Dowling Richard

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THE ONLY REAL GHOST IN FICTION

My most ingenious friend met me one day, and asked me whether I considered I should be richer if I had the ghost of sixpence or if I had not the ghost of sixpence.

"What side do you take?" I inquired, for I knew his disputatious turn.

"I am ready to take either," he answered; "but I give preference to the ghost."

"What!" I said. "Give preference to the ghost!"

"Yes. You see, if I haven't the ghost of sixpence I have nothing at all; but if I have the ghost of a sixpence – "

"Well?"

"Well, I am the richer by having the ghost of a sixpence."

"And do you think when you add one more delusion to those under which you already labour" – he and I could never agree about the difference between infinity and zero – "that you will be the better off?"

"I have not admitted a ghost is a delusion; and even if I had I

am not prepared to grant that a delusion may not be a source of wealth. Look at the South Sea Bubble."

I was willing, so there and then we fell to and were at the question – or rather, the questions to which it led – for hours, until we finally emerged upon the crystallization of cast-iron, the possibility of a Napoleonic restoration, or some other kindred matter. How we wandered about and writhed in that talk I can no more remember than I can recall the first articulate words that fell into my life. I know we handled ghosts (it was broad day and in a public street) with a freedom and familiarity that must have been painful to spirits of refinement and reserve. I know we said much about dreams, and compared the phantoms of the open lids with the phantoms of the closed eyes, and pitted them one against another like cocks in a main, and I remember that the case of the dreamer in Boswell's Johnson came up between us. The case in Boswell submitted to Johnson as an argument in favour of a man's reason being more acute in sleep than in waking, showed the phantom antagonistic able to floor the dreamer in his proper person. Johnson laughed at such a delusion, for, he pointed out, only the dreamer was besotted with sleep he would have perceived that he himself had furnished the confounding arguments to the shadowy disputant. That is very good, and seems quite conclusive as far as it goes; but is there nothing beyond what Johnson saw? Was there no ghostly prompter in the scene? No *suggeritore* invisible and inaudible to the dreamer, who put words and notes into the mouth of the opponent? No

thinner shade than the spectral being visible in the dream? If in our waking hours we are subject to phantoms which sometimes can be seen and sometimes cannot, why not in our sleeping hours also? Are all ghosts of like grossness, or do some exist so fine as to be beyond our carnal apprehension, and within the ken only of the people of our sleep? If we ponderable mortals are haunted, who can say that our insubstantial midnight visitors may not know wraiths finer and subtler than we, may not be haunted as we are? In physical life parasites have parasites. Why in phantom life should not ghosts have ghosts?

The firm, familiar earth – our earth of this time, the earth upon which we each of us stand at this moment – is thickly peopled with living tangible folk who can eat, and drink, and talk, and sing, and walk, and draw cheques, and perform a number of other useful, and hateful, and amusing actions. In the course of a day a man meets, let us say, forty people, with whom he exchanges speech. If a man is a busy dreamer, with how many people in the course of one night does he exchange speech? Ten, a hundred, a thousand? In the dreaming of one minute by the clock a man may converse with half the children of Adam since the Fall! The command of the greatest general alive would not furnish sentries and vedettes for the army of spirits that might visit one man in the interval between one beat of the pendulum of Big Ben and another!

Shortly after that talk with my friend about the ghost of the sixpence, I was walking alone through one of the narrow lanes in

the tangle of ways between Holborn and Fleet Street, when my eye was caught by the staring white word "Dreams" on a black ground. The word is, so to speak, printed in white on the black cover of a paper-bound book, and under the word "Dreams" are three faces, also printed in white on a black ground. Two of the faces are those of women: one of a young woman, purporting to be beautiful, with a star close to her forehead, and the other of a witch with the long hair and disordered eyes becoming to a person of her occupation. I dare say these two women are capable not only of justification, but of the simplest explanation. For all I know to the contrary, the composition may be taken wholly, or in part, from a well-known picture, or perhaps some canon of ghostly lore would be violated if any other design appeared on the cover. About such matters I know absolutely nothing. The word "Dreams" and the two female faces are now much less prominent than when I saw the book first, for, Goth that I am, long ago I dipped a brush in ink and ran a thin wash over the letters and the two faces; as they were, to use artist's phrases, in front of the third face, and killing it.

The third face is that of a man, a young man clean shaven and handsome, with no ghastliness or look of austerity. His arms are resting on a ledge, and extend from one side of the picture to the other. The left arm lies partly under the right, and the left hand is clenched softly and retired in half shadow. The right arm rises slightly as it crosses the picture, and the right wrist and hand ride on the left. The fore and middle fingers are apart, and point

forward and a little downward, following the sleeve of the other arm. The third finger droops still more downward, and the little finger, with a ring on it, lies directly perpendicular along the cuff of the sleeve beneath. The hand is not well drawn, and yet there is some weird suggestiveness in the purposeless dispersion of the fingers.

Fortunately upon my coming across the book, the original cost of which was one shilling, I had more than the ghost of a sixpence, and for two-thirds of that sum the book became mine. It is the only art purchase I ever made on the spur of the moment; I knew nothing of the book then, and know little of it now. It says it is the cut-down edition of a much larger work, and what I have read of it is foolish. The worst of the book is that it does not afford subject for a laugh. Thomas Carlyle is reported to have said in conversation respecting one of George Eliot's latest stories that "it was not amusing, and it was not instructive; it was only dull – dull." This book of dreams is only dull. However, there are some points in it that may be referred to, as this is an idle time.

"To dream you see an angel or angels is very good, and to dream that you yourself are one is much better." The noteworthy thing in connection with this passage being that nothing is said of the complexion of the angel or angels! Black or white it is all the same. You have only to dream of them and be happy. "To dream that you play upon bagpipes, signifies trouble, contention, and being overthrown at law." Doubtless from the certainty, in civilised parts, of being prosecuted by your neighbours as a

public nuisance. I would give a trifle to know a man who did dream that he played upon the bagpipes. Of course, it is quite possible he might be an amiable man in other ways.

"To dream you have a beard long, thick, and unhandsome is of a good signification to an orator, or an ambassador, lawyer, philosopher or any who desires to speak well or to learn arts and sciences." That "ambassador" gleams like a jewel among the other homely folk. I remember once seeing a newspaper contents-bill after a dreadful accident with the words "Death of fifty-seven people and a peer." "To dream that you have a brow of brass, copper, marble, or iron signifies irreconcilable hatred against your enemies." The man capable of such a dream I should like to see – but through bars of metal made from his own sleep-zoned forehead. "If any one dreams that he hath encountered a cat or killed one, he will commit a thief to prison and prosecute him to the death; for the cat signifies a common thief." Mercy on us! Does the magistrate who commits usually prosecute, and is thieving a hanging matter now? This is necromancy or nothing; prophecy, inspiration, or something out of the common indeed.

"To dream one plays or sees another play on a clavicord, shows the death of relations, or funeral obsequies." I now say with feelings of the most profound gratitude that I never to my knowledge even saw a clavicord. I do not know what the beastly, ill-omened contrivance is like. The most recondite musical instrument I ever remember to have performed on is the Jew's harp; and although there seems to be something weak, uncandid

and treacherous in the spelling of "clavicord," I presume the two are not identical. In any case I am safe, for I have never dreamed of playing even on the Jew's harp. Here however is a cheerful promise from a painful experience – one wants something encouraging after that terrifying "clavicord." "For a man to dream that his flesh is full of corns, shows that a man will grow rich proportionately to his corns." I can breathe freely once more, having got away from outlandish musical instruments and within the influence of the familiar horn.

As might be expected, it is not useful to dream about the devil. Let sleeping dogs lie. "To dream of eating human flesh" is also a bad way of spending the hours of darkness. It is lucky to dream you are a fool. You see, even in sleep, the virtue of candour brings reward. "To dream that you lose your keys signifies anger." And very naturally too. "To dream you kill your father is a bad sign." I had made up my mind not to go beyond the parricide, but I am lured on to quote this, "To dream of eating mallows, signifies exemption from trouble and dispatch of business, because this herb renders the body soluble." I will not say that Nebuchadnezzar may not at one time have eaten mallows among other unusual herbs, but I never did. That however is not where the wonder creeps in. It is at the reason. If you eat mallows you will have no trouble *because* this herb renders the body *soluble*. Why is it good to render the body soluble, and what is the body soluble in? One more and I am done. "To dream one plays, or sees another play, upon the virginals, signifies the death

of relations, or funeral obsequies." From bagpipes, clavicords, and virginals, we hope we may be protected. And yet if these are the only instruments banned, a person having an extensive acquaintance with wind and string instruments of the orchestra may be musical in slumber without harm to himself or threat to his friends.

In the interpretation of dreams Artemidorus was the most learned man that ever lived. He gave the best part of his life to collecting matter about dreams, and this he afterwards put together in five books. He might better have spent his time in bottling shadows of the moon.

It was however for the face of the man on the cover that I bought and have kept the book. The face is that of a man between thirty and thirty-five years of age. It is regular and handsome. The forehead leans slightly forward, and the lower part of the face is therefore a little foreshortened. It is looking straight out of the picture; the shadows fall on the left of the face, on the right as it fronts you. The nose is as long and broad-backed as the nose of the Antinous. The mouth is large and firm and well-shaping with lips neither thick nor thin. The interval between the nostrils and verge of the upper lip is short. The chin is gently pointed and prominent. The outline of the jaws square. The modelling of the left cheek is defectively emphasised at the line from above the hollow of the nostrils downward and backward. The brows are straight, the left one being slightly more arched than the right. The forehead is low, broad, compact, hard, with clear lines. The

lower line of the temples projects beyond the perpendicular. The hair is thick and wavy and divided at the left side, depressed rather than divided, for the parting is visible no further up the head than a splay letter V.

The eyes are wide open, and notwithstanding the obtuse angle made by the facial line in the forward pose of the head, they are looking out level with their own height upon the horizon. There is no curiosity or speculation in the eyes. There is no wonder or doubt; no fear or joy. The gaze is heavy. There is a faint smile, the faintest smile the human face is capable of displaying, about the mouth. There is no light in the eyes. The expression of the whole face is infinitely removed from sinister. In it there is kindliness with a touch of wisdom and pity. It asks no question; desires to say no word. It is the face of one who beyond all doubt knows things we do not know, things which can scarcely be shaped into words, things we are in ignorance of. It is not the face of a charlatan, a seer, or a prophet.

It is the face of a man once ardent and hopeful, to whom everything that is to be known has lately been revealed, and who has come away from the revelation with feelings of unassuageable regret and sorrow for Man. It says with terrible calmness, "I have seen all, and there is nothing in it. For your own sakes let me be mute. Live you your lives. *Miserere nobis!*"

My belief is that the extraordinary expression of that face is an accident, a happy chance, a result that the artist never foresaw. Who drew the cover I cannot tell. No initials appear on it and I

have never made inquiries. Remember that in pictures and poems (I know nothing of music), what is a miracle to you, has in most cases been a miracle to the painter or poet also. Any poet can explain how he makes a poem, but no poet can explain how he makes poetry. He is simply writing a poem and the poetry glides or rushes in. When it comes he is as much astonished by it as you are. The poem may cost him infinite trouble, the poetry he gets as a free gift. He begins a poem to prepare himself for the reception of poetry or to induce its flow. His poem is only a lightning-rod to attract a fluid over which he has no control before it comes to him. There may be a poetic art, such as verse-making, but to talk about the art of poetry is to talk nonsense. It is men of genteel intellects who speak of the art of poetry. The man who wrote the *Art of Poetry* knew better than to credit the possible existence of any such art. He himself says the poet is born, not made.

I am very bad at dates, but I think Le Fanu wrote *Green Tea* before a whole community of Canadian nuns were thrown into the most horrible state of nervous misery by excessive indulgence in that drug. Of all the horrible tales that are not revolting, *Green Tea* is I think the most horrible. The bare statement that an estimable and pious man is haunted by the ghost of a monkey is at the first blush funny. But if you have not read the story read it, and see how little of fun is in it. The horror of the tale lies in the fact that this apparition of a monkey is the only *probable* ghost in fiction. I have not the book by me as I write, and I cannot recall the victim's name, but he is a clergyman, and, as far as we

know to the contrary, a saint. There is no reason *on earth* why he should be pursued by this malignant spectre. He has committed no crime, no sin even. He labours with all the sincerity of a holy man to regain his health and exorcise his foe. He is as crimeless as you or I and infinitely more faultless. He has not deserved his fate, yet he is driven in the end to cut his throat, and you excuse *that* crime by saying he is mad.

I do not think any additional force is gained in the course of this unique story by the importation of malignant irreverence to Christianity in the latter manifestations of the ape. I think the apparition is at its best and most terrible when it is simply an indifferent pagan, before it assumes the *rôle* of antichrist. This ape is at his best as a mind-destroyer when the clergyman, going down the avenue in the twilight, raised his eyes and finds the awful presence preceding him along the top of the wall. There the clergyman reaches the acme of piteous, unsupportable horror. In the pulpit with the brute, the priest is fighting against the devil. In the avenue he has not the strengthening or consoling reflection that he is defending a cause, struggling against hell. The instant motive enters into the story the situation ceases to be dramatic and becomes merely theatrical. Every "converted" tinker will tell you stirring stories of his wrestling with Satan, forgetting that it takes two to fight, and what a loathsome creature he himself is. But the conflict between a good man and the unnecessary apparition of this ape is pathetic, horribly pathetic, and full of the dramatic despair of the finest tragedy.

It is desirable at this point to focus some scattered words that have been set down above. The reason this apparition of the ape appears probable is *because* it is unnecessary. Any one can understand why Macbeth should see that awful vision at the banquet. The apparition of the murdered dead is little more than was to be expected, and can be explained in an easy fashion. You or I never committed murder, therefore we are not liable to be troubled by the ghost of Banquo. In your life or mine Nemesis is not likely to take heroic dimensions. The spectres of books, as a rule, only excite our imaginative fears, not our personal terrors. The spectres of books have and can have nothing to do with us any more than the sufferings of the Israelites in the desert. When a person of our acquaintance dies, we inquire the particulars of his disease, and then discover the predisposing causes, so that we may prove to ourselves we are not in the same category with him. We do not deny our liability to contract the disease, we deny our likelihood to supply the predisposing causes. He died of aneurysm of the aorta: Ah, we say, induced by the violent exercise he took – we never take violent exercise. If not of aneurysm of the aorta, but fatty degeneration of the heart: Ah, induced by the sedentary habits of his latter years – we take care to secure plenty of exercise. If a man has been careful of his health and dies, we allege that he took all the robustness out of his constitution by over-heedfulness; if he has been careless, we say he took no precautions at all; and from either of these extremes we are exempt, and therefore we shall live for ever.

Now here in this story of *Green Tea* is a ghost which is possible, probable, almost familiar. It is a ghost without genesis or justification. The gods have nothing to do with it. Something, an accident due partly to excessive tea-drinking, has happened to the clergyman's nerves, and the ghost of this ape glides into his life and sits down and abides with him. There is no reason why the ghost should be an ape. When the victim sees the apparition first he does not know it to be an ape. He is coming home in an omnibus one night and descries two gleaming spots of fire in the dark, and from that moment the life of the poor gentleman becomes a ruin. It is a thing that may happen to you or me any day, any hour. That is why Le Fanu's ghost is so horrible. You and I might drink green tea to the end of our days and suffer from nothing more than ordinary impaired digestion. But you or I may get a fall, or a sunstroke, and ever afterwards have some hideous familiar. To say there can be no such things as ghosts is a paltry blasphemy. It is a theory of the smug, comfortable kind. A ghost need not wear a white sheet and have intelligible designs on personal property. A ghost need not be the spirit of a dead person. A ghost need have no moral mission whatever.

I once met a haunted man, a man who had seen a real ghost; a ghost that had, as the ape, no ascertainable moral mission but to drive his victim mad. In this case too the victim was a clergyman. He is, I believe, alive and well now. He has shaken off the incubus and walks a free man. I was travelling at the time, and accidentally got into chat with him on the deck of a steamboat

by night. We were quite alone in the darkness and far from land when he told me his extraordinary story. I do not of course intend retailing it here. I look on it as a private communication. I asked him what brought him to the mental plight in which he had found himself, and he answered briefly, "Overwork." He was then convalescent, and had been assured by his physicians that with care the ghost which had been laid would appear no more. The spectre he saw threatened physical harm, and while he was haunted by it he went in constant dread of death by violence. It had nothing good or bad to do with his ordinary life or his sacred calling. It had no foundation on fact, no basis on justice. He had been for months pursued by the figure of a man threatening to take away his life. He did not believe this man had any corporeal existence. He did not know whether the creature had the power to kill him or not. The figure was there in the attitude of menace and would not be banished. He knew that no one but himself could see the murderous being. That ghost was there for him, and there for him alone.

Respecting the Canadian nuns whose convent was beleaguered and infested by ghostly enemies that came not by ones or twos but in battalions, I had a fancy at the time. I do not intend using the terminologies or theories of the dissecting room, or the language of physiology found in books. I am not sure the fancy is wholly my own, but some of it is original. I shall suppose that the nerves are not only capable of various conditions of health and disease, but of large structural alteration

in life; structural alteration not yet recorded or observed in fact; structural alteration which, if you will, exists in life but disappears instantly at death. In fine, I mean rather to illustrate my fancy than to describe anything that exists or could exist. Before letting go the last strand of sense, let me say that talking of nerves being highly strung is sheer nonsense, and not good nonsense either. The muscles it is that are highly strung. The poor nerves are merely insulated wires from the battery in the head. Their tension is no more affected by the messages that go over them, than an Atlantic cable is tightened or loosened by the signals indicating fluctuations in the Stock Exchanges of London and New York.

The nerves, let us suppose, in their normal condition of health have three skins over the absolute sentient tissue. In the ideal man in perfect health, let us say Hodge, the man whose privilege it is to "draw nutrition, propagate, and rot," the three skins are always at their thickest and toughest. Now genius is a disease, and it falls, as ladies of Mrs. Gamp's degree say, "on the nerves." That is, the first of these skins having been worn away or never supplied by nature, the patient "sees visions and dreams dreams." The man of genius is not exactly under delusions. He does not think he is in China because he is writing of Canton in London, but his optic nerve, wanting the outer coating, can build up images out of statistics until the images are as full of line and colour and as incapable of change at will as the image of a barrel of cider which occupies Hodge's retina when it is imminent to his

desires, present to his touch. The sensibility of the nerves of genius is greater than the sensibility of the nerves of Hodge. Not all the eloquence of an unabridged dictionary could create an image in Hodge's mind of a thing he had never seen. From a brief description a painter of genius could make a picture – not a likeness of course – of Canton, although he had never been outside the four corners of these kingdoms. The painting would not, in all likelihood, be in the least like Canton, but it would be very like the image formed in the painter's mind of that city. In the painter such an image comes and goes at will. He can either see it or not see it as he pleases. It is the result of the brain reacting on the nerve. It relies on data and combination. It is his slave, not his master. Before it can be formed there must be great increase of sensibility. Hodge is crude silver, the painter is the polished mirror. The painter can see things which are not, things which he himself makes in his mind. His invention is at least as vivid as his memory.

I suppose then that the man of genius, the painter or poet, is one who, having lost the first skin, or portion of the first skin of his nerves, can create and see in his mind's eye things never seen by the eye of any other man, and see them as vividly as men of no genius can see objects of memory.

Now peel off the second skin. The more exquisitely sensitive or the innermost skin of the nerve is exposed. Things which the eye of genius could not invent or even dream of are revealed. A drop of putrid water under the microscope becomes a lake

full of terrifying monsters large enough to destroy man. Heard through the microphone the sap ascending a tree becomes loud as a torrent. Seen through a telescope nebulous spots in the sky become clusters of constellations. Divested of its second skin the nerve becomes sensitive to influences too rare and fine for the perception of the optic nerve in a more protected state. Beings that bear no relation whatever to weight or the law of impenetrability, float about and flash hither and thither swifter than lightning. The air and other ponderable matter are nothing to them. They are no more than the shadows or reflections of action, the imperishable progeny of thought. Here lies disclosed to the partly emancipated nerve the Canton of the painter's vision. Here the city he made to himself is as firm and sturdy and solid and full of life as the Canton of this day on the southern coast of China. Here throng the unrecorded visions of all the poets. Here are the counterfeits of all the dead in all their phases. Here float the dreams of men, the unbroken scrolls of life and action and thought complete of all beings, man and beast, that have lived since time began. In the world of matter nothing is lost; in the world of spirit nothing is lost either.

If instead of taking the whole of this imaginary skin off the optic nerve, we simply injure it ever so slightly, the nerve may become alive to some of these spirits; and this premature perception of what is around all of us, but perceived by few, we call seeing ghosts. It may be objected that all space is not vast enough to afford room for such a stupendous panorama.

When we begin to talk of limits of space to anything beyond our knowledge and the touch of our inch-tape, we talk like fools. There is no good in allotting space with a two-foot rule. It is all the same whether we divide zero into infinity or infinity into zero. The answer is the same; "I don't know how many times it goes." Take a cubic inch of air outside your window and see the things packed into it. Here interblent we find all together resistance and light and sound and odour and flavour. We must stop there, for we have got to the end, not of what *is* packed into that cubic inch of air, but to the end of the things in it revealed to our senses. If we had five more senses we should find five more qualities; if we had five thousand senses, five thousand qualities. But even if we had only our own senses in higher form we should see ghosts.

If the third skin were removed from the optic nerve all things we now call opaque would become transparent, owing to the naked nerve being sensitive to the latent light in every body. The whole round world would become a crystal ball, the different degrees of what we now call opacity being indicated merely by a faint chromatic modification. What we now regard as brilliant sunlight would then be dense shadow. Apocalyptic ranges of colour would be disclosed, beginning with what is in our present condition the least faint trace of tint and ascending through a thousand grades to white, white brighter far than the sun our present eyes blink upon. Burnished brass flaming in our present sun would then be the beginning of the chromatic scale

descending in the shadow of yellow, burnished copper of red, burnished tin of black, burnished steel of blue. So intense then would the sensibility of the optic nerve become that the satellites attendant on the planets in the system of the suns, called fixed stars, would blaze brighter than our own moon reflected in the sea. To the eye matter would cease to be matter in its present, gross obstructive sense. It would be no more than a delicate transparent pigment in the wash of a water-colour artist. The gross rotundity of the earth would be, in the field of the human eye, a variegated transparent globe of reduced luminousness and enormous scales and chords of colour. The Milky Way would then be a concave measureless ocean of prismatic light with pendulous opaline spheres.

The figures of dreams and ghosts may be as real as we are pleased to consider ourselves. What arrogance of us to say they are our own creation! They may look upon themselves as superior to us, as we look upon ourselves as superior to the jelly-fish. No doubt we are to ghosts the baser order, the spirits stained with the woad of earth, low creatures who give much heed to heat and cold, and food and motion. They are the sky-children, the chosen people. They are nothing but circumscribed will wedded to incorporeal reasons of the nobler kind, and with scopes the contemplation of which would split our tenement of clay. They are the arch-angelic hierarchs of man, the ultimate condition of the race, the spirit of this planet distilled by the sun.

THE BEST TWO BOOKS

In no list I met of the best hundred books, when that craze took the place of spelling-bees and the fifteen puzzle, do I recollect seeing mention made of my two favourite works. These two books stand completely apart in my esteem, and if I were asked to name the volume that comes third, I should have to make a speech of explanation. The first of them is not in prose or verse, it is not a work of theology or philosophy or science or art or history or fiction or general literature. It is at once the most comprehensive and impartial book I know. This paragraph is assuming the aspect of a riddle. Being in a mild and passionless way a lover of my species, I am a loather of riddles. So I will go no further on the downward way, but declare the name, title, and style of my book to be Nuttall's *Standard Dictionary*.

I am well aware there is a great deal to be said against Nuttall's *Dictionary* as a dictionary, but I am not speaking of it in that sense. I am treating it as a dear companion, a true friend, a *vade mecum*. Let those who have a liking for discovering spots in the sun glare at the orb until they have a taste for nothing else but spots in the sun. I find Nuttall so close to my affections that I can perceive no defects in him. I cannot bear to hold him at arm's length, for critical examination. I hug him close to me, and feel that while I have him I am almost independent of all other books printed in the English language.

Cast your eyes along your own bookshelves of English authors; every word, liberally speaking, that is in each and every volume on your shelves is in my Nuttall! Here is the juice of the language, from Shakespeare to Huxley, in a concentrated solution. Here is a book that starts by telling you that A is a vowel, and does not desert you until it informs you that zythum is a beverage, a liquor made from malt and wheat; a fact, I will wager, you never dreamed of before! And between A and zythum, what a boundless store of learning is disclosed! This is the only single-volume book I know of which no man living is or ever can be the master. Charles Lamb would not allow that dictionaries are books at all. In his days they were white-livered charlatans compared with the full-blooded enthusiast, Nuttall.

If such an unkind thing were desirable as to diminish the conceit of a man of average reading and intelligence, there is no book could be used with such paralysing effect upon him as this one. It is almost impossible for any student to realise the infinite capacity for ignorance with which man is gifted until he is brought face to face with such a book as Nuttall. The list of words whose meanings are given occupies 771 very closely printed pages of small type in double column. The letter A takes up from 1 to 52. How many words unfamiliar to the ordinary man are to be found in this fifteenth part of the dictionary! On the top of every folio there occur four words, one at the head of each column. Barring the right of the candidates in ignorance to guess from the roots how many well-informed people know

or would use any of the following words – absciss, acidimeter, acroteleutic, adminicular, adminiculator, adustion, aerie, agrestic, allignment, allision, ambreine, ampulla, ampullaceous, android, antiphonary, antiphony, apanthropy, aponeurosis, appellor, aramaic, aretology, armilla, armillary, asiarch, assentation, asymptote, asymptotical, aurate, averruncator, aversant, axotomous, or axunge? And yet all these are at the heads of columns under A alone! Take, now, one column haphazard perpendicularly, and with the same reservation as before, who would use antimaniac, antimask, antimasonic, antimeter, antimonite, antinephritic, antinomian, antinomy, antipathous, antipedobaptist, antiperistaltic, antiperistasis, or antiphlogistic? The letter A taken along the top of the pages or down one column is not a good letter for the confusion of the conceited; because viewed across the top of the page it is pitifully the prey of prefixes which lead to large families of words, and viewed down the column (honestly selected at haphazard), it is the bondslave of one prefix. When, however, one starts a theory, it is not fair to pick and choose. I have, of course, eschewed derivatives in coming down the column; across the column I did not do so, as the chance of a prime word being at the bottom of one column and its derivate at the top of the next ought to count two in my favour. I am aware this claim may be disputed; I have disputed it with myself at much too great length to record here, and I have decided in my own favour.

Of course the mere reading of the dictionary in a mechanical

way would produce no more effect than the repetition of numerals abstracted from things. There is no greater suggestiveness in saying a million than in saying one. But what an enlargement of the human capacity takes place when a person passes from the idea of one man to the idea of a million men. Take the first word quoted from the head of the column. I had wholly forgotten the meaning of absciss. I cannot even now remember that I ever knew the meaning of it, though of course I must, for I was supposed to have learned conic sections once. Why any one should be expected to learn conic sections I cannot guess. As far as I can now recall, they are the study of certain possible systems and schemes of lines in a wholly unnecessary figure. I believe the cone was invented by some one who had conic sections up his sleeve, and devised the miserable spinning of the triangle merely to gratify his lust of cruelty to the young. The only one use to which cones are put, as far as I am aware, is for a weather signal on the sea coast. The only section of a cone put to any pleasant use is a frustum when it appears in the bark of the cork tree; and even this conic section is not of much use to pleasure until it is removed from the bottle. Conic sections are reprehensible in another way. They are, in the matter of difficulty, nothing better than impostors. They are really "childlike and bland," and will, when you have conquered your schoolboy terror of them, be found agreeable after-dinner reading.

But I must return to Nuttall. The systematic study of the book

is to be deplored. It is, like the Essays of Elia, not to be read through at a sitting, but to be dipped into curiously when one is in the vein. The charm of Lamb is in the flavour; and one cannot reach the more remote and finer joys of taste if one eats quickly. There is no cohesion, and but little thought in Nuttall. It is as a spur, an incentive, to thought I worship the book, and as a storehouse for elemental lore. You have known a thing all your life, let us say, and have called it by a makeshift name. You feel in your heart and soul there must be a more close-fitting appellation than you employ for it, and you endure a sense of feebleness and dispersion of mind. One day you are idly glancing through your Nuttall, and suddenly the clouds, the nebulous mists of a generalized term, roll away, and out shines, clear and sharply defined, the particular definition of the thing. From childhood I have, for example, known a pile-driver, and called it a pile-driver for years and years. All along something told me pile-driver was no better than a loose and off-hand way of describing the machine. It partook of the barbarous nature of a hieroglyphic. You drew, as it were, the figure of a post, and of a weight descending upon it. The device was much too pictorial and crude. Moreover, it was, so described, a thing without a history. To call a pile-driver a pile-driver is no more than to describe a barn-door cock onomatopoetically as cock-a-doodle-doo – a thing repellent to a pensive mind. But in looking over Nuttall I accidentally alighted on this: "Fistuca, fis' – tu-ka, *s.* A machine which is raised to a given height by pulleys, and then allowed suddenly to

fall on the head of a pile; a monkey (L. a rammer)." Henceforth there is, in my mind, no need of a picture for the machine. So to speak, the abstract has become concrete. I would not, of course, dream of using the word fistuca, but it is a great source of internal consolation to me. Besides, I attain with it to other eminences of curiosity, which show me fields of inquiry I never dreamed of before.

I have not met the word monkey in this sense until now. I look out monkey in my book, and find one of the meanings "a pile-driver," and that the word is derived from the Italian "*monna*, contraction for *madonna*." Up to this moment I did not know from what monkey was derived, although I had heard that from monkey man was derived. All this sets one off into a delicious doze of thought and keeps one carefully apart from his work. For "who would fardels bear to groan and sweat under a weary" load of even pens, when he might lie back and close his eyes, and drift off to the Rome of Augustus or the Venice of to-day? Philology as mere philology is colourless, but if one uses the records of verbal changes as glasses to the past and present, what panchromatic hues sweep into the pale field of the dictionary! What myriads of dead men stand up out of their graves, and move once more through scenes of their former activities! What reimpositions of old times on old earth take place! What bravery of arms and beauty of women are renewed; what glowing argosies, long mouldered, sparkle once more in the sun! What brazen trumpets blare of conquest, and dust of battle

roll along the plain! What plenitude of life, of movement, of man is revealed! A dictionary is to me the key-note in the orchestra where mankind sit tuning their reeds for the overture to the final cataclysm of the world.

My second book would be Whitaker's *Almanack*. Owing to miserable ill-luck I have not been able to get a copy of the almanac for this year. I offered fair round coin of the realm for it before the Jubilee plague of ugliness fell upon the broad pieces of her most gracious Majesty. But, alas! no copy was to be had. I was too late in the race. All the issue had been sold. The last edition of which I have a copy is that for 1886. I have one for each year of the ten preceding, and I cannot tell how crippled and humiliated I feel in being without one for 1887.

This is another of the books that Charles Lamb classes among the no-books. As in the case of Nuttall, there was no Whitaker in his day, and certainly no almanac at all as good. At first glance this book may seem dry and sapless as the elm ready sawn for conversion into parish coffins. But how can anything be considered dry or dead when two hundred thousand of its own brothers are at this moment dwelling in useful amity among our fellowmen? It in one way contrasts unfavourably with almanacs which can claim a longer life, there are no vaticinations in it. But if the gift of prophecy were possessed by other almanacs, why did they not foretell that they would be in the end known as humbugs, and cut their conceited throats? I freely own I am a bigot in this matter; I have never given any other almanac a

fair chance, and, what is worse, I have firmly made up my mind not to give any other one any chance at all. What is the good of being loyal to one's friends if one's loyalty is at the beck of every upstart acquaintance, no matter how great his merits or how long his purse? I place my faith in Whitaker, and am ready to go to the stake (provided it is understood that nothing unpleasant takes place there) chaunting my belief and glorying in my doom.

If you took away Whitaker's *Almanack* from me I do not know how I should get on. It is a book for diurnal use and permanent reference. One edition of it ought to be printed on bank note paper for the pocket, and another on bronze for friezes for the temple of history. It is worth all the Livys and Tacituses that ever breathed and lied. It is more truthful than the sun, for that luminary is always eight minutes in advance of where it seems to be. It is as impartial and veracious as fossilising mud. It contains infinitely more figures than Madame Tussaud's, and teaches of everything above and under the sun, from stellar influences to sewage.

How is the daily paper to be understood lacking the aid of Whitaker? Who is the honourable member for Berborough, of whom the Chanceller of the Exchequer spoke in such sarcastic terms last night? For what place sits Mr. Snivel, who made that most edifying speech yesterday? How old is the Earl of Champagne, who has been appointed Governor of Labuan? Where is Labuan? What is the value in English money of £T97,000, and 2,784,000 roubles? What are the chances of a

man of forty (yourself) living to be a hundred? and what is the chance of a woman of sixty-four (your mother-in-law) dying next year? How much may one deduct from one's income with a view to income tax before one needs begin to lie? What annuity ought a man of your age be able to get for the five thousand pounds you expect on the death of your mother-in-law? How much will you have to pay to the state if you article your son to a solicitor or give him a little capital and start him in an honest business as a pawnbroker? How old is the judge that charged dead against the prisoner whom the jury acquitted without leaving the box? What railway company spends the most money in coal? legal charges? palm oil? Is there anything now worth a gentleman's while to smuggle on his return from the Continent? What is the tonnage of the ironclad rammed yesterday morning by another ironclad of the Channel squadron? When may one begin to eat oysters? What was the most remarkable event last year? How much longer is it likely to pay to breed farmers in England?

These are only a few, very few, of the queries Whitaker will answer cheerfully for you. Indeed, you can scarcely frame any questions to which it will not make a reply of some kind or other. It contains, moreover, either direct or indirect reference to every man in the United Kingdoms of Great Britain and Ireland. If you occupy a prominent official position in any walk in life, you will find yourself herein mentioned by name. If you are a simple and prudent trader, you will have your name and your goods described elaborately among the advertisements. If you

come under neither of these heads you are sure to be included, not distinguished perhaps personally, under the statistics of the Insane or Criminal classes.

All the information on the points indicated may be said to lie within the parochial domain of the book. But it has a larger, a universal scope, and takes into view all the civilized and half civilized nations of all the earth. It contains multitudinous facts and figures about Abyssinia, Afghanistan, Annam, Argentine Republic, Austro-Hungary, Baluchistan, Belgium, Bokhara, Bolivia, Borneo, Brazil, Bulgaria, Eastern Roumelia, Burmah, Corea, Central America, Chili, China, Cochin China, Colombia, Congo State, Denmark, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Egypt, France, Germany, Greece, Hawaiian Islands, Hayti, Italy, Japan, Liberia, Madagascar, Mexico, Montenegro, Morocco, Nepal, Netherlands, Oman, Orange Free State, Paraguay, Persia, Peru, Portugal, Roumania, Russia, Sarawak, Servia, Siam, Sokoto, Spain, Sweden and Norway, Switzerland, Tibet, Transvaal, Tripoli, Tunis, Turkey, United States, Uruguay, Venezuela, and Zanzibar!

The list takes away one's breath. The mere recital of it leaves one faint and exhausted. Passing the most elementary knowledge of these nations and countries through the mind is like looking at a varying rainbow while the ears are solicited by a thousand tunes. The names, the mere names, of Mexico and Brazil stop my heart with amazement. The Aztecs and the Amazon call up such visions of man in decay and nature in naked strength that I pause

like one in a gorgeous wood held in fear by its unfamiliarity. What has the Amazon done in the ages of its unlettered history? What did the Aztecs know before they began to revert to birds? Then Morocco and Tripoli, what memories and mysteries of man! And Sokoto – of which little is known but the name; and that man was here before England was dissevered from the mainland of Europe. Turkey, as it even now lies crippled and shorn, embraces within its stupendous arms the tombs of the greatest empire of antiquity. Only to think of China is to grow old beyond the reach of chroniclers. Compared with China, Turkey, India, and Russia, even Greece and Rome are mushroom states, and Germany and France virgin soil.

But when I am in no humour for contemplation and alarms of eld I take up my Whitaker for 1886, and open it at page 285. There begins the most incredible romance ever written by man, and what increases its incredibility is that it happens to be all true.

At page 285 opens an account of the British Empire. The first article is on India, and as one reads, taking in history and statistics with alternate breaths, the heart grows afraid to beat in the breast lest its motion and sound might dispel the enchantment and bring this "miracle of rare device" down about one's head. The opening statement forbids further progress for a time. When one hears that "the British Empire in India extends over a territory as large as the continent of Europe without Russia," it is necessary to pause and let the capacity of the mind enlarge in order to take in this stupendous fact with its stupendous significances.

Here are 254 millions of people living under the flag of Britain! Here is a vast country of the East whose history goes back for a thousand years from this era, which knew Alexander the Great and was the scene of Tamerlane's exploits, subject to the little island on the western verge of modern Europe. Here, paraded in the directest and most prosaic fashion, are facts and figures that swell out the fancy almost intolerably. Here is one feudatory state, one dependent province, almost as populous as the whole empire over which Don Pedro II. reigns in South America. Here is a public revenue of eighty millions sterling a year, and Calcutta, including suburbs, with a population close upon a million. Here are no fewer than fifty-three towns and cities of more than fifty thousand people each. Here is a gross number of seven hundred and fourteen thousand towns and villages! Is not this one item incredible? Just three quarters of a million, not of people or even houses, but of "towns and villages!" The population of Madras alone is five-sixths of that of the United Kingdom, that of the North-West Provinces and Oudh considerably more, and that of Bengal nearly twice as much as England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales together. The Native States have many more inhabitants than any country in Europe, except Russia. Bombay equals Spain. The Punjaub exceeds Turkey in Asia. Assam exceeds Turkey in Europe. The Central Provinces about equal Belgium and Holland together; British Burmah, Switzerland. Berar exceeds Denmark, and all taken together contain more than the combined populations

of the United States of America, Austria, Germany, France, Turkey, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Holland, and Belgium! All ours absolutely, or in the feudatory leash; with more Mohammedans than are to be found in the Sultan's dominions, and a larger revenue than is enjoyed by any country on earth except England, France, United States of America, Austria, and Russia!

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.