

He put the nuts back on the dish, and then, in an apparently irrelevant manner, he said abruptly:

‘Do you remember Wych Street, my lord?’

The Lord Chief justice grunted.

‘Wych Street! Of course I do.’

‘Where would you say it was, my lord?’

‘Why, here, of course.’

His lordship took a pencil from his pocket and sketched a plan on the tablecloth.

‘It used to run from there to here.’

Stephen adjusted his glasses and carefully examined the plan. He took a long time to do this, and when he had finished his hand instinctively went towards a breast pocket where he kept a notebook with little squared pages. Then he stopped and sighed. After all, why argue with the law? The law was like that – an excellent thing, not infallible, of course (even the plan of the Lord Chief justice was a quarter of a mile out), but still an excellent, a wonderful thing. He examined the bony knuckles of his hands and yawned slightly.

‘Do you remember it?’ said the Lord Chief justice.

Stephen nodded sagely, and his voice seemed to come from a long way off:

‘Yes, I remember it, my lord. It was a melancholy little street.’

The Water Ghost of Harrowby Hall (John Kendrick Bangs)

The trouble with Harrowby Hall was that it was haunted, and, what was worse, the ghost did not content itself with merely appearing at the bedside of the afflicted person who saw it, but persisted in remaining there for one mortal hour before it would disappear.

It never appeared except on Christmas Eve, and then as the clock was striking twelve, in which respect alone was it lacking in that originality which in these days is a *sine qua non*³⁴ of success in spectral life. The owners of Harrowby Hall had done their utmost to rid themselves of the damp and dewy lady who rose up out of the best bedroom floor at midnight, but without avail. They had tried stopping the clock, so that the ghost would not know when it was midnight; but she made her appearance just the same, with that fearful miasmatic personality of hers, and there she would stand until everything about her was thoroughly saturated.

Then the owners of Harrowby Hall caulked up every crack in the floor with the very best quality of hemp, and over this was placed layers of tar and canvas; the walls were made waterproof, and the doors and windows likewise, the proprietors having conceived the notion that the unexorcised lady would find it difficult to leak into the room after these precautions had been taken; but even this did not suffice. The following Christmas Eve she appeared as promptly as before, and frightened the occupant of the room quite out of his senses by sitting down alongside of him and gazing with her cavernous blue eyes into his; and he noticed, too, that in her long, aqueously bony fingers bits of dripping sea-weed were entwined, the ends hanging down, and these ends she drew across his forehead until he became like one insane. And then he swooned away, and was found unconscious in his bed the next morning by his host, simply saturated with sea-water and fright, from the combined effects of which he never recovered, dying four years later of pneumonia and nervous prostration at the age of seventy-eight.

The next year the master of Harrowby Hall decided not to have the best spare bedroom opened at all, thinking that perhaps the ghost's thirst for making herself disagreeable would be satisfied by haunting the furniture, but the plan was as unavailing as the many that had preceded it.

The ghost appeared as usual in the room – that is, it was supposed she did, for the hangings were dripping wet the next morning, and in the parlor below the haunted room a great damp spot appeared on the ceiling. Finding no one there, she immediately set out to learn the reason why, and she chose none other to haunt than the owner of the Harrowby himself. She found him in his own cosy room drinking whiskey – whiskey undiluted – and felicitating himself upon having foiled her ghostship, when all of a sudden the curl went out of his hair, his whiskey bottle filled and overflowed, and he was himself in a condition similar to that of a man who has fallen into a water-butt. When he recovered from the shock, which was a painful one, he saw before him the lady of the cavernous eyes and sea-weed fingers. The sight was so unexpected and so terrifying that he fainted, but immediately came to, because of the vast amount of water in his hair, which, trickling down over his face, restored his consciousness.

Now it so happened that the master of Harrowby was a brave man, and while he was not particularly fond of interviewing ghosts, especially such quenching ghosts as the one before him, he was not to be daunted by an apparition. He had paid the lady the compliment of fainting from the effects of his first surprise, and now that he had come to he intended to find out a few things he felt he had a right to know. He would have liked to put on a dry suit of clothes first, but the apparition declined to leave him for an instant until her hour was up, and he was forced to deny himself that

³⁴ *sine qua non* – necessary conditions (*Latin*)

pleasure. Every time he would move she would follow him, with the result that everything she came in contact with got a ducking. In an effort to warm himself up he approached the fire, an unfortunate move as it turned out, because it brought the ghost directly over the fire, which immediately was extinguished. The whiskey became utterly valueless as a comforter to his chilled system, because it was by this time diluted to a proportion of ninety per cent of water. The only thing he could do to ward off the evil effects of his encounter he did, and that was to swallow ten two-grain quinine pills, which he managed to put into his mouth before the ghost had time to interfere. Having done this, he turned with some asperity to the ghost, and said:

‘Far be it from me to be impolite to a woman, madam, but I’m hanged if it wouldn’t please me better if you’d stop these infernal visits of yours to this house. Go sit out on the lake, if you like that sort of thing; soak the water-butt, if you wish; but do not, I implore you, come into a gentleman’s house and saturate him and his possessions in this way. It is damned disagreeable.’

‘Henry Hartwick Oglethorpe,’ said the ghost, in a gurgling voice, ‘you don’t know what you are talking about.’

‘Madam,’ returned the unhappy householder, ‘I wish that remark were strictly truthful. I was talking about you. It would be shillings and pence – nay, pounds, in my pocket, madam, if I did not know you.’

‘That is a bit of specious nonsense,’ returned the ghost, throwing a quart of indignation into the face of the master of Harrowby. ‘It may rank high as repartee, but as a comment upon my statement that you do not know what you are talking about, it savors of irrelevant impertinence. You do not know that I am compelled to haunt this place year after year by inexorable fate. It is no pleasure to me to enter this house, and ruin and mildew everything I touch. I never aspired to be a shower-bath, but it is my doom. Do you know who I am?’

‘No, I don’t,’ returned the master of Harrowby. ‘I should say you were the Lady of the Lake, or Little Sallie Waters.’

‘You are a witty man for your years,’ said the ghost.

‘Well, my humor is drier than yours ever will be,’ returned the master.

‘No doubt. I’m never dry. I am the Water Ghost of Harrowby Hall, and dryness is a quality entirely beyond my wildest hope. I have been the incumbent of this highly unpleasant office for two hundred years to-night.’

‘How the deuce did you ever come to get elected?’ asked the master.

‘Through a suicide,’ replied the spectre. ‘I am the ghost of that fair maiden whose picture hangs over the mantel-piece in the drawing-room. I should have been your great-great-great-great-great-aunt if I had lived, Henry Hartwick Oglethorpe, for I was the own sister of your great-great-great-great-grandfather.’

‘But what induced you to get this house into such a predicament?’

‘I was not to blame, sir,’ returned the lady. ‘It was my father’s fault. He it was who built Harrowby Hall, and the haunted chamber was to have been mine. My father had it furnished in pink and yellow, knowing well that blue and gray formed the only combination of color I could tolerate. He did it merely to spite me, and, with what I deem a proper spirit, I declined to live in the room; whereupon my father said I could live there or on the lawn, he didn’t care which. That night I ran from the house and jumped over the cliff into the sea.’

‘That was rash,’ said the master of Harrowby.

‘So I’ve heard,’ returned the ghost. ‘If I had known what the consequences were to be I should not have jumped; but I really never realized what I was doing until after I was drowned. I had been drowned a week when a sea-nymph came to me and informed me that I was to be one of her followers forever afterwards, adding that it should be my doom to haunt Harrowby Hall for one hour every Christmas Eve throughout the rest of eternity. I was to haunt that room on such

Christmas Eves as I found it inhabited; and if it should turn out not to be inhabited, I was and am to spend the allotted hour with the head of the house.’

‘I’ll sell the place.’

‘That you cannot do, for it is also required of me that I shall appear as the deeds are to be delivered to any purchaser, and divulge to him the awful secret of the house.’

‘Do you mean to tell me that on every Christmas Eve that I don’t happen to have somebody in that guest-chamber, you are going to haunt me wherever I may be, ruining my whiskey, taking all the curl out of my hair, extinguishing my fire, and soaking me through to the skin?’ demanded the master.

‘You have stated the case, Oglethorpe. And what is more,’ said the water ghost, ‘it doesn’t make the slightest difference where you are, if I find that room empty, wherever you may be I shall douse you with my spectral pres—’

Here the clock struck one, and immediately the apparition faded away. It was perhaps more of a trickle than a fade, but as a disappearance it was complete.

‘By St. George and his Dragon!’³⁵ ejaculated the master of Harrowby, wringing his hands. ‘It is guineas to hot-cross buns that next Christmas there’s an occupant of the spare room, or I spend the night in a bath-tub.’

But the master of Harrowby would have lost his wager had there been any one there to take him up, for when Christmas Eve came again he was in his grave, never having recovered from the cold contracted that awful night. Harrowby Hall was closed, and the heir to the estate was in London, where to him in his chambers came the same experience that his father had gone through, saving only that being younger and stronger, he survived the shock. Everything in his rooms was ruined – his clocks were rusted in the works; a fine collection of water-color drawings was entirely obliterated by the onslaught of the water ghost; and what was worse, the apartments below his were drenched with the water soaking through the floors, a damage for which he was compelled to pay, and which resulted in his being requested by his landlady to vacate the premises immediately.

The story of the visitation inflicted upon his family had gone abroad, and no one could be got to invite him out to any function save afternoon teas and receptions. Fathers of daughters declined to permit him to remain in their houses later than eight o’clock at night, not knowing but that some emergency might arise in the supernatural world which would require the unexpected appearance of the water ghost in this on nights other than Christmas Eve, and before the mystic hour when weary churchyards, ignoring the rules which are supposed to govern polite society, begin to yawn. Nor would the maids themselves have aught to do with him, fearing the destruction by the sudden incursion of aqueous femininity of the costumes which they held most dear.

So the heir of Harrowby Hall resolved, as his ancestors for several generations before him had resolved, that something must be done. His first thought was to make one of his servants occupy the haunted room at the crucial moment; but in this he failed, because the servants themselves knew the history of that room and rebelled. None of his friends would consent to sacrifice their personal comfort to his, nor was there to be found in all England a man so poor as to be willing to occupy the doomed chamber on Christmas Eve for pay.

Then the thought came to the heir to have the fireplace in the room enlarged, so that he might evaporate the ghost at its first appearance, and he was felicitating himself upon the ingenuity of his plan, when he remembered what his father had told him – how that no fire could withstand the lady’s extremely contagious dampness. And then he bethought him of steam-pipes. These, he remembered, could lie hundreds of feet deep in water, and still retain sufficient heat to drive the water away in vapor; and as a result of this thought the haunted room was heated by steam to

³⁵ **St. George and his Dragon** – a Christian martyr of the 3d century and the patron saint of England; St. George saved a Libyan king’s daughter from the dragon and killed the monster in return for the promise that the people of Libya would be baptized.

a withering degree, and the heir for six months attended daily the Turkish baths, so that when Christmas Eve came he could himself withstand the awful temperature of the room.

The scheme was only partially successful. The water ghost appeared at the specified time, and found the heir of Harrowby prepared; but hot as the room was, it shortened her visit by no more than five minutes in the hour, during which time the nervous system of the young master was well-nigh shattered, and the room itself was cracked and warped to an extent which required the outlay of a large sum of money to remedy. And worse than this, as the last drop of the water ghost was slowly sizzling itself out on the floor, she whispered to her would-be conqueror that his scheme would avail him nothing, because there was still water in great plenty where she came from, and that next year would find her rehabilitated and as exasperatingly saturating as ever.

It was then that the natural action of the mind, in going from one extreme to the other, suggested to the ingenious heir of Harrowby the means by which the water ghost was ultimately conquered, and happiness once more came within the grasp of the house of Oglethorpe.

The heir provided himself with a warm suit of fur under-clothing. Donning this with the furry side in, he placed over it a rubber garment, tightfitting, which he wore just as a woman wears a jersey. On top of this he placed another set of under-clothing, this suit made of wool, and over this was a second rubber garment like the first. Upon his head he placed a light and comfortable diving helmet, and so clad, on the following Christmas Eve he awaited the coming of his tormentor.

It was a bitterly cold night that brought to a close this twenty-fourth day of December. The air outside was still, but the temperature was below zero. Within all was quiet, the servants of Harrowby Hall awaiting with beating hearts the outcome of their master's campaign against his supernatural visitor.

The master himself was lying on the bed in the haunted room, clad as has already been indicated, and then —

The clock clanged out the hour of twelve.

There was a sudden banging of doors, a blast of cold air swept through the halls, the door leading into the haunted chamber flew open, a splash was heard, and the water ghost was seen standing at the side of the heir of Harrowby, from whose outer dress there streamed rivulets of water, but whose own person deep down under the various garments he wore was as dry and as warm as he could have wished.

‘Ha!’ said the young master of Harrowby. ‘I’m glad to see you.’

‘You are the most original man I’ve met, if that is true,’ returned the ghost. ‘May I ask where did you get that hat?’

‘Certainly, madam,’ returned the master, courteously. ‘It is a little portable observatory I had made for just such emergencies as this. But, tell me, is it true that you are doomed to follow me about for one mortal hour – to stand where I stand, to sit where I sit?’

‘That is my delectable fate,’ returned the lady.

‘We’ll go out on the lake,’ said the master, starting up.

‘You can’t get rid of me that way,’ returned the ghost. ‘The water won’t swallow me up; in fact, it will just add to my present bulk.’

‘Nevertheless,’ said the master, firmly, ‘we will go out on the lake.’

‘But, my dear sir,’ returned the ghost, with a pale reluctance, ‘it is fearfully cold out there. You will be frozen hard before you’ve been out ten minutes.’

‘Oh no, I’ll not,’ replied the master. ‘I am very warmly dressed. Come!’ This last in a tone of command that made the ghost ripple.

And they started.

They had not gone far before the water ghost showed signs of distress.

‘You walk too slowly,’ she said. ‘I am nearly frozen. My knees are so stiff now I can hardly move. I beseech you to accelerate your step.’

‘I should like to oblige a lady,’ returned the master, courteously, ‘but my clothes are rather heavy, and a hundred yards an hour is about my speed. Indeed, I think we would better sit down here on this snowdrift, and talk matters over.’

‘Do not! Do not do so, I beg!’ cried the ghost. ‘Let me move on. I feel myself growing rigid as it is. If we stop here, I shall be frozen stiff.’

‘That, madam,’ said the master slowly, and seating himself on an ice-cake – ‘that is why I have brought you here. We have been on this spot just ten minutes, we have fifty more. Take your time about it, madam, but freeze, that is all I ask of you.’

‘I cannot move my right leg now,’ cried the ghost, in despair, ‘and my overskirt is a solid sheet of ice. Oh, good, kind Mr. Oglethorpe, light a fire, and let me go free from these icy fetters.’

‘Never, madam. It cannot be. I have you at last.’

‘Alas!’ cried the ghost, a tear trickling down her frozen cheek. ‘Help me, I beg. I congeal!’

‘Congeal, madam, congeal!’ returned Oglethorpe, coldly. ‘You have drenched me and mine for two hundred and three years, madam. To-night you have had your last drench.’

‘Ah, but I shall thaw out again, and then you’ll see. Instead of the comfortably tepid, genial ghost I have been in my past, sir, I shall be iced-water,’ cried the lady, threateningly.

‘No, you won’t, either,’ returned Oglethorpe; ‘for when you are frozen quite stiff, I shall send you to a cold-storage warehouse, and there shall you remain an icy work of art forever more.’

‘But warehouses burn.’

‘So they do, but this warehouse cannot burn. It is made of asbestos and surrounding it are fire-proof walls, and within those walls the temperature is now and shall forever be 416 degrees below the zero point; low enough to make an icicle of any flame in this world – or the next,’ the master added, with an ill-suppressed chuckle.

‘For the last time let me beseech you. I would go on my knees to you, Oglethorpe, were they not already frozen. I beg of you do not doo—’

Here even the words froze on the water ghost’s lips and the clock struck one. There was a momentary tremor throughout the ice-bound form, and the moon, coming out from behind a cloud, shone down on the rigid figure of a beautiful woman sculptured in clear, transparent ice. There stood the ghost of Harrowby Hall, conquered by the cold, a prisoner for all time.

The heir of Harrowby had won at last, and to-day in a large storage house in London stands the frigid form of one who will never again flood the house of Oglethorpe with woe and sea-water.

As for the heir of Harrowby, his success in coping with a ghost has made him famous, a fame that still lingers about him, although his victory took place some twenty years ago; and so far from being unpopular with the fair sex, as he was when we first knew him, he has not only been married twice, but is to lead a third bride to the altar before the year is out.

Aunt Joanna (Sabine Baring-Gould)

In the Land's End district is the little church-town of Zennor. There is no village to speak of – a few scattered farms, and here and there a cluster of cottages. The district is bleak, the soil does not lie deep over granite that peers through the surface on exposed spots, where the furious gales from the ocean sweep the land. If trees ever existed there, they have been swept away by the blast, but the golden furze or gorse defies all winds, and clothes the moorland with a robe of splendour, and the heather flushes the slopes with crimson towards the decline of summer, and mantles them in soft, warm brown in winter, like the fur of an animal.

In Zennor is a little church, built of granite, rude and simple of construction, crouching low, to avoid the gales, but with a tower that has defied the winds and the lashing rains, because wholly devoid of sculptured detail, which would have afforded the blasts something to lay hold of and eat away. In Zennor parish is one of the finest cromlechs³⁶ in Cornwall³⁷, a huge slab of unwrought stone like a table, poised on the points of standing upright blocks as rude as the mass they sustain.

Near this monument of a hoar and indeed unknown antiquity lived an old woman by herself, in a small cottage of one story in height, built of moor stones set in earth, and pointed only with lime. It was thatched with heather, and possessed but a single chimney that rose but little above the apex of the roof, and had two slates set on the top to protect the rising smoke from being blown down the chimney into the cottage when the wind was from the west or from the east. When, however, it drove from north or south, then the smoke must take care of itself. On such occasions it was wont to find its way out of the door, and little or none went up the chimney.

The only fuel burnt in this cottage was peat – not the solid black peat from deep, bogs, but turf of only a spade graft, taken from the surface, and composed of undissolved roots. Such fuel gives flame, which the other does not; but, on the other hand, it does not throw out the same amount of heat, nor does it last one half the time.

The woman who lived in the cottage was called by the people of the neighbourhood Aunt Joanna. What her family name was but few remembered, nor did it concern herself much. She had no relations at all, with the exception of a grand-niece, who was married to a small tradesman, a wheelwright near the church. But Joanna and her great-niece were not on speaking terms. The girl had mortally offended the old woman by going to a dance at St. Ives³⁸, against her express orders. It was at this dance that she had met the wheelwright, and this meeting, and the treatment the girl had met with from her aunt for having gone to it, had led to the marriage. For Aunt Joanna was very strict in her Wesleyanism³⁹, and bitterly hostile to all such carnal amusements as dancing and play-acting. Of the latter there was none in that wild west Cornish district, and no temptation ever afforded by a strolling company setting up its booth within reach of Zennor. But dancing, though denounced, still drew the more independent spirits together. Rose Penaluna had been with her great-aunt after her mother's death. She was a lively girl, and when she heard of a dance at St. Ives, and had been asked to go to it, although forbidden by Aunt Joanna, she stole from the cottage at night, and found her way to St. Ives.

Her conduct was reprehensible certainly. But that of Aunt Joanna was even more so, for when she discovered that the girl had left the house she barred her door, and refused to allow Rose to re-enter it. The poor girl had been obliged to take refuge the same night at the nearest farm and sleep

³⁶ **cromlechs** – in prehistoric architecture, a *cromlech* is an acircle of stones enclosed by a broad rampant

³⁷ **Cornwall** – a historic county on the Atlantic coast in southwestern England

³⁸ **St. Yves** – a coastal town in Cornwall

³⁹ **Wesleyanism** – the Wesleyan church, one of the Protestant churches, founded by John Wesley (1703–1791), a clergyman and church reformer; the members of the Wesleyan church promise to live a sinless life.

in an outhouse, and next morning to go into St. Ives and entreat an acquaintance to take her in till she could enter into service. Into service she did not go, for when Abraham Hext, the carpenter, heard how she had been treated, he at once proposed, and in three weeks married her. Since then no communication had taken place between the old woman and her grand-niece. As Rose knew, Joanna was implacable in her resentments, and considered that she had been acting aright in what she had done.

The nearest farm to Aunt Joanna's cottage was occupied by the Hockins. One day Elizabeth, the farmer's wife, saw the old woman outside the cottage as she was herself returning from market; and, noticing how bent and feeble Joanna was, she halted, and talked to her, and gave her good advice.

'See you now, auntie, you'm gettin' old and crimmed wi' rheumatics. How can you get about? An' there's no knowin' but you might be took bad in the night. You ought to have some little lass wi' you to mind you.'

'I don't want nobody, thank the Lord.'

'Not just now, auntie, but suppose any chance ill-luck were to come on you. And then, in the bad weather, you'm not fit to go abroad after the turves, and you can't get all you want – tay and sugar and milk for yourself now. It would be handy to have a little maid by you.'

'Who should I have?' asked Joanna.

'Well, now, you couldn't do better than take little Mary, Rose Hext's eldest girl. She's a handy maid, and bright and pleasant to speak to.'

'No,' answered the old woman, 'I'll have none o' they Hexts, not I. The Lord is agin Rose and all her family, I know it. I'll have none of them.'

'But, auntie, you must be nigh on ninety.'

'I be ower that. But what o' that? Didn't Sarah⁴⁰, the wife of Abraham⁴¹, live to an hundred and seven and twenty years, and that in spite of him worritin' of her wi' that owdacious maid of hem, Hagar⁴²? If it hadn't been for their goings on, of Abraham and Hagar, it's my belief that she'd ha' held on to a hundred and fifty-seven. I thank the Lord I've never had no man to worrit me. So why I shouldn't equal Sarah's life I don't see.'

Then she went indoors and shut the door.

After that a week elapsed without Mrs. Hockin seeing the old woman. She passed the cottage, but no Joanna was about. The door was not open, and usually it was. Elizabeth spoke about this to her husband. 'Jabez,' said she, 'I don't like the looks o' this; I've kept my eye open, and there be no Auntie Joanna hoppin' about. Whativer can be up? It's my opinion us ought to go and see.'

'Well, I've naught on my hands now,' said the farmer, 'so I reckon we will go.' The two walked together to the cottage. No smoke issued from the chimney, and the door was shut. Jabez knocked, but there came no answer; so he entered, followed by his wife.

There was in the cottage but the kitchen, with one bedroom at the side. The hearth was cold. 'There's some'ut up,' said Mrs. Hockin.

'I reckon it's the old lady be down,' replied her husband, and, throwing open the bedroom door, he said: 'Sure enough, and no mistake – there her be, dead as a dried pilchard.'

And in fact Auntie Joanna had died in the night, after having so confidently affirmed her conviction that she would live to the age of a hundred and twenty-seven.

'Whativer shall we do?' asked Mrs. Hockin. 'I reckon,' said her husband, 'us had better take an inventory of what is here, lest wicked rascals come in and steal anything and everything.'

⁴⁰ **Sarah** – a biblical figure, in the Old Testament, the wife of Abraham and the mother of Isaac

⁴¹ **Abraham** – in the Old Testament, the first of the Hebrew patriarchs, revered in Judaism, Christianity and Islam

⁴² **Hagar** – in the Old Testament, Sarah's maid and Abraham's mistress, the mother of his illegitimate son, Ishmael

‘Folks bain’t so bad as that, and a corpse in the house,’ observed Mrs. Hockin. ‘Don’t be sure o’ that – these be terrible wicked times,’ said the husband. ‘And I sez, sez I, no harm is done in seein’ what the old creetur had got.’

‘Well, surely,’ acquiesced Elizabeth, ‘there is no harm in that.’ In the bedroom was an old oak chest, and this the farmer and his wife opened. To their surprise they found in it a silver teapot, and half a dozen silver spoons.

‘Well, now,’ exclaimed Elizabeth Hockin, ‘fancy her havin’ these – and me only Britannia metal⁴³.’

‘I reckon she came of a good family,’ said Jabez. ‘Leastwise, I’ve heard as how she were once well off.’

‘And look here!’ exclaimed Elizabeth, ‘there’s fine and beautiful linen underneath – sheets and pillow-cases.’

‘But look here!’ cried Jabez, ‘blessed if the taypot bain’t chock-full o’ money! Whereiver did she get it from?’

‘Her’s been in the way of showing folk the Zennor Quoit, visitors from St. Ives and Penzance⁴⁴, and she’s had scores o’ shillings that way.’

‘Lord!’ exclaimed Jabez. ‘I wish she’d left it to me, and I could buy a cow; I want another cruel bad.’

‘Ay, we do, terrible,’ said Elizabeth. ‘But just look to her bed, what torn and wretched linen be on that – and here these fine bedclothes all in the chest.’

‘Who’ll get the silver taypot and spoons, and the money?’ inquired Jabez.

‘Her had no kin – none but Rose Hext, and her couldn’t abide her. Last words her said to me was that she’d ’have never naught to do wi’ the Hexts, they and all their belongings.’

‘That was her last words?’

‘The very last words her spoke to me – or to anyone.’

‘Then,’ said Jabez, ‘I’ll tell ye what, Elizabeth, it’s our moral dooty to abide by the wishes of Aunt Joanna. It never does to go agin what is might. And as hem expressed herself that strong, why us, as honest folks, must carry out her wishes, and see that none of all her savings go to them darned and dratted Hexts.’

‘But who be they to go to, then?’

‘Well – we’ll see. Fust us will have her removed, and provide that her be daycent buried. Them Hexts be in a poor way, and couldn’t afford the expense, and it do seem to me, Elizabeth, as it would be a liberal and a kindly act in us to take all the charges on ourselves. Us is the closest neighbours.’

‘Ay – and her have had milk of me these ten or twelve years, and I’ve never charged her a penny, thinking her couldn’t afford it. But her could, her were a-hoardin’ of hem money – and not paying me. That were not honest, and what I say is, that I have a right to some of her savin’s, to pay the milk bill – and it’s butter I’ve let her have now and then in a liberal way.’

‘Very well, Elizabeth. Fust of all, we’ll take the silver taypot and the spoons wi’ us, to get ’em out of harm’s way.’

‘And I’ll carry the linen sheets and pillow-cases. My word I – why didn’t she use ’em, instead of them rags?’

All Zennor declared that the Hockins were a most neighbourly and generous couple, when it was known that they took upon themselves to defray the funeral expenses.

Mrs. Hext came to the farm, and said that she was willing to do what she could, but Mrs. Hockin replied:

⁴³ **Britannia metal** – the alloy composed of tin, antimony and copper, used for making household utensils

⁴⁴ **Penzance** – a town in Cornwall where the English Channel joins the Atlantic Ocean

‘My good Rose, it’s no good. I seed your aunt when her was ailin’, and nigh on death, and her laid it on me solemn as could be that we was to bury her, and that she’d have nothin’ to do wi’ the Hexts at no price.’

Rose sighed, and went away.

Rose had not expected to receive anything from her aunt. She had never been allowed to look at the treasures in the oak chest. As far as she had been aware, Aunt Joanna had been extremely poor. But she remembered that the old woman had at one time befriended her, and she was ready to forgive the harsh treatment to which she had finally been subjected. In fact, she had repeatedly made overtures to her great-aunt to be reconciled, but these overtures had been always rejected. She was, accordingly, not surprised to learn from Mrs. Hockin that the old woman’s last words had been as reported.

But, although disowned and disinherited, Rose, her husband, and children dressed in black, and were chief mourners at the funeral. Now it had so happened that when it came to the laying out of Aunt Joanna, Mrs. Hockin had looked at the beautiful linen sheets she had found in the oak chest, with the object of furnishing the corpse with one as a winding-sheet. But – she said to herself – it would really be a shame to spoil a pair, and where else could she get such fine and beautiful old linen as was this? So she put the sheets away and furnished for the purpose a clean but coarse and ragged sheet such as Aunt Joanna had in common use. That was good enough to moulder in the grave. It would be positively sinful, because wasteful, to give up to corruption and the worm such fine white linen as Aunt Joanna had hoarded. The funeral was conducted, otherwise, liberally. Aunt Joanna was given an elm, and not a mean deal board coffin, such as is provided for paupers; and a handsome escutcheon⁴⁵ of white metal was put on the lid.

Moreover, plenty of gin was drunk, and cake and cheese eaten at the house, all at the expense of the Hockins. And the conversation among those who attended, and ate and drank, and wiped their eyes, was rather anent the generosity of the Hockins than of the virtues of the departed.

Mr. and Mrs. Hockin heard this, and their hearts swelled within them. Nothing so swells the heart as the consciousness of virtue being recognised. Jabez in an undertone informed a neighbour that he were’nt goin’ to stick at the funeral expenses, not he; he’d have a neat stone erected above the grave with work on it, at twopence a letter. The name and the date of departure of Aunt Joanna, and her age, and two lines of a favourite hymn of his, all about earth being no dwelling-place, heaven being properly her home.

It was not often that Elizabeth Hockin cried, but she did this day; she wept tears of sympathy with the deceased, and happiness at the ovation accorded to herself and her husband. At length, as the short winter day closed in, the last of those who had attended the funeral, and had returned to the farm to recruit and regale after it, departed, and the Hockins were left to themselves.

‘It were a beautiful day,’ said Jabez. ‘Ay,’ responded Elizabeth, ‘and what a sight o’ people came here.’

‘This here buryin’ of Aunt Joanna have set us up tremendous in the estimation of the neighbours.’

‘I’d like to know who else would ha’ done it for a poor old creetur as is no relation; ay – and one as owed a purty long bill to me for milk and butter through ten or twelve years.’

‘Well,’ said Jabez, ‘I’ve allus heard say that a good deed brings its own reward wi’ it – and it’s a fine proverb. I feels it in my insides.’

‘P’raps it’s the gin, Jabez.’

‘No – it’s virtue. It’s warmer nor gin a long sight. Gin gives a smouldering spark, but a good conscience is a blaze of furze.’

⁴⁵ **escutcheon** – a metal plate placed on a wooden article either to decorate it or to protect the wood

The farm of the Hockins was small, and Hockin looked after his cattle himself. One maid was kept, but no man in the house. All were wont to retire early to bed; neither Hockin nor his wife had literary tastes, and were not disposed to consume much oil, so as to read at night.

During the night, at what time she did not know, Mrs. Hockin awoke with a start, and found that her husband was sitting up in bed listening. There was a moon that night, and no clouds in the sky. The room was full of silver light. Elizabeth Hockin heard a sound of feet in the kitchen, which was immediately under the bedroom of the couple.

‘There’s someone about,’ she whispered; ‘go down, Jabez.’

‘I wonder, now, who it be. P’raps its Sally.’

‘It can’t be Sally – how can it, when she can’t get out o’ hem room wi’out passin’ through ours?’

‘Run down, Elizabeth, and see.’

‘It’s your place to go, Jabez.’

‘But if it was a woman – and me in my night-shirt?’

‘And, Jabez, if it was a man, a robber – and me in my night-shirt? It ’ud be shameful.’

‘I reckon us had best go down together.’

‘We’ll do so – but I hope it’s not—’

‘What?’

Mrs. Hockin did not answer. She and her husband crept from bed, and, treading on tiptoe across the room, descended the stair.

There was no door at the bottom, but the staircase was boarded up at the side; it opened into the kitchen.

They descended very softly and cautiously, holding each other, and when they reached the bottom, peered timorously into the apartment that served many purposes – kitchen, sitting-room, and dining-place. The moonlight poured in through the broad, low window.

By it they saw a figure. There could be no mistaking it – it was that of Aunt Joanna, clothed in the tattered sheet that Elizabeth Hockin had allowed for her grave-clothes. The old woman had taken one of the fine linen sheets out of the cupboard in which it had been placed, and had spread it over the long table, and was smoothing it down with her bony hands.

The Hockins trembled, not with cold, though it was mid-winter, but with terror. They dared not advance, and they felt powerless to retreat.

Then they saw Aunt Joanna go to the cupboard, open it, and return with the silver spoons; she placed all six on the sheet, and with a lean finger counted them.

She turned her face towards those who were watching her proceedings, but it was in shadow, and they could not distinguish the features nor note the expression with which she regarded them.

Presently she went back to the cupboard, and returned with the silver teapot. She stood at one end of the table, and now the reflection of the moon on the linen sheet was cast upon her face, and they saw that she was moving her lips – but no sound issued from them.

She thrust her hand into the teapot and drew forth the coins, one by one, and rolled them along the table. The Hockins saw the glint of the metal, and the shadow cast by each piece of money as it rolled. The first coin lodged at the further left-hand corner and the second rested near it; and so on, the pieces were rolled, and ranged themselves in order, ten in a row. Then the next ten were run across the white cloth in the same manner, and dropped over on their sides below the first row; thus also the third ten. And all the time the dead woman was mouthing, as though counting, but still inaudibly.

The couple stood motionless observing proceedings, till suddenly a cloud passed before the face of the moon, so dense as to eclipse the light.

Then in a paroxysm of terror both turned and fled up the stairs, bolted their bedroom door, and jumped into bed.

There was no sleep for them that night. In the gloom when the moon was concealed, in the glare when it shone forth, it was the same, they could hear the light rolling of the coins along the table, and the click as they fell over. Was the supply inexhaustible? It was not so, but apparently the dead woman did not weary of counting the coins. When all had been ranged, she could be heard moving to the further end of the table, and there re-commencing the same proceeding of coin-rolling.

Not till near daybreak did this sound cease, and not till the maid, Sally, had begun to stir in the inner bedchamber did Hockin and his wife venture to rise. Neither would suffer the servant girl to descend till they had been down to see in what condition the kitchen was. They found that the table had been cleared, the coins were all back in the teapot, and that and the spoons were where they had themselves placed them. The sheet, moreover, was neatly folded, and replaced where it had been before.

The Hockins did not speak to one another of their experiences during the past night, so long as they were in the house, but when Jabez was in the field, Elizabeth went to him and said: 'Husband, what about Aunt Joanna?'

'I don't know – maybe it were a dream.'

'Curious us should ha' dreamed alike.'

'I don't know that; 'twere the gin made us dream, and us both had gin, so us dreamed the same thing.'

''Twere more like real truth than dream,' observed Elizabeth. 'We'll take it as dream,' said Jabez. 'Mebbe it won't happen again.' But precisely the same sounds were heard on the following night. The moon was obscured by thick clouds, and neither of the two had the courage to descend to the kitchen. But they could hear the patter of feet, and then the roll and click of the coins. Again sleep was impossible.

'Whatever shall we do?' asked Elizabeth Hockin next morning of her husband. 'Us can't go on like this wi' the dead woman about our house nightly. There's no tellin' she might take it into her head to come upstairs and pull the sheets off us. As we took hers, she may think it fair to carry off ours.'

'I think,' said Jabez sorrowfully, 'we'll have to return 'em.'

'But how?'

After some consultation the couple resolved on conveying all the deceased woman's goods to the churchyard, by night, and placing them on her grave.

'I reckon,' said Hockin, 'we'll bide in the porch and watch what happens. If they be left there till mornin', why we may carry 'em back wi' an easy conscience. We've spent some pounds over her buryin'.'

'What have it come to?'

'Three pounds five and fourpence, as I make it out.'

'Well,' said Elizabeth, 'we must risk it.'

When night had fallen murk, the farmer and his wife crept from their house, carrying the linen sheets, the teapot, and the silver spoons. They did not start till late, for fear of encountering any villagers on the way, and not till after the maid, Sally, had gone to bed.

They fastened the farm door behind them. The night was dark and stormy, with scudding clouds, so dense as to make deep night, when they did not part and allow the moon to peer forth.

They walked timorously, and side by side, looking about them as they proceeded, and on reaching the churchyard gate they halted to pluck up courage before opening and venturing within. Jabez had furnished himself with a bottle of gin, to give courage to himself and his wife.

Together they heaped the articles that had belonged to Aunt Joanna upon the fresh grave, but as they did so the wind caught the linen and unfurled and flapped it, and they were forced to place

stones upon it to hold it down. Then, quaking with fear, they retreated to the church porch, and Jabez, uncorking the bottle, first took a long pull himself, and then presented it to his wife.

And now down came a tearing rain, driven by a blast from the Atlantic, howling among the gravestones, and screaming in the battlements of the tower and its bell-chamber windows. The night was so dark, and the rain fell so heavily, that they could see nothing for full half an hour. But then the clouds were rent asunder, and the moon glared white and ghastly over the churchyard.

Elizabeth caught her husband by the arm and pointed. There was, however, no need for her to indicate that on which his eyes were fixed already.

Both saw a lean hand come up out of the grave, and lay hold of one of the fine linen sheets and drag at it. They saw it drag the sheet by one corner, and then it went down underground, and the sheet followed, as though sucked down in a vortex; fold on fold it descended, till the entire sheet had disappeared.

‘Her have taken it for her windin’ sheet,’ whispered Elizabeth. ‘Whatever will her do wi’ the rest?’

‘Have a drop o’ gin; this be terrible tryin’,’ said Jabez in an undertone; and again the couple put their lips to the bottle, which came away considerably lighter after the draughts.

‘Look!’ gasped Elizabeth.

Again the lean hand with long fingers appeared above the soil, and this was seen groping about the grass till it laid hold of the teapot. Then it groped again, and gathered up the spoons, that flashed in the moonbeams. Next, up came the second hand, and a long arm that stretched along the grave till it reached the other sheets. At once, on being raised, these sheets were caught by the wind, and flapped and fluttered like half-hoisted sails. The hands retained them for a while till they bellied with the wind, and then let them go, and they were swept away by the blast across the churchyard, over the wall, and lodged in the carpenter’s yard that adjoined, among his timber.

‘She have sent ’em to the Hexts,’ whispered Elizabeth. Next the hands began to trifle with the teapot, and to shake out some of the coins.

In a minute some silver pieces were flung with so true an aim that they fell clinking down on the floor of the porch.

How many coins, how much money was cast, the couple were in no mood to estimate. Then they saw the hands collect the pillow-cases, and proceed to roll up the teapot and silver spoons in them, and, that done, the white bundle was cast into the air, and caught by the wind and carried over the churchyard wall into the wheelwright’s yard.

At once a curtain of vapour rushed across the face of the moon, and again the graveyard was buried in darkness. Half an hour elapsed before the moon shone out again. Then the Hockins saw that nothing was stirring in the cemetery.

‘I reckon us may go now,’ said Jabez.

‘Let us gather up what she chucked to us,’ advised Elizabeth. So the couple felt about the floor, and collected a number of coins. What they were they could not tell till they reached their home, and had lighted a candle.

‘How much be it?’ asked Elizabeth.

‘Three pound five and fourpence, exact,’ answered Jabez.

The Inconsiderate Waiter (James Matthew Barrie)

Frequently I have to ask myself in the street for the name of the man I bowed to just now, and then, before I can answer, the wind of the first corner blows him from my memory. I have a theory, however, that those puzzling faces, which pass before I can see who cut the coat, all belong to club waiters.

Until William forced his affairs upon me that was all I did know of the private life of waiters, though I have been in the club for twenty years. I was even unaware whether they slept downstairs or had their own homes; nor had I the interest to inquire of other members, nor they the knowledge to inform me. I hold that this sort of people should be fed and clothed and given airing and wives and children, and I subscribe yearly, I believe for these purposes; but to come into closer relation with waiters is bad form; they are club fittings, and William should have kept his distress to himself, or taken it away and patched it up like a rent in one of the chairs. His inconsiderateness has been a pair of spectacles to me for months.

It is not correct taste to know the name of a club waiter, so I must apologise for knowing William's, and still more for not forgetting it. If, again, to speak of a waiter is bad form, to speak bitterly is the comic degree of it. But William has disappointed me sorely. There were years when I would defer dining several minutes that he might wait on me. His pains to reserve the window-seat for me were perfectly satisfactory. I allowed him privileges, as to suggest dishes, and would give him information, as that someone had startled me in the reading-room by slamming a door. I have shown him how I cut my finger with a piece of string. Obviously he was gratified by these attentions, usually recommending a liqueur; and I fancy he must have understood my sufferings, for he often looked ill himself. Probably he was rheumatic, but I cannot say for certain, as I never thought of asking, and he had the sense to see that the knowledge would be offensive to me.

In the smoking-room we have a waiter so independent that once, when he brought me a yellow chartreuse⁴⁶, and I said I had ordered green, he replied, 'No, sir; you said yellow.' William could never have been guilty of such effrontery. In appearance, of course, he is mean, but I can no more describe him than a milkmaid could draw cows. I suppose we distinguish one waiter from another much as we pick our hat from the rack. We could have plotted a murder safely before William. He never presumed to have any opinions of his own. When such was my mood he remained silent, and if I announced that something diverting had happened to me he laughed before I told him what it was. He turned the twinkle in his eye off or on at my bidding as readily as if it was the gas. To my 'Sure to be wet to-morrow,' he would reply, 'Yes, sir;' and to Trelawney's 'It doesn't look like rain,' two minutes afterward, he would reply, 'No, sir.' It was one member who said Lightning Rod would win the Derby⁴⁷ and another who said Lightning Rod had no chance, but it was William who agreed with both. He was like a cheroot⁴⁸, which may be smoked from either end. So used was I to him that, had he died or got another situation (or whatever it is such persons do when they disappear from the club), I should probably have told the head waiter to bring him back, as I disliked changes.

It would not become me to know precisely when I began to think William an ingrate, but I date his lapse from the evening when he brought me oysters. I detest oysters, and no one knew it better than William. He has agreed with me that he could not understand any gentleman's liking them. Between me and a certain member who smacks his lips twelve times to a dozen of them William knew I liked a screen to be placed until we had reached the soup, and yet he gave me the oysters and the other man my sardine. Both the other member and I quickly called for brandy and

⁴⁶ **chartreuse** – the liqueur made from more than 130 different plants by the monks of La Grande Chartreuse in France

⁴⁷ **Derby** – one of the most famous English horse races, an annual event since 1730; the Derby is run on the first Saturday of June.

⁴⁸ **cheroot** – a thin cigar open at both ends

the head waiter. To do William justice, he shook, but never can I forget his audacious explanation: 'Beg pardon, sir, but I was thinking of something else.'

In these words William had flung off the mask, and now I knew him for what he was.

I must not be accused of bad form for looking at William on the following evening. What prompted me to do so was not personal interest in him, but a desire to see whether I dare let him wait on me again. So, recalling that a caster was off a chair yesterday, one is entitled to make sure that it is on to-day before sitting down. If the expression is not too strong, I may say that I was taken aback by William's manner. Even when crossing the room to take my orders he let his one hand play nervously with the other. I had to repeat 'Sardine on toast' twice, and instead of answering 'Yes, sir,' as if my selection of sardine on toast was a personal gratification to him, which is the manner one expects of a waiter, he glanced at the clock, then out at the window, and, starting, asked, 'Did you say sardine on toast, sir?'

It was the height of summer, when London smells like a chemist's shop, and he who has the dinner-table at the window needs no candles to show him his knife and fork. I lay back at intervals, now watching a starved-looking woman sleep on a door-step, and again complaining of the club bananas. By-and-by I saw a girl of the commonest kind, ill-clad and dirty, as all these Arabs are. Their parents should be compelled to feed and clothe them comfortably, or at least to keep them indoors, where they cannot offend our eyes. Such children are for pushing aside with one's umbrella; but this girl I noticed because she was gazing at the club windows. She had stood thus for perhaps ten minutes when I became aware that someone was leaning over me to look out at the window. I turned round. Conceive my indignation on seeing that the rude person was William.

'How dare you, William?' I said, sternly. He seemed not to hear me. Let me tell, in the measured words of one describing a past incident, what then took place. To get nearer the window he pressed heavily on my shoulder.

'William, you forget yourself!' I said, meaning – as I see now – that he had forgotten me.

I heard him gulp, but not to my reprimand. He was scanning the street. His hands chattered on my shoulder, and, pushing him from me, I saw that his mouth was agape.

'What are you looking for?' I asked.

He stared at me, and then, like one who had at last heard the echo of my question, seemed to be brought back to the club. He turned his face from me for an instant, and answered shakily:

'I beg your pardon, sir! I—I shouldn't have done it. Are the bananas too ripe, sir?'

He recommended the nuts, and awaited my verdict so anxiously while I ate one that I was about to speak graciously, when I again saw his eyes drag him to the window.

'William,' I said, my patience giving way at last, 'I dislike being waited on by a melancholy waiter.'

'Yes, sir,' he replied, trying to smile, and then broke out passionately, 'For God's sake, sir, tell me, have you seen a little girl looking in at the club windows?'

He had been a good waiter once, and his distracted visage was spoiling my dinner.

'There,' I said, pointing to the girl, and no doubt would have added that he must bring me coffee immediately, had he continued to listen. But already he was beckoning to the child. I have not the least interest in her (indeed, it had never struck me that waiters had private affairs, and I still think it a pity that they should have); but as I happened to be looking out at the window I could not avoid seeing what occurred. As soon as the girl saw William she ran into the street, regardless of vehicles, and nodded three times to him. Then she disappeared.

I have said that she was quite a common child, without attraction of any sort, and yet it was amazing the difference she made in William. He gasped relief, like one who had broken through the anxiety that checks breathing, and into his face there came a silly laugh of happiness. I had dined well, on the whole, so I said:

'I am glad to see you cheerful again, William.'

I meant that I approved his cheerfulness because it helped my digestion, but he must needs think I was sympathising with him.

‘Thank you, sir,’ he answered. ‘Oh, sir! when she nodded and I saw it was all right I could have gone down on my knees to God.’

I was as much horrified as if he had dropped a plate on my toes. Even William, disgracefully emotional as he was at the moment, flung out his arms to recall the shameful words.

‘Coffee, William!’ I said, sharply.

I sipped my coffee indignantly, for it was plain to me that William had something on his mind.

‘You are not vexed with me, sir?’ he had the hardihood to whisper.

‘It was a liberty,’ I said.

‘I know, sir; but I was beside myself.’

‘That was a liberty also.’

He hesitated, and then blurted out:

‘It is my wife, sir. She—’

I stopped him with my hand. William, whom I had favoured in so many ways, was a married man! I might have guessed as much years before had I ever reflected about waiters, for I knew vaguely that his class did this sort of thing. His confession was distasteful to me, and I said warningly:

‘Remember where you are, William.’

‘Yes, sir; but you see, she is so delicate—’

‘Delicate! I forbid your speaking to me on unpleasant topics.’

‘Yes, sir; begging your pardon.’

It was characteristic of William to beg my pardon and withdraw his wife, like some unsuccessful dish, as if its taste would not remain in the mouth. I shall be chided for questioning him further about his wife, but, though doubtless an unusual step, it was only bad form superficially, for my motive was irreproachable. I inquired for his wife, not because I was interested in her welfare, but in the hope of allaying my irritation. So I am entitled to invite the wayfarer who has bespattered me with mud to scrape it off.

I desired to be told by William that the girl’s signals meant his wife’s recovery to health. He should have seen that such was my wish and answered accordingly. But, with the brutal inconsiderateness of his class, he said:

‘She has had a good day; but the doctor, he – the doctor is afeard she is dying.’

Already I repented my questions. William and his wife seemed in league against me, when they might so easily have chosen some other member.

‘Pooh! the doctor,’ I said.

‘Yes, sir,’ he answered.

‘Have you been married long, William?’

‘Eight years, sir. Eight years ago she was – I-I mind her when... and now the doctor says—’

The fellow gaped at me. ‘More coffee, sir?’ he asked.

‘What is her ailment?’

‘She was always one of the delicate kind, but full of spirit, and – and you see, she has had a baby lately—’

‘William!’

‘And she – I – the doctor is afeard she’s not picking up.’

‘I feel sure she will pick up.’

‘Yes, sir?’

It must have been the wine I had drunk that made me tell him:

‘I was once married, William. My wife – it was just such a case as yours.’

‘She did not get better sir?’

‘No.’

After a pause he said, ‘Thank you, sir,’ meaning for the sympathy that made me tell him that. But it must have been the wine.

‘That little girl comes here with a message from your wife?’

‘Yes; if she nods three times it means my wife is a little better.’

‘She nodded thrice to-day.’

‘But she is told to do that to relieve me, and maybe those nods don’t tell the truth.’

‘Is she your girl?’

‘No; we have none but the baby. She is a neighbour’s; she comes twice a day.’

‘It is heartless of her parents not to send her every hour.’

‘But she is six years old,’ he said, ‘and has a house and two sisters to look after in the daytime, and a dinner to cook. Gentlefolk don’t understand.’

‘I suppose you live in some low part, William.’

‘Off Drury Lane,’ he answered, flushing; ‘but – but it isn’t low. You see, we were never used to anything better, and I mind when I let her see the house before we were married, she – she a sort of cried because she was so proud of it. That was eight years ago, and now – she’s afeard she’ll die when I’m away at my work.’

‘Did she tell you that?’

‘Never; she always says she is feeling a little stronger.’

‘Then how can you know she is afraid of that?’

‘I don’t know how I know, sir; but when I am leaving the house in the morning I look at her from the door, and she looks at me, and then I–I know.’

‘A green chartreuse, William!’

I tried to forget William’s vulgar story in billiards, but he had spoiled my game. My opponent, to whom I can give twenty, ran out when I was sixty-seven, and I put aside my cue pettishly. That in itself was bad form, but what would they have thought had they known that a waiter’s impertinence caused it! I grew angrier with William as the night wore on, and next day I punished him by giving my orders through another waiter.

As I had my window-seat, I could not but see that the girl was late again. Somehow I dawdled over my coffee. I had an evening paper before me, but there was so little in it that my eyes found more of interest in the street. It did not matter to me whether William’s wife died, but when that girl had promised to come, why did she not come? These lower classes only give their word to break it. The coffee was undrinkable.

At last I saw her. William was at another window, pretending to do something with the curtains. I stood up, pressing closer to the window. The coffee had been so bad that I felt shaky. She nodded three times, and smiled.

‘She is a little better,’ William whispered to me, almost gaily.

‘Whom are you speaking of?’ I asked, coldly, and immediately retired to the billiard-room, where I played a capital game. The coffee was much better there than in the dining-room.

Several days passed, and I took care to show William that I had forgotten his maunderings. I chanced to see the little girl (though I never looked for her) every evening, and she always nodded three times, save once, when she shook her head, and then William’s face grew white as a napkin. I remember this incident because that night I could not get into a pocket. So badly did I play that the thought of it kept me awake in bed, and that, again, made me wonder how William’s wife was. Next day I went to the club early (which was not my custom) to see the new books. Being in the club at any rate, I looked into the dining-room to ask William if I had left my gloves there, and the sight of him reminded me of his wife; so I asked for her. He shook his head mournfully, and I went off in a rage.

So accustomed am I to the club that when I dine elsewhere I feel uncomfortable next morning, as if I had missed a dinner. William knew this; yet here he was, hounding me out of the club! That evening I dined (as the saying is) at a restaurant, where no sauce was served with the asparagus. Furthermore, as if that were not triumph enough for William, his doleful face came between me and every dish, and I seemed to see his wife dying to annoy me.

I dined next day at the club for self-preservation, taking, however, a table in the middle of the room, and engaging a waiter who had once nearly poisoned me by not interfering when I put two lumps of sugar into my coffee instead of one, which is my allowance. But no William came to me to acknowledge his humiliation, and by-and-by I became aware that he was not in the room. Suddenly the thought struck me that his wife must be dead, and I – it was the worst cooked and the worst served dinner I ever had in the club.

I tried the smoking-room. Usually the talk there is entertaining, but on that occasion it was so frivolous that I did not remain five minutes. In the card-room a member told me excitedly that a policeman had spoken rudely to him; and my strange comment was:

‘After all, it is a small matter.’

In the library, where I had not been for years, I found two members asleep, and, to my surprise, William on a ladder dusting books.

‘You have not heard, sir?’ he said, in answer to my raised eyebrows. Descending the ladder, he whispered tragically: ‘It was last evening, sir. I—I lost my head, and I – swore at a member.’

I stepped back from William, and glanced apprehensively at the two members. They still slept.

‘I hardly knew,’ William went on, ‘what I was doing all day yesterday, for I had left my wife so weakly that—’

I stamped my foot.

‘I beg your pardon for speaking of her,’ he had the grace to say, ‘but I couldn’t help slipping up to the window often yesterday to look for Jenny, and when she did come, and I saw she was crying, it – it sort of confused me, and I didn’t know right, sir, what I was doing. I hit against a member, Mr. Myddleton Finch, and he – he jumped and swore at me. Well, sir, I had just touched him after all, and I was so miserable, it a kind of stung me to be treated like – like that, and me a man as well as him; and I lost my senses, and – and I swore back.’

William’s shamed head sank on his chest, but I even let pass his insolence in likening himself to a member of the club, so afraid was I of the sleepers waking and detecting me in talk with a waiter.

‘For the love of God,’ William cried, with coarse emotion, ‘don’t let them dismiss me!’

‘Speak lower!’ I said. ‘Who sent you here?’

‘I was turned out of the dining-room at once, and told to attend to the library until they had decided what to do with me. Oh, sir, I’ll lose my place!’

He was blubbering, as if a change of waiters was a matter of importance.

‘This is very bad, William,’ I said. ‘I fear I can do nothing for you.’

‘Have mercy on a distracted man!’ he entreated. ‘I’ll go on my knees to Mr. Myddleton Finch.’

How could I but despise a fellow who would be thus abject for a pound a week?

‘I dare not tell her,’ he continued, ‘that I have lost my place. She would just fall back and die.’

‘I forbade your speaking of your wife,’ I said, sharply, ‘unless you can speak pleasantly of her.’

‘But she may be worse now, sir, and I cannot even see Jenny from here. The library windows look to the back.’

‘If she dies,’ I said, ‘it will be a warning to you to marry a stronger woman next time.’

Now everyone knows that there is little real affection among the lower orders. As soon as they have lost one mate they take another. Yet William, forgetting our relative positions, drew himself up and raised his fist, and if I had not stepped back I swear he would have struck me.

The highly improper words William used I will omit, out of consideration for him. Even while he was apologising for them I retired to the smoking-room, where I found the cigarettes so badly rolled that they would not keep alight. After a little I remembered that I wanted to see Myddleton Finch about an improved saddle of which a friend of his has the patent. He was in the newsroom, and, having questioned him about the saddle, I said:

‘By the way, what is this story about your swearing at one of the waiters?’

‘You mean about his swearing at me,’ Myddleton Finch replied, reddening.

‘I am glad that was it,’ I said; ‘for I could not believe you guilty of such bad form.’

‘If I did swear—’ he was beginning, but I went on:

‘The version which has reached me was that you swore at him, and he repeated the word. I heard he was to be dismissed and you reprimanded.’

‘Who told you that?’ asked Myddleton Finch, who is a timid man.

‘I forget; it is club talk,’ I replied, lightly. ‘But of course the committee will take your word. The waiter, whichever one he is, richly deserves his dismissal for insulting you without provocation.’

Then our talk returned to the saddle, but Myddleton Finch was abstracted, and presently he said:

‘Do you know, I fancy I was wrong in thinking that the waiter swore at me, and I’ll withdraw my charge to-morrow.’

Myddleton Finch then left me, and, sitting alone, I realised that I had been doing William a service. To some slight extent I may have intentionally helped him to retain his place in the club, and I now see the reason, which was that he alone knows precisely to what extent I like my claret⁴⁹ heated.

For a mere second I remembered William’s remark that he should not be able to see the girl Jenny from the library windows. Then this recollection drove from my head that I had only dined in the sense that my dinner-bill was paid. Returning to the dining-room, I happened to take my chair at the window, and while I was eating a deviled kidney I saw in the street the girl whose nods had such an absurd effect on William.

The children of the poor are as thoughtless as their parents, and this Jenny did not sign to the windows in the hope that William might see her, though she could not see him. Her face, which was disgracefully dirty, bore doubt and dismay on it, but whether she brought good news it would not tell. Somehow I had expected her to signal when she saw me, and, though her message could not interest me, I was in the mood in which one is irritated at that not taking place which he is awaiting. Ultimately she seemed to be making up her mind to go away.

A boy was passing with the evening papers, and I hurried out to get one, rather thoughtlessly, for we have all the papers in the club. Unfortunately, I misunderstood the direction the boy had taken; but round the first corner (out of sight of the club windows) I saw the girl Jenny, and so asked her how William’s wife was.

‘Did he send you to me?’ she replied, impertinently taking me for a waiter. ‘My!’ she added, after a second scrutiny, ‘I b’lieve you’re one of them. His missis is a bit better, and I was to tell him as she took all the tapiocar.’

‘How could you tell him?’ I asked.

⁴⁹ **claret** – famous Bordeaux wine made since Roman times in the region around the city of Bordeaux in France; the word *claret* is not used in modern French.

‘I was to do like this,’ she replied, and went through the supping of something out of a plate in dumb-show.

‘That would not show she ate all the tapioca,’ I said.

‘But I was to end like this,’ she answered, licking an imaginary plate with her tongue.

I gave her a shilling (to get rid of her), and returned to the club disgusted.

Later in the evening I had to go to the club library for a book, and while William was looking in vain for it (I had forgotten the title) I said to him:

‘By the way, William, Mr. Myddleton Finch is to tell the committee that he was mistaken in the charge he brought against you, so you will doubtless be restored to the dining-room to-morrow.’

The two members were still in their chairs, probably sleeping lightly; yet he had the effrontery to thank me.

‘Don’t thank me,’ I said, blushing at the imputation. ‘Remember your place, William!’

‘But Mr. Myddleton Finch knew I swore,’ he insisted.

‘A gentleman,’ I replied, stiffly, ‘cannot remember for twenty-four hours what a waiter has said to him.’

‘No, sir; but—’

To stop him I had to say: ‘And, ah, William, your wife is a little better. She has eaten the tapioca – all of it.’

‘How can you know, sir?’

‘By an accident.’

‘Jenny signed to the window?’

‘No.’

‘Then you saw her, and went out, and—’

‘Nonsense!’

‘Oh, sir, to do that for me! May God bl—’

‘William!’

‘Forgive me, sir; but – when I tell my missis, she will say it was thought of your own wife as made you do it.’

He wrung my hand. I dared not withdraw it, lest we should waken the sleepers.

William returned to the dining-room, and I had to show him that if he did not cease looking gratefully at me I must change my waiter. I also ordered him to stop telling me nightly how his wife was, but I continued to know, as I could not help seeing the girl Jenny from the window. Twice in a week I learned from this objectionable child that the ailing woman had again eaten all the tapioca. Then I became suspicious of William. I will tell why.

It began with a remark of Captain Upjohn’s. We had been speaking of the inconvenience of not being able to get a hot dish served after 1 A.M., and he said:

‘It is because these lazy waiters would strike. If the beggars had a love of their work they would not rush away from the club the moment one o’clock strikes. That glum fellow who often waits on you takes to his heels the moment he is clear of the club steps. He ran into me the other night at the top of the street, and was off without apologising.’

‘You mean the foot of the street, Upjohn,’ I said; for such is the way to Drury Lane.

‘No; I mean the top. The man was running west.’

‘East.’

‘West.’

I smiled, which so annoyed him that he bet me two to one in sovereigns. The bet could have been decided most quickly by asking William a question, but I thought, foolishly doubtless, that it might hurt his feelings, so I watched him leave the club. The possibility of Upjohn’s winning the bet had seemed remote to me. Conceive my surprise, therefore when William went westward.

Amazed, I pursued him along two streets without realising that I was doing so. Then curiosity put me into a hansom⁵⁰. We followed William, and it proved to be a three-shilling fare, for, running when he was in breath and walking when he was out of it, he took me to West Kensington⁵¹.

I discharged my cab, and from across the street watched William's incomprehensible behaviour. He had stopped at a dingy row of workmen's houses, and knocked at the darkened window of one of them. Presently a light showed. So far as I could see, someone pulled up the blind and for ten minutes talked to William. I was uncertain whether they talked, for the window was not opened, and I felt that, had William spoken through the glass loud enough to be heard inside, I must have heard him too. Yet he nodded and beckoned. I was still bewildered when, by setting off the way he had come, he gave me the opportunity of going home.

Knowing from the talk of the club what the lower orders are, could I doubt that this was some discreditable love-affair of William's? His solicitude for his wife had been mere pretence; so far as it was genuine, it meant that he feared she might recover. He probably told her that he was detained nightly in the club till three.

I was miserable next day, and blamed the deviled kidneys for it. Whether William was unfaithful to his wife was nothing to me, but I had two plain reasons for insisting on his going straight home from his club: the one that, as he had made me lose a bet, I must punish him; the other that he could wait upon me better if he went to bed betimes.

Yet I did not question him. There was something in his face that – Well, I seemed to see his dying wife in it.

I was so out of sorts that I could eat no dinner. I left the club. Happening to stand for some time at the foot of the street, I chanced to see the girl Jenny coming, and – no; let me tell the truth, though the whole club reads: I was waiting for her.

'How is William's wife to-day?' I asked.

'She told me to nod three times,' the little slattern replied; 'but she looked like nothing but a dead one till she got the brandy.'

'Hush, child!' I said, shocked. 'You don't know how the dead look.'

'Bless yer,' she answered, 'don't I just! Why, I've helped to lay 'em out. I'm going on seven.'

'Is William good to his wife?'

'Course he is. Ain't she his missis?'

'Why should that make him good to her?' I asked, cynically, out of my knowledge of the poor. But the girl, precocious in many ways, had never had any opportunities of studying the lower classes in the newspapers, fiction, and club talk. She shut one eye, and, looking up wonderingly, said:

'Ain't you green – just!'

'When does William reach home at night?'

'Tain't night; it's morning. When I wakes up at half dark and half light, and hears a door shutting, I know as it's either father going off to his work or Mr. Hicking come home from his.'

'Who is Mr. Hicking?'

'Him as we've been speaking on – William. We calls him mister, 'cause he's a toff. Father's just doing jobs in Covent Gardens, but Mr. Hicking, he's a waiter, and a clean shirt every day. The old woman would like father to be a waiter, but he hain't got the 'ristocratic look.'

'What old woman?'

'Go 'long! that's my mother. Is it true there's a waiter in the club just for to open the door?'

'Yes; but—'

'And another just for to lick the stamps? My!'

⁵⁰ **hansom** – a low two-wheeled open carriage with the elevated driver's seat

⁵¹ **West Kensington** – a fashionable district in central London

‘William leaves the club at one o’clock?’ I said, interrogatively.

She nodded. ‘My mother,’ she said, ‘is one to talk, and she says Mr. Hicking as he should get away at twelve, ’cause his missis needs him more’n the gentlemen need him. The old woman do talk.’

‘And what does William answer to that?’

‘He says as the gentlemen can’t be kept waiting for their cheese.’

‘But William does not go straight home when he leaves the club?’

‘That’s the kid.’

‘Kid!’ I echoed, scarcely understanding, for, knowing how little the poor love their children, I had asked William no questions about the baby.

‘Didn’t you know his missis had a kid?’

‘Yes; but that is no excuse for William’s staying away from his sick wife,’ I answered, sharply. A baby in such a home as William’s, I reflected, must be trying; but still – besides, his class can sleep through any din.

‘The kid ain’t in our court,’ the girl explained. ‘He’s in W.⁵², he is, and I’ve never been out of W.C.; leastwise, not as I knows of.’

‘This is W. I suppose you mean that the child is at West Kensington? Well, no doubt it was better for William’s wife to get rid of the child—’

‘Better!’ interposed the girl. ‘’Tain’t better for her not to have the kid. Ain’t her not having him what she’s always thinking on when she looks like a dead one?’

‘How could you know that?’

‘’Cause,’ answered the girl, illustrating her words with a gesture, ‘I watches her, and I sees her arms going this way, just like as she wanted to hug her kid.’

‘Possibly you are right,’ I said, frowning; ‘but William had put the child out to nurse because it disturbed his night’s rest. A man who has his work to do—’

‘You are green!’

‘Then why have the mother and child been separated?’

‘Along of that there measles. Near all the young ’uns in our court has ’em bad.’

‘Have you had them?’

‘I said the young ’uns.’

‘And William sent the baby to West Kensington to escape infection?’

‘Took him, he did.’

‘Against his wife’s wishes?’

‘Na-o!’

‘You said she was dying for want of the child?’

‘Wouldn’t she rayther die than have the kid die?’

‘Don’t speak so heartlessly, child. Why does William not go straight home from the club? Does he go to West Kensington to see it?’

‘’Tain’t a hit, it’s an ’e. Course he do.’

‘Then he should not. His wife has the first claim on him.’

‘Ain’t you green! It’s his missis as wants him to go. Do you think she could sleep till she knowed how the kid was?’

‘But he does not go into the house at West Kensington?’

‘Is he soft? Course he don’t go in, fear of taking the infection to the kid. They just holds the kid up at the window to him, so as he can have a good look. Then he comes home and tells his missis. He sits foot of the bed and tells.’

‘And that takes place every night? He can’t have much to tell.’

⁵² W. – West

‘He has just.’

‘He can only say whether the child is well or ill.’

‘My! He tells what a difference there is in the kid since he seed him last.’

‘There can be no difference!’

‘Go ’long! Ain’t a kid always growing? Haven’t Mr. Hicking to tell how the hair is getting darker, and heaps of things beside?’

‘Such as what?’

‘Like whether he larfed, and if he has her nose, and how as he knowed him. He tells her them things more ’n once.’

‘And all this time he is sitting at the foot of the bed?’

‘’Cept when he holds her hand.’

‘But when does he get to bed himself?’

‘He don’t get much. He tells her as he has a sleep at the club.’

‘He cannot say that.’

‘Hain’t I heard him? But he do go to his bed a bit, and then they both lies quiet, her pretending she is sleeping so as he can sleep, and him ’feard to sleep case he shouldn’t wake up to give her the bottle stuff.’

‘What does the doctor say about her?’

‘He’s a good one, the doctor. Sometimes he says she would get better if she could see the kid through the window.’

‘Nonsense!’

‘And if she was took to the country.’

‘Then why does not William take her?’

‘My! you are green! And if she drank port wines.’

‘Doesn’t she?’

‘No; but William, he tells her about the gentlemen drinking them.’

On the tenth day after my conversation with this unattractive child I was in my brougham⁵³, with the windows up, and I sat back, a paper before my face lest anyone should look in. Naturally, I was afraid of being seen in company of William’s wife and Jenny, for men about town are uncharitable, and, despite the explanation I had ready, might have charged me with pitying William. As a matter of fact, William was sending his wife into Surrey to stay with an old nurse of mine, and I was driving her down because my horses needed an outing. Besides, I was going that way at any rate.

I had arranged that the girl Jenny, who was wearing an outrageous bonnet, should accompany us, because, knowing the greed of her class, I feared she might blackmail me at the club.

William joined us in the suburbs, bringing the baby with him, as I had foreseen they would all be occupied with it, and to save me the trouble of conversing with them. Mrs. Hicking I found too pale and fragile for a workingman’s wife, and I formed a mean opinion of her intelligence from her pride in the baby, which was a very ordinary one. She created quite a vulgar scene when it was brought to her, though she had given me her word not to do so, what irritated me even more than her tears being her ill-bred apology that she ‘had been ‘feared baby wouldn’t know her again.’ I would have told her they didn’t know any one for years had I not been afraid of the girl Jenny, who dandled the infant on her knees and talked to it as if it understood. She kept me on tenter-hooks⁵⁴ by asking it offensive questions, such as, ‘Oo know who give me that bonnet?’ and answering them herself, ‘It was the pretty gentleman there;’ and several times I had to affect sleep because she announced, ‘Kiddy wants to kiss the pretty gentleman.’

⁵³ **brougham** – a four-wheeled one-horse carriage designed in 1838 by Henry Brougham, a former lord chancellor of England

⁵⁴ **kept me on tenter-hooks** – *idiom* kept me in a state of anxiety

Irksome as all this necessarily was to a man of taste, I suffered even more when we reached our destination. As we drove through the village the girl Jenny uttered shrieks of delight at the sight of flowers growing up the cottage walls, and declared they were ‘just like a music-’all without the drink license.’ As my horses required a rest, I was forced to abandon my intention of dropping these persons at their lodgings and returning to town at once, and I could not go to the inn lest I should meet inquisitive acquaintances. Disagreeable circumstances, therefore, compelled me to take tea with a waiter’s family – close to a window too, through which I could see the girl Jenny talking excitedly to the villagers, and telling them, I felt certain, that I had been good to William. I had a desire to go out and put myself right with those people.

William’s long connection with the club should have given him some manners, but apparently his class cannot take them on, for, though he knew I regarded his thanks as an insult, he looked them when he was not speaking them, and hardly had he sat down, by my orders, than he remembered that I was a member of the club, and jumped up. Nothing is in worse form than whispering, yet again and again, when he thought I was not listening, he whispered to Mrs. Hicking, ‘You don’t feel faint?’ or ‘How are you now?’ He was also in extravagant glee because she ate two cakes (it takes so little to put these people in good spirits), and when she said she felt like another being already the fellow’s face charged me with the change. I could not but conclude, from the way Mrs. Hicking let the baby pound her, that she was stronger than she had pretended.

I remained longer than was necessary, because I had something to say to William which I knew he would misunderstand, and so I put off saying it. But when he announced that it was time for him to return to London, – at which his wife suddenly paled, so that he had to sign to her not to break down, – I delivered the message.

‘William,’ I said, ‘the head waiter asked me to say that you could take a fortnight’s holiday just now. Your wages will be paid as usual.’

Confound them! William had me by the hand, and his wife was in tears before I could reach the door.

‘Is it your doing again, sir?’ William cried.

‘William!’ I said, fiercely.

‘We owe everything to you,’ he insisted. ‘The port wine—’

‘Because I had no room for it in my cellar.’

‘The money for the nurse in London—’

‘Because I objected to being waited on by a man who got no sleep.’

‘These lodgings—’

‘Because I wanted to do something for my old nurse.’

‘And now, sir, a fortnight’s holiday!’

‘Good-bye, William!’ I said, in a fury.

But before I could get away Mrs. Hicking signed to William to leave the room, and then she kissed my hand. She said something to me. It was about my wife. Somehow I – What business had William to tell her about my wife?

They are all back in Drury Lane now, and William tells me that his wife sings at her work just as she did eight years ago. I have no interest in this, and try to check his talk of it; but such people have no sense of propriety, and he even speaks of the girl Jenny, who sent me lately a gaudy pair of worsted gloves worked by her own hand. The meanest advantage they took of my weakness, however, was in calling their baby after me. I have an uncomfortable suspicion, too, that William has given the other waiters his version of the affair; but I feel safe so long as it does not reach the committee.

The Solid Gold Reef Company, Limited (Walter Besant)

Act I

‘You dear old boy,’ said the girl, ‘I am sure I wish it could be, with all my heart, if I have any heart.’

‘I don’t believe you have,’ replied the boy gloomily.

‘Well, but, Reg, consider; you’ve got no money.’

‘I’ve got five thousand pounds. If a man can’t make his way upon that he must be a poor stick.’

‘You would go abroad with it and dig, and take your wife with you – to wash and cook.’

‘We would do something with the money here. You should stay in London, Rosie.’

‘Yes. In a suburban villa, at Shepherd’s Bush, perhaps. No, Reg, when I marry, if ever I do – I am in no hurry – I will step out of this room into one exactly like it.’ The room was a splendid drawing-room in Palace Gardens, splendidly furnished. ‘I shall have my footmen and my carriage, and I shall—’

‘Rosie, give me the right to earn all these things for you!’ the young man cried impetuously.

‘You can only earn them for me by the time you have one foot in the grave. Hadn’t I better in the meantime marry some old gentleman with his one foot in the grave, so as to be ready for you against the time you come home? In two or three years the other foot, I dare say, would slide into the grave as well.’

‘You laugh at my trouble. You feel nothing.’

‘If the pater would part, but he won’t; he says he wants all his money for himself, and that I’ve got to marry well. Besides, Reg’ – here her face clouded and she lowered her voice – ‘there are times when he looks anxious. We didn’t always live in Palace Gardens. Suppose we should lose it all as quickly as we got it. Oh!’ she shivered and trembled. ‘No, I will never, never marry a poor man. Get rich, my dear boy, and you may aspire even to the valuable possession of this heartless hand.’

She held it out. He took it, pressed it, stooped and kissed her. Then he dropped her hand and walked quickly out of the room.

‘Poor Reggie!’ she murmured. ‘I wish – I wish – but what is the use of wishing?’

Act II

Two men – one young, the other about fifty – sat in the veranda of a small bungalow. It was after breakfast. They lay back in long bamboo chairs, each with a cigar. It looked as if they were resting. In reality they were talking business, and that very seriously.

‘Yes, sir,’ said the elder man, with something of an American accent, ‘I have somehow taken a fancy to this place. The situation is healthy.’

‘Well, I don’t know; I’ve had more than one touch of fever here.’

‘The climate is lovely—’

‘Except in the rains.’

‘The soil is fertile—’

‘I’ve dropped five thousand in it, and they haven’t come up again yet.’

‘They will. I have been round the estate, and I see money in it. Well, sir, here’s my offer: five thousand down, hard cash, as soon as the papers are signed.’

Reginald sat up. He was on the point of accepting the proposal, when a pony rode up to the house, and the rider, a native groom, jumped off and gave him a note. He opened it and read. It was from his nearest neighbour, two or three miles away:

Don’t sell that man your estate. Gold has been found. The whole country is full of gold. Hold on. He’s an assayer. If he offers to buy, be quite sure that he has found gold on your land.

F.G.

He put the note into his pocket, gave a verbal message to the boy, and turned to his guest, without betraying the least astonishment or emotion.

‘I beg your pardon. The note was from Bellamy, my next neighbour. Well? You were saying —’

‘Only that I have taken a fancy – perhaps a foolish fancy – to this place of yours, and I’ll give you, if you like, all that you have spent upon it.’

‘Well,’ he replied reflectively, but with a little twinkle in his eye, ‘that seems handsome. But the place isn’t really worth the half that I spent upon it. Anybody would tell you that. Come, let us be honest, whatever we are. I’ll tell you a better way. We will put the matter into the hands of Bellamy. He knows what a coffee plantation is worth. He shall name a price, and if we can agree upon that, we will make a deal of it.’

The other man changed colour. He wanted to settle the thing at once as between gentlemen. What need of third parties? But Reginald stood firm, and he presently rode away, quite sure that in a day or two this planter, too, would have heard the news.

A month later, the young coffee-planter stood on the deck of a steamer homeward bound. In his pocket-book was a plan of his auriferous estate; in a bag hanging round his neck was a small collection of yellow nuggets; in his boxes was a chosen assortment of quartz.

Act III

‘Well, sir,’ said the financier, ‘you’ve brought this thing to me. You want my advice. Well, my advice is, don’t fool away the only good thing that will ever happen to you. Luck such as this doesn’t come more than once in a lifetime.’

‘I have been offered ten thousand pounds for my estate.’

‘Oh! Have you! Ten thousand? That was very liberal – very liberal indeed. Ten thousand for a gold reef!’

‘But I thought as an old friend of my father you would, perhaps—’

‘Young man, don’t fool it away. He’s waiting for you, I suppose, round the corner, with a bottle of fizz, ready to close.’

‘He is.’

‘Well, go and drink his champagne. Always get whatever you can. And then tell him that you’ll see him—’

‘I certainly will, sir, if you advise it. And then?’

‘And then – leave it to me. And, young man, I think I heard, a year or two ago, something about you and my girl Rosie.’

‘There was something, sir. Not enough to trouble you about it.’

‘She told me. Rosie tells me all her love affairs.’

‘Is she – is she unmarried?’

‘Oh, yes! and for the moment I believe she is free. She has had one or two engagements, but, somehow, they have come to nothing. There was the French count, but that was knocked on the head very early in consequence of things discovered. And there was the Boom in Guano, but he fortunately smashed, much to Rosie’s joy, because she never liked him. The last was Lord Evergreen. He was a nice old chap when you could understand what he said, and Rosie would have liked the title very much, though his grandchildren opposed the thing. Well, sir, I suppose you couldn’t understand the trouble we took to keep that old man alive for his own wedding. Science did all it could, but ’twas of no use—’ The financier sighed. ‘The ways of Providence are inscrutable. He died, sir, the day before.’

‘That was very sad.’

‘A dashing of the cup from the lip, sir. My daughter would have been a countess. Well, young gentleman, about this estate of yours. I think I see a way – I think, I am not yet sure – that I do see a way. Go now. See this liberal gentleman, and drink his champagne. And come here in a week. Then, if I still see my way, you shall understand what it means to hold the position in the City which is mine.’

‘And – and – may I call upon Rosie?’

‘Not till this day week – not till I have made my way plain.’

Act IV

‘And so it means this. Oh, Rosie, you look lovelier than ever, and I’m as happy as a king. It means this. Your father is the greatest genius in the world. He buys my property for sixty thousand pounds – sixty thousand. That’s over two thousand a year for me, and he makes a company out of it with a hundred and fifty thousand capital. He says that, taking ten thousand out of it for expenses, there will be a profit of eighty thousand. And all that he gives to you – eighty thousand, that’s three thousand a year for you; and sixty thousand, that’s two more, my dearest Rosie. You remember what you said, that when you married you should step out of one room like this into another just as good?’

‘Oh, Reggie,’ she sank upon his bosom – ‘you know I never could love anybody but you. It’s true I was engaged to old Lord Evergreen, but that was only because he had one foot – you know – and when the other foot went in too, just a day too soon, I actually laughed. So the pater is going to make a company of it, is he? Well, I hope he won’t put any of his own money into it, I’m sure, because of late all the companies have turned out so badly.’

‘But, my child, the place is full of gold.’

‘Then why did he turn it into a company, my dear boy? And why didn’t he make you stick to it? But you know nothing of the City. Now, let us sit down and talk about what we shall do – don’t, you ridiculous boy!’

Act V

Another house just like the first. The bride stepped out of one palace into another. With their five or six thousand a year, the young couple could just manage to make both ends meet. The husband was devoted; the wife had everything that she could wish. Who could be happier than this pair in a nest so luxurious, their life so padded, their days so full of sunshine? It was a year after marriage. The wife, contrary to her usual custom, was the first at breakfast. A few letters were waiting for her – chiefly invitations. She opened and read them. Among them lay one addressed to her husband. Not looking at the address, she opened and read that as well:

Dear Reginald:

I venture to address you as an old friend of your own and school-fellow of your mother's. I am a widow with four children. My husband was the vicar of your old parish – you remember him and me. I was left with a little income of about two hundred a year. Twelve months ago I was persuaded in order to double my income – a thing which seemed certain from the prospectus – to invest everything in a new and rich gold mine. Everything. And the mine has never paid anything. The company – it is called the Solid Gold Reef Company, is in liquidation because, though there is really the gold there, it costs too much to get it. I have no relatives anywhere to help me. Unless I can get assistance my children and I must go at once – tomorrow – into the workhouse. Yes, we are paupers. I am ruined by the cruel lies of that prospectus, and the wickedness which deluded me, and I know not how many others, out of my money. I have been foolish, and am punished; but those people, who will punish them? Help me, if you can, my dear Reginald. Oh! For... *GOD'S...* sake, help my children and me. Help your mother's friend, your own old friend.

'This,' said Rosie meditatively, 'is exactly the kind of thing to make Reggie uncomfortable. Why, it might make him unhappy all day. Better burn it.' She dropped the letter into the fire. 'He's an impulsive, emotional nature, and he doesn't understand the City. If people are so foolish – What a lot of fibs the poor old pater does tell, to be sure! He's a regular novelist – Oh! here you are, you lazy boy!'

'Kiss me, Rosie.' He looked as handsome as Apollo, and as cheerful. 'I wish all the world were as happy as you and me. Heigho! some poor devils, I'm afraid—'

'Tea or coffee, Reg?'

An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge (Ambrose Bierce)

Chapter I

A man stood upon a railroad bridge in northern Alabama⁵⁵, looking down into the swift water twenty feet below. The man's hands were behind his back, the wrists bound with a cord. A rope closely encircled his neck. It was attached to a stout cross-timber above his head and the slack fell to the level of his knees. Some loose boards laid upon the ties supporting the rails of the railway supplied a footing for him and his executioners – two private soldiers of the Federal army⁵⁶, directed by a sergeant who in civil life may have been a deputy sheriff. At a short remove upon the same temporary platform was an officer in the uniform of his rank, armed. He was a captain. A sentinel at each end of the bridge stood with his rifle in the position known as 'support,' that is to say, vertical in front of the left shoulder, the hammer resting on the forearm thrown straight across the chest – a formal and unnatural position, enforcing an erect carriage of the body. It did not appear to be the duty of these two men to know what was occurring at the center of the bridge; they merely blockaded the two ends of the foot planking that traversed it.

Beyond one of the sentinels nobody was in sight; the railroad ran straight away into a forest for a hundred yards, then, curving, was lost to view. Doubtless there was an outpost farther along. The other bank of the stream was open ground – a gentle slope topped with a stockade of vertical tree trunks, loopholed for rifles, with a single embrasure through which protruded the muzzle of a brass cannon commanding the bridge. Midway up the slope between the bridge and fort were the spectators – a single company of infantry in line, at 'parade rest,' the butts of their rifles on the ground, the barrels inclining slightly backward against the right shoulder, the hands crossed upon the stock. A lieutenant stood at the right of the line, the point of his sword upon the ground, his left hand resting upon his right. Excepting the group of four at the center of the bridge, not a man moved. The company faced the bridge, staring stonily, motionless. The sentinels, facing the banks of the stream, might have been statues to adorn the bridge. The captain stood with folded arms, silent, observing the work of his subordinates, but making no sign. Death is a dignitary who when he comes announced is to be received with formal manifestations of respect, even by those most familiar with him. In the code of military etiquette silence and fixity are forms of deference.

The man who was engaged in being hanged was apparently about thirty-five years of age. He was a civilian, if one might judge from his habit, which was that of a planter. His features were good – a straight nose, firm mouth, broad forehead, from which his long, dark hair was combed straight back, falling behind his ears to the collar of his well fitting frock coat. He wore a moustache and pointed beard, but no whiskers; his eyes were large and dark gray, and had a kindly expression which one would hardly have expected in one whose neck was in the hemp. Evidently this was no vulgar assassin. The liberal military code makes provision for hanging many kinds of persons, and gentlemen are not excluded.

The preparations being complete, the two private soldiers stepped aside and each drew away the plank upon which he had been standing. The sergeant turned to the captain, saluted and placed himself immediately behind that officer, who in turn moved apart one pace. These movements left the condemned man and the sergeant standing on the two ends of the same plank, which spanned three of the cross-ties of the bridge. The end upon which the civilian stood almost, but not quite,

⁵⁵ **Alabama** – the US state in the south (131 334 sq. km); the first Europeans who came there were the Spanish, the first settlement was founded by the French in 1701; after the war of 1763, the territory was ceded to England.

⁵⁶ **the Federal army** – the army of the federal government in the American Civil War of 1861–1865 with 11 Southern states

reached a fourth. This plank had been held in place by the weight of the captain; it was now held by that of the sergeant. At a signal from the former the latter would step aside, the plank would tilt and the condemned man go down between two ties. The arrangement commended itself to his judgement as simple and effective. His face had not been covered nor his eyes bandaged. He looked a moment at his 'unsteadfast footing,' then let his gaze wander to the swirling water of the stream racing madly beneath his feet. A piece of dancing driftwood caught his attention and his eyes followed it down the current. How slowly it appeared to move! What a sluggish stream!

He closed his eyes in order to fix his last thoughts upon his wife and children. The water, touched to gold by the early sun, the brooding mists under the banks at some distance down the stream, the fort, the soldiers, the piece of drift – all had distracted him. And now he became conscious of a new disturbance. Striking through the thought of his dear ones was sound which he could neither ignore nor understand, a sharp, distinct, metallic percussion like the stroke of a blacksmith's hammer upon the anvil; it had the same ringing quality. He wondered what it was, and whether immeasurably distant or nearby – it seemed both. Its recurrence was regular, but as slow as the tolling of a death knell. He awaited each new stroke with impatience and – he knew not why – apprehension. The intervals of silence grew progressively longer; the delays became maddening. With their greater infrequency the sounds increased in strength and sharpness. They hurt his ear like the thrust of a knife; he feared he would shriek. What he heard was the ticking of his watch.

He unclosed his eyes and saw again the water below him. 'If I could free my hands,' he thought, 'I might throw off the noose and spring into the stream. By diving I could evade the bullets and, swimming vigorously, reach the bank, take to the woods and get away home. My home, thank God, is as yet outside their lines; my wife and little ones are still beyond the invader's farthest advance.'

As these thoughts, which have here to be set down in words, were flashed into the doomed man's brain rather than evolved from it the captain nodded to the sergeant. The sergeant stepped aside.

Chapter II

Peyton Fahrquhar was a well to do planter, of an old and highly respected Alabama family. Being a slave owner and like other slave owners a politician, he was naturally an original secessionist and ardently devoted to the Southern cause⁵⁷. Circumstances of an imperious nature, which it is unnecessary to relate here, had prevented him from taking service with that gallant army which had fought the disastrous campaigns ending with the fall of Corinth⁵⁸, and he chafed under the inglorious restraint, longing for the release of his energies, the larger life of the soldier, the opportunity for distinction. That opportunity, he felt, would come, as it comes to all in wartime. Meanwhile he did what he could. No service was too humble for him to perform in the aid of the South, no adventure too perilous for him to undertake if consistent with the character of a civilian who was at heart a soldier, and who in good faith and without too much qualification assented to at least a part of the frankly villainous dictum that all is fair in love and war.

One evening while Fahrquhar and his wife were sitting on a rustic bench near the entrance to his grounds, a gray-clad soldier rode up to the gate and asked for a drink of water. Mrs. Fahrquhar was only too happy to serve him with her own white hands. While she was fetching the water her husband approached the dusty horseman and inquired eagerly for news from the front.

‘The Yanks⁵⁹ are repairing the railroads,’ said the man, ‘and are getting ready for another advance. They have reached the Owl Creek bridge, put it in order and built a stockade on the north bank. The commandant has issued an order, which is posted everywhere, declaring that any civilian caught interfering with the railroad, its bridges, tunnels, or trains will be summarily hanged. I saw the order.’

‘How far is it to the Owl Creek bridge?’ Fahrquhar asked.

‘About thirty miles.’

‘Is there no force on this side of the creek?’

‘Only a picket post half a mile out, on the railroad, and a single sentinel at this end of the bridge.’

‘Suppose a man – a civilian and student of hanging – should elude the picket post and perhaps get the better of the sentinel,’ said Fahrquhar, smiling, ‘what could he accomplish?’

The soldier reflected. ‘I was there a month ago,’ he replied. ‘I observed that the flood of last winter had lodged a great quantity of driftwood against the wooden pier at this end of the bridge. It is now dry and would burn like tinder.’

The lady had now brought the water, which the soldier drank. He thanked her ceremoniously, bowed to her husband and rode away. An hour later, after nightfall, he repassed the plantation, going northward in the direction from which he had come. He was a Federal.

⁵⁷ **the Southern cause** – the southern states seceded from the Union in 1860–1861; the Northern and the Southern states had different economies, different attitude to slavery, trade and the very idea of states’ rights.

⁵⁸ **Corinth** – a city in northeastern Mississippi; the bloody battle took place to the north of the city during the American Civil War.

⁵⁹ **the Yanks** – Yankees, a nickname of the citizens of New England states; the word was used by Southerners for Northerners and Federal soldiers during the American Civil War.

Chapter III

As Peyton Farquhar fell straight downward through the bridge he lost consciousness and was as one already dead. From this state he was awakened – ages later, it seemed to him – by the pain of a sharp pressure upon his throat, followed by a sense of suffocation. Keen, poignant agonies seemed to shoot from his neck downward through every fiber of his body and limbs. These pains appeared to flash along well defined lines of ramification and to beat with an inconceivably rapid periodicity. They seemed like streams of pulsating fire heating him to an intolerable temperature. As to his head, he was conscious of nothing but a feeling of fullness – of congestion. These sensations were unaccompanied by thought. The intellectual part of his nature was already effaced; he had power only to feel, and feeling was torment. He was conscious of motion. Encompassed in a luminous cloud, of which he was now merely the fiery heart, without material substance, he swung through unthinkable arcs of oscillation, like a vast pendulum. Then all at once, with terrible suddenness, the light about him shot upward with the noise of a loud splash; a frightful roaring was in his ears, and all was cold and dark. The power of thought was restored; he knew that the rope had broken and he had fallen into the stream. There was no additional strangulation; the noose about his neck was already suffocating him and kept the water from his lungs. To die of hanging at the bottom of a river! – the idea seemed to him ludicrous. He opened his eyes in the darkness and saw above him a gleam of light, but how distant, how inaccessible! He was still sinking, for the light became fainter and fainter until it was a mere glimmer. Then it began to grow and brighten, and he knew that he was rising toward the surface – knew it with reluctance, for he was now very comfortable. ‘To be hanged and drowned,’ he thought, ‘that is not so bad; but I do not wish to be shot. No; I will not be shot; that is not fair.’

He was not conscious of an effort, but a sharp pain in his wrist apprised him that he was trying to free his hands. He gave the struggle his attention, as an idler might observe the feat of a juggler, without interest in the outcome. What splendid effort! – what magnificent, what superhuman strength! Ah, that was a fine endeavor! Bravo! The cord fell away; his arms parted and floated upward, the hands dimly seen on each side in the growing light. He watched them with a new interest as first one and then the other pounced upon the noose at his neck. They tore it away and thrust it fiercely aside, its undulations resembling those of a water snake. ‘Put it back, put it back!’ He thought he shouted these words to his hands, for the undoing of the noose had been succeeded by the direst pang that he had yet experienced. His neck ached horribly; his brain was on fire, his heart, which had been fluttering faintly, gave a great leap, trying to force itself out at his mouth. His whole body was racked and wrenched with an insupportable anguish! But his disobedient hands gave no heed to the command. They beat the water vigorously with quick, downward strokes, forcing him to the surface. He felt his head emerge; his eyes were blinded by the sunlight; his chest expanded convulsively, and with a supreme and crowning agony his lungs engulfed a great draught of air, which instantly he expelled in a shriek!

He was now in full possession of his physical senses. They were, indeed, preternaturally keen and alert. Something in the awful disturbance of his organic system had so exalted and refined them that they made record of things never before perceived. He felt the ripples upon his face and heard their separate sounds as they struck. He looked at the forest on the bank of the stream, saw the individual trees, the leaves and the veining of each leaf – he saw the very insects upon them: the locusts, the brilliant bodied flies, the gray spiders stretching their webs from twig to twig. He noted the prismatic colors in all the dewdrops upon a million blades of grass. The humming of the gnats that danced above the eddies of the stream, the beating of the dragon flies’ wings, the strokes of the water spiders’ legs, like oars which had lifted their boat – all these made audible music. A fish slid along beneath his eyes and he heard the rush of its body parting the water.

He had come to the surface facing down the stream; in a moment the visible world seemed to wheel slowly round, himself the pivotal point, and he saw the bridge, the fort, the soldiers upon the bridge, the captain, the sergeant, the two privates, his executioners. They were in silhouette against the blue sky. They shouted and gesticulated, pointing at him. The captain had drawn his pistol, but did not fire; the others were unarmed. Their movements were grotesque and horrible, their forms gigantic.

Suddenly he heard a sharp report and something struck the water smartly within a few inches of his head, splattering his face with spray. He heard a second report, and saw one of the sentinels with his rifle at his shoulder, a light cloud of blue smoke rising from the muzzle. The man in the water saw the eye of the man on the bridge gazing into his own through the sights of the rifle. He observed that it was a gray eye and remembered having read that gray eyes were keenest, and that all famous marksmen had them. Nevertheless, this one had missed.

A counter-swirl had caught Farquhar and turned him half round; he was again looking at the forest on the bank opposite the fort. The sound of a clear, high voice in a monotonous singsong now rang out behind him and came across the water with a distinctness that pierced and subdued all other sounds, even the beating of the ripples in his ears. Although no soldier, he had frequented camps enough to know the dread significance of that deliberate, drawling, aspirated chant; the lieutenant on shore was taking a part in the morning's work. How coldly and pitilessly – with what an even, calm intonation, presaging, and enforcing tranquility in the men – with what accurately measured interval fell those cruel words:

‘Company!.. Attention!.. Shoulder arms!.. Ready!.. Aim!.. Fire!’

Farquhar dived – dived as deeply as he could. The water roared in his ears like the voice of Niagara⁶⁰, yet he heard the dull thunder of the volley and, rising again toward the surface, met shining bits of metal, singularly flattened, oscillating slowly downward. Some of them touched him on the face and hands, then fell away, continuing their descent. One lodged between his collar and neck; it was uncomfortably warm and he snatched it out.

As he rose to the surface, gasping for breath, he saw that he had been a long time under water; he was perceptibly farther downstream – nearer to safety. The soldiers had almost finished reloading; the metal ramrods flashed all at once in the sunshine as they were drawn from the barrels, turned in the air, and thrust into their sockets. The two sentinels fired again, independently and ineffectually.

The hunted man saw all this over his shoulder; he was now swimming vigorously with the current. His brain was as energetic as his arms and legs; he thought with the rapidity of lightning:

‘The officer,’ he reasoned, ‘will not make that martinet's error a second time. It is as easy to dodge a volley as a single shot. He has probably already given the command to fire at will. God help me, I cannot dodge them all!’

An appalling splash within two yards of him was followed by a loud, rushing sound, DIMINUENDO, which seemed to travel back through the air to the fort and died in an explosion which stirred the very river to its depths! A rising sheet of water curved over him, fell down upon him, blinded him, strangled him! The cannon had taken an hand in the game. As he shook his head free from the commotion of the smitten water he heard the deflected shot humming through the air ahead, and in an instant it was cracking and smashing the branches in the forest beyond.

‘They will not do that again,’ he thought; ‘the next time they will use a charge of grape. I must keep my eye upon the gun; the smoke will apprise me – the report arrives too late; it lags behind the missile. That is a good gun.’

Suddenly he felt himself whirled round and round – spinning like a top. The water, the banks, the forests, the now distant bridge, fort and men, all were commingled and blurred. Objects were

⁶⁰ **Niagara** – Niagara Falls on the Niagara River in northeastern North America, on the USA-Canadian border

represented by their colors only; circular horizontal streaks of color – that was all he saw. He had been caught in a vortex and was being whirled on with a velocity of advance and gyration that made him giddy and sick. In few moments he was flung upon the gravel at the foot of the left bank of the stream – the southern bank – and behind a projecting point which concealed him from his enemies. The sudden arrest of his motion, the abrasion of one of his hands on the gravel, restored him, and he wept with delight. He dug his fingers into the sand, threw it over himself in handfuls and audibly blessed it. It looked like diamonds, rubies, emeralds; he could think of nothing beautiful which it did not resemble. The trees upon the bank were giant garden plants; he noted a definite order in their arrangement, inhaled the fragrance of their blooms. A strange roseate light shone through the spaces among their trunks and the wind made in their branches the music of Aeolian harps⁶¹. He had no wish to perfect his escape – he was content to remain in that enchanting spot until retaken.

A whiz and a rattle of grapeshot among the branches high above his head roused him from his dream. The baffled cannoneer had fired him a random farewell. He sprang to his feet, rushed up the sloping bank, and plunged into the forest.

All that day he traveled, laying his course by the rounding sun. The forest seemed interminable; nowhere did he discover a break in it, not even a woodman's road. He had not known that he lived in so wild a region. There was something uncanny in the revelation.

By nightfall he was fatigued, footsore, famished. The thought of his wife and children urged him on. At last he found a road which led him in what he knew to be the right direction. It was as wide and straight as a city street, yet it seemed untraveled. No fields bordered it, no dwelling anywhere. Not so much as the barking of a dog suggested human habitation. The black bodies of the trees formed a straight wall on both sides, terminating on the horizon in a point, like a diagram in a lesson in perspective. Overhead, as he looked up through this rift in the wood, shone great golden stars looking unfamiliar and grouped in strange constellations. He was sure they were arranged in some order which had a secret and malign significance. The wood on either side was full of singular noises, among which – once, twice, and again – he distinctly heard whispers in an unknown tongue.

His neck was in pain and lifting his hand to it found it horribly swollen. He knew that it had a circle of black where the rope had bruised it. His eyes felt congested; he could no longer close them. His tongue was swollen with thirst; he relieved its fever by thrusting it forward from between his teeth into the cold air. How softly the turf had carpeted the untraveled avenue – he could no longer feel the roadway beneath his feet!

Doubtless, despite his suffering, he had fallen asleep while walking, for now he sees another scene – perhaps he has merely recovered from a delirium⁶². He stands at the gate of his own home. All is as he left it, and all bright and beautiful in the morning sunshine. He must have traveled the entire night. As he pushes open the gate and passes up the wide white walk, he sees a flutter of female garments; his wife, looking fresh and cool and sweet, steps down from the veranda to meet him. At the bottom of the steps she stands waiting, with a smile of ineffable joy, an attitude of matchless grace and dignity. Ah, how beautiful she is! He springs forwards with extended arms. As he is about to clasp her he feels a stunning blow upon the back of the neck; a blinding white light blazes all about him with a sound like the shock of a cannon – then all is darkness and silence!

Peyton Farquhar was dead; his body, with a broken neck, swung gently from side to side beneath the timbers of the Owl Creek bridge.

⁶¹ **Aeolian harps** – *Aeolian harp* is a musical instrument in which sound is produced by the movement of the wind over the strings; in Greek mythology, Aeolus is the god of the winds.

⁶² **delirium** – mental state marked by confused thinking, hallucinations, etc. as a result of the intoxication of the brain caused by fever or some other physical disorder

An Heiress from Redhorse (Ambrose Bierce)

Coronado, June 20th

I find myself more and more interested in him. It is not, I am sure, his – do you know any noun corresponding to the adjective ‘handsome’? One does not like to say ‘beauty’ when speaking of a man. He is handsome enough, heaven knows; I should not even care to trust you with him – faithful of all possible wives that you are – when he looks his best, as he always does. Nor do I think the fascination of his manner has much to do with it. You recollect that the charm of art inheres in that which is indefinable, and to you and me, my dear Irene, I fancy there is rather less of that in the branch of art under consideration than to girls in their first season. I fancy I know how my fine gentleman produces many of his effects, and could, perhaps, give him a pointer on heightening them. Nevertheless, his manner is something truly delightful. I suppose what interests me chiefly is the man’s brains. His conversation is the best I have ever heard, and altogether unlike anyone’s else. He seems to know everything, as, indeed, he ought, for he has been everywhere, read everything, seen all there is to see – sometimes I think rather more than is good for him – and had acquaintance with the QUEEREST people. And then his voice – Irene, when I hear it I actually feel as if I ought to have PAID AT THE DOOR, though, of course, it is my own door.

July 3d

I fear my remarks about Dr. Barritz must have been, being thoughtless, very silly, or you would not have written of him with such levity, not to say disrespect. Believe me, dearest, he has more dignity and seriousness (of the kind, I mean, which is not inconsistent with a manner sometimes playful and always charming) than any of the men that you and I ever met. And young Raynor – you knew Raynor at Monterey⁶³ – tells me that the men all like him, and that he is treated with something like deference everywhere. There is a mystery, too – something about his connection with the Blavatsky people⁶⁴ in Northern India. Raynor either would not or could not tell me the particulars. I infer that Dr. Barritz is thought – don't you dare to laugh at me – a magician! Could anything be finer than that? An ordinary mystery is not, of course, as good as a scandal, but when it relates to dark and dreadful practices – to the exercise of unearthly powers – could anything be more piquant? It explains, too, the singular influence the man has upon me. It is the indefinable in his art – black art. Seriously, dear, I quite tremble when he looks me full in the eyes with those unfathomable orbs of his, which I have already vainly attempted to describe to you. How dreadful if we have the power to make one fall in love! Do you know if the Blavatsky crowd have that power – outside of Sepoy?⁶⁵

⁶³ **Monterey** – a city in California, 135 km south of San Francisco; the first Europeans in the region were the Spanish in 1542.

⁶⁴ **the Blavatsky people** – followers of Helena Blavatsky (1831–1891), an occultist and spiritualist; she founded the Theosophical Society to promote theosophy (divine wisdom), a philosophical-religious system.

⁶⁵ **Sepoy** – 1) a place in India; 2) an Indian soldier in the service of the British India Company.

July 1

The strangest thing! Last evening while Auntie was attending one of the hotel hops (I hate them) Dr. Barritz called. It was scandalously late – I actually believe he had talked with Auntie in the ballroom, and learned from her that I was alone. I had been all the evening contriving how to worm out of him the truth about his connection with the Thugs⁶⁶ in Sepoy, and all of that black business, but the moment he fixed his eyes on me (for I admitted him, I'm ashamed to say) I was helpless, I trembled, I blushed, I – O Irene, Irene, I love the man beyond expression, and you know how it is yourself!

Fancy! I, an ugly duckling from Redhorse – daughter (they say) of old Calamity Jim – certainly his heiress, with no living relation but an absurd old aunt, who spoils me a thousand and fifty ways – absolutely destitute of everything but a million dollars and a hope in Paris – I daring to love a god like him! My dear, if I had you here, I could tear your hair out with mortification.

I am convinced that he is aware of my feeling, for he stayed but a few moments, said nothing but what another man might have said half as well, and pretending that he had an engagement went away. I learned to-day (a little bird told me – the bell bird) that he went straight to bed. How does that strike you as evidence of exemplary habits?

⁶⁶ **the Thugs** – members of the Indian organization of professional assassins who travelled throughout the country for several centuries since 1356

July 17th

That little wretch, Raynor, called yesterday, and his babble set me almost wild. He never runs down – that is to say, when he exterminates a score of reputations, more or less, he does not pause between one reputation and the next. (By the way, he inquired about you, and his manifestations of interest in you had, I confess, a good deal of *vraisemblance*⁶⁷.)

Mr. Raynor observes no game laws; like Death (which he would inflict if slander were fatal) he has all seasons for his own. But I like him, for we knew one another at Redhorse when we were young and true-hearted and barefooted. He was known in those far fair days as ‘Giggles,’ and I – O Irene, can you ever forgive me? – I was called ‘Gunny.’ God knows why; perhaps in allusion to the material of my pinafores; perhaps because the name is in alliteration with ‘Giggles,’ for Gig and I were inseparable playmates, and the miners may have thought it a delicate compliment to recognize some kind of relationship between us.

Later, we took in a third – another of Adversity’s brood, who, like Garrick⁶⁸ between Tragedy and Comedy, had a chronic inability to adjudicate the rival claims (to himself) of Frost and Famine. Between him and the grave there was seldom anything more than a single suspender and the hope of a meal which would at the same time support life and make it insupportable. He literally picked up a precarious living for himself and an aged mother by ‘chloriding the dumps,’ that is to say, the miners permitted him to search the heaps of waste rock for such pieces of “pay ore” as had been overlooked; and these he sacked up and sold at the Syndicate Mill⁶⁹. He became a member of our firm – ‘Gunny, Giggles, and Dumps,’ thenceforth – through my favor; for I could not then, nor can I now, be indifferent to his courage and prowess in defending against Giggles the immemorial right of his sex to insult a strange and unprotected female – myself. After old Jim struck it in the Calamity, and I began to wear shoes and go to school, and in emulation Giggles took to washing his face, and became Jack Raynor, of Wells, Fargo & Co., and old Mrs. Barts was herself chlorided to her fathers, Dumps drifted over to San Juan Smith and turned stage driver, and was killed by road agents, and so forth.

Why do I tell you all this, dear? Because it is heavy on my heart. Because I walk the Valley of Humility. Because I am subduing myself to permanent consciousness of my unworthiness to unloose the latchet of Dr. Barritz’s shoe. Because – oh, dear, oh, dear – there’s a cousin of Dumps at this hotel! I haven’t spoken to him. I never had any acquaintance with him, but – do you suppose he has recognized me? Do, please, give me in your next your candid, sure – enough opinion about it, and say you don’t think so. Do you think He knows about me already and that is why He left me last evening when He saw that I blushed and trembled like a fool under His eyes? You know I can’t bribe ALL the newspapers, and I can’t go back on anybody who was good to Gunny at Redhorse – not if I’m pitched out of society into the sea. So the skeleton sometimes rattles behind the door. I never cared much before, as you know, but now – NOW it is not the same. Jack Raynor I am sure of – he will not tell him. He seems, indeed, to hold him in such respect as hardly to dare speak to him at all, and I’m a good deal that way myself. Dear, dear! I wish I had something besides a million dollars! If Jack were three inches taller I’d marry him alive and go back to Redhorse and wear sackcloth again to the end of my miserable days.

⁶⁷ *vraisemblance* = love of truth (*French*)

⁶⁸ **Garrick** – David Garrick (1717–1779), a famous English actor, producer and dramatist, one of the managers of the Drury Lane Theatre in London

⁶⁹ **the Syndicate Mill** – a mill belonging to the Syndicate, an association of racketeers in control of organized crime in the USA

July 25th

We had a perfectly splendid sunset last evening, and I must tell you all about it. I ran away from Auntie and everybody, and was walking alone on the beach. I expect you to believe, you infidel! that I had not looked out of my window on the seaward side of the hotel and seen him walking alone on the beach. If you are not lost to every feeling of womanly delicacy you will accept my statement without question. I soon established myself under my sunshade and had for some time been gazing out dreamily over the sea, when he approached, walking close to the edge of the water – it was ebb tide. I assure you the wet sand actually brightened about his feet! As he approached me, he lifted his hat, saying: ‘Miss Dement, may I sit with you? – or will you walk with me?’

The possibility that neither might be agreeable seems not to have occurred to him. Did you ever know such assurance? Assurance? My dear, it was gall, downright GALL! Well, I didn’t find it wormwood, and replied, with my untutored Redhorse heart in my throat: ‘I–I shall be pleased to do ANYTHING.’ Could words have been more stupid? There are depths of fatuity in me, friend o’ my soul, which are simply bottomless!

He extended his hand, smiling, and I delivered mine into it without a moment’s hesitation, and when his fingers closed about it to assist me to my feet, the consciousness that it trembled made me blush worse than the red west. I got up, however, and after a while, observing that he had not let go my hand, I pulled on it a little, but unsuccessfully. He simply held on, saying nothing, but looking down into my face with some kind of a smile – I didn’t know – how could I? – whether it was affectionate, derisive, or what, for I did not look at him. How beautiful he was! – with the red fires of the sunset burning in the depths of his eyes. Do you know, dear, if the Thugs and Experts of the Blavatsky region have any special kind of eyes? Ah, you should have seen his superb attitude, the godlike inclination of his head as he stood over me after I had got upon my feet! It was a noble picture, but I soon destroyed it, for I began at once to sink again to the earth. There was only one thing for him to do, and he did it; he supported me with an arm about my waist.

‘Miss Dement, are you ill?’ he said.

It was not an exclamation; there was neither alarm nor solicitude in it. If he had added: ‘I suppose that is about what I am expected to say,’ he would hardly have expressed his sense of the situation more clearly. His manner filled me with shame and indignation, for I was suffering acutely. I wrenched my hand out of his, grasped the arm supporting me, and, pushing myself free, fell plump into the sand and sat helpless. My hat had fallen off in the struggle, and my hair tumbled about my face and shoulders in the most mortifying way.

‘Go away from me,’ I cried, half choking. ‘Oh, PLEASE go away, you – you Thug! How dare you think THAT when my leg is asleep?’

I actually said those identical words! And then I broke down and sobbed. Irene, I BLUBBERED!

His manner altered in an instant – I could see that much through my fingers and hair. He dropped on one knee beside me, parted the tangle of hair, and said, in the tenderest way: ‘My poor girl, God knows I have not intended to pain you. How should I? – I who love you – I who have loved you for – for years and years!’

He had pulled my wet hands away from my face and was covering them with kisses. My cheeks were like two coals, my whole face was flaming and, I think, steaming. What could I do? I hid it on his shoulder – there was no other place. And, oh, my dear friend, how my leg tingled and thrilled, and how I wanted to kick!

We sat so for a long time. He had released one of my hands to pass his arm about me again, and I possessed myself of my handkerchief and was drying my eyes and my nose. I would not look up until that was done; he tried in vain to push me a little away and gaze into my eyes. Presently,

when it was all right, and it had grown a bit dark, I lifted my head, looked him straight in the eyes, and smiled my best – my level best, dear.

‘What do you mean,’ I said, ‘by “years and years”?’

‘Dearest,’ he replied, very gravely, very earnestly, ‘in the absence of the sunken cheeks, the hollow eyes, the lank hair, the slouching gait, the rags, dirt, and youth, can you not – will you not understand? Gunny, I’m Dumps!’

In a moment I was upon my feet and he upon his. I seized him by the lapels of his coat and peered into his handsome face in the deepening darkness. I was breathless with excitement.

‘And you are not dead?’ I asked, hardly knowing what I said.

‘Only dead in love, dear. I recovered from the road agent’s bullet, but this, I fear, is fatal.’

‘But about Jack – Mr. Raynor? Don’t you know—’

‘I am ashamed to say, darling, that it was through that unworthy person’s invitation that I came here from Vienna.’

Irene, they have played it upon your affectionate friend,

MARY JANE DEMENT.

P.S. – The worst of it is that there is no mystery. That was an invention of Jack to arouse my curiosity and interest. James is not a Thug. He solemnly assures me that in all his wanderings he has never set foot in Sepoy.

The Coin of Dionysius (Ernest Bramah)⁷⁰

It was eight o'clock at night and raining, scarcely a time when a business so limited in its clientele as that of a coin dealer could hope to attract any customer, but a light was still showing in the small shop that bore over its window the name of Baxter, and in the even smaller office at the back the proprietor himself sat reading the latest Pall Mall⁷¹. His enterprise seemed to be justified, for presently the door bell gave its announcement, and throwing down his paper Mr. Baxter went forward.

As a matter of fact the dealer had been expecting someone and his manner as he passed into the shop was unmistakably suggestive of a caller of importance. But at the first glance towards his visitor the excess of deference melted out of his bearing, leaving the urbane, self-possessed shopman in the presence of the casual customer.

'Mr. Baxter, I think?' said the latter. He had laid aside his dripping umbrella and was unbuttoning overcoat and coat to reach an inner pocket. 'You hardly remember me, I suppose? Mr. Carlyle – two years ago – I took up a case for you—' The Coin of Dionysius

'To be sure, Mr. Carlyle, the private detective—'

'Inquiry agent,' corrected Mr. Carlyle precisely.

'Well,' smiled Mr. Baxter, 'for that matter I am a coin dealer and not an antiquarian or a numismatist. Is there anything in that way that I can do for you?'

'Yes,' replied his visitor; 'it is my turn to consult you.' He had taken a small wash-leather bag from the inner pocket and now turned something carefully out upon the counter. 'What can you tell me about that?'

The dealer gave the coin a moment's scrutiny.

'There is no question about this,' he replied. 'It is a Sicilian tetradrachm⁷² of Dionysius.'

'Yes, I know that – I have it on the label out of the cabinet. I can tell you further that it's supposed to be one that Lord Seastoke gave two hundred and fifty pounds for at the Brice sale in '94.'

'It seems to me that you can tell me more about it than I can tell you,' remarked Mr. Baxter. 'What is it that you really want to know?'

'I want to know,' replied Mr. Carlyle, 'whether it is genuine or not.'

'Has any doubt been cast upon it?'

'Certain circumstances raised a suspicion – that is all.'

The dealer took another look at the tetradrachm through his magnifying glass, holding it by the edge with the careful touch of an expert. Then he shook his head slowly in a confession of ignorance.

'Of course I could make a guess—'

'No, don't,' interrupted Mr. Carlyle hastily. 'An arrest hangs on it and nothing short of certainty is any good to me.'

'Is that so, Mr. Carlyle?' said Mr. Baxter, with increased interest.

'Well, to be quite candid, the thing is out of my line. Now if it was a rare Saxon penny or a doubtful noble I'd stake my reputation on my opinion, but I do very little in the classical series.'

Mr. Carlyle did not attempt to conceal his disappointment as he returned the coin to the bag and replaced the bag in the inner pocket.

'I had been relying on you,' he grumbled reproachfully. 'Where on earth am I to go now?'

⁷⁰ **Dionysius** (430 BC–367 BC) – a tyrant of Syracuse, an ancient Greek city on the east coast of Sicily

⁷¹ **Pall Mall** – Pall Mall Gazette, a British newspaper, one of the "poppers"

⁷² **tetradrachm** – an ancient Greek coin used for trade with the Scythians and the Celts

‘There is always the British Museum.’

‘Ah, to be sure, thanks. But will anyone who can tell me be there now?’

‘Now? No fear!’ replied Mr. Baxter. ‘Go round in the morning—’

‘But I must know to-night,’ explained the visitor, reduced to despair again. ‘To-morrow will be too late for the purpose.’

Mr. Baxter did not hold out much encouragement in the circumstances.

‘You can scarcely expect to find anyone at business now,’ he remarked. ‘I should have been gone these two hours myself only I happened to have an appointment with an American millionaire who fixed his own time.’ Something indistinguishable from a wink slid off Mr. Baxter’s right eye. ‘Offmunson he’s called, and a bright young pedigree-hunter has traced his descent from Offa⁷³, King of Mercia⁷⁴. So he – quite naturally – wants a set of Offas as a sort of collateral proof.’

‘Very interesting,’ murmured Mr. Carlyle, fidgeting with his watch. ‘I should love an hour’s chat with you about your millionaire customers – some other time. Just now – look here, Baxter, can’t you give me a line of introduction to some dealer in this sort of thing who happens to live in town? You must know dozens of experts.’

‘Why, bless my soul, Mr. Carlyle, I don’t know a man of them away from his business,’ said Mr. Baxter, staring. ‘They may live in Park Lane or they may live in Petticoat Lane for all I know. Besides, there aren’t so many experts as you seem to imagine. And the two best will very likely quarrel over it. You’ve had to do with “expert witnesses,” I suppose?’

‘I don’t want a witness; there will be no need to give evidence. All I want is an absolutely authoritative pronouncement that I can act on. Is there no one who can really say whether the thing is genuine or not?’

Mr. Baxter’s meaning silence became cynical in its implication as he continued to look at his visitor across the counter. Then he relaxed.

‘Stay a bit; there is a man – an amateur – I remember hearing wonderful things about some time ago. They say he really does know.’

‘There you are,’ explained Mr. Carlyle, much relieved. ‘There always is someone. Who is he?’

‘Funny name,’ replied Baxter. ‘Something Wynn or Wynn something.’ He craned his neck to catch sight of an important motor-car that was drawing to the kerb before his window. ‘Wynn Carrados! You’ll excuse me now, Mr. Carlyle, won’t you? This looks like Mr. Offmunson.’

Mr. Carlyle hastily scribbled the name down on his cuff.

‘Wynn Carrados, right. Where does he live?’

‘Haven’t the remotest idea,’ replied Baxter, referring the arrangement of his tie to the judgment of the wall mirror. ‘I have never seen the man myself. Now, Mr. Carlyle, I’m sorry I can’t do any more for you. You won’t mind, will you?’

Mr. Carlyle could not pretend to misunderstand. He enjoyed the distinction of holding open the door for the transatlantic representative of the line of Offa as he went out, and then made his way through the muddy streets back to his office. There was only one way of tracing a private individual at such short notice – through the pages of the directories, and the gentleman did not flatter himself by a very high estimate of his chances.

Fortune favoured him, however. He very soon discovered a Wynn Carrados living at Richmond⁷⁵, and, better still, further search failed to unearth another. There was, apparently, only one householder at all events of that name in the neighbourhood of London. He jotted down the address and set out for Richmond.

⁷³ **Offa** – the king of Mercia (757–796), one of the most powerful kings of Anglo-Saxon England

⁷⁴ **Mercia** – one of the most powerful kingdoms of Anglo-Saxon England in the 7th–9th centuries

⁷⁵ **Richmond** – an outer borough (an incorporate town or district with special privileges) of London, along the River Thames

The house was some distance from the station, Mr. Carlyle learned. He took a taxicab and drove, dismissing the vehicle at the gate. He prided himself on his power of observation and the accuracy of his deductions which resulted from it – a detail of his business. ‘It’s nothing more than using one’s eyes and putting two and two together,’ he would modestly declare, when he wished to be deprecatory rather than impressive. By the time he had reached the front door of ‘The Turrets’ he had formed some opinion of the position and tastes of the people who lived there.

A man-servant admitted Mr. Carlyle and took his card – his private card, with the bare request for an interview that would not detain Mr. Carrados for ten minutes. Luck still favoured him; Mr. Carrados was at home and would see him at once. The servant, the hall through which they passed, and the room into which he was shown, all contributed something to the deductions which the quietly observant gentleman, was half unconsciously recording.

‘Mr. Carlyle,’ announced the servant.

The room was a library or study. The only occupant, a man of about Carlyle’s own age, had been using a typewriter up to the moment of his visitor’s entrance. He now turned and stood up with an expression of formal courtesy.

‘It’s very good of you to see me at this hour,’ apologised Mr. Carlyle.

The conventional expression of Mr. Carrados’s face changed a little.

‘Surely my man has got your name wrong?’ he explained. ‘Isn’t it Louis Calling?’

Mr. Carlyle stopped short and his agreeable smile gave place to a sudden flash of anger or annoyance.

‘No sir,’ he replied stiffly. ‘My name is on the card which you have before you.’

‘I beg your pardon,’ said Mr. Carrados, with perfect good-humour. ‘I hadn’t seen it. But I used to know a Calling some years ago – at St. Michael’s.’

‘St. Michael’s!’ Mr. Carlyle’s features underwent another change, no less instant and sweeping than before. ‘St. Michael’s! Wynn Carrados? Good heavens! it isn’t Max Wynn – old “Winning” Wynn?’

‘A little older and a little fatter – yes,’ replied Carrados. ‘I have changed my name you see.’

‘Extraordinary thing meeting like this,’ said his visitor, dropping into a chair and staring hard at Mr. Carrados. ‘I have changed more than my name. How did you recognize me?’

‘The voice,’ replied Carrados. ‘It took me back to that little smoke-dried attic den of yours where we—’

‘My God!’ exclaimed Carlyle bitterly, ‘don’t remind me of what we were going to do in those days.’ He looked round the well-furnished, handsome room and recalled the other signs of wealth that he had noticed. ‘At all events, you seem fairly comfortable, Wynn.’

‘I am alternately envied and pitied,’ replied Carrados, with a placid tolerance of circumstance that seemed characteristic of him. ‘Still, as you say, I am fairly comfortable.’

‘Envied, I can understand. But why are you pitied?’

‘Because I am blind,’ was the tranquil reply.

‘Blind!’ exclaimed Mr. Carlyle, using his own eyes superlatively. ‘Do you mean – literally blind?’

‘Literally... I was riding along a bridle-path through a wood about a dozen years ago with a friend. He was in front. At one point a twig sprang back – you know how easily a thing like that happens. It just flicked my eye – nothing to think twice about.’

‘And that blinded you?’

‘Yes, ultimately. It’s called amaurosis.’

‘I can scarcely believe it. You seem so sure and self-reliant. Your eyes are full of expression – only a little quieter than they used to be. I believe you were typing when I came... Aren’t you having me?’

‘You miss the dog and the stick?’ smiled Carrados. ‘No; it’s a fact.’

‘What an awful affliction for you, Max. You were always such an impulsive, reckless sort of fellow – never quiet. You must miss such a fearful lot.’

‘Has anyone else recognized you?’ asked Carrados quietly.

‘Ah, that was the voice, you said,’ replied Carlyle.

‘Yes; but other people heard the voice as well. Only I had no blundering, self-confident eyes to be hoodwinked.’

‘That’s a rum way of putting it,’ said Carlyle. ‘Are your ears never hoodwinked, may I ask?’

‘Not now. Nor my fingers. Nor any of my other senses that have to look out for themselves.’

‘Well, well,’ murmured Mr. Carlyle, cut short in his sympathetic emotions. ‘I’m glad you take it so well. Of course, if you find it an advantage to be blind, old man—’ He stopped and reddened. ‘I beg your pardon,’ he concluded stiffly.

‘Not an advantage, perhaps,’ replied the other thoughtfully. ‘Still it has compensations that one might not think of. A new world to explore, new experiences, new powers awakening; strange new perceptions; life in the fourth dimension. But why do you beg my pardon, Louis?’

‘I am an ex-solicitor, struck off in connexion with the falsifying of a trust account, Mr. Carrados,’ replied Carlyle, rising.

‘Sit down, Louis,’ said Carrados suavely. His face, even his incredibly living eyes, beamed placid good-nature. ‘The chair on which you will sit, the roof above you, all the comfortable surroundings to which you have so amiably alluded, are the direct result of falsifying a trust account. But do I call you “Mr. Carlyle” in consequence? Certainly not, Louis.’

‘I did not falsify the account,’ cried Carlyle hotly. He sat down however, and added more quietly: ‘But why do I tell you all this? I have never spoken of it before.’

‘Blindness invites confidence,’ replied Carrados. ‘We are out of the running – human rivalry ceases to exist. Besides, why shouldn’t you? In my case the account *was* falsified.’

‘Of course that’s all bunkum, Max’ commented Carlyle. ‘Still, I appreciate your motive.’

‘Practically everything I possess was left to me by an American cousin, on the condition that I took the name of Carrados. He made his fortune by an ingenious conspiracy of doctoring the crop reports and unloading favourably in consequence. And I need hardly remind you that the receiver is equally guilty with the thief.’

‘But twice as safe. I know something of that, Max... Have you any idea what my business is?’

‘You shall tell me,’ replied Carrados.

‘I run a private inquiry agency. When I lost my profession I had to do something for a living. This occurred. I dropped my name, changed my appearance and opened an office. I knew the legal side down to the ground and I got a retired Scotland Yard man to organize the outside work.’

‘Excellent!’ cried Carrados. ‘Do you unearth many murders?’

‘No,’ admitted Mr. Carlyle; ‘our business lies mostly on the conventional lines among divorce and defalcation.’

‘That’s a pity,’ remarked Carrados. ‘Do you know, Louis, I always had a secret ambition to be a detective myself. I have even thought lately that I might still be able to do something at it if the chance came my way. That makes you smile?’

‘Well, certainly, the idea—’

‘Yes, the idea of a blind detective – the blind tracking the alert—’

‘Of course, as you say, certain facilities are no doubt quickened,’ Mr. Carlyle hastened to add considerably, ‘but, seriously, with the exception of an artist, I don’t suppose there is any man who is more utterly dependent on his eyes.’

Whatever opinion Carrados might have held privately, his genial exterior did not betray a shadow of dissent. For a full minute he continued to smoke as though he derived an actual visual enjoyment from the blue sprays that travelled and dispersed across the room. He had already placed before his visitor a box containing cigars of a brand which that gentleman keenly appreciated but

generally regarded as unattainable, and the matter-of-fact ease and certainty with which the blind man had brought the box and put it before him had sent a questioning flicker through Carlyle's mind.

'You used to be rather fond of art yourself, Louis,' he remarked presently. 'Give me your opinion of my latest purchase – the bronze lion on the cabinet there.' Then, as Carlyle's gaze went about the room, he added quickly: 'No, not that cabinet – the one on your left.'

Carlyle shot a sharp glance at his host as he got up, but Carrados's expression was merely benignly complacent. Then he strolled across to the figure.

'Very nice,' he admitted. 'Late Flemish, isn't it?'

'No, It is a copy of Vidal's "Roaring Lion."'

'Vidal?'

'A French artist.' The voice became indescribably flat. 'He, also, had the misfortune to be blind, by the way.'

'You old humbug, Max!' shrieked Carlyle, 'you've been thinking that out for the last five minutes.' Then the unfortunate man bit his lip and turned his back towards his host.

'Do you remember how we used to pile it up on that obtuse ass Sanders, and then roast him?' asked Carrados, ignoring the half-smothered exclamation with which the other man had recalled himself.

'Yes,' replied Carlyle quietly. 'This is very good,' he continued, addressing himself to the bronze again. 'How ever did he do it?'

'With his hands.'

'Naturally. But, I mean, how did he study his model?'

'Also with his hands. He called it 'seeing near.''

'Even with a lion – handled it?'

'In such cases he required the services of a keeper, who brought the animal to bay while Vidal exercised his own particular gifts... You don't feel inclined to put me on the track of a mystery, Louis?'

Unable to regard this request as anything but one of old Max's unquenchable pleasantries, Mr. Carlyle was on the point of making a suitable reply when a sudden thought caused him to smile knowingly. Up to that point, he had, indeed, completely forgotten the object of his visit. Now that he remembered the doubtful Dionysius and Baxter's recommendation he immediately assumed that some mistake had been made. Either Max was not the Wynn Carrados he had been seeking or else the dealer had been misinformed; for although his host was wonderfully expert in the face of his misfortune, it was inconceivable that he could decide the genuineness of a coin without seeing it. The opportunity seemed a good one of getting even with Carrados by taking him at his word.

'Yes,' he accordingly replied, with crisp deliberation, as he re-crossed the room; 'yes, I will, Max. Here is the clue to what seems to be a rather remarkable fraud.' He put the tetradrachm into his host's hand. 'What do you make of it?'

For a few seconds Carrados handled the piece with the delicate manipulation of his fingertips while Carlyle looked on with a self-appreciative grin. Then with equal gravity the blind man weighed the coin in the balance of his hand. Finally he touched it with his tongue.

'Well?' demanded the other.

'Of course I have not much to go on, and if I was more fully in your confidence I might come to another conclusion—'

'Yes, yes,' interposed Carlyle, with amused encouragement.

‘Then I should advise you to arrest the parlourmaid, Nina Brun, communicate with the police authorities of Padua⁷⁶ for particulars of the career of Helene Brunesi, and suggest to Lord Seastoke that he should return to London to see what further depredations have been made in his cabinet.’

Mr. Carlyle’s groping hand sought and found a chair, on to which he dropped blankly. His eyes were unable to detach themselves for a single moment from the very ordinary spectacle of Mr. Carrados’s mildly benevolent face, while the sterilized ghost of his now forgotten amusement still lingered about his features.

‘Good heavens!’ he managed to articulate, ‘how do you know?’

‘Isn’t that what you wanted of me?’ asked Carrados suavely.

‘Don’t humbug, Max,’ said Carlyle severely. ‘This is no joke.’ An undefined mistrust of his own powers suddenly possessed him in the presence of this mystery. ‘How do you come to know of Nina Brun and Lord Seastoke?’

‘You are a detective, Louis,’ replied Carrados. ‘How does one know these things? By using one’s eyes and putting two and two together.’

Carlyle groaned and flung out an arm petulantly.

‘Is it all bunkum, Max? Do you really see all the time – though that doesn’t go very far towards explaining it.’

‘Like Vidal, I see very well – at close quarters,’ replied Carrados, lightly running a forefinger along the inscription on the tetradrachm. ‘For longer range I keep another pair of eyes. Would you like to test them?’

Mr. Carlyle’s assent was not very gracious; it was, in fact, faintly sulky. He was suffering the annoyance of feeling distinctly unimpressive in his own department; but he was also curious.

‘The bell is just behind you, if you don’t mind,’ said his host. ‘Parkinson will appear. You might take note of him while he is in.’

The man who had admitted Mr. Carlyle proved to be Parkinson.

‘This gentleman is Mr. Carlyle, Parkinson,’ explained Carrados the moment the man entered. ‘You will remember him for the future?’

Parkinson’s apologetic eye swept the visitor from head to foot, but so lightly and swiftly that it conveyed to that gentleman the comparison of being very deftly dusted.

‘I will endeavour to do so, sir,’ replied Parkinson, turning again to his master.

‘I shall be at home to Mr. Carlyle whenever he calls. That is all.’

‘Very well, sir.’

‘Now, Louis,’ remarked Mr. Carrados briskly, when the door had closed again, ‘you have had a good opportunity of studying Parkinson. What is he like?’

‘In what way?’

‘I mean as a matter of description. I am a blind man – I haven’t seen my servant for twelve years – what idea can you give me of him? I asked you to notice.’

‘I know you did, but your Parkinson is the sort of man who has very little about him to describe. He is the embodiment of the ordinary. His height is about average—’

‘Five feet nine,’ murmured Carrados. ‘Slightly above the mean.’

‘Scarcely noticeably so. Clean-shaven. Medium brown hair. No particularly marked features. Dark eyes. Good teeth.’

‘False,’ interposed Carrados. ‘The teeth – not the statement.’

‘Possibly,’ admitted Mr. Carlyle. ‘I am not a dental expert and I had no opportunity of examining Mr. Parkinson’s mouth in detail. But what is the drift of all this?’

‘His clothes?’

‘Oh, just the ordinary evening dress of a valet. There is not much room for variety in that.’

⁷⁶ **Padua** – a city in northern Italy, west of Venice, first mentioned in 302 BC

‘You noticed, in fact, nothing special by which Parkinson could be identified?’

‘Well, he wore an unusually broad gold ring on the little finger of the left hand.’

‘But that is removable. And yet Parkinson has an ineradicable mole – a small one, I admit – on his chin. And you a human sleuth-hound. Oh, Louis!’

‘At all events,’ retorted Carlyle, writhing a little under this good-humoured satire, although it was easy enough to see in it Carrados’s affectionate intention – ‘at all events, I dare say I can give as good a description of Parkinson as he can give of me.’

‘That is what we are going to test. Ring the bell again.’

‘Seriously?’

‘Quite. I am trying my eyes against yours. If I can’t give you fifty out of a hundred I’ll renounce my private detectorial ambition forever.’

‘It isn’t quite the same,’ objected Carlyle, but he rang the bell.

‘Come in and close the door, Parkinson,’ said Carrados when the man appeared. ‘Don’t look at Mr. Carlyle again – in fact, you had better stand with your back towards him, he won’t mind. Now describe to me his appearance as you observed it.’

Parkinson tendered his respectful apologies to Mr. Carlyle for the liberty he was compelled to take, by the deferential quality of his voice.

‘Mr. Carlyle, sir, wears patent leather boots of about size seven and very little used. There are five buttons, but on the left boot one button – the third up – is missing, leaving loose threads and not the more usual metal fastener. Mr. Carlyle’s trousers, sir, are of a dark material, a dark grey line of about a quarter of an inch width on a darker ground. The bottoms are turned permanently up and are, just now, a little muddy, if I may say so.’

‘Very muddy,’ interposed Mr. Carlyle generously. ‘It is a wet night, Parkinson.’

‘Yes, sir; very unpleasant weather. If you will allow me, sir, I will brush you in the hall. The mud is dry now, I notice. Then, sir,’ continued Parkinson, reverting to the business in hand, ‘there are dark green cashmere hose. A curb-pattern key-chain passes into the left-hand trouser pocket.’

From the visitor’s nether garments the photographic-eyed Parkinson proceeded to higher ground, and with increasing wonder Mr. Carlyle listened to the faithful catalogue of his possessions. His fetter-and-link albert of gold and platinum was minutely described. His spotted blue ascot, with its gentlemanly pearl scarf pin, was set forth, and the fact that the buttonhole in the left lapel of his morning coat showed signs of use was duly noted. What Parkinson saw he recorded, but he made no deductions. A handkerchief carried in the cuff of the right sleeve was simply that to him and not an indication that Mr. Carlyle was, indeed, left-handed.

But a more delicate part of Parkinson’s undertaking remained. He approached it with a double cough.

‘As regards Mr. Carlyle’s personal appearance, sir—’

‘No, enough!’ cried the gentleman concerned hastily. ‘I am more than satisfied. You are a keen observer, Parkinson.’

‘I have trained myself to suit my master’s requirements, sir,’ replied the man. He looked towards Mr. Carrados, received a nod and withdrew.

Mr. Carlyle was the first to speak.

‘That man of yours would be worth five pounds a week to me, Max,’ he remarked thoughtfully. ‘But, of course—’

‘I don’t think that he would take it,’ replied Carrados, in a voice of equally detached speculation. ‘He suits me very well. But you have the chance of using his services – indirectly.’

‘You still mean that – seriously?’

‘I notice in you a chronic disinclination to take me seriously, Louis. It is really – to an Englishman – almost painful. Is there something inherently comic about me or the atmosphere of The Turrets?’

‘No, my friend,’ replied Mr. Carlyle, ‘but there is something essentially prosperous. That is what points to the improbable. Now what is it?’

‘It might be merely a whim, but it is more than that,’ replied Carrados. ‘It is, well, partly vanity, partly ennui, partly’ – certainly there was something more nearly tragic in his voice than comic now – ‘partly hope.’

Mr. Carlyle was too tactful to pursue the subject.

‘Those are three tolerable motives,’ he acquiesced. ‘I’ll do anything you want, Max, on one condition.’

‘Agreed. And it is?’

‘That you tell me how you knew so much of this affair.’ He tapped the silver coin which lay on the table near them. ‘I am not easily flabbergasted,’ he added.

‘You won’t believe that there is nothing to explain – that it was purely second-sight?’

‘No,’ replied Carlyle tersely: ‘I won’t.’

‘You are quite right. And yet the thing is very simple.’

‘They always are – when you know,’ soliloquised the other. ‘That’s what makes them so confoundedly difficult when you don’t.’

‘Here is this one then. In Padua, which seems to be regaining its old reputation as the birthplace of spurious antiques, by the way, there lives an ingenious craftsman named Pietro Stelli. This simple soul, who possesses a talent not inferior to that of Cavino at his best, has for many years turned his hand to the not unprofitable occupation of forging rare Greek and Roman coins. As a collector and student of certain Greek colonials and a specialist in forgeries I have been familiar with Stelli’s workmanship for years. Latterly he seems to have come under the influence of an international crook called – at the moment – Dompierre, who soon saw a way of utilizing Stelli’s genius on a royal scale. Helene Brunesi, who in private life is – and really is, I believe – Madame Dompierre, readily lent her services to the enterprise.’

‘Quite so,’ nodded Mr. Carlyle, as his host paused.

‘You see the whole sequence, of course?’

‘Not exactly – not in detail,’ confessed Mr. Carlyle.

‘Dompierre’s idea was to gain access to some of the most celebrated cabinets of Europe and substitute Stelli’s fabrications for the genuine coins. The princely collection of rarities that he would thus amass might be difficult to dispose of safely, but I have no doubt that he had matured his plans. Helene, in the person of Nina Brun, an Anglicised French parlourmaid – a part which she fills to perfection – was to obtain wax impressions of the most valuable pieces and to make the exchange when the counterfeits reached her. In this way it was obviously hoped that the fraud would not come to light until long after the real coins had been sold, and I gather that she has already done her work successfully in general houses. Then, impressed by her excellent references and capable manner, my housekeeper engaged her, and for a few weeks she went about her duties here. It was fatal to this detail of the scheme, however, that I have the misfortune to be blind. I am told that Helene has so innocently angelic a face as to disarm suspicion, but I was incapable of being impressed and that good material was thrown away. But one morning my material fingers – which, of course, knew nothing of Helene’s angelic face – discovered an unfamiliar touch about the surface of my favourite Euclidean⁷⁷, and, although there was doubtless nothing to be seen, my critical sense of smell reported that wax had been recently pressed against it. I began to make discreet inquiries and in the meantime my cabinets went to the local bank for safety. Helene countered by receiving a telegram from Angiers, calling her to the death-bed of her aged mother. The aged mother succumbed; duty compelled Helene to remain at the side of her stricken patriarchal father, and doubtless The Turrets was written off the syndicate’s operations as a bad debt.’

⁷⁷ **Euclidean** – here: one of ancient Greek coins

‘Very interesting,’ admitted Mr. Carlyle; ‘but at the risk of seeming obtuse’ – his manner had become delicately chastened – ‘I must say that I fail to trace the inevitable connexion between Nina Brun and this particular forgery – assuming that it is a forgery.’

‘Set your mind at rest about that, Louis,’ replied Carrados. ‘It is a forgery, and it is a forgery that none but Pietro Stelli could have achieved. That is the essential connexion. Of course, there are accessories. A private detective coming urgently to see me with a notable tetradrachm in his pocket, which he announces to be the clue to a remarkable fraud – well, really, Louis, one scarcely needs to be blind to see through that.’

‘And Lord Seastoke? I suppose you happened to discover that Nina Brun had gone there?’

‘No, I cannot claim to have discovered that, or I should certainly have warned him at once when I found out – only recently – about the gang. As a matter of fact, the last information I had of Lord Seastoke was a line in yesterday’s *Morning Post* to the effect that he was still at Cairo. But many of these pieces—’ He brushed his finger almost lovingly across the vivid chariot race that embellished the reverse of the coin, and broke off to remark: ‘You really ought to take up the subject, Louis. You have no idea how useful it might prove to you some day.’

‘I really think I must,’ replied Carlyle grimly. ‘Two hundred and fifty pounds the original of this cost, I believe.’

‘Cheap, too; it would make five hundred pounds in New York to-day. As I was saying, many are literally unique. This gem by Kimon is – here is his signature, you see; Peter is particularly good at lettering – and as I handled the genuine tetradrachm about two years ago, when Lord Seastoke exhibited it at a meeting of our society in Albemarle Street, there is nothing at all wonderful in my being able to fix the locale of your mystery. Indeed, I feel that I ought to apologize for it all being so simple.’

‘I think,’ remarked Mr. Carlyle, critically examining the loose threads on his left boot, ‘that the apology on that head would be more appropriate from me.’

Aunt Jane's Album (Eliza Calvert Hall)

They were a bizarre mass of color on the sweet spring landscape, those patchwork quilts, swaying in a long line under the elms and maples. The old orchard made a blossoming background for them, and farther off on the horizon rose the beauty of fresh verdure and purple mist on those low hills, or 'knobs', that are to the heart of the Kentuckian⁷⁸ as the Alps to the Swiss or the sea to the sailor.

I opened the gate softly and paused for a moment between the blossoming lilacs that grew on each side of the path. The fragrance of the white and the purple blooms was like a resurrection-call over the graves of many a dead spring; and as I stood, shaken with thoughts as the flowers are with the winds, Aunt Jane came around from the back of the house, her black silk cape fluttering from her shoulders, and a calico sunbonnet hiding her features in its cavernous depth. She walked briskly to the clothes-line and began patting and smoothing the quilts where the breeze had disarranged them.

'Aunt Jane,' I called out, 'are you having a fair all by yourself?'

She turned quickly, pushing back the sunbonnet from her eyes.

'Why, child,' she said, with a happy laugh, 'you come pretty nigh skeerin' me. No, I ain't havin' any fair; I'm jest givin' my quilts their spring airin'. Twice a year I put 'em out in the sun and wind; and this mornin' the air smelt so sweet, I thought it was a good chance to freshen 'em up for the summer. It's about time to take 'em in now.'

She began to fold the quilts and lay them over her arm, and I did the same. Back and forth we went from the clothes-line to the house, and from the house to the clothes-line, until the quilts were safely housed from the coming dewfall and piled on every available chair in the front room. I looked at them in sheer amazement. There seemed to be every pattern that the ingenuity of woman could devise and the industry of woman put together, – 'four-patches,' 'nine-patches,' 'log-cabins,' 'wild-geese chases,' 'rising suns,' hexagons, diamonds, and only Aunt Jane knows what else. As for color, a Sandwich Islander⁷⁹ would have danced with joy at the sight of those reds, purples, yellows, and greens.

'Did you really make all these quilts, Aunt Jane?' I asked wonderingly.

Aunt Jane's eyes sparkled with pride.

'Every stitch of 'em, child,' she said, 'except the quiltin'. The neighbors used to come in and help some with that. I've heard folks say that piecin' quilts was nothin' but a waste o' time, but that ain't always so. They used to say that Sarah Jane Mitchell would set down right after breakfast and piece till it was time to git dinner, and then set and piece till she had to git supper, and then piece by candle-light till she fell asleep in her cheer.

'I ricollect goin' over there one day, and Sarah Jane was gittin' dinner in a big hurry, for Sam had to go to town with some cattle, and there was a big basket o' quilt pieces in the middle o' the kitchen floor, and the house lookin' like a pigpen, and the children runnin' around half naked. And Sam he laughed, and says he, "Aunt Jane, if we could wear quilts and eat quilts we'd be the richest people in the country." Sam was the best-natured man that ever was, or he couldn't 'a' put up with Sarah Jane's shiftless ways. Hannah Crawford said she sent Sarah Jane a bundle o' caliker once by Sam, and Sam always declared he lost it. But Uncle Jim Matthews said he was ridin' along the road jest behind Sam, and he saw Sam throw it into the creek jest as he got on the bridge. I never blamed Sam a bit if he did.

⁷⁸ **Kentuckian** – a resident of Kentucky, the US state in the south (102 694 sq. km)

⁷⁹ **a Sandwich Islander** – a resident of the Sandwich Islands, the second name of the Hawaiian Islands, a group of the volcanic islands in the Pacific Ocean; the first European who visited the islands in 1778 was Captain James Cook (1728–1779).

‘But there never was any time wasted on my quilts, child. I can look at every one of ‘em with a clear conscience. I did my work faithful; and then, when I might ‘a’ set and held my hands, I’d make a block or two o’ patchwork, and before long I’d have enough to put together in a quilt. I went to piecin’ as soon as I was old enough to hold a needle and a piece o’ cloth, and one o’ the first things I can remember was settin’ on the back door-step sewin’ my quilt pieces, and mother praisin’ my stitches. Nowadays folks don’t have to sew unless they want to, but when I was a child there warn’t any sewin’-machines, and it was about as needful for folks to know how to sew as it was for ‘em to know how to eat; and every child that was well raised could hem and run and backstitch and gether and overhand by the time she was nine years old. Why, I’d pieced four quilts by the time I was nineteen years old, and when me and Abram set up housekeepin’ I had bedclothes enough for three beds.

‘I’ve had a heap o’ comfort all my life makin’ quilts, and now in my old age I wouldn’t take a fortune for ‘em. Set down here, child, where you can see out o’ the winder and smell the lilacs, and we’ll look at ‘em all. You see, some folks has albums to put folks’ pictures in to remember ‘em by, and some folks has a book and writes down the things that happen every day so they won’t forgit ‘em; but, honey, these quilts is my albums and my di’ries, and whenever the weather’s bad and I can’t git out to see folks, I jest spread out my quilts and look at ‘em and study over ‘em, and it’s jest like goin’ back fifty or sixty years and livin’ my life over agin.

‘There ain’t nothin’ like a piece o’ caliker for bringin’ back old times, child, unless it’s a flower or a bunch o’ thyme or a piece o’ pennyroy’l – anything that smells sweet. Why, I can go out yonder in the yard and gether a bunch o’ that purple lilac and jest shut my eyes and see faces I ain’t seen for fifty years, and somethin’ goes through me like a flash o’ lightnin’, and it seems like I’m young agin jest for that minute.’

Aunt Jane’s hands were stroking lovingly a ‘nine-patch’ that resembled the coat of many colors.

‘Now this quilt, honey,’ she said, ‘I made out o’ the pieces o’ my children’s clothes, their little dresses and waists and aprons. Some of ‘em’s dead, and some of ‘em’s grown and married and a long way off from me, further off than the ones that’s dead, I sometimes think. But when I set down and look at this quilt and think over the pieces, it seems like they all come back, and I can see ‘em playin’ around the floors and goin’ in and out, and hear ‘em cryin’ and laughin’ and callin’ me jest like they used to do before they grew up to men and women, and before there was any little graves o’ mine out in the old buryin’-ground over yonder.’

Wonderful imagination of motherhood that can bring childhood back from the dust of the grave and banish the wrinkles and gray hairs of age with no other talisman than a scrap of faded calico!

The old woman’s hands were moving tremulously over the surface of the quilt as if they touched the golden curls of the little dream children who had vanished from her hearth so many years ago. But there were no tears either in her eyes or in her voice. I had long noticed that Aunt Jane always smiled when she spoke of the people whom the world calls ‘dead,’ or the things it calls ‘lost’ or ‘past.’ These words seemed to have for her higher and tenderer meanings than are placed on them by the sorrowful heart of humanity.

But the moments were passing, and one could not dwell too long on any quilt, however well beloved. Aunt Jane rose briskly, folded up the one that lay across her knees, and whisked out another from the huge pile in an old splint-bottomed chair.

‘Here’s a piece o’ one o’ Sally Ann’s purple caliker dresses. Sally Ann always thought a heap o’ purple caliker. Here’s one o’ Milly Amos’ gingham – that pink-and-white one. And that piece o’ white with the rosebuds in it, that’s Miss Penelope’s. She give it to me the summer before she died. Bless her soul! That dress jest matched her face exactly. Somehow her and her clothes always looked alike, and her voice matched her face, too. One o’ the things I’m lookin’ forward to, child,

is seein' Miss Penelope agin and hearin' her sing. Voices and faces is alike; there's some that you can't remember, and there's some you can't forgit. I've seen a heap o' people and heard a heap o' voices, but Miss Penelope's face was different from all the rest, and so was her voice. Why, if she said "Good morning" to you, you'd hear that "Good mornin'" all day, and her singin' – I know there never was anything like it in this world. My grandchildren all laugh at me for thinkin' so much o' Miss Penelope's singin', but then they never heard her, and I have: that's the difference. My grandchild Henrietta was down here three or four years ago, and says she, "Grandma, don't you want to go up to Louisville with me and hear Patti sing?" And says I, "Patty who, child?" Says I, "If it was to hear Miss Penelope sing, I'd carry these old bones o' mine clear from here to New York. But there ain't anybody else I want to hear sing bad enough to go up to Louisville or anywhere else. And some o' these days," says I, "*I'm goin' to hear Miss Penelope sing.*"

Aunt Jane laughed blithely, and it was impossible not to laugh with her.

'Honey,' she said, in the next breath, lowering her voice and laying her finger on the rosebud piece, 'honey, there's one thing I can't git over. Here's a piece o' Miss Penelope's dress, but *where's Miss Penelope?* Ain't it strange that a piece o' caliker'll outlast you and me? Don't it look like folks ought 'o hold on to their bodies as long as other folks holds on to a piece o' the dresses they used to wear?'

Questions as old as the human heart and its human grief! Here is the glove, but where is the hand it held but yesterday? Here the jewel that she wore, but where is she?

'Where is the Pompadour⁸⁰ now?

This was the Pompadour's fan!

Strange, that such things as gloves, jewels, fans, and dresses can outlast a woman's form.

'Behold! I show you a mystery' – the mystery of mortality. And an eery feeling came over me as I entered into the old woman's mood and thought of the strong, vital bodies that had clothed themselves in those fabrics of purple and pink and white, and that now were dust and ashes lying in sad, neglected graves on farm and lonely roadside. There lay the quilt on our knees, and the gay scraps of calico seemed to mock us with their vivid colors. Aunt Jane's cheerful voice called me back from the tombs.

'Here's a piece o' one o' my dresses,' she said; 'brown ground with a red ring in it. Abram picked it out. And here's another one, that light yellor ground with the vine runnin' through it. I never had so many caliker dresses that I didn't want one more, for in my day folks used to think a caliker dress was good enough to wear anywhere. Abram knew my failin', and two or three times a year he'd bring me a dress when he come from town. And the dresses he'd pick out always suited me better'n the ones I picked.'

'I ricollect I finished this quilt the summer before Mary Frances was born, and Sally Ann and Milly Amos and Maria Petty come over and give me a lift on the quiltin'. Here's Milly's work, here's Sally Ann's, and here's Maria's.'

I looked, but my inexperienced eye could see no difference in the handiwork of the three women. Aunt Jane saw my look of incredulity.

'Now, child,' she said, earnestly, 'you think I'm foolin' you, but, la! there's jest as much difference in folks' sewin' as there is in their handwritin'. Milly made a fine stitch, but she couldn't keep on the line to save her life; Maria never could make a reg'lar stitch, some'd be long and some short, and Sally Ann's was reg'lar, but all of 'em coarse. I can see 'em now stoopin' over the quiltin' frames – Milly talkin' as hard as she sewed, Sally Ann throwin' in a word now and then, and Maria never openin' her mouth except to ask for the thread or the chalk. I ricollect they come

⁸⁰ **Pompadour** – Marquise de Pompadour (1721–1764), the mistress of Louis XV, king of France; she was a well-educated woman and a patron of art and literature.

over after dinner, and we got the quilt out o' the frames long before sundown, and the next day I begun bindin' it, and I got the premium on it that year at the Fair.

'I hardly ever showed a quilt at the Fair that I didn't take the premium, but here's one quilt that Sarah Jane Mitchell beat me on.'

And Aunt Jane dragged out a ponderous, red-lined affair, the very antithesis of the silken, down-filled comfortable that rests so lightly on the couch of the modern dame.

'It makes me laugh jest to think o' that time, and how happy Sarah Jane was. It was way back yonder in the fifties. I ricollect we had a mighty fine Fair that year. The crops was all fine that season, and such apples and pears and grapes you never did see. The Floral Hall was full o' things, and the whole county turned out to go to the Fair. Abram and me got there the first day bright and early, and we was walkin' around the amp'itheater and lookin' at the townfolks and the sights, and we met Sally Ann. She stopped us, and says she, "Sarah Jane Mitchell's got a quilt in the Floral Hall in competition with yours and Milly Amos". Says I, "Is that all the competition there is?" And Sally Ann says, "All that amounts to anything. There's one more, but it's about as bad a piece o' sewin' as Sarah Jane's, and that looks like it'd hardly hold together till the Fair's over. And," says she, "I don't believe there'll be any more. It looks like this was an off year on that particular kind o' quilt. I didn't get mine done," says she, "and neither did Maria Petty, and maybe it's a good thing after all."

'Well, I saw in a minute what Sally Ann was aimin' at. And I says to Abram, "Abram, haven't you got somethin' to do with app'intin' the judges for the women's things?" And he says, "Yes." And I says, "Well, you see to it that Sally Ann gits app'inted to help judge the caliker quilts." And bless your soul, Abram got me and Sally Ann both app'inted. The other judge was Mis' Doctor Brigham, one o' the town ladies. We told her all about what we wanted to do, and she jest laughed and says, "Well, if that ain't the kindest, nicest thing! Of course we'll do it."

'Seein' that I had a quilt there, I hadn't a bit o' business bein' a judge; but the first thing I did was to fold my quilt up and hide it under Maria Petty's big worsted quilt, and then we pinned the blue ribbon on Sarah Jane's and the red on Milly's. I'd fixed it all up with Milly, and she was jest as willin' as I was for Sarah Jane to have the premium. There was jest one thing I was afraid of: Milly was a good-hearted woman, but she never had much control over her tongue. And I says to her, says I: "Milly, it's mighty good of you to give up your chance for the premium, but if Sarah Jane ever finds it out, that'll spoil everything. For," says I, "there ain't any kindness in doin' a person a favor and then tellin' everybody about it." And Milly laughed, and says she: "I know what you mean, Aunt Jane. It's mighty hard for me to keep from tellin' everything I know and some things I don't know, but," says she, "I'm never goin' to tell this, even to Sam." And she kept her word, too. Every once in a while she'd come up to me and whisper, "I ain't told it yet, Aunt Jane," jest to see me laugh.

'As soon as the doors was open, after we'd all got through judgin' and puttin' on the ribbons, Milly went and hunted Sarah Jane up and told her that her quilt had the blue ribbon. They said the pore thing like to 'a' fainted for joy. She turned right white, and had to lean up against the post for a while before she could git to the Floral Hall. I never shall forgit her face. It was worth a dozen premiums to me, and Milly, too. She jest stood lookin' at that quilt and the blue ribbon on it, and her eyes was full o' tears and her lips quiverin', and then she started off and brought the children in to look at "Mammy's quilt." She met Sam on the way out, and says she: "Sam, what do you reckon? My quilt took the premium." And I believe in my soul Sam was as much pleased as Sarah Jane. He came saunterin' up, tryin' to look unconcerned, but anybody could see he was mighty well satisfied. It does a husband and wife a heap o' good to be proud of each other, and I reckon that was the first time Sam ever had cause to be proud o' pore Sarah Jane. It's my belief that he thought more o' Sarah Jane all the rest o' her life jest on account o' that premium. Me and Sally Ann helped her pick it out. She had her choice betwixt a butter-dish and a cup, and she took the cup.

Folks used to laugh and say that that cup was the only thing in Sarah Jane's house that was kept clean and bright, and if it hadn't 'a' been solid silver, she'd 'a' wore it all out rubbin' it up. Sarah Jane died o' pneumonia about three or four years after that, and the folks that nursed her said she wouldn't take a drink o' water or a dose o' medicine out o' any cup but that. There's some folks, child, that don't have to do anything but walk along and hold out their hands, and the premiums jest naturally fall into 'em; and there's others that work and strive the best they know how, and nothin' ever seems to come to 'em; and I reckon nobody but the Lord and Sarah Jane knows how much happiness she got out o' that cup. I'm thankful she had that much pleasure before she died.'

There was a quilt hanging over the foot of the bed that had about it a certain air of distinction. It was a solid mass of patchwork, composed of squares, parallelograms, and hexagons. The squares were of dark gray and red-brown, the hexagons were white, the parallelograms black and light gray. I felt sure that it had a history that set it apart from its ordinary fellows.

'Where did you get the pattern, Aunt Jane?' I asked. 'I never saw anything like it.'

The old lady's eyes sparkled, and she laughed with pure pleasure.

'That's what everybody says,' she exclaimed, jumping up and spreading the favored quilt over two laden chairs, where its merits became more apparent and striking. 'There ain't another quilt like this in the State o' Kentucky, or the world, for that matter. My granddaughter Henrietta, Mary Frances' youngest child, brought me this pattern *from Europe*.'

She spoke the words as one might say, 'from Paradise,' or 'from Olympus⁸¹,' or 'from the Lost Atlantis⁸².' 'Europe' was evidently a name to conjure with, a country of mystery and romance unspeakable. I had seen many things from many lands beyond the sea, but a quilt pattern from Europe! Here at last was something new under the sun. In what shop of London or Paris were quilt patterns kept on sale for the American tourist?

'You see,' said Aunt Jane, 'Henrietta married a mighty rich man, and jest as good as he's rich, too, and they went to Europe on their bridal trip. When she come home she brought me the prettiest shawl you ever saw. She made me stand up and shut my eyes, and she put it on my shoulders and made me look in the lookin'-glass, and then she says, "I brought you a new quilt pattern, too, grandma, and I want you to piece one quilt by it and leave it to me when you die." And then she told me about goin' to a town over yonder they call Florence⁸³, and how she went into a big church that was built hundreds o' years before I was born. And she said the floor was made o' little pieces o' colored stone, all laid together in a pattern, and they called it mosaic. And says I, "Honey, has it got anything to do with Moses and his law?" You know the Commandments⁸⁴ was called the Mosaic Law⁸⁵, and was all on tables o' stone. And Henrietta jest laughed, and says she: "No, grandma; I don't believe it has. But," says she, "the minute I stepped on that pavement I thought about you, and I drew this pattern off on a piece o' paper and brought it all the way to Kentucky for you to make a quilt by." Henrietta bought the worsted for me, for she said it had to be jest the colors o' that pavement over yonder, and I made it that very winter.'

Aunt Jane was regarding the quilt with worshipful eyes, and it really was an effective combination of color and form.

'Many a time while I was piecin' that,' she said, 'I thought about the man that laid the pavement in that old church, and wondered what his name was, and how he looked, and what he'd

⁸¹ **Olympus** – a mount in Greece (2,917 m); in Greek mythology, the place where gods lived.

⁸² **the Lost Atlantis** – a legendary island in the Atlantic Ocean, described by antique authors as a highly developed and powerful civilization

⁸³ **Florence** – a city in central Italy, founded in the 1st century BC and notable for its works of art

⁸⁴ **the Commandments** – in the Bible, the list of religious principles revealed to Moses, a Hebrew prophet of the 14th—13th centuries BC, on Mount Sinai

⁸⁵ **the Mosaic Law** – the religious principles of Judaism revealed to Moses, a Hebrew prophet of the 14th—13th centuries BC

think if he knew there was a old woman down here in Kentucky usin' his patterns to make a bed quilt.'

It was indeed a far cry from the Florentine artisan of centuries ago to this humble worker in calico and worsted, but between the two stretched a cord of sympathy that made them one – the eternal aspiration after beauty.

'Honey,' said Aunt Jane, suddenly, 'did I ever show you my premiums?'

And then, with pleasant excitement in her manner, she arose, fumbled in her deep pocket for an ancient bunch of keys, and unlocked a cupboard on one side of the fireplace. One by one she drew them out, unrolled the soft yellow tissue-paper that enfolded them, and ranged them in a stately line on the old cherry center-table – nineteen sterling silver cups and goblets. 'Abram took some of 'em on his fine stock, and I took some of 'em on my quilts and salt-risin' bread and cakes,' she said, impressively.

To the artist his medals, to the soldier his cross of the Legion of Honor⁸⁶, and to Aunt Jane her silver cups. All the triumph of a humble life was symbolized in these shining things. They were simple and genuine as the days in which they were made. A few of them boasted a beaded edge or a golden lining, but no engraving or embossing marred their silver purity. On the bottom of each was the stamp: 'John B. Akin, Danville, Ky.' There they stood,

'Filled to the brim with precious memories,' – memories of the time when she and Abram had worked together in field or garden or home, and the County Fair brought to all a yearly opportunity to stand on the height of achievement and know somewhat the taste of Fame's enchanted cup.

'There's one for every child and every grandchild,' she said, quietly, as she began wrapping them in the silky paper, and storing them carefully away in the cupboard, there to rest until the day when children and grandchildren would claim their own, and the treasures of the dead would come forth from the darkness to stand as heirlooms on fashionable sideboards and damask⁸⁷-covered tables.

'Did you ever think, child,' she said, presently, 'how much piecin' a quilt's like livin' a life? And as for sermons, why, they ain't no better sermon to me than a patchwork quilt, and the doctrines is right there a heap plainer'n they are in the catechism⁸⁸. Many a time I've set and listened to Parson Page preachin' about predestination and free-will, and I've said to myself, "Well, I ain't never been through Centre College up at Danville, but if I could jest git up in the pulpit with one of my quilts, I could make it a heap plainer to folks than parson's makin' it with all his big words." You see, you start out with jest so much caliker; you don't go to the store and pick it out and buy it, but the neighbors will give you a piece here and a piece there, and you'll have a piece left every time you cut out a dress, and you take jest what happens to come. And that's like predestination. But when it comes to the cuttin' out, why, you're free to choose your own pattern. You can give the same kind o' pieces to two persons, and one'll make a "nine-patch" and one'll make a "wild-goose chase," and there'll be two quilts made out o' the same kind o' pieces, and jest as different as they can be. And that is jest the way with livin'. The Lord sends us the pieces, but we can cut 'em out and put 'em together pretty much to suit ourselves, and there's a heap more in the cuttin' out and the sewin' than there is in the caliker. The same sort o' things comes into all lives, jest as the Apostle says, "There hath no trouble taken you but is common to all men."

'The same trouble'll come into two people's lives, and one'll take it and make one thing out of it, and the other'll make somethin' entirely different. There was Mary Harris and Mandy Crawford. They both lost their husbands the same year; and Mandy set down and cried and worried

⁸⁶ **the Legion of Hono(u)r** – the National Order of the Legion of Honour, a military and civil order of the French Republic, created by Napoleon in 1802

⁸⁷ **damask** – a silk, fine, patterned fabric, originally produced in Damascus, Syria

⁸⁸ **catechism** – a religious instruction in the form of questions and answers

and wondered what on earth she was goin' to do, and the farm went to wrack and the children turned out bad, and she had to live with her son-in-law in her old age. But Mary, she got up and went to work, and made everybody about her work, too; and she managed the farm better'n it ever had been managed before, and the boys all come up steady, hard-workin' men, and there wasn't a woman in the county better fixed up than Mary Harris. Things is predestined to come to us, honey, but we're jest as free as air to make what we please out of 'em. And when it comes to puttin' the pieces together, there's another time when we're free. You don't trust to luck for the caliker to put your quilt together with; you go to the store and pick it out yourself, any color you like. There's folks that always looks on the bright side and makes the best of everything, and that's like puttin' your quilt together with blue or pink or white or some other pretty color; and there's folks that never see anything but the dark side, and always lookin' for trouble, and treasurin' it up after they git it, and they're puttin' their lives together with black, jest like you would put a quilt together with some dark, ugly color. You can spoil the prettiest quilt pieces that ever was made jest by puttin' 'em together with the wrong color, and the best sort o' life is miserable if you don't look at things right and think about 'em right.

'Then there's another thing. I've seen folks piece and piece, but when it come to puttin' the blocks together and quiltin' and linin' it, they'd give out; and that's like folks that do a little here and a little there, but their lives ain't of much use after all, any more'n a lot o' loose pieces o' patchwork. And then while you're livin' your life, it looks pretty much like a jumble o' quilt pieces before they're put together; but when you git through with it, or pretty nigh through, as I am now, you'll see the use and the purpose of everything in it. Everything'll be in its right place jest like the squares in this "four-patch," and one piece may be pretty and another one ugly, but it all looks right when you see it finished and joined together.'

Did I say that every pattern was represented? No, there was one notable omission. Not a single 'crazy quilt' was there in the collection. I called Aunt Jane's attention to this lack.

'Child,' she said, 'I used to say there wasn't anything I couldn't do if I made up my mind to it. But I hadn't seen a "crazy quilt" then. The first one I ever seen was up at Danville at Mary Frances', and Henrietta says, "Now, grandma, you've got to make a crazy quilt; you've made every other sort that ever was heard of." And she brought me the pieces and showed me how to baste 'em on the square, and said she'd work the fancy stitches around 'em for me. Well, I set there all the mornin' tryin' to fix up that square, and the more I tried, the uglier and crookeder the thing looked. And finally I says: "Here, child, take your pieces. If I was to make this the way you want me to, they'd be a crazy quilt and a crazy woman, too."'

Aunt Jane was laying the folded quilts in neat piles here and there about the room. There was a look of unspeakable satisfaction on her face – the look of the creator who sees his completed work and pronounces it good.

'I've been a hard worker all my life,' she said, seating herself and folding her hands restfully, 'but 'most all my work has been the kind that "perishes with the usin'," as the Bible says. That's the discouragin' thing about a woman's work. Milly Amos used to say that if a woman was to see all the dishes that she had to wash before she died, piled up before her in one pile, she'd lie down and die right then and there. I've always had the name o' bein' a good housekeeper, but when I'm dead and gone there ain't anybody goin' to think o' the floors I've swept, and the tables I've scrubbed, and the old clothes I've patched, and the stockin's I've darned. Abram might 'a' remembered it, but he ain't here. But when one o' my grandchildren or great-grandchildren sees one o' these quilts, they'll think about Aunt Jane, and, wherever I am then, I'll know I ain't forgotten.

'I reckon everybody wants to leave somethin' behind that'll last after they're dead and gone. It don't look like it's worth while to live unless you can do that. The Bible says folks 'rest from their labors, and their works do follow them,' but that ain't so. They go, and maybe they do rest, but their works stay right here, unless they're the sort that don't outlast the usin'. Now, some folks has

money to build monuments with – great, tall, marble pillars, with angels on top of ‘em, like you see in Cave Hill and them big city buryin’-grounds. And some folks can build churches and schools and hospitals to keep folks in mind of ‘em, but all the work I’ve got to leave behind me is jest these quilts, and sometimes, when I’m settin’ here, workin’ with my caliker and gingham pieces, I’ll finish off a block, and I laugh and say to myself, “Well, here’s another stone for the monument.”

‘I reckon you think, child, that a caliker or a worsted quilt is a curious sort of a monument – ‘bout as perishable as the sweepin’ and scrubbin’ and mendin’. But if folks values things rightly, and knows how to take care of ‘em, there ain’t many things that’ll last longer’n a quilt. Why, I’ve got a blue and white counterpane that my mother’s mother spun and wove, and there ain’t a sign o’ givin’ out in it yet. I’m goin’ to will that to my granddaughter that lives in Danville, Mary Frances’ oldest child. She was down here last summer, and I was lookin’ over my things and packin’ ‘em away, and she happened to see that counterpane and says she, “Grandma, I want you to will me that.” And says I: “What do you want with that old thing, honey? You know you wouldn’t sleep under such a counterpane as that.” And says she, “No, but I’d hang it up over my parlor door for a—”’

‘Portière?’⁸⁹ I suggested, as Aunt Jane hesitated for the unaccustomed word.

‘That’s it, child. Somehow I can’t ricollect these new-fangled words, any more’n I can understand these new-fangled ways. Who’d ever ‘a’ thought that folks’d go to stringin’ up bed-coverin’s in their doors? And says I to Janie, “You can hang your great-grandmother’s counterpane up in your parlor door if you want to, but,” says I, “don’t you ever make a door-curtain out o’ one o’ my quilts.” But la! the way things turn around, if I was to come back fifty years from now, like as not I’d find ‘em usin’ my quilts for window-curtains or door-mats.’

We both laughed, and there rose in my mind a picture of a twentieth-century house decorated with Aunt Jane’s ‘nine-patches’ and ‘rising suns.’ How could the dear old woman know that the same esthetic sense that had drawn from their obscurity the white and blue counterpanes of colonial days would forever protect her loved quilts from such a desecration as she feared? As she lifted a pair of quilts from a chair nearby, I caught sight of a pure white spread in striking contrast with the many-hued patchwork.

‘Where did you get that Marseilles⁹⁰ spread, Aunt Jane?’ I asked, pointing to it. Aunt Jane lifted it and laid it on my lap without a word. Evidently she thought that here was something that could speak for itself. It was two layers of snowy cotton cloth thinly lined with cotton, and elaborately quilted into a perfect imitation of a Marseilles counterpane. The pattern was a tracery of roses, buds, and leaves, very much conventionalized, but still recognizable for the things they were. The stitches were fairylike, and altogether it might have covered the bed of a queen.

‘I made every stitch o’ that spread the year before me and Abram was married,’ she said. ‘I put it on my bed when we went to housekeepin’; it was on the bed when Abram died, and when I die I want ‘em to cover me with it.’ There was a life-history in the simple words. I thought of Desdemona⁹¹ and her bridal sheets, and I did not offer to help Aunt Jane as she folded this quilt.

‘I reckon you think,’ she resumed presently, ‘that I’m a mean, stingy old creetur not to give Janie the counterpane now, instead o’ hoardin’ it up, and all these quilts too, and keepin’ folks waitin’ for ‘em till I die. But, honey, it ain’t all selfishness. I’d give away my best dress or my best bonnet or an acre o’ ground to anybody that needed ‘em more’n I did; but these quilts – Why, it looks like my whole life was sewed up in ‘em, and I ain’t goin’ to part with ‘em while life lasts.’

There was a ring of passionate eagerness in the old voice, and she fell to putting away her treasures as if the suggestion of losing them had made her fearful of their safety.

⁸⁹ **portière** – heavy curtains hung in a doorway

⁹⁰ **Marseilles** – a city and port in southern France on the Mediterranean Sea, founded 2,500 years ago

⁹¹ **Desdemona** – a fictional character in Shakespeare’s tragedy ‘Othello’ (1603)

I looked again at the heap of quilts. An hour ago they had been patchwork, and nothing more. But now! The old woman's words had wrought a transformation in the homely mass of calico and silk and worsted. Patchwork? Ah, no! It was memory, imagination, history, biography, joy, sorrow, philosophy, religion, romance, realism, life, love, and death; and over all, like a halo, the love of the artist for his work and the soul's longing for earthly immortality.

No wonder the wrinkled fingers smoothed them as reverently as we handle the garments of the dead.

The Queer Feet (Gilbert Keith Chesterton)

If you meet a member of that select club, 'The Twelve True Fishermen,' entering the Vernon Hotel for the annual club dinner, you will observe, as he takes off his overcoat, that his evening coat is green and not black. If (supposing that you have the star-defying audacity to address such a being) you ask him why, he will probably answer that he does it to avoid being mistaken for a waiter. You will then retire crushed. But you will leave behind you a mystery as yet unsolved and a tale worth telling.

If (to pursue the same vein of improbable conjecture) you were to meet a mild, hard-working little priest, named Father Brown, and were to ask him what he thought was the most singular luck of his life, he would probably reply that upon the whole his best stroke was at the Vernon Hotel, where he had averted a crime and, perhaps, saved a soul, merely by listening to a few footsteps in a passage. He is perhaps a little proud of this wild and wonderful guess of his, and it is possible that he might refer to it. But since it is immeasurably unlikely that you will ever rise high enough in the social world to find 'The Twelve True Fishermen,' or that you will ever sink low enough among slums and criminals to find Father Brown, I fear you will never hear the story at all unless you hear it from me.

The Vernon Hotel at which The Twelve True Fishermen held their annual dinners was an institution such as can only exist in an oligarchical society which has almost gone mad on good manners. It was that topsy-turvy product – an 'exclusive' commercial enterprise. That is, it was a thing which paid not by attracting people, but actually by turning people away. In the heart of a plutocracy tradesmen become cunning enough to be more fastidious than their customers. They positively create difficulties so that their wealthy and weary clients may spend money and diplomacy in overcoming them. If there were a fashionable hotel in London which no man could enter who was under six foot, society would meekly make up parties of six-foot men to dine in it. If there were an expensive restaurant which by a mere caprice of its proprietor was only open on Thursday afternoon, it would be crowded on Thursday afternoon. The Vernon Hotel stood, as if by accident, in the corner of a square in Belgravia⁹². It was a small hotel; and a very inconvenient one. But its very inconveniences were considered as walls protecting a particular class. One inconvenience, in particular, was held to be of vital importance: the fact that practically only twenty-four people could dine in the place at once. The only big dinner table was the celebrated terrace table, which stood open to the air on a sort of veranda overlooking one of the most exquisite old gardens in London. Thus it happened that even the twenty-four seats at this table could only be enjoyed in warm weather; and this making the enjoyment yet more difficult made it yet more desired. The existing owner of the hotel was a Jew named Lever; and he made nearly a million out of it, by making it difficult to get into. Of course he combined with this limitation in the scope of his enterprise the most careful polish in its performance. The wines and cooking were really as good as any in Europe, and the demeanour of the attendants exactly mirrored the fixed mood of the English upper class. The proprietor knew all his waiters like the fingers on his hand; there were only fifteen of them all told. It was much easier to become a Member of Parliament than to become a waiter in that hotel. Each waiter was trained in terrible silence and smoothness, as if he were a gentleman's servant. And, indeed, there was generally at least one waiter to every gentleman who dined.

The club of The Twelve True Fishermen would not have consented to dine anywhere but in such a place, for it insisted on a luxurious privacy; and would have been quite upset by the mere thought that any other club was even dining in the same building. On the occasion of their annual dinner the Fishermen were in the habit of exposing all their treasures, as if they were in a private

⁹² **Belgravia** – an area in the borough of Westminster in London, east of Chelsea and south of Hyde Park

house, especially the celebrated set of fish knives and forks which were, as it were, the insignia of the society, each being exquisitely wrought in silver in the form of a fish, and each loaded at the hilt with one large pearl. These were always laid out for the fish course, and the fish course was always the most magnificent in that magnificent repast. The society had a vast number of ceremonies and observances, but it had no history and no object; that was where it was so very aristocratic. You did not have to be anything in order to be one of the Twelve Fishers; unless you were already a certain sort of person, you never even heard of them. It had been in existence twelve years. Its president was Mr. Audley. Its vice-president was the Duke of Chester.

If I have in any degree conveyed the atmosphere of this appalling hotel, the reader may feel a natural wonder as to how I came to know anything about it, and may even speculate as to how so ordinary a person as my friend Father Brown came to find himself in that golden galley. As far as that is concerned, my story is simple, or even vulgar. There is in the world a very aged rioter and demagogue who breaks into the most refined retreats with the dreadful information that all men are brothers, and wherever this leveller went on his pale horse it was Father Brown's trade to follow. One of the waiters, an Italian, had been struck down with a paralytic stroke that afternoon; and his Jewish employer, marvelling mildly at such superstitions, had consented to send for the nearest Popish priest⁹³. With what the waiter confessed to Father Brown we are not concerned, for the excellent reason that that cleric kept it to himself; but apparently it involved him in writing out a note or statement for the conveying of some message or the righting of some wrong. Father Brown, therefore, with a meek impudence which he would have shown equally in Buckingham Palace⁹⁴, asked to be provided with a room and writing materials. Mr. Lever was torn in two. He was a kind man, and had also that bad imitation of kindness, the dislike of any difficulty or scene. At the same time the presence of one unusual stranger in his hotel that evening was like a speck of dirt on something just cleaned. There was never any borderland or anteroom in the Vernon Hotel, no people waiting in the hall, no customers coming in on chance. There were fifteen waiters. There were twelve guests. It would be as startling to find a new guest in the hotel that night as to find a new brother taking breakfast or tea in one's own family. Moreover, the priest's appearance was second-rate and his clothes muddy; a mere glimpse of him afar off might precipitate a crisis in the club. Mr. Lever at last hit on a plan to cover, since he might not obliterate, the disgrace. When you enter (as you never will) the Vernon Hotel, you pass down a short passage decorated with a few dingy but important pictures, and come to the main vestibule and lounge which opens on your right into passages leading to the public rooms, and on your left to a similar passage pointing to the kitchens and offices of the hotel. Immediately on your left hand is the corner of a glass office, which abuts upon the lounge – a house within a house, so to speak, like the old hotel bar which probably once occupied its place.

In this office sat the representative of the proprietor (nobody in this place ever appeared in person if he could help it), and just beyond the office, on the way to the servants' quarters, was the gentlemen's cloak room, the last boundary of the gentlemen's domain. But between the office and the cloak room was a small private room without other outlet, sometimes used by the proprietor for delicate and important matters, such as lending a duke a thousand pounds or declining to lend him sixpence. It is a mark of the magnificent tolerance of Mr. Lever that he permitted this holy place to be for about half an hour profaned by a mere priest, scribbling away on a piece of paper. The story which Father Brown was writing down was very likely a much better story than this one, only it will never be known. I can merely state that it was very nearly as long, and that the last two or three paragraphs of it were the least exciting and absorbing.

⁹³ **Popish priest** = Catholic priest

⁹⁴ **Buckingham Palace** – royal residence in London; the famous architect John Nash converted the house built in 1705 for the Duke of Buckingham into a royal residence for king George IV.

For it was by the time that he had reached these that the priest began a little to allow his thoughts to wander and his animal senses, which were commonly keen, to awaken. The time of darkness and dinner was drawing on; his own forgotten little room was without a light, and perhaps the gathering gloom, as occasionally happens, sharpened the sense of sound. As Father Brown wrote the last and least essential part of his document, he caught himself writing to the rhythm of a recurrent noise outside, just as one sometimes thinks to the tune of a railway train. When he became conscious of the thing he found what it was: only the ordinary patter of feet passing the door, which in an hotel was no very unlikely matter. Nevertheless, he stared at the darkened ceiling, and listened to the sound. After he had listened for a few seconds dreamily, he got to his feet and listened intently, with his head a little on one side. Then he sat down again and buried his brow in his hands, now not merely listening, but listening and thinking also.

The footsteps outside at any given moment were such as one might hear in any hotel; and yet, taken as a whole, there was something very strange about them. There were no other footsteps. It was always a very silent house, for the few familiar guests went at once to their own apartments, and the well-trained waiters were told to be almost invisible until they were wanted. One could not conceive any place where there was less reason to apprehend anything irregular. But these footsteps were so odd that one could not decide to call them regular or irregular. Father Brown followed them with his finger on the edge of the table, like a man trying to learn a tune on the piano.

First, there came a long rush of rapid little steps, such as a light man might make in winning a walking race. At a certain point they stopped and changed to a sort of slow, swinging stamp, numbering not a quarter of the steps, but occupying about the same time. The moment the last echoing stamp had died away would come again the run or ripple of light, hurrying feet, and then again the thud of the heavier walking. It was certainly the same pair of boots, partly because (as has been said) there were no other boots about, and partly because they had a small but unmistakable creak in them. Father Brown had the kind of head that cannot help asking questions; and on this apparently trivial question his head almost split. He had seen men run in order to jump. He had seen men run in order to slide. But why on earth should a man run in order to walk? Or, again, why should he walk in order to run? Yet no other description would cover the antics of this invisible pair of legs. The man was either walking very fast down one-half of the corridor in order to walk very slow down the other half; or he was walking very slow at one end to have the rapture of walking fast at the other. Neither suggestion seemed to make much sense. His brain was growing darker and darker, like his room.

Yet, as he began to think steadily, the very blackness of his cell seemed to make his thoughts more vivid; he began to see as in a kind of vision the fantastic feet capering along the corridor in unnatural or symbolic attitudes. Was it a heathen religious dance? Or some entirely new kind of scientific exercise? Father Brown began to ask himself with more exactness what the steps suggested. Taking the slow step first: it certainly was not the step of the proprietor. Men of his type walk with a rapid waddle, or they sit still. It could not be any servant or messenger waiting for directions. It did not sound like it. The poorer orders (in an oligarchy) sometimes lurch about when they are slightly drunk, but generally, and especially in such gorgeous scenes, they stand or sit in constrained attitudes. No; that heavy yet springy step, with a kind of careless emphasis, not specially noisy, yet not caring what noise it made, belonged to only one of the animals of this earth. It was a gentleman of western Europe, and probably one who had never worked for his living.

Just as he came to this solid certainty, the step changed to the quicker one, and ran past the door as feverishly as a rat. The listener remarked that though this step was much swifter it was also much more noiseless, almost as if the man were walking on tiptoe. Yet it was not associated in his mind with secrecy, but with something else – something that he could not remember. He was maddened by one of those half-memories that make a man feel half-witted. Surely he had heard that strange, swift walking somewhere. Suddenly he sprang to his feet with a new idea in his head,

and walked to the door. His room had no direct outlet on the passage, but let on one side into the glass office, and on the other into the cloak room beyond. He tried the door into the office, and found it locked. Then he looked at the window, now a square pane full of purple cloud cleft by livid sunset, and for an instant he smelt evil as a dog smells rats.

The rational part of him (whether the wiser or not) regained its supremacy. He remembered that the proprietor had told him that he should lock the door, and would come later to release him. He told himself that twenty things he had not thought of might explain the eccentric sounds outside; he reminded himself that there was just enough light left to finish his own proper work. Bringing his paper to the window so as to catch the last stormy evening light, he resolutely plunged once more into the almost completed record. He had written for about twenty minutes, bending closer and closer to his paper in the lessening light; then suddenly he sat upright. He had heard the strange feet once more.

This time they had a third oddity. Previously the unknown man had walked, with levity indeed and lightning quickness, but he had walked. This time he ran. One could hear the swift, soft, bounding steps coming along the corridor, like the pads of a fleeing and leaping panther. Whoever was coming was a very strong, active man, in still yet tearing excitement. Yet, when the sound had swept up to the office like a sort of whispering whirlwind, it suddenly changed again to the old slow, swaggering stamp.

Father Brown flung down his paper, and, knowing the office door to be locked, went at once into the cloak room on the other side. The attendant of this place was temporarily absent, probably because the only guests were at dinner and his office was a sinecure. After groping through a grey forest of overcoats, he found that the dim cloak room opened on the lighted corridor in the form of a sort of counter or half-door, like most of the counters across which we have all handed umbrellas and received tickets. There was a light immediately above the semicircular arch of this opening. It threw little illumination on Father Brown himself, who seemed a mere dark outline against the dim sunset window behind him. But it threw an almost theatrical light on the man who stood outside the cloak room in the corridor.

He was an elegant man in very plain evening dress; tall, but with an air of not taking up much room; one felt that he could have slid along like a shadow where many smaller men would have been obvious and obstructive. His face, now flung back in the lamplight, was swarthy and vivacious, the face of a foreigner. His figure was good, his manners good humoured and confident; a critic could only say that his black coat was a shade below his figure and manners, and even bulged and bagged in an odd way. The moment he caught sight of Brown's black silhouette against the sunset, he tossed down a scrap of paper with a number and called out with amiable authority: 'I want my hat and coat, please; I find I have to go away at once.'

Father Brown took the paper without a word, and obediently went to look for the coat; it was not the first menial work he had done in his life. He brought it and laid it on the counter; meanwhile, the strange gentleman who had been feeling in his waistcoat pocket, said laughing: 'I haven't got any silver; you can keep this.' And he threw down half a sovereign, and caught up his coat.

Father Brown's figure remained quite dark and still; but in that instant he had lost his head. His head was always most valuable when he had lost it. In such moments he put two and two together and made four million. Often the Catholic Church (which is wedded to common sense) did not approve of it. Often he did not approve of it himself. But it was real inspiration – important at rare crises – when whosoever shall lose his head the same shall save it.

'I think, sir,' he said civilly, 'that you have some silver in your pocket.'

The tall gentleman stared. 'Hang it,' he cried, 'if I choose to give you gold, why should you complain?'

'Because silver is sometimes more valuable than gold,' said the priest mildly; 'that is, in large quantities.'

The stranger looked at him curiously. Then he looked still more curiously up the passage towards the main entrance. Then he looked back at Brown again, and then he looked very carefully at the window beyond Brown's head, still coloured with the after-glow of the storm. Then he seemed to make up his mind. He put one hand on the counter, vaulted over as easily as an acrobat and towered above the priest, putting one tremendous hand upon his collar.

'Stand still,' he said, in a hacking whisper. 'I don't want to threaten you, but—'

'I do want to threaten you,' said Father Brown, in a voice like a rolling drum, 'I want to threaten you with the worm that dieth not, and the fire that is not quenched.'

'You're a rum sort of cloak-room clerk,' said the other.

'I am a priest, Monsieur Flambeau,' said Brown, 'and I am ready to hear your confession.'

The other stood gasping for a few moments, and then staggered back into a chair.

The first two courses of the dinner of The Twelve True Fishermen had proceeded with placid success. I do not possess a copy of the menu; and if I did it would not convey anything to anybody. It was written in a sort of super-French employed by cooks, but quite unintelligible to Frenchmen. There was a tradition in the club that the hors d'oeuvres should be various and manifold to the point of madness. They were taken seriously because they were avowedly useless extras, like the whole dinner and the whole club. There was also a tradition that the soup course should be light and unpretending – a sort of simple and austere vigil for the feast of fish that was to come. The talk was that strange, slight talk which governs the British Empire, which governs it in secret, and yet would scarcely enlighten an ordinary Englishman even if he could overhear it. Cabinet ministers on both sides were alluded to by their Christian names with a sort of bored benignity. The Radical Chancellor of the Exchequer⁹⁵, whom the whole Tory party⁹⁶ was supposed to be cursing for his extortions, was praised for his minor poetry, or his saddle in the hunting field. The Tory leader, whom all Liberals were supposed to hate as a tyrant, was discussed and, on the whole, praised – as a Liberal. It seemed somehow that politicians were very important. And yet, anything seemed important about them except their politics. Mr. Audley, the chairman, was an amiable, elderly man who still wore Gladstone⁹⁷ collars; he was a kind of symbol of all that phantasmal and yet fixed society. He had never done anything – not even anything wrong. He was not fast; he was not even particularly rich. He was simply in the thing; and there was an end of it. No party could ignore him, and if he had wished to be in the Cabinet he certainly would have been put there. The Duke of Chester, the vice-president, was a young and rising politician. That is to say, he was a pleasant youth, with flat, fair hair and a freckled face, with moderate intelligence and enormous estates. In public his appearances were always successful and his principle was simple enough. When he thought of a joke he made it, and was called brilliant. When he could not think of a joke he said that this was no time for trifling, and was called able. In private, in a club of his own class, he was simply quite pleasantly frank and silly, like a schoolboy. Mr. Audley, never having been in politics, treated them a little more seriously. Sometimes he even embarrassed the company by phrases suggesting that there was some difference between a Liberal and a Conservative. He himself was a Conservative, even in private life. He had a roll of grey hair over the back of his collar, like certain old-fashioned statesmen, and seen from behind he looked like the man the empire wants. Seen from the front he looked like a mild, self-indulgent bachelor, with rooms in the Albany – which he was.

As has been remarked, there were twenty-four seats at the terrace table, and only twelve members of the club. Thus they could occupy the terrace in the most luxurious style of all, being

⁹⁵ **the Exchequer** – the government department responsible for receiving and distributing the public revenue, founded in the 12th century; later the Exchequer was joined with the Treasury.

⁹⁶ **Gladstone** – William Ewart Gladstone (1809–1898), four-time prime minister of Great Britain

⁹⁷ **Gladstone** – William Ewart Gladstone (1809–1898), four-time prime minister of Great Britain

ranged along the inner side of the table, with no one opposite, commanding an uninterrupted view of the garden, the colours of which were still vivid, though evening was closing in somewhat luridly for the time of year. The chairman sat in the centre of the line, and the vice-president at the right-hand end of it. When the twelve guests first trooped into their seats it was the custom (for some unknown reason) for all the fifteen waiters to stand lining the wall like troops presenting arms to the king, while the fat proprietor stood and bowed to the club with radiant surprise, as if he had never heard of them before. But before the first chink of knife and fork this army of retainers had vanished, only the one or two required to collect and distribute the plates darting about in deathly silence. Mr. Lever, the proprietor, of course had disappeared in convulsions of courtesy long before. It would be exaggerative, indeed, irreverent, to say that he ever positively appeared again. But when the important course, the fish course, was being brought on, there was – how shall I put it? – A vivid shadow, a projection of his personality, which told that he was hovering near. The sacred fish course consisted (to the eyes of the vulgar) in a sort of monstrous pudding, about the size and shape of a wedding cake, in which some considerable number of interesting fishes had finally lost the shapes which God had given to them. The Twelve True Fishermen took up their celebrated fish knives and fish forks, and approached it as gravely as if every inch of the pudding cost as much as the silver fork it was eaten with. So it did, for all I know. This course was dealt with in eager and devouring silence; and it was only when his plate was nearly empty that the young duke made the ritual remark: ‘They can’t do this anywhere but here.’

‘Nowhere,’ said Mr. Audley, in a deep bass voice, turning to the speaker and nodding his venerable head a number of times. ‘Nowhere, assuredly, except here. It was represented to me that at the Café Anglais—’

Here he was interrupted and even agitated for a moment by the removal of his plate, but he recaptured the valuable thread of his thoughts. ‘It was represented to me that the same could be done at the Cafe Anglais. Nothing like it, sir,’ he said, shaking his head ruthlessly, like a hanging judge. ‘Nothing like it.’

‘Overrated place,’ said a certain Colonel Pound, speaking (by the look of him) for the first time for some months.

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ said the Duke of Chester, who was an optimist, ‘it’s jolly good for some things. You can’t beat it at—’

A waiter came swiftly along the room, and then stopped dead. His stoppage was as silent as his tread; but all those vague and kindly gentlemen were so used to the utter smoothness of the unseen machinery which surrounded and supported their lives, that a waiter doing anything unexpected was a start and a jar. They felt as you and I would feel if the inanimate world disobeyed – if a chair ran away from us.

The waiter stood staring a few seconds, while there deepened on every face at table a strange shame which is wholly the product of our time. It is the combination of modern humanitarianism with the horrible modern abyss between the souls of the rich and poor. A genuine historic aristocrat would have thrown things at the waiter, beginning with empty bottles, and very probably ending with money. A genuine democrat would have asked him, with comrade-like clearness of speech, what the devil he was doing. But these modern plutocrats could not bear a poor man near to them, either as a slave or as a friend. That something had gone wrong with the servants was merely a dull, hot embarrassment. They did not want to be brutal, and they dreaded the need to be benevolent. They wanted the thing, whatever it was, to be over. It was over. The waiter, after standing for some seconds rigid, like a cataleptic, turned round and ran madly out of the room.

When he reappeared in the room, or rather in the doorway, it was in company with another waiter, with whom he whispered and gesticulated with southern fierceness. Then the first waiter went away, leaving the second waiter, and reappeared with a third waiter. By the time a fourth waiter

had joined this hurried synod⁹⁸, Mr. Audley felt it necessary to break the silence in the interests of Tact. He used a very loud cough, instead of a presidential hammer, and said: 'Splendid work young Moocher's doing in Burmah⁹⁹. Now, no other nation in the world could have—'

A fifth waiter had sped towards him like an arrow, and was whispering in his ear: 'So sorry. Important! Might the proprietor speak to you?'

The chairman turned in disorder, and with a dazed stare saw Mr. Lever coming towards them with his lumbering quickness. The gait of the good proprietor was indeed his usual gait, but his face was by no means usual. Generally it was a genial copper-brown; now it was a sickly yellow.

'You will pardon me, Mr. Audley,' he said, with asthmatic breathlessness. 'I have great apprehensions. Your fish-plates, they are cleared away with the knife and fork on them!'

'Well, I hope so,' said the chairman, with some warmth.

'You see him?' panted the excited hotel keeper; 'you see the waiter who took them away? You know him?'

'Know the waiter?' answered Mr. Audley indignantly. 'Certainly not!'

Mr. Lever opened his hands with a gesture of agony. 'I never send him,' he said. 'I know not when or why he come. I send my waiter to take away the plates, and he find them already away.'

Mr. Audley still looked rather too bewildered to be really the man the empire wants; none of the company could say anything except the man of wood – Colonel Pound – who seemed galvanised into an unnatural life. He rose rigidly from his chair, leaving all the rest sitting, screwed his eyeglass into his eye, and spoke in a raucous undertone as if he had half-forgotten how to speak. 'Do you mean,' he said, 'that somebody has stolen our silver fish service?'

The proprietor repeated the open-handed gesture with even greater helplessness and in a flash all the men at the table were on their feet.

'Are all your waiters here?' demanded the colonel, in his low, harsh accent.

'Yes; they're all here. I noticed it myself,' cried the young duke, pushing his boyish face into the inmost ring. 'Always count 'em as I come in; they look so queer standing up against the wall.'

'But surely one cannot exactly remember,' began Mr. Audley, with heavy hesitation.

'I remember exactly, I tell you,' cried the duke excitedly. 'There never have been more than fifteen waiters at this place, and there were no more than fifteen tonight, I'll swear; no more and no less.'

The proprietor turned upon him, quaking in a kind of palsy of surprise. 'You say – you say,' he stammered, 'that you see all my fifteen waiters?'

'As usual,' assented the duke. 'What is the matter with that!'

'Nothing,' said Lever, with a deepening accent, 'only you did not. For one of zem is dead upstairs.'

There was a shocking stillness for an instant in that room. It may be (so supernatural is the word death) that each of those idle men looked for a second at his soul, and saw it as a small dried pea. One of them – the duke, I think – even said with the idiotic kindness of wealth: 'Is there anything we can do?'

'He has had a priest,' said the Jew, not untouched.

Then, as to the clang of doom, they awoke to their own position. For a few weird seconds they had really felt as if the fifteenth waiter might be the ghost of the dead man upstairs. They had been dumb under that oppression, for ghosts were to them an embarrassment, like beggars. But the remembrance of the silver broke the spell of the miraculous; broke it abruptly and with a brutal reaction. The colonel flung over his chair and strode to the door. 'If there was a fifteenth man here,

⁹⁸ **synod** – in the Christian church, a local assembly of church officials

⁹⁹ **Burmah** – Burma (now Myanmar), a country in Southeast Asia

friends,' he said, 'that fifteenth fellow was a thief. Down at once to the front and back doors and secure everything; then we'll talk. The twenty-four pearls of the club are worth recovering.'

Mr. Audley seemed at first to hesitate about whether it was gentlemanly to be in such a hurry about anything; but, seeing the duke dash down the stairs with youthful energy, he followed with a more mature motion.

At the same instant a sixth waiter ran into the room, and declared that he had found the pile of fish plates on a sideboard, with no trace of the silver.

The crowd of diners and attendants that tumbled helter-skelter down the passages divided into two groups. Most of the Fishermen followed the proprietor to the front room to demand news of any exit. Colonel Pound, with the chairman, the vice-president, and one or two others darted down the corridor leading to the servants' quarters, as the more likely line of escape. As they did so they passed the dim alcove or cavern of the cloak room, and saw a short, black-coated figure, presumably an attendant, standing a little way back in the shadow of it.

'Hallo, there!' called out the duke. 'Have you seen anyone pass?'

The short figure did not answer the question directly, but merely said: 'Perhaps I have got what you are looking for, gentlemen.'

They paused, wavering and wondering, while he quietly went to the back of the cloak room, and came back with both hands full of shining silver, which he laid out on the counter as calmly as a salesman. It took the form of a dozen quaintly shaped forks and knives.

'You – you—' began the colonel, quite thrown off his balance at last. Then he peered into the dim little room and saw two things: first, that the short, black-clad man was dressed like a clergyman; and, second, that the window of the room behind him was burst, as if someone had passed violently through. 'Valuable things to deposit in a cloak room, aren't they?' remarked the clergyman, with cheerful composure.

'Did – did you steal those things?' stammered Mr. Audley, with staring eyes.

'If I did,' said the cleric pleasantly, 'at least I am bringing them back again.'

'But you didn't,' said Colonel Pound, still staring at the broken window.

'To make a clean breast of it, I didn't,' said the other, with some humour. And he seated himself quite gravely on a stool. 'But you know who did,' said the colonel.

'I don't know his real name,' said the priest placidly, 'but I know something of his fighting weight, and a great deal about his spiritual difficulties. I formed the physical estimate when he was trying to throttle me, and the moral estimate when he repented.'

'Oh, I say – repented!' cried young Chester, with a sort of crow of laughter.

Father Brown got to his feet, putting his hands behind him. 'Odd, isn't it,' he said, 'that a thief and a vagabond should repent, when so many who are rich and secure remain hard and frivolous, and without fruit for God or man? But there, if you will excuse me, you trespass a little upon my province. If you doubt the penitence as a practical fact, there are your knives and forks. You are The Twelve True Fishers, and there are all your silver fish. But He has made me a fisher of men.'

'Did you catch this man?' asked the colonel, frowning.

Father Brown looked him full in his frowning face. 'Yes,' he said, 'I caught him, with an unseen hook and an invisible line which is long enough to let him wander to the ends of the world, and still to bring him back with a twitch upon the thread.'

There was a long silence. All the other men present drifted away to carry the recovered silver to their comrades, or to consult the proprietor about the queer condition of affairs. But the grim-faced colonel still sat sideways on the counter, swinging his long, lank legs and biting his dark moustache.

At last he said quietly to the priest: 'He must have been a clever fellow, but I think I know a cleverer.'

'He was a clever fellow,' answered the other, 'but I am not quite sure of what other you mean.'

‘I mean you,’ said the colonel, with a short laugh. ‘I don’t want to get the fellow jailed; make yourself easy about that. But I’d give a good many silver forks to know exactly how you fell into this affair, and how you got the stuff out of him. I reckon you’re the most up-to-date devil of the present company.’

Father Brown seemed rather to like the saturnine candour of the soldier. ‘Well,’ he said, smiling, ‘I mustn’t tell you anything of the man’s identity, or his own story, of course; but there’s no particular reason why I shouldn’t tell you of the mere outside facts which I found out for myself.’

He hopped over the barrier with unexpected activity, and sat beside Colonel Pound, kicking his short legs like a little boy on a gate. He began to tell the story as easily as if he were telling it to an old friend by a Christmas fire.

‘You see, colonel,’ he said, ‘I was shut up in that small room there doing some writing, when I heard a pair of feet in this passage doing a dance that was as queer as the dance of death. First came quick, funny little steps, like a man walking on tiptoe for a wager; then came slow, careless, creaking steps, as of a big man walking about with a cigar. But they were both made by the same feet, I swear, and they came in rotation; first the run and then the walk, and then the run again. I wondered at first idly and then wildly why a man should act these two parts at once. One walk I knew; it was just like yours, colonel. It was the walk of a well-fed gentleman waiting for something, who strolls about rather because he is physically alert than because he is mentally impatient. I knew that I knew the other walk, too, but I could not remember what it was. What wild creature had I met on my travels that tore along on tiptoe in that extraordinary style? Then I heard a clink of plates somewhere; and the answer stood up as plain as St. Peter’s¹⁰⁰. It was the walk of a waiter – that walk with the body slanted forward, the eyes looking down, the ball of the toe spurning away the ground, the coat tails and napkin flying. Then I thought for a minute and a half more. And I believe I saw the manner of the crime, as clearly as if I were going to commit it.’

Colonel Pound looked at him keenly, but the speaker’s mild grey eyes were fixed upon the ceiling with almost empty wistfulness.

‘A crime,’ he said slowly, ‘is like any other work of art. Don’t look surprised; crimes are by no means the only works of art that come from an infernal workshop. But every work of art, divine or diabolic, has one indispensable mark – I mean, that the centre of it is simple, however much the fulfilment may be complicated. Thus, in Hamlet, let us say, the grotesqueness of the gravedigger, the flowers of the mad girl, the fantastic finery of Osric, the pallor of the ghost and the grin of the skull are all oddities in a sort of tangled wreath round one plain tragic figure of a man in black. Well, this also,’ he said, getting slowly down from his seat with a smile, ‘this also is the plain tragedy of a man in black. Yes,’ he went on, seeing the colonel look up in some wonder, ‘the whole of this tale turns on a black coat. In this, as in Hamlet, there are the rococo¹⁰¹ excrescences – yourselves, let us say. There is the dead waiter, who was there when he could not be there. There is the invisible hand that swept your table clear of silver and melted into air. But every clever crime is founded ultimately on some one quite simple fact – some fact that is not itself mysterious. The mystification comes in covering it up, in leading men’s thoughts away from it. This large and subtle and (in the ordinary course) most profitable crime, was built on the plain fact that a gentleman’s evening dress is the same as a waiter’s. All the rest was acting, and thundering good acting, too.’

‘Still,’ said the colonel, getting up and frowning at his boots, ‘I am not sure that I understand.’

‘Colonel,’ said Father Brown, ‘I tell you that this archangel¹⁰² of impudence who stole your forks walked up and down this passage twenty times in the blaze of all the lamps, in the glare of

¹⁰⁰ **St. Peter** – the Apostle, one of Christ’s disciples; when asked thrice, after Jesus Christ’s arrest, if he knew Him, St. Peter said ‘No’.

¹⁰¹ **rococo** – a style in painting, sculpture, architecture and decorative arts, originated in Paris in the early 19th century

¹⁰² **archangel** – in the hierarchy of angels, one of the chief angels

all the eyes. He did not go and hide in dim corners where suspicion might have searched for him. He kept constantly on the move in the lighted corridors, and everywhere that he went he seemed to be there by right. Don't ask me what he was like; you have seen him yourself six or seven times tonight. You were waiting with all the other grand people in the reception room at the end of the passage there, with the terrace just beyond. Whenever he came among you gentlemen, he came in the lightning style of a waiter, with bent head, flapping napkin and flying feet. He shot out on to the terrace, did something to the table cloth, and shot back again towards the office and the waiters' quarters. By the time he had come under the eye of the office clerk and the waiters he had become another man in every inch of his body, in every instinctive gesture. He strolled among the servants with the absent-minded insolence which they have all seen in their patrons. It was no new thing to them that a swell from the dinner party should pace all parts of the house like an animal at the Zoo; they know that nothing marks the Smart Set more than a habit of walking where one chooses. When he was magnificently weary of walking down that particular passage he would wheel round and pace back past the office; in the shadow of the arch just beyond he was altered as by a blast of magic, and went hurrying forward again among the Twelve Fishermen, an obsequious attendant. Why should the gentlemen look at a chance waiter? Why should the waiters suspect a first-rate walking gentleman? Once or twice he played the coolest tricks. In the proprietor's private quarters he called out breezily for a syphon of soda water, saying he was thirsty. He said genially that he would carry it himself, and he did; he carried it quickly and correctly through the thick of you, a waiter with an obvious errand. Of course, it could not have been kept up long, but it only had to be kept up till the end of the fish course.

'His worst moment was when the waiters stood in a row; but even then he contrived to lean against the wall just round the corner in such a way that for that important instant the waiters thought him a gentleman, while the gentlemen thought him a waiter. The rest went like winking. If any waiter caught him away from the table, that waiter caught a languid aristocrat. He had only to time himself two minutes before the fish was cleared, become a swift servant, and clear it himself. He put the plates down on a sideboard, stuffed the silver in his breast pocket, giving it a bulgy look, and ran like a hare (I heard him coming) till he came to the cloak room. There he had only to be a plutocrat again – a plutocrat called away suddenly on business. He had only to give his ticket to the cloak-room attendant, and go out again elegantly as he had come in. Only – only I happened to be the cloak-room attendant.'

'What did you do to him?' cried the colonel, with unusual intensity. 'What did he tell you?'

'I beg your pardon,' said the priest immovably, 'that is where the story ends.'

'And the interesting story begins,' muttered Pound. 'I think I understand his professional trick. But I don't seem to have got hold of yours.'

'I must be going,' said Father Brown.

They walked together along the passage to the entrance hall, where they saw the fresh, freckled face of the Duke of Chester, who was bounding buoyantly along towards them.

'Come along, Pound,' he cried breathlessly. 'I've been looking for you everywhere. The dinner's going again in spanking style, and old Audley has got to make a speech in honour of the forks being saved. We want to start some new ceremony, don't you know, to commemorate the occasion. I say, you really got the goods back, what do you suggest?'

'Why,' said the colonel, eyeing him with a certain sardonic approval, 'I should suggest that henceforward we wear green coats, instead of black. One never knows what mistakes may arise when one looks so like a waiter.'

'Oh, hang it all!' said the young man, 'a gentleman never looks like a waiter.'

'Nor a waiter like a gentleman, I suppose,' said Colonel Pound, with the same lowering laughter on his face. 'Reverend sir, your friend must have been very smart to act the gentleman.'

Father Brown buttoned up his commonplace overcoat to the neck, for the night was stormy, and took his commonplace umbrella from the stand.

‘Yes,’ he said; ‘it must be very hard work to be a gentleman; but, do you know, I have sometimes thought that it may be almost as laborious to be a waiter.’

And saying ‘Good evening,’ he pushed open the heavy doors of that palace of pleasures. The golden gates closed behind him, and he went at a brisk walk through the damp, dark streets in search of a penny omnibus¹⁰³.

¹⁰³ **omnibus** – a large vehicle designed to carry passengers on a fixed route, a bus

Ma'ame Pelagie (Kate Chopin)

I

When the war began, there stood on an imposing mansion of red brick, shaped like the Pantheon¹⁰⁴. A grove of majestic live-oaks surrounded it.

Thirty years later, only the thick walls were standing, with the dull red brick showing here and there through a matted growth of clinging vines. The huge round pillars were intact; so to some extent was the stone flagging of hall and portico. There had been no home so stately along the whole stretch of Cote Joyeuse. Everyone knew that, as they knew it had cost Philippe Valmet sixty thousand dollars to build, away back in 1840. No one was in danger of forgetting that fact, so long as his daughter Pelagie survived. She was a queenly, white-haired woman of fifty. 'Ma'ame Pelagie,' they called her, though she was unmarried, as was her sister Pauline, a child in Ma'ame Pelagie's eyes; a child of thirty-five.

The two lived alone in a three-roomed cabin, almost within the shadow of the ruin. They lived for a dream, for Ma'ame Pelagie's dream, which was to rebuild the old home.

It would be pitiful to tell how their days were spent to accomplish this end; how the dollars had been saved for thirty years and the picayunes hoarded; and yet, not half enough gathered! But Ma'ame Pelagie felt sure of twenty years of life before her, and counted upon as many more for her sister. And what could not come to pass in twenty – in forty – years?

Often, of pleasant afternoons, the two would drink their black coffee, seated upon the stone-flagged portico whose canopy was the blue sky of Louisiana. They loved to sit there in the silence, with only each other and the sheeny, prying lizards for company, talking of the old times and planning for the new; while light breezes stirred the tattered vines high up among the columns, where owls nested.

'We can never hope to have all just as it was, Pauline,' Ma'ame Pelagie would say; 'perhaps the marble pillars of the salon will have to be replaced by wooden ones, and the crystal candelabra left out. Should you be willing, Pauline?'

'Oh, yes Sesoeur, I shall be willing.' It was always, 'Yes, Sesoeur,' or 'No, Sesoeur,' 'Just as you please, Sesoeur,' with poor little Mam'selle Pauline. For what did she remember of that old life and that old splendor? Only a faint gleam here and there; the half-consciousness of a young, uneventful existence; and then a great crash. That meant the nearness of war; the revolt of slaves; confusion ending in fire and flame through which she was borne safely in the strong arms of Pelagie, and carried to the log cabin which was still their home. Their brother, Leandre, had known more of it all than Pauline, and not so much as Pelagie. He had left the management of the big plantation with all its memories and traditions to his older sister, and had gone away to dwell in cities. That was many years ago. Now, Leandre's business called him frequently and upon long journeys from home, and his motherless daughter was coming to stay with her aunts at Cote Joyeuse.

They talked about it, sipping their coffee on the ruined portico. Mam'selle Pauline was terribly excited; the flush that throbbed into her pale, nervous face showed it; and she locked her thin fingers in and out incessantly.

'But what shall we do with La Petite¹⁰⁵, Sesoeur? Where shall we put her? How shall we amuse her? Ah, Seigneur!¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ **the Pantheon** – the 18th century building in Paris, an example of Neoclassical architecture with columns and a high dome

¹⁰⁵ **La Petite** – baby (*French*)

¹⁰⁶ **Seigneur** – Lord, God (*French*)

‘She will sleep upon a cot in the room next to ours,’ responded Ma’ame Pelagie, ‘and live as we do. She knows how we live, and why we live; her father has told her. She knows we have money and could squander it if we chose. Do not fret, Pauline; let us hope La Petite is a true Valmet.’

Then Ma’ame Pelagie rose with stately deliberation and went to saddle her horse, for she had yet to make her last daily round through the fields; and Mam’selle Pauline threaded her way slowly among the tangled grasses toward the cabin.

The coming of La Petite, bringing with her as she did the pungent atmosphere of an outside and dimly known world, was a shock to these two, living their dream-life. The girl was quite as tall as her aunt Pelagie, with dark eyes that reflected joy as a still pool reflects the light of stars; and her rounded cheek was tinged like the pink crepe myrtle. Mam’selle Pauline kissed her and trembled. Ma’ame Pelagie looked into her eyes with a searching gaze, which seemed to seek a likeness of the past in the living present.

And they made room between them for this young life.

II

La Petite had determined upon trying to fit herself to the strange, narrow existence which she knew awaited her at Côte Joyeuse. It went well enough at first. Sometimes she followed Ma'ame Pelagie into the fields to note how the cotton was opening, ripe and white; or to count the ears of corn upon the hardy stalks. But oftener she was with her aunt Pauline, assisting in household offices, chattering of her brief past, or walking with the older woman arm-in-arm under the trailing moss of the giant oaks.

Mam'selle Pauline's steps grew very buoyant that summer, and her eyes were sometimes as bright as a bird's, unless La Petite were away from her side, when they would lose all other light but one of uneasy expectancy. The girl seemed to love her well in return, and called her endearingly Tan'tante¹⁰⁷. But as the time went by, La Petite became very quiet, – not listless, but thoughtful, and slow in her movements. Then her cheeks began to pale, till they were tinged like the creamy plumes of the white crepe myrtle that grew in the ruin.

One day when she sat within its shadow, between her aunts, holding a hand of each, she said: 'Tante Pelagie, I must tell you something, you and Tan'tante.' She spoke low, but clearly and firmly. 'I love you both, – please remember that I love you both. But I must go away from you. I can't live any longer here at Côte Joyeuse.'

A spasm passed through Mam'selle Pauline's delicate frame. La Petite could feel the twitch of it in the wiry fingers that were intertwined with her own. Ma'ame Pelagie remained unchanged and motionless. No human eye could penetrate so deep as to see the satisfaction which her soul felt. She said: 'What do you mean, Petite? Your father has sent you to us, and I am sure it is his wish that you remain.'

'My father loves me, tante Pelagie, and such will not be his wish when he knows. Oh!' she continued with a restless, movement, 'it is as though a weight were pressing me backward here. I must live another life; the life I lived before. I want to know things that are happening from day to day over the world, and hear them talked about. I want my music, my books, my companions. If I had known no other life but this one of privation, I suppose it would be different. If I had to live this life, I should make the best of it. But I do not have to; and you know, tante Pelagie, you do not need to. It seems to me,' she added in a whisper, 'that it is a sin against myself. Ah, Tan'tante! – what is the matter with Tan'tante?'

It was nothing; only a slight feeling of faintness, that would soon pass. She entreated them to take no notice; but they brought her some water and fanned her with a palmetto¹⁰⁸ leaf.

But that night, in the stillness of the room, Mam'selle Pauline sobbed and would not be comforted. Ma'ame Pelagie took her in her arms.

'Pauline, my little sister Pauline,' she entreated, 'I never have seen you like this before. Do you no longer love me? Have we not been happy together, you and I?'

'Oh, yes, Sesoeur.'

'Is it because La Petite is going away?'

'Yes, Sesoeur.'

'Then she is dearer to you than I!' spoke Ma'ame Pelagie with sharp resentment. 'Than I, who held you and warmed you in my arms the day you were born; than I, your mother, father, sister, everything that could cherish you. Pauline, don't tell me that.'

Mam'selle Pauline tried to talk through her sobs.

¹⁰⁷ **Tan'tante** – from tante = aunt (*French*)

¹⁰⁸ **palmetto** – a sort of small palm trees

‘I can’t explain it to you, Sesoeur. I don’t understand it myself. I love you as I have always loved you; next to God. But if La Petite goes away I shall die. I can’t understand, – help me, Sesoeur. She seems – she seems like a saviour; like one who had come and taken me by the hand and was leading me somewhere – somewhere I want to go.’

Ma’ame Pelagie had been sitting beside the bed in her peignoir and slippers. She held the hand of her sister who lay there, and smoothed down the woman’s soft brown hair. She said not a word, and the silence was broken only by Mam’selle Pauline’s continued sobs. Once Ma’ame Pelagie arose to mix a drink of orange-flower water, which she gave to her sister, as she would have offered it to a nervous, fretful child. Almost an hour passed before Ma’ame Pelagie spoke again. Then she said: –

‘Pauline, you must cease that sobbing, now, and sleep. You will make yourself ill. La Petite will not go away. Do you hear me? Do you understand? She will stay, I promise you.’

Mam’selle Pauline could not clearly comprehend, but she had great faith in the word of her sister, and soothed by the promise and the touch of Ma’ame Pelagie’s strong, gentle hand, she fell asleep.

III

Ma'ame Pelagie, when she saw that her sister slept, arose noiselessly and stepped outside upon the low-roofed narrow gallery. She did not linger there, but with a step that was hurried and agitated, she crossed the distance that divided her cabin from the ruin.

The night was not a dark one, for the sky was clear and the moon resplendent. But light or dark would have made no difference to Ma'ame Pelagie. It was not the first time she had stolen away to the ruin at night-time, when the whole plantation slept; but she never before had been there with a heart so nearly broken. She was going there for the last time to dream her dreams; to see the visions that hitherto had crowded her days and nights, and to bid them farewell.

There was the first of them, awaiting her upon the very portal; a robust old white-haired man, chiding her for returning home so late. There are guests to be entertained. Does she not know it? Guests from the city and from the near plantations. Yes, she knows it is late. She had been abroad with Felix, and they did not notice how the time was speeding. Felix is there; he will explain it all. He is there beside her, but she does not want to hear what he will tell her father.

Ma'ame Pelagie had sunk upon the bench where she and her sister so often came to sit. Turning, she gazed in through the gaping chasm of the window at her side. The interior of the ruin is ablaze. Not with the moonlight, for that is faint beside the other one – the sparkle from the crystal candelabra, which negroes, moving noiselessly and respectfully about, are lighting, one after the other. How the gleam of them reflects and glances from the polished marble pillars!

The room holds a number of guests. There is old Monsieur Lucien Santien, leaning against one of the pillars, and laughing at something which Monsieur Lafirme is telling him, till his fat shoulders shake. His son Jules is with him – Jules, who wants to marry her. She laughs. She wonders if Felix has told her father yet. There is young Jerome Lafirme playing at checkers upon the sofa with Leandre. Little Pauline stands annoying them and disturbing the game. Leandre reproves her. She begins to cry, and old black Clementine, her nurse, who is not far off, limps across the room to pick her up and carry her away. How sensitive the little one is! But she trots about and takes care of herself better than she did a year or two ago, when she fell upon the stone hall floor and raised a great 'bo-bo' on her forehead. Pelagie was hurt and angry enough about it; and she ordered rugs and buffalo robes to be brought and laid thick upon the tiles, till the little one's steps were surer.

'Il ne faut pas faire mal à Pauline.'¹⁰⁹ She was saying it aloud – 'faire mal à Pauline.'

But she gazes beyond the salon, back into the big dining hall, where the white crepe myrtle grows. Ha! how low that bat has circled. It has struck Ma'ame Pelagie full on the breast. She does not know it. She is beyond there in the dining hall, where her father sits with a group of friends over their wine. As usual they are talking politics. How tiresome! She has heard them say 'la guerre'¹¹⁰ oftener than once. La guerre. Bah! She and Felix have something pleasanter to talk about, out under the oaks, or back in the shadow of the oleanders.

But they were right! The sound of a cannon, shot at Sumter¹¹¹, has rolled across the Southern States, and its echo is heard along the whole stretch of Cote Joyeuse.

Yet Pelagie does not believe it. Not till La Ricaneuse stands before her with bare, black arms akimbo, uttering a volley of vile abuse and of brazen impudence. Pelagie wants to kill her. But yet she will not believe. Not till Felix comes to her in the chamber above the dining hall – there where that trumpet vine hangs – comes to say good-by to her. The hurt which the big brass buttons of his new gray uniform pressed into the tender flesh of her bosom has never left it. She sits upon the

¹⁰⁹ **Il ne faut pas faire mal à Pauline.** – Don't do harm to Pauline. (*French*)

¹¹⁰ **la guerre** = war (*French*)

¹¹¹ **Sumter** – a county in South Caroline, US

sofa, and he beside her, both speechless with pain. That room would not have been altered. Even the sofa would have been there in the same spot, and Ma'ame Pelagie had meant all along, for thirty years, all along, to lie there upon it someday when the time came to die.

But there is no time to weep, with the enemy at the door. The door has been no barrier. They are clattering through the halls now, drinking the wines, shattering the crystal and glass, slashing the portraits.

One of them stands before her and tells her to leave the house. She slaps his face. How the stigma stands out red as blood upon his blanched cheek!

Now there is a roar of fire and the flames are bearing down upon her motionless figure. She wants to show them how a daughter of Louisiana¹¹² can perish before her conquerors. But little Pauline clings to her knees in an agony of terror. Little Pauline must be saved.

'Il ne faut pas faire mal à Pauline.' Again she is saying it aloud – 'faire mal à Pauline.'

The night was nearly spent; Ma'ame Pelagie had glided from the bench upon which she had rested, and for hours lay prone upon the stone flagging, motionless. When she dragged herself to her feet it was to walk like one in a dream. About the great, solemn pillars, one after the other, she reached her arms, and pressed her cheek and her lips upon the senseless brick.

'Adieu¹¹³, adieu!' whispered Ma'ame Pelagie.

There was no longer the moon to guide her steps across the familiar pathway to the cabin. The brightest light in the sky was Venus¹¹⁴ that swung low in the east. The bats had ceased to beat their wings about the ruin. Even the mocking-bird that had warbled for hours in the old mulberry-tree had sung himself asleep. That darkest hour before the day was mantling the earth. Ma'ame Pelagie hurried through the wet, clinging grass, beating aside the heavy moss that swept across her face, walking on toward the cabin – toward Pauline. Not once did she look back upon the ruin that brooded like a huge monster – a black spot in the darkness that enveloped it.

¹¹² **Louisiana** – the US state (123,366 sq. km) admitted to the union in 1812 as the 18th member; it borders Arkansas, Mississippi and Texas.

¹¹³ **Adieu!** – Goodbye!

¹¹⁴ **Venus** – the second planet from the Sun; when it is visible, it is the brightest in the sky.

IV

Little more than a year later the transformation which the old Valmet place had undergone was the talk and wonder of Cote Joyeuse. One would have looked in vain for the ruin; it was no longer there; neither was the log cabin. But out in the open, where the sun shone upon it, and the breezes blew about it, was a shapely structure fashioned from woods that the forests of the State had furnished. It rested upon a solid foundation of brick.

Upon a corner of the pleasant gallery sat Leandre smoking his afternoon cigar, and chatting with neighbors who had called. This was to be his pied à terre¹¹⁵ now; the home where his sisters and his daughter dwelt. The laughter of young people was heard out under the trees, and within the house where La Petite was playing upon the piano. With the enthusiasm of a young artist she drew from the keys strains that seemed marvelously beautiful to Mam'selle Pauline, who stood enraptured near her. Mam'selle Pauline had been touched by the re-creation of Valmet. Her cheek was as full and almost as flushed as La Petite's. The years were falling away from her.

Ma'ame Pelagie had been conversing with her brother and his friends. Then she turned and walked away; stopping to listen awhile to the music which La Petite was making. But it was only for a moment. She went on around the curve of the veranda, where she found herself alone. She stayed there, erect, holding to the banister rail and looking out calmly in the distance across the fields.

She was dressed in black, with the white kerchief she always wore folded across her bosom. Her thick, glossy hair rose like a silver diadem from her brow. In her deep, dark eyes smouldered the light of fires that would never flame. She had grown very old. Years instead of months seemed to have passed over her since the night she bade farewell to her visions.

Poor Ma'ame Pelagie! How could it be different! While the outward pressure of a young and joyous existence had forced her footsteps into the light, her soul had stayed in the shadow of the ruin.

¹¹⁵ **pied à terre** – a place of refuge where a person lives from time to time (*French*)

Desirée's Baby (Kate Chopin)

As the day was pleasant, Madame Valmonde drove over to L'Abri to see Desirée and the baby.

It made her laugh to think of Desirée with a baby. Why, it seemed but yesterday that Desirée was little more than a baby herself; when Monsieur in riding through the gateway of Valmonde had found her lying asleep in the shadow of the big stone pillar.

The little one awoke in his arms and began to cry for 'Dada.' That was as much as she could do or say. Some people thought she might have strayed there of her own accord, for she was of the toddling age. The prevailing belief was that she had been purposely left by a party of Texans¹¹⁶, whose canvas-covered wagon, late in the day, had crossed the ferry that Coton Mais kept, just below the plantation. In time Madame Valmonde abandoned every speculation but the one that Desirée had been sent to her by a beneficent Providence to be the child of her affection, seeing that she was without child of the flesh. For the girl grew to be beautiful and gentle, affectionate and sincere, – the idol of Valmonde.

It was no wonder, when she stood one day against the stone pillar in whose shadow she had lain asleep, eighteen years before, that Armand Aubigny riding by and seeing her there, had fallen in love with her. That was the way all the Aubignys fell in love, as if struck by a pistol shot. The wonder was that he had not loved her before; for he had known her since his father brought him home from Paris, a boy of eight, after his mother died there. The passion that awoke in him that day, when he saw her at the gate, swept along like an avalanche, or like a prairie fire, or like anything that drives headlong over all obstacles.

Monsieur Valmonde grew practical and wanted things well considered: that is, the girl's obscure origin. Armand looked into her eyes and did not care. He was reminded that she was nameless. What did it matter about a name when he could give her one of the oldest and proudest in Louisiana? He ordered the corbeille¹¹⁷ from Paris, and contained himself with what patience he could until it arrived; then they were married.

Madame Valmonde had not seen Desirée and the baby for four weeks. When she reached L'Abri she shuddered at the first sight of it, as she always did. It was a sad-looking place, which for many years had not known the gentle presence of a mistress, old Monsieur Aubigny having married and buried his wife in France, and she having loved her own land too well ever to leave it. The roof came down steep and black like a cowl, reaching out beyond the wide galleries that encircled the yellow stuccoed house. Big, solemn oaks grew close to it, and their thick-leaved, far-reaching branches shadowed it like a pall. Young Aubigny's rule was a strict one, too, and under it his negroes had forgotten how to be gay, as they had been during the old master's easy-going and indulgent lifetime.

The young mother was recovering slowly, and lay full length, in her soft white muslins¹¹⁸ and laces, upon a couch. The baby was beside her, upon her arm, where he had fallen asleep, at her breast. The yellow nurse woman sat beside a window fanning herself.

Madame Valmonde bent her portly figure over Desirée and kissed her, holding her an instant tenderly in her arms. Then she turned to the child.

'This is not the baby!' she exclaimed, in startled tones. French was the language spoken at Valmonde in those days.

¹¹⁶ **Texans** – residents of Texas, the US state in the south

¹¹⁷ **corbeille** – a basket; here: a set of clothes (*French*)

¹¹⁸ **muslin** – a thin cotton fabric, first made in Mosul, Iraq

‘I knew you would be astonished,’ laughed Desirée, ‘at the way he has grown. The little cochon de lait!’¹¹⁹ Look at his legs, mamma, and his hands and fingernails, – real finger-nails. Zandrine had to cut them this morning. Isn’t it true, Zandrine?’

The woman bowed her turbaned head majestically, ‘Mais si!’¹²⁰, Madame.’

‘And the way he cries,’ went on Desirée, ‘is deafening. Armand heard him the other day as far away as La Blanche’s cabin.’

Madame Valmonde had never removed her eyes from the child. She lifted it and walked with it over to the window that was lightest. She scanned the baby narrowly, then looked as searchingly at Zandrine, whose face was turned to gaze across the fields.

‘Yes, the child has grown, has changed,’ said Madame Valmonde, slowly, as she replaced it beside its mother. ‘What does Armand say?’

Desirée’s face became suffused with a glow that was happiness itself.

‘Oh, Armand is the proudest father in the parish, I believe, chiefly because it is a boy, to bear his name; though he says not, – that he would have loved a girl as well. But I know it isn’t true. I know he says that to please me. And mamma,’ she added, drawing Madame Valmonde’s head down to her, and speaking in a whisper, ‘he hasn’t punished one of them – not one of them – since baby is born. Even Negrillon, who pretended to have burnt his leg that he might rest from work – he only laughed, and said Negrillon was a great scamp. Oh, mamma, I’m so happy; it frightens me.’

What Desirée said was true. Marriage, and later the birth of his son had softened Armand Aubigny’s imperious and exacting nature greatly. This was what made the gentle Desirée so happy, for she loved him desperately. When he frowned she trembled, but loved him. When he smiled, she asked no greater blessing of God. But Armand’s dark, handsome face had not often been disfigured by frowns since the day he fell in love with her.

When the baby was about three months old, Desirée awoke one day to the conviction that there was something in the air menacing her peace. It was at first too subtle to grasp. It had only been a disquieting suggestion; an air of mystery among the blacks; unexpected visits from far-off neighbors who could hardly account for their coming. Then a strange, an awful change in her husband’s manner, which she dared not ask him to explain. When he spoke to her, it was with averted eyes, from which the old love-light seemed to have gone out. He absented himself from home; and when there, avoided her presence and that of her child, without excuse. And the very spirit of Satan seemed suddenly to take hold of him in his dealings with the slaves. Desirée was miserable enough to die.

She sat in her room, one hot afternoon, in her peignoir¹²¹, listlessly drawing through her fingers the strands of her long, silky brown hair that hung about her shoulders. The baby, half naked, lay asleep upon her own great mahogany bed, that was like a sumptuous throne, with its satin-lined half-canopy. One of La Blanche’s little quadroon boys – half naked too – stood fanning the child slowly with a fan of peacock feathers. Desirée’s eyes had been fixed absently and sadly upon the baby, while she was striving to penetrate the threatening mist that she felt closing about her. She looked from her child to the boy who stood beside him, and back again; over and over. ‘Ah!’ It was a cry that she could not help; which she was not conscious of having uttered. The blood turned like ice in her veins, and a clammy moisture gathered upon her face.

She tried to speak to the little quadroon boy; but no sound would come, at first. When he heard his name uttered, he looked up, and his mistress was pointing to the door. He laid aside the great, soft fan, and obediently stole away, over the polished floor, on his bare tiptoes.

She stayed motionless, with gaze riveted upon her child, and her face the picture of fright.

¹¹⁹ **cochon de lait** – a sucking pig; here: a small baby (*French*)

¹²⁰ **Mais si!** = Oh, yes, yes! (*French*)

¹²¹ **peignoir** – a loose dressing gown

Presently her husband entered the room, and without noticing her, went to a table and began to search among some papers which covered it.

‘Armand,’ she called to him, in a voice which must have stabbed him, if he was human. But he did not notice. ‘Armand,’ she said again. Then she rose and tottered towards him. ‘Armand,’ she panted once more, clutching his arm, ‘look at our child. What does it mean? tell me.’

He coldly but gently loosened her fingers from about his arm and thrust the hand away from him. ‘Tell me what it means!’ she cried despairingly.

‘It means,’ he answered lightly, ‘that the child is not white; it means that you are not white.’

A quick conception of all that this accusation meant for her nerved her with unwonted courage to deny it. ‘It is a lie; it is not true, I am white! Look at my hair, it is brown; and my eyes are gray, Armand, you know they are gray. And my skin is fair,’ seizing his wrist. ‘Look at my hand; whiter than yours, Armand,’ she laughed hysterically.

‘As white as La Blanche’s,’ he returned cruelly; and went away leaving her alone with their child.

When she could hold a pen in her hand, she sent a despairing letter to Madame Valmonde.

‘My mother, they tell me I am not white. Armand has told me I am not white. For God’s sake tell them it is not true. You must know it is not true. I shall die. I must die. I cannot be so unhappy, and live.’

The answer that came was brief:

‘My own Desirée: Come home to Valmonde; back to your mother who loves you. Come with your child.’

When the letter reached Desirée she went with it to her husband’s study, and laid it open upon the desk before which he sat. She was like a stone image: silent, white, motionless after she placed it there.

In silence he ran his cold eyes over the written words.

He said nothing. ‘Shall I go, Armand?’ she asked in tones sharp with agonized suspense.

‘Yes, go.’

‘Do you want me to go?’

‘Yes, I want you to go.’

He thought Almighty God had dealt cruelly and unjustly with him; and felt, somehow, that he was paying Him back in kind when he stabbed thus into his wife’s soul. Moreover he no longer loved her, because of the unconscious injury she had brought upon his home and his name.

She turned away like one stunned by a blow, and walked slowly towards the door, hoping he would call her back.

‘Good-by, Armand,’ she moaned.

He did not answer her. That was his last blow at fate.

Desirée went in search of her child. Zandrine was pacing the sombre gallery with it. She took the little one from the nurse’s arms with no word of explanation, and descending the steps, walked away, under the live-oak branches.

It was an October afternoon; the sun was just sinking. Out in the still fields the negroes were picking cotton.

Desirée had not changed the thin white garment nor the slippers which she wore. Her hair was uncovered and the sun’s rays brought a golden gleam from its brown meshes. She did not take the broad, beaten road which led to the far-off plantation of Valmonde. She walked across a deserted field, where the stubble bruised her tender feet, so delicately shod, and tore her thin gown to shreds.

She disappeared among the reeds and willows that grew thick along the banks of the deep, sluggish bayou¹²²; and she did not come back again.

¹²² **bayou** – a river armlet with slow movement

Some weeks later there was a curious scene enacted at L'Abri. In the centre of the smoothly swept back yard was a great bonfire. Armand Aubigny sat in the wide hallway that commanded a view of the spectacle; and it was he who dealt out to a half dozen negroes the material which kept this fire ablaze.

A graceful cradle of willow, with all its dainty furnishings, was laid upon the pyre, which had already been fed with the richness of a priceless layette¹²³. Then there were silk gowns, and velvet and satin ones added to these; laces, too, and embroideries; bonnets and gloves; for the corbeille had been of rare quality.

The last thing to go was a tiny bundle of letters; innocent little scribblings that Desirée had sent to him during the days of their espousal¹²⁴. There was the remnant of one back in the drawer from which he took them. But it was not Desirée's; it was part of an old letter from his mother to his father. He read it. She was thanking God for the blessing of her husband's love: –

‘But above all,’ she wrote, ‘night and day, I thank the good God for having so arranged our lives that our dear Armand will never know that his mother, who adores him, belongs to the race that is cursed with the brand of slavery.’

¹²³ **layette** – a dowry of a new-born baby (*French*)

¹²⁴ **espousal** – marriage, engagement (*archaic*)

The Traveller's Story of a Terribly Strange Bed (Wilkie Collins)

Prologue to the First Story

Before I begin, by the aid of my wife's patient attention and ready pen, to relate any of the stories which I have heard at various times from persons whose likenesses I have been employed to take, it will not be amiss if I try to secure the reader's interest in the following pages by briefly explaining how I became possessed of the narrative matter which they contain.

Of myself I have nothing to say, but that I have followed the profession of a travelling portrait-painter for the last fifteen years. The pursuit of my calling has not only led me all through England, but has taken me twice to Scotland and once to Ireland. In moving from district to district, I am never guided beforehand by any settled plan. Sometimes the letters of recommendation which I get from persons who are satisfied with the work I have done for them determine the direction in which I travel. Sometimes I hear of a new neighbourhood in which there is no resident artist of ability, and remove thither on speculation. Sometimes my friends among the picture-dealers say a good word on my behalf to their rich customers, and so pave the way for me in the large towns. Sometimes my prosperous and famous brother artists, hearing of small commissions which it is not worth their while to accept, mention my name, and procure me introductions to pleasant country houses. Thus I get on, now in one way and now in another, not winning a reputation or making a fortune, but happier, perhaps, on the whole, than many men who have got both the one and the other. So, at least, I try to think now, though I started in my youth with as high an ambition as the best of them. Thank God, it is not my business here to speak of past times and their disappointments. A twinge of the old hopeless heartache comes over me sometimes still, when I think of my student days.

One peculiarity of my present way of life is, that it brings me into contact with all sorts of characters. I almost feel, by this time, as if I had painted every civilized variety of the human race. Upon the whole, my experience of the world, rough as it has been, has not taught me to think unkindly of my fellow-creatures. I have certainly received such treatment at the hands of some of my sitters as I could not describe without saddening and shocking any kind-hearted reader; but, taking one year and one place with another, I have cause to remember with gratitude and respect, sometimes even with friendship and affection, a very large proportion of the numerous persons who have employed me.

Some of the results of my experience are curious in a moral point of view. For example, I have found women almost uniformly less delicate in asking me about my terms, and less generous in remunerating me for my services, than men. On the other hand, men, within my knowledge, are decidedly vainer of their personal attractions, and more vexatiously anxious to have them done full justice to on canvas, than women. Taking both sexes together, I have found young people, for the most part, more gentle, more reasonable, and more considerate than old. And, summing up, in a general way, my experience of different ranks (which extends, let me premise, all the way down from peers to publicans), I have met with most of my formal and ungracious receptions among rich people of uncertain social standing; the highest classes and the lowest among my employers almost always contrive – in widely different ways, of course – to make me feel at home as soon as I enter their houses.

The one great obstacle that I have to contend against in the practice of my profession is not, as some persons may imagine, the difficulty of making my sitters keep their heads still while I paint them, but the difficulty of getting them to preserve the natural look and the every-day

peculiarities of dress and manner. People will assume an expression, will brush up their hair, will correct any little characteristic carelessness in their apparel – will, in short, when they want to have their likenesses taken, look as if they were sitting for their pictures. If I paint them under these artificial circumstances, I fail, of course, to present them in their habitual aspect; and my portrait, as a necessary consequence, disappoints everybody, the sitter always included. When we wish to judge of a man's character by his handwriting, we want his customary scrawl dashed off with his common workaday pen, not his best small text traced laboriously with the finest procurable crow-quill point. So it is with portrait-painting, which is, after all, nothing but a right reading of the externals of character recognisably presented to the view of others.

Experience, after repeated trials, has proved to me that the only way of getting sitters who persist in assuming a set look to resume their habitual expression is to lead them into talking about some subject in which they are greatly interested. If I can only beguile them into speaking earnestly, no matter on what topic, I am sure of recovering their natural expression; sure of seeing all the little precious every-day peculiarities of the man or woman peep out, one after another, quite unawares. The long maundering stories about nothing, the wearisome recitals of petty grievances, the local anecdotes unrelieved by the faintest suspicion of anything like general interest, which I have been condemned to hear, as a consequence of thawing the ice off the features of formal sitters by the method just described, would fill hundreds of volumes and promote the repose of thousands of readers. On the other hand, if I have suffered under the tediousness of the many, I have not been without my compensating gains from the wisdom and experience of the few. To some of my sitters I have been indebted for information which has enlarged my mind, to some for advice which has lightened my heart, to some for narratives of strange adventure which riveted my attention at the time, which have served to interest and amuse my fireside circle for many years past, and which are now, I would fain hope, destined to make kind friends for me among a wider audience than any that I have yet addressed.

Singularly enough, almost all the best stories that I have heard from my sitters have been told by accident. I only remember two cases in which a story was volunteered to me; and, although I have often tried the experiment, I cannot call to mind even a single instance in which leading questions (as lawyers call them) on my part, addressed to a sitter, ever produced any result worth recording. Over and over again I have been disastrously successful in encouraging dull people to weary me. But the clever people who have something interesting to say seem, so far as I have observed them, to acknowledge no other stimulant than chance. For every story, excepting one, I have been indebted, in the first instance, to the capricious influence of the same chance. Something my sitter has seen about me, something I have remarked in my sitter, or in the room in which I take the likeness, or in the neighbourhood through which I pass on my way to work, has suggested the necessary association, or has started the right train of recollections, and then the story appeared to begin of its own accord. Occasionally the most casual notice, on my part, of some very unpromising object has smoothed the way for the relation of a long and interesting narrative. I first heard one of the most dramatic stories merely through being carelessly inquisitive to know the history of a stuffed poodle-dog.

It is thus not without reason that I lay some stress on the desirableness of prefacing the following narrative by a brief account of the curious manner in which I became possessed of it. As to my capacity for repeating the story correctly, I can answer for it that my memory may be trusted. I may claim it as a merit, because it is, after all, a mechanical one, that I forget nothing, and that I can call long-past conversations and events as readily to my recollection as if they had happened but a few weeks ago. Of two things at least I feel tolerably certain before-hand, in meditating over its contents: first, that I can repeat correctly all that I have heard; and, secondly, that I have never missed anything worth hearing when my sitters were addressing me on an interesting subject.

Although I cannot take the lead in talking while I am engaged in painting, I can listen while others speak, and work all the better for it.

So much in the way of general preface to the pages for which I am about to ask the reader's attention. Let me now advance to particulars, and describe how I came to hear the story. I begin with it because it is the story that I have oftenest 'rehearsed,' to borrow a phrase from the stage. Wherever I go, I am sooner or later sure to tell it. Only last night I was persuaded into repeating it once more by the inhabitants of the farm-house in which I am now staying.

Not many years ago, on returning from a short holiday visit to a friend settled in Paris, I found professional letters awaiting me at my agent's in London, which required my immediate presence in Liverpool. Without stopping to unpack, I proceeded by the first conveyance to my new destination; and, calling at the picture-dealer's shop where portrait-painting engagements were received for me, found to my great satisfaction that I had remunerative employment in prospect, in and about Liverpool¹²⁵, for at least two months to come. I was putting up my letters in high spirits, and was just leaving the picture-dealer's shop to look out for comfortable lodgings, when I was met at the door by the landlord of one of the largest hotels in Liverpool – an old acquaintance whom I had known as manager of a tavern in London in my student days.

'Mr. Kerby!' he exclaimed, in great astonishment. 'What an unexpected meeting! the last man in the world whom I expected to see, and yet the very man whose services I want to make use of!'

'What! more work for me?' said I. 'Are all the people in Liverpool going to have their portraits painted?'

'I only know of one,' replied the landlord, 'a gentleman staying at my hotel, who wants a chalk drawing done of him. I was on my way here to inquire for any artist whom our picture-dealing friend could recommend. How glad I am that I met you before I had committed myself to employing a stranger!'

'Is this likeness wanted at once?' I asked, thinking of the number of engagements that I had already got in my pocket.

'Immediately – to-day – this very hour, if possible,' said the landlord. 'Mr. Faulkner, the gentleman I am speaking of, was to have sailed yesterday for the Brazils from this place; but the wind shifted last night to the wrong quarter, and he came ashore again this morning. He may, of course, be detained here for some time; but he may also be called on board ship at half an hour's notice, if the wind shifts back again in the right direction. This uncertainty makes it a matter of importance that the likeness should be begun immediately. Undertake it if you possibly can, for Mr. Faulkner is a liberal gentleman, who is sure to give you your own terms.'

I reflected for a minute or two. The portrait was only wanted in chalk, and would not take long; besides, I might finish it in the evening, if my other engagements pressed hard upon me in the daytime. Why not leave my luggage at the picture-dealer's, put off looking for lodgings till night, and secure the new commission boldly by going back at once with the landlord to the hotel? I decided on following this course almost as soon as the idea occurred to me; put my chalks in my pocket, and a sheet of drawing-paper in the first of my portfolios that came to hand; and so presented myself before Mr. Faulkner, ready to take his likeness, literally at five minutes' notice.

I found him a very pleasant, intelligent man, young and handsome. He had been a great traveller, had visited all the wonders of the East, and was now about to explore the wilds of the vast South American continent. Thus much he told me good-humouredly and unconstrainedly while I was preparing my drawing materials.

As soon as I had put him in the right light and position, and had seated myself opposite to him, he changed the subject of conversation, and asked me, a little confusedly as I thought, if it

¹²⁵ **Liverpool** – a city and port on the Irish Sea in northeastern England

was not a customary practice among portrait-painters to gloss over the faults in their sitters' faces, and to make as much as possible of any good points which their features might possess.

'Certainly,' I answered. 'You have described the whole art and mystery of successful portrait-painting in a few words.'

'May I beg, then,' said he, 'that you will depart from the usual practice in my case, and draw me with all my defects, exactly as I am? The fact is,' he went on, after a moment's pause, 'the likeness you are now preparing to take is intended for my mother; my roving disposition makes me a great anxiety to her, and she parted from me this last time very sadly and unwillingly. I don't know how the idea came into my head, but it struck me this morning that I could not better employ the time while I was delayed here on shore than by getting my likeness done to send to her as a keepsake. She has no portrait of me since I was a child, and she is sure to value a drawing of me more than anything else I could send to her. I only trouble you with this explanation to prove that I am really sincere in my wish to be drawn unflatteringly, exactly as I am.'

Secretly respecting and admiring him for what he had just said, I promised that his directions should be implicitly followed, and began to work immediately. Before I had pursued my occupation for ten minutes, the conversation began to flag, and the usual obstacle to my success with a sitter gradually set itself up between us. Quite unconsciously, of course, Mr. Faulkner stiffened his neck, shut his mouth, and contracted his eyebrows – evidently under the impression that he was facilitating the process of taking his portrait by making his face as like a lifeless mask as possible. All traces of his natural animated expression were fast disappearing, and he was beginning to change into a heavy and rather melancholy-looking man.

This complete alteration was of no great consequence so long as I was only engaged in drawing the outline of his face and the general form of his features. I accordingly worked on doggedly for more than an hour; then left off to point my chinks again, and to give my sitter a few minutes' rest. Thus far the likeness had not suffered through Mr. Faulkner's unfortunate notion of the right way of sitting for his portrait; but the time of difficulty, as I well knew, was to come. It was impossible for me to think of putting any expression into the drawing unless I could contrive some means, when he resumed his chair, of making him look like himself again. 'I will talk to him about foreign parts,' thought I, 'and try if I can't make him forget that he is sitting for his picture in that way.'

While I was pointing my chinks, Mr. Faulkner was walking up and down the room. He chanced to see the portfolio I had brought with me leaning against the wall, and asked if there were any sketches in it. I told him there were a few which I had made during my recent stay in Paris. 'In Paris?' he repeated, with a look of interest; 'may I see them?'

I gave him the permission he asked as a matter of course. Sitting down, he took the portfolio on his knee, and began to look through it. He turned over the first five sketches rapidly enough; but when he came to the sixth I saw his face flush directly, and observed that he took the drawing out of the portfolio, carried it to the window, and remained silently absorbed in the contemplation of it for full five minutes. After that he turned round to me, and asked very anxiously if I had any objection to parting with that sketch.

It was the least interesting drawing of the collection – merely a view in one of the streets running by the backs of the houses in the Palais Royal¹²⁶. Some four or five of these houses were comprised in the view, which was of no particular use to me in any way, and which was too valueless, as a work of art, for me to think of selling it. I begged his acceptance of it at once. He thanked me quite warmly; and then, seeing that I looked a little surprised at the odd selection he had made from my sketches, laughingly asked me if I could guess why he had been so anxious to become possessed of the view which I had given him.

¹²⁶ the Palais Royal – an area and a famous theatre in Paris

‘Probably,’ I answered, ‘there is some remarkable historical association connected with that street at the back of the Palais Royal, of which I am ignorant.’

‘No,’ said Mr. Faulkner; ‘at least none that *I* know of. The only association connected with the place in *my* mind is a purely personal association. Look at this house in your drawing – the house with the water-pipe running down it from top to bottom. I once passed a night there – a night I shall never forget to the day of my death. I have had some awkward travelling adventures in my time; but *that* adventure! Well, never mind, suppose we begin the sitting. I make but a bad return for your kindness in giving me the sketch by thus wasting your time in mere talk.’

‘Come! come!’ thought I, as he went back to the sitter’s chair, ‘I shall see your natural expression on your face if I can only get you to talk about that adventure.’ It was easy enough to lead him in the right direction. At the first hint from me, he returned to the subject of the house in the back street. Without, I hope, showing any undue curiosity, I contrived to let him see that I felt a deep interest in everything he now said. After two or three preliminary hesitations, he at last, to my great joy, fairly started on the narrative of his adventure. In the interest of his subject he soon completely forgot that he was sitting for his portrait, – the very expression that I wanted came over his face, – and my drawing proceeded toward completion, in the right direction, and to the best purpose. At every fresh touch I felt more and more certain that I was now getting the better of my grand difficulty; and I enjoyed the additional gratification of having my work lightened by the recital of a true story, which possessed, in my estimation, all the excitement of the most exciting romance.

This, as I recollect it, is how Mr. Faulkner told me his adventure.

The Traveller's Story of a Terribly Strange Bed

Shortly after my education at college was finished, I happened to be staying at Paris with an English friend. We were both young men then, and lived, I am afraid, rather a wild life, in the delightful city of our sojourn. One night we were idling about the neighbourhood of the Palais Royal, doubtful to what amusement we should next betake ourselves. My friend proposed a visit to Frascati's¹²⁷; but his suggestion was not to my taste. I knew Frascati's, as the French saying is, by heart; had lost and won plenty of five-franc pieces there, merely for amusement's sake, until it was amusement no longer, and was thoroughly tired, in fact, of all the ghastly respectabilities of such a social anomaly as a respectable gambling-house. 'For Heaven's sake,' said I to my friend, 'let us go somewhere where we can see a little genuine, blackguard, poverty-stricken gaming with no false gingerbread glitter thrown over it all. Let us get away from fashionable Frascati's, to a house where they don't mind letting in a man with a ragged coat, or a man with no coat, ragged or otherwise.' 'Very well,' said my friend, 'we needn't go out of the Palais Royal to find the sort of company you want. Here's the place just before us; as blackguard a place, by all report, as you could possibly wish to see.' In another minute we arrived at the door and entered the house, the back of which you have drawn in your sketch.

When we got upstairs, and had left our hats and sticks with the doorkeeper, we were admitted into the chief gambling-room. We did not find many people assembled there. But, few as the men were who looked up at us on our entrance, they were all types – lamentably true types – of their respective classes.

We had come to see blackguards; but these men were something worse. There is a comic side, more or less appreciable, in all blackguardism – here there was nothing but tragedy – mute, weird tragedy. The quiet in the room was horrible. The thin, haggard, long-haired young man, whose sunken eyes fiercely watched the turning up of the cards, never spoke; the flabby, fat-faced, pimply player, who pricked his piece of pasteboard perseveringly, to register how often black won, and how often red – never spoke; the dirty, wrinkled old man, with the vulture eyes and the darned great-coat, who had lost his last sou¹²⁸, and still looked on desperately, after he could play no longer – never spoke. Even the voice of the croupier sounded as if it were strangely dulled and thickened in the atmosphere of the room. I had entered the place to laugh, but the spectacle before me was something to weep over. I soon found it necessary to take refuge in excitement from the depression of spirits which was fast stealing on me. Unfortunately I sought the nearest excitement, by going to the table and beginning to play. Still more unfortunately, as the event will show, I won – won prodigiously; won incredibly; won at such a rate that the regular players at the table crowded round me; and staring at my stakes with hungry, superstitious eyes, whispered to one another that the English stranger was going to break the bank.

The game was Rouge et Noir¹²⁹. I had played at it in every city in Europe, without, however, the care or the wish to study the Theory of Chances¹³⁰ – that philosopher's stone of all gamblers! And a gambler, in the strict sense of the word, I had never been. I was heart-whole from the corroding passion for play. My gaming was a mere idle amusement. I never resorted to it by necessity, because I never knew what it was to want money. I never practised it so incessantly as to lose more than I could afford, or to gain more than I could coolly pocket without being thrown

¹²⁷ **Frascati's** – a casino in Paris

¹²⁸ **sou** – a French coin of low value (no longer in use)

¹²⁹ **Rouge et Noir** – 'Red and Black' (*French*), a French card game played in casinos of France, Italy and Monte Carlo

¹³⁰ **the Theory of Chances** – a theory used in gambling to predict the outcome of a game, the result of which may be determined by chance, or accident, or miscalculation

off my balance by my good luck. In short, I had hitherto frequented gambling-tables – just as I frequented ball-rooms and opera-houses – because they amused me, and because I had nothing better to do with my leisure hours.

But on this occasion it was very different – now, for the first time in my life, I felt what the passion for play really was. My success first bewildered, and then, in the most literal meaning of the word, intoxicated me. Incredible as it may appear, it is nevertheless true, that I only lost when I attempted to estimate chances, and played according to previous calculation. If I left everything to luck, and staked without any care or consideration, I was sure to win – to win in the face of every recognized probability in favour of the bank. At first some of the men present ventured their money safely enough on my colour; but I speedily increased my stakes to sums which they dared not risk. One after another they left off playing, and breathlessly looked on at my game.

Still, time after time, I staked higher and higher, and still won. The excitement in the room rose to fever pitch. The silence was interrupted by a deep-muttered chorus of oaths and exclamations in different languages, every time the gold was shovelled across to my side of the table – even the imperturbable croupier dashed his rake on the floor in a (French) fury of astonishment at my success. But one man present preserved his self-possession, and that man was my friend. He came to my side, and whispering in English, begged me to leave the place, satisfied with what I had already gained. I must do him the justice to say that he repeated his warnings and entreaties several times, and only left me and went away after I had rejected his advice (I was to all intents and purposes gambling drunk) in terms which rendered it impossible for him to address me again that night.

Shortly after he had gone, a hoarse voice behind me cried: ‘Permit me, my dear sir – permit me to restore to their proper place two napoleons¹³¹ which you have dropped. Wonderful luck, sir! I pledge you my word of honour, as an old soldier, in the course of my long experience in this sort of thing, I never saw such luck as yours – never! Go on, sir – *Sacre mille bombes!*¹³² Go on boldly, and break the bank!’

I turned round and saw, nodding and smiling at me with inveterate civility, a tall man, dressed in a frogged and braided surtout. If I had been in my senses, I should have considered him, personally, as being rather a suspicious specimen of an old soldier. He had goggling bloodshot eyes, mangy moustaches, and a broken nose. His voice betrayed a barrack-room intonation of the worst order, and he had the dirtiest pair of hands I ever saw – even in France. These little personal peculiarities exercised, however, no repelling influence on me. In the mad excitement, the reckless triumph of that moment, I was ready to ‘fraternize’ with anybody who encouraged me in my game. I accepted the old soldier’s offered pinch of snuff; clapped him on the back, and swore he was the honestest fellow in the world – the most glorious relic of the Grand Army that I had ever met with. ‘Go on!’ cried my military friend, snapping his fingers in ecstasy – ‘Go on, and win! Break the bank – *Mille tonnerres!*¹³³ my gallant English comrade, break the bank!’

And I *did* go on – went on at such a rate, that in another quarter of an hour the croupier¹³⁴ called out, ‘Gentlemen, the bank has discontinued for to-night.’ All the notes, and all the gold in that ‘bank’ now lay in a heap under my hands; the whole floating capital of the gambling-house was waiting to pour into my pockets!

‘Tie up the money in your pocket-handkerchief, my worthy sir,’ said the old soldier, as I wildly plunged my hands into my heap of gold. ‘Tie it up, as we used to tie up a bit of dinner in the Grand Army; your winnings are too heavy for any breeches-pockets that ever were sewed. There!

¹³¹ **napoleon** – an old French gold coin equal to 20 francs

¹³² **Sacre mille bombes!** – an exclamation of anxiety (*French*)

¹³³ **Mille tonnerres!** – an exclamation of encouragement (*French*)

¹³⁴ **croupier** – a person who gathers money and pays out winnings in a gambling house

that's it – shovel them in, notes and all! *Credie!* what luck! Stop! another napoleon on the floor! Ah! *sacre petit polisson de Napoleon!*¹³⁵ have I found thee at last? Now then, sir – two tight double knots each way with your honourable permission, and the money's safe. Feel it! feel it, fortunate sir! hard and round as a cannon-ball – *Ah, bah!* if they had only fired such cannon-balls at us at Austerlitz¹³⁶ – *nom d'une pipe!*¹³⁷ if they only had! And now, as an ancient grenadier, as an ex-brave of the French army, what remains for me to do? I ask what? Simply this: to entreat my valued English friend to drink a bottle of champagne with me, and toast the goddess Fortune in foaming goblets before we part!

'Excellent ex-brave! Convivial ancient grenadier! Champagne by all means! An English cheer for an old soldier! Hurrah! hurrah! Another English cheer for the goddess Fortune! Hurrah! hurrah! hurrah!'

'Bravo! the Englishman; the amiable, gracious Englishman, in whose veins circulates the vivacious blood of France! Another glass? *Ah, bah!* – the bottle is empty! Never mind! *Vive le vin!*¹³⁸ I, the old soldier, order another bottle, and half a pound of bonbons with it!'

'No, no, ex-brave; never – ancient grenadier!¹³⁹ *Your* bottle last time; my bottle this. Behold it! Toast away! The French Army! the great Napoleon! the present company! the croupier! the honest croupier's wife and daughters – if he has any! the Ladies generally! everybody in the world!'

By the time the second bottle of champagne was emptied, I felt as if I had been drinking liquid fire – my brain seemed all aflame. No excess in wine had ever had this effect on me before in my life. Was it the result of a stimulant acting upon my system when I was in a highly excited state? Was my stomach in a particularly disordered condition? Or was the champagne amazingly strong?

'Ex-brave of the French Army!' cried I, in a mad state of exhilaration, 'I am on fire! how are you? You have set me on fire. Do you hear, my hero of Austerlitz? Let us have a third bottle of champagne to put the flame out!'

The old soldier wagged his head, rolled his goggle-eyes, until I expected to see them slip out of their sockets; placed his dirty forefinger by the side of his broken nose; solemnly ejaculated 'Coffee!' and immediately ran off into an inner room.

The word pronounced by the eccentric veteran seemed to have a magical effect on the rest of the company present. With one accord they all rose to depart. Probably they had expected to profit by my intoxication; but finding that my new friend was benevolently bent on preventing me from getting dead drunk, had now abandoned all hope of thriving pleasantly on my winnings. Whatever their motive might be, at any rate they went away in a body. When the old soldier returned, and sat down again opposite to me at the table, we had the room to ourselves. I could see the croupier, in a sort of vestibule which opened out of it, eating his supper in solitude. The silence was now deeper than ever.

A sudden change, too, had come over the 'ex-brave'. He assumed a portentously solemn look; and when he spoke to me again, his speech was ornamented by no oaths, enforced by no finger-snapping, enlivened by no apostrophes or exclamations.

'Listen, my dear sir,' said he, in mysteriously confidential tones – 'listen to an old soldier's advice. I have been to the mistress of the house (a very charming woman, with a genius for cookery!) to impress on her the necessity of making us some particularly strong and good coffee. You must drink this coffee in order to get rid of your little amiable exaltation of spirits before you think of going home – you *must*, my good and gracious friend! With all that money to take home

¹³⁵ *Sacre petit polisson de Napoleon!* – Oh, little prankster of Napoleon! (*French*)

¹³⁶ *Austerlitz* – the Battle of Austerlitz in 1805, one of the greatest victories of Napoleon over joined Russian-Austrian forces

¹³⁷ *Nom d'une pipe!* – an exclamation 'listen', 'oh', 'there' (*French*)

¹³⁸ *Vive le vine!* = Long live the wine! (*French*)

¹³⁹ *grenadier* – a soldier trained to hurl grenades, small explosive bombs

to-night, it is a sacred duty to yourself to have your wits about you. You are known to be a winner to an enormous extent by several gentlemen present to-night, who, in a certain point of view, are very worthy and excellent fellows; but they are mortal men, my dear sir, and they have their amiable weaknesses. Need I say more? Ah, no, no! you understand me! Now, this is what you must do – send for a cabriolet¹⁴⁰ when you feel quite well again – draw up all the windows when you get into it – and tell the driver to take you home only through the large and well-lighted thoroughfares. Do this; and you and your money will be safe. Do this; and to-morrow you will thank an old soldier for giving you a word of honest advice.’

Just as the ex-brave ended his oration in very lachrymose tones, the coffee came in, ready poured out in two cups. My attentive friend handed me one of the cups with a bow. I was parched with thirst, and drank it off at a draught. Almost instantly afterwards, I was seized with a fit of giddiness, and felt more completely intoxicated than ever. The room whirled round and round furiously; the old soldier seemed to be regularly bobbing up and down before me like the piston of a steam-engine. I was half deafened by a violent singing in my ears; a feeling of utter bewilderment, helplessness, idiocy, overcame me. I rose from my chair, holding on by the table to keep my balance; and stammered out that I felt dreadfully unwell – so unwell that I did not know how I was to get home.

‘My dear friend,’ answered the old soldier – and even his voice seemed to be bobbing up and down as he spoke – ‘my dear friend, it would be madness to go home in *your* state; you would be sure to lose your money; you might be robbed and murdered with the greatest ease. *I* am going to sleep here; do you sleep here, too – they make up capital beds in this house – take one; sleep off the effects of the wine, and go home safely with your winnings to-morrow – to-morrow, in broad daylight.’

I had but two ideas left: one, that I must never let go hold of my handkerchief full of money; the other, that I must lie down somewhere immediately, and fall off into a comfortable sleep. So I agreed to the proposal about the bed, and took the offered arm of the old soldier, carrying my money with my disengaged hand. Preceded by the croupier, we passed along some passages and up a flight of stairs into the bedroom which I was to occupy. The ex-brave shook me warmly by the hand, proposed that we should breakfast together, and then, followed by the croupier, left me for the night.

I ran to the wash-hand stand; drank some of the water in my jug; poured the rest out, and plunged my face into it; then sat down in a chair and tried to compose myself. I soon felt better. The change for my lungs, from the fetid atmosphere of the gambling-room to the cool air of the apartment I now occupied, the almost equally refreshing change for my eyes, from the glaring gaslights of the ‘salon’ to the dim, quiet flicker of one bedroom candle, aided wonderfully the restorative effects of cold water. The giddiness left me, and I began to feel a little like a reasonable being again. My first thought was of the risk of sleeping all night in a gambling-house; my second, of the still greater risk of trying to get out after the house was closed, and of going home alone at night through the streets of Paris with a large sum of money about me. I had slept in worse places than this on my travels; so I determined to lock, bolt, and barricade my door, and take my chance till the next morning.

Accordingly, I secured myself against all intrusion; looked under the bed, and into the cupboard; tried the fastening of the window; and then, satisfied that I had taken every proper precaution, pulled off my upper clothing, put my light, which was a dim one, on the hearth among a feathery litter of wood-ashes, and got into bed, with the handkerchief full of money under my pillow.

¹⁴⁰ **cabriolet** – a two-wheeled, one-horse open carriage, first used in France in the 18th century

I soon felt not only that I could not go to sleep, but that I could not even close my eyes. I was wide awake, and in a high fever. Every nerve in my body trembled – every one of my senses seemed to be preternaturally sharpened. I tossed and rolled, and tried every kind of position, and perseveringly sought out the cold corners of the bed, and all to no purpose. Now I thrust my arms over the clothes; now I poked them under the clothes; now I violently shot my legs straight out down to the bottom of the bed; now I convulsively coiled them up as near my chin as they would go; now I shook out my crumpled pillow, changed it to the cool side, patted it flat, and lay down quietly on my back; now I fiercely doubled it in two, set it up on end, thrust it against the board of the bed, and tried a sitting posture. Every effort was in vain; I groaned with vexation as I felt that I was in for a sleepless night.

What could I do? I had no book to read. And yet, unless I found out some method of diverting my mind, I felt certain that I was in the condition to imagine all sorts of horrors; to rack my brain with forebodings of every possible and impossible danger; in short, to pass the night in suffering all conceivable varieties of nervous terror.

I raised myself on my elbow, and looked about the room – which was brightened by a lovely moonlight pouring straight through the window – to see if it contained any pictures or ornaments that I could at all clearly distinguish. While my eyes wandered from wall to wall, a remembrance of Le Maistre's¹⁴¹ delightful little book, 'Voyage autour de ma Chambre,'¹⁴² occurred to me. I resolved to imitate the French author, and find occupation and amusement enough to relieve the tedium of my wakefulness, by making a mental inventory of every article of furniture I could see, and by following up to their sources the multitude of associations which even a chair, a table, or a wash-hand stand may be made to call forth.

In the nervous unsettled state of my mind at that moment, I found it much easier to make my inventory than to make my reflections, and thereupon soon gave up all hope of thinking in Le Maistre's fanciful track – or, indeed, of thinking at all. I looked about the room at the different articles of furniture, and did nothing more.

There was, first, the bed I was lying in; a four-post bed, of all things in the world to meet with in Paris – yes, a thoroughly clumsy British four-poster, with the regular top lined with chintz – the regular fringed valance all round – the regular stifling, unwholesome curtains, which I remembered having mechanically drawn back against the posts without particularly noticing the bed when I first got into the room. Then there was the marble-topped wash-hand stand, from which the water I had spilled, in my hurry to pour it out, was still dripping, slowly and more slowly, on to the brick floor. Then two small chairs, with my coat, waistcoat, and trousers flung on them. Then a large elbow-chair covered with dirty-white dimity, with my cravat and shirt collar thrown over the back. Then a chest of drawers with two of the brass handles off, and a tawdry, broken china inkstand placed on it by way of ornament for the top. Then the dressing-table, adorned by a very small looking-glass, and a very large pincushion. Then the window – an unusually large window. Then a dark old picture, which the feeble candle dimly showed me. It was a picture of a fellow in a high Spanish hat, crowned with a plume of towering feathers. A swarthy, sinister ruffian, looking upward, shading his eyes with his hand, and looking intently upward – it might be at some tall gallows at which he was going to be hanged. At any rate, he had the appearance of thoroughly deserving it.

This picture put a kind of constraint upon me to look upward too – at the top of the bed. It was a gloomy and not an interesting object, and I looked back at the picture. I counted the feathers in the man's hat – they stood out in relief – three white, two green. I observed the crown of his hat, which was of conical shape, according to the fashion supposed to have been favoured by Guido

¹⁴¹ **Le Maistre** – Antoine Le Maistre (1608–1658), a French religious figure and theologian

¹⁴² 'Voyage autour de ma Chambre' – 'A Trip Around My Room' (French)

Fawkes¹⁴³. I wondered what he was looking up at. It couldn't be at the stars; such a desperado¹⁴⁴ was neither astrologer nor astronomer. It must be at the high gallows, and he was going to be hanged presently. Would the executioner come into possession of his conical crowned hat and plume of feathers? I counted the feathers again – three white, two green.

While I still lingered over this very improving and intellectual employment, my thoughts insensibly began to wander. The moonlight shining into the room reminded me of a certain moonlight night in England – the night after a picnic party in a Welsh valley. Every incident of the drive homeward, through lovely scenery, which the moonlight made lovelier than ever, came back to my remembrance, though I had never given the picnic a thought for years; though, if I had *tried* to recollect it, I could certainly have recalled little or nothing of that scene long past. Of all the wonderful faculties that help to tell us we are immortal, which speaks the sublime truth more eloquently than memory? Here was I, in a strange house of the most suspicious character, in a situation of uncertainty, and even of peril, which might seem to make the cool exercise of my recollection almost out of the question; nevertheless, remembering, quite involuntarily, places, people, conversations, minute circumstances of every kind, which I had thought forgotten for ever; which I could not possibly have recalled at will, even under the most favourable auspices. And what cause had produced in a moment the whole of this strange, complicated, mysterious effect? Nothing but some rays of moonlight shining in at my bedroom window.

I was still thinking of the picnic – of our merriment on the drive home – of the sentimental young lady who *would quote* 'Childe Harold'¹⁴⁵ because it was moonlight. I was absorbed by these past scenes and past amusements, when, in an instant, the thread on which my memories hung snapped asunder; my attention immediately came back to present things more vividly than ever, and I found myself, I neither knew why nor wherefore, looking hard at the picture again.

Looking for what?

Good God! the man had pulled his hat down on his brows! No! the hat itself was gone! Where was the conical crown? Where the feathers – three white, two green? Not there! In place of the hat and feathers, what dusky object was it that now hid his forehead, his eyes, his shading hand?

Was the bed moving?

I turned on my back and looked up. Was I mad? drunk? dreaming? giddy again? or was the top of the bed really moving down – sinking slowly, regularly, silently, horribly, right down throughout the whole of its length and breadth – right down upon me, as I lay underneath?

My blood seemed to stand still. A deadly paralysing coldness stole all over me as I turned my head round on the pillow and determined to test whether the bed-top was really moving or not, by keeping my eye on the man in the picture.

The next look in that direction was enough. The dull, black, frowzy outline of the valance above me was within an inch of being parallel with his waist. I still looked breathlessly. And steadily and slowly – very slowly – I saw the figure, and the line of frame below the figure, vanish, as the valance moved down before it.

I am, constitutionally, anything but timid. I have been on more than one occasion in peril of my life, and have not lost my self-possession for an instant; but when the conviction first settled on my mind that the bed-top was really moving, was steadily and continuously sinking down upon me, I looked up shuddering, helpless, panic-stricken, beneath the hideous machinery for murder, which was advancing closer and closer to suffocate me where I lay.

¹⁴³ **Guido Fawkes** – Guy Fawkes (1570–1606), an active participant of the famous Gunpowder Plot against James I of England in 1605

¹⁴⁴ **desperado** – a bandit, a ruffian

¹⁴⁵ **'Childe Harold'** – 'Childe Harold's Pilgrimage', a poem by George Gordon Byron (1788–1824), a famous British Romantic poet

I looked up, motionless, speechless, breathless. The candle, fully spent, went out; but the moonlight still brightened the room. Down and down, without pausing and without sounding, came the bed-top, and still my panic terror seemed to bind me faster and faster to the mattress on which I lay – down and down it sank, till the dusty odour from the lining of the canopy came stealing into my nostrils.

At that final moment the instinct of self-preservation startled me out of my trance, and I moved at last. There was just room for me to roll myself sideways off the bed. As I dropped noiselessly to the floor, the edge of the murderous canopy touched me on the shoulder.

Without stopping to draw my breath, without wiping the cold sweat from my face, I rose instantly on my knees to watch the bed-top. I was literally spellbound by it. If I had heard footsteps behind me, I could not have turned round; if a means of escape had been miraculously provided for me, I could not have moved to take advantage of it. The whole life in me was, at that moment, concentrated in my eyes.

It descended – the whole canopy, with the fringe round it, came down – down – close down; so close that there was not room now to squeeze my finger between the bed-top and the bed. I felt at the sides, and discovered that what had appeared to me from beneath to be the ordinary light canopy of a four-post bed was in reality a thick, broad mattress, the substance of which was concealed by the valance and its fringe. I looked up and saw the four posts rising hideously bare. In the middle of the bed-top was a huge wooden screw that had evidently worked it down through a hole in the ceiling, just as ordinary presses are worked down on the substance selected for compression. The frightful apparatus moved without making the faintest noise. There had been no creaking as it came down; there was now not the faintest sound from the room above. Amid a dead and awful silence I beheld before me – in the nineteenth century, and in the civilized capital of France – such a machine for secret murder by suffocation as might have existed in the worst days of the Inquisition¹⁴⁶, in the lonely inns among the Harz Mountains¹⁴⁷, in the mysterious tribunals of Westphalia¹⁴⁸! Still, as I looked on it, I could not move, I could hardly breathe, but I began to recover the power of thinking, and in a moment I discovered the murderous conspiracy framed against me in all its horror.

My cup of coffee had been drugged, and drugged too strongly. I had been saved from being smothered by having taken an overdose of some narcotic. How I had chafed and fretted at the fever-fit which had preserved my life by keeping me awake! How recklessly I had confided myself to the two wretches who had led me into this room, determined, for the sake of my winnings, to kill me in my sleep by the surest and most horrible contrivance for secretly accomplishing my destruction! How many men, winners like me, had slept, as I had proposed to sleep, in that bed, and had never been seen or heard of more! I shuddered at the bare idea of it.

But, ere long, all thought was again suspended by the sight of the murderous canopy moving once more. After it had remained on the bed – as nearly as I could guess – about ten minutes, it began to move up again. The villains who worked it from above evidently believed that their purpose was now accomplished. Slowly and silently, as it had descended, that horrible bed-top rose towards its former place. When it reached the upper extremities of the four posts, it reached the ceiling, too. Neither hole nor screw could be seen; the bed became in appearance an ordinary bed again – the canopy – an ordinary canopy¹⁴⁹ – even to the most suspicious eyes.

Now, for the first time, I was able to move – to rise from my knees – to dress myself in my upper clothing – and to consider of how I should escape. If I betrayed by the smallest noise that the

¹⁴⁶ **the Inquisition** – an institution of the Roman Catholic Church established in the 13th century to combat heresy

¹⁴⁷ **the Harz Mountains** – a northern mountain range in Germany

¹⁴⁸ **Westphalia** – a historic region in northwestern Germany

¹⁴⁹ **canopy** – a hood or cover over a door, bed, fireplace, etc.

attempt to suffocate me had failed, I was certain to be murdered. Had I made any noise already? I listened intently, looking towards the door.

No! no footsteps in the passage outside – no sound of a tread, light or heavy, in the room above – absolute silence everywhere. Besides locking and bolting my door, I had moved an old wooden chest against it, which I had found under the bed. To remove this chest (my blood ran cold as I thought of what its contents might be!) without making some disturbance was impossible; and, moreover, to think of escaping through the house, now barred up for the night, was sheer insanity. Only one chance was left me – the window. I stole to it on tiptoe.

My bedroom was on the first floor, above an entresol, and looked into a back street. I raised my hand to open the window, knowing that on that action hung, by the merest hairbreadth, my chance of safety. They keep vigilant watch in a house of murder. If any part of the frame cracked, if the hinge creaked, I was a lost man! It must have occupied me at least five minutes, reckoning by time – five *hours*, reckoning by suspense – to open that window. I succeeded in doing it silently – in doing it with all the dexterity of a house-breaker – and then looked down into the street. To leap the distance beneath me would be almost certain destruction! Next, I looked round at the sides of the house. Down the left side ran a thick water-pipe – it passed close by the outer edge of the window. The moment I saw the pipe I knew I was saved. My breath came and went freely for the first time since I had seen the canopy of the bed moving down upon me!

To some men the means of escape which I had discovered might have seemed difficult and dangerous enough – to *me* the prospect of slipping down the pipe into the street did not suggest even a thought of peril. I had always been accustomed, by the practice of gymnastics, to keep up my school-boy powers as a daring and expert climber; and knew that my head, hands, and feet would serve me faithfully in any hazards of ascent or descent. I had already got one leg over the window-sill, when I remembered the handkerchief filled with money under my pillow. I could well have afforded to leave it behind me, but I was revengefully determined that the miscreants of the gambling-house should miss their plunder as well as their victim. So I went back to the bed and tied the heavy handkerchief at my back by my cravat¹⁵⁰.

Just as I had made it tight and fixed it in a comfortable place, I thought I heard a sound of breathing outside the door. The chill feeling of horror ran through me again as I listened. No! dead silence still in the passage – I had only heard the night air blowing softly into the room. The next moment I was on the window-sill, and the next I had a firm grip on the water-pipe with my hands and knees.

I slid down into the street easily and quietly, as I thought I should, and immediately set off at the top of my speed to a branch ‘prefecture’ of Police, which I knew was situated in the immediate neighbourhood. A ‘sub-prefect,’ and several picked men among his subordinates, happened to be up, maturing, I believe, some scheme for discovering the perpetrator of a mysterious murder which all Paris was talking of just then. When I began my story, in a breathless hurry and in very bad French, I could see that the sub-prefect suspected me of being a drunken Englishman who had robbed somebody; but he soon altered his opinion as I went on, and before I had anything like concluded, he shoved all the papers before him into a drawer, put on his hat, supplied me with another (for I was bareheaded), ordered a file of soldiers, desired his expert followers to get ready all sorts of tools for breaking open doors and ripping up brick flooring, and took my arm, in the most friendly and familiar manner possible, to lead me with him out of the house. I will venture to say that when the sub-prefect was a little boy, and was taken for the first time to the play, he was not half as much pleased as he was now at the job in prospect for him at the gambling-house!

¹⁵⁰ **cravat** – a piece of linen or lace worn as a tie

Away we went through the streets, the sub-prefect cross-examining and congratulating me in the same breath as we marched at the head of our formidable posse comitatus¹⁵¹. Sentinels were placed at the back and front of the house the moment we got to it; a tremendous battery of knocks was directed against the door; a light appeared at a window; I was told to conceal myself behind the police; then came more knocks and a cry of ‘Open in the name of the law!’ At that terrible summons bolts and locks gave way before an invisible hand, and the moment after the sub-prefect was in the passage, confronting a waiter half dressed and ghastly pale. This was the short dialogue which immediately took place:

‘We want to see the Englishman who is sleeping in this house.’

‘He went away hours ago.’

‘He did no such thing. His friend went away; *he* remained. Show us to his bedroom!’

‘I swear to you, Monsieur le Sous-préfet¹⁵², he is not here! He—’

‘I swear to you, Monsieur le GarÇon¹⁵³, he is. He slept here; he didn’t find your bed comfortable; he came to us to complain of it; here he is among my men; and here am I ready to look for a flea or two in his bedstead. Renaudin!’ (calling to one of the subordinates, and pointing to the waiter), ‘collar that man, and tie his hands behind him. Now then, gentlemen, let us walk upstairs!’

Every man and woman in the house was secured – the ‘old soldier’ the first. Then I identified the bed in which I had slept, and then we went into the room above.

No object that was at all extraordinary appeared in any part of it. The sub-prefect looked round the place, commanded everybody to be silent, stamped twice on the floor, called for a candle, looked attentively at the spot he had stamped on, and ordered the flooring there to be carefully taken up. This was done in no time. Lights were produced, and we saw a deep raftered cavity between the floor of this room and the ceiling of the room beneath. Through this cavity there ran perpendicularly a sort of case of iron, thickly greased; and inside the case appeared the screw, which communicated with the bed-top below. Extra lengths of screw, freshly oiled; levers covered with felt; all the complete upper works of a heavy press – constructed with infernal ingenuity so as to join the fixtures below, and when taken to pieces again to go into the smallest possible compass – were next discovered and pulled out on the floor. After some little difficulty the sub-prefect succeeded in putting the machinery together, and, leaving his men to work it, descended with me to the bedroom. The smothering canopy was then lowered, but not so noiselessly as I had seen it lowered. When I mentioned this to the sub-prefect, his answer, simple as it was, had a terrible significance. ‘My men,’ said he, ‘are working down the bed-top for the first time; the men whose money you won were in better practice.’

We left the house in the sole possession of two police agents, every one of the inmates being removed to prison on the spot. The sub-prefect, after taking down my proces verbal¹⁵⁴ in his office, returned with me to my hotel to get my passport. ‘Do you think,’ I asked, as I gave it to him, ‘that any men have really been smothered in that bed, as they tried to smother *me*?’

‘I have seen dozens of drowned men laid out at the morgue,’ answered the sub-prefect, ‘in whose pocket-books were found letters stating that they had committed suicide in the Seine, because they had lost everything at the gaming-table. Do I know how many of those men entered the same gambling-house that *you* entered? won as *you* won? took that bed as *you* took it? slept in it? were smothered in it? and were privately thrown into the river, with a letter of explanation written by the murderers and placed in their pocket-books? No man can say how many or how few have suffered the fate from which you have escaped. The people of the gambling-house kept their

¹⁵¹ **posse comitatus** – a group of armed men who help to maintain order, catch criminals, etc.

¹⁵² **le Sous-préfet** = sub-prefect (*French*)

¹⁵³ **le GarÇon** = waiter, servant (*French*)

¹⁵⁴ **proces verbal** – transcript of interrogation

bedstead machinery a secret from *us* – even from the police! The dead kept the rest of the secret for them. Good-night, or rather good-morning, Monsieur Faulkner! Be at my office again at nine o'clock; in the meantime, *au revoir*!¹⁵⁵

The rest of my story is soon told. I was examined and reexamined; the gambling-house was strictly searched all through from top to bottom; the prisoners were separately interrogated, and two of the less guilty among them made a confession. I discovered that the old soldier was master of the gambling-house – *justice* discovered that he had been drummed out of the army as a vagabond years ago; that he had been guilty of all sorts of villainies since; that he was in possession of stolen property, which the owners identified; and that he, the croupier, another accomplice, and the woman who had made my cup of coffee were all in the secret of the bedstead. There appeared some reason to doubt whether the inferior persons attached to the house knew anything of the suffocating machinery; and they received the benefit of that doubt, by being treated simply as thieves and vagabonds. As for the old soldier and his two head myrmidons¹⁵⁶, they went to the galleys; the woman who had drugged my coffee was imprisoned for I forget how many years; the regular attendants at the gambling-house were considered 'suspicious,' and placed under 'surveillance'; and I became, for one whole week (which is a long time), the head 'lion' in Parisian society. My adventure was dramatised by three illustrious play-makers, but never saw theatrical daylight; for the censorship forbade the introduction on the stage of a correct copy of the gambling-house bedstead.

One good result was produced by my adventure, which any censorship must have approved: it cured me of ever again trying *rouge-et-noir* as an amusement. The sight of a green cloth, with packs of cards and heaps of money on it, will henceforth be forever associated in my mind with the sight of a bed canopy descending to suffocate me in the silence and darkness of the night.

Just as Mr. Faulkner pronounced these words he started in his chair, and resumed his stiff, dignified position in a great hurry. 'Bless my soul!' cried he, with a comic look of astonishment and vexation, 'while I have been telling you what is the real secret of my interest in the sketch you have so kindly given to me, I have altogether forgotten that I came here to sit for my portrait. For the last hour or more I must have been the worst model you ever had to draw from!'

'On the contrary, you have been the best,' said I. 'I have been trying to catch your likeness; and, while telling your story, you have unconsciously shown me the natural expression I wanted to insure my success.'

THE END

¹⁵⁵ **au revoir** = goodbye (*French*)

¹⁵⁶ **myrmidons** – here: accomplices

Note by Mrs. Kerby

I cannot let this story end without mentioning what the chance saying was which caused it to be told at the farmhouse the other night. Our friend, the young sailor, among his other quaint objections to sleeping on shore, declared that he particularly hated four-post beds, because he never slept in one without doubting whether the top might not come down in the night and suffocate him. I thought this chance reference to the distinguishing feature of William's narrative curious enough, and my husband agreed with me. But he says it is scarcely worthwhile to mention such a trifle in anything so important as a book. I cannot venture, after this, to do more than slip these lines in modestly at the end of the story. If the printer should notice my few last words, perhaps he may not mind the trouble of putting them into some out-of-the-way corner, in very small type.

L. K.

That Little Square Box (Arthur Conan Doyle)

‘All aboard!’ said the captain

‘All aboard, sir!’ said the mate.

‘Then stand by to let her go.’

It was nine o’clock on a Wednesday morning. The good ship *Spartan* was lying off Boston Quay with her cargo under hatches, her passengers shipped, and everything prepared for a start. The warning whistle had been sounded twice, the final bell had been rung. Her bowsprit was turned towards England, and the hiss of escaping steam showed that all was ready for her run of three thousand miles. She strained at the warps that held her like a greyhound at its leash.

I have the misfortune to be a very nervous man. A sedentary literary life has helped to increase the morbid love of solitude which, even in my boyhood, was one of my distinguishing characteristics. As I stood upon the quarter-deck of the Transatlantic steamer, I bitterly cursed the necessity which drove me back to the land of my forefathers. The shouts of the sailors, the rattle of the cordage, the farewells of my fellow-passengers, and the cheers of the mob, each and all jarred upon my sensitive nature. I felt sad too. An indescribable feeling, as of some impending calamity, seemed to haunt me. The sea was calm, and the breeze light. There was nothing to disturb the equanimity of the most confirmed of landmen, yet I felt as if I stood upon the verge of a great though indefinable danger. I have noticed that such presentiments occur often in men of my peculiar temperament, and that they are not uncommonly fulfilled. There is a theory that it arises from a species of second-sight – a subtle spiritual communication with the future. I well remember that Herr Raumer, the eminent spiritualist, remarked on one occasion that I was the most sensitive subject as regards supernatural phenomena that he had ever encountered in the whole of his wide experience. Be that as it may, I certainly felt far from happy as I threaded my way among the weeping, cheering groups which dotted the white decks of the good ship *Spartan*. Had I known the experience which awaited me in the course of the next twelve hours, I would even then at the last moment have sprung upon the shore, and made my escape from the accursed vessel.

‘Time’s up!’ said the captain, closing his chronometer with a snap, and replacing it in his pocket. ‘Time’s up!’ said the mate. There was a last wail from the whistle, a rush of friends and relatives upon the land. One warp was loosened, the gangway was being pushed away, when there was a shout from the bridge, and two men appeared running rapidly down the quay. They were waving their hands and making frantic gestures, apparently with the intention of stopping the ship. ‘Look sharp!’ shouted the crowd. ‘Hold hard!’ cried the captain. ‘Ease her! stop her! Up with the gangway!’ and the two men sprang aboard just as the second warp parted, and a convulsive throb of the engine shot us clear of the shore. There was a cheer from the deck, another from the quay, a mighty fluttering of handkerchiefs, and the great vessel ploughed its way out of the harbour, and steamed grandly away across the placid bay.

We were fairly started upon our fortnight’s voyage. There was a general dive among the passengers in quest of berths and luggage, while a popping of corks in the saloon proved that more than one bereaved traveller was adopting artificial means for drowning the pangs of separation. I glanced round the deck and took a running inventory of my *compagnons de voyage*¹⁵⁷. They presented the usual types met with upon these occasions. There was no striking face among them. I speak as a connoisseur, for faces are a specialty of mine. I pounce upon a characteristic feature as a botanist does on a flower, and bear it away with me to analyse at my leisure, and classify and label it in my little anthropological museum. There was nothing worthy of me here. Twenty types of young America going to ‘Yurrupe,’ a few respectable middle-aged couples as an antidote,

¹⁵⁷ *compagnons de voyage* = voyage companions (French)

a sprinkling' of clergymen and professional men, young ladies, bagmen, British exclusives, and all the olla podrida¹⁵⁸ of an ocean-going steamer. I turned away from them and gazed back at the receding shores of America, and, as a cloud of remembrances rose before me, my heart warmed towards the land of my adoption. A pile of portmanteaus and luggage chanced to be lying on one side of the deck, awaiting their turn to be taken below. With my usual love for solitude I walked behind these, and sitting on a coil of rope between them and the vessel's side, I indulged in a melancholy reverie.

I was aroused from this by a whisper behind me. 'Here's a quiet place,' said the voice. 'Sit down, and we can talk it over in safety.'

Glancing through a chink between two colossal chests, I saw that the passengers who had joined us at the last moment were standing at the other side of the pile. They had evidently failed to see me as I crouched in the shadow of the boxes. The one who had spoken was a tall and very thin man with a blue-black beard and a colourless face. His manner was nervous and excited. His companion was a short, plethoric little fellow, with a brisk and resolute air. He had a cigar in his mouth, and a large ulster slung over his left arm. They both glanced round uneasily, as if to ascertain whether they were alone. 'This is just the place,' I heard the other say. They sat down on a bale of goods with their backs turned towards me, and I found myself, much against my will, playing the unpleasant part of eavesdropper to their conversation.

'Well, Muller,' said the taller of the two, 'we've got it aboard right enough.'

'Yes,' assented the man whom he had addressed as Muller; 'it's safe aboard.'

'It was rather a near go.'

'It was that, Flannigan.'

'It wouldn't have done to have missed the ship.'

'No; it would have put our plans out.'

'Ruined them entirely,' said the little man, and puffed furiously at his cigar for some minutes.

'I've got it here,' he said at last.

'Let me see it.'

'Is no one looking?'

'No; they are nearly all below.'

'We can't be too careful where so much is at stake,' said Muller, as he uncoiled the ulster¹⁵⁹ which hung over his arm, and disclosed a dark object which he laid upon the deck. One glance at it was enough to cause me to spring to my feet with an exclamation of horror. Luckily they were so engrossed in the matter on hand that neither of them observed me. Had they turned their heads they would infallibly have seen my pale face glaring at them over the pile of boxes.

From the first moment of their conversation a horrible misgiving had come over me. It seemed more than confirmed as I gazed at what lay before me. It was a little square box made of some dark wood, and ribbed with brass. I suppose it was about the size of a cubic foot. It reminded me of a pistol-case, only it was decidedly higher. There was an appendage to it, however, on which my eyes were riveted, and which suggested the pistol itself rather than its receptacle. This was a trigger-like arrangement upon the lid, to which a coil of string was attached. Beside this trigger there was a small square aperture through the wood. The tall man, Flannigan, as his companion called him, applied his eye to this and peered in for several minutes with an expression of intense anxiety upon his face.

'It seems right enough,' he said at last.

'I tried not to shake it,' said his companion.

'Such delicate things need delicate treatment. Put in some of the needful, Muller.'

¹⁵⁸ olla podrida = ragout made of red beans, pork and sausage (*Spanish*)

¹⁵⁹ ulster – a long, loose overcoat with a belt

The shorter man fumbled in his pocket for some time, and then produced a small paper packet. He opened this, and took out of it half a handful of whitish granules, which he poured down through the hole. A curious clicking noise followed from the inside of the box, and both the men smiled in a satisfied way.

‘Nothing much wrong there,’ said Flannigan.

‘Right as a trivet,’ answered his companion.

‘Look out! here’s some one coming. Take it down to our berth. It wouldn’t do to have any one suspecting what our game is, or, worse still, have them fumbling with it, and letting it off by mistake.’

‘Well, it would come to the same, whoever let it off,’ said Muller.

‘They’d be rather astonished if they pulled the trigger,’ said the taller, with a sinister laugh. ‘Ha, ha! fancy their faces! It’s not a bad bit of workmanship, I flatter myself.’

‘No,’ said Muller. ‘I hear it is your own design, every bit of it, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, the spring and the sliding shutter are my own.’

‘We should take out a patent.’

And the two men laughed again with a cold, harsh laugh, as they took up the little brass-bound package and concealed it in Muller’s voluminous overcoat.

‘Come down, and we’ll stow it in our berth,’ said Flannigan. ‘We won’t need it until tonight, and it will be safe there.’

His companion assented, and the two went arm-in-arm along the deck and disappeared down the hatchway, bearing the mysterious little box away with them. The last words I heard were a muttered injunction from Flannigan to carry it carefully, and avoid knocking it against the bulwarks.

How long I remained sitting on that coil of rope I shall never know. The horror of the conversation I had just overheard was aggravated by the first sinking qualms of sea-sickness. The long roll of the Atlantic was beginning to assert itself over both ship and passengers. I felt prostrated in mind and in body, and fell into a state of collapse, from which I was finally aroused by the hearty voice of our worthy quartermaster¹⁶⁰.

‘Do you mind moving out of that, sir?’ he said. ‘We want to get this lumber cleared off the deck.’

His bluff manner and ruddy, healthy face seemed to be a positive insult to me in my present condition. Had I been a courageous or a muscular man I could have struck him. As it was, I treated the honest sailor to a melodramatic scowl, which seemed to cause him no small astonishment, and strode past him to the other side of the deck. Solitude was what I wanted – solitude in which I could brood over the frightful crime which was being hatched before my very eyes. One of the quarter-boats was hanging rather low down upon the davits. An idea struck me, and, climbing on the bulwarks, I stepped into the empty boat and lay down in the bottom of it. Stretched on my back, with nothing but the blue sky above me, and an occasional view of the mizzen as the vessel rolled, I was at least alone with my sickness and my thoughts.

I tried to recall the words which had been spoken in the terrible dialogue I had overheard. Would they admit of any construction but the one which stared me in the face? My reason forced me to confess that they would not. I endeavoured to array the various facts which formed the chain of circumstantial evidence, and to find a flaw in it; but no, not a link was missing. There was the strange way in which our passengers had come aboard, enabling them to evade any examination of their luggage. The very name of ‘Flannigan’ smacked of Fenianism, while ‘Muller’ suggested nothing but Socialism and murder. Then their mysterious manner; their remark that their plans would have been ruined had they missed the ship; their fear of being observed; last, but not least,

¹⁶⁰ **quartermaster** – an officer responsible for the quartering and movement of troops; on a ship, an officer in charge of steering and signals.

the clenching evidence in the production of the little square box with the trigger, and their grim joke about the face of the man who should let it off by mistake – could these facts lead to any conclusion other than that they were the desperate emissaries of some body, political or otherwise, and intended to sacrifice themselves, their fellow-passengers, and the ship, in one great holocaust? The whitish granules which I had seen one of them pour into the box formed no doubt a fuse or train for exploding it. I had myself heard a sound come from it which might have emanated from some delicate piece of machinery. But what did they mean by their allusion to tonight? Could it be that they contemplated putting their horrible design into execution on the very first evening of our voyage? The mere thought of it sent a cold shudder over me, and made me for a moment superior even to the agonies of sea-sickness.

I have remarked that I am a physical coward. I am a moral one also. It is seldom that the two defects are united to such a degree in the one character. I have known many men who were most sensitive to bodily danger, and yet were distinguished for the independence and strength of their minds. In my own case, however, I regret to say that my quiet and retiring habits had fostered a nervous dread of doing anything remarkable, or making myself conspicuous, which exceeded, if possible, my fear of personal peril. An ordinary mortal placed under the circumstances in which I now found myself would have gone at once to the captain, confessed his fears, and put the matter into his hands. To me, however, constituted as I am, the idea was most repugnant. The thought of becoming the observed of all observers, cross-questioned by a stranger, and confronted with two desperate conspirators in the character of a denouncer, was hateful to me. Might it not by some remote possibility prove that I was mistaken? What would be my feelings if there should turn out to be no grounds for my accusation? No, I would procrastinate; I would keep my eye on the two desperadoes and dog them at every turn. Anything was better than the possibility of being wrong.

Then it struck me that even at that moment some new phase of the conspiracy might be developing itself. The nervous excitement seemed to have driven away my incipient attack of sickness, for I was able to stand up and lower myself from the boat without experiencing any return of it. I staggered along the deck with the intention of descending into the cabin and finding how my acquaintances of the morning were occupying themselves. Just as I had my hand on the companion-rail, I was astonished by receiving a hearty slap on the back, which nearly shot me down the steps with more haste than dignity.

‘Is that you, Hammond?’ said a voice which I seemed to recognise.

‘God bless me,’ I said as I turned round, ‘it can’t be Dick Merton! Why, how are you, old man?’

This was an unexpected piece of luck in the midst of my perplexities. Dick was just the man I wanted; kindly and shrewd in his nature, and prompt in his actions, I should have no difficulty in telling him my suspicions, and could rely upon his sound sense to point out the best course to pursue. Since I was a little lad in the second form at Harrow, Dick had been my adviser and protector. He saw at a glance that something had gone wrong with me.

‘Hullo!’ he said, in his kindly way, ‘what’s put you about, Hammond? You look as white as a sheet. *Mal de mer*¹⁶¹, eh?’

‘No, not that altogether,’ said I. ‘Walk up and down with me, Dick; I want to speak to you. Give me your arm.’

Supporting myself on Dick’s stalwart frame, I tottered along by his side; but it was some time before I could muster resolution to speak.

‘Have a cigar,’ said he, breaking the silence.

‘No, thanks,’ said I. ‘Dick, we shall all be corpses tonight.’

¹⁶¹ **mal de mer** = seasickness (*French*)

‘That’s no reason against your having a cigar now,’ said Dick, in his cool way, but looking hard at me from under his shaggy eyebrows as he spoke. He evidently thought that my intellect was a little gone.

‘No,’ I continued; ‘it’s no laughing matter, and I speak in sober earnest, I assure you. I have discovered an infamous conspiracy, Dick, to destroy this ship and every soul that is in her;’ and I then proceeded systematically, and in order, to lay before him the chain of evidence which I had collected. ‘There, Dick,’ I said, as I concluded, ‘what do you think of that? and, above all, what am I to do?’

To my astonishment he burst into a hearty fit of laughter.

‘I’d be frightened,’ he said, ‘if any fellow but you had told me as much. You always had a way, Hammond, of discovering mares’ nests. I like to see the old traits breaking out again. Do you remember at school how you swore there was a ghost in the long room, and how it turned out to be your own reflection in the mirror? Why, man,’ he continued, ‘what object would anyone have in destroying this ship? We have no great political guns aboard. On the contrary, the majority of the passengers are Americans. Besides, in this sober nineteenth century, the most wholesale murderers stop at including themselves among their victims. Depend upon it, you have misunderstood them, and have mistaken a photographic camera, or something equally innocent, for an infernal machine.’ ‘Nothing of the sort, sir,’ said I, rather touchily. ‘You will learn to your cost, I fear, that I have neither exaggerated nor misinterpreted a word. As to the box, I have certainly never before seen one like it. It contained delicate machinery; of that I am convinced, from the way in which the men handled it and spoke of it.’

‘You’d make out every packet of perishable goods to be a torpedo,’ said Dick, ‘if that is to be your only test.’

‘The man’s name was Flannigan,’ I continued.

‘I don’t think that would go very far in a court of law,’ said Dick; ‘but come, I have finished my cigar. Suppose we go down together and split a bottle of claret. You can point out these two Orsinis to me if they are still in the cabin.’

‘All right,’ I answered; ‘I am determined not to lose sight of them all day. Don’t look hard at them, though; for I don’t want them to think that they are being watched.’

‘Trust me,’ said Dick; ‘I’ll look as unconscious and guileless as a lamb;’ and with that we passed down the companion and into the saloon.

A good many passengers were scattered about the great central table, some wrestling with refractory carpet-bags and rug-straps, some having their luncheon, and a few reading and otherwise amusing themselves. The objects of our quest were not there. We passed down the room and peered into every berth; but there was no sign of them. ‘Heavens!’ thought I, ‘perhaps at this very moment they are beneath our feet, in the hold or engine-room, preparing their diabolical contrivance!’ It was better to know the worst than to remain in such suspense.

‘Steward,’ said Dick, ‘are there any other gentlemen about?’

‘There’s two in the smoking-room, sir,’ answered the steward.

The smoking-room was a little snugger, luxuriously fitted up, and adjoining the pantry. We pushed the door open and entered. A sigh of relief escaped from my bosom. The very first object on which my eye rested was the cadaverous face of Flannigan, with its hard-set mouth and unwinking eye. His companion sat opposite to him. They were both drinking, and a pile of cards lay upon the table. They were engaged in playing as we entered. I nudged Dick to show him that we had found our quarry, and we sat down beside them with as unconcerned an air as possible. The two conspirators seemed to take little notice of our presence. I watched them both narrowly. The game at which they were playing was ‘Napoleon.’ Both were adepts at it; and I could not help admiring the consummate nerve of men who, with such a secret at their hearts, could devote their minds to the manipulating of a long suit or the finessing of a queen. Money changed hands rapidly; but the

run of luck seemed to be all against the taller of the two players. At last he threw down his cards on the table with an oath and refused to go on.

‘No, I’m hanged if I do!’ he said; ‘I haven’t had more than two of a suit for five hands.’

‘Never mind,’ said his comrade, as he gathered up his winnings; ‘a few dollars one way or the other won’t go very far after tonight’s work.’

I was astonished at the rascal’s audacity, but took care to keep my eyes fixed abstractedly upon the ceiling, and drank my wine in as unconscious a manner as possible. I felt that Flannigan was looking towards me with his wolfish eyes to see if I had noticed the allusion. He whispered something to his companion which I failed to catch. It was a caution, I suppose, for the other answered rather angrily —

‘Nonsense! Why shouldn’t I say what I like? Over-caution is just what would ruin us.’

‘I believe you want it not to come off,’ said Flannigan.

‘You believe nothing of the sort,’ said the other, speaking rapidly and loudly. ‘You know as well as I do that when I play for a stake I like to win it. But I won’t have my words criticised and cut short by you or any other man; I have as much interest in our success as you have — more, I hope.’

He was quite hot about it, and puffed furiously at his cigar for a few minutes. The eyes of the other ruffian wandered alternately from Dick Merton to myself. I knew that I was in the presence of a desperate man, that a quiver of my lip might be the signal for him to plunge a weapon into my heart; but I betrayed more self-command than I should have given myself credit for under such trying circumstances. As to Dick, he was as immovable and apparently as unconscious as the Egyptian Sphinx.

There was silence for some time in the smoking-room, broken only by the crisp rattle of the cards as the man Muller shuffled them up before replacing them in his pocket. He still seemed to be somewhat flushed and irritable. Throwing the end of his cigar into the spittoon, he glanced defiantly at his companion, and turned towards me.

‘Can you tell me, sir,’ he said, ‘when this ship will be heard of again?’

They were both looking at me; but though my face may have turned a trifle paler, my voice was as steady as ever as I answered —

‘I presume, sir, that it will be heard of first when it enters Queenstown Harbour.’

‘Ha, ha!’ laughed the angry little man; ‘I knew you would say that. Don’t you kick me under the table, Flannigan; I won’t stand it. I know what I am doing. You are wrong, sir,’ he continued, turning to me; ‘utterly wrong.’

‘Some passing ship, perhaps,’ suggested Dick.

‘No, nor that either.’

‘The weather is fine,’ I said; ‘why should we not be heard of at our destination?’

‘I didn’t say we shouldn’t be heard of at our destination. No doubt we shall in the course of time; but that is not where we shall be heard of first.’

‘Where then?’ asked Dick.

‘That you will never know. Suffice it that a rapid and mysterious agency will signal our whereabouts, and that before the day is out. Ha, ha!’ and he chuckled once again.

‘Come on deck!’ growled his comrade; ‘you have drunk too much of that confounded brandy-and-water. It has loosened your tongue. Come away!’ and taking him by the arm he half led him, half forced him out of the smoking-room, and we heard them stumbling up the companion together, and on to the deck.

‘Well, what do you think now?’ I gasped, as I turned towards Dick. He was as imperturbable as ever.

‘Think!’ he said; ‘why, I think what his companion thinks — that we have been listening to the ravings of a half-drunken man. The fellow stunk of brandy.’

‘Nonsense, Dick! you saw how the other tried to stop his tongue.’

‘Of course he did. He didn’t want his friend to make a fool of himself before strangers. Maybe the short one is a lunatic, and the other his private keeper. It’s quite possible.’

‘Oh, Dick, Dick,’ I cried; ‘how can you be so blind? Don’t you see that every word confirmed our previous suspicion?’

‘Humbug, man!’ said Dick; ‘you’re working yourself into a state of nervous excitement. Why, what the devil do *you* make of all that nonsense about a mysterious agent which would signal our whereabouts?’

‘I’ll tell you what he meant, Dick,’ I said, bending forward and grasping my friend’s arm. ‘He meant a sudden glare and a flash seen far out at sea by some lonely fisherman off the American coast. That’s what he meant.’

‘I didn’t think you were such a fool, Hammond,’ said Dick Merton testily. ‘If you try to fix a literal meaning on the twaddle that every drunken man talks, you will come to some queer conclusions. Let us follow their example, and go on deck. You need fresh air, I think. Depend upon it, your liver is out of order. A sea-voyage will do you a world of good.’

‘If ever I see the end of this one,’ I groaned, ‘I’ll promise never to venture on another. They are laying the cloth, so it’s hardly worth while my going up. I’ll stay below and finish my smoke.’

‘I hope dinner will find you in a more pleasant state of mind,’ said Dick; and he went out, leaving me to my thoughts until the clang of the great gong summoned us to the saloon.

My appetite, I need hardly say, had not been improved by the incidents which had occurred during the day. I sat down, however, mechanically at the table, and listened to the talk which was going on around me. There were nearly a hundred first-class passengers, and as the wine began to circulate, their voices combined with the clash of the dishes to form a perfect Babel. I found myself seated between a very stout and nervous old lady and a prim little clergyman; and as neither made any advances, I retired into my shell, and spent my time in observing the appearance of my fellow-voyagers. I could see Dick in the dim distance dividing his attentions between a jointless fowl in front of him and a self-possessed young lady at his side. Captain Dowie was doing the honours at my end, while the surgeon of the vessel was seated at the other. I was glad to notice that Flannigan was placed almost opposite to me. As long as I had him before my eyes I knew that, for the time at least, we were safe. He was sitting with what was meant to be a sociable smile on his grim face. It did not escape me that he drank largely of wine – so largely that even before the dessert appeared his voice had become decidedly husky. His friend Muller was seated a few places lower down. He ate little, and appeared to be nervous and restless.

‘Now, ladies,’ said our genial captain, ‘I trust that you will consider yourselves at home aboard my vessel. I have no fears for the gentlemen. A bottle of champagne, steward. Here’s to a fresh breeze and a quick passage! I trust our friends in America will hear of our safe arrival in twelve days, or a fortnight at the very latest.’

I looked up. Quick as was the glance which passed between Flannigan and his confederate, I was able to intercept it. There was an evil smile upon the former’s thin lips.

The conversation rippled on. Politics, the sea, amusements, religion, each was in turn discussed. I remained a silent though an interested listener. It struck me that no harm could be done by introducing the subject which was ever in my mind. It could be managed in an off-hand way, and would at least have the effect of turning the captain’s thoughts in that direction. I could watch, too, what effect it would have upon the faces of the conspirators.

There was a sudden lull in the conversation. The ordinary subjects of interest appeared to be exhausted. The opportunity was a favourable one.

‘May I ask, captain,’ I said, bending forward, and speaking very distinctly, ‘what you think of Fenian manifestoes?’

The captain’s ruddy face became a shade darker from honest indignation.

‘They are poor cowardly things,’ he said, ‘as silly as they are wicked.’

‘The impotent threats of a set of anonymous scoundrels,’ said a pompous-looking old gentleman beside him.

‘Oh, captain!’ said the fat lady at my side, ‘you don’t really think they would blow up a ship?’

‘I have no doubt they would if they could. But I am very sure they will never blow up mine.’

‘May I ask what precautions are taken against them?’ said an elderly man at the end of the table.

‘All goods sent aboard the ship are strictly examined,’ said Captain Dowie.

‘But suppose a man brought explosives aboard with him?’ said I.

‘They are too cowardly to risk their own lives in that way.’

During this conversation Flannigan had not betrayed the slightest interest in what was going on. He raised his head now, and looked at the captain.

‘Don’t you think you are rather underrating them?’ he said. ‘Every secret society has produced desperate men – why shouldn’t the Fenians have them too? Many men think it a privilege to die in the service of a cause which seems right in their eyes, though others may think it wrong.’

‘Indiscriminate murder cannot be right in anybody’s eyes,’ said the little clergyman.

‘The bombardment of Paris was nothing else,’ said Flannigan; ‘yet the whole civilised world agreed to look on with folded arms, and change the ugly word “murder” into the more euphonious one of “war.” It seemed right enough to German eyes; why shouldn’t dynamite seem so to the Fenian?’

‘At any rate their empty vapourings have led to nothing as yet,’ said the captain.

‘Excuse me,’ returned Flannigan, ‘but is there not some room for doubt yet as to the fate of the *Dotterel*? I have met men in America who asserted from their own personal knowledge that there was a coal torpedo aboard that vessel.’

‘Then they lied,’ said the captain. ‘It was proved conclusively at the court-martial to have arisen from an explosion of coal-gas – but we had better change the subject, or we may cause the ladies to have a restless night;’ and the conversation once more drifted back into its original channel.

During this little discussion Flannigan had argued his point with a gentlemanly deference and a quiet power for which I had not given him credit. I could not help admiring a man who, on the eve of a desperate enterprise, could courteously argue upon a point which must touch him so nearly. He had, as I have already mentioned, partaken of a considerable quantity of wine; but though there was a slight flush upon his pale cheek, his manner was as reserved as ever. He did not join in the conversation again, but seemed to be lost in thought.

A whirl of conflicting ideas was battling in my own mind. What was I to do? Should I stand up now and denounce them before both passengers and captain? Should I demand a few minutes’ conversation with the latter in his own cabin, and reveal it all? For an instant I was half resolved to do it, but then the old constitutional timidity came back with redoubled force. After all there might be some mistake. Dick had heard the evidence, and had refused to believe in it. I determined to let things go on their course. A strange reckless feeling came over me. Why should I help men who were blind to their own danger? Surely it was the duty of the officers to protect us, not ours to give warning to them. I drank off a couple of glasses of wine, and staggered upon deck with the determination of keeping my secret locked in my own bosom.

It was a glorious evening. Even in my excited state of mind I could not help leaning against the bulwarks and enjoying the refreshing breeze. Away to the westward a solitary sail stood out as a dark speck against the great sheet of flame left by the setting sun. I shuddered as I looked at it. It seemed like a sea of blood. A single star was twinkling faintly above our main-mast, but a thousand seemed to gleam in the water below with every stroke of our propeller. The only blot in the fair scene was the great trail of smoke which stretched away behind us like a black slash upon a crimson curtain. It seemed hard to believe that the great peace which hung over all Nature could be marred by a poor miserable mortal.

‘After all,’ I thought, as I gazed upon the blue depths beneath me, ‘if the worst comes to the worst, it is better to die here than to linger in agony upon a sick-bed on land.’ A man’s life seems a very paltry thing amid the great forces of Nature. All my philosophy could not prevent my shuddering, however, when I turned my head and saw two shadowy figures at the other side of the deck, which I had no difficulty in recognising. They seemed to be conversing earnestly, but I had no opportunity of overhearing what was said; so I contented myself with pacing up and down, and keeping a vigilant watch upon their movements.

It was a relief to me when Dick came on deck. Even an incredulous confidant is better than none at all.

‘Well, old man,’ he said, giving me a facetious dig in the ribs, ‘we’ve not been blown up yet.’

‘No, not yet,’ said I; ‘but that’s no proof that we are not going to be.’

‘Nonsense, man!’ said Dick; ‘I can’t conceive what has put this extraordinary idea into your head. I have been talking to one of your supposed assassins, and he seems a pleasant fellow enough; quite a sporting character, I should think, from the way he speaks.’

‘Dick,’ I said, ‘I am as certain that those men have an infernal machine, and that we are on the verge of eternity, as if I saw them putting the match to the fuse.’

‘Well, if you really think so,’ said Dick, half awed for the moment by the earnestness of my manner, ‘it is your duty to let the captain know of your suspicions.’

‘You are right,’ I said; ‘I will. My absurd timidity has prevented my doing so sooner. I believe our lives can only be saved by laying the whole matter before him.’

‘Well, go and do it now,’ said Dick; ‘but for goodness’ sake don’t mix me up in the matter.’

‘I’ll speak to him when he comes off the bridge,’ I answered; ‘and in the meantime I don’t mean to lose sight of them.’

‘Let me know of the result,’ said my companion; and with a nod he strolled away in search, I fancy, of his partner at the dinner-table.

Left to myself, I bethought me of my retreat of the morning, and climbing on the bulwark I mounted into the quarter-boat, and lay down there. In it I could reconsider my course of action, and by raising my head I was able at any time to get a view of my disagreeable neighbours.

An hour passed, and the captain was still on the bridge. He was talking to one of the passengers, a retired naval officer, and the two were deep in debate concerning some abstruse point in navigation. I could see the red tips of their cigars from where I lay. It was dark now – so dark that I could hardly make out the figures of Flannigan and his accomplice. They were still standing in the position which they had taken up after dinner. A few of the passengers were scattered about the deck, but many had gone below. A strange stillness seemed to pervade the air. The voices of the watch and the rattle of the wheel were the only sounds which broke the silence.

Another half-hour passed. The captain was still upon the bridge. It seemed as if he would never come down. My nerves were in a state of unnatural tension, so much so that the sound of two steps upon the deck made me start up in a quiver of excitement I peered over the side of the boat, and saw that our suspicious passengers had crossed from the other side and were standing almost directly beneath me. The light of a binnacle fell full upon the ghastly face of the ruffian Flannigan. Even in that short glance I saw that Muller had the ulster, whose use I knew so well, slung loosely over his arm. I sank back with a groan. It seemed that my fatal procrastination had sacrificed two hundred innocent lives.

I had read of the fiendish vengeance which awaited a spy. I knew that men with their lives in their hands would stick at nothing. All I could do was to cower at the bottom of the boat and listen silently to their whispered talk below.

‘This place will do,’ said a voice.

‘Yes, the leeward side is best.’

‘I wonder if the trigger will act?’

‘I am sure it will.’

‘We were to let it off at ten, were we not?’

‘Yes, at ten sharp. We have eight minutes yet.’ There was a pause. Then the voice began again —

‘They’ll hear the drop of the trigger, won’t they?’

‘It doesn’t matter. It will be too late for anyone to prevent its going off.’

‘That’s true. There will be some excitement among those we have left behind, won’t there?’

‘Rather! How long do you reckon it will be before they hear of us?’

‘The first news will get in in about twenty-four hours.’

‘That will be mine.’

‘No, mine.’

‘Ha, ha! we’ll settle that.’

There was a pause here. Then I heard Muller’s voice in a ghastly whisper, ‘There’s only five minutes more.’

How slowly the moments seemed to pass! I could count them by the throbbing of my heart.

‘It’ll make a sensation on land,’ said a voice.

‘Yes, it will make a noise in the newspapers.’

I raised my head and peered over the side of the boat. There seemed no hope, no help. Death stared me in the face, whether I did or did not give the alarm. The captain had at last left the bridge. The deck was deserted, save for those two dark figures crouching in the shadow of the boat. Flannigan had a watch lying open in his hand.

‘Three minutes more,’ he said. ‘Put it down upon the deck.’

‘No, put it here on the bulwarks.’

It was the little square box. I knew by the sound that they had placed it near the davit, and almost exactly under my head.

I looked over again. Flannigan was pouring something out of a paper into his hand. It was white and granular – the same that I had seen him use in the morning. It was meant as a fuse, no doubt, for he shovelled it into the little box, and I heard the strange noise which had previously arrested my attention.

‘A minute and a half more,’ he said. ‘Shall you or I pull the string?’

‘I will pull it,’ said Muller.

He was kneeling down and holding the end in his hand. Flannigan stood behind with his arms folded, and an air of grim resolution upon his face.

I could stand it no longer. My nervous system seemed to give way in a moment.

‘Stop!’ I screamed, springing to my feet. ‘Stop, misguided and unprincipled men!’

They both staggered backwards. I fancy they thought I was a spirit, with the moonlight streaming down upon my pale face.

I was brave enough now. I had gone too far to retreat.

‘Cain was damned,’ I cried, ‘and he slew but one; would you have the blood of two hundred upon your souls?’

‘He’s mad!’ said Flannigan. ‘Time’s up! Let it off, Muller.’

I sprang down upon the deck.

‘You shan’t do it!’ I said.

‘By what right do you prevent us?’

‘By every right, human and divine.’

‘It’s no business of yours. Clear out of this!’

‘Never!’ said I.

‘Confound the fellow! There’s too much at stake to stand on ceremony. I’ll hold him, Muller, while you pull the trigger.’

Next moment I was struggling in the herculean grasp of the Irishman. Resistance was useless; I was a child in his hands.

He pinned me up against the side of the vessel, and held me there.

‘Now,’ he said, ‘look sharp. He can’t prevent us.’

I felt that I was standing on the verge of eternity. Half-strangled in the arms of the taller ruffian, I saw the other approach the fatal box. He stooped over it and seized the string. I breathed one prayer when I saw his grasp tighten upon it. Then came a sharp snap, a strange rasping noise. The trigger had fallen, the side of the box flew out, and let off – *two grey carrier-pigeons!*

Little more need be said. It is not a subject on which I care to dwell. The whole thing is too utterly disgusting and absurd. Perhaps the best thing I can do is to retire gracefully from the scene, and let the sporting correspondent of the New York Herald¹⁶² fill my unworthy place. Here is an extract clipped from its columns shortly after our departure from America: —

‘Pigeon-flying Extraordinary. – A novel match has been brought off, last week, between the birds of John H. Flannigan, of Boston, and Jeremiah Muller, a well-known citizen of Ashport. Both men have devoted much time and attention to an improved breed of bird, and the challenge is an old-standing one. The pigeons were backed to a large amount, and there was considerable local interest in the result. The start was from the deck of the Transatlantic steamship *Spartan*, at ten o’clock on the evening of the day of starting, the vessel being then reckoned to be about a hundred miles from the land. The bird which reached home first was to be declared the winner. Considerable caution had, we believe, to be observed, as British captains have a prejudice against the bringing off of sporting events aboard their vessels. In spite of some little difficulty at the last moment, the trap was sprung almost exactly at ten o’clock. Muller’s bird arrived in Ashport in an extreme state of exhaustion on the following afternoon, while Flannigan’s has not been heard of. The backers of the latter have the satisfaction of knowing, however, that the whole affair has been characterised by extreme fairness. The pigeons were confined in a specially invented trap, which could only be opened by the spring. It was thus possible to feed them through an aperture in the top, but any tampering with their wings was quite out of the question. A few such matches would go far towards popularising pigeon-flying in America, and form an agreeable variety to the morbid exhibitions of human endurance which have assumed such proportions during the last few years.’

¹⁶² the New York Herald – an American daily newspaper published from 1835 till 1924

The Horror of the Heights (Arthur Conan Doyle)

The idea that the extraordinary narrative which has been called the Joyce-Armstrong Fragment is an elaborate practical joke evolved by some unknown person, cursed by a perverted and sinister sense of humour, has now been abandoned by all who have examined the matter. The most macabre and imaginative of plotters would hesitate before linking his morbid fancies with the unquestioned and tragic facts which reinforce the statement. Though the assertions contained in it are amazing and even monstrous, it is none the less forcing itself upon the general intelligence that they are true, and that we must readjust our ideas to the new situation. This world of ours appears to be separated by a slight and precarious margin of safety from a most singular and unexpected danger. I will endeavour in this narrative, which reproduces the original document in its necessarily somewhat fragmentary form, to lay before the reader the whole of the facts up to date, prefacing my statement by saying that, if there be any who doubt the narrative of Joyce-Armstrong, there can be no question at all as to the facts concerning Lieutenant Myrtle, R. N.¹⁶³, and Mr. Hay Connor, who undoubtedly met their end in the manner described.

The Joyce-Armstrong Fragment was found in the field which is called Lower Haycock, lying one mile to the westward of the village of Withyham, upon the Kent¹⁶⁴ and Sussex¹⁶⁵ border. It was on the 15th September last that an agricultural labourer, James Flynn, in the employment of Mathew Dodd, farmer, of the Chantry Farm, Withyham, perceived a briar pipe lying near the footpath which skirts the hedge in Lower Haycock. A few paces farther on he picked up a pair of broken binocular glasses. Finally, among some nettles in the ditch, he caught sight of a flat, canvas-backed book, which proved to be a note-book with detachable leaves, some of which had come loose and were fluttering along the base of the hedge. These he collected, but some, including the first, were never recovered, and leave a deplorable hiatus in this all-important statement. The note-book was taken by the labourer to his master, who in turn showed it to Dr. J. H. Atherton, of Hartfield. This gentleman at once recognized the need for an expert examination, and the manuscript was forwarded to the Aero Club in London, where it now lies.

The first two pages of the manuscript are missing. There is also one torn away at the end of the narrative, though none of these affect the general coherence of the story. It is conjectured that the missing opening is concerned with the record of Mr. Joyce-Armstrong's qualifications as an aeronaut, which can be gathered from other sources and are admitted to be unsurpassed among the air-pilots of England. For many years he has been looked upon as among the most daring and the most intellectual of flying men, a combination which has enabled him to both invent and test several new devices, including the common gyroscopic attachment which is known by his name. The main body of the manuscript is written neatly in ink, but the last few lines are in pencil and are so ragged as to be hardly legible – exactly, in fact, as they might be expected to appear if they were scribbled off hurriedly from the seat of a moving aeroplane. There are, it may be added, several stains, both on the last page and on the outside cover which have been pronounced by the Home Office experts to be blood – probably human and certainly mammalian. The fact that something closely resembling the organism of malaria was discovered in this blood, and that Joyce-Armstrong is known to have suffered from intermittent fever, is a remarkable example of the new weapons which modern science has placed in the hands of our detectives.

And now a word as to the personality of the author of this epoch-making statement. Joyce-Armstrong, according to the few friends who really knew something of the man, was a poet and

¹⁶³ **R. N.** – Royal Navy

¹⁶⁴ **Kent** – a county in England facing the European continent across the Strait of Dover

¹⁶⁵ **Sussex** – a historic county in southeastern England along the English Channel coast

a dreamer, as well as a mechanic and an inventor. He was a man of considerable wealth, much of which he had spent in the pursuit of his aeronautical hobby. He had four private aeroplanes in his hangars near Devizes, and is said to have made no fewer than one hundred and seventy ascents in the course of last year. He was a retiring man with dark moods, in which he would avoid the society of his fellows. Captain Dangerfield, who knew him better than anyone, says that there were times when his eccentricity threatened to develop into something more serious. His habit of carrying a shot-gun with him in his aeroplane was one manifestation of it.

Another was the morbid effect which the fall of Lieutenant Myrtle had upon his mind. Myrtle, who was attempting the height record, fell from an altitude of something over thirty thousand feet. Horrible to narrate, his head was entirely obliterated, though his body and limbs preserved their configuration. At every gathering of airmen, Joyce-Armstrong, according to Dangerfield, would ask, with an enigmatic smile: 'And where, pray, is Myrtle's head?'

On another occasion after dinner, at the mess of the Flying School on Salisbury Plain¹⁶⁶, he started a debate as to what will be the most permanent danger which airmen will have to encounter. Having listened to successive opinions as to air-pockets, faulty construction, and over-banking, he ended by shrugging his shoulders and refusing to put forward his own views, though he gave the impression that they differed from any advanced by his companions.

It is worth remarking that after his own complete disappearance it was found that his private affairs were arranged with a precision which may show that he had a strong premonition of disaster. With these essential explanations I will now give the narrative exactly as it stands, beginning at page three of the blood-soaked note-book:

'Nevertheless, when I dined at Rheims¹⁶⁷ with Coselli and Gustav Raymond I found that neither of them was aware of any particular danger in the higher layers of the atmosphere. I did not actually say what was in my thoughts, but I got so near to it that if they had any corresponding idea they could not have failed to express it. But then they are two empty, vainglorious fellows with no thought beyond seeing their silly names in the newspaper. It is interesting to note that neither of them had ever been much beyond the twenty-thousand-foot level. Of course, men have been higher than this both in balloons and in the ascent of mountains. It must be well above that point that the aeroplane enters the danger zone – always presuming that my premonitions are correct.

'Aeroplaning has been with us now for more than twenty years, and one might well ask: Why should this peril be only revealing itself in our day? The answer is obvious. In the old days of weak engines, when a hundred horse-power Gnome or Green was considered ample for every need, the flights were very restricted. Now that three hundred horse-power is the rule rather than the exception, visits to the upper layers have become easier and more common. Some of us can remember how, in our youth, Garros made a world-wide reputation by attaining nineteen thousand feet, and it was considered a remarkable achievement to fly over the Alps. Our standard now has been immeasurably raised, and there are twenty high flights for one in former years. Many of them have been undertaken with impunity. The thirty-thousand-foot level has been reached time after time with no discomfort beyond cold and asthma. What does this prove? A visitor might descend upon this planet a thousand times and never see a tiger. Yet tigers exist, and if he chanced to come down into a jungle he might be devoured. There are jungles of the upper air, and there are worse things than tigers which inhabit them. I believe in time they will map these jungles accurately out. Even at the present moment I could name two of them. One of them lies over the Pau-Biarritz

¹⁶⁶ **Salisbury Plain** – a treeless area, a chalk plateau, in the county of Wiltshire, famous for its prehistoric monuments, the best known of which is Stonehenge

¹⁶⁷ **Rheims** – a city in northeastern France; most French kings were crowned there since 1429.

district¹⁶⁸ of France. Another is just over my head as I write here in my house in Wiltshire. I rather think there is a third in the Homburg-Wiesbaden district¹⁶⁹.

‘It was the disappearance of the airmen that first set me thinking. Of course, everyone said that they had fallen into the sea, but that did not satisfy me at all. First, there was Verrier in France; his machine was found near Bayonne¹⁷⁰, but they never got his body. There was the case of Baxter also, who vanished, though his engine and some of the iron fixings were found in a wood in Leicestershire¹⁷¹. In that case, Dr. Middleton, of Amesbury, who was watching the flight with a telescope, declares that just before the clouds obscured the view he saw the machine, which was at an enormous height, suddenly rise perpendicularly upwards in a succession of jerks in a manner that he would have thought to be impossible. That was the last seen of Baxter. There was a correspondence in the papers, but it never led to anything. There were several other similar cases, and then there was the death of Hay Connor. What a cackle there was about an unsolved mystery of the air, and what columns in the halfpenny papers, and yet how little was ever done to get to the bottom of the business! He came down in a tremendous vol-plane from an unknown height. He never got off his machine and died in his pilot’s seat. Died of what? “Heart disease,” said the doctors. Rubbish! Hay Connor’s heart was as sound as mine is. What did Venables say? Venables was the only man who was at his side when he died. He said that he was shivering and looked like a man who had been badly scared. “Died of fright,” said Venables, but could not imagine what he was frightened about. Only said one word to Venables, which sounded like “Monstrous.” They could make nothing of that at the inquest. But I could make something of it. Monsters! That was the last word of poor Harry Hay Connor. And he DID die of fright, just as Venables thought.

‘And then there was Myrtle’s head. Do you really believe – does anybody really believe – that a man’s head could be driven clean into his body by the force of a fall? Well, perhaps it may be possible, but I, for one, have never believed that it was so with Myrtle. And the grease upon his clothes — “all slimy with grease,” said somebody at the inquest. Queer that nobody got thinking after that! I did – but, then, I had been thinking for a good long time. I’ve made three ascents – how Dangerfield used to chaff me about my shot-gun – but I’ve never been high enough. Now, with this new, light Paul Veroner machine and its one hundred and seventy-five Robur, I should easily touch the thirty thousand tomorrow. I’ll have a shot at the record. Maybe I shall have a shot at something else as well. Of course, it’s dangerous. If a fellow wants to avoid danger he had best keep out of flying altogether and subside finally into flannel slippers and a dressing-gown. But I’ll visit the air-jungle tomorrow – and if there’s anything there I shall know it. If I return, I’ll find myself a bit of a celebrity. If I don’t this note-book may explain what I am trying to do, and how I lost my life in doing it. But no drivell about accidents or mysteries, if YOU please.

‘I chose my Paul Veroner monoplane for the job. There’s nothing like a monoplane when real work is to be done. Beaumont found that out in very early days. For one thing it doesn’t mind damp, and the weather looks as if we should be in the clouds all the time. It’s a bonny little model and answers my hand like a tender-mouthed horse. The engine is a ten-cylinder rotary Robur working up to one hundred and seventy-five. It has all the modern improvements – enclosed fuselage, high-curved landing skids, brakes, gyroscopic steadiers, and three speeds, worked by an alteration of the angle of the planes upon the Venetian-blind¹⁷² principle. I took a shot-gun with me and a dozen cartridges filled with buck-shot. You should have seen the face of Perkins, my old mechanic, when I directed him to put them in. I was dressed like an Arctic explorer, with two jerseys under my

¹⁶⁸ **the Pau-Biarritz district** – a district along the Bay of Biscay in southwestern France, near the Spanish border

¹⁶⁹ **the Homburg-Wiesbaden district** – a district in the south and southwest of Germany

¹⁷⁰ **Bayonne** – a town in southwestern France

¹⁷¹ **Leicestershire** – a county in England, in the East Midlands region

¹⁷² **Venetian blind** – a wind screen made of horizontal stripes of wood or plastic

overalls, thick socks inside my padded boots, a storm-cap with flaps, and my talc goggles. It was stifling outside the hangars, but I was going for the summit of the Himalayas, and had to dress for the part. Perkins knew there was something on and implored me to take him with me. Perhaps I should if I were using the biplane, but a monoplane is a one-man show – if you want to get the last foot of life out of it. Of course, I took an oxygen bag; the man who goes for the altitude record without one will either be frozen or smothered – or both.

‘I had a good look at the planes, the rudder-bar, and the elevating lever before I got in. Everything was in order so far as I could see. Then I switched on my engine and found that she was running sweetly. When they let her go she rose almost at once upon the lowest speed. I circled my home field once or twice just to warm her up, and then with a wave to Perkins and the others, I flattened out my planes and put her on her highest. She skimmed like a swallow downwind for eight or ten miles until I turned her nose up a little and she began to climb in a great spiral for the cloud-bank above me. It’s all-important to rise slowly and adapt yourself to the pressure as you go.

‘It was a close, warm day for an English September, and there was the hush and heaviness of impending rain. Now and then there came sudden puffs of wind from the south-west – one of them so gusty and unexpected that it caught me napping and turned me half-round for an instant. I remember the time when gusts and whirls and air-pockets used to be things of danger – before we learned to put an overmastering power into our engines. Just as I reached the cloud-banks, with the altimeter marking three thousand, down came the rain. My word, how it poured! It drummed upon my wings and lashed against my face, blurring my glasses so that I could hardly see. I got down on to a low speed, for it was painful to travel against it. As I got higher it became hail, and I had to turn tail to it. One of my cylinders was out of action – a dirty plug, I should imagine, but still I was rising steadily with plenty of power. After a bit the trouble passed, whatever it was, and I heard the full, deep-throated purr – the ten singing as one. That’s where the beauty of our modern silencers comes in. We can at last control our engines by ear. How they squeal and squeak and sob when they are in trouble! All those cries for help were wasted in the old days, when every sound was swallowed up by the monstrous racket of the machine. If only the early aviators could come back to see the beauty and perfection of the mechanism which have been bought at the cost of their lives!

‘About nine-thirty I was nearing the clouds. Down below me, all blurred and shadowed with rain, lay the vast expanse of Salisbury Plain. Half a dozen flying machines were doing hackwork at the thousand-foot level, looking like little black swallows against the green background. I dare say they were wondering what I was doing up in cloud-land. Suddenly a grey curtain drew across beneath me and the wet folds of vapours were swirling round my face. It was clammy cold and miserable. But I was above the hail-storm, and that was something gained. The cloud was as dark and thick as a London fog. In my anxiety to get clear, I cocked her nose up until the automatic alarm-bell rang, and I actually began to slide backwards. My sopped and dripping wings had made me heavier than I thought, but presently I was in lighter cloud, and soon had cleared the first layer. There was a second – opal-coloured and fleecy – at a great height above my head, a white, unbroken ceiling above, and a dark, unbroken floor below, with the monoplane labouring upwards upon a vast spiral between them. It is deadly lonely in these cloud-spaces. Once a great flight of some small water-birds went past me, flying very fast to the westwards. The quick whir of their wings and their musical cry were cheery to my ear. I fancy that they were teal, but I am a wretched zoologist. Now that we humans have become birds we must really learn to know our brethren by sight.

‘The wind down beneath me whirled and swayed the broad cloud-plain. Once a great eddy formed in it, a whirlpool of vapour, and through it, as down a funnel, I caught sight of the distant world. A large white biplane was passing at a vast depth beneath me. I fancy it was the morning mail service betwixt Bristol and London. Then the drift swirled inwards again and the great solitude was unbroken.

‘Just after ten I touched the lower edge of the upper cloud – stratum. It consisted of fine diaphanous vapour drifting swiftly from the westwards. The wind had been steadily rising all this time and it was now blowing a sharp breeze – twenty-eight an hour by my gauge. Already it was very cold, though my altimeter only marked nine thousand. The engines were working beautifully, and we went droning steadily upwards. The cloud-bank was thicker than I had expected, but at last it thinned out into a golden mist before me, and then in an instant I had shot out from it, and there was an unclouded sky and a brilliant sun above my head – all blue and gold above, all shining silver below, one vast, glimmering plain as far as my eyes could reach. It was a quarter past ten o’clock, and the barograph¹⁷³ needle pointed to twelve thousand eight hundred. Up I went and up, my ears concentrated upon the deep purring of my motor, my eyes busy always with the watch, the revolution indicator, the petrol lever, and the oil pump. No wonder aviators are said to be a fearless race. With so many things to think of there is no time to trouble about oneself. About this time I noted how unreliable is the compass when above a certain height from earth. At fifteen thousand feet mine was pointing east and a point south. The sun and the wind gave me my true bearings.

‘I had hoped to reach an eternal stillness in these high altitudes, but with every thousand feet of ascent the gale grew stronger. My machine groaned and trembled in every joint and rivet as she faced it, and swept away like a sheet of paper when I banked her on the turn, skimming down wind at a greater pace, perhaps, than ever mortal man has moved. Yet I had always to turn again and tack up in the wind’s eye, for it was not merely a height record that I was after. By all my calculations it was above little Wiltshire that my air-jungle lay, and all my labour might be lost if I struck the outer layers at some farther point.

‘When I reached the nineteen-thousand-foot level, which was about midday, the wind was so severe that I looked with some anxiety to the stays of my wings, expecting momentarily to see them snap or slacken. I even cast loose the parachute behind me, and fastened its hook into the ring of my leathern belt, so as to be ready for the worst. Now was the time when a bit of scamped work by the mechanic is paid for by the life of the aeronaut. But she held together bravely. Every cord and strut was humming and vibrating like so many harp-strings, but it was glorious to see how, for all the beating and the buffeting, she was still the conqueror of Nature and the mistress of the sky. There is surely something divine in man himself that he should rise so superior to the limitations which Creation seemed to impose – rise, too, by such unselfish, heroic devotion as this air-conquest has shown. Talk of human degeneration! When has such a story as this been written in the annals of our race?

‘These were the thoughts in my head as I climbed that monstrous, inclined plane with the wind sometimes beating in my face and sometimes whistling behind my ears, while the cloud-land beneath me fell away to such a distance that the folds and hummocks of silver had all smoothed out into one flat, shining plain. But suddenly I had a horrible and unprecedented experience. I have known before what it is to be in what our neighbours have called a *tourbillon*¹⁷⁴, but never on such a scale as this. That huge, sweeping river of wind of which I have spoken had, as it appears, whirlpools within it which were as monstrous as itself. Without a moment’s warning I was dragged suddenly into the heart of one. I spun round for a minute or two with such velocity that I almost lost my senses, and then fell suddenly, left wing foremost, down the vacuum funnel in the centre. I dropped like a stone, and lost nearly a thousand feet. It was only my belt that kept me in my seat, and the shock and breathlessness left me hanging half-insensible over the side of the fuselage. But I am always capable of a supreme effort – it is my one great merit as an aviator. I was conscious that the descent was slower. The whirlpool was a cone rather than a funnel, and I had come to the apex. With a terrific wrench, throwing my weight all to one side, I levelled my planes and brought

¹⁷³ **barograph** – a barometer that records changes of barometric pressure

¹⁷⁴ **tourbillon** – whirlwind, turbulence (*French*)

her head away from the wind. In an instant I had shot out of the eddies and was skimming down the sky. Then, shaken but victorious, I turned her nose up and began once more my steady grind on the upward spiral. I took a large sweep to avoid the danger-spot of the whirlpool, and soon I was safely above it. Just after one o'clock I was twenty-one thousand feet above the sea-level. To my great joy I had topped the gale, and with every hundred feet of ascent the air grew stiller. On the other hand, it was very cold, and I was conscious of that peculiar nausea which goes with rarefaction of the air. For the first time I unscrewed the mouth of my oxygen bag and took an occasional whiff of the glorious gas. I could feel it running like a cordial through my veins, and I was exhilarated almost to the point of drunkenness. I shouted and sang as I soared upwards into the cold, still outer world.

'It is very clear to me that the insensibility which came upon Glaisher, and in a lesser degree upon Coxwell, when, in 1862, they ascended in a balloon to the height of thirty thousand feet, was due to the extreme speed with which a perpendicular ascent is made. Doing it at an easy gradient and accustoming oneself to the lessened barometric pressure by slow degrees, there are no such dreadful symptoms. At the same great height I found that even without my oxygen inhaler I could breathe without undue distress. It was bitterly cold, however, and my thermometer was at zero, Fahrenheit. At one-thirty I was nearly seven miles above the surface of the earth, and still ascending steadily. I found, however, that the rarefied air was giving markedly less support to my planes, and that my angle of ascent had to be considerably lowered in consequence. It was already clear that even with my light weight and strong engine-power there was a point in front of me where I should be held. To make matters worse, one of my sparking-plugs was in trouble again and there was intermittent misfiring in the engine. My heart was heavy with the fear of failure.

'It was about that time that I had a most extraordinary experience. Something whizzed past me in a trail of smoke and exploded with a loud, hissing sound, sending forth a cloud of steam. For the instant I could not imagine what had happened. Then I remembered that the earth is forever being bombarded by meteor stones, and would be hardly inhabitable were they not in nearly every case turned to vapour in the outer layers of the atmosphere. Here is a new danger for the high-altitude man, for two others passed me when I was nearing the forty-thousand-foot mark. I cannot doubt that at the edge of the earth's envelope the risk would be a very real one.

'My barograph needle marked forty-one thousand three hundred when I became aware that I could go no farther. Physically, the strain was not as yet greater than I could bear but my machine had reached its limit. The attenuated air gave no firm support to the wings, and the least tilt developed into side-slip, while she seemed sluggish on her controls. Possibly, had the engine been at its best, another thousand feet might have been within our capacity, but it was still misfiring, and two out of the ten cylinders appeared to be out of action. If I had not already reached the zone for which I was searching then I should never see it upon this journey. But was it not possible that I had attained it? Soaring in circles like a monstrous hawk upon the forty-thousand-foot level I let the monoplane guide herself, and with my Mannheim¹⁷⁵ glass I made a careful observation of my surroundings. The heavens were perfectly clear; there was no indication of those dangers which I had imagined.

'I have said that I was soaring in circles. It struck me suddenly that I would do well to take a wider sweep and open up a new air-tract. If the hunter entered an earth-jungle he would drive through it if he wished to find his game. My reasoning had led me to believe that the air-jungle which I had imagined lay somewhere over Wiltshire. This should be to the south and west of me. I took my bearings from the sun, for the compass was hopeless and no trace of earth was to be seen – nothing but the distant, silver cloud-plain. However, I got my direction as best I might and kept her head straight to the mark. I reckoned that my petrol supply would not last for more than

¹⁷⁵ **Mannheim** – a city in southwestern Germany on the Rhine River, famous for the manufacture of instruments and equipment

another hour or so, but I could afford to use it to the last drop, since a single magnificent vol-plane could at any time take me to the earth.

‘Suddenly I was aware of something new. The air in front of me had lost its crystal clearness. It was full of long, ragged wisps of something which I can only compare to very fine cigarette smoke. It hung about in wreaths and coils, turning and twisting slowly in the sunlight. As the monoplane shot through it, I was aware of a faint taste of oil upon my lips, and there was a greasy scum upon the woodwork of the machine. Some infinitely fine organic matter appeared to be suspended in the atmosphere. There was no life there. It was inchoate and diffuse, extending for many square acres and then fringing off into the void. No, it was not life. But might it not be the remains of life? Above all, might it not be the food of life, of monstrous life, even as the humble grease of the ocean is the food for the mighty whale? The thought was in my mind when my eyes looked upwards and I saw the most wonderful vision that ever man has seen. Can I hope to convey it to you even as I saw it myself last Thursday?

‘Conceive a jelly-fish such as sails in our summer seas, bell-shaped and of enormous size – far larger, I should judge, than the dome of St. Paul’s. It was of a light pink colour veined with a delicate green, but the whole huge fabric so tenuous that it was but a fairy outline against the dark blue sky. It pulsed with a delicate and regular rhythm. From it there depended two long, drooping, green tentacles, which swayed slowly backwards and forwards. This gorgeous vision passed gently with noiseless dignity over my head, as light and fragile as a soap-bubble, and drifted upon its stately way.

‘I had half-turned my monoplane, that I might look after this beautiful creature, when, in a moment, I found myself amidst a perfect fleet of them, of all sizes, but none so large as the first. Some were quite small, but the majority about as big as an average balloon, and with much the same curvature at the top. There was in them a delicacy of texture and colouring which reminded me of the finest Venetian glass. Pale shades of pink and green were the prevailing tints, but all had a lovely iridescence where the sun shimmered through their dainty forms. Some hundreds of them drifted past me, a wonderful fairy squadron of strange unknown argosies of the sky – creatures whose forms and substance were so attuned to these pure heights that one could not conceive anything so delicate within actual sight or sound of earth.

‘But soon my attention was drawn to a new phenomenon – the serpents of the outer air. These were long, thin, fantastic coils of vapour-like material, which turned and twisted with great speed, flying round and round at such a pace that the eyes could hardly follow them. Some of these ghost-like creatures were twenty or thirty feet long, but it was difficult to tell their girth, for their outline was so hazy that it seemed to fade away into the air around them. These air-snakes were of a very light grey or smoke colour, with some darker lines within, which gave the impression of a definite organism. One of them whisked past my very face, and I was conscious of a cold, clammy contact, but their composition was so unsubstantial that I could not connect them with any thought of physical danger, any more than the beautiful bell-like creatures which had preceded them. There was no more solidity in their frames than in the floating spume from a broken wave.

‘But a more terrible experience was in store for me. Floating downwards from a great height there came a purplish patch of vapour, small as I saw it first, but rapidly enlarging as it approached me, until it appeared to be hundreds of square feet in size. Though fashioned of some transparent, jelly-like substance, it was none the less of much more definite outline and solid consistence than anything which I had seen before. There were more traces, too, of a physical organization, especially two vast, shadowy, circular plates upon either side, which may have been eyes, and a perfectly solid white projection between them which was as curved and cruel as the beak of a vulture.

‘The whole aspect of this monster was formidable and threatening, and it kept changing its colour from a very light mauve to a dark, angry purple so thick that it cast a shadow as it drifted

between my monoplane and the sun. On the upper curve of its huge body there were three great projections which I can only describe as enormous bubbles, and I was convinced as I looked at them that they were charged with some extremely light gas which served to buoy up the misshapen and semi-solid mass in the rarefied air. The creature moved swiftly along, keeping pace easily with the monoplane, and for twenty miles or more it formed my horrible escort, hovering over me like a bird of prey which is waiting to pounce. Its method of progression – done so swiftly that it was not easy to follow – was to throw out a long, glutinous streamer in front of it, which in turn seemed to draw forward the rest of the writhing body. So elastic and gelatinous was it that never for two successive minutes was it the same shape, and yet each change made it more threatening and loathsome than the last.

‘I knew that it meant mischief. Every purple flush of its hideous body told me so. The vague, goggling eyes which were turned always upon me were cold and merciless in their viscid hatred. I dipped the nose of my monoplane downwards to escape it. As I did so, as quick as a flash there shot out a long tentacle from this mass of floating blubber, and it fell as light and sinuous as a whip-lash across the front of my machine. There was a loud hiss as it lay for a moment across the hot engine, and it whisked itself into the air again, while the huge, flat body drew itself together as if in sudden pain. I dipped to a vol-pique, but again a tentacle fell over the monoplane and was shorn off by the propeller as easily as it might have cut through a smoke wreath. A long, gliding, sticky, serpent-like coil came from behind and caught me round the waist, dragging me out of the fuselage. I tore at it, my fingers sinking into the smooth, glue-like surface, and for an instant I disengaged myself, but only to be caught round the boot by another coil, which gave me a jerk that tilted me almost on to my back.

‘As I fell over I blazed off both barrels of my gun, though, indeed, it was like attacking an elephant with a pea-shooter to imagine that any human weapon could cripple that mighty bulk. And yet I aimed better than I knew, for, with a loud report, one of the great blisters upon the creature’s back exploded with the puncture of the buck-shot. It was very clear that my conjecture was right, and that these vast, clear bladders were distended with some lifting gas, for in an instant the huge, cloud-like body turned sideways, writhing desperately to find its balance, while the white beak snapped and gaped in horrible fury. But already I had shot away on the steepest glide that I dared to attempt, my engine still full on, the flying propeller and the force of gravity shooting me downwards like an aerolite¹⁷⁶. Far behind me I saw a dull, purplish smudge growing swiftly smaller and merging into the blue sky behind it. I was safe out of the deadly jungle of the outer air.

‘Once out of danger I throttled my engine, for nothing tears a machine to pieces quicker than running on full power from a height. It was a glorious, spiral vol-plane from nearly eight miles of altitude – first, to the level of the silver cloud-bank, then to that of the storm-cloud beneath it, and finally, in beating rain, to the surface of the earth. I saw the Bristol Channel¹⁷⁷ beneath me as I broke from the clouds, but, having still some petrol in my tank, I got twenty miles inland before I found myself stranded in a field half a mile from the village of Ashcombe. There I got three tins of petrol from a passing motor-car, and at ten minutes past six that evening I alighted gently in my own home meadow at Devizes, after such a journey as no mortal upon earth has ever yet taken and lived to tell the tale. I have seen the beauty and I have seen the horror of the heights – and greater beauty or greater horror than that is not within the ken of man.

‘And now it is my plan to go once again before I give my results to the world. My reason for this is that I must surely have something to show by way of proof before I lay such a tale before my fellow-men. It is true that others will soon follow and will confirm what I have said, and yet I should wish to carry conviction from the first. Those lovely iridescent bubbles of the air should not

¹⁷⁶ **aerolite** – a stony meteorite

¹⁷⁷ **the Bristol Channel** – an inlet of the Atlantic Ocean separating England from Wales

be hard to capture. They drift slowly upon their way, and the swift monoplane could intercept their leisurely course. It is likely enough that they would dissolve in the heavier layers of the atmosphere, and that some small heap of amorphous jelly might be all that I should bring to earth with me. And yet something there would surely be by which I could substantiate my story. Yes, I will go, even if I run a risk by doing so. These purple horrors would not seem to be numerous. It is probable that I shall not see one. If I do I shall dive at once. At the worst there is always the shot-gun and my knowledge of...'

Here a page of the manuscript is unfortunately missing. On the next page is written, in large, straggling writing:

'Forty-three thousand feet. I shall never see earth again. They are beneath me, three of them. God help me; it is a dreadful death to die!'

Such in its entirety is the Joyce-Armstrong Statement. Of the man nothing has since been seen. Pieces of his shattered monoplane have been picked up in the preserves of Mr. Budd-Lushington upon the borders of Kent and Sussex, within a few miles of the spot where the note-book was discovered. If the unfortunate aviator's theory is correct that this air-jungle, as he called it, existed only over the south-west of England, then it would seem that he had fled from it at the full speed of his monoplane, but had been overtaken and devoured by these horrible creatures at some spot in the outer atmosphere above the place where the grim relics were found. The picture of that monoplane skimming down the sky, with the nameless terrors flying as swiftly beneath it and cutting it off always from the earth while they gradually closed in upon their victim, is one upon which a man who valued his sanity would prefer not to dwell. There are many, as I am aware, who still jeer at the facts which I have here set down, but even they must admit that Joyce-Armstrong has disappeared, and I would commend to them his own words: 'This note-book may explain what I am trying to do, and how I lost my life in doing it. But no drivel about accidents or mysteries, if YOU please.'

The Tale (Joseph Conrad)

Outside the large single window the crepuscular¹⁷⁸ light was dying out slowly in a great square gleam without colour, framed rigidly in the gathering shades of the room.

It was a long room. The irresistible tide of the night ran into the most distant part of it, where the whispering of a man's voice, passionately interrupted and passionately renewed, seemed to plead against the answering murmurs of infinite sadness.

At last no answering murmur came. His movement when he rose slowly from his knees by the side of the deep, shadowy couch holding the shadowy suggestion of a reclining woman revealed him tall under the low ceiling, and sombre all over except for the crude discord of the white collar under the shape of his head and the faint, minute spark of a brass button here and there on his uniform.

He stood over her a moment, masculine and mysterious in his immobility, before he sat down on a chair nearby. He could see only the faint oval of her upturned face and, extended on her black dress, her pale hands, a moment before abandoned to his kisses and now as if too weary to move.

He dared not make a sound, shrinking as a man would do from the prosaic necessities of existence. As usual, it was the woman who had the courage. Her voice was heard first – almost conventional while her being vibrated yet with conflicting emotions.

‘Tell me something,’ she said.

The darkness hid his surprise and then his smile. Had he not just said to her everything worth saying in the world – and that not for the first time!

‘What am I to tell you?’ he asked, in a voice creditably steady. He was beginning to feel grateful to her for that something final in her tone which had eased the strain.

‘Why not tell me a tale?’

‘A tale!’ He was really amazed.

‘Yes. Why not?’

These words came with a slight petulance, the hint of a loved woman's capricious will, which is capricious only because it feels itself to be a law, embarrassing sometimes and always difficult to elude.

‘Why not?’ he repeated, with a slightly mocking accent, as though he had been asked to give her the moon. But now he was feeling a little angry with her for that feminine mobility that slips out of an emotion as easily as out of a splendid gown.

He heard her say, a little unsteadily with a sort of fluttering intonation which made him think suddenly of a butterfly's flight:

‘You used to tell – your – your simple and – and professional – tales very well at one time. Or well enough to interest me. You had a – a sort of art – in the days – the days before the war.’

‘Really?’ he said, with involuntary gloom. ‘But now, you see, the war is going on,’ he continued in such a dead, equable tone that she felt a slight chill fall over her shoulders. And yet she persisted. For there's nothing more unswerving in the world than a woman's caprice.

‘It could be a tale not of this world,’ she explained.

‘You want a tale of the other, the better world?’ he asked, with a matter-of-fact surprise. ‘You must evoke for that task those who have already gone there.’

‘No. I don't mean that. I mean another – some other – world. In the universe – not in heaven.’

‘I am relieved. But you forget that I have only five days' leave.’

‘Yes. And I've also taken a five days' leave from – from my duties.’

‘I like that word.’

¹⁷⁸ **crepuscular** – seen during twilight

‘What word?’

‘Duty.’

‘It is horrible – sometimes.’

‘Oh, that’s because you think it’s narrow. But it isn’t. It contains infinities, and – and so—’

‘What is this jargon?’

He disregarded the interjected scorn. ‘An infinity of absolution, for instance,’ he continued. ‘But as to this another world’ – who’s going to look for it and for the tale that is in it?’

‘You,’ she said, with a strange, almost rough, sweetness of assertion.

He made a shadowy movement of assent in his chair, the irony of which not even the gathered darkness could render mysterious.

‘As you will. In that world, then, there was once upon a time a Commanding Officer and a Northman¹⁷⁹. Put in the capitals, please, because they had no other names. It was a world of seas and continents and islands—’

‘Like the earth,’ she murmured, bitterly.

‘Yes. What else could you expect from sending a man made of our common, tormented clay on a voyage of discovery? What else could he find? What else could you understand or care for, or feel the existence of even? There was comedy in it, and slaughter.’

‘Always like the earth,’ she murmured. ‘Always. And since I could find in the universe only what was deeply rooted in the fibres of my being there was love in it, too. But we won’t talk of that.’

‘No. We won’t,’ she said, in a neutral tone which concealed perfectly her relief – or her disappointment. Then after a pause she added: ‘It’s going to be a comic story.’

‘Well—’ he paused, too. ‘Yes. In a way. In a very grim way. It will be human, and, as you know, comedy is but a matter of the visual angle. And it won’t be a noisy story. All the long guns in it will be dumb – as dumb as so many telescopes.’

‘Ah, there are guns in it, then! And may I ask – where?’

‘Afloat. You remember that the world of which we speak had its seas. A war was going on in it. It was a funny work! and terribly in earnest. Its war was being carried on over the land, over the water, under the water, up in the air, and even under the ground. And many young men in it, mostly in wardrooms and mess-rooms, used to say to each other – pardon the unparliamentary word – they used to say, “It’s a damned bad war, but it’s better than no war at all.” Sounds flippant, doesn’t it.’

He heard a nervous, impatient sigh in the depths of the couch while he went on without a pause.

‘And yet there is more in it than meets the eye. I mean more wisdom. Flippancy, like comedy, is but a matter of visual first impression. That world was not very wise. But there was in it a certain amount of common working sagacity. That, however, was mostly worked by the neutrals in diverse ways, public and private, which had to be watched; watched by acute minds and also by actual sharp eyes. They had to be very sharp indeed, too, I assure you.’

‘I can imagine,’ she murmured, appreciatively.

‘What is there that you can’t imagine?’ he pronounced, soberly. ‘You have the world in you. But let us go back to our commanding officer, who, of course, commanded a ship of a sort. My tales if often professional (as you remarked just now) have never been technical. So I’ll just tell you that the ship was of a very ornamental sort once, with lots of grace and elegance and luxury about her. Yes, once! She was like a pretty woman who had suddenly put on a suit of sackcloth and stuck revolvers in her belt. But she floated lightly, she moved nimbly, she was quite good enough.’

‘That was the opinion of the commanding officer?’ said the voice from the couch.

‘It was. He used to be sent out with her along certain coasts to see – what he could see. Just that. And sometimes he had some preliminary information to help him, and sometimes he had not.

¹⁷⁹ Northman – 1) *hist.* a Viking, a Scandinavian seafaring warrior; 2) a Danish, Norwegian or Swede.

And it was all one, really. It was about as useful as information trying to convey the locality and intentions of a cloud, of a phantom taking shape here and there and impossible to seize, would have been.

‘It was in the early days of the war. What at first used to amaze the commanding officer was the unchanged face of the waters, with its familiar expression, neither more friendly nor more hostile. On fine days the sun strikes sparks upon the blue; here and there a peaceful smudge of smoke hangs in the distance, and it is impossible to believe that the familiar clear horizon traces the limit of one great circular ambush.

‘Yes, it is impossible to believe, till some day you see a ship not your own ship (that isn’t so impressive), but some ship in company, blow up all of a sudden and plop under almost before you know what has happened to her. Then you begin to believe. Henceforth you go out for the work to see – what you can see, and you keep on at it with the conviction that someday you will die from something you have not seen. One envies the soldiers at the end of the day, wiping the sweat and blood from their faces, counting the dead fallen to their hands, looking at the devastated fields, the torn earth that seems to suffer and bleed with them. One does, really. The final brutality of it – the taste of primitive passion – the ferocious frankness of the blow struck with one’s hand – the direct call and the straight response. Well, the sea gave you nothing of that, and seemed to pretend that there was nothing the matter with the world.’

She interrupted, stirring a little.

‘Oh, yes. Sincerity – frankness – passion – three words of your gospel. Don’t I know them!’

‘Think! Isn’t it ours – believed in common?’ he asked, anxiously, yet without expecting an answer, and went on at once: ‘Such were the feelings of the commanding officer. When the night came trailing over the sea, hiding what looked like the hypocrisy of an old friend, it was a relief. The night blinds you frankly – and there are circumstances when the sunlight may grow as odious to one as falsehood itself. Night is all right.

‘At night the commanding officer could let his thoughts get away – I won’t tell you where. Somewhere where there was no choice but between truth and death. But thick weather, though it blinded one, brought no such relief. Mist is deceitful, the dead luminosity of the fog is irritating. It seems that you ought to see.

‘One gloomy, nasty day the ship was steaming along her beat in sight of a rocky, dangerous coast that stood out intensely black like an India-ink¹⁸⁰ drawing on gray paper. Presently the second in command spoke to his chief. He thought he saw something on the water, to seaward. Small wreckage, perhaps.

“‘But there shouldn’t be any wreckage here, sir,” he remarked.

“‘No,” said the commanding officer. “The last reported submarined ships were sunk a long way to the westward. But one never knows. There may have been others since then not reported nor seen. Gone with all hands.”

‘That was how it began. The ship’s course was altered to pass the object close; for it was necessary to have a good look at what one could see. Close, but without touching; for it was not advisable to come in contact with objects of any form whatever floating casually about. Close, but without stopping or even diminishing speed; for in those times it was not prudent to linger on any particular spot, even for a moment. I may tell you at once that the object was not dangerous in itself. No use in describing it. It may have been nothing more remarkable than, say, a barrel of a certain shape and colour. But it was significant.

‘The smooth bow-wave hove it up as if for a closer inspection, and then the ship, brought again to her course, turned her back on it with indifference, while twenty pairs of eyes on her deck stared in all directions trying to see – what they could see.

¹⁸⁰ **India ink** – special black-colour pigment mixed with gum or glue, used for drawing or writing

‘The commanding officer and his second in command discussed the object with understanding. It appeared to them to be not so much a proof of the sagacity as of the activity of certain neutrals. This activity had in many cases taken the form of replenishing the stores of certain submarines at sea. This was generally believed, if not absolutely known. But the very nature of things in those early days pointed that way. The object, looked at closely and turned away from with apparent indifference, put it beyond doubt that something of the sort had been done somewhere in the neighbourhood.

‘The object in itself was more than suspect. But the fact of its being left in evidence roused other suspicions. Was it the result of some deep and devilish purpose? As to that all speculation soon appeared to be a vain thing. Finally the two officers came to the conclusion that it was left there most likely by accident, complicated possibly by some unforeseen necessity; such, perhaps, as the sudden need to get away quickly from the spot, or something of that kind.

‘Their discussion had been carried on in curt, weighty phrases, separated by long, thoughtful silences. And all the time their eyes roamed about the horizon in an everlasting, almost mechanical effort of vigilance. The younger man summed up grimly:

“‘Well, it’s evidence. That’s what this is. Evidence of what we were pretty certain of before. And plain, too.”

““And much good it will do to us,” retorted the commanding officer. “The parties are miles away; the submarine, devil only knows where, ready to kill; and the noble neutral slipping away to the eastward, ready to lie!”

‘The second in command laughed a little at the tone. But he guessed that the neutral wouldn’t even have to lie very much. Fellows like that, unless caught in the very act, felt themselves pretty safe. They could afford to chuckle. That fellow was probably chuckling to himself. It’s very possible he had been before at the game and didn’t care a rap for the bit of evidence left behind. It was a game in which practice made one bold and successful, too.

‘And again he laughed faintly. But his commanding officer was in revolt against the murderous stealthiness of methods and the atrocious callousness of complicities that seemed to taint the very source of men’s deep emotions and noblest activities; to corrupt their imagination which builds up the final conceptions of life and death. He suffered—’

The voice from the sofa interrupted the narrator.

‘How well I can understand that in him!’

He bent forward slightly.

‘Yes. I, too. Everything should be open in love and war. Open as the day, since both are the call of an ideal which it is so easy, so terribly easy, to degrade in the name of Victory.’

He paused; then went on: I don’t know that the commanding officer delved so deep as that into his feelings. But he did suffer from them – a sort of disenchanted sadness. It is possible, even, that he suspected himself of folly. Man is various. But he had no time for much introspection, because from the southwest a wall of fog had advanced upon his ship. Great convolutions of vapours flew over, swirling about masts and funnel, which looked as if they were beginning to melt. Then they vanished.

‘The ship was stopped, all sounds ceased, and the very fog became motionless, growing denser and as if solid in its amazing dumb immobility. The men at their stations lost sight of each other. Footsteps sounded stealthy; rare voices, impersonal and remote, died out without resonance. A blind white stillness took possession of the world.

‘It looked, too, as if it would last for days. I don’t mean to say that the fog did not vary a little in its density. Now and then it would thin out mysteriously, revealing to the men a more or less ghostly presentment of their ship. Several times the shadow of the coast itself swam darkly before their eyes through the fluctuating opaque brightness of the great white cloud clinging to the water.

‘Taking advantage of these moments, the ship had been moved cautiously nearer the shore. It was useless to remain out in such thick weather. Her officers knew every nook and cranny of the coast along their beat. They thought that she would be much better in a certain cove. It wasn’t a large place, just ample room for a ship to swing at her anchor. She would have an easier time of it till the fog lifted up.

‘Slowly, with infinite caution and patience, they crept closer and closer, seeing no more of the cliffs than an evanescent dark loom with a narrow border of angry foam at its foot. At the moment of anchoring the fog was so thick that for all they could see they might have been a thousand miles out in the open sea. Yet the shelter of the land could be felt. There was a peculiar quality in the stillness of the air. Very faint, very elusive, the wash of the ripple against the encircling land reached their ears, with mysterious sudden pauses.

‘The anchor dropped, the leads were laid in. The commanding officer went below into his cabin. But he had not been there very long when a voice outside his door requested his presence on deck. He thought to himself: ‘What is it now?’ He felt some impatience at being called out again to face the wearisome fog.

‘He found that it had thinned again a little and had taken on a gloomy hue from the dark cliffs which had no form, no outline, but asserted themselves as a curtain of shadows all round the ship, except in one bright spot, which was the entrance from the open sea. Several officers were looking that way from the bridge. The second in command met him with the breathlessly whispered information that there was another ship in the cove.

‘She had been made out by several pairs of eyes only a couple of minutes before. She was lying at anchor very near the entrance – a mere vague blot on the fog’s brightness. And the commanding officer by staring in the direction pointed out to him by eager hands ended by distinguishing it at last himself. Indubitably a vessel of some sort.

“‘It’s a wonder we didn’t run slap into her when coming in,” observed the second in command.

“‘Send a boat on board before she vanishes,” said the commanding officer. He surmised that this was a coaster. It could hardly be anything else. But another thought came into his head suddenly. “It is a wonder,” he said to his second in command, who had rejoined him after sending the boat away.

‘By that time both of them had been struck by the fact that the ship so suddenly discovered had not manifested her presence by ringing her bell.

“‘We came in very quietly, that’s true,” concluded the younger officer. “But they must have heard our leadsmen at least. We couldn’t have passed her more than fifty yards off. The closest shave! They may even have made us out, since they were aware of something coming in. And the strange thing is that we never heard a sound from her. The fellows on board must have been holding their breath.”

“‘Aye,” said the commanding officer, thoughtfully.

‘In due course the boarding-boat returned, appearing suddenly alongside, as though she had burrowed her way under the fog. The officer in charge came up to make his report, but the commanding officer didn’t give him time to begin. He cried from a distance:

“‘Coaster, isn’t she?”

“‘No, sir. A stranger – a neutral,” was the answer.

“‘No. Really! Well, tell us all about it. What is she doing here?”

‘The young man stated then that he had been told a long and complicated story of engine troubles. But it was plausible enough from a strictly professional point of view and it had the usual features: disablement, dangerous drifting along the shore, weather more or less thick for days, fear of a gale, ultimately a resolve to go in and anchor anywhere on the coast, and so on. Fairly plausible.

“‘Engines still disabled?” inquired the commanding officer.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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