

SIX COMMON THINGS

BY

E. F. BENSON

AUTHOR OF

"DODO: A DETAIL OF THE DAY"

LONDON

OSGOOD, McILVAINE & CO.

45 ALBEMARLE STREET, W.

1893

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Short Stories by British Authors

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ONCE

Certain early years of childhood have to most of us, though we have perhaps become since then middle-aged and quite prosaic, an air of mystery, of romance, of a vague vastness, that remains to us long after we have decided once and for all that we are average and commonplace individuals. It is a difficult question to decide whether we were happier as children than we are now; and we are apt to be biased by the obvious palpable happiness that all children, who are real children, can find in simple ordinary things, which are no longer sufficient to produce in us any absorbing bliss. But if the joys of childhood are entirely absorbing, it is equally true that its troubles are productive of the same fine order of emotion, and the bliss of the first half-crown is quite counterbalanced by the blind misery of the dentist. Though now a half-crown does not convert the whole of life into a garden of Sharon, we have our compensation in the power to look beyond that hour in the dentist's chair, and to realise that though our immediate horizon is black with clouds, tea-time will come as usual at five o'clock, and that the visit to the dentist will be numbered with the dead joys and sorrows of this uncertain world.

The explanation is simple enough; a child lives wholly in the present moment, whether it is sweet or bitter, while the ordinary adult can conceive a future, and can dwell in the past. Moreover, by whatever names we may call ourselves, whether we are pessimists or the "morbid *fin de siècle* outcome of a disillusioned and over cultivated civilisation"—it is easy enough to find sufficiently bad names for the most modern of our race—the fact remains, that however flat and stale the present appears to us, however uninteresting the future, we still look with something of longing and regret on our own past years. We forget all that was unpleasant, pessimists though we be, and to us now, childhood was a long sunny day, without any lessons to do, and full of strange lovely mysteries. I remember being promised by an elder brother in return for some small service, a purple box with stars upon it, that was in a wood. I do not think that the purple box ever existed; certainly I never got it, yet I used to lie awake at night thinking of it, and wondering when it would come; whereas what I do not remember is the period when the advent of the purple box passed in my mind from being imminent to being remote, and the first moment when I realised that it was not going to come at all. That the moment was bitter I do not doubt, but that I have forgotten; what does remain with me, is the mystery and the joy that hung round the purple box which I have never yet set eyes on.

When I was eight years old, we moved from a midland county town into a house near Truro, deep in the rural heart of Cornwall. I think I shall never forget the first sight of primroses growing wild in the lanes. We had arrived at the house late one night, and after the long journey, we children were put to bed at once. But I awoke early the next morning, and saw in my room a light that was altogether unfamiliar to me, and which I thought then and think still, is one of the most lovely things in the world. It is the light which comes from the level rays of the sun, when they shine through fresh green leaves. You may see it on most days of the year, if you care to look for it; whether you seek it at morning or evening in some little hollow fringed by tender beech trees, or loveliest of all, where young elms and ashes lean and listen together over a brook which makes its valley melodious, or whether you see it, as I saw it now for the first time, reflected on to the whitewashed ceiling of a small bedroom. It is an aqueous quivering light, full of tender shifting shadows and dim tranquillity, too delicate for words. Child as I was, I felt something of its spell, and dressed quickly and went out, and at that moment realised consciously for the first time something of what a spring morning is always ready to tell us, if we will only stand quiet and listen to its message.

It was just half-past six, and from where I stood at the front door, I looked over a long deep Cornish valley stretching away to the east and lost in morning. Thin skeins of fine cloud still lingered on the lower slopes of the hills, and in the centre of the valley the dim forms of houses, and the steeples of the Truro churches pricked the mist. The fields that sloped gently away from my feet were shining with the early May dew; to the right stretched a mossy bird-haunted lawn, and in the air there was the keen scent of morning, that indescribable suggestion of something too ethereal to call fragrance, and which seems only the smell of pure and complete cleanliness.

I followed a little path that led to a small copse, and there in the hedge—I could show you the place to this day—I saw for the first time a clump of wild primroses. I had never heard of Linnaeus and the gorse, and I think it would have seemed to me rather profane to introduce primroses into my prayers, but I certainly felt that life would be something quite different ever afterwards.

The next days were full of beautiful surprises. Hens really did lay eggs in totally unexpected places, and on the second evening I found one in a hawthorn hedge. Cows were milked visibly, and the milk was good to drink. There was a hay-rick with a little niche in it, where one could lie in fragrant seclusion, and watch the mysteries of poultry life. Best of all there was a hedge-sparrow's nest, in which one morning there appeared what might have been a piece of blue sky. Later there were four half-naked little forms, with veiled eyes and open mouths, which by degrees grew feathered and timid, and stared at me with apprehension. It was all strange and new and beautiful.

Near the hay-rick was a creviced wall, the home of tiny spiral snail shells, who lived in a wide forest of moss and lichen,

and went out walking to see their friends on damp evenings.

We soon started a collection of these, and looked out their names in a green conchological manual, which described them as "minute shells." This was taken to be a compound substantive, evidently constructed on the same principle as the word hour-glass.

About a week after we came to live in this new earth, I remember a great gale, which raged for two or three days, and on the second morning I was standing at the window of the nursery which looked towards the north, and heard during a temporary lull, a low rhythmical thunder, the sound of which for some reason, frightened me, and I was told it was the sound of the Atlantic waves seven miles away. That morning a great elm-tree was blown down, and I ran out, hoping to find something new and wonderful among the leaves at the top of the tree, now placed unexpectedly within my reach. I was just turning away disappointed, for the topmost branch seemed to be like any other branch, when I caught sight of a piece of blue mottled eggshell on the ground, and lying near it a little unfledged rook, dead and crushed.

The gardener said it was a pity it was so young, for a few more weeks would have qualified it for a rook pie. I thought it extremely unfeeling of him, and we buried the little body that afternoon with much ceremony in the shrubbery, and over its grave put a cross, formed of two hazel-twigs, and came in to tea with the feeling that we had done something very pious, and that it was rather like Sunday. At the same time I felt that we had had a perfectly charming time, and next morning I searched carefully round the neighbourhood of the fallen tree hoping to find another dead rook, or indeed anything capable of receiving decent and Christian burial.

These things are trifles, are they not? I found a dead rabbit here in the woods yesterday, and I did not get an empty box of Pears' soap, and dig its grave under the cedar tree. It would have been quite ridiculous. Yet I thought that I would like to feel once more the childish instinct that made me bury the young rook that had rocked securely in the nest to the soft breeze, till that morning, when a blind gust overturned its home and its world. We have learnt so much since these dim childish days, and yet, after all, we are so little wiser: the mysteries of childhood have ceased to interest us, but not because we have found the key to them. The mystery is there in all its old beauty; it is we who have changed; we can calculate the force per square inch of the wind that lays our elm trees low, and the young dead rook may lie and rot. The gardener was quite right; it was a pity it did not live to qualify for a rook pie. That would have been far more useful. Yet I remember the burial of that young rook under the white flowering laurustinus more keenly than I remember any rook pie. The moral is that there are at least two ways of looking at everything, and which is the better, who shall say?

The next great joy was the aquarium. Measured by the limitations of actual space and cubic contents, the capacities of the aquarium were not large, for it was only a brown earthen-ware bowl with a diameter of about eighteen inches; but its potentialities were infinite. We had even dim ideas of rearing a salmon parr in it.

The happy hunting ground, from which the treasures of the aquarium were drawn, was a little stream that ran swiftly over gravelly soil about half-a-mile from our house. On each side of it stretched low lying water meadows, rich with ragwort and meadow-sweet, among which one day we found a lark's nest. Every now and then the stream spread out into shallow tranquil pools, overhung by thick angular hawthorns. Sticklebacks made their nests under the banks; small trout flashed through the clear shallows, and the caddice-worms collected the small twigs which fell from the trees, and made of them the rafters of their houses.

It was by such pools as these that we spent hours dabbling in the stream and filling small tin cans with water snails and caddices, for subsequent transference to the aquarium: here, too, we watched for the salmon parr, which did not exist, and laid dark plots against the little trout, which treated them with severe disdain, and here one evening we caught a stickleback. It was my sister's doing, but I considered then, and consider still, that the credit was as much mine as hers.

It was this way: she had been poking our net as usual among the débris that lay in the backwater of the pool, and had found four caddices and two water snails, one of which was a new sort. She had just said "That's all," and was preparing to throw the rest back into the stream, when I saw something move at the bottom of the net, and there among the dead leaves and twigs lay a live stickleback. That night, the aquarium, which usually lived in an empty coach house, was moved solemnly up to the nursery. The idea of Gray's cat and the gold fish was too strong for us: besides, if the cat did get at our stickleback, the aquarium would not be deep enough to drown it; and in any case the nervous shock to the stickleback might be fatal.

The week that followed was the balmiest period the aquarium ever knew. One morning, as we were watching the stickleback, a small gauzy being crawled up from the water and rested on the edge of the bowl. There was a bright sun shining, and in a moment or two his water-logged wings grew rapidly firm and iridescent, he fanned them up and down, and they became larger and more wonderful under our very eyes. . . . Ah well, it was only a caddice-worm turning into a fly. Such things happen very often.

The aquarium was paved with pieces of spa which we had picked up at Torquay the year before, and bright smooth sea

pebbles. I am afraid the caddices would have preferred a little wholesome mud, but that was not to be thought of. Round the edge crept the water snails, and the caddice-worms hid among the spa and pebbles, and walked over each other, with a fine disregard of the laws of politeness. But the king of our water world was the stickleback: it is a very common fish, but to us there was only one, and that one was ours.

Every other day the aquarium used to be emptied out and fresh water was put in. This operation required some delicacy of handling. The water was strained through a very narrow piece of netting into the little drain outside the coach-house. Snails, caddice-worms, and stickleback were caught in the netting, and instantly placed in a temporary hotel, in the shape of an old washing basin, filled with water. Two tadpoles, which also belong to this period, used to cause us some uneasiness at such times. They would hide among the spa, at the bottom of the aquarium, at the imminent risk of being crushed as it was tilted up; besides this, the stickleback used to make short runs at them, and they did not get on at all well together. What we were to do when they became frogs, was a momentous question. If I had known French, I should have expressed my feelings about them by saying that they would be likely to have become *déclassés* by living with our stickleback in a palace of spa: as it was, I simply felt that it would be unsuitable to turn them back into the somewhat dirty pool from which they came, but that the impropriety of their continuing to live as frogs with the stickleback and the caddice-worms was more glaring still. They were decidedly of a different class; as long as they were tadpoles it did not matter; all classes meet as children. Again, they would soon be several sizes too large for the aquarium, and as our nurse said, they would be “all over.”

It was during one of these cleanings out that the great catastrophe happened. The stickleback, according to custom, was swimming fiercely and defiantly round the sinking water in the aquarium. He would always do this till there was scarcely any left, then make a sudden rush against the netting and try to swim through it, a feat which he never accomplished, but which he never perceived was impossible. How it happened I do not quite know, something caused me to let the water out less discreetly than usual; the last pint came with a sudden rush, and my sister who was holding the netting, dropped one corner of it. At this moment the stickleback charged, and for once passed the netting, and the next moment the flow of water had carried him down the drain.

For a space we sat silent, and then my sister said, with a curious tone in her voice which I had never heard before, but which I now associate with other griefs which we have been through together, “It is gone.”

We silently placed the netting with the caddice-worms and water snails in the basin, and extracted the tadpoles from the spa. We had not got the heart to arrange and clean out the aquarium, and it lay there empty, with the spa and pebbles scattered over the cobbled yard.

Later in the morning we came back again, and arranged it as usual. As our heads were bent together over it, while we placed the pebbles at the bottom, I saw two large tears roll from her eyes on to the red earthen-ware rim of the bowl, and when we had finished, we both looked at the little drain-hole where the stickleback had vanished, and our eyes met. We had not spoken about it since she said “It is gone.”

“I am so sorry,” she whispered, “oh, why did I let go of the net?” and another tear ran down her cheek.

“Don’t mind so much,” I said, “it was more my fault than yours. Something jogged my elbow.”

But we never caught another stickleback.

AUTUMN AND LOVE

There is a day, I had almost said a moment, in every year when summer definitely stops. It dies a sudden death, and we seldom notice that the end is near, until it has come. This year it was even more sudden than usual. It occurred yesterday evening, while I was sitting out on the lawn below the terrace walk reading the account of the horrible scenes in Hamburg during the cholera there. A strange little wind swept across the still air, and a rose-leaf from the great climbing creeper fluttered down on to the page, and at that moment summer stopped. . . .

I awoke this morning from a deep dreamless sleep, which, with a strange mixture of cruelty and kindness, often follows on some great sorrow. It is no doubt a relief to lose, though only for a few hours, the sense of suffering, yet when we wake, we find that sleep has brought us a doubtful gift, for it has only quickened our capabilities for suffering. The first few moments of conscious thought are often the slow involuntary gathering up of the threads of our interrupted sensations, and it was with a vague reminiscence of some change which had taken place, that I began to piece together the events of the preceding evening. An old servant had come in late the night before to tell me that his little daughter, who had been slowly dying of consumption for months past, was just dead. He felt it to be a release, but that did not make it less sad: if she was only to have so few summers here, they might at least have been more full of that unthinking receptive happiness, which is the birthright of children, but which so few retain beyond childhood. He had asked me to come in and see the poor little face once more, "She looks so happy and peaceful," he said, with that strange unreserve that many poor people have about death, "her arms are lying just as they were when she died, she had crossed them on her breast, as she used to do when she was saying her prayers to her mother, I could fancy that she had been saying them, and had fallen asleep so."

The poor fellow evidently found a vague consolation in this. Death, which so closely resembled life, was partly robbed of its horror for him. It is a merciful arrangement.

There had been a slight frost in the night, the first of the year, and from the little chestnut tree in front of my windows unseen hands were stripping off the yellow leaves. There is something ironical in this yearly death of vegetation, which makes the fall of the leaves doubly dreadful to us, to whom, when autumn comes, no spring will bring a renewal of life. I had half-hoped last night that I had been wrong about the death of the summer, the air was so mild, and the wind stirred so softly in the shrubbery, but this morning it is no longer possible to doubt; the freshness of the air cannot be mistaken for the coolness of a summer morning, it is the forerunner of cold and mist and long dark evenings.

After breakfast I went down to the old man's cottage. The dead girl had been his only daughter; she was the child of old age, and nothing was left him now. By a former marriage he had one son, who had died in infancy, and his second wife had died in giving birth to this daughter. Life and death often walk hand in hand, and when we clasp the hand of life, we cannot but feel that we accept death as part of our union.

The father asked me to go in to see the dead child's face; it was wonderfully dignified with the dignity that only can come to complete tranquillity; and he then took me back to his little front room, and told me the saddest story I have ever heard.

"I was sitting," he said, "late last night in the room where she is lying, and I had gone to sleep, for I was very tired with the watching and the short nights. I had left the door ajar I suppose; for I was awakened by a scratching sound, and soon I saw her little dog, Tiny she called him, pushing through the crack. I was tired and weary, and I sat still and watched him. He put his two paws on the bed, and tried to lick her hand, but it was out of his reach. And he whined as dogs do, when they want to attract their master's attention, and gave a little short bark. Then he got down on to the floor again, and sat up to beg, as she had taught him to do. He used to dislike it, and she often had trouble to make him do it, when she wanted him to show off to strangers and suchlike. But he couldn't understand, I expect, why she took no notice of him, and he wanted to make her attend to him."

He paused a moment, seeming half-uncertain whether I wanted to hear him go on.

"It's nothing in the telling," he said, but it went to my heart to see the dog do so. He seemed to wonder why she didn't speak to him. There was one other trick he used to do when he was younger, but I reckon he is getting old like the rest of us, and his joints are a bit stiff. He would turn head over his heels for all the world like a clown you see at the circus, but it must be a year and more since she tried to make him do it, for she saw it hurt him.

"But I reckon he couldn't understand how it was she took no notice of him, for she had always petted him, and given him a bit of biscuit or something when he did his tricks well, his lessons, she used to call them, poor lamb! though it seemed to me he cared more for her attention than a bit of biscuit: so what should the dog do, but try to turn head over heels, as he hadn't done for a year and more. But he was too stiff, and he fell over. He wagged his tail, and looked up at the bed, as if he should say he'd tried his best, and when he saw she didn't notice him, he gave a whine like a thing in pain, and lay down by the bed. But he couldn't rest, but he must keep jumping up and trying to get up on to the bed,

until I took him down with me and gave him his supper. But he wouldn't so much as look at it, and this morning when I came downstairs, he was lying at the door, instead of in his basket in the kitchen. And when I went to him, I found he was quite dead. I reckon he was getting old, and he didn't feel to care for anything no more now she wasn't there to pet him and tease him."

The old man sat silent for a minute or two, looking into the fire in dry-eyed sorrow. The old do not shed tears very easily; they have learnt that it does no good. But in a few minutes the blessed relief came, and he sobbed like a little child.

"It seemed to bring it home to me that she was dead," he said, "when I saw her not taking any notice of her Tiny."

The horror of utter helplessness was upon me. The unfathomable mystery of death never seemed to me before to so utterly defy scrutiny. I tried to make him feel that though I could offer him no consolation, I wished to share his sorrow, and he talked on for an hour or so.

The sun was warm as I walked back, and the rime frost had completely disappeared. But the cruel glory of the dying woodland was there in all its thoughtless splendour; like some great lady, whose beauty has shone for a short hour or two in some dark hovel, where a servant or friend lies dying, the splendid trees mock us with their yearly renewal of loveliness, and when they pass from us in the autumn, we know that their glory will shine on in years to come, while we are left in the dark house, with the coffin and the pall and all the grim apparatus of death.

It is evening again, and as I sit by the open window, the faint sweet smells from the glimmering flower beds are wafted in with the sighing of the wind. This long melancholy day is drawing to a close, and everything is lying hushed beneath the benediction of evening. The same strange little wind that woke in the bushes last night, again stirs in the dusk, and strikes a sudden shiver in the still evening air. The birds call to each other in the shrubbery with low flute-like notes, and by-and-by a great yellow moon swings into sight. White winged moths hover noiselessly over the dim flowers, and pass away out of sight among the dark masses of the trees. One can almost believe in the possibility of peace on such a night as this, a burning brain and an aching heart seem almost a desecration; yet in that cottage beyond the dark meadow below, in the window of which there has just now sprung up a faint tiny light, there lies a dead child, and in the garden there is a small newly turned piece of turf, and under it sleeps a dumb dog, who could not make his mistress hear or see his little attempts to please her, and into whose soul such dim mysterious anguish entered that he could not live without her. I cannot but wonder and doubt whether there is anything in the world so strong as that necessity that made him die with her, and which we call love. If so, there is hope even in this still autumn evening, the absolute peace of which is so full of the presage of death.

TWO DAYS AFTER

Two days have passed, and this afternoon they are going to bury the child of whose death I have just told you. Old Ellis came here yesterday, and asked me, ever so timidly, whether I would go with him to the funeral, if it was not too much to ask.

He expected, he said, a sister of his who lived some ten miles away, the aunt of the dead child, but there would be no one else. He scarcely liked to ask me, but I had known his daughter, and she had always been so pleased when I had come to see her. So, if I would do one thing more—it was pitiful to hear him.

I arrived at the cottage about two o'clock. I ordered the carriage to wait, because I thought he might like to go in it to the churchyard. But he would not—he wished to follow her more closely; he would not leave her while she was above ground. It was nearly a mile to the church, and I told the coachman to follow us at some distance; I knew he could not manage to walk both ways, for he was very old.

The blinds were all drawn down, and at the end of the little passage, there stood the coffin, on a dismal-looking truck, round which hovered two men in black. The old man met me at the door, and we went into the room, where his sister was sitting. She was a tall, angular woman, and she was eating seed-cake and drinking sherry with mournful alacrity. She stood up when I entered, and made a stiff courtesy to me.

The old man sat in the window, with his hands crossed on his knees, looking out over the fields with tired, tearless eyes. I talked quietly to him and his sister for a few minutes, until a knock came at the door, and the undertaker looked in.

Ellis got up from his seat.

"It's time we were off, sir," he said.

"Ah, poor lamb," said his sister, opening and shutting her mouth, as if it was worked with a steel snap.

I had brought with me a wreath of hot-house flowers, which I laid on the coffin as it was being wheeled out. Ellis turned round to me, as I placed them there, and he tried to speak, but it was too much for him, when he thought that all that had been dearest to him was leaving the house for ever, and the bitter dryness of his eyes was flooded.

"We will wait a few minutes," I said. "Come back here in to the room. Ah, my old friend, I wish I could tell you what I feel for you, but you know it, do you not? Yes, yes."

In a few minutes he was quiet again, and grasped my hand.

"I take it very kind of you, sir," he said, "to think so much of my poor little lamb; very kind indeed. God bless you for that."

The coffin was waiting by the little garden gate, and we joined his sister again, who had remained in the passage. As soon as we got outside the house, she drew a large handkerchief, made of some very stiff material from her pocket, and held it in front of her nose and mouth all the way to the churchyard. In the other hand she carried a little glass case of white artificial flowers, bought with money that I am sure she could ill-afford, to place on the grave.

I wonder if there is anyone, of whatever religion or belief, who has heard our English burial service said over one they loved, without feeling strengthened and comforted by its strong security, its patient hope. Poor old Ellis, I know, looked up at the sound of the grave voice, which met us at the gate of the churchyard, and walked more firmly and steadily. In some dim unformulated way he felt that the issues of life and death were in other hands, and in those hands he was content to leave them.

"They are only words," you say, "what words are of value, when all love has gone?"

So be it; but there are those, perhaps the simplest and best among us, who do value them. Would you take their comfort from them, for they are in sore need.

The service was soon over, and even as we left the grave, a cold drizzle of rain began. The poor people in this village think that it is a good thing if it rains directly after they have buried some one. They say that the sky is weeping for them. That is a beautiful belief, is it not?

The carriage was waiting at the gate into the churchyard, but just as the old man was stepping into it, he looked back again at the little open grave, which the sexton had already begun to fill in.

"I must go back, sir, just for a minute," he said, and with a curious stumbling run, he made his way over the little mounds, between the white headstones to where he had left his dear child, and by the side of the grave he knelt down, and remained there for a minute or two, with the cold showers beating on to his grey uncovered head. I was suddenly

afraid, and went quickly but silently to his side. He saw me, but did not rise from his knees. He was looking earnestly into that horrible cold pit, and his lips moved silently. Then half audibly he whispered:

“Good-bye, dear lamb, dear lamb.”

Then he turned to me.

“I have kept you waiting, sir, I am afraid,” he said. “I just came back to say good-bye to her once more, and to repeat for her the prayer we have always said together of an evening. I will come now.”

His sister was sitting in the carriage, with her handkerchief in the same discreet position, and we drove back together to his house.

This evening he sits there alone. His sister had to go back to her home, for she could not leave the children, and made her departure in an old farm cart, drawn by a shaggy pony, observing the proprieties to the last, and soon afterwards I left him. He wished, I think, to be alone, and get more used to his sorrow.

Ah, what does it all mean? What is the reason of this weary world? Do you know Heine’s “Old play?”

“She was loveable, and he loved her, but he was not loveable and she did not love him.”

The deadly tune of the song of the unwept tear, when one woman alone did not weep, he says is sung in hell. But we are not in hell, we are on this earth, but to-day when I think of the old man sitting alone in his cottage, and another sleeping in God’s acre, once more a deadly tune is sung, which I think, is not less sad than Heine’s.

“She was loveable, and he loved her; he was loveable, and she loved him.”

This song has nothing to do with Heine’s hero, who can still be glad that he is alive. These are not sighs of hopeless passion, they are not young vows breathed to one who will not listen; this is only the sorrow of a very old man, who loved a little daughter, who in turn loved him, and it is all over; he is unhappy, but she has ceased to suffer; at that he is glad; and now he sits alone, and will sit alone till he has ceased to suffer too. Such things are very common.

It is a good thing, is it not, that he is very old; he will have less long to suffer. But it is strange to be glad that Death is probably not far off.

This old man wanted so little, yet he had scarcely enough; only enough for two to live on somewhat sparingly, and very frugally. Now he has enough; there will be no more doctor’s bills; no more nursing expenses. But it was very pitiful to hear him say “Good-bye, dear lamb, dear lamb,” after he had prayed with her for the last time.

This little story, I imagine, will touch very few, fewer, perhaps, than will feel the sadness of the death of this little girl’s dog. So many want a little more subtleness in sorrow than truth can always give them. The sorrow of a dumb thing is more bizarre, more out of the way; the sorrow of an old man is so common, and old men are less attractive than intelligent dogs. Thus many people, I expect, will pass this story over for precisely these reasons, which led me to write it.

CARRINGTON

There is a beauty in old faces, which the young for all their insolent abundance of loveliness cannot rival, which is the result of having accepted old age, and the circumstances attendant on it, of being able, mentally speaking, to sit down contentedly, instead of walking or trying to run, and of enjoying peace of mind without the effort of attaining it.

Mrs. Carrington was sitting in her housekeeper's room at Langley, with her hands crossed before her on her lap, looking into the fire. She must always have been beautiful, but old age had added to her face the quality I have tried to describe above, and which always seems to me to be, in a way, the crowning grace of beauty. She had in her eyes that indwelling look which the old have when they are happiest, and she was very happy. She had seen two generations of Davenports grow up at her knee, and she had felt absolutely widowed when her latest, her Benjamin of babies had flown. Reggie had always been much more dependent on her than any of the others; he had been weak and sickly till he was ten, and after a year at school, which it was hoped would have put more grit into him, he had been ordered abroad by the doctors for two years, and he was due home again to-night. The carriage had started for the station an hour ago, and Carrington's eyes had followed it till it was out of sight, and she had then sat down by the fire, too happily expectant to take her sewing up, or do anything more than sit and wait quietly for the fulfilment of her happiness.

Round her room was all that was dear to her; small presents which the children had made her from time to time, little records of her own even uneventful years. The old nursery tea-things were set out on the table, which though they had dwindled down to two teacups, one with a broken handle, and four plates, were more than sufficient for Carrington's present purpose. "Eh, he'll be cold and hungry when he comes in," she had said to herself, "the tea will be over in the drawing-room; he shall have it up here with me."

The silence which had been broken only by the lapping tongues of the flames as they licked the bars of the grate, began to be gradually overscored by the faint rumbling of carriage wheels. Carrington smiled to herself as if a pleasant thought had also overscored the vague, happy music of her mind, and set the kettle back on the hob. In a moment or two the contented song began again, and she poured the hissing water into the teapot. The wheels were more audible now, and the frosty ring of the horse's hoofs could be heard like a triplet passage across ground bass. She left her room with a smile on her old lips, and went gently through the swing-door that led to the top of the stairs. Here for some reason, scarcely known even to herself, she paused. Hitherto she had always been the first to welcome him in his home-comings, waiting in the hall for the door to be opened, or opening it herself. But now for some cause she stopped at the head of the stairs. She heard the front door open, but she could not see it, as the banisters over which she was leaning were just above it: then a "Hullo Wilkins," the rattle of a stick on the table, and the small thump of a hat on the floor, and a light curly head crossed the hall below. He had gone into the drawing-room; through the door, before it closed, there was borne to her the murmur of pleasant welcoming voices, and then all was silent again. A few minutes afterwards a footman came upstairs carrying a portmanteau, and she heard the subdued sound of a bell ringing distantly. The butler reappeared, and went into the drawing-room, passed out again, and again came across with a tea-tray in his hands, on which was a silver teapot, a few plates of bread and butter and cake, and one tea-cup.

Somehow she felt unreasonably disappointed, she had expected something very different. She had so often pictured to herself his return as she would wish it to be. A brief visit to the drawing-room—a demand for tea—an announcement that it had been already sent away—an eager proposal that he should have it upstairs with her—all this was so common in her thoughts that any violation of it seemed, quite illogically, a cruel privation.

Carrington went slowly back to her room, took the kettle off the hob, and placed it in the grate. There was already enough tea made for one. Her eyes had lost their quiet happy light, and she poured out a cup of tea with a rather uncertain hand. She had been at pains to get a couple of buns with pink sugar on the top from the stillroom, but she did not eat those: they had been consecrated, as it were, already, to some one else.

Instead of sitting by the fire, and feeding on her own thoughts, she took up a piece of plain sewing, and worked steadily at it. Her tea stood untasted.

Reggie Davenport was a particularly nice boy, with a special fondness for helpless things, like kittens and ugly half-fledged birds, and old people. His emotions took the form of impulses, and he was entirely thoughtless, which on the whole is better at that age than being thoughtful, and possibly priggish.

He went into the drawing-room in the first instance, because it was entirely natural and laudable in him to wish to see his mother, and he stayed there because he was asked a great many questions, which he enjoyed answering. He talked about kangaroos and rattle-snakes, and how awfully sick he was on the Indian Ocean, and how beastly ugly all niggers were.

Meanwhile Carrington was sitting by her fire, feeling that her last chick was further from her perhaps than she had ever imagined him to be when he was in Australia, and that her eyes were too dim even to do her plain sewing.

She waited and waited, but there was no sign. Once she went to the top of the stairs and listened. Laughter and pleasant voices came to her in muffled tones from behind the closed door. She crept back to her room: the fire was nearly out, and it was chilly and uncomfortable. She went to the window and drew down the blind which she had raised two hours before, in order to watch the lamps of the carriage, as it went to the station to bring him home. Not caring to light the fire again, she wrapped a shawl round her, and took up her sewing. She was never idle, except when she was very happy.

After a time the dressing-bell rang, surely he would come now if only for a minute. But the clock went ticking inexorably on, twenty minutes to eight, a quarter to, ten minutes to. Then there came a burst of laughter, in which a half treble and entirely boyish voice predominated. Some one came rushing upstairs three steps at a time, and the door at the top of the staircase banged.

Carrington's room opened into a small cross passage, intersected by the main passage from the head of the stairs. When she heard the door bang, she rose gently from her chair and stood by her half-opened door. The steps came quickly along the main passage, and across the square of intersection passed a slim young figure. He neither stopped nor turned his head, but went quickly on to his room, and she heard the door shut behind him. Her two wrinkled old hands made a sudden movement towards each other, and then fell limply again to her side. Never had mistress waited for her lover more faithfully than she, and this was all: a light elastic step, and an unturned head.

Her disappointment was that of dumb unreasoning animals, or of children, or of the old. They are the same in kind, for animals and children cannot reason, and the old do not. Disappointment comes, and it is there. She did not consider that his first thought was naturally for his mother and father, that it was an axiom that he should stay talking to them, until he would certainly be late for dinner, unless he ran upstairs three steps at a time, and banged the door of his room behind him. And this unreasoning suffering is more pathetic than any other: it lives only in the present bitter moment. Yet what was it after all? Simply that a boy of thirteen did not go to see his old nurse during the first hour that he was in the house.

But her desire would not be denied. She went softly up to his door and tapped. From within there came a sound exactly as if someone was kicking off a pair of boots. She tapped again.

"Hullo, who's that?"

"Eh? its only me," said Carrington, turning the handle.

"Oh, you can't come in," in hurried tones. "I'm half undressed. Wait a minute."

A hand was cautiously thrust round the door, innocent of any sign of shirt cuff about the wrist.

Carrington's two wrinkled old hands closed upon the soft smooth fingers, and she did not trust herself to speak.

"How are you, Carry?" asked a cheerful voice, "I nearly came up to have tea with you, only Ma wanted me to stop. I must go on dressing now, or I shall be late. I shall come up to see you when I go to bed."

Carrington went back to her room, with her hunger only partly filled. It was different to what she had expected somehow. But she had heard him kick off his boots, she had touched his hand, and nothing could deprive her of that.

Reggie ate a remarkably good dinner, and felt hugely sleepy afterwards. He went up to his room to get some "rum things," as he called them, which he had bought at various places, and his bed looked so extremely inviting that he put his candle down on his dressing table, and lay down, intending to go back to the drawing-room in a minute or two. A quarter of an hour after this, Carrington came upstairs beaming with anticipation. She trotted backwards and forwards from the house-maid's cupboard to her fire-place and laid the fire again. In a few minutes the cheerfulest of blazes was crackling on the hearth. She had not thought it worth while to light her fire when it went out before, but this was altogether a different matter. She swept the old ashes neatly under the grate, drew two chairs up close, and went to wash her hands. The most precious of her possessions lay on the table; this was a cedar box, with a lid that frequently defied both persuasion and force. It is almost needless to say that this was a present that Reggie had made her during a fitful fever of carpentering. But a case of jewels would have pleased her less.

Carrington's clock remarked that it was ten; then a quarter past; then eleven. The fire was kindly still, though not so uproariously cheerful.

Meantime Reggie had awoke, and had found the most alarming quantity of suppressed sleep still in his system, had thrown off his clothes, and tumbled into bed, without giving one thought to anything in the world, except the immediate and imperative necessity of going to sleep again.

As eleven struck, Carrington got up and went to his room.

He was lying on his back in dreamless sleep. One arm was thrown carelessly outside on the counterpane, and his

breath came evenly between parted lips. His candle stood still lighted on the dressing table, and his clothes were in a mixed untidy heap on the floor. Carrington stood by the bed for a moment, half afraid of his waking, half longing he should wake, and then quietly took up his candle and left the room.

JACK AND POLL

The worst of possessing a parrot is that its so-called owner is always conscious of his own glaring inferiority in point of ability and knowledge, though ability is perhaps too superficial a word to apply to the deep malignant wisdom implanted in its breast. To begin with, parrots live on an average, if they have been properly acclimatised, about a hundred years. During the whole of this period they get wiser and wiser up to the end. Eventually a parrot dies of stomachic disorders which leave its cleamess of head quite untouched. That is a severe handicap for any man to labour under. The other day only, though I am becoming more accustomed to parrots than I ever thought I should be, the full irony of the situation burst upon me. Personally, I have not nearly reached middle age, my parrot I believe to be about sixty-five, and it has probably thirty more years to live. Thirty years ago I was not nearly born, yet even then, this venerable fowl was considerably older than I am now, and infinitely wiser than I ever shall be. Yet by some left-handed arrangement of the order of things, I am legally the owner and master of it. I fully feel the absurdity of my position, but there is no cure. It is no good presenting the bird to Mr Gladstone, for in the infinity of the wisdom of a parrot, the difference between the ability of the Prime Minister and me, which to judge by human standards is oppressively great, becomes as nothing. Mathematicians tell us that a million is not appreciably nearer infinity than a unit. This incredible truth illustrates, in a way, what I am trying to point out.

More than this, a parrot is born into this world with an instinctive knowledge of its own utter aloofness and its dazzling pre-eminence. Not that a parrot ever is dazzled, it is only we who are dazzled when we think of it. A parrot is never surprised, it is never amused, it is never humble, and it is never kind. Parrots will submit, it is true, to be handled by a certain number of human beings without causing a hooked beak to meet in their fingers, but it is not kindness that prompts this concession; it is only a far-reaching contempt bred of an unwilling familiarity.

But why, it will be asked, do I keep a parrot, if I feel thus towards it? For several reasons. In the first place, it is good to have a high and impossible standard to live by; a parrot's presence is therefore stimulating and healthy. Again, though I cannot amuse my parrot, my parrot can, in lighter moments, amuse me. It does not amuse me, because it thinks I like to be amused, on the contrary, if I make it clear that I want to be amused, it will freeze me with a cold unblinking eye, until I creep away ashamed. When it amuses me, it does so of its own essential sense of humour, it makes jokes because it is witty, in obedience to the imperious necessities of its own unfathomable mind. Like the Master of Ballantrae, I sometimes wish it was kinder, but if it was kind, it would not be a parrot. Again it may at any moment say things, which, though they were better unsaid, I would sooner it said to me, than to other people, because I understand it, and in a way I love it—"Aimer c'est tout comprendre."

Is it then quite inaccessible to our little human needs and longings; will it never love anybody? At heart, never. But in spite of the nirvanic remoteness of its nature, it is not quite untroubled by human emotions. It is intolerably and inordinately greedy, and it pleases me to compel it to come down from its high standard under the influence of this emotion. It will never care for me, I know, but I can make it pretend to, if I trifle with the sugar basin. That is something. As long as it retains the slightest desire for sugar, I can make it give me Judas kisses, I can make it bark like a dog, and I can make it call itself "Pretty Polly," which is nonsense, for it knows that it is not pretty as well as I do, and has no pleasing illusions whatever on that score. In a word, for the time being, I am its master, it knows it, and it hates it; and it knows I am not really its master, and it knows I know it knows it. We quite understand each other.

Several times a day then, I am in the temporary position of being its master, on those occasions when its abilities are temporarily eclipsed by its appetites. But I feel all the time that it is not a true position; though I can force it to my level, and even below it, through its material needs, it never really regards me for a moment as its equal. I have a mysterious dominion over sugar, and for a share in that, it is willing to talk to me and to bark for me, but it no more admits my superiority than I admit the superiority of my banker to myself. But he has in his keeping certain or uncertain sums of money which I have to ask him for, and in the same way the parrot has to ask me for lumps of sugar; that he regards the sugar as really his, is certain from his behaviour, when he is left alone with it.

I only once felt really wiser than this bird. That was on an occasion when it got into the garden, and climbed laboriously by beak and claws, for its wings are cut, up a high tree. It enjoyed it thoroughly for a time, and was good enough to tell me so, in a way that is peculiarly its own. It calculated the exact height at which I could not reach it, standing on a chair, having previously ascertained that the step-ladder had gone to be repaired, and sat on a small bough there, and talked to me. First of all, it assumed a pious air, which sat remarkably badly on it, and said, "Let us pray." Then it barked at me, and said "Poor Puss"; it was rather excited, and I think it was trying to be sarcastic by talking nonsense to me, as if to a child. Then it whistled several tunes, and asked itself whether it wished to go to bed. Then it pretended that elm bark was good to eat, though it must have known it was not, and spread its clipped wings as if it intended to fly away. This was in order to frighten me, for it laughed in a hoarse manner afterwards. I suppose it thought it was funny.

Of course I couldn't stand this, so I retired to a tree where its coarse gibes could not reach me, and read a book. The bird thereupon came down a little lower, and staggered along to the very end of a small branch, where it looked at me scornfully through the leaves. Then it made a real fool of itself. It began nibbling at the branch between the tree and it, without having the slightest idea that when it had bitten it through, it would itself fall heavily to the ground. I warned it solemnly what would happen, for I was afraid it would hurt itself if it fell. Of course it thought it knew best, and went on, only pausing to blow its nose contemptuously at me. Naturally in a minute or two it did fall heavily to the ground, and said "Damn" very distinctly and decidedly. But before I could get to it, it had scrambled up the tree again, and pretended it had fallen down on purpose. But it was no use, it knew perfectly well that it had made a real fool of itself.

The tree on which it was sitting was part of a rookery, and it went up to the top towards evening to have a chat. There were a good many rooks at home, and I watched the interview with some curiosity. It evidently thought it was making an impression, for I could hear it talking with ease and animation. There were some twenty rooks listening to it at first, but by degrees, they all tailed away, and it was left quite alone. So it made a few reflections of a perfectly appalling character, and waited for the result. But nobody gave it a piece of sugar to stop its unchristian sentiments, and it realised at that moment, perhaps for the first time, that it was not quite everybody. It came thoughtfully down again, and walked into its cage which was standing on the lawn, and appeared lost in meditation. It did not even remember to curse the housemaid, when she covered it up for the night, and I recollect her saying to me in the morning that she thought it must be ill.

When the personality of my parrot became too oppressive, I used to unbend my mind over my jackdaw. The parrot thought the jackdaw low, and would never take the slightest notice of him, except once, when he was standing close to its cage, it took the opportunity to spit at him through the wires. It would shrug its shoulders when it saw me speaking to the jackdaw, and think that it was a very suitable companion for me. The only thing in common between them was that they both swore, when they were annoyed.

The jackdaw was always much more of a companion than the parrot, though he was a low pothouse sort of bird. Still, when the parrot had been more than usually unkind, I longed for sympathy of any sort, and the jackdaw never refused that.

He always took the keenest interest in whatever I happened to be doing. He used to sit on the table if I was reading or writing, full of great thoughts. The turning over of leaves in a book, for some reason he regarded as a personal insult to himself, and he would peck at the fresh page with a zest that never seemed to lose the first fanatic zeal which had inspired it. He had a tinful of water in which he used to wash every morning, spilling something more than half of it on the carpet. When he had finished washing, it was necessary to upset the rest all over the room. This was an almost invariable part of the process; I made spasmodic efforts to prevent it, but all to no purpose. One morning when the carpet was particularly marshy, I tried the effect of giving him no bath at all; but he made up for that by getting into my tea-caddy, which happened to be open, and fluttered the tea all over the breakfast table. But when I remembered on the next occasion, on which the mess was unbearable, to shut the tea can, I thought I could laugh at fate. Not so. A harsh discordant voice summoned me to my bedroom, where I found that a misguided and improvident desire for cold water had led him to trust himself to the hidden depths of my water jug, where he was in imminent danger of drowning.

One morning my watch was not to be found. The parrot of course knew all about it, but it was too busy practising a new sort of sneeze to attend to me. However a watch hidden by a jackdaw is not at all likely to be stolen, though there is a certain risk of treading on it. I cursed myself mildly for having left it on the table, and sat down to breakfast. The parrot laughed coldly and mockingly, and the jackdaw seemed to have something to tell me, but thought better of it, and went off to say three sharp words to a golf ball, which he had long regarded with entirely unfounded and unconcealed dislike. After breakfast I satisfied myself that the watch was not in any danger of being trodden on, from being playfully concealed under the hearth rug, and mentioned to my servant that there was a watch somewhere about, and that I should be glad to have it, when it turned up. Before long he returned with the teapot in his hand, and there at the bottom parboiled and ruined, lay what had once been an excellent time-keeper. I imprisoned the jackdaw under the "Times" as a sort of penance, and he soon ate his way out through the only leading article that I had wanted to read.

Alas, that was really his last piece of mischief! Early in the spring he ruined his digestion by eating too largely of the worms, which had been out of reach for months of frost, and in the early days of March he hopped into his cage for the last time, shutting the door behind him as he had always done, and in the morning I found him dead. An old servant asked me if she might have the poor little body, she had liked him so, she said, and she bore it away with a sort of melancholy triumph. A week afterwards she brought me a large square parcel discreetly wrapped up in brown paper, and would I accept of it. It would look so nice, she thought, on the chimney-piece of my sitting-room. I opened the parcel with faint apprehension, and it was as I thought. The jackdaw was standing in a bower of brilliant ever-lasting flowers, with his head turned very much to one side to obviate the depth of case, which his beak would otherwise have entailed. His beak was slightly parted, and as if to commemorate the cause of his death, there dangled from it a small

pink string. Behind was a blue sky, which grew on the low horizon into a glowing sunset.

“It’s so natural like,” said the old lady, “picking up a worm.”

The parrot coughed and sneezed when he saw it. Such things do not interest him.

AT KING'S CROSS STATION

The pathos of small and trivial disappointments has to me a heart-searching sadness, which I feel to be quite unreasonable, but against which I am perfectly powerless. The great tragic figures of history have a certain recompense in the grandeur and sublimity of their woes, and though our eyes are dim when we read of their mighty sorrows, yet simply because they are mighty we feel the keenness of them less; and it is in the small unnoticed sorrows of average people that I realise most deeply the infinite pathos of human life.

It is the story of one of these small disappointments that I am about to describe to you. There will be no loud-sounding grief in these pages, no wailing nor beating of the breast, only a few silent tears shed by a silent unattractive woman, a little wretchedness, perhaps a sleepless hour or two, and for me a regret that will not soon be still. You will think, I daresay, that it does not matter much; and I would not contradict you; after all, what is one little disappointment among the million aching tragedies round us?

One dark winter afternoon I was leaving London for the north. I had come up to town on matters of business which had arranged themselves satisfactorily, I had lunched with a friend whose company is always particularly congenial to me, I had an interesting novel, the corner seat in a third class carriage, and a hot water tin; above all I was going home, and was purely happy in a purely animal way.

Outside, the densest fog was drifting in at the yawning mouth of the station, like some cold flood of poisonous disease. The air was a tangle of broken sounds, engines yelled, doors banged, and couplings clashed and jangled together, all coming to my ears through the thick palpable atmosphere, as if through layers of wool. On the platform opposite to my carriage, a train of emigrants was just starting for some northern port; many had evidently got to that stage, when suffering, grown dumb and weary with waiting, is often mistaken for indifference, and sadness for sullenness. The frost had laid a heavy hand on the town during the last few days, and the cheerless warmth of the station was only just enough to melt the little icicles, which dripped dismally from the eaves of the carriage on to the ledge outside, reminding me of two crusty maiden ladies whom I had seen that morning, who had determined to be no pleasanter to me than they could possibly help. Such things, when one is particularly conscious of a happy background to one's own thoughts, strike merely the artistic eye, and leave the inward eye undimmed. I thought only how completely dreary the whole scene was, and it added its mite to my own sense of well-being.

Opposite to me there sat a young woman of a particularly English stamp, who had seldom, perhaps, known the stress of actual want, but never comfort. She had a hard, rather unpleasant face, the surface of which suggested gold-beater's skin highly polished and crudely tinted. Her eyes were indeterminate in colour, they were neither green nor yellow nor blue, and reminded me of the buttons on a Norfolk jacket of my own, the colours of which concentrated on their polished surface the sober hues of the wool. Her nose was of that order which is entirely concealed by a profile view; and there were high spots of colour on her cheeks, which emphasised her already emphatic cheek bones. Her mouth, which she held slightly open, displayed several prominent teeth. The lower lip seemed to have been intended for another upper lip, and its corners were extremely unfinished. A possible expression of honesty in her whole face might, perhaps, be merely due to its marked want of ability.

She wore a small hat, which sat in the front row, as it were, of an orchestral fringe of gigantic proportions, composed of vaguely-coloured hair, which, like her lower lip, seemed to have been designed for some one else. Her black jacket was very short in the sleeves, and displayed a wrist with a prominent bone, and her gloves were far from covering the deficiencies of her jacket. Round her neck she wore a massive chain and locket, too magnificent to be valuable; and an aimless braid ran round the button-holes and edges of her jacket, seeming to terminate in a side pocket, which bulged largely, and from which dangled a fragment of limp whitey-brown paper. Beneath her skirt might be seen elastic-sided boots, the toes of which were encased in a sort of patent leather; a curious white line strayed round them, imitating apparently a set of loops and crosscuts, as performed by a brilliant skater.

Next her sat a middle-aged gentleman, who was particularly odious to me, because I felt sure that he was in the same brutally contented state of mind as myself. He was smoking a good cigar, and was reading the *Pall Mall*. As the woman took her seat, he turned to her and said,

"You know, miss, this is a smoking carriage."

There was no audible reply to this remark, but her lower lip drooped a little more, and then resumed its normal position. An uncertain movement of the tongue against her prominent teeth seemed to convey acquiescence.

The middle-aged gentleman turned away again, and resumed his *Pall Mall*. The woman cast a furtive glance round, as if she had been guilty of something rather improper, and out of her jacket pocket drew a woolly mass, which resolved itself into a darning needle, a piece of purple worsted thread, and an old black stocking. She removed her gloves, and made several ineffectual attempts to thread her needle. Eventually she worried a small end of the worsted through, and

with her teeth persuaded the rest to follow, and began darning with large uncertain stitches. Her hands were cold and moist, and she occasionally wiped them against her jacket, and her fingers trembled rather. She sat in an awkward position, with her shoulders sloping forward, and her lower lip drooping more than ever. Now and then she drew a handkerchief from her pocket, and squeezed the end of her nose with it. This action was usually accompanied with a deprecating glance round, and more than once she caught my eye. After a little reflection I decided that hers were green.

It was during one of these submissive movements, that a porter came round and lit some more of the gas-lamps outside in the station, that I saw with greater distinctness, how ill-favoured and slovenly she was. Her gloves had fallen from her lap on to the carriage floor, and she had not noticed them.

I was about to call her attention to this fact, when the ticket collector looked in and asked for our tickets. The middle-aged gentleman grunted "Season," and grumblingly drew out a greasy leather case, with a cardboard square sticking up between two bank-notes. The other tickets were shown, and still the young woman made no sign, but darned on with greater assiduity. The ticket collector had a harsh unpleasant voice.

"Now, young woman, your ticket."

Slowly and fumblingly she took out the whitey-brown paper parcel from her pocket, and affected to feel in the corners of it. I think I never saw so poor a dramatic display. It was intensely obvious that she had no ticket at all. To my mind, at that moment, the marked want of ability entirely accounted for the possible honesty of expression to which I have alluded above.

The other pocket and the stocking-foot were then subjected to the same aimless scrutiny; but their assets were only a few cake crumbs and a brass thimble.

The collector grew impatient.

"Well, where's your ticket? You can't keep the train waiting."

The lower lip gathered itself up for speech.

"I don't know where it is."

"How did you lose it?"

No answer.

"Where are you going to?"

"I shall be all right if I can get to Grantham."

The words came out in sloppy syllables. Before she spoke, one knew from her boots, her jacket, her gloves, her fringe, her splendid locket, exactly how she would speak.

"The fare's eight and nine. Be quick, please, the train is over time already."

A further investigation produced a leather purse with a broken steel clasp, fastened round with a frayed elastic band. She drew out a florin, then two more shillings, a three-penny-piece, and four coppers.

"Come, that's not enough," said the man. "You'll have to get out of this; no defrauding the company. I could give you in charge for trying to travel without a ticket."

She gathered up her work and thrust it into the front of her jacket. A band-box, and a small plant in a pot formed the rest of her luggage. She did not appear to mind much, and stepped out on to the damp platform, and stood beneath a flaring gas-lamp. If she had been a prima donna, receiving the ovation of a crowded house, she would have chosen exactly that position. She laid her band-box on the platform, and put the plant by its side.

The ticket collector had moved on to the next carriage, and I heard his harsh voice demanding tickets. The woman followed him with her eyes, and when his back was turned, took two steps towards the carriage, from which she had just been evicted, and then stopped. She could probably have entered unseen, though whether her possible honesty or her distrust of her own ability checked her, I do not know.

She went back to her former position, and drew the whitey-brown paper from her pocket. It contained a hard green rasping apple. She took a large bite out of it and proceeded to chew it. A piece of decent size was stowed away in her cheek. Just as she was raising her hand to take another bite, the corners of her mouth, which had shown a bitter tension, for which after the first bite I had held the apple responsible, broke down, and two large tears gathered in her eyes. She did not abandon the apple, but she took out her handkerchief, and convulsive movements of the throat mingled themselves with the swallowing. The whole scene lasted not more than twenty or thirty seconds, and we slid

slowly out of the station.

Then it was that the pathos of the whole scene came upon me, the pitiful incongruity of the band-box, the tears, and the apple. It was too late; I threw down the window, and looked back. I could still see her, a misty figure through the fog, and one hand was raised to her mouth. Whether it contained the apple or the handkerchief, I do not know; but for me the bitter memory was made.

Ten minutes later, my eye caught sight of a dark object on the floor; she had forgotten to take her gloves.

THE SOUND OF THE GRINDING

For many years I used to live in London. My rooms looked out on to the Embankment, where sometimes even in a stifling June, the breath of country summers is felt at evening, when the tide turns seawards, and the foul water is carried off to the ocean. In that soft hour that follows sunset I could sometimes make the broad stream talk to me of the pleasant time, when its waters glided under the green shadows of the upper valleys, and plunged into the dark coolness below the weirs, where they wandered for a time, lost in the happy trouble of circling backwaters, before they ran on between noisy banks, and broke against sullen bridges, and were saddled with grim burdens. And when the tide first turned, and the wind blew upstream, I could sometimes taste, or thought I tasted, the infinite freshness of the sea.

But there was little else to remind one of the existence of anything so remote from the disquiet of streets and hurrying crowds, and of all crowds the London crowd is the saddest; that ceaseless stress of men and women who are all hurrying, who may not stop, who have not time to think. They work to gain a tranquillity which few of them attain. Their only thought is to make some money, to earn enough to give them a little leisure at their lives' grey end, in which they can rest for a minute, can get drowsy before they fall asleep. And the very contrasts are not the least sad part of this dismal tragedy. On Bank holidays there are the same crowds, to whom the habit of hurrying has become a necessity, whose leisure is as feverish as their work. This eternal necessity of work however, brings with it a sort of consolation under certain circumstances, which is as melancholy as its sorrows.

One morning, I remember, I was passing down the Embankment, when I saw a small crowd, chiefly of children form itself in front of me. The centre of its attraction seemed to be a policeman, who was carrying in his arms a small still burden. The explanation was forthcoming. A small boy was my informant.

"There's a poor baby fell off the wall, and killed 'itself. Ain't it a shame?"

The small still body was the baby which had just been killed. Yes, it did seem a shame. But that was all, it was only a poor baby. And my informant proceeded to black my shoes, with hands untouched by water or emotion.

Just below my window, there used to be a recess, where an old man last year sold chestnuts, and where a little abutment of wall sheltered him from easterly winds. One day, as I came home, I saw a couple of men putting up useless iron railings there, with spikes at the top, so as to shut this little corner out of the street. The chestnut seller had not been there for some weeks. It had been bitterly cold weather, and he used to cough a good deal before his disappearance. He was probably suffering from some weakness in the chest; that is very common in London, where there is a good deal of illness. Two days after this iron railing had been erected, he came back, wheeling his little stove in front of him. He looked very thin, and he wore a scarf round his throat. There was a bitter wind blowing at the time, and the corner which used to shelter him was quite inaccessible. He stood there for a few minutes, and then wheeled his stove away, and I lost sight of him in the crowd. Perhaps he found another sheltered corner, perhaps he did not. But the worst of it is that the tall iron railing is entirely useless.

Further down the street is a factory, where they make little glass ornaments, and for six weeks before Christmas a larger staff is employed, and the result is that they turn out or finish a great stock of Christmas cards with frosted foregrounds. These foregrounds are, or used to be, made by a fine glass-dust blown on to a slightly adhesive surface. One year they were very much in vogue, and the staff employed was consequently very large. The impalpable glass-dust is blown down a tube on to the cards, chiefly by children, for it is a work that requires little or no skill. Some of it sticks on the adhesive surface, some of it is blown too hard or too softly—it does not matter much, for it is very cheap—and floats about in the air, and the children breathe it into their lungs. It is not at all good for the lungs, but children are nearly as cheap as glass-dust. The Christmas cards are fashionable, and they have delightful mottoes on them. The picture often represents a country church, in the background, with sprigs of holly in the corners, and in front those terrible frosted foregrounds. They would not be nearly so pretty if they were the colour of blood. Even the realistic tendencies of this age might not quite like that.

A realistic age likes to be harrowed, and it likes to read things which it reflects with pride do not make it feel sick. These it calls strong, and it is very fond of strong things. But it draws a curious inconsistent line between the things that stir its sluggish emotions, and produce fear, longing, or pity, and those which make it feel ashamed, or make it ashamed of not feeling ashamed.

This last class of things is altogether in bad taste; and the writer who speaks of them is fain to fill his belly with the husks the swine eat, and everyone says, "How very suitable." While those who tell us things that should not even be named among us, these are they that sit in kings' houses. It is very easy to be disgusting, and no wonder it is a common profession.

The grinding need for going on is what seems to me so horrible, and what makes it so much worse is, that these poor people do not know how to be quiet, do not even want to be quiet. The real Londoner of these orders feels lonely in the

country; he misses the bustle and the stir of his home. Sometimes, however, he can see the other point of view, though he cannot attain it. In these moods he will go to the National Gallery, and the sunlit mists of Turner, the sleeping Italian valley, the remote serenity of early Madonnas, and the smooth animals of Landseer have a certain effect. He sees the existence of another sort of life; he realises, though he does not know it, that such scenes are the legitimate outcome of another mood than his. I often speak to men whom I see there. One of them said to me once, "Yes, sir, I like to see the pictures; they seem to make me feel quieter when I get home."

Atmosphere is responsible for a great deal. Twenty years ago a consumptive patient was kept in hot rooms, was forbidden to go out when it was at all cold, and under this *régime* grew worse and died. But there are Swiss valleys, where you may see in the depth of winter a hundred men and women skating and tobogganing in a temperature of something below zero. These are the consumptive patients, who live out of doors, and do not die. It is exactly the same with our moral nature; it lives not by the care that is taken of it, but by the atmosphere it breathes; and an air of tranquillity, a sense of space is what the National Gallery gives to those who could scarcely tell you the name or the subject of any picture they had seen in it.

I once saw two very promising figures standing in front of an entombment, which used to be attributed to Michael Angelo. The man had got hold of a catalogue, and he and the girl who was with him, laboriously spelled out this information. They neither of them looked at the picture at all, but before they went on to the next the girl remarked: "Michael Angelo. Ain't it a rum name?"

But even these were somehow worked upon by the sense of space and peace. I passed them again as they came out into the Square. They parted at the top of the steps, and the man said: "Well, Liza, them pictures is 'evingly. Good-bye. I'll be reound 'o Sunday." And they kissed each other resoundingly.

The comedy of the great play is so inextricably mixed up with the tragedy, that one is puzzled as to which is the most inevitably radical, and whether we ought to laugh or cry. If that be the true definition of humour, London is humorous enough, and Heine need concern us no longer, nor Jerome K. Jerome either, for upon my life, I know not whether I want to laugh or to cry when I see what he has done. Perhaps after all London is a great comedy, and I have been mistaking it for a tragedy—such mistakes have been made before—but think of the frosted Christmas cards. That is very melancholy: the comedy is in temporary eclipse.

It is not the fashion to get up very early in London, for those at least of us who need not work all the time it is day, but sometimes when you are returning from your balls at five in the morning, you might drive round to look at Covent Garden Market. It would amuse you, or I should not recommend it to you, and you would form a very fine contrast as you stood there in your ball-dress, with a handful of cotillion toys in your hand. The critics of the New English Art Club would do well to see you then, and you would be a fugue or a diapason for the rest of your life, with a Leit-motif embroidered on your skirt, and an adagio worked into your coils of black hair.

One morning, early in June, I stood there at the corner, where the traffic passes from the roaring Strand up to the Market. A small donkey-cart had caught my eye some twenty yards down the street. The donkey trotted along contentedly, a mouse-coloured patient donkey, hardly bigger than a Newfoundland dog. Behind it lumbered a rampaging 'bus, nodding twelve feet high above the pavement. In the donkey-cart were sitting an old woman who was driving, and a child of about four on the seat beside her. At the moment when they reached the corner, the road was blocked by a lumbering fruit van which was also going into the Market. The 'bus threatened to overwhelm them from behind, or to crush them against the fruit van in front. But the small child, without looking round, held up a tiny chubby fist with admirable gravity and importance, as he had seen footmen do on their smart carriages when the way is blocked. The 'bus driver saw it—though it was very, very small—and pulled up his horses just in time, but they were so close that one of them put down his head and nipped off a small piece of lettuce from the back of the donkey-cart. The owner of the small fist maintained his professional gravity to the end, and kept that ridiculously tiny hand in the air till the fruit van had passed round the corner, and the donkey's head was directed up the side street, and then he lowered the danger signal.

The night had been very wet, though the sky was now blue and clear. One old man arrived rather late: the thick mud on the wheels of his cart showed he had come over a bad road, and had passed through much rain, and the contents of one of his hampers was quite spoiled. It was full of cherries; they looked a little over ripe, and the rain had gutted them, and they were nothing more than a red mess of juice and stones and stalks. When he saw the state they were in, he stripped off the label which advertised them at 4d. the pound, and substituted one offering them at half that price. But the cherries remained unsold, till a seedy-looking man dismounting from a van belonging to a jam manufactory offered him three shillings for the lot. There could not have been less than twenty or twenty-five pounds weight of fruit, and he refused the offer. Half an hour later they were still unsold, and as I left the Market I saw him look wistfully at me. "The lot for half-a-crown," he said. "They're a bit spoiled by the rain, sir."

What could I do? I could not buy up all the spoiled fruit in the Market, and twenty pounds of crushed cherries were hardly a purchase which a housekeeper would welcome. But I remembered a scene which happened at King's Cross Station, and I bought them. It would have been easier to have given him half-a-crown, and told him to throw the cherries away, but it was not safe. Even poor people, you must know, have feelings, and it is as well not to hurt people's feelings, even those of poor people, if you can avoid doing so. From a Political Economist's point of view my purchase was horribly immoral: indirectly, I believe, it encouraged the sale of fruit which was unfit for consumption, and the consequence was that I had to take a hansom back home, for I could not carry twenty pounds of cherries about the street, and the juice ran out and made a little purple puddle on the floor, and the driver demanded half-a-crown for a new mat. "But it was the old man's fault for not packing his cherries properly." Quite so. I am not defending myself: on the contrary I pleaded guilty without reservation, or an appeal for mercy. Yet the old man looked very wistful, and very disappointed. He had taken a great deal of trouble in the picking of the cherries, and they had been very good cherries, rich black-hearts with plenty of juice; and it you had felt as I felt one day, when my train glided out of King's Cross Station, I think you would perhaps have done as I did.

BLUE STRIPE

The sight of some very familiar object, observed again even half unconsciously after some great change has happened, is full of a pathos almost unbearable. That ruthless unchangingness of pieces of wood, of cloth, of a picture, or a wall-paper, which you see again, after the whole court of your being has been altered, mocks you with its unfeeling sameness. The chair where she used to sit, which had for you a special clearness, which seemed almost like part of her, a companion, a familiar thing, remains the same in form, but the soul is gone. Wherever you turn, you see corpses from which a life has been withdrawn, phantoms to remind you of what you have lost. I remember, many years ago, standing here at this window, and looking out over the level lawn that stretches southwards from the house. Three days had passed since I saw it consciously. During those three days, no doubt it had often been in front of my eyes, but I had not seen it. A great change had happened, upstairs there was a darkened room—a life withdrawn, and a little life just started on its uncertain pilgrimage.

The servants of course had drawn down the blinds, in decorous propriety; but the sun was shining brightly outside, throwing the shadows of the window-bars definitely on to the red stuff, and the colour it cast into the room was horrible—ominous, like a theatrical hell. I drew up one blind, and let the light in; the other, I remember it perfectly to this day, was out of order, and my efforts only resulted in pulling the blind-cord down.

“It is a morning pure and sweet;” I know no other words to express it, a day that might have been the herald of summer, had not the bare trees and yellow leaves lying thick on the ground told of November. The sky was woven over near the horizon with streamers of thinnest cloud; above the clear, pale blue. The air was unusually still, and the trees delicately defined against the sky and the dark masses of the cypresses reminded me of Albert Durer’s etchings. At one end of the lawn stood a lime tree, not yet entirely bare and gaunt, but the last leaves were now detaching themselves, and falling without twist or turn through the windless air, on to the grass below. A little further on the lawn ceased under thick evergreen bushes.

Croquet hoops were still standing in order on the grass, but the dead leaves had drifted among them, and were clinging to their wires. I could see into the summer house opposite, and the mallets and balls were lying about in disorder on the floor; one was leaning against the back of a green garden chair. Everything was pitilessly unchanged. It was nearly a month since they had been touched, since she and I had come in together one October evening. Her sister and brother-in-law had been staying with us, and on the last day of their visit, the warm mildness of the late afternoon had tempted us out again, after we had all returned from a ride, and we had played croquet together till the carriage came round to take them to the station; and when we had seen them off, we wandered together round into the garden again, and continued the game in the state it had been left, taking two balls each. Eventually she put one of my balls out, and from sheer malice croquetted the other into the bushes at the end of the lawn, and by two extremely lucky shots finished the game, and stood laughing at my complete defeat.

“Never say women can’t play games,” she said, drawing her arm through mine.

“It was foolish of you to croquet me into the bushes,” I remarked, “because now you’ll have to go and find the ball.”

This she positively refused to do. It was my ball, and I must look for it.

“The batsman doesn’t look for the lost ball at cricket,” she said, with a superficial show of reason.

The matter admitted of no compromise, so we went to the summer house, and placed our mallets there, leaving the ball in the bushes to take care of itself. She leaned her mallet against a green garden chair.

The mellow glow in the western sky faded into the palest saffron, and overhead the vault grew deeper at the approach of night. Birds chuckled in the bushes, and before we turned to go indoors, a great yellow star had swung over the dim edge of the earth. In the stillness our souls were mingled together, and we spoke of the dear event that was coming. That night a vague dread began to take shape in my mind, but she was blissfully serene and happy; the infinite yearning of a mother’s heart waiting for its fulfilment left no room for fear.

She paused for a moment on the threshold of the door opening on to the steps that led into the garden; a waft of late jasmine was carried to us, and she stood to pluck a few blossoms, and gave me them to smell. I hardly know whether I love that smell or hate it most. Then she turned again, and looked out over the darkening earth.

“This beautiful world,” she said, “it has been very good to us. But the winter is very close. I wish spring was nearer.”

Till the morning after the child was born all was going very well. She was weak, of course, and looked very fragile, but I never saw her looking more happy. Then something happened, the doctor was sent for hurriedly. . . . He was grave, he would not say anything for certain, he hoped it would be all right. But after his second visit, as he came from the room to where I was standing waiting on the landing outside, he shook his head, and held the door open for me to enter.

“You can go in,” he said, “for a few minutes. Then you will have to leave her with us. You had better . . . his eyes looked compassionately at me . . . you had better prepare for the worst. It is not hopeless, but . . . yes, yes; be brave, and leave it in God’s hands, when we have done our best.”

The nurses had removed the little wailing child. She smiled at me as I entered, but lay very still. The doctors had not told her how ill she was, but she must have heard his words to me, or guessed the import, and her eyes questioned me as I knelt down by her bed.

“I think I know all,” she said. “It is good-bye, isn’t it?”

“No, no,” I whispered, “they hope—”

“Ah, I thought it had come to that. There is not much time then. Ah, my darling, what shall we say to each other? We do not need to say much, do we? We know without that. But it is very hard on you—very hard. Don’t grieve too much. The years are only little things. Till then—ah, Jack, there’s the boy.”

“How can I bear it?” I cried. “You mustn’t leave me.”

“It has been very sweet,” she whispered, “there is that, though I should wish to live.”

I do not remember how the next minutes passed. All I know is that after a time the door opened again, and I was led out, that I kissed her once more—that I saw her dear eyes for the last time.

Then twenty-four grey hours passed by, and on the next morning I remember going downstairs and pulling up one red blind, and breaking the cord of the other, and looking out again over the croquet lawn.

This morning a curious fancy seized me. I went down among the bushes at the end of the lawn, and poked about them with a stick. They grew very thick, and I could see only a few feet into them. Where was it exactly? Ah, I recollect now seeing the green fans of that dwarf fir bend and nod suddenly. The shrub has grown a good deal, and it must be somewhere near the middle. That is it. My stick struck a hard substance, and after some pushing and shoving, something came out on the far side, and as it rolled down the little slope to the gravel path, the tassels of the dwarf fir again bent and rustled.

There it lay, rather mildewy with long exposure, and slimed with snails. I see it has two red stripes, and my ball was blue. She must have croquetted her own ball away by mistake.

A WINTER MORNING

For four long weeks we have been living in a world of whiteness. Late in December the first snows fell, and morning after morning I have seen the fine tracery of frost thick on my windows, bringing back to me one of the earliest and most mysterious of my childish memories. It was always a matter of dim wonder, and sometimes of serious speculation to me, how in the cover of the still barren nights those aerial sheets of white vegetation grew and filled the nursery panes. I still remember the scorn poured on me by an elder brother, when I asked him what it was, though his answer that it was the frost, rendered it hardly more intelligible. These things do not get less wonderful as one gets older; the knowledge that those white forests are the effect of a condensation of the moist particles in the air, and their subsequent crystallisation, seems to me only the substitution for a simple and unknown expression, one equally unknown and more complicated.

But yesterday afternoon a message of change was whispered among the bushes, and the armies of the frost dropped their spears and swords. The soft plunge of spongy snow was busy in the shrubbery, and on the leaves the little icicles seemed to have grown less hard in outline. At nightfall a little bitter wind rose and sobbed round the house, and from time to time a cold patter of rain shivered against the windows, and with it there swept over me a memory which is ever new, but which the first relenting of the grip of frost brings back with a distinctness which does not grow less with years.

I went up to bed last night with the old pain creeping and stirring again at the heart, till at last I dropped into the vague, shadow-haunted twilight of those grey slopes that lie between the shores of living consciousness and the deeper gulfs of sleep. Whenever our souls would pass into that dark sea beyond, they have always to wade through these ill-defined shallows, where the restless little waves beat upon the land, where we feel the chill of the deeps of unconsciousness, but not their quiet, as we stumble dizzily from the shore, only wanting to rest, yet not able to lose ourselves in the still depths beyond.

All night I wandered as it seemed for long half-conscious years, on that grey borderland, not sleeping and not waking, moving painfully forward under a sunless sky, hearing strange moans and cries from the land which I could not leave, and the shrill pipe of a wind that seemed to blow all round me, and yet touched me not. Now and then that long monotony of sea and sky would resolve itself into the dim square of my window, and the blast that blew over those grey wastes was only the sighing of the breeze outside, and the flapping of the dying flame. But at last there came along the shore a little figure moving quickly towards me, and as it came nearer I saw it was no dull contortion which my tired brain drew from some object in the room, for against the greyness it glowed with a lucid outline, and when it got close to me, I seemed to mingle with it, and the weary twilight deepened into the blackness of dreamless sleep.

To-day a faint sun looks on the trees that are muffled no longer, and the snow that still lies somewhat thick on the grass seems less impenetrably white; the oozy droppings from shrubs, and the last dead leaves that fell when the snow was yet thin, have stained it with an ugly brown.

To me this first false hint of spring is laden with a memory which seems to grow more vivid with each slow turning year; perhaps the dream that I had last night has made its presence more insistent, for this morning it is with me like those strange throbs of double consciousness, which most of us know, the sense that something we have just said or seen is only the repetition of a real event which is intensely vivid to us, yet which we cannot grasp or localise.

What I am going to tell you happened many years ago, twenty years ago this winter. I will try to say it in simple straightforward words, for it is a very simple story, and a very common one.

It is twenty-six years ago since my wife died, since I was left alone with a year-old baby; and it is twenty years ago since the baby died.

We had twenty years ago a month of weather very like these last four weeks. The snow had fallen thickly for a day or two, and after that, the earth had lain still and white under the grip of a windless frost. One evening I was playing billiards here in the hall with my brother. The boy, Jack, was sitting on the hearth-rug teasing his dog. The dog had enough of it before Jack ceased to find it amusing, and he walked with dignity to the door. Jack was left with nothing to do, and he came to give a wide-eyed inspection to us.

After a while it became clear that the little boxes under the table that held the chalk, and the square blocks of chalk, with their green paper coverings, were quite the most fascinating things on earth. It was necessary to screw these boxes round on their pivots as fast as possible, and if the chalk flew out, it was simply charming. I have got one of these pieces of chalk still: I am going to tell you why I keep it.

Jack was in the way, and when he was told so, it hurt his feelings rather: at any rate he did not understand it. But he retired to the hearth-rug with his bit of chalk, and drew on the baize carpet a picture of a somewhat irregular horse.

In the course of a few minutes, my brother was about to make a stroke from over the box which had held Jack's piece of chalk. It was a stroke involving a certain amount of screw back, and he wished to chalk his cue. Jack's feelings were hurt again, when it was found that his chalk was wanted, and he was told not to touch it any more. Soon afterwards he went to bed.

That night the snow, which had lain thick across the fields, was breathed on by the south wind; and when we let Jack's dog out for a run, we stood in the porch for a moment and listened to the thud of the soft stuff as it slid off the labouring trees, which rustled and stirred as their burden dropped off them, and all round the bitter rain fell coldly through the dark night.

As we passed into the hall again, I happened to notice Jack's picture on the carpet. It was not quite finished, for it had only three legs, and the entire absence of any eye gave it a blind idiotic appearance.

To Jack this thaw was delightful; his pony passed from being a beautiful dream into a dear reality. After breakfast he cantered off with a groom in attendance, scattering gleefully behind him the lumps of slushy snow.

Two hours after, I was kneeling by his side in the hall. His pony had slipped on the hard treacherous ground beneath, and Jack was dying. He was quite unconscious, and it was doubtful whether he would regain consciousness again. His back—ah, God!—was broken, and he had only an hour or so to live.

He lay on a pile of rugs, close to the hearth. Near his head, on the carpet, I could see the faint outline of the unfinished horse, which the housemaids had not quite succeeded in obliterating. He lay quite still, and there was no disfigurement. His breath came evenly, and his eyes were shut. He looked like a child tired with play; but Jack never used to be tired.

Just before the end he stirred and opened his eyes, and saw me kneeling by him. The shadow of death was on his face.

"I want to tell you," he whispered, "I took——"

So he went out alone into the dark valley.

They took him up to his room, and laid him on the bed. Death had been very merciful; he had come swiftly and silently; there had been no struggle and no fear. But what was it he wanted to tell me?

Later in the day I went up again. His clothes were lying on a chair by the bed, and a sheet covered the still body of a child.

More than half unconsciously I took them up, and laid them in a drawer. As I carried them across the room, something fell out of his coat pocket.

It was a piece of chalk from the billiard table.

But why does that little thing stand out so clearly to me from the heavy background of my sorrow? Why is the pathos of that one moment, when Jack wished to tell me of that tiny act of disobedience before the great silence closed about him, so piercingly sharp? The thought of it must have been present to him all the morning; for, when he woke for a moment from that dim hour which preceded death, the threads of interrupted consciousness reasserted themselves, though he went out into the dark valley with his secret untold. I cannot help feeling, quite irrationally, that if I had only remembered his childish desire for that bit of chalk in the morning, and given it to him, if only he had finished drawing his horse, that the bitterness which now fills me would be measurably less. Yet there are those who in an ignorance which seems to be almost insolent, talk of little things not mattering, who would rob life of half its deepest emotions of joy and sorrow. Yet it is not that we need these little things to keep sorrow and joy alive, the strength of memory does not depend on them. Perhaps it is because those we loved and still love are human, because they were full of little wants and little failings, because the idea of a cold disembodied perfection is not so dear to us as the memory of one who was human, who was imperfect, full of little cares and trivial wants, who felt small disappointments and small homely joys, and whom, because we are human too, we loved for these little things.

The cold unkind morning creeps on to noon: the trees look drowsy and tired, as if they had been awakened in the middle of the night by some bad news that banished sleep, though not the weary craving for it. A few birds peck aimlessly among the brown leaves that are beginning to appear again through the pitted snow. They seem half to realise that this promise of warmth and spring is delusive.

Ah, my little Jack, I am very lonely and very tired.

THE ZOO

Some of the saddest sights that I know in the saddest city of all the world, our English London, are to be seen at the Zoological Gardens. You may see there also some of the most amusing comedies, and screaming farces, that have ever been exhibited. The name "variety entertainment," always makes me think of the Zoo, and I never yet saw the entertainment which was half so varied, or half so entertaining. The chief comedians are the birds, particularly the parrots, but of parrots I have spoken elsewhere, and the comedies performed by parrots, as a dramatic company, are rather noisy. The reflective mind is out of its element in the parrot house. One might as well try to reflect during a railway accident.

One of the most charming little comedies *à deux* is performed by a stork and a small seal. It is worth seeing more than once. The little seal spends his life in a tiny enclosure, in the centre of which is a sunk iron basin full of water, and he passes the day in swimming rapidly round it, coming up every now and again to take breath, or to look at the prospect. He balances himself on the edge of the basin with one fin, and regards the world with a serious contemplative air.

Sooner or later the stork, who lives on the adjoining estate, walks up to the wire netting, which separates them, and looks coldly at the seal. The seal has a warm heart, and he doesn't like it; so by way of amusing his friend he drops back into the iron basin and races round it at express speed. When he is tired, he comes up and looks wistfully at the stork. The stork opens and shuts his mouth like a middle-aged gentleman, waking up from an after-dinner nap, and says, "How very improper." Poor little seal!

Even the comedies for the most part are really tragedies, for they end rather sadly. The small black bears who stand on their hind legs, when you look at them, and keep their mouths permanently open, in case a piece of bun wanders by, are not properly comedians. Sometimes the bun strikes a bar of their cage, and falls where neither you nor they can reach it, and as you turn to go, they drop down on all-fours, and wait rather sadly for the next bun-bearer. I once saw a boy throw a pebble into the bear's mouth. The bear snapped his teeth upon it, and then dropped it on the floor, but opened its mouth again, in case a bun flew in. But before he dropped the pebble he looked at us, and as Pierre Loti says, at that moment I caught his soul. He was surprised, and sorry, not angry, but puzzled. I was horribly afraid that he would think it was I who had thrown it, which was of course extremely foolish of me, and I went to buy him something to eat. He was being fed by others when I came back, but in an interval, I saw him sniff at the pebble, which lay at the bottom of his cage, before he remembered about it.

Do you know the dingoes? They are an Australian wild-dog, I believe, and they have a seven-fold portion of the doggy spirit. In their eyes is the liquid pathos of the collie's, the trustfulness of the retriever's, the honour of the mastiff's. Perhaps a dog's eyes mean nothing to you, and if so, I am talking nonsense, as far as you are concerned, but if they do, go and talk to the dingo, for he will show you what I mean.

I go to the snake-house for purely moral reasons. I do not talk to the snakes, and I cannot feed them, because they have glass instead of wire in front of their dens; I go merely to look at what seems to me an embodiment of all that is low and hateful and mean; for the same reason I would go to look at the Devil, if he was on view, but as he is not, I find the snakes come most near my idea of him.

It is possible to catch a snake's eye. He will not look at you for long, but in one second of that glance you will get to know something of the eternal mystery of evil, which you will scarcely learn elsewhere. I cannot think of him as an animal, he is evil, no more. I once saw the snakes fed; the public are no longer allowed to see it, and quite rightly. There were about a dozen people in the snake-house, at the time, and I think we were all silent as we went out, when the feeding was over. The snake I watched was a large python from South America—I cannot remember his name, and I have never been near the cage since—and he was given a live rat, for they will not eat the dead food. The rat was let in through a small wire grating, and seemed quite at his ease at first, for the snake was asleep. He ran about the cage for a little while, and eventually walked across two of the reptile's coils. At that moment the other opened his eyes and saw the rat. He was in no hurry, and stretched himself slowly. That was the most awful motion I ever saw; though the head and the end of the tail of the beast remained still, the great coils stirred and glided along one another, parallel lines moved in opposite directions, and passed and repassed silently and smoothly.

The rat was still unconcerned, he was sitting in a corner, performing his last toilet, which was not worth while, and it was very pitiful. Presently he looked up, and saw that which made him drop down on all-fours, and tremble. The snake had fully awoke, he was hungry and it was dinner time; two small eyes were looking towards the living meal . . . it was horrible.

It is many years since I saw that sight. It was, I think, the most terrifying thing I ever beheld. In sleep, the horror of it sometimes still reaches me. I am in a dim unfamiliar room, alone at first, but as I sit there, something wakes into existence which is horrible, evil, not understood, and I cannot get away.

But the creatures who know best the anguish of not being able to think, and the pain of frequent striving after thought, are the monkeys. And what makes their existence so much sadder is that they are by nature, as it were, philosophers, with the craving but not the power for thought, who somehow find themselves forced to play the rôle of low comedians.

If you have ever watched monkeys at play, you will know what I mean; light-hearted mischief is not their nature; the infinite sadness of their eyes is a contradiction to their gambols. They chase each other round the cage with anxious care-worn faces, muttering and scolding to themselves, and when they are tired they do not go to sleep contentedly like other animals; they sit down mournfully, and from their eyes looks forth a lost soul. Their existence comes near to being a problem to them, and thus they come near to being the saddest things on earth.

I once saw a monkey at the Zoological Gardens, which I believe reached this boundary line between animals and man. Some one had put a small looking-glass in its cage, and it stretched out a skinny arm, and began examining it. It was not good to eat, and it was just going to throw it away, when it caught sight of its own eyes in the glass. For one half second that monkey was more man than animal. *It was puzzled at itself.* I have seen many animals look at themselves in a glass, but none as that monkey did. A dog, for instance, will say to itself: "That's a dog; how did it get there?" and I have known one run round behind a pier glass to find the dog. It is hard to make a cat see itself in a glass, but if it does, it will paw the glass, and dismiss it from its mind. A parrot strikes its image with the upper part of its beak, using its head like a hammer, but it is not really interested.

Now this monkey's conduct was different in kind, not in degree, from that of all these other animals. It said: *That is I; I am what?* For one moment it stared and wondered, in the next the animal had reasserted itself, and the only trace of its humanity left took the form, at the bidding of the animal, of fright and anger. It dashed the glass down, and *ran away.*

Into that dim-lit brain there entered for a moment all the sadness of human life. The problem of what we are lies at the root of all human anguish. If that was solved for us, we should all of us either find existence impossible or should discover in life a joy that would transcend all thought.

We have creeds, as all mankind have had creeds, since the beginning of the world, all directed against that impregnable rock: "What are we?" The whole puzzle of life, how we came here, where we are going, what is good, what is evil, all depend directly on that. A creed is a probability to many who do not believe it; to a few who do believe it, a certainty. Yet who has realised for the space of a lightning flash any creed, and has retained it as a creed? For a realised creed is no longer a creed, but an experience.

But what of the monkey, who for one half second was a man? Has that flash of blind thought that glimmered into his small brain, passed away as entirely as those hundred other flashes that did just not reach his dim narrow consciousness? Was that to him the supreme intellectual and spiritual effort of his life, a struggle, the tearing asunder of his normal limits of consciousness, a statement of that supremest mystery, self? I dare not say that it was, yet who dare say that it was not? One mystery the more in this illimitable riddle of things, one more confession, "We cannot tell," is no startling phenomenon.

Yet that moment seems to have made no difference to the monkey. It is, I think, the most melancholy of all those sad prisoners; but the keeper tells me that it was never very lively. It has a curious way of looking earnestly at people who visit the monkey house, and I have heard more than one person say: "What odd, sad eyes that monkey has." But perhaps they would say that of all monkeys, if they looked at them. This one naturally attracts a good deal of attention. It has a blue face, and a tail with two green rings on it.

THE THREE OLD LADIES

What the name of the three old ladies was, I never knew; the Christian name of one, I learned by implication, but I am quite possibly wrong about it, and of the Christian names of the others, or the surname of any, I have no idea. That they were sisters is fairly obvious. They all dressed quite alike, and very curiously; they were between sixty and seventy years of age, I should say, when I first saw them; they lived together, and there was a strong family resemblance between them. Some people have faces which it is impossible to forget; the three old ladies, on the other hand, had faces which it was impossible to remember. If I saw any one of them now, dressed in an ordinary manner, somewhere away from this town, and if she was sitting down, not walking—I think I know their walk; they all walked exactly alike—I do not suppose I should recognise her.

They lived in a square, gloomy-looking house at the corner where one road met another. The house stood back a little way from the road, and a strip of damp, mouldy garden occupied the interval. From the fact that they passed my windows at about a quarter to eleven every morning, I conclude they usually went for a walk at half-past ten; but of their life at home, I know nothing whatever.

In summer they were visible at a very long distance off. They walked in a row, holding their skirts very high. The result of this was that one saw the whole of six elastic-sided boots, occasional glimpses of six white stockings, and about two and a half feet of brilliant purple petticoat. One seldom sees real purple in this dingy world, and it is a most surprising colour. It has a vividness that is quite incredible to those who have never seen it; a real purple object, so to speak, hits one in the face. This gave rise, in the instance with which we are concerned, to a curious optical delusion, which I have never got over. The three purple petticoats always appeared to me at a distance to be much nearer than their owners, who showed dimly behind them. They all wore straw bonnets, of a rather juvenile cut, and smart black jackets. Their skirts were usually of a dull red colour, which showed up the petticoats amazingly, and the petticoats themselves, I have omitted to say, had two large pieces of black braid running round the bottom, at the distance of about three inches apart.

Such was the appearance of the three old ladies two years ago. On Saturday morning they always went to market, each carrying a discreet black basket. Their marketing lasted about two hours, and they returned home, past my windows, shortly after one. From the fact that a large lettuce poked its leaves out of one of the baskets, one Saturday morning, I conclude they had no kitchen garden.

My house looks straight on to an unfrequented foot path, through which the three old ladies passed; and one morning as they were going out for their daily walk, one of them dropped a pocket handkerchief opposite my window. I tapped at the pane, and pointed to it as it lay on the ground. There was a hurried consultation between them, and the eldest, whose name I believe to have been Deborah, came back and picked it up.

She glanced at my window nervously as she did so, dropped a little curtsy, and rejoined the others. It was her youngest sister to whom the handkerchief belonged, and she gave it to her in a private and secret manner. It was obviously not quite proper that she should go herself and pick up her handkerchief in sight of a strange gentleman, who had made signs at her; for the eldest, the impropriety was sensibly less.

Whenever they passed, they seemed to be talking to each other in a polite and interested manner, but in low tones. But one morning after the marketing expedition, they returned more slowly than usual, and the second sister had given her arm to Deborah, while the youngest carried Deborah's basket and her own. As they passed my window, the second sister said to Deborah: "You must keep very quiet, dear, for the rest of the day." What wild antics Deborah usually indulged in, I do not know; I am sure however that they were strictly confined to the house.

On Monday, for they did not go out walking on Sunday, instead of seeing three figures pass my window, there were only two. Deborah was absent. But as the two sisters were able to leave her, I concluded there was nothing much the matter. Deborah was probably only keeping quiet. But next day they did not, I am pretty sure, pass my windows, nor all that week; and on Saturday, in the town I passed a servant girl carrying in her hand a market basket unquestionably belonging to one of the three old ladies.

I suppose it was nearly a fortnight before I saw any of them again, and then there were, as you will have guessed, only two, and they wore rusty black crape on their jaunty straw bonnets, and their skirts were of the same colour. But from force of habit, for the roads though dry were not dusty, they still held their skirts up, and the purple petticoats were, as usual, visible at an incredibly long distance. I thought they both looked older, and talked less than they had done when there were three of them.

After that, things seemed to go on much as before; I met them once in a fruiterer's shop, where they were buying, rather tremulously, a little bunch of white flowers. The elder of the two laid them tenderly on the top of some other purchases, and then took them out and asked for a piece of paper to wrap them in. Her hands trembled as she folded

the paper round the flowers, and the other sister invested two shillings in a hideous little glass case of tin flowers with flaring green leaves. The flowers were supposed to be snowdrops, and as they left the shop, the younger one whispered: "Deborah's flowers, dear." For this reason, I believe the eldest sister's name to have been Deborah.

Winter came early that year, and for many mornings together they did not pass my windows. Late one afternoon, however, as I was walking home, a cab passed me and drew up at the door of their house, and the two old ladies got out. As I passed, I heard the elder one say to her sister: "It'll be two miles from the cemetery; shall we give him——" and the rest of the sentence was lost.

There is to me something inexpressibly sad in these little things. If three old ladies live together, it is certain that one will die first, and that two will be left; that they will continue to take their little walks together, and do their marketing on Saturday, as they used to, when there were three of them. Yet, yet, think of the tin snowdrops, and the silent drive to the cemetery; the empty, unused market basket; a purple petticoat laid by in a drawer.

It is, I think, our protective feelings that revolt so strongly against this hideous necessity of death for others. I cannot think of the poor, old, timid lady going out into that dim immensity which we call death, without a passionate feeling of the cruel loneliness of the dark valley through which she has to pass. However strongly we believe in the presence of some spiritual guide, there comes that hour when the whole course of our being is checked, when all the rules and faint ideas that we have ever gathered are subverted, and we go out alone to find what the unknown has to give us. Yet, if the worst gift that death has in store for us is utter forgetfulness and peace, a closing round of the grey limits of annihilation, we face nothing but what we long for. But it is very lonely.

Before Spring had come round again, the youngest of the three sisters had followed Deborah, and the second one alone remains. It is Summer again now, and the purple petticoat is still to be seen on fine mornings, and on Saturdays the market basket makes its punctual appearance. She walks very slowly; and yesterday I saw her resting in a greengrocer's shop in the market place. The shop-boy was grinning undisguisedly at the purple petticoat, for much rain had fallen, and her skirt was gathered up higher than usual. Just as I came in, she looked up and saw him. Whether she knew what he was laughing at, or not, I cannot say; but she got up from her seat and walked out of the shop, smoothing her skirt down over her petticoat with trembling hands. But economy conquered in the end, and when I caught her up on the road, a quarter of an hour later, it was flaring again as largely as ever.

It will seem, I daresay, absurd to you, but I longed to tell her that she was not so much alone as she thought; that I wanted to carry her basket for her, to sit and read to her in the evening, or to box the ears of the shop-boy who had grinned at her purple petticoat. But it was impossible; it would not do. I could not have explained what I felt, and if I had, she would not have understood me.

LIKE A GRAMMARIAN

I was only fourteen years old when the Professor began to live here. The first time I saw him, I came to the conclusion that he was quite the most delightful person in the world. I had just returned home from school for the Christmas holidays, and the Professor was having tea in the drawing-room with my mother and father. He was quite an old man even then, and he wore spectacles and a brown velvet skull-cap. But behind his spectacles I saw the kindest and brightest grey eyes that ever won a boy's heart. I thought at the time it was curious that he seemed so extremely glad to see me, but it was equally mysterious that I was so extremely glad to see him. The likes and dislikes of children are unerring; wisdom is often acquired only by the sacrifice of instinct, and when instinct has gone, appearance and manner, if artistic enough, must deceive the wisest; but in children, I do believe there is an unconscious instinctive knowledge which is never wrong.

Anyhow, the Professor seemed to me to have been waiting for me, and wanting me to come; and to the Professor I went. He asked me questions about what I had been doing at school, and what work I liked best; and instead of replying in the usual formula which a boy uses when asked about such subjects, and saying, "I don't know," I soon found myself in a deep ethical discussion with him, as to whether there could have been any excuse for Achilles dragging Hector's body round the walls of Troy, and what Helen felt when she saw Menelaus in the host of the Greeks.

The worst of it was that the Professor was not often to be seen. From Monday morning till Saturday night he worked hard all day. Perhaps once a week he would go out to tea with one of his neighbours—it was on an occasion of this sort that I met him first—and he went for a walk every afternoon at half-past-one, returning punctually at half-past-two, and sometimes I caught sight of him passing our house during this hour, while we sat at lunch. Otherwise, all I saw of him on week days, was his side face as he sat at a large knee-hole table in his window, with the brown skull-cap on, surrounded by books of reference and piles of paper. He seldom drew down his blinds, and in the evening he could be seen in the same position, writing by a lamp with a green shade that cast a vivid light on his paper and his hand, but left the upper part of his body and his head in comparative darkness. The first time I saw that, it gave me a sudden start. There was just that hand writing busily, and a circle of light round it, and it reminded me of the pictures thrown on a sheet by a magic lantern. One night, I remember waking suddenly from a childish nightmare, and groping about in terror for the matches, feeling an irresistible need of light. I could not find them, and I stumbled across to the window, for I saw by the clean shadows of its bars cast on to the blind, that there was a bright moon shining, and pulled it up. That was enough; there was light, and I stood looking out for a few minutes. My room was at the top of the house, facing the road, looking straight on to the Professor's study, and there in his window I saw the circle of light and the busy hand moving about among books and papers. In sudden wonder, I felt my way back to bed, fished my watch out from under the pillow, and took it to the window to see what time it was. It was just a quarter-past two. I drew down the blind and got back into bed again, feeling soothed by the consciousness that the Professor was awake.

The Professor was Scotch, with strong Sabbatarian principles, so that it was on Sunday that I saw him most. Every afternoon he would come in to see if there was anyone inclined for a walk with him, and I remember feeling very glad if there was no one at home, who cared to go except myself, for I wanted to have the Professor alone. One Sunday, in those same holidays, it began to snow heavily just after lunch, and I sat dismally in the window, thinking that I should not get my walk with him, when I heard his front gate clang, and the boot-boy came across with a note in his hand. The servant was some little time in answering the bell, and I impatiently went downstairs to answer it myself. The note was addressed to me, and contained an invitation to come across to his house, and "amuse him for an hour or two," for he had a cold and could not go out. I snatched up a cap from the hall-table, ran across the road, and found myself obliged to wait a cold minute on his doorstep, while the boot-boy went round and opened the door for me.

It was on that day that I learned, with a vague feeling of sadness, what it was that kept the Professor's hand so busy in that circle of light on his table. He was compiling a Dictionary of Greek Mythology, which was to be exhaustive and final. The table was crowded with books of reference, and in the drawers were neatly docketed papers, covered with the most minute and exquisite handwriting, containing finished articles. On the table was a small sheaf of papers headed "Demeter," and one sentence I remember caught my eye: "We have seen that the twelve labours of Hercules are only to be explained as a solar myth, and applying the same tests as before, we shall find that the legend of Demeter"—the rest I have forgotten, but those words remained in my memory with great vividness, though I could not understand them.

I always look back to that afternoon, in spite of the Dictionary of Greek Mythology, as one of supreme happiness. The Professor gave me a big arm-chair to sit in, and told me the most wonderful stories, and showed me his Angora cat, who questioned me with deep topaz eyes, and finally deciding that I could be trusted, rolled herself up in a great silky ball on my knee, and purred like five tea kettles. That is the most exquisite compliment an animal can pay us, for it measures everything by its own sense of security. I feel I would give anything to remember what the Professor said, to see once more, though only for a moment, his kind, grey eyes,—but whenever we are happy in a receptive, contemplative

manner, our recollections are always atmospheric, not incidental, and I only know that that afternoon has still a halo in my memory, and is a recollection of tranquil happiness.

But in the evening, when I went up to bed, I thought of the stacks of paper, the great books on his table, and the busy-tired hand creeping on and on over the white plains, and again that vague sadness stole over me. Boy as I was, I felt a dumb anger, for which I could find no words, against the Dictionary of Greek Mythology, which occupied the Professor so continuously from Monday morning till Saturday night. Somehow it seemed to me that he was sacrificing something to it, which no man could afford or ought to afford to sacrifice; and I had long half-waking dreams, in which the Dictionary of Greek Mythology appeared as a grey statue covered with minute writing with blank unseeing eyes, and the Professor was trying to convince me that I had much better be a solar myth than an ordinary human boy, which filled me with a passionate feeling of protest.

After those Christmas holidays, I did not see the Professor again for five or six years. My father had come into an estate in a distant part of the country, and we moved there. Now and then he wrote to me, but his letter said little more than that he hoped he would finish his work before he died; but one morning, when I was at home, I received a letter which I had long feared to receive.

"I have been unwell," he wrote, "and the doctor tells me I want a change of air, and a complete holiday. Just now, that is impossible for me, as I cannot leave home before I have finished the piece of work I am at. But I wish you could come and see me; bring some of your work with you, as I shall be very busy. It is not a very tempting invitation, but do come. I have been obliged to stop writing in the evenings now, but I really can see to the end of the whole work. My dear boy, I do hope you will come: there are things I want to talk over with you, and I feel very lonely sitting here in the evening, unable to work."

My hatred of the Dictionary of Greek Mythology was strong upon me: that grey cold phantom which was forcing him to terminate a hermit's life by a suicide's death. But it was very pathetic. Of course I went, and found him changed and aged. The drawers of the knee-hole table were quite full now, and a new deal shelf had been put up on the wall behind, already half full of those destructive little packets of paper. He had paid a heavy price for them.

All that afternoon I sat with him, arguing, entreating. Even from his own point of view, it was folly to work just now. Given a month's rest, he could come back more able to work, for a tired brain cannot give birth to vigorous offspring.

The doctor came early in the evening, with that cheerful professional manner which is so dismal on some occasions.

"You must make him leave all this behind," he said to me. "Take him to the sea and build sand castles together. But I am afraid you'll find him very obstinate and hard to persuade."

I followed him out into the hall.

"What is the real state of the case?" I asked.

"If he would go away at once," he said, "he might recover. But I would not be certain even of that."

"Recover?"

"His brain has broken down," said he. "He looks a little better to-day; but some days he will sit for hours with his books in front of him, and when I come in, he says that they are upside down, and asks me to put them straight for him. Yes; very sad; simply from overstrain. But as long as he has lucid intervals—he is quite himself this evening—there is a hope of recovery, if he would only go away and rest."

When I went back into his room. I found him sitting at his writing table, as I had seen him six years ago from the street outside, with the light full on his paper and on one white thin hand. He looked up as I entered and said:

"I am so much better this evening, I feel as if I could finish the article on Pluto. Let's see, where was I?"—and he again relapsed into a silence broken only by the faint scratching of his pen as it travelled along the endless sheets of paper, and the occasional reference to one of the books round him.

I sat down in the arm-chair by the fire, and read a book. An hour passed, two hours, and it was already after twelve, when I heard a low moan from where he was sitting. He was turning rapidly over the leaves of an old musty folio, and as I got up out of my chair to go to him, he laid it down with a sigh.

"I can't understand it," he murmured. "I don't know what language it's written in."

I laid my hand gently on his shoulder.

"Come, old friend," I said, "you have been doing too much. It is after twelve, you had better go to bed, you will be fresher in the morning."

He got up very quietly and came across the room. Close to the door was a high bookcase, and as we passed it, he

suddenly took a book at random from a shelf and opened it.

“No, it is no use,” he said, “I can’t understand it.”

He put it back on the shelf, and stood there for a moment, looking wistfully at the books. Then he raised his hand to them, and stroked their backs with a loving but puzzled air.

“How is it I can’t understand them?” he said. “They mean nothing to me. Well, well, when I am better, I shall be able to read them again; I think I shall be better soon.”

For the next three days he was very quiet. I persuaded him to leave his writing at least once a day, and come for a stroll with me in the warm soft air. Spring was bursting out in all its fulness, and morning by morning in the row of elms in front of my window, some fresh tree stood enveloped in a sweet green mist of early leaves. Once as we came in he stopped at the house opposite, where we used to live, and said to me:

“Do you remember asking me whether Achilles had any right to drag Hector’s body round the walls? That was the first time I saw you; you had just come back from school. And then there came a snowy Sunday, when you sat with me at home. I had just got as far as Demeter then.”

After that day he got very much worse. The puzzled look in his eyes, which I dreaded to see, was always there. He would stretch out his hands very piteously, as if he was blind, and all night he would keep talking to himself, saying he had not much time; and one morning they found him lying very quiet, when they went to awake him, and the puzzled look had gone from his eyes and the groping hands were at rest.

He had often spoken to me about the publication of his work; it was that mainly for which he wished to have me with him; and after his death I sent it all to a friend of mine, who had made a special study of the subject, and was considered the best living authority on it. But it was as I feared; the Professor’s work was altogether antiquated; it was patient, laborious, honest, all that good work should be, but perfectly useless.

I do not think I realised the enormous pathos of his whole life, until I heard that. Those long hours, the ungrudged unremitting toil, the loneliness, the failure of power, they were lost, unrewarded; but it was the other loss that seems to me most pitiful. That one as delicately sensitive, as unerringly sympathetic as he, should have known nothing of this “warm kind world,” should have lived in the ashes of dead fables, falsely reconstructed; it was this that seemed so hopeless. Even if his work had been supremely successful, if he had shown the way, not followed the old abandoned grass-grown road that led nowhere, even then would it have been worth while? Even had he throned Zeus for ever on an eternally appropriate throne, and analysed Athene from the top of her helmet to the tail feathers of the owl that sits at her feet, would it have been worth the sacrifice, for he weighed the world against it, and found it wanting? Life is given us that we may live, and that we may know, and is not only a space of time allotted to learn in. But for the gentle, there is surely a gentle school, and for the loving, somewhere and somehow, love. Even if it were not so, at any rate he lies now in a very peaceful place, on no rock-summit, but in what seems to me a more appropriate country, in a quiet green churchyard, where trees whisper and lean together, facing a southern sea, where snow and storm seldom come, where he will learn to be still, and where his sleep will be sound, for he was very tired.

POOR MISS HUNTINGFORD

The intelligent foreigner who happened to ask his hostess who that quiet, nice looking girl was, whom he saw at lunch but not at dinner, would in nine cases out of ten be told that it was “only the governess.” Governesses usually only appear at lunch, they have their breakfast with the children, and of course “one cannot have one’s governess down to dinner.” If you ask why, you will be told that it is quite impossible.

I was staying the other day with a certain Mrs. Naseby, whose father as we all know was a successful soap-boiler in Liverpool. She was the only child; she had an enormous fortune, and in course of time was sacrificed on the altar of younger sons, and is now an honourable, and will probably be a countess before she dies, as her husband’s elder brother has no children, and is rapidly drinking himself to death. The effect of all this is, that she is aristocratic to the tips of her finger-nails, and is quite unconscious of her governess’s presence.

Personally I always make a point of talking to governesses, because nobody else ever talks to them. Our acquaintance began at lunch. I came in rather late, on the first day on which I was there, and saw that there were two places vacant. One of these was some way off, at the other end of the table, but I had reason for choosing it.

Naturally I had two neighbours, one was a pretty child of about twelve years old, who inherits all her mother’s beauty—nobody has ever thought of saying that Mrs. Naseby is not wonderfully handsome—the other was a woman of about thirty, dressed quite irreproachably in a gown of a sober hue. Governesses, like footmen, are obliged to be irreproachably dressed, when they appear in public, for like footmen, they are part of the household, which reflects creditably or discreditably on the hostess.

There are certain Madonnas, in which you will find no idealised beauty; the mother of God is a simple peasant woman, with a sweet patient face, a face such as the grave serious artists of old must often have seen in their quiet Italian villages. They are evidently drawn from the life, and I imagine from women to whom life was a dim ever-present responsibility, for the explanation they were willing to wait, and in the meantime to go about their small repeated duties with resignation and perhaps cheerfulness. Such a habit of life produces a very distinct type of face, and the woman next whom I sat was a good representative of it. These faces are not often noticed, and there are more of them than we think, for they have no beauty of line or colour, they are only very patient and very sweet, and sweetness and patience are at a discount just now.

Her eyes—but nobody is supposed to notice that a governess has eyes—were of that particular shade of grey which, as the Irish say so well, look as if they had been put in with a smutty finger. About her neck she wore a string of olive-wood beads, which had that peculiarly dowdy appearance which is common in trophies from the Holy Land. She had a submissive attentive air, which is characteristic of governesses, and she was eating a slice of hot boiled beef, with carrots, turnips, and a suet dumpling. It is possible to conceive a foreigner so intelligent as to remark that there is a diet which indicates a governess as clearly as her quiet submissive manner. It has often been noticed that governesses like black currants, and the remark is profoundly true. Why they like black currants, is hard to explain but easy to perceive. It is simply part of that eternal fitness, which strings the events of this world together like the beads which governesses wear round their necks. Boiled beef is equally characteristic, especially with suet dumpling, and so also is cake, particularly seed-cake. It is worth while to eat seed-cake and drink water just once, when you have finished the sweet course at lunch, for if you do that, in a receptive spirit, you will learn something about the position of governesses, which it is hard to know from outside, as it were, from mere observation or instruction. The spirit, as we know, is accessible through the “subtle gateways of the body,” and seed-cake and cold water produce their definite ethical effect, just as brandy, hashchish or opium.

There was no black currant tart or black currant pudding at lunch, but there was a sago pudding, and the governess took some. As she helped herself to it, she accidentally knocked a wine-glass off the table, which crashed in pieces on the floor, and there was a moment’s silence.

Mrs. Naseby looked up, saw what had happened, and said in audible tones:

“Very awkward.”

The poor governess began to murmur some apology, but I gave myself the pleasure of interrupting her.

“I am so sorry, Mrs. Naseby, I am afraid I have broken one of your glasses.”

Mrs. Naseby had beautiful manners. She took my word for it, and smiled gracefully.

“I don’t think I shall forgive you,” she said. “I shall stop your pocket-money.”

The governess turned a submissive eye towards me. Her lips moved, but the words were inaudible. A slight blush had spread over her face, but it was a hot day, and it may only have been the effect of stooping down to pick up the

fragments of the wine-glass. The footman does not pick things up for the governess.

As ill-luck would have it, there was sitting opposite to me, a certain Miss Grantham, to whom I had expounded that morning some of my views on the position of governesses. She caught my eye, smiled maliciously, and took a custard from the tray which a footman was handing. Then she turned to the man and said, "I am so very much obliged to you."

The footman was too well bred to stare, and passed on.

The governess did not hear, and consequently the shot fell harmless.

But Miss Grantham did not intend to be balked of her scene. She had a morbid craving for small scenes, which made other people rather uncomfortable. With her most winning air she addressed the governess directly.

"Edith tells me you are doing the first canto of the 'Faerie Queene' with her, Miss Huntingford. I am so fond of the 'Faerie Queene.' What a treat for both of you. I wish you would allow me to read it with you some morning. How one longs for the age of chivalry to return. It is so rare in these horrible *fin de siècle* days."

That shot went home. Miss Huntingford was not wise, she was not even foolish, and either quality would have been sufficient. But she was only sensible and sensitive. Consequently she blushed more deeply, and drank a little water.

"I'm sure I should be very glad," she murmured.

The unusual sound of a voice that has not been heard before, caused one or two people to stop talking and look up. Miss Grantham went on with an infernal sweetness of manner, unable to deny herself the pleasure of making a scene even at the expense of a governess.

"I never thought the age of chivalry was really over," she said, addressing me directly. "I know it's the fashion to say that it's a lost virtue or vice, whichever it may be. But it certainly has dwindled, though, of course, you see isolated instances of chivalry now and then. Why has it dwindled so? Are women less charming than they used to be, or are men less susceptible?"

"Chivalry defends women from men," I said. "The age in which it was needed has passed. What there is room for and need for, is a new chivalry which will defend women from women."

"How interesting," said Miss Grantham. "Yes, I daresay you are right. You mean, that you can't expect chivalry to flourish when women treat women as no man would think of doing."

"Exactly," said I. "But there never yet was a chivalrous woman. I don't suppose there ever will be. They defend their own sex, when the attack is general, but they never defend an individual."

Miss Grantham never got angry. I had put myself at a great disadvantage, or the governess at a greater.

She laughed.

"I didn't know you were so well up in the subject," she said. "So men are still chivalrous to women. I wonder how long it will last."

She picked up a claret glass, and deliberately snapped the stem in half. There was again a sudden silence, and Mrs. Naseby looked up enquiringly.

"Well?" said Miss Grantham, addressing me.

I did not answer her, and she laughed again.

"The habit of breaking things is infectious," she said to Mrs. Naseby, "and the age of chivalry is over. It stopped about half-a-minute ago."

There was a great laugh from Miss Grantham's immediate neighbours, who had followed the scene from the beginning, and as lunch was over, Mrs. Naseby collected eyes, and the people dispersed.

I happened to be the last to leave the dining room, and the governess was standing in the hall.

"Thank you very much," she said, "for trying to shield me, but I wish you hadn't done it." And she went hurriedly upstairs.

When I went into the drawing-room, Miss Grantham was giving her mother and Mrs. Naseby a moderately accurate account of what had happened.

"It's too delicious," the latter was saying. "Really a very pretty piece of fence."

She gave a little gush of laughter.

"Here is the squire of distressed dames," said Miss Grantham, as I entered.

"It really is very funny," said Mrs. Naseby. "But why wouldn't you do the same for Norah?"

"Because I'm not a distressed dame," said Miss Grantham. "Isn't it so?"

"Of course," I said. "But you were very cruel to her."

"Really it is very funny," said Mrs. Naseby. "We are a lady short. Shall I tell her to come down to dinner? What's her name, by-the-way? She only came yesterday."

"Edith told me," said Miss Grantham, "it's Miss Huntingford."

At anyrate governesses have, as a rule, one consolation. Their business is to look after children, who may be thoughtless and troublesome, but are probably still child-like. Half the time, at anyrate, they live in an atmosphere which is not vitiated, a sort of oasis, in this wilderness of those who do not care. But Miss Huntingford had not even that solace. Edith was twelve years old, but a woman of the world. She wished to be treated as if she was grown up; she did not care for fairy stories; they seemed to her to be most improbable, as indeed they are. She used to go to the pantomime at Christmas, but she always came away before the harlequinade. She spoke French very well, almost as well as Miss Huntingford, and her musical tastes lay in the direction of Wagner. She was altogether quite up-to-date. Poor Miss Huntingford! Even some one with the best intentions in the world, had done something "she wished he hadn't."

Miss Grantham always smoked cigarettes after lunch. We went down to a lake in front of the house until the day got a little cooler, and she sat on a pile of cushions in a broad flat-bottomed punt, and made cynical remarks. Her silver cigarette case was in an insecure position on the edge of the boat; her face was turned away from it, and as she felt for it with her hand, she managed to knock it off into the deep water. It was no use quarrelling with her.

"I'm so sorry," I said. "I'm afraid I've knocked your cigarette case overboard."

THE DEFEAT OF LADY GRANTHAM

Sir Robert Grantham's house in London has a garden attached to it of sufficient size to enable Lady Grantham to give garden parties. Her duties as a hostess on these occasions are limited to sitting under the charming cedar tree which stands just behind the house, and making scornful remarks to her guests. However, the affability of Sir Robert is universally acknowledged to be enough for two. Lady Grantham is Spanish by birth, and dislikes English people. I got there rather late, and the guests were beginning to go. The remainder were grouped together round Sir Robert, who was pointing out to them the superiority of his garden to all others in London, not by praising his own, but by depreciating the rest.

"I don't know what I should do without a bit of a garden where I can sit and smoke a cigar of an evening," he was just saying. "I often wonder why any one ever comes up to London, if they have to live in a stuffy house like a barrack, with no garden attached, or a garden like Lord Orme's. I often say to him, 'Now my dear fellow, why on earth don't you buy up those two houses next you, and run a wall along from the corner? You'd get quite a decent little garden if you did that, whereas now you've scarcely got room to smoke a cigarette.'"

Lady Grantham was sitting as usual under her cedar tree reading her French novel, and Miss Grantham, who had found it impossible to talk to people any longer, apart from the fact that her father was addressing everyone who remained collectively, was sitting by her, and eating strawberries with an absent air. Lady Grantham looked up vindictively as I approached. "You are very late," she said. "It is such wretched manners to come just as everyone else is just going away, and your hostess wants to go too. It is far better not to come at all, unless you can manage to come in decent time."

The only sensible way of treating Lady Grantham is to take your cue from her. If she is not rude, there is no reason why you should be; if she is, there is no reason why you should not. Besides we are old friends.

"I didn't come to talk to you," I said. "Please go away if you want. Or go on with your book if you like. You must have read a good deal this afternoon; you always read at your own parties, I believe."

Lady Grantham smiled.

"Nora will talk to you, if you want to talk," she said. "Talk, Nora."

"What shall we talk about," said Miss Grantham. "Have some strawberries. Oh, by-the-way, do you remember Miss Huntingford last year at the Nasebys'? You were very chivalrous to her on that occasion I remember."

"Yes, I remember. She's married."

"That is what I was just going to tell you. How did you know?"

"It's no secret I imagine, I saw her the other day."

"She married the eldest Naseby. Her dear mother-in-law is furious."

Lady Grantham looked up.

"Do you mean the governess, Nora?"

"Yes, the one who broke the wine glass."

"It serves that woman right. I told her so this afternoon."

"I have no doubt you did," I gave myself the satisfaction of saying.

"She used to have her down to the drawing room to play after dinner," continued Lady Grantham. "Now I always keep my governess in her proper place."

"You treat her like an under housemaid, as far as I remember," I said.

"You'd better not say much more, mother," said Miss Grantham. "He's got a passion for governesses."

"That's not quite true," said I, "only I don't see why they should be treated like servants."

Lady Grantham yawned.

"Why should we talk about governesses?" she said.

"Well, you will have to talk *to* a governess soon, I expect," remarked Miss Grantham.

"Why?"

"Well, to an ex-governess; Mrs. Naseby told me she was coming when I saw her this morning."

“Why did you ask her?”

“You told me to; you went down to Ascot on Harry Naseby’s coach last week you know.”

“I shall send for Miss Toots to talk to her,” said Lady Grantham. “Those people are much happier with their own class. They can talk about French exercises.”

“I met Mrs. Henry Naseby the other day,” I said, “she is very charming, and she has caught the trick of the world. I advise you to take care.”

Sir Robert’s party had begun to drift back towards the cedar, which, as he was careful to point out to them, was quite the finest tree of its sort in London, and had been planted by the first Lord Sandown, who, as all the world knew, and if they didn’t he told them, was the founder of the family, and had been ennobled in the reign of Charles I. By degrees the remainder of the guests began to move, and there were only three beside myself left on the lawn, when a footman came out followed by a woman whom I scarcely recognised.

Mrs. Naseby was perhaps even more perfectly dressed than Lady Grantham herself, and that is saying a great deal. She walked as if she had been stared at all her life, and rather enjoyed it. I had only met her once since her marriage, and that several months ago, and though it was clear that she was learning the trick pretty quickly, I was not prepared for this transformation.

She lounged up to the cedar where we were sitting, bowed to me as if she ought to remember me but just did not, with that sublime self-possession which I had always imagined a thing which some were born with, but to be as unattainable as the line of aristocratic ancestors with which it is usually coupled. Then apparently for the first time she caught sight of Lady Grantham, who did not offer to rise.

“Ah, dear Lady Grantham,” she said, “I really did not see you before. You are so right to keep quiet, and not stand about in the way most of us think it necessary to do when we receive our friends. I know how trying a hostess’s duties are. And how do you do, Sir Robert. What a charming garden you have! I always tell everyone it is quite the best in London, and they always tell me that they knew that already.”

Mrs. Naseby drew off a long glove meditatively.

“I remember so well meeting you at my mother-in-law’s,” she continued, turning to Lady Grantham again, “but of course you would not remember me.”

“No, one necessarily sees very little of the governess,” remarked Lady Grantham.

It was quite clear that Mrs. Naseby remembered Lady Grantham, and I waited for more.

“So dreadfully close, is it not, this afternoon,” she went on; “I was really afraid that I should not get here at all, but your beautiful garden is the only cool place I have been in for days. You are not thinking of selling it, I suppose, Sir Robert? I should simply make Harry buy it, if you were. How I shall survive to-night I really do not know. Prince Waldenech is dining with us, and we’ve got a party afterwards. So sorry I couldn’t include you at dinner, Lady Grantham, but you know what a polky little dining-room we have.”

Henry Naseby had one of the largest houses in London, and a new and magnificent dining-room, which would hold eighty people comfortably, and Lady Grantham knew it, and Mrs. Naseby knew she knew it, and everybody else knew they both knew it.

Mrs. Naseby waited for a moment with a true artistic instinct and then continued.

“But I hope you can manage to look in on us afterwards. Do you know the Prince? Of course he is quite an old friend of ours.”

Lady Grantham shut her book and cleared for action.

“Is he really? I should not have thought you would have known him long.”

Mrs. Naseby laughed.

“Of course I cannot say that I am an old friend of his judging simply by the number of years I have known him. He is a compatriot of yours, is he not, Lady Grantham? You have known him twenty or thirty years? More than that I dare say. How I envy you! Such a charming man!”

Lady Grantham had to explain herself. She did so with a direct lucidity which is all her own.

“Your paths in life have not always been on the same level,” she said. “That was all I meant. But perhaps he came up to the nursery when your husband was still small enough to be in your charge and used to pat him on the head. Was he a troublesome little boy? I suppose he must have been. All little boys are troublesome it seems to me. I think we owe so

much to our governesses who kindly take charge of them for us till they are old enough to go to school.”

Mrs. Naseby received the thrust with perfect composure.

“Yes, I think governesses are owed a great deal. You, dear Lady Grantham, can form no conception how odious small children, even the most delightful of their kind, can be. It’s true that Harry is in my charge now—I feel the responsibility very much. But as a matter of fact he takes care of me. It is so delightful to have a husband whose longer experience of the world saves one from all snares and pitfalls. It makes me feel quite a little girl again.”

Lady Grantham knew perfectly well that Mrs. Naseby was her husband’s senior, and she was not the woman to scruple to say so.

“Yes of course he has been in the world—his world, my world, longer than you. You would not have come out, would you, until you married? I quite envy you the freshness of your impressions; it must be so interesting to know that other side of life. I always make my maid gossip to me in the evening when she is doing my hair. But how very stupid, if you will excuse my saying so, of your mother-in-law. She assured me that you were older than he. No doubt she exaggerated, for she was speaking with some bitterness.”

Mrs. Naseby laughed charmingly.

“Really, Sir Robert, I am quite sorry for you. What an inquisition to have in the house! We are all so dreadfully afraid of Lady Grantham, you know. I shall have to warn the Prince against her. She will be saying all sorts of awful things to him, asking him his age and the Princess’ age, and he will scold me dreadfully for having asked her at all. You will come, won’t you, Lady Grantham? But wasn’t it rude of her? Really I quite long to be a governess again, in order to make you stand in the corner for being so rude.”

Lady Grantham very seldom laughed, and laughter alone could have saved her. There are certain remarks which to ignore is to acknowledge.

She sat quite still for a moment, and an angry flush rose to her face. Sir Robert who was always getting the worst of it with his wife entirely declined to come to her assistance. She turned to Norah.

“Send for Miss Toots,” she said.

Then to Mrs. Naseby—

“I am sure you would like to see my governess. You can compare experiences. She is an excellent woman, and you probably have much more in common with her than you have with me.”

“That is very likely,” said Mrs. Naseby. “I always tell everyone how kind you are, Lady Grantham, and how thoughtful for your guests; but, as you say, two Englishwomen must have much more to say to each other, than an Englishwoman and a foreigner. Do let Miss Toots come to us to-night. She is very pretty, I hear, and the dear Prince is a great admirer of English beauty.”

Lady Grantham retreated in good order, but she distinctly retreated. I was delighted, and had a pitched battle with her on the next occasion that we met, and on parting wondered whether Mrs. Naseby would, for a consideration, give lessons in the noble art of self-defence.

THE TRAGEDY OF A GREEN TOTEM

Totemism is a form of belief common to most savage nations. Like other primitive notions the principles of it are simple and intelligible. The totem is a tribal god who is embodied in an animal, a man, or sometimes a plant. He protects his tribe, and though naturally he may be of a venomous disposition, he will not hurt them. Thus a tribe whose totem is a snake, do not experience any ill effects when that particular snake bites them, in fact it is rather an honour than otherwise. Totems are regarded with great veneration, as being the embodiment of the god, and they are sometimes solemnly eaten, in order that their worshippers may share their attributes; a totem dog for instance will confer speed, a totem lion, courage. Difficulties, however, may arise in this connection, for if the totem is a very edible beast, his sacred character is somewhat inconvenient. The totem of an American Indian tribe is an ox, and its tribesmen are not vegetarians. So they kill their ox and get beef in the ordinary way; but they stuff the skin afterwards, and pretend that the ox is not dead, and then they all go to the stuffed ox, and say, "I'm sure I beg your pardon." Thus they have beef for supper, without offending their god. The proceeding has the merit of ingenuity and simplicity. A tribe whose totem was a potato would live in a chronic state of apology.

Savages and children have much in common. If all children were left without any religious instruction, I believe in a few generations the Totemistic age would return. Jack, for instance, had a series of totems, of which the greatest the last and the best was the Green Totem.

The Green Totem was not green at all in its primitive state, being of a bright brick-red colour, but in its final, and as mythologists would say, its crystallised state—though it never was crystallised, except once, when it fell into a pond, and was frozen in for a fortnight, after which it was fished out in a sodden and not a crystallised state—it was bright pea green. During the period of crystallisation it was inaccessible, and though we could see it like a bee in amber, in the ice, yet when it got free again it was, as I say, sodden.

But during the primitive or brick-red stage, it was not a totem at all, but either Mrs. Noah, or one of the Misses Noahs, or perhaps Noah himself, though I think he had a beard, or Shem, Ham or Japhet. I take it that it began to be a Totem at the moment when Jack partook of it, for it had been divine before, and at that moment it also ceased to be brick-red, and became pea green, because the brick-red was water colour. The pea green, as far as I know, was permanent.

On the whole, then, the Green Totem is the least misleading title.

I remember the passing of Mrs. Noah, Miss Noah, Shem, Ham or Japhet, into the Totem existence very well. It was during a painful scene one Sunday morning. Jack had been naughty, and had recorded a scornful vow to say his prayers to the moo-cow like the children of Israel. The book of Judges had a fascination for him, and he wanted to be Gibeon. There was a solemn pause after this regrettable statement, and Jack having delivered his ultimatum pulled one of the dramatis personæ of the diluvian epoch out of the ark, and began to lick it. Hitherto that dramatis persona had been a Totem in all but the essential point I have alluded to above, and as soon as Jack partook of it, it ceased to be of the family of Noah and became the Green Totem. Its character as a Totem, I consider to have been definitely established after the lapse of an hour or two, when it became evident that the brick-red paint had not interfered with Jack's internal economy; for the Totem, as I have explained, does not injure its worshippers.

Jack always brought the Green Totem into my dressing-room in the morning, and for a time it eclipsed his desire to have razors. On one of these occasions its name was finally given it. Jack wished to call it Mrs. Noah, but I pointed out to him that he could not tell whether it was not one of the Misses Noah, or Shem, Ham or Japhet. He maintained that it was impossible that Shem, Ham or Japhet should dress in pea green because they were men, and that therefore the choice was limited to the women, and I retorted by saying, "How about Robin Hood?"

That argument was of course unanswerable, but Jack turned the tables on me by asking what its name was, if it wasn't Mrs. Noah. Naturally I replied, "the Green Totem," or for the sake of brevity, "Totem." Jack was only half satisfied. "Did I know for certain that Totem was one of Noah's family names?"

"Well, not exactly, but I thought that there were invincible objections to calling the individual by any other name, whereas there were positively none to calling it Totem;" and then we went down to breakfast, Jack, Green Totem, and myself.

Totem lived mainly in Jack's pocket, but it had a country house in the stem of a hollow oak tree in the garden, and we went to Totem's "at homes," and arranged its furniture, and turned its bedroom into its sitting-room, and its dining-room into its front hall, with a familiarity that I am afraid it must have considered bordered on impertinence.

When we went to call on Totem, we used to discuss the state of the weather or the crops for a few minutes, and then one of us would notice that a blade of grass had begun to grow in the dining-room, in a way that threatened to leave Totem no room to eat in. Now in the hall that would not matter; it would only be like the India rubber tree at home; so

Totem was picked up and laid in its kitchen garden till the necessary change had been made. It is true that by the new arrangement the hall door led straight into the dining-room, and that you had to pass through that splendid apartment to get to the hall; but that was a less serious inconvenience than not having room to use your knife and fork; and in five minutes Totem held another "At Home," and we shook our heads again over the rainy August, and the backward state of the wheat.

Green Totem had a long and eventful career. Of course it started by being a full grown Totem, and could plunge into the wild vortex of life without any of the preliminary skirmishing of childhood and youth. It began by gaining signal victories over all the animals in its native ark, and though the brim of its hat, which was of the shape that appears to have been almost universal in diluvian times, got chipped and broken, being made of wood, which I maintain is not a suitable material to wear on the head when you are fighting lions who are constructed of the same vegetable substance, Totem's spirit remained unbroken to the end. But though its hat, as I say, got chipped when it came in contact with the lions, for Totem's method of attack was to butt them with its head—an invention, the merits of which, I submit, have been distinctly unappreciated—yet the legs of the lions got equally broken when they came into contact with the hat, and there were as many pin-legs when the campaigns were over as there were chips out of Totem's hat. Totem always stood upon a small wooden disc, as befitted a god, and when that was broken it could not stand at all, as its feet were irregular in shape, and by no means subtended its centre of gravity. But Totem was terrible, even when it leaned against a tea-cup.

I speak of Totem in the neuter gender, because it could not possibly be classed with things masculine or feminine. It went through its terrific encounters with the diluvian menagerie with a firmness of purpose which, though manly, is embodied in no man; it did the honours of its country house with a dignity unknown to duchesses, and its neuter characteristics were more strongly marked than either of these. Just as the masculine gender would be unsuitable to it when it was at home, and the feminine gender when it was fighting elephants and large white hens on the wilds of the Turkey carpet, so both masculine and feminine genders were glaringly inadequate to express Totem in repose, and it really seemed more suitable to talk of it as "they," for it was a variety of distilled types embodied in one unique entity. Even in its country house Totem was he and she, for Jack and I took it in turns to be Totem, and unless we can interpret the rapid change of voice from a deepish bass to a shrill piping treble as being a mere mockery on Totem's part, or a rapid succession of bronchial catarrhs, neither of which explanations seems to me at all tenable, we must, I think, allow the possibility of a plurality of persons in Totem.

About a fortnight after Totem's stand had come off, it began to get very much frayed about the feet; its heels disintegrated altogether, and the disease was spreading up the legs. It was obviously serious, and we resorted to drastic, but, I am glad to say, effectual remedies. The stumps were cut neatly off at the point where they joined its solid green ulster, two tin tacks were driven in, and Totem could stand again. This saved its life in at least two ways: in the first place it is clear that the disease would have spread, and ultimately undermined its constitution, and in the second place it saved Totem from drowning in a rather curious manner.

One day Totem was sailing about in its yacht on a small pond near its country house. Like Ulysses, it was tied to the mast to prevent it falling overboard, but the cotton came undone, and Totem took the neatest little header into the water. Its specific gravity enabled it to float, but as it was circular, the chances were exactly even that its face would be under water, and that it would drown in spite of its specific gravity. But its tin feet were of a denser specific gravity than the rest of its body, wherefore they inclined directly downwards, whereby the whole of Totem's head was out of the water. Any immediate danger therefore was averted, but though we spent some time throwing sticks and stones at Totem, we did not succeed in getting it to land. However, if a wind sprang up in the night, we were sure to find it ashore in the morning.

But no wind sprang up; on the contrary, it froze hard, and next morning Totem was still visible as far as its shoulders, but it was even more out of reach than ever, for the ice would not bear. We could just see its head appearing above the thinly frozen surface, and it talked to us for a few minutes. On the whole we decided that it looked pretty cheerful.

The frost lasted two nights, and then snow fell; thick snow, covering everything up. This is important. The pond lay in a small hollow, and when the snow melted in the course of a few days, the water drained down on the ice, and covered it to the depth of about half an inch. Totem of course vanished entirely, but we settled that it had been so long in the water that it had probably become a sort of fish, and that the water did not matter to it any longer.

Then the frost set in again; the water on the top of the old ice was entirely frozen up, and in a few days we were skating over Totem's head. We could see it in the ice, as I mentioned before, like a bee in amber, and though we were so near, we were very far. Small oblations in the shape of minute pieces of cake were left for it, and as they had always vanished by next day it was clear that Totem was alive and well, and that there was no reason to be apprehensive, even on the ground of its starving to death. Totem obviously knew much that was not dreamed of in our philosophy.

When the frost broke up, we found one morning a sodden stranded Totem on the edge of the pond. Evidently that exposure was the cause of its death, for it brought on a tendency to splinter all over its body. In its weak state, it was sheer madness to lie down on the gravel by the front door in a wheel rut. In a stronger condition, it might have escaped any fatal effects from a carriage wheel passing over it, at the expense of a little general tattooing of pebbles into the green ulster; indeed such a thing had happened before, but in its enfeebled condition, it was an inconceivable stupidity. But Totem was always headstrong.

The "small slain body" was picked up an hour or two afterwards, but life was extinct. We found some slight consolation in the pomp of its funeral, which was followed by its own bereaved family, and the diluvian menagerie, which forgave and forgot all previous disagreements, though the contemplation of so many pin-legs standing round Totem's grave must have given rise to a certain feeling of relief in the minds of the meaner animals, when they saw Totem's coffin lowered into the floor of its country house.

It is a commonplace, that at the most solemn moments the most frivolous thoughts will occur to one; and as we raised the box of Bryant and May's safety matches, in which was laid what was once Totem, on to the shoulders of two elephants, it struck me that the prototype of a certain advertisement of that firm had undergone a sudden incarnation.

At the door of Totem's country house, Jack erected a small wooden board, which at the same time gave notice that Totem's house was to let, and recorded the fact of his demise in straggling letters laid on with Aspinall's enamel. The inscription was terse, and pointed "Totem is dead." But no fresh Totem applied for the lease, and the house is still untenanted.

I often pass the place, seldom without thinking of Totem, and other things.

THE DEATH WARRANT

It seems that I am not going to remain in this vast cold world for very long; that is good news to me. And because you have followed me so far already, because you have looked with me at sadness, because you have faced death with me, and because I have made you all sharers in my sorrows and in my happinesses, it is fitting that I should say good-bye to you, as you will have very few words more from me, and that I should tell you why I have to say good-bye, and with what feelings I do so.

For some weeks past, I have suspected this. I knew that my father, my grand-father and one of my aunts died of the same disease—it has an ugly cruel name, cancer, and we will not dwell on it—and I have thought lately that I was going to follow the same road. Yesterday, I went to see a doctor. I knew very soon by his face that I was right, and I urged him to tell me exactly what my case was. Yes, it was cancer. Was there any hope of saving my life by any operation? No, none; it was in a vital spot. How long had I to live? Perhaps six months, because I am very strong. We will not talk any more about cancer.

And now twenty-four hours have passed, and I have grown used to the thought. I am no longer lonely, for a kindly presence has come to me, whom they call Death. Let me tell you quite shortly what I have thought about in the last twenty-four hours, and that will be all.

May I treat you all quite intimately? May I say things to you that I would say only to those I trusted and loved? Surely, for if you have read these little things which I have told you, these six common things as I have called them, you know me well. In this last half hour perhaps I have gained a friend, or if not that, I have treated you as if you were my friends, and I cannot go back now. But if you have laughed at them, if you have sneered, if you have thought that these stories are foolish, stupid, mock-heroic, you may still read on; but I am not talking to you. I have given you my heart, I could give you no more. If it is worthless, toss it away. Soon I shall not care. But let us walk together a few steps towards the mouth of the valley of the shadow.

So then at last I am face to face with the great mystery, the inconceivable end of life. Believe me it is not so dreadful. I have always looked on death with horror, with a feeling of passionate revolt, but now that is gone. Perhaps when one is going to die, one is in a way fitted for it, and it becomes as natural as life. Once before I was face to face with death, on a frozen peak of the great Zermatt mountains. I had slipped when climbing about alone, and for a few seconds, until I dropped on to an unsuspected ledge above the great ice fall below, I was alone with God and death, and I was not frightened. And now I am not frightened; only a miracle could save my life; humanly speaking I must die; in a year I shall know this earth no longer, I shall be a name, and soon not even that. What do I then look forward to? I hardly know. It is impossible for a living being to contemplate annihilation; it is inconceivable. This one can only realise for oneself; when those we love pass from us, all we know is that they are gone; that to us, as living beings on this earth, they have passed for ever; they are dead.

And if not annihilation, what then? Life surely in some form, and if this is inevitably true for us, it is true for them, for Jack, for—ah God, is that true?

So I do not fear, but I look forward to this change that will soon happen to me, with the intensest longing and wonder. What will it be? I wish I could come back and tell you.

But here am I in the presence of that which I always thought of with loathing, with abhorrence, and let this be some comfort to you, who fear and dread death, who think of it as a horrible cruel annihilation. Believe me when it comes to you, you will feel how impossible that is, and try to realise it now. It is worth while—there is suffering enough for all already.

And in the meantime, what am I going to do? They have told me that two months out of these six at least will be passed in pain which is terrible and wearing—they can relieve that a good deal with morphia and other drugs, but while I am conscious I shall not be myself, I shall not be able to think. I shall be tired and racked with this pain.

So then I have four months before the struggle begins; till then they say, I shall not suffer much. How shall I spend it?

Well, first of all, I shall finish writing this little book. That will not take long now, and then? I think I shall behave quite as usual, for I do not see how I could behave differently. I do not fear death, and it will be useless to think of the two weary months before death comes. Some men, I know, believe that they would put an end to themselves. That I could not do. That death would be horrible, unnatural, and I have an idea that it would be like running away; it is worth while, I think, to be brave.

It is now March. The hint of spring was whispered through the trees yesterday. I noticed that as I came back from the doctor's house. I was dazed, confused then, but I can remember now that I noticed it. The buds on the lime tree were red, and on the ash the black knots had appeared. April and May will come and go; the birds will build again, and the

swallows will wheel and circle round the barn where they make their nests. Everything will go on quite as usual. I want to realise that. June—ah, I am sorry I shall only see June once more; that from the hay-fields the breath of summer will steal up over the lawn no more after that for me. I hope the nightingales will build here again this year. There is a beech-tree not far from the door, where they built last year, and one night, when the moon was up, I went softly out and sat down under the tree, while between me and the infinite sky the bird told his heart to the still air.

And after that comes July, and that last moment, when I shall stand at my window, and say good-bye to the sleeping summer night for ever. That last night, before I pass upstairs to wait for the end, should be fine and windless; summer should be at its full, luxuriant, with promise of infinite summers to come for the delight of man.

I would not have it different. I want to be quiet for these few months, to sit and think, to wonder, to prepare for the great change, which is new to me, for I have never regarded death as coming near me. Yet here he is, an old friend of twenty-four hours' standing, waiting for me, and his face is kind, and in his eyes I see a promise, which he may not tell me yet.

So much life then I have still before me, for those two later months I cannot count as life, and before they come I want to find out why they are coming. It seems unnecessary and cruel. That is the only complaint I have to make.

There is one more thing I have to ask you. When September comes, think of me for a minute or two. Choose some quiet autumn night, when the winds are still, when a harvest moon shines big over the yellow fields, and before that moment comes when summer stops. Stand for a little while looking out into the night, for in the night, thoughts which only hover restlessly round our busy brains during the day, come home to their nests, and, if you can, think this: that there is one who was very tired and very lonely, to whom the beauty of earth and air was a mystery that he could not fathom, but in which sometimes he found peace, and that to him perhaps at this moment there is coming something so strange, so wonderful and so new, that he may even now be learning the meaning of what has puzzled, has wearied him; that perhaps into his dim-lit soul a light has entered which has made things plain, or that at the worst they trouble him no longer. That he is very thankful, and very content, and that he in turn has thought of you, who have shared some of his sorrows with him, and that at the end of the dark valley there is a light shining. And then, thank God for all this.

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[The end of *Six Common Things* by E. F. Benson]