'If you will excuse me,' he said, clenching his hands behind his back, 'I think I should feel myself justified in——'

'Oh! Come along in,' exploded the lieutenant. He made the same gesture of savage surrender. And he slammed into the office, the rest of us at his heels.

P. Montmorency, house-agent, was a solitary old gentleman sitting behind a bare brown counter. He had an egglike head, froglike jaws, and a grey hairy fringe of aureole round the lower part of his face; the whole combined with a reddish, aquiline nose. He wore a shabby black frock-coat, a sort of semi-clerical tie worn at a very unclerical angle, and looked, generally speaking, about as unlike the house-agent as anything could look, short of something like a sandwich-man or a Scotch Highlander.

We stood inside the room for fully forty seconds, and the odd old gentleman did not look at us. Neither, to tell the truth, odd as he was, did we look at him. Our eyes were fixed, where his were fixed, upon something that was crawling about on the counter in front of him. It was a ferret.

The silence was broken by Rupert Grant. He spoke in that sweet and steely voice which he reserved for great occasions and practised for hours together in his bedroom. He said:

'Mr. Montmorency, I think?'

The old gentleman started, lifted his eyes with a bland bewilderment, picked up the ferret by the neck, stuffed it alive into his trousers pocket, smiled apologetically, and said:

'Sir.'

'You are a house-agent, are you not?' asked Rupert.

To the delight of that criminal investigator, Mr. Montmorency's eyes wandered unquietly towards Lieutenant Keith, the only man present that he knew.

'A house-agent,' cried Rupert again, bringing out the word as if it were 'burglar.'

'Yes . . . oh, yes,' said the man, with a quavering

and almost coquettish smile. 'I am a house-agent, . . . oh, yes.'

'Well, I think,' said Rupert, with a sardonic sleekness, 'that Lieutenant Keith wants to speak to you. We have come in by his request.'

Lieutenant Keith was lowering gloomily, and now he spoke.

'I have come, Mr. Montmorency, about that house of mine.'

'Yes, sir,' said Montmorency, spreading his fingers on the flat counter. 'It 's all ready, sir. I 've attended to all your suggestions—er—about the br——'

'Right,' cried Keith, cutting the words short with the startling neatness of a gunshot. 'We needn't bother about all that. If you 've done what I told you, all right.'

And he turned sharply towards the door.

Mr. Montmorency, house-agent, presented a picture of pathos. After stammering a moment he said: 'Excuse me . . . Mr. Keith . . . there was another matter . . . about which I wasn't quite sure. I tried to get all the heating apparatus possible under the circumstances . . . but in winter . . . at that elevation . . .'

'Can't expect much, eh ? ' said the lieutenant, cutting in with the same sudden skill. 'No, of course not. That 's all right, Montmorency. There can't be any more difficulties,' and he put his hand on the handle of the door.

'I think,' said Rupert Grant, with a satanic suavity, 'that Mr. Montmorency has something further to say to you, lieutenant.'

'Only,' said the house-agent, in desperation, 'what about the birds ? '

'I beg your pardon,' said Rupert, in a general blank.

'What about the birds ? ' said the house-agent doggedly.

Basil, who had remained throughout the proceedings in a state of Napoleonic calm, which might be more

accurately described as a state of Napoleonic stupidity, suddenly lifted his leonine head.

'Before you go, Lieutenant Keith,' he said. 'Come now. Really, what about the birds?'

'I 'll take care of them,' said Lieutenant Keith, still with his long back turned to us; 'they shan't suffer.'

'Thank you, sir, thank you,' cried the incomprehensible house-agent, with an air of ecstasy. 'You 'll excuse my concern, sir. You know I 'm wild on wild animals. I 'm as wild as any of them on that. Thank you, sir. But there 's another thing . . .'

The lieutenant, with his back turned to us, exploded with an indescribable laugh and swung round to face us. It was a laugh, the purport of which was direct and essential, and yet which one cannot exactly express. As near as it said anything, verbally speaking, it said: 'Well, if you must spoil it, you must. But you don't know what you 're spoiling.'

'There is another thing,' continued Mr. Montmorency weakly. 'Of course, if you don't want to be visited you 'll paint the house green, but——'

'Green!' shouted Keith. 'Green! Let it be green or nothing. I won't have a house of another colour. Green!' and before we could realize anything the door had banged between us and the street.

Rupert Grant seemed to take a little time to collect himself; but he spoke before the echoes of the door died away.

'Your client, Lieutenant Keith, appears somewhat excited,' he said. 'What is the matter with him? Is he unwell?'

'Oh, I should think not,' said Mr. Montmorency, in some confusion. 'The negotiations have been somewhat difficult—the house is rather——'

'Green,' said Rupert calmly. 'That appears to be a very important point. It must be rather green. May I ask you, Mr. Montmorency, before I rejoin my companion outside, whether, in your business, it is usual to ask for houses by their colour? Do clients write to a

house-agent asking for a pink house or a blue house? Or, to take another instance, for a green house?'

'Only,' said Montmorency, trembling, 'only to be inconspicuous.'

Rupert had his ruthless smile. 'Can you tell me any place on Earth in which a green house would be inconspicuous?'

The house-agent was fidgeting nervously in his pocket. Slowly drawing out a couple of lizards and leaving them to run on the counter, he said:

'No; I can't.'

'You can't suggest an explanation?'

'No,' said Mr. Montmorency, rising slowly and yet in such a way as to suggest a sudden situation. 'I can't. And may I, as a busy man, be excused if I ask you, gentlemen, if you have any demand to make of me in connection with my business. What kind of house would you desire me to get for you, sir?'

He opened his blank blue eyes on Rupert, who seemed for the second staggered. Then he recovered himself with perfect common sense and answered:

'I am sorry, Mr. Montmorency. The fascination of your remarks has unduly delayed us from joining our friend outside. Pray excuse my apparent impertinence.'

'Not at all, sir,' said the house-agent, taking a South American spider idly from his waistcoat pocket and letting it climb up the slope of his desk. 'Not at all, sir. I hope you will favour me again.'

Rupert Grant dashed out of the office in a gust of anger, anxious to face Lieutenant Keith. He was gone. The dull, star-lit street was deserted.

'What do you say now?' cried Rupert to his brother. His brother said nothing now.

We all three strode down the street in silence, Rupert feverish, myself dazed, Basil, to all appearance, merely dull. We walked through grey street after grey street, turning corners, traversing squares, scarcely meeting any one, except occasional drunken knots of two or three.

In one small street, however, the knots of two or

three began abruptly to thicken into knots of five or six and then into great groups and then into a crowd. The crowd was stirring very slightly. But any one with a knowledge of the eternal populace knows that if the outside rim of a crowd stirs ever so slightly it means that there is madness in the heart and core of the mob. It soon became evident that something really important had happened in the centre of this excitement. We wormed our way to the front, with the cunning which is known only to Cockneys, and once there we soon learned the nature of the difficulty. There had been a brawl concerned with some six men, and one of them lay almost dead on the stones of the street. Of the other four, all interesting matters were, as far as we were concerned, swallowed in one stupendous fact. One of the four survivors of the brutal and perhaps fatal scuffle was the immaculate Lieutenant Keith, his clothes torn to ribbons, his eyes blazing, blood on his knuckles. One other thing, however, pointed at him in a worse manner. A short sword, or very long knife, had been drawn out of his elegant walking-stick, and lay in front of him upon the stones. It did not, however, appear to be bloody.

The police had already pushed into the centre with their ponderous omnipotence, and even as they did so, Rupert Grant sprang forward with his incontrollable and intolerable secret.

'That is the man, constable,' he shouted, pointing at the battered lieutenant. 'He is a suspicious character. He did the murder.'

'There 's been no murder done, sir,' said the policeman, with his automatic civility. 'The poor man 's only hurt. I shall only be able to take the names and addresses of the men in the scuffle and have a good eye kept on them.'

'Have a good eye kept on that one,' said Rupert, pale to the lips, and pointing to the ragged Keith.

'All right, sir,' said the policeman, unemotionally, and went the round of the people present collecting the addresses. When he had completed his task the dusk

had fallen and most of the people not immediately connected with the examination had gone away. He still found, however, one eager-faced stranger lingering on the outskirts of the affair. It was Rupert Grant.

'Constable,' he said, 'I have a very particular reason for asking you a question. Would you mind telling me whether that military fellow who dropped his sword-stick in the row gave you an address or not?'

'Yes, sir,' said the policeman, after a reflective pause; 'yes, he gave me his address.'

'My name is Rupert Grant,' said that individual, with some pomp. 'I have assisted the police on more than one occasion. I wonder whether you would tell me, as a special favour, what address?'

The constable looked at him.

'Yes,' he said slowly, 'if you like. His address is: "The Elms, Buxton Common, near Purley, Surrey."'

'Thank you,' said Rupert, and ran home through the gathering night as fast as his legs could carry him, repeating the address to himself.

* * * * * *

Rupert Grant generally came down late in a rather lordly way to breakfast; he contrived,I don't know how, to achieve always the attitude of the indulged younger brother. Next morning, however, when Basil and I came down we found him ready and restless.

'Well,' he said sharply to his brother almost before we sat down to the meal. 'What do you think of your Drummond Keith now?'

'What do I think of him?' inquired Basil slowly. 'I don't think anything of him.'

'I 'm glad to hear it,' said Rupert, buttering his toast with an energy that was somewhat exultant. 'I thought you 'd come round to my view, but I own I was startled at your not seeing it from the beginning. The man is a translucent liar and knave.'

'I think,' said Basil, in the same heavy monotone as before, 'that I did not make myself clear. When I said that I thought nothing of him I meant grammatically

what I said. I meant that I did not think about him; that he did not occupy my mind. You, however, seem to me to think a lot of him, since you think him a knave. I should say he was glaringly good myself.'

'I sometimes think you talk paradox for its own sake,' said Rupert, breaking an egg with unnecessary sharpness. 'What the deuce is the sense of it? Here 's a man whose original position was, by our common agreement, dubious. He 's a wanderer, a teller of tall tales, a man who doesn't conceal his acquaintance with all the blackest and bloodiest scenes on earth. We take the trouble to follow him to one of his appointments, and if ever two human beings were plotting together and lying to every one else, he and that impossible house-agent were doing it. We followed him home, and the very same night he is in the thick of a fatal, or nearly fatal, brawl, in which he is the only man armed. Really, if this is being glaringly good, I must confess that the glare does not dazzle me.'

Basil was quite unmoved. 'I admit his moral goodness is of a certain kind, a quaint, perhaps a casual kind. He is very fond of change and experiment. But all the points you so ingeniously make against him are mere coincidents or special pleading. It 's true he didn't want to talk about his house business in front of us. No man would. It 's true that he carries a swordstick. Any man might. It 's true he drew it in the shock of a street fight. Any man would. But there 's nothing really dubious in all this. There 's nothing to confirm——'

As he spoke a knock came at the door.

'If you please, sir,' said the landlady, with an alarmed air, 'there 's a policeman wants to see you.'

'Show him in,' said Basil, amid the blank silence.

The heavy, handsome constable who appeared at the door spoke almost as soon as he appeared there.

'I think one of you gentlemen,' he said, curtly but respectfully, 'was present at the affair in Copper Street last night, and drew my attention very strongly to a particular man.'

Rupert half rose from his chair, with eyes like diamonds, but the constable went on calmly, referring to a paper.

'A young man with grey hair. Had light grey clothes, very good, but torn in a struggle. Gave his name as Drummond Keith.'

'This is amusing,' said Basil, laughing. 'I was in the very act of clearing that poor officer's character of rather fanciful aspersions. What about him?'

'Well, sir,' said the constable, 'I took all the men's addresses and had them watched. It wasn't serious enough to do more than that. All the other addresses are all right. But this man Keith gave a false address. The place doesn't exist.'

The breakfast table was nearly flung over as Rupert sprang up, slapping both his thighs.

'Well, by all that 's good,' he cried. 'This is a sign from heaven.'

'It 's certainly very extraordinary,' said Basil quietly, with knitted brows. 'It 's odd the fellow should have given a false address, considering he was perfectly innocent in the——'

'Oh, you jolly old early Christian duffer,' cried Rupert, in a sort of rapture, 'I don't wonder you couldn't be a judge. You think every one as good as yourself. Isn't the thing plain enough now? A doubtful acquaintance; rowdy stories, a most suspicious conversation, mean streets, a concealed knife, a man nearly killed, and, finally, a false address. That 's what we call glaring goodness.'

'It 's certainly very extraordinary,' repeated Basil. And he strolled moodily about the room. Then he said: 'You are quite sure, constable, that there 's no mistake? You got the address right, and the police have really gone to it and found it was a fraud?'

'It was very simple, sir,' said the policeman, chuckling. 'The place he named was a well-known common quite near London, and our people were down there this morning before any of you were awake. And there 's no such house. In fact, there are hardly any houses at

all. Though it is so near London, it 's a blank moor with hardly five trees on it, to say nothing of Christians. Oh, no, sir, the address was a fraud right enough. He was a clever rascal, and chose one of those scraps of lost England that people know nothing about. Nobody could say off-hand that there was not a particular house dropped somewhere about the heath. But as a fact, there isn't.'

Basil's face during this sensible speech had been growing darker and darker with a sort of desperate sagacity. He was cornered almost for the first time since I had known him ; and to tell the truth I rather wondered at the almost childish obstinacy which kept him so close to his original prejudice in favour of the wildly questionable lieutenant. At length he said :

'You really searched the common ? And the address was really not known in the district—by the way, what was the address ? '

The constable selected one of his slips of paper and consulted it, but before he could speak Rupert Grant, who was leaning in the window in a perfect posture of the quiet and triumphant detective, struck in with the sharp and suave voice he loved so much to use.

'Why, I can tell you that, Basil,' he said graciously, as he idly plucked leaves from a plant in the window. 'I took the precaution to get this man's address from the constable last night.'

'And what was it ? ' asked his brother gruffly.

'The constable will correct me if I am wrong,' said Rupert, looking sweetly at the ceiling. 'It was "The Elms, Buxton Common, near Purley, Surrey." '

'Right, sir,' said the policeman, laughing and folding up his papers.

There was a silence, and the blue eyes of Basil looked blindly for a few seconds into the void. Then his head fell back in his chair so suddenly that I started up, thinking him ill. But before I could move further his lips had flown apart (I can use no other phrase) and a peal of gigantic laughter struck and shook the ceiling—

laughter that shook the laughter, laughter redoubled, laughter incurable, laughter that could not stop.

Two whole minutes afterwards it was still unended; Basil was ill with laughter; but still he laughed. The rest of us were by this time ill almost with terror.

'Excuse me,' said the insane creature, getting at last to his feet. 'I am awfully sorry. It is horribly rude. And stupid, too. And also unpractical, because we have not much time to lose if we 're to get down to that place. The train service is confoundedly bad, as I happen to know. It 's quite out of proportion to the comparatively small distance.'

'Get down to that place?' I repeated blankly. 'Get down to what place?'

'I have forgotten its name,' said Basil vaguely, putting his hands in his pockets as he rose. 'Something Common near Purley. Has any one got a time-table?'

'You don't seriously mean,' cried Rupert, who had been staring in a sort of confusion of emotions. 'You don't mean that you want to go to Buxton Common, do you? You can't mean that!'

'Why shouldn't I go to Buxton Common?' asked Basil, smiling.

'Why should you?' said his brother, catching hold again restlessly of the plant in the window and staring at the speaker.

'To find our friend, the lieutenant, of course,' said Basil Grant. 'I thought you wanted to find him?'

Rupert broke a branch brutally from the plant and flung it impatiently on the floor. 'And in order to find him,' he said, 'you suggest the admirable expedient of going to the only place on the habitable earth where we know he can't be.'

The constable and I could not avoid breaking into a kind of assenting laugh, and Rupert, who had family eloquence, was encouraged to go on with a reiterated gesture:

'He may be in Buckingham Palace; he may be sitting astride the cross of St. Paul's; he may be in

jail (which I think most likely); he may be in the Great Wheel; he may be in my pantry; he may be in your store cupboard; but out of all the innumerable points of space, there is only one where he has just been systematically looked for and where we know that he is not to be found—and that, if I understand you rightly, is where you want us to go.'

'Exactly,' said Basil calmly, getting into his great-coat; 'I thought you might care to accompany me. If not, of course, make yourselves jolly here till I come back.'

It is our nature always to follow vanishing things and value them if they really show a resolution to depart. We all followed Basil, and I cannot say why, except that he was a vanishing thing, that he vanished decisively with his greatcoat and his stick. Rupert ran after him with a considerable flurry of rationality.

'My dear chap,' he cried, 'do you really mean that you see any good in going down to this ridiculous scrub, where there is nothing but beaten tracks and a few twisted trees, simply because it was the first place that came into a rowdy lieutenant's head when he wanted to give a lying reference in a scrape?'

'Yes,' said Basil, taking out his watch, 'and, what 's worse, we 've lost the train.'

He paused a moment and then added: 'As a matter of fact, I think we may just as well go down later in the day. I have some writing to do, and I think you told me, Rupert, that you thought of going to the Dulwich Gallery. I was rather too impetuous. Very likely he wouldn't be in. But if we get down by the 5.15, which gets to Purley about 6, I expect we shall just catch him.'

'Catch him!' cried his brother, in a kind of final anger. 'I wish we could. Where the deuce shall we catch him now?'

'I keep forgetting the name of the common,' said Basil, as he buttoned up his coat. 'The Elms—what is it? Buxton Common, near Purley. That 's where we shall find him.'

'But there is no such place,' groaned Rupert; but he followed his brother downstairs.

We all followed him. We snatched our hats from the hat-stand and our sticks from the umbrella-stand; and why we followed him we did not and do not know. But we always followed him, whatever was the meaning of the fact, whatever was the nature of his mastery. And the strange thing was that we followed him the more completely the more nonsensical appeared the thing which he said. At bottom, I believe, if he had risen from our breakfast table and said, 'I am going to find the Holy Pig with Ten Tails,' we should have followed him to the end of the world.

I don't know whether this mystical feeling of mine about Basil on this occasion has got any of the dark and cloudy colour, so to speak, of the strange journey that we made the same evening. It was already very dense twilight when we struck southward from Purley. Suburbs and things on the London border may be, in most cases, commonplace and comfortable. But if ever by any chance they really are empty solitudes they are to the human spirit more desolate and dehumanized than any Yorkshire moors or Highland hills, because the suddenness with which the traveller drops into that silence has something about it as of evil elf-land. It seems to be one of the ragged suburbs of the Cosmos half-forgotten by God—such a place was Buxton Common, near Purley.

There was certainly a sort of grey futility in the landscape itself. But it was enormously increased by the sense of grey futility in our expedition. The tracts of drab turf looked useless, the occasional wind-stricken trees looked useless, but we, the human beings, more useless than the hopeless turf or the idle trees. We were maniacs akin to the foolish landscape, for we were come to chase the wild goose which has led men and left men in bogs from the beginning. We were three dazed men under the captaincy of a madman going to look for a man whom we knew was not there in a house that had

no existence. A livid sunset seemed to look at us with a sort of sickly smile before it died.

Basil went on in front with his coat collar turned up, looking in the gloom rather like a grotesque Napoleon. We crossed swell after swell of the windy common in increasing darkness and entire silence. Suddenly Basil stopped and turned to us, his hands in his pockets. Through the dusk I could just detect that he wore a broad grin as of comfortable success.

'Well,' he cried, taking his heavily gloved hands out of his pockets and slapping them together, 'here we are at last.'

The wind swirled sadly over the homeless heath; two desolate elms rocked above us in the sky like shapeless clouds of grey. There was not a sign of man or beast to the sullen circle of the horizon, and in the midst of that wilderness Basil Grant stood rubbing his hands with the air of an innkeeper standing at an open door.

'How jolly it is,' he cried, 'to get back to civilization. That notion that civilization isn't poetical is a civilized delusion. Wait till you 've really lost yourself in nature, among the devilish woodlands and the cruel flowers. Then you 'll know that there 's no star like the red star of man that he lights on his hearthstone; no river like the red river of man, the good red wine, which you, Mr. Rupert Grant, if I have any knowledge of you, will be drinking in two or three minutes in enormous quantities.'

Rupert and I exchanged glances of fear. Basil went on heartily, as the wind died in the dreary trees.

'You 'll find our host a much more simple kind of fellow in his own house. I did when I visited him when he lived in the cabin at Yarmouth, and again in the loft at the city warehouse. He 's really a very good fellow. But his greatest virtue remains what I said originally.'

'What do you mean?' I asked, finding his speech straying towards a sort of sanity. 'What is his greatest virtue?'

'His greatest virtue,' replied Basil, 'is that he always tells the literal truth.'

'Well, really,' cried Rupert, stamping about between cold and anger and slapping himself like a cabman, 'he doesn't seem to have been very literal or truthful in this case, nor you either. Why the deuce, may I ask, have you brought us out to this infernal place?'

'He was too truthful, I confess,' said Basil, leaning against the tree; 'too hardly veracious, too severely accurate. He should have indulged in a little more suggestiveness and legitimate romance. But come, it's time we went in. We shall be late for dinner.'

Rupert whispered to me with a white face:

'Is it a hallucination, do you think? Does he really fancy he sees a house?'

'I suppose so,' I said. Then I added aloud, in what was meant to be a cheery and sensible voice, but which sounded in my ears almost as strange as the wind:

'Come, come, Basil, my dear fellow. Where do you want us to go?'

'Why, up here,' cried Basil, and with a bound and a swing he was above our heads swarming up the grey column of the colossal tree.

'Come up, all of you,' he shouted out of the darkness, with the voice of a schoolboy. 'Come up. You'll be late for dinner.'

The two great elms stood so close together that there was hardly a yard anywhere, and in some places not more than a foot, between them. Thus occasional branches and even bosses and boles formed a series of footholds that almost amounted to a rude natural ladder. They must, I supposed, have been some sport of growth, Siamese twins of vegetation.

Why we did it I cannot think; perhaps, as I have said, the mystery of the waste and dark had brought and made primary something wholly mystical in Basil's supremacy. But we only felt that there was a giant's staircase going somewhere, perhaps to the stars; and the victorious voice above called to us out of heaven. We hoisted ourselves up after him.

Half-way up some cold tongue of the night air struck

and sobered me suddenly. The hypnotism of the madman above fell from me, and I saw the whole map of our silly actions as clearly as if it were printed. I saw three modern men in black coats who had begun with a perfectly sensible suspicion of a doubtful adventurer and who had ended, God knows how, half-way up a naked tree on a naked moorland, far from that adventurer and all his works, that adventurer who was at that moment, in all probability, laughing at us in some dirty Soho restaurant. He had plenty to laugh at us about, and no doubt he was laughing his loudest; but when I thought what his laughter would be if he knew where we were at that moment, I nearly let go of the tree and fell.

'Swinburne,' said Rupert suddenly, from above, 'what are we doing? Let 's get down again,' and by the mere sound of his voice I knew that he too felt the shock of wakening to reality.

'We can't leave poor Basil,' I said. 'Can't you call to him or get hold of him by the leg?'

'He 's too far ahead,' answered Rupert; 'he 's nearly at the top of the beastly thing. Looking for Lieutenant Keith in the rooks' nests, I suppose.'

We were ourselves by this time far on our frantic vertical journey. The mighty trunks were beginning to sway and shake slightly in the wind. Then I looked down and saw something which made me feel that we were far from the world in a sense and to a degree that I cannot easily describe. I saw that the almost straight lines of the tall elm trees diminished a little in perspective as they fell. I was used to seeing parallel lines taper toward the sky. But to see them taper towards the earth made me feel lost in space, like a falling star.

'Can nothing be done to stop Basil?' I called out.

'No,' answered my fellow-climber. 'He 's too far up. He must get to the top, and when he finds nothing but wind and leaves he may go sane again. Hark at him above there; you can just hear him talking to himself.'

'Perhaps he 's talking to us,' I said.

'No,' said Rupert, 'he 'd shout if he was. I 've never known him to talk to himself before; I am afraid he really is bad to-night; it 's a known sign of the brain going.'

'Yes,' I said sadly, and listened. Basil's voice certainly was sounding above us, and not by any means in the rich and riotous tones in which he had hailed us before. He was speaking quietly, and laughing every now and then, up there among the leaves and stars. After a silence mingled with this murmur, Rupert Grant suddenly said, 'My God!' with a violent voice.

'What 's the matter—are you hurt?' I cried alarmed.

'No. Listen to Basil,' said the other in a very strange voice. 'He 's not talking to himself.'

'Then he is talking to us,' I cried.

'No,' said Rupert simply, 'he 's talking to somebody else.'

Great branches of the elm loaded with leaves swung about us in a sudden burst of wind, but when it died down I could still hear the conversational voice above. I could hear two voices.

Suddenly from aloft came Basil's boisterous hailing voice as before: 'Come up, you fellows. Here 's Lieutenant Keith.'

And a second afterwards came the half-American voice we had heard in our chambers more than once. It called out:

'Happy to see you, gentlemen; pray come in.'

Out of a hole in an enormous dark egg-shaped thing pendent in the branches like a wasp's nest, was protruding the pale face and fierce moustache of the lieutenant, his teeth shining with that slightly Southern air that belonged to him.

Somehow or other, stunned and speechless, we lifted ourselves heavily into the opening. We fell into the full glow of a lamp-lit, cushioned, tiny room, with a circular wall lined with books, a circular table, and a circular seat round it. At this table sat three people. One was Basil, who, in the instant after alighting there,

had fallen into an attitude of marmoreal ease as if he had been there from boyhood ; he was smoking a cigar with a slow pleasure. The second was Lieutenant Drummond Keith, who looked happy also, but feverish and doubtful compared with his granite guest. The third was the little bald-headed house-agent with the wild whiskers, who called himself Montmorency. The spears, the green umbrella, and the cavalry sword hung in parallels on the wall. The sealed jar of strange wine was on the mantelpiece, the enormous rifle in the corner. In the middle of the table was a magnum of champagne. Glasses were already set for us.

The wind of the night roared far below us, like an ocean at the foot of a lighthouse. The room stirred slightly, as a cabin might in a mild sea.

Our glasses were filled, and we still sat there dazed and dumb. Then Basil spoke.

'You seem still a little doubtful, Rupert. Surely there is no further question about the cold veracity of our injured host.'

'I don't quite grasp it all,' said Rupert, blinking still in the sudden glare. 'Lieutenant Keith said his address was——'

'It 's really quite right, sir,' said Keith, with an open smile. 'The bobby asked me where I lived. And I said, quite truthfully, that I lived in the elms on Buxton Common, near Purley. So I do. This gentleman, Mr. Montmorency, whom I think you have met before, is an agent for houses of this kind. He has a special line in arboreal villas. It 's being kept rather quiet at present, because the people who want these houses don't want them to get too common. But it 's just the sort of thing that a fellow like myself, racketing about in all sorts of queer corners of London, naturally knocks up against.'

'Are you really an agent for arboreal villas?' asked Rupert eagerly, recovering his ease with the romance of the reality.

Mr. Montmorency, in his embarrassment, fingered one

of his pockets and nervously pulled out a snake, which crawled about the table.

'W—well, yes, sir,' he said. 'The fact was—er—my people wanted me very much to go into the house-agency business. But I never cared myself for anything but natural history and botany and things like that. My poor parents have been dead some years now, but—naturally I like to respect their wishes. And I thought somehow that an arboreal villa agency was a sort of —of compromise between being a botanist and being a house-agent.'

Rupert could not help laughing. 'Do you have much custom ?' he asked.

'N—not much,' replied Mr. Montmorency, and then he glanced at Keith, who was (I am convinced) his only client. 'But what there is—very select.'

'My dear friends,' said Basil, puffing his cigar, 'always remember two facts. The first is that though, when you are guessing about any one who is sane, the sanest thing is the most likely ; when you are guessing about any one who is, like our host, insane, the maddest thing is the most likely. The second is to remember that very plain literal fact always seems fantastic. If Keith had taken a little brick box of a house in Clapham with nothing but railings in front of it and had written "The Elms" over it, you wouldn't have thought there was anything fantastic about that. Simply because it was a great blaring, swaggering lie you would have believed it.'

'Drink your wine, gentlemen,' said Keith, laughing, 'for this confounded wind will upset it.'

We drank, and as we did so, although the hanging house, by a cunning mechanism, swung only slightly, we knew that the great head of the elm-trees swayed in the sky like a stricken thistle.

ANOTHER HOME IN THE BOUGHS[1]

'THE roads certainly seem to be very irregular,' said Dorian reflectively.

'Well,' cried Patrick, with a queer kind of impatience, 'you 're English, and I 'm not. You ought to know why the road winds about like this. Why, the Saints deliver us,' he cried, 'it 's one of the wrongs of Ireland that she can't understand England. England won't understand herself. England won't tell us why these roads go wriggling about. Englishmen won't tell us! You won't tell us!'

'Don't be too sure,' said Dorian, with a quiet irony.

Dalroy, with an irony far from quiet, emitted a loud yell of victory.

'Right,' he shouted. 'More Songs of the Car Club! We 're all poets here, I hope. Each shall write something about why the road jerks about so much. So much as this, for example,' he added, as the whole vehicle nearly rolled over in a ditch.

For indeed Pump appeared to be attacking such inclines as are more suitable for a goat than a small motor-car. This may have been exaggerated in the emotions of his companions, who had both, for different reasons, seen much of mere flat country lately. The sensation was like a combination of trying to get into the middle of the maze at Hampton Court, and climbing the spiral staircase to the Belfry at Bruges.

'This is the right way to roundabout,' said Dalroy cheerfully. 'Charming place. Salubrious spot. You can't miss it. First to the left and right and straight on round the corner and back again. That 'll do for my poem. Get on, you slackers; why aren't you writing your poems?'

'I 'll try one if you like,' said Dorian, treating his

[1] From *The Flying Inn*.

flattered egotism lightly. 'But it 's too dark to write; and getting darker.'

Indeed they had come under a shadow between them and the stars like the brim of a giant's hat; only through the holes and rents in which the summer stars could now look down on them. The hill like a cluster of domes, though smooth and even bare in its lower contours, was topped with a tangle of spreading trees that sat above them like a bird brooding over its nest. The wood was larger and vaguer than the clump that is the crown of the hill at Chanctonbury; but was rather like it and held much the same high and romantic position. The next moment they were in the wood itself, and winding in and out among the trees by a ribbon of paths. The emerald twilight between the stems, combined with the dragon-like contortions of the great grey roots of the beeches, had a suggestion of monsters and the deep sea; especially as a long litter of crimson and copper-coloured fungi, which might well have been the more gorgeous types of anemone or jelly-fish, reddened the ground like a sunset dropped from the sky. And yet, contradictorily enough, they had also a strong sense of being high up; and even near to heaven; and the brilliant summer stars that stared through the chinks of the leafy roof, might almost have been white starry blossoms on the trees of the wood.

But though they had entered the wood as if it were a house, their strongest sensation still was the rotatory; it seemed as if that high green house went round and round like a revolving lighthouse or the whizzygig temple in the old pantomimes. The stars seemed to circle over their heads; and Dorian felt almost certain he had seen the same beech-tree twice.

At length they came to a central place where the hill rose in a sort of cone in the thick of its trees, lifting its trees with it. Here Pump stopped the car; and clambering up the slope came to the crawling colossal roots of a very large but very low beech-tree. It spread out to the four quarters of heaven more in the manner of an octopus

than a tree; and within its low crown branches there was a kind of hollow, like a cup, into which Mr. Humphrey Pump, of 'The Old Ship,' Pebbleswick, suddenly and entirely disappeared.

When he appeared it was with a kind of rope ladder, which he politely hung over the side for his companions to ascend by; but the Captain preferred to swing himself on to one of the octopine branches with a whirl of large wild legs worthy of a chimpanzee. When they were established there, each propped in a hollow against a branch, almost as comfortably as in an arm-chair, Humphrey himself descended once more and began to take out their simple stores. The dog was still asleep in the car.

'An old haunt of yours, Hump, I suppose,' said the Captain. 'You seem quite at home.'

'I am at home,' answered Pump, with gravity. 'At the sign of "The Old Ship."' And he stuck the old blue and red sign-board erect among the toadstools, as if inviting the passer-by to climb the tree for a drink.

The tree just topped the mound or clump of trees, and from it they could see the whole champaign of the country they had passed; with the silver roads roaming about in it like rivers. They were so exalted they could almost fancy the stars would burn them.

'Those roads remind me of the songs you 've all promised,' said Dalroy at last. 'Let 's have some supper, Hump, and then recite.'

Humphrey had hung one of the motor lanterns on to a branch above him, and proceeded, by the light of it, to tap the kegs of rum and hand round the cheese.

'What an extraordinary thing!' exclaimed Dorian Wimpole suddenly. 'Why, I 'm quite comfortable! Such a thing has never happened before, I should imagine. And how holy this cheese tastes!'

'It has gone on a pilgrimage,' answered Dalroy, 'or rather a crusade. It 's a heroic, a fighting cheese. The rum 's good, too. I 've earned this glass of rum—earned

it by Christian humility. For nearly a month I 've lowered myself to the beasts of the field, and gone about on all fours like a teetotaller. Hump, circulate the bottle —I mean the cask—and let us have some of this poetry you 're so keen about. Each poem must have the same title, you know ; it 's a rattling good title. It 's called " An Inquiry into the causes geological, historical, agricultural, psychological, psychical, moral, spiritual, and theological of the alleged cases of double, treble, quadruple, and other curvature in the English Road, conducted by a specially appointed secret commission in a hole in a tree by admittedly judicious and academic authorities specially appointed by themselves to report to the Dog Quoodle, having power to add to their number and also to take away the number they first thought of ; God save the King.' Having delivered this formula with blinding rapidity, he added rather breathlessly, ' That 's the note to strike. The lyric note.'

For all his rather formless hilarity, Dalroy still impressed the poet as being more *distrait* than the others, as if his mind were labouring with some bigger thing in the background. He was in a sort of creative trance ; and Humphrey Pump, who knew him like his own soul, knew well that it was not mere literary creation. Rather it was a kind of creation which many modern moralists would call destruction. For Patrick Dalroy was, not a little to his misfortune, what is called a man of action, as Captain Dawson realized, when he found his entire person a bright pea-green. Fond as he was of jokes and rhymes, nothing he could write, or even sing, ever satisfied him like something he could do.

Thus it happened that his contribution to the metrical inquiry into the crooked roads was avowedly hasty and flippant : while Dorian, who was of the opposite temper, the temper that receives impressions instead of pushing out to make them, found his artist's love of beauty fulfilled as it had never been before in that noble nest ; and was far more serious and human than usual. Patrick's verses ran :

'Some say that Guy of Warwick,
The man that killed the Cow
And brake the mighty Boar alive
Beyond the Bridge at Slough ;
Went up against a Loathly Worm
That wasted all the Downs,
And so the roads they twist and squirm
(If I may be allowed the term)
From the writhing of the stricken Worm
That died in seven towns.
I see no scientific proof
That this idea is sound,
And I should say they wound about
To find the town of Roundabout,
The merry town of Roundabout,
That makes the world go round.

Some say that Robin Goodfellow,
Whose lantern lights the meads
(To steal a phrase Sir Walter Scott
In heaven no longer needs),
Such dance around the trysting-place
The moonstruck lover leads ;
Which superstition I should scout
There is more faith in honest doubt
(As Tennyson has pointed out)
Than in those nasty creeds.
But peace and righteousness (St. John)
In Roundabout can kiss,
And since that's all that's found about
The pleasant town of Roundabout,
The roads they simply bound about
To find out where it is.

Some say that when Sir Lancelot
Went forth to find the Grail,
Grey Merlin wrinkled up the roads
For hope that he should fail ;
All roads led back to Lyonesse
And Camelot in the Vale,
I cannot yield assent to this
Extravagant hypothesis,
The plain, shrewd Briton will dismiss
Such rumours (*Daily Mail*).
But in the streets of Roundabout
Are no such factions found,

Or theories to expound about,
Or roll upon the ground about,
In the happy town of Roundabout,
That makes the world go round.'

Patrick Dalroy relieved his feelings by finishing with a shout, draining a stiff glass of his sailor's wine, turning restlessly on his elbow and looking across the landscape towards London.

Dorian Wimpole had been drinking golden rum and strong starlight and the fragrance of forests ; and though his verses too were burlesque, he read them more emotionally than was his wont :

'Before the Roman came to Rye or out to Severn strode,
The rolling English drunkard made the rolling English road ;
A reeling road, a rolling road, that rambles round the shire,
And after him the parson ran, the sexton and the squire ;
A merry road, a mazy road, and such as we did tread
The night we went to Birmingham by way of Beachy Head.

I knew no harm of Bonaparte and plenty of the Squire,
And for to fight the Frenchman I did not much desire ;
But I did bash their baggonets because they came arrayed
To straighten out the crooked road an English drunkard made,
Where you and I went down the lane with ale-mugs in our hands,
The night we went to Glastonbury by way of Goodwin Sands.

His sins they were forgiven him ; or why do flowers run
Behind him ; and the hedges all strengthing in the sun?
The wild thing went from left to right and knew not which was which,
But the wild rose was above him when they found him in the ditch.
God pardon us, nor harden us ; we did not see so clear
The night we went to Bannockburn by way of Brighton Pier.

My friends, we will not go again or ape an ancient rage,
Or stretch the folly of our youth to be the shame of age,
But walk with clearer eyes and ears this path that wandereth,
And see undrugged in evening light the decent inn of death ;
For there is good news yet to hear and fine things to be seen,
Before we go to Paradise by way of Kensal Green.'

THE POET AND THE CHEESE[1]

THERE is something creepy in the flat Eastern Counties; a brush of the white feather. There is a stillness, which is rather of the mind than of the bodily senses. Rapid changes and sudden revelations of scenery, even when they are soundless, have something in them analogous to a movement of music, to a crash or a cry. Mountain hamlets spring out on us with a shout like mountain brigands. Comfortable valleys accept us with open arms and warm words, like comfortable inn-keepers. But travelling in the great level lands has a curiously still and lonely quality; lonely even when there are plenty of people on the road and in the market-place. One's voice seems to break an almost elvish silence, and something unreasonably weird in the phrase of the nursery tales, 'And he went a little farther and came to another place,' comes back into the mind.

In some such mood I came along a lean, pale road south of the fens, and found myself in a large, quiet, and seemingly forgotten village. It was one of those places that instantly produce a frame of mind which, it may be, one afterwards decks out with unreal details. I dare say that grass did not really grow in the streets, but I came away with a curious impression that it did. I dare say the market-place was not literally lonely and without sign of life, but it left the vague impression of being so. The place was large and even loose in design, yet it had the air of something hidden away and always overlooked. It seemed shy, like a big yokel; the low roofs seemed to be ducking behind the hedges and railings, and the chimneys holding their breath. I came into it in that dead hour of the afternoon which is neither after lunch nor before tea, nor anything else even on a half-holiday; and I had a fantastic feeling that I had strayed into a lost and extra hour that is not numbered in the twenty-four.

[1] From *A Miscellany of Men.*

I entered an inn which stood openly in the market-place yet was almost as private as a private house. Those who talk of 'public-houses' as if they were all one problem would have been both puzzled and pleased with such a place. In the front window a stout old lady in black with an elaborate cap sat doing a large piece of needlework. She had a kind of comfortable Puritanism about her; and might have been (perhaps she was) the original Mrs. Grundy. A little more withdrawn into the parlour sat a tall, strong, and serious girl, with a face of beautiful honesty and a pair of scissors stuck in her belt, doing a small piece of needlework. Two feet behind them sat a hulking labourer with a humorous face like wood painted scarlet, before a huge mug of mild beer which he had not touched and probably would not touch for hours. On the hearthrug there was an equally motionless cat; and on the table a copy of *Household Words*.

I was conscious of some atmosphere, still and yet bracing, that I had met somewhere in literature. There was poetry in it as well as piety; and yet it was not poetry after my particular taste. It was somehow at once solid and airy. Then I remembered that it was the atmosphere in some of Wordsworth's rural poems; which are full of genuine freshness and wonder, and yet are in some incurable way commonplace. This was strange; for Wordsworth's men were of the rocks and fells, and not of the fenlands or flats. But perhaps it is the clearness of still water and the mirrored skies of meres and pools that produces this crystalline virtue. Perhaps that is why Wordsworth is called a Lake Poet instead of a mountain poet. Perhaps it is the water that does it. Certainly the whole of that town was like a cup of water given at morning.

After a few sentences exchanged at long intervals in the manner of rustic courtesy, I inquired casually what was the name of the town. The old lady answered that its name was Stilton, and composedly continued her needlework. But I had paused with my mug in air, and

was gazing at her with a suddenly arrested concern. 'I suppose,' I said, 'that it has nothing to do with the cheese of that name?' 'Oh yes,' she answered, with a staggering indifference, 'they used to make it here.'

I put down my mug with a gravity far greater than her own. 'But this place is a Shrine!' I said. 'Pilgrims should be pouring into it from wherever the English legend has endured alive. There ought to be a colossal statue in the market-place of the man who invented Stilton cheese. There ought to be another colossal statue of the first cow who provided the foundations of it. There should be a burnished tablet let into the ground on the spot where some courageous man first ate Stilton cheese, and survived. On the top of a neighbouring hill (if there are any neighbouring hills) there should be a huge model of a Stilton cheese, made of some rich green marble and engraven with some haughty motto: I suggest something like "Ver non semper viret; sed Stiltonia semper virescit."' The old lady said, 'Yes, sir,' and continued her domestic occupations.

After a strained and emotional silence, I said, 'If I take a meal here to-night can you *give* me any Stilton?'

'No, sir; I 'm afraid we haven't got any *Stilton*,' said the immovable one, speaking as if it were something thousands of miles away.

'This is awful,' I said: for it seemed to me a strange allegory of England as she is now; this little town that had lost its glory and forgotten, so to speak, the meaning of its own name. And I thought it yet more symbolic because from all that old and full and virile life the great cheese was gone; and only the beer remained. And even that will be stolen by the Liberals or adulterated by the Conservatives. Politely disengaging myself, I made my way as quickly as possible to the nearest large, noisy, and nasty town in that neighbourhood, where I sought out the nearest vulgar, tawdry, and avaricious restaurant. There (after trifling with beef, mutton, puddings, pies, and so on) I got a Stilton cheese. I was so much moved by my memories that I wrote a sonnet to the cheese.

Some critical friends have hinted to me that my sonnet is not strictly new ; that it contains ' echoes ' (as they express it) of some other poem that they have read somewhere. Here, at least, are the lines I wrote :—

SONNET TO A STILTON CHEESE

Stilton, thou shouldst be living at this hour.
And so thou art. Nor losest grace thereby ;
England has need of thee, and so have I—
She is a Fen. Far as the eye can scour,
League after grassy league from Lincoln tower
To Stilton in the fields, she is a Fen.
Yet this high cheese, by choice of fenland men,
Like a tall green volcano rose in power.

Plain living and long drinking are no more,
And pure religion, reading *Household Words*,
And sturdy manhood, sitting still all day,
Shrink, like this cheese that crumbles to its core ;
While my digestion, like the House of Lords,
The heaviest burdens on herself doth lay.

I confess I feel myself as if some literary influence, something that has haunted me, were present in this otherwise original poem ; but it is hopeless to disentangle it now.

THE CONTENTED MAN[1]

THE word content is not inspiring nowadays ; rather it is irritating because it is dull. It prepares the mind for a little sermon in the style of the Vicar of Wakefield about how you and I should be satisfied with our countrified innocence,and our simple village sports. The word, however, has two meanings, somewhat singularly connected ; the ' sweet content ' of the poet and the ' cubic content ' of the mathematician. Some distin-

[1] From *A Miscellany of Men*.

guish these by stressing the different syllables. Thus, it might happen to any of us, at some social juncture, to remark gaily, 'Of the *con*tent of the King of the Cannibal Islands' stewpot I am con*tent* to be ignorant'; or 'Not con*tent* with measuring the cubic *con*tent of my safe, you are stealing the spoons.' And there really is an analogy between the mathematical and the moral use of the term, for lack of the observation of which the latter has been much weakened and misused.

The preaching of contentment is in disrepute, well deserved in so far that the moral is really quite inapplicable to the anarchy and insane peril of our tall and toppling cities. Content suggests some kind of security; and it is not strange that our workers should often think about rising above their position, since they have so continually to think about sinking below it. The philanthropist who urges the poor to saving and simple pleasures deserves all the derision that he gets. To advise people to be content with what they have got may or may not be sound moral philosophy.

But to urge people to be content with what they haven't got is a piece of impudence hard for even the English poor to pardon. But though the creed of content is unsuited to certain special riddles and wrongs, it remains true for the normal of mortal life. We speak of divine discontent; discontent may sometimes be a divine thing, but content must always be the human thing. It may be true that a particular man, in his relation to his master or his neighbour, to his country or his enemies, will do well to be fiercely unsatisfied or thirsting for an angry justice. But it is not true, no sane person can call it true, that man as a whole in his general attitude towards the world, in his posture towards death or green fields, towards the weather or the baby, will be wise to cultivate dissatisfaction. In a broad estimate of our earthly experience, the great truism on the tablet remains: he must not covet his neighbour's ox nor his ass nor anything that is his. In highly complex and scientific civilizations he may sometimes find himself forced into an

exceptional vigilance. But, then, in highly complex and scientific civilizations, nine times out of ten, he only wants his own ass back.

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But I wish to urge the case for cubic content ; in which (even more than in moral content) I take a personal interest. Now, moral content has been undervalued and neglected because of its separation from the other meaning. It has become a negative rather than a positive thing. In some accounts of contentment it seems to be little more than a meek despair.

But this is not the true meaning of the term ; it should stand for the idea of a positive and thorough appreciation of the content of anything ; for feeling the substance and not merely the surface of experience. 'Content' ought to mean in English, as it does in French, being pleased ; placidly, perhaps, but still positively pleased. Being contented with bread and cheese ought not to mean not caring what you eat. It ought to mean caring for bread and cheese ; handling and enjoying the cubic content of the bread and cheese and adding it to your own. Being content with an attic ought not to mean being unable to move from it and resigned to living in it. It ought to mean appreciating what there is to appreciate in such a position ; such as the quaint and elvish slope of the ceiling or the sublime aerial view of the opposite chimney-pots. And in this sense contentment is a real and even an active virtue ; it is not only affirmative, but creative. The poet in the attic does not forget the attic in poetic musings ; he remembers whatever the attic has of poetry ; he realizes how high, how starry, how cool, how unadorned and simple—in short, how Attic is the attic.

True contentment is a thing as active as agriculture. It is the power of getting out of any situation all that there is in it. It is arduous and it is rare. The absence of this digestive talent is what makes so cold and incredible the tales of so many people who say they have been 'through' things ; when it is evident that they have come out on the other side quite unchanged. A

man might have gone 'through' a plum pudding as a bullet might go through a plum pudding; it depends on the size of the pudding—and the man. But the awful and sacred question is, 'Has the pudding been through him?' Has he tasted, appreciated, and absorbed the solid pudding, with its three dimensions and its three thousand tastes and smells? Can he offer himself to the eyes of men as one who has cubically conquered and contained a pudding?

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In the same way we may ask of those who profess to have passed through trivial or tragic experiences whether they have absorbed the content of them; whether they licked up such living water as there was. It is a pertinent question in connexion with many modern problems.

Thus the young genius says, 'I have lived in my dreary and squalid village before I found success in Paris or Vienna.' The sound philosopher will answer, 'You have never lived in your village, or you would not call it dreary and squalid.'

Thus the Imperialist, the Colonial idealist (who commonly speaks and always thinks with a Yankee accent), will say, 'I 've been right away from these little muddy islands, and seen God's great seas and prairies.' The sound philosopher will reply, 'You have never been in these islands; you have never seen the weald of Sussex or the plain of Salisbury; otherwise you could never have called them either muddy or little.'

Thus the Suffragette will say, 'I have passed through the paltry duties of pots and pans, the drudgery of the vulgar kitchen; but I have come out to intellectual liberty.' The sound philosopher will answer, 'You have never passed through the kitchen, or you never would call it vulgar. Wiser and stronger women than you have really seen a poetry in pots and pans; naturally, because there is a poetry in them.' It is right for the village violinist to climb into fame in Paris or Vienna; it is right for the stray Englishman to climb across the high shoulder of the world; it is right for the woman to

climb into whatever *cathedræ* or high places she can allow to her sexual dignity. But it is wrong that any of these climbers should kick the ladder by which they have climbed. But indeed these bitter people who record their experiences really record their lack of experiences. It is the countryman who has not succeeded in being a countryman who comes up to London. It is the clerk who has not succeeded in being a clerk who tries (on vegetarian principles) to be a countryman. And the woman with a past is generally a woman angry about the past she never had.

When you have really exhausted an experience you always reverence and love it. The two things that nearly all of us have thoroughly and really been through are childhood and youth. And though we would not have them back again on any account, we feel that they are both beautiful, because we have drunk them dry.

THE DRAGON'S GRANDMOTHER[1]

I MET a man the other day who did not believe in fairy tales. I do not mean that he did not believe in the incidents narrated in them—that he did not believe that a pumpkin could turn into a coach. He did, indeed, entertain this curious disbelief. And, like all the other people I have ever met who entertained it, he was wholly unable to give me an intelligent reason for it. He tried the laws of nature, but he soon dropped that. Then he said that pumpkins were unalterable in ordinary experience, and that we all reckoned on their infinitely protracted pumpkinity. But I pointed out to him that this was not an attitude we adopt specially towards impossible marvels, but simply the attitude we adopt towards all unusual occurrences. If we were certain of miracles we should not count on them. Things that happen very

[1] From *Tremendous Trifles.*

seldom we all leave out of our calculations, whether they are miraculous or not. I do not expect a glass of water to be turned into wine; but neither do I expect a glass of water to be poisoned with prussic acid. I do not in ordinary business relations act on the assumption that the editor is a fairy; but neither do I act on the assumption that he is a Russian spy, or the lost heir of the Holy Roman Empire. What we assume in action is not that the natural order is unalterable, but simply that it is much safer to bet on common incidents than on uncommon ones. This does not touch the credibility of any attested tale about a Russian spy or a pumpkin turned into a coach. If I had seen a pumpkin turned into a Panhard motor-car with my own eyes that would not make me any more inclined to assume that the same thing would happen again. I should not invest largely in pumpkins with an eye to the motor trade. Cinderella got a ball dress from the fairy; but I do not suppose that she looked after her own clothes any the less after it.

But the view that fairy tales cannot really have happened, though crazy, is common. The man I speak of disbelieved in fairy tales in an even more amazing and perverted sense. He actually thought that fairy tales ought not to be told to children. That is (like a belief in slavery or annexation) one of those intellectual errors which lie very near to ordinary mortal sins. There are some refusals which, though they may be done what is called conscientiously, yet carry so much of their whole horror in the very act of them, that a man must in doing them not only harden but slightly corrupt his heart. One of them was the refusal of milk to young mothers when their husbands were in the field against us. Another is the refusal of fairy tales to children.

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The man had come to see me in connexion with some silly society of which I am an enthusiastic member. He was a fresh-coloured, short-sighted young man, like a stray curate who was too helpless even to find his way to the Church of England. He had a curious green neck-

tie and a very long neck ; I am always meeting idealists with very long necks. Perhaps it is that their eternal aspiration slowly lifts their heads nearer and nearer to the stars. Or perhaps it has something to do with the fact that so many of them are vegetarians : perhaps they are slowly evolving the neck of the giraffe so that they can eat all the tops of the trees in Kensington Gardens. These things are in every sense above me. Such, anyhow, was the young man who did not believe in fairy tales ; and by a curious coincidence he entered the room when I had just finished looking through a pile of contemporary fiction, and had begun to read *Grimm's Fairy Tales* as a natural consequence.

The modern novels stood before me, anyhow, in a stack ; and you can imagine their titles for yourself. There was *Suburban Sue : A Tale of Psychology*, and also *Psychological Sue : A Tale of Suburbia* ; there was *Trixy : A Temperament*, and *Man-Hate : A Monochrome*, and all those nice things. I read them with real interest, but, curiously enough, I grew tired of them at last, and when I saw *Grimm's Fairy Tales* lying accidentally on the table, I gave a cry of indecent joy. Here at least, here at last, one could find a little common sense. I opened the book, and my eyes fell on these splendid and satisfying words, 'The Dragon's Grandmother.' That at least was reasonable ; that at least was comprehensible ; that at least was true. 'The Dragon's Grandmother !' while I was rolling this first touch of ordinary human reality upon my tongue, I looked up suddenly and saw this monster with a green tie standing in the doorway.

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I listened to what he said about the society politely enough, I hope ; but when he incidentally mentioned that he did not believe in fairy tales, I broke out beyond control. 'Man,' I said, 'who are you that you should not believe in fairy tales ? It is much easier to believe in Blue Beard than to believe in you. A blue beard is a misfortune ; but there are green ties which are sins.

It is far easier to believe in a million fairy tales than to believe in one man who does not like fairy tales. I would rather kiss Grimm instead of a Bible and swear to all his stories as if they were thirty-nine articles than say seriously and out of my heart that there can be such a man as you; that you are not some temptation of the devil or some delusion from the void. Look at these plain, homely, practical words. "The Dragon's Grandmother." That is all right; that is rational almost to the verge of rationalism. If there was a dragon, he had a grandmother. But you—you had no grandmother! If you had had one, she would have taught you to love fairy tales. You had no father, you had no mother; no natural causes can explain you. You cannot be. I believe many things which I have not seen; but of such things as you it may be said, "Blessed is he that has seen and yet has disbelieved."'

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It seemed to me that he did not follow me with sufficient delicacy, so I moderated my tone. 'Can you not see,' I said, 'that fairy tales in their essence are quite solid and straightforward; but that this everlasting fiction about modern life is in its nature essentially incredible? Folk-lore means that the soul is sane, but that the universe is wild and full of marvels. Realism means that the world is dull and full of routine, but that the soul is sick and screaming. The problem of the fairy tale is—what will a healthy man do with a fantastic world? The problem of the modern novel is—what will a madman do with a dull world? In the fairy tales the cosmos goes mad; but the hero does not go mad. In the modern novels the hero is mad before the book begins, and suffers from the harsh steadiness and cruel sanity of the cosmos. In the excellent tale of "The Dragon's Grandmother," in all the other tales of Grimm, it is assumed that the young man setting out on his travels will have all substantial truths in him; that he will be brave, full of faith, reasonable, that he will respect his parents, keep his word, rescue one kind of people,

defy another kind, " parcere subjectis et debellare," etc. Then, having assumed this centre of sanity, the writer entertains himself by fancying what would happen if the whole world went mad all round it, if the sun turned green and the moon blue, if horses had six legs and giants two heads. But your modern literature takes insanity as its centre. Therefore it loses the interest even of insanity. A lunatic is not startling to himself, because he is quite serious ; that is what makes him a lunatic. A man who thinks he is a poached egg is to himself as plain as a poached egg. A man who thinks he is a kettle is to himself as common as a kettle. It is only sanity that can see even a wild poetry in insanity. Therefore these wise old tales made the hero ordinary and the tale extraordinary. But you have made the hero extraordinary and the tale ordinary—so ordinary—oh, so very ordinary.'

I saw him still gazing at me fixedly. Some nerve snapped in me under that hypnotic stare. I leapt to my feet and cried, ' In the name of God and Democracy and the Dragon's grandmother—in the name of all good things—I charge you to avaunt and haunt this house no more.' Whether or no it was the result of the exorcism, there is no doubt that he definitely went away.

THE MAID OF ORLEANS[1]

A CONSIDERABLE time ago (at far too early an age, in fact) I read Voltaire's *La Pucelle*, a savage sarcasm on the traditional purity of Joan of Arc, very dirty, and very funny. I had not thought of it again for years, but it came back into my mind this morning because I began to turn over the leaves of the new *Jeanne d'Arc*, by that great and graceful writer, Anatole France. It is written in a tone of tender sympathy, and

[1] From *All Things Considered*.

a sort of sad reverence ; it never loses touch with a noble tact and courtesy, like that of a gentleman escorting a peasant girl through the modern crowd. It is invariably respectful to Joan, and even respectful to her religion. And being myself a furious admirer of Joan the Maid, I have reflectively compared the two methods, and I come to the conclusion that I prefer Voltaire's.

When a man of Voltaire's school has to explode a saint or a great religious hero, he says that such a person is a common human fool, or a common human fraud. But when a man like Anatole France has to explode a saint, he explains a saint as somebody belonging to his particular fussy little literary set. Voltaire read human nature into Joan of Arc, though it was only the brutal part of human nature. At least it was not specially Voltaire's nature. But M. France read M. France's nature into Joan of Arc—all the cold kindness, all the homeless sentimentalism of the modern literary man. There is one book that it recalled to me with startling vividness, though I have not seen the matter mentioned anywhere ; Renan's *Vie de Jésus*. It has just the same general intention : that if you do not attack Christianity, you can at least patronise it. My own instinct, apart from my opinions, would be quite the other way. If I disbelieved in Christianity, I should be the loudest blasphemer in Hyde Park. Nothing ought to be too big for a brave man to attack ; but there are some things too big for a man to patronise.

And I must say that the historical method seems to me excessively unreasonable. I have no knowledge of history, but I have as much knowledge of reason as Anatole France. And, if anything is irrational, it seems to me that the Renan-France way of dealing with miraculous stories is irrational. The Renan-France method is simply this : you explain supernatural stories that have some foundation simply by inventing natural stories that have no foundation. Suppose that you are confronted with the statement that Jack climbed up the beanstalk into the sky. It is perfectly philosophical

to reply that you do not think that he did. It is (in my opinion) even more philosophical to reply that he may very probably have done so. But the Renan-France method is to write like this: 'When we consider Jack's curious and even perilous heredity, which no doubt was derived from a female greengrocer and a profligate priest, we can easily understand how the ideas of heaven and a beanstalk came to be combined in his mind. Moreover, there is little doubt that he must have met some wandering conjurer from India, who told him about the tricks of the mango plant, and how it is sent up to the sky. We can imagine these two friends, the old man and the young, wandering in the woods together at evening, looking at the red and level clouds, as on that night when the old man pointed to a small beanstalk, and told his too imaginative companion that this also might be made to scale the heavens. And then, when we remember the quite exceptional psychology of Jack, when we remember how there was in him a union of the prosaic, the love of plain vegetables, with an almost irrelevant eagerness for the unattainable, for invisibility and the void, we shall no longer wonder that it was to him especially that was sent this sweet, though merely symbolic, dream of the tree uniting earth and heaven.' That is the way that Renan and France write, only they do it better. But, really, a rationalist like myself becomes a little impatient and feels inclined to say, 'But, hang it all, what do you know about the heredity of Jack or the psychology of Jack? You know nothing about Jack at all, except that some people say that he climbed up a beanstalk. Nobody would ever have thought of mentioning him if he hadn't. You must interpret him in terms of the beanstalk religion; you cannot merely interpret religion in terms of him. We have the materials of this story, and we can believe them or not. But we have not got the materials to make another story.'

It is no exaggeration to say that this is the manner of M. Anatole France in dealing with Joan of Arc. Because her miracle is incredible to his somewhat old-fashioned

materialism, he does not therefore dismiss it and her to fairyland with Jack and the Beanstalk. He tries to invent a real story, for which he can find no real evidence. He produces a scientific explanation which is quite destitute of any scientific proof. It is as if I (being entirely ignorant of botany and chemistry) said that the beanstalk grew to the sky because nitrogen and argon got into the subsidiary ducts of the corolla. To take the most obvious example, the principal character in M. France's story is a person who never existed at all. All Joan's wisdom and energy, it seems, came from a certain priest, of whom there is not the tiniest trace in all the multitudinous records of her life. The only foundation I can find for this fancy is the highly undemocratic idea that a peasant girl could not possibly have any ideas of her own. It is very hard for a freethinker to remain democratic. The writer seems altogether to forget what is meant by the moral atmosphere of a community. To say that Joan must have learnt her vision of a virgin overthrowing evil from *a* priest, is like saying that some modern girl in London, pitying the poor, must have learnt it from *a* Labour Member. She would learn it where the Labour Member learnt it—in the whole state of our society.

But that is the modern method: the method of the reverent sceptic. When you find a life entirely incredible and incomprehensible from the outside, you pretend that you understand the inside. As Renan, the rationalist, could not make any sense out of Christ's most public acts, he proceeded to make an ingenious system out of His private thoughts. As Anatole France, on his own intellectual principle, cannot believe in what Joan of Arc did, he professes to be her dearest friend and to know exactly what she meant. I cannot feel it to be a very rational manner of writing history; and sooner or later we shall have to find some more solid way of dealing with those spiritual phenomena with which all history is as closely spotted and spangled as the sky is with stars.

Joan of Arc is a wild and wonderful thing enough, but she is much saner than most of her critics and biographers. We shall not recover the common sense of Joan until we have recovered her mysticism. Our wars fail, because they begin with something sensible and obvious—such as getting to Pretoria by Christmas. But her war succeeded—because it began with something wild and perfect—the saints delivering France. She put her idealism in the right place, and her realism also in the right place: we moderns get both displaced. She put her dreams and her sentiment into her aims, where they ought to be; she put her practicality into her practice. In modern Imperial wars, the case is reversed. Our dreams, our aims are always, we insist, quite practical. It is our practice that is dreamy.

It is not for us to explain this flaming figure in terms of our tired and querulous culture. Rather we must try to explain ourselves by the blaze of such fixed stars. Those who called her a witch hot from hell were much more sensible than those who depict her as a silly sentimental maiden prompted by her parish priest. If I have to choose between the two schools of her scattered enemies, I could take my place with those subtle clerks who thought her divine mission devilish, rather than with those rustic aunts and uncles who thought it impossible.

THE PERFECT GAME[1]

WE have all met the man who says that some odd things have happened to him, but that he does not really believe that they were supernatural. My own position is the opposite of this. I believe in the supernatural as a matter of intellect and reason, not as a matter of personal experience. I do not see ghosts;

[1] From *Tremendous Trifles.*

I only see their inherent probability. But it is entirely a matter of the mere intelligence, not even of the emotions ; my nerves and body are altogether of this earth very earthy. But upon people of this temperament one weird incident will often leave a peculiar impression. And the weirdest circumstance that ever occurred to me occurred a little while ago. It consisted in nothing less than my playing a game, and playing it quite well for some seventeen consecutive minutes. The ghost of my grandfather would have astonished me less.

On one of these blue and burning afternoons I found myself, to my inexpressible astonishment, playing a game called croquet. I had imagined that it belonged to the epoch of Leech and Anthony Trollope, and I had neglected to provide myself with those very long and luxuriant side whiskers which are really essential to such a scene. I played it with a man whom we will call Parkinson, and with whom I had a semi-philosophical argument which lasted through the entire contest. It is deeply implanted in my mind that I had the best of the argument ; but it is certain and beyond dispute that I had the worst of the game.

'Oh, Parkinson, Parkinson!' I cried, patting him affectionately on the head with a mallet, 'how far you really are from the pure love of the sport—you who can play. It is only we who play badly who love the Game itself. You love glory ; you love applause ; you love the earthquake voice of victory ; you do not love croquet. You do not love croquet until you love being beaten at croquet. It is we the bunglers who adore the occupation in the abstract. It is we to whom it is art for art's sake. If we may see the face of Croquet herself (if I may so express myself) we are content to see her face turned upon us in anger. Our play is called amateurish ; and we wear proudly the name of amateur, for amateurs is but the French for Lovers. We accept all adventures from our Lady, the most disastrous or the most dreary. We wait outside her iron gates (I allude to the hoops), vainly essaying to enter. Our devoted

balls, impetuous and full of chivalry, will not be confined within the pedantic boundaries of the mere croquet ground. Our balls seek honour in the ends of the earth; they turn up in the flower-beds and the conservatory; they are to be found in the front garden and the next street. No, Parkinson! The good painter loves his skill. It is the bad painter who loves his art. The good musician loves being a musician; the bad musician loves music. With such a pure and hopeless passion do I worship croquet. I love the game itself. I love the parallelogram of grass marked out with chalk or tape, as if its limits were the frontiers of my sacred fatherland, the four seas of Britain. I love the mere swing of the mallets, and the click of the balls is music. The four colours are to me sacramental and symbolic, like the red of martyrdom, or the white of Easter Day. You lose all this, my poor Parkinson. You have to solace yourself for the absence of this vision by the paltry consolation of being able to go through hoops and to hit the stick.'

And I waved my mallet in the air with a graceful gaiety.

'Don't be too sorry for me,' said Parkinson, with his simple sarcasm. 'I shall get over it in time. But it seems to me that the more a man likes a game the better he would want to play it. Suppose the pleasure in the thing itself does come first, doesn't the pleasure of success come naturally and inevitably afterwards? Or, take your own simile of the Knight and his Lady-love. I admit the gentleman does first and foremost want to be in the lady's presence. But I never heard of a gentleman who wanted to look an utter ass when he was there.'

'Perhaps not; though he generally looks it,' I replied. 'But the truth is that there is a fallacy in the simile, although it was my own. The happiness at which the lover is aiming is an infinite happiness, which can be extended without limit. The more he is loved, normally speaking, the jollier he will be. It is definitely true that the stronger the love of both lovers, the stronger will be the happiness. But it is not true that the stronger the

play of both croquet players the stronger will be the game. It is logically possible—(follow me closely here, Parkinson !)—it is logically possible, to play croquet too well to enjoy it at all. If you could put this blue ball through that distant hoop as easily as you could pick it up with your hand, then you would not put it through that hoop any more than you pick it up with your hand ; it would not be worth doing. If you could play unerringly you would not play at all. The moment the game is perfect the game disappears.'

'I do not think, however,' said Parkinson, 'that you are in any immediate danger of effecting that sort of destruction. I do not think your croquet will vanish through its own faultless excellence. You are safe for the present.'

I again caressed him with the mallet, knocked a ball about, wired myself, and resumed the thread of my discourse.

The long, warm evening had been gradually closing in, and by this time it was almost twilight. By the time I had delivered four more fundamental principles, and my companion had gone through five more hoops, the dusk was verging upon dark.

'We shall have to give this up,' said Parkinson, as he missed a ball almost for the first time, 'I can't see a thing.'

'Nor can I,' I answered, 'and it is a comfort to reflect that I could not hit anything if I saw it.'

With that I struck a ball smartly, and sent it away into the darkness towards where the shadowy figure of Parkinson moved in the hot haze. Parkinson immediately uttered a loud and dramatic cry. The situation, indeed, called for it. I had hit the right ball.

Stunned with astonishment, I crossed the gloomy ground, and hit my ball again. It went through a hoop. I could not see the hoop ; but it was the right hoop. I shuddered from head to foot.

Words were wholly inadequate, so I slouched heavily after that impossible ball. Again I hit it away into the

night, in what I supposed was the vague direction of the quite invisible stick. And in the dead silence I heard the stick rattle as the ball struck it heavily.

I threw down my mallet. 'I can't stand this,' I said. 'My ball has gone right three times. These things are not of this world.'

'Pick your mallet up,' said Parkinson, 'have another go.'

'I tell you I daren't. If I made another hoop like that I should see all the devils dancing there on the blessed grass.'

'Why devils?' asked Parkinson; 'they may be only fairies making fun of you. They are sending you the "Perfect Game," which is no game.'

I looked about me. The garden was full of a burning darkness, in which the faint glimmers had the look of fire. I stepped across the grass as if it burnt me, picked up the mallet, and hit the ball somewhere—somewhere where another ball might be. I heard the dull click of the balls touching, and ran into the house like one pursued.

DICKENS AND CHRISTMAS[1]

UPON Dickens descended the real tradition of 'Merry England,' and not upon the pallid mediævalists who thought they were reviving it. The Pre-Raphaelites, the Gothicists, the admirers of the Middle Ages, had in their subtlety and sadness the spirit of the present day. Dickens had in his buffoonery and bravery the spirit of the Middle Ages. He was much more mediæval in his attacks on mediævalism than they were in their defences of it. It was he who had the things of Chaucer, the love of large jokes and long stories and brown ale and all the white roads of England. Like Chaucer he loved story

[1] From *Charles Dickens*.

within story, every man telling a tale. Like Chaucer he saw something openly comic in men's motley trades. Sam Weller would have been a great gain to the Canterbury Pilgrimage and told an admirable story. Rossetti's Damozel would have been a great bore, regarded as too fast by the Prioress and too priggish by the Wife of Bath. It is said that in the somewhat sickly Victorian revival of feudalism which was called 'Young England,' a nobleman hired a hermit to live in his grounds. It is also said that the hermit struck for more beer. Whether this anecdote be true or not, it is always told as showing a collapse from the ideal of the Middle Ages to the level of the present day. But in the mere act of striking for beer the holy man was very much more 'mediæval' than the fool who employed him.

It would be hard to find a better example of this than Dickens's great defence of Christmas. In fighting for Christmas he was fighting for the old European festival, Pagan and Christian, for that trinity of eating, drinking and praying which to moderns appears irreverent, for the holy day which is really a holiday. He had himself the most babyish ideas about the past. He supposed the Middle Ages to have consisted of tournaments and torture-chambers, he supposed himself to be a brisk man of the manufacturing age, almost a Utilitarian. But for all that he defended the mediæval feast which was going out against the Utilitarianism which was coming in. He could only see all that was bad in mediævalism. But he fought for all that was good in it. And he was all the more really in sympathy with the old strength and simplicity because he only knew that it was good and did not know that it was old. He cared as little for mediævalism as the mediævals did. He cared as much as they did for lustiness and virile laughter and sad tales of good lovers and pleasant tales of good livers. He would have been very much bored by Ruskin and Walter Pater if they had explained to him the strange sunset tints of Lippi and Botticelli. He had no pleasure in looking on the dying Middle Ages. But he looked on the living Middle Ages,