

GALSWORTHY

JOHN

THE COMPLETE ESSAYS
OF JOHN GALSWORTHY

John Galsworthy

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of John Galsworthy**

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John Galsworthy
The Complete Essays of John Galsworthy

“Je vous dirai que l’excès est toujours un mal.”
– ANATOLE FRANCE

CONCERNING LIFE, Part 1

THE INN OF TRANQUILLITY

Under a burning blue sky, among the pine-trees and junipers, the cypresses and olives of that Odyssean coast, we came one afternoon on a pink house bearing the legend: “Osteria di Tranquillita,”; and, partly because of the name, and partly because we did not expect to find a house at all in those goat-haunted groves above the waves, we tarried for contemplation. To the familiar simplicity of that Italian building there were not lacking signs of a certain spiritual change, for out of the olive-grove which grew to its very doors a skittle-alley had been formed, and two baby cypress-trees were cut into the effigies of a cock and hen. The song of a gramophone, too, was breaking forth into the air, as it were the presiding voice of a high and cosmopolitan mind. And, lost in admiration, we became conscious of the odour of a full-flavoured cigar. Yes – in the skittle-alley a gentleman was standing who wore a bowler hat, a bright brown suit, pink tie, and very yellow boots. His head was round, his cheeks fat and well-coloured, his lips red and full under a black moustache, and he was regarding us through very thick and half-closed eyelids.

Perceiving him to be the proprietor of the high and cosmopolitan mind, we accosted him.

“Good-day!” he replied: “I spik English. Been in Amurrica yes.”

“You have a lovely place here.”

Sweeping a glance over the skittle-alley, he sent forth a long puff of smoke; then, turning to my companion (of the politer sex) with the air of one who has made himself perfect master of a foreign tongue, he smiled, and spoke.

“Too-quiet!”

“Precisely; the name of your inn, perhaps, suggests – ”

“I change all that – soon I call it Anglo-American hotel.”

“Ah! yes; you are very up-to-date already.”

He closed one eye and smiled.

Having passed a few more compliments, we saluted and walked on; and, coming presently to the edge of the cliff, lay down on the thyme and the crumbled leaf-dust. All the small singing birds had long been shot and eaten; there came to us no sound but that of the waves swimming in on a gentle south wind. The wanton creatures seemed stretching out white arms to the land, flying desperately from a sea of such stupendous serenity; and over their bare shoulders their hair floated back, pale in the sunshine. If the air was void of sound, it was full of scent – that delicious and enlivening perfume of mingled gum, and herbs, and sweet wood being burned somewhere a long way off; and a silky, golden warmth slanted on to us through the olives and umbrella pines. Large wine-red violets were growing near. On such a cliff might Theocritus have lain, spinning his songs; on that divine sea Odysseus should have passed. And we felt that presently the goat-god must put his head forth from behind a rock.

It seemed a little queer that our friend in the bowler hat should move and breathe within one short flight of a cuckoo from this home of Pan. One could not but at first feelingly remember the old Boer saying: “O God, what things man sees when he goes out without a gun!” But soon the infinite incongruity of this juxtaposition began to produce within one a curious eagerness, a sort of half-philosophical delight. It began to seem too good, almost too romantic, to be true. To think of the gramophone wedded to the thin sweet singing of the olive leaves in the evening wind; to remember the scent of his rank cigar marrying with this wild incense; to read that enchanted name, “Inn of Tranquillity,” and hear the bland and affable remark of the gentleman who owned it – such were, indeed, phenomena to stimulate souls to speculation. And all unconsciously one began to justify them

by thoughts of the other incongruities of existence – the strange, the passionate incongruities of youth and age, wealth and poverty, life and death; the wonderful odd bedfellows of this world; all those lurid contrasts which haunt a man's spirit till sometimes he is ready to cry out: "Rather than live where such things can be, let me die!"

Like a wild bird tracking through the air, one's meditation wandered on, following that trail of thought, till the chance encounter became spiritually luminous. That Italian gentleman of the world, with his bowler hat, his skittle-alley, his gramophone, who had planted himself down in this temple of wild harmony, was he not Progress itself – the blind figure with the stomach full of new meats and the brain of raw notions? Was he not the very embodiment of the wonderful child, Civilisation, so possessed by a new toy each day that she has no time to master its use – naive creature lost amid her own discoveries! Was he not the very symbol of that which was making economists thin, thinkers pale, artists haggard, statesmen bald – the symbol of Indigestion Incarnate! Did he not, delicious, gross, unconscious man, personify beneath his Americo-Italian polish all those rank and primitive instincts, whose satisfaction necessitated the million miseries of his fellows; all those thick rapacities which stir the hatred of the humane and thin-skinned! And yet, one's meditation could not stop there – it was not convenient to the heart!

A little above us, among the olive-trees, two blue-clothed peasants, man and woman, were gathering the fruit – from some such couple, no doubt, our friend in the bowler hat had sprung; more "virile" and adventurous than his brothers, he had not stayed in the home groves, but had gone forth to drink the waters of hustle and commerce, and come back – what he was. And he, in turn, would beget children, and having made his pile out of his 'Anglo-American hotel' would place those children beyond the coarser influences of life, till they became, perhaps, even as our selves, the salt of the earth, and despised him. And I thought: "I do not despise those peasants – far from it. I do not despise myself – no more than reason; why, then, despise my friend in the bowler hat, who is, after all, but the necessary link between them and me?" I did not despise the olive-trees, the warm sun, the pine scent, all those material things which had made him so thick and strong; I did not despise the golden, tenuous imaginings which the trees and rocks and sea were starting in my own spirit. Why, then, despise the skittle-alley, the gramophone, those expressions of the spirit of my friend in the billy-cock hat? To despise them was ridiculous!

And suddenly I was visited by a sensation only to be described as a sort of smiling certainty, emanating from, and, as it were, still tingling within every nerve of myself, but yet vibrating harmoniously with the world around. It was as if I had suddenly seen what was the truth of things; not perhaps to anybody else, but at all events to me. And I felt at once tranquil and elated, as when something is met with which rouses and fascinates in a man all his faculties.

"For," I thought, "if it is ridiculous in me to despise my friend – that perfect marvel of disharmony – it is ridiculous in me to despise anything. If he is a little bit of continuity, as perfectly logical an expression of a necessary phase or mood of existence as I myself am, then, surely, there is nothing in all the world that is not a little bit of continuity, the expression of a little necessary mood. Yes," I thought, "he and I, and those olive-trees, and this spider on my hand, and everything in the Universe which has an individual shape, are all fit expressions of the separate moods of a great underlying Mood or Principle, which must be perfectly adjusted, volving and revolving on itself. For if It did not volve and revolve on Itself, It would peter out at one end or the other, and the image of this petering out no man with his mental apparatus can conceive. Therefore, one must conclude It to be perfectly adjusted and everlasting. But if It is perfectly adjusted and everlasting, we are all little bits of continuity, and if we are all little bits of continuity it is ridiculous for one of us to despise another. So," I thought, "I have now proved it from my friend in the billy-cock hat up to the Universe, and from the Universe down, back again to my friend."

And I lay on my back and looked at the sky. It seemed friendly to my thought with its smile, and few white clouds, saffron-tinged like the plumes of a white duck in sunlight. "And yet," I wondered,

“though my friend and I may be equally necessary, I am certainly irritated by him, and shall as certainly continue to be irritated, not only by him, but by a thousand other men and so, with a light heart, you may go on being irritated with your friend in the bowler hat, you may go on loving those peasants and this sky and sea. But, since you have this theory of life, you may not despise any one or any thing, not even a skittle-alley, for they are all threaded to you, and to despise them would be to blaspheme against continuity, and to blaspheme against continuity would be to deny Eternity. Love you cannot help, and hate you cannot help; but contempt is – for you – the sovereign idiocy, the irreligious fancy!”

There was a bee weighing down a blossom of thyme close by, and underneath the stalk a very ugly little centipede. The wild bee, with his little dark body and his busy bear’s legs, was lovely to me, and the creepy centipede gave me shudderings; but it was a pleasant thing to feel so sure that he, no less than the bee, was a little mood expressing himself out in harmony with Designs tiny thread on the miraculous quilt. And I looked at him with a sudden zest and curiosity; it seemed to me that in the mystery of his queer little creepings I was enjoying the Supreme Mystery; and I thought: “If I knew all about that wriggling beast, then, indeed, I might despise him; but, truly, if I knew all about him I should know all about everything – Mystery would be gone, and I could not bear to live!”

So I stirred him with my finger and he went away.

“But how” – I thought “about such as do not feel it ridiculous to despise; how about those whose temperaments and religions show them all things so plainly that they know they are right and others wrong? They must be in a bad way!” And for some seconds I felt sorry for them, and was discouraged. But then I thought: “Not at all – obviously not! For if they do not find it ridiculous to feel contempt, they are perfectly right to feel contempt, it being natural to them; and you have no business to be sorry for them, for that is, after all, only your euphemism for contempt. They are all right, being the expressions of contemptuous moods, having religions and so forth, suitable to these moods; and the religion of your mood would be Greek to them, and probably a matter for contempt. But this only makes it the more interesting. For though to you, for instance, it may seem impossible to worship Mystery with one lobe of the brain, and with the other to explain it, the thought that this may not seem impossible to others should not discourage you; it is but another little piece of that Mystery which makes life so wonderful and sweet.”

The sun, fallen now almost to the level of the cliff, was slanting upward on to the burnt-red pine boughs, which had taken to themselves a quaint resemblance to the great brown limbs of the wild men Titian drew in his pagan pictures, and down below us the sea-nymphs, still swimming to shore, seemed eager to embrace them in the enchanted groves. All was fused in that golden glow of the sun going down-sea and land gathered into one transcendent mood of light and colour, as if Mystery desired to bless us by showing how perfect was that worshipful adjustment, whose secret we could never know. And I said to myself: “None of those thoughts of yours are new, and in a vague way even you have thought them before; but all the same, they have given you some little feeling of tranquillity.”

And at that word of fear I rose and invited my companion to return toward the town. But as we stealthy crept by the “Osteria di Tranquillita,” our friend in the bowler hat came out with a gun over his shoulder and waved his hand toward the Inn.

“You come again in two week – I change all that! And now,” he added, “I go to shoot little bird or two,” and he disappeared into the golden haze under the olive-trees.

A minute later we heard his gun go off, and returned homeward with a prayer.

1910.

MAGPIE OVER THE HILL

I lay often that summer on a slope of sand and coarse grass, close to the Cornish sea, trying to catch thoughts; and I was trying very hard when I saw them coming hand in hand.

She was dressed in blue linen, and a little cloud of honey-coloured hair; her small face had serious eyes the colour of the chicory flowers she was holding up to sniff at – a clean sober little maid, with a very touching upward look of trust. Her companion was a strong, active boy of perhaps fourteen, and he, too, was serious – his deep-set, blacklashed eyes looked down at her with a queer protective wonder; the while he explained in a soft voice broken up between two ages, that exact process which bees adopt to draw honey out of flowers. Once or twice this hoarse but charming voice became quite fervent, when she had evidently failed to follow; it was as if he would have been impatient, only he knew he must not, because she was a lady and younger than himself, and he loved her.

They sat down just below my nook, and began to count the petals of a chicory flower, and slowly she nestled in to him, and he put his arm round her. Never did I see such sedate, sweet lovering, so trusting on her part, so guardianlike on his. They were like, in miniature – though more dewy, – those sober couples who have long lived together, yet whom one still catches looking at each other with confidential tenderness, and in whom, one feels, passion is atrophied from never having been in use.

Long I sat watching them in their cool communion, half-embraced, talking a little, smiling a little, never once kissing. They did not seem shy of that; it was rather as if they were too much each other's to think of such a thing. And then her head slid lower and lower down his shoulder, and sleep buttoned the lids over those chicory-blue eyes. How careful he was, then, not to wake her, though I could see his arm was getting stiff! He still sat, good as gold, holding her, till it began quite to hurt me to see his shoulder thus in chancery. But presently I saw him draw his arm away ever so carefully, lay her head down on the grass, and lean forward to stare at something. Straight in front of them was a magpie, balancing itself on a stripped twig of thorn-tree. The agitating bird, painted of night and day, was making a queer noise and flirting one wing, as if trying to attract attention. Rising from the twig, it circled, vivid and stealthy, twice round the tree, and flew to another a dozen paces off. The boy rose; he looked at his little mate, looked at the bird, and began quietly to move toward it; but uttering again its queer call, the bird glided on to a third thorn-tree. The boy hesitated then – but once more the bird flew on, and suddenly dipped over the hill. I saw the boy break into a run; and getting up quickly, I ran too.

When I reached the crest there was the black and white bird flying low into a dell, and there the boy, with hair streaming back, was rushing helter-skelter down the hill. He reached the bottom and vanished into the dell. I, too, ran down the hill. For all that I was prying and must not be seen by bird or boy, I crept warily in among the trees to the edge of a pool that could know but little sunlight, so thickly arched was it by willows, birch-trees, and wild hazel. There, in a swing of boughs above the water, was perched no pied bird, but a young, dark-haired girl with, dangling, bare, brown legs. And on the brink of the black water goldened, with fallen leaves, the boy was crouching, gazing up at her with all his soul. She swung just out of reach and looked down at him across the pool. How old was she, with her brown limbs, and her gleaming, slanting eyes? Or was she only the spirit of the dell, this elf-thing swinging there, entwined with boughs and the dark water, and covered with a shift of wet birch leaves. So strange a face she had, wild, almost wicked, yet so tender; a face that I could not take my eyes from. Her bare toes just touched the pool, and flicked up drops of water that fell on the boy's face.

From him all the sober steadfastness was gone; already he looked as wild as she, and his arms were stretched out trying to reach her feet. I wanted to cry to him: "Go back, boy, go back!" but could not; her elf eyes held me dumb-they looked so lost in their tender wildness.

And then my heart stood still, for he had slipped and was struggling in deep water beneath her feet. What a gaze was that he was turning up to her – not frightened, but so longing, so desperate; and hers how triumphant, and how happy!

And then he clutched her foot, and clung, and climbed; and bending down, she drew him up to her, all wet, and clasped him in the swing of boughs.

I took a long breath then. An orange gleam of sunlight had flamed in among the shadows and fell round those two where they swung over the dark water, with lips close together and spirits lost in one another's, and in their eyes such drowning ecstasy! And then they kissed! All round me pool, and leaves, and air seemed suddenly to swirl and melt – I could see nothing plain!.. What time passed – I do not know – before their faces slowly again became visible! His face the sober boy's – was turned away from her, and he was listening; for above the whispering of leaves a sound of weeping came from over the hill. It was to that he listened.

And even as I looked he slid down from out of her arms; back into the pool, and began struggling to gain the edge. What grief and longing in her wild face then! But she did not wail. She did not try to pull him back; that elfish heart of dignity could reach out to what was coming, it could not drag at what was gone. Unmoving as the boughs and water, she watched him abandon her.

Slowly the struggling boy gained land, and lay there, breathless. And still that sound of lonely weeping came from over the hill.

Listening, but looking at those wild, mourning eyes that never moved from him, he lay. Once he turned back toward the water, but fire had died within him; his hands dropped, nerveless – his young face was all bewilderment.

And the quiet darkness of the pool waited, and the trees, and those lost eyes of hers, and my heart. And ever from over the hill came the little fair maiden's lonely weeping.

Then, slowly dragging his feet, stumbling, half-blinded, turning and turning to look back, the boy groped his way out through the trees toward that sound; and, as he went, that dark spirit-elf, abandoned, clasping her own lithe body with her arms, never moved her gaze from him.

I, too, crept away, and when I was safe outside in the pale evening sunlight, peered back into the dell. There under the dark trees she was no longer, but round and round that cage of passion, fluttering and wailing through the leaves, over the black water, was the magpie, flighting on its twilight wings.

I turned and ran and ran till I came over the hill and saw the boy and the little fair, sober maiden sitting together once more on the open slope, under the high blue heaven. She was nestling her tear-stained face against his shoulder and speaking already of indifferent things. And he – he was holding her with his arm and watching over her with eyes that seemed to see something else.

And so I lay, hearing their sober talk and gazing at their sober little figures, till I awoke and knew I had dreamed all that little allegory of sacred and profane love, and from it had returned to reason, knowing no more than ever which was which.

1912.

SHEEP-SHEARING

From early morning there had been bleating of sheep in the yard, so that one knew the creatures were being sheared, and toward evening I went along to see. Thirty or forty naked-looking ghosts of sheep were penned against the barn, and perhaps a dozen still inhabiting their coats. Into the wool of one of these bulky ewes the farmer's small, yellow-haired daughter was twisting her fist, hustling it toward Fate; though pulled almost off her feet by the frightened, stubborn creature, she never let go, till, with a despairing cough, the ewe had passed over the threshold and was fast in the hands of a shearer. At the far end of the barn, close by the doors, I stood a minute or two before shifting up to watch the shearing. Into that dim, beautiful home of age, with its great rafters and mellow stone archways, the June sunlight shone through loopholes and chinks, in thin glamour, powdering with its very strangeness the dark cathedraled air, where, high up, clung a fog of old grey cobwebs so thick as ever were the stalactites of a huge cave. At this end the scent of sheep and wool and men had not yet routed that home essence of the barn, like the savour of acorns and withering beech leaves.

They were shearing by hand this year, nine of them, counting the postman, who, though farm-bred, "did'n putt much to the shearin'," but had come to round the sheep up and give general aid.

Sitting on the creatures, or with a leg firmly crooked over their heads, each shearer, even the two boys, had an air of going at it in his own way. In their white canvas shearing suits they worked very steadily, almost in silence, as if drowsed by the "click-clip, click-clip" of the shears. And the sheep, but for an occasional wriggle of legs or head, lay quiet enough, having an inborn sense perhaps of the fitness of things, even when, once in a way, they lost more than wool; glad too, mayhap, to be rid of their matted vestments. From time to time the little damsel offered each shearer a jug and glass, but no man drank till he had finished his sheep; then he would get up, stretch his cramped muscles, drink deep, and almost instantly sit down again on a fresh beast. And always there was the buzz of flies swarming in the sunlight of the open doorway, the dry rustle of the pollarded lime-trees in the sharp wind outside, the bleating of some released ewe, upset at her own nakedness, the scrape and shuffle of heels and sheep's limbs on the floor, together with the "click-clip, click-clip" of the shears.

As each ewe, finished with, struggled up, helped by a friendly shove, and bolted out dazedly into the pen, I could not help wondering what was passing in her head – in the heads of all those unceremoniously treated creatures; and, moving nearer to the postman, I said:

"They're really very good, on the whole."

He looked at me, I thought, queerly.

"Yaas," he answered; "Mr. Molton's the best of them."

I looked askance at Mr. Molton; but, with his knee crooked round a young ewe, he was shearing calmly.

"Yes," I admitted, "he is certainly good."

"Yaas," replied the postman.

Edging back into the darkness, away from that uncomprehending youth, I escaped into the air, and passing the remains of last year's stacks under the tall, toppling elms, sat down in a field under the bank. It seemed to me that I had food for thought. In that little misunderstanding between me and the postman was all the essence of the difference between that state of civilisation in which sheep could prompt a sentiment, and that state in which sheep could not.

The heat from the dropping sun, not far now above the moorline, struck full into the ferns and long grass of the bank where I was sitting, and the midges rioted on me in this last warmth. The wind was barred out, so that one had the full sweetness of the clover, fast becoming hay, over which the swallows were wheeling and swooping after flies. And far up, as it were the crown of Nature's beautiful devouring circle, a buzzard hawk, almost stationary on the air, floated, intent on something pleasant below him. A number of little hens crept through the gate one by one, and came round me. It

seemed to them that I was there to feed them; and they held their neat red or yellow heads to one side and the other, inquiring with their beady eyes, surprised at my stillness. They were pretty with their speckled feathers, and as it seemed to me, plump and young, so that I wondered how many of them would in time feed me. Finding, however, that I gave them nothing to eat, they went away, and there arose, in place of their clucking, the thin singing of air passing through some long tube. I knew it for the whining of my dog, who had nosed me out, but could not get through the padlocked gate. And as I lifted him over, I was glad the postman could not see me – for I felt that to lift a dog over a gate would be against the principles of one for whom the connection of sheep with good behaviour had been too strange a thought. And it suddenly rushed into my mind that the time would no doubt come when the conduct of apples, being plucked from the mother tree, would inspire us, and we should say: “They’re really very good!” And I wondered, were those future watchers of apple-gathering farther from me than I, watching sheep-shearing, from the postman? I thought, too, of the pretty dreams being dreamt about the land, and of the people who dreamed them. And I looked at that land, covered with the sweet pinkish-green of the clover, and considered how much of it, through the medium of sheep, would find its way into me, to enable me to come out here and be eaten by midges, and speculate about things, and conceive the sentiment of how good the sheep were. And it all seemed queer. I thought, too, of a world entirely composed of people who could see the sheen rippling on that clover, and feel a sort of sweet elation at the scent of it, and I wondered how much clover would be sown then? Many things I thought of, sitting there, till the sun sank below the moor line, the wind died off the clover, and the midges slept. Here and there in the iris-coloured sky a star crept out; the soft-hooting owls awoke. But still I lingered, watching how, one after another, shapes and colours died into twilight; and I wondered what the postman thought of twilight, that inconvenient state, when things were neither dark nor light; and I wondered what the sheep were thinking this first night without their coats. Then, slinking along the hedge, noiseless, unheard by my sleeping spaniel, I saw a tawny dog stealing by. He passed without seeing us, licking his lean chops.

“Yes, friend,” I thought, “you have been after something very unholy; you have been digging up buried lamb, or some desirable person of that kind!”

Sneaking past, in this sweet night, which stirred in one such sentiment, that ghoulish cur was like the omnivorousness of Nature. And it came to me, how wonderful and queer was a world which embraced within it, not only this red gloating dog, fresh from his feast on the decaying flesh of lamb, but all those hundreds of beings in whom the sight of a fly with one leg shortened produced a quiver of compassion. For in this savage, slinking shadow, I knew that I had beheld a manifestation of divinity no less than in the smile of the sky, each minute growing more starry. With what Harmony – I thought – can these two be enwrapped in this round world so fast that it cannot be moved! What secret, marvellous, all-pervading Principle can harmonise these things! And the old words ‘good’ and ‘evil’ seemed to me more than ever quaint.

It was almost dark, and the dew falling fast; I roused my spaniel to go in.

Over the high-walled yard, the barns, the moon-white porch, dusk had brushed its velvet. Through an open window came a roaring sound. Mr. Molton was singing “The Happy Warrior,” to celebrate the finish of the shearing. The big doors into the garden, passed through, cut off the full sweetness of that song; for there the owls were already masters of night with their music.

On the dew-whitened grass of the lawn, we came on a little dark beast. My spaniel, liking its savour, stood with his nose at point; but, being called off, I could feel him obedient, still quivering, under my hand.

In the field, a wan huddle in the blackness, the dismantled sheep lay under a holly hedge. The wind had died; it was mist-warm.

1910

EVOLUTION

Coming out of the theatre, we found it utterly impossible to get a taxicab; and, though it was raining slightly, walked through Leicester Square in the hope of picking one up as it returned down Piccadilly. Numbers of hansoms and four-wheelers passed, or stood by the curb, hailing us feebly, or not even attempting to attract our attention, but every taxi seemed to have its load. At Piccadilly Circus, losing patience, we beckoned to a four-wheeler and resigned ourselves to a long, slow journey. A sou'-westerly air blew through the open windows, and there was in it the scent of change, that wet scent which visits even the hearts of towns and inspires the watcher of their myriad activities with thought of the restless Force that forever cries: "On, on!" But gradually the steady patter of the horse's hoofs, the rattling of the windows, the slow thudding of the wheels, pressed on us so drowsily that when, at last, we reached home we were more than half asleep. The fare was two shillings, and, standing in the lamplight to make sure the coin was a half-crown before handing it to the driver, we happened to look up. This cabman appeared to be a man of about sixty, with a long, thin face, whose chin and drooping grey moustaches seemed in permanent repose on the up-turned collar of his old blue overcoat. But the remarkable features of his face were the two furrows down his cheeks, so deep and hollow that it seemed as though that face were a collection of bones without coherent flesh, among which the eyes were sunk back so far that they had lost their lustre. He sat quite motionless, gazing at the tail of his horse. And, almost unconsciously, one added the rest of one's silver to that half-crown. He took the coins without speaking; but, as we were turning into the garden gate, we heard him say:

"Thank you; you've saved my life."

Not knowing, either of us, what to reply to such a curious speech, we closed the gate again and came back to the cab.

"Are things so very bad?"

"They are," replied the cabman. "It's done with – is this job. We're not wanted now." And, taking up his whip, he prepared to drive away.

"How long have they been as bad as this?"

The cabman dropped his hand again, as though glad to rest it, and answered incoherently:

"Thirty-five year I've been drivin' a cab."

And, sunk again in contemplation of his horse's tail, he could only be roused by many questions to express himself, having, as it seemed, no knowledge of the habit.

"I don't blame the taxis, I don't blame nobody. It's come on us, that's what it has. I left the wife this morning with nothing in the house. She was saying to me only yesterday: 'What have you brought home the last four months?' 'Put it at six shillings a week,' I said. 'No,' she said, 'seven.' Well, that's right – she enters it all down in her book."

"You are really going short of food?"

The cabman smiled; and that smile between those two deep hollows was surely as strange as ever shone on a human face.

"You may say that," he said. "Well, what does it amount to? Before I picked you up, I had one eighteen-penny fare to-day; and yesterday I took five shillings. And I've got seven bob a day to pay for the cab, and that's low, too. There's many and many a proprietor that's broke and gone – every bit as bad as us. They let us down as easy as ever they can; you can't get blood from a stone, can you?" Once again he smiled. "I'm sorry for them, too, and I'm sorry for the horses, though they come out best of the three of us, I do believe."

One of us muttered something about the Public.

The cabman turned his face and stared down through the darkness.

"The Public?" he said, and his voice had in it a faint surprise. "Well, they all want the taxis. It's natural. They get about faster in them, and time's money. I was seven hours before I picked you

up. And then you was lookin' for a taxi. Them as take us because they can't get better, they're not in a good temper, as a rule. And there's a few old ladies that's frightened of the motors, but old ladies aren't never very free with their money – can't afford to be, the most of them, I expect.”

“Everybody's sorry for you; one would have thought that – ”

He interrupted quietly: “Sorrow don't buy bread.. I never had nobody ask me about things before.” And, slowly moving his long face from side to side, he added: “Besides, what could people do? They can't be expected to support you; and if they started askin' you questions they'd feel it very awkward. They know that, I suspect. Of course, there's such a lot of us; the hansoms are pretty nigh as bad off as we are. Well, we're gettin' fewer every day, that's one thing.”

Not knowing whether or no to manifest sympathy with this extinction, we approached the horse. It was a horse that “stood over” a good deal at the knee, and in the darkness seemed to have innumerable ribs. And suddenly one of us said: “Many people want to see nothing but taxis on the streets, if only for the sake of the horses.”

The cabman nodded.

“This old fellow,” he said, “never carried a deal of flesh. His grub don't put spirit into him nowadays; it's not up to much in quality, but he gets enough of it.”

“And you don't?”

The cabman again took up his whip.

“I don't suppose,” he said without emotion, “any one could ever find another job for me now. I've been at this too long. It'll be the workhouse, if it's not the other thing.”

And hearing us mutter that it seemed cruel, he smiled for the third time.

“Yes,” he said slowly, “it's a bit 'ard on us, because we've done nothing to deserve it. But things are like that, so far as I can see. One thing comes pushin' out another, and so you go on. I've thought about it – you get to thinkin' and worryin' about the rights o' things, sittin' up here all day. No, I don't see anything for it. It'll soon be the end of us now – can't last much longer. And I don't know that I'll be sorry to have done with it. It's pretty well broke my spirit.”

“There was a fund got up.”

“Yes, it helped a few of us to learn the motor-drivin'; but what's the good of that to me, at my time of life? Sixty, that's my age; I'm not the only one – there's hundreds like me. We're not fit for it, that's the fact; we haven't got the nerve now. It'd want a mint of money to help us. And what you say's the truth – people want to see the end of us. They want the taxis – our day's over. I'm not complaining; you asked me about it yourself.”

And for the third time he raised his whip.

“Tell me what you would have done if you had been given your fare and just sixpence over?”

The cabman stared downward, as though puzzled by that question.

“Done? Why, nothing. What could I have done?”

“But you said that it had saved your life.”

“Yes, I said that,” he answered slowly; “I was feelin' a bit low. You can't help it sometimes; it's the thing comin' on you, and no way out of it – that's what gets over you. We try not to think about it, as a rule.”

And this time, with a “Thank you, kindly!” he touched his horse's flank with the whip. Like a thing aroused from sleep the forgotten creature started and began to draw the cabman away from us. Very slowly they travelled down the road among the shadows of the trees broken by lamplight. Above us, white ships of cloud were sailing rapidly across the dark river of sky on the wind which smelled of change. And, after the cab was lost to sight, that wind still brought to us the dying sound of the slow wheels.

1910.

RIDING IN MIST

Wet and hot, having her winter coat, the mare exactly matched the drenched fox-coloured beech-leaf drifts. As was her wont on such misty days, she danced along with head held high, her neck a little arched, her ears pricked, pretending that things were not what they seemed, and now and then vigorously trying to leave me planted on the air. Stones which had rolled out of the lane banks were her especial goblins, for one such had maltreated her nerves before she came into this ball-room world, and she had not forgotten.

There was no wind that day. On the beech-trees were still just enough of coppery leaves to look like fires lighted high-up to air the eeriness; but most of the twigs, pearled with water, were patterned very naked against universal grey. Berries were few, except the pink spindle one, so far the most beautiful, of which there were more than Earth generally vouchsafes. There was no sound in the deep lanes, none of that sweet, overhead sighing of yesterday at the same hour, but there was a quality of silence – a dumb mist murmuration. We passed a tree with a proud pigeon sitting on its top spire, quite too heavy for the twig delicacy below; undisturbed by the mare's hoofs or the creaking of saddle leather, he let us pass, absorbed in his world of tranquil turtledoves. The mist had thickened to a white, infinitesimal rain-dust, and in it the trees began to look strange, as though they had lost one another. The world seemed inhabited only by quick, soundless wraiths as one trotted past.

Close to a farm-house the mare stood still with that extreme suddenness peculiar to her at times, and four black pigs scuttled by and at once became white air. By now we were both hot and inclined to cling closely together and take liberties with each other; I telling her about her nature, name, and appearance, together with comments on her manners; and she giving forth that sterterous, sweet snuffle, which begins under the star on her forehead. On such days she did not sneeze, reserving those expressions of her joy for sunny days and the crisp winds. At a forking of the ways we came suddenly on one grey and three brown ponies, who shied round and flung away in front of us, a vision of pretty heads and haunches tangled in the thin lane, till, conscious that they were beyond their beat, they faced the bank and, one by one, scrambled over to join the other ghosts out on the dim common.

Dipping down now over the road, we passed hounds going home. Pied, dumb-footed shapes, padding along in that soft-eyed, remote world of theirs, with a tall riding splash of red in front, and a tall splash of riding red behind. Then through a gate we came on to the moor, amongst whitened furze. The mist thickened. A curlew was whistling on its invisible way, far up; and that wistful, wild calling seemed the very voice of the day. Keeping in view the glint of the road, we galloped; rejoicing, both of us, to be free of the jog jog of the lanes.

And first the voice of the curlew died; then the glint of the road vanished; and we were quite alone. Even the furze was gone; no shape of anything left, only the black, peaty ground, and the thickening mist. We might as well have been that lonely bird crossing up there in the blind white nothingness, like a human spirit wandering on the undiscovered moor of its own future.

The mare jumped a pile of stones, which appeared, as it were, after we had passed over; and it came into my mind that, if we happened to strike one of the old quarry pits, we should infallibly be killed. Somehow, there was pleasure in this thought, that we might, or might not, strike that old quarry pit. The blood in us being hot, we had pure joy in charging its white, impalpable solidity, which made way, and at once closed in behind us. There was great fun in this yard-by-yard discovery that we were not yet dead, this flying, shelterless challenge to whatever might lie out there, five yards in front. We felt supremely above the wish to know that our necks were safe; we were happy, panting in the vapour that beat against our faces from the sheer speed of our galloping. Suddenly the ground grew lumpy and made up-hill. The mare slackened pace; we stopped. Before us, behind, to right and left, white vapour. No sky, no distance, barely the earth. No wind in our faces, no wind anywhere. At first we just got our breath, thought nothing, talked a little. Then came a chillness, a faint clutching

over the heart. The mare snuffled; we turned and made down-hill. And still the mist thickened, and seemed to darken ever so little; we went slowly, suddenly doubtful of all that was in front. There came into our minds visions, so distant in that darkening vapour, of a warm stall and manger of oats; of tea and a log fire. The mist seemed to have fingers now, long, dark white, crawling fingers; it seemed, too, to have in its sheer silence a sort of muttered menace, a shuddery lurkingness, as if from out of it that spirit of the unknown, which in hot blood we had just now so gleefully mocked, were creeping up at us, intent on its vengeance. Since the ground no longer sloped, we could not go down-hill; there were no means left of telling in what direction we were moving, and we stopped to listen. There was no sound, not one tiny noise of water, wind in trees, or man; not even of birds or the moor ponies. And the mist darkened. The mare reached her head down and walked on, smelling at the heather; every time she sniffed, one's heart quivered, hoping she had found the way. She threw up her head, snorted, and stood still; and there passed just in front of us a pony and her foal, shapes of scampering dusk, whisked like blurred shadows across a sheet. Hoof-silent in the long heather – as ever were visiting ghosts – they were gone in a flash. The mare plunged forward, following. But, in the feel of her gallop, and the feel of my heart, there was no more that ecstasy of facing the unknown; there was only the cold, hasty dread of loneliness. Far asunder as the poles were those two sensations, evoked by this same motion. The mare swerved violently and stopped. There, passing within three yards, from the same direction as before, the soundless shapes of the pony and her foal flew by again, more intangible, less dusky now against the darker screen. Were we, then, to be haunted by those bewildering uncanny ones, flitting past ever from the same direction? This time the mare did not follow, but stood still; knowing as well as I that direction was quite lost. Soon, with a whimper, she picked her way on again, smelling at the heather. And the mist darkened!

Then, out of the heart of that dusky whiteness, came a tiny sound; we stood, not breathing, turning our heads. I could see the mare's eye fixed and straining at the vapour. The tiny sound grew till it became the muttering of wheels. The mare dashed forward. The muttering ceased untimely; but she did not stop; turning abruptly to the left, she slid, scrambled, and dropped into a trot. The mist seemed whiter below us; we were on the road. And involuntarily there came from me a sound, not quite a shout, not quite an oath. I saw the mare's eye turn back, faintly derisive, as who should say: Alone I did it! Then slowly, comfortably, a little ashamed, we jogged on, in the mood of men and horses when danger is over. So pleasant it seemed now, in one short half-hour, to have passed through the circle-swing of the emotions, from the ecstasy of hot recklessness to the clutching of chill fear. But the meeting-point of those two sensations we had left out there on the mysterious moor! Why, at one moment, had we thought it finer than anything on earth to risk the breaking of our necks; and the next, shuddered at being lost in the darkening mist with winter night fast coming on?

And very luxuriously we turned once more into the lanes, enjoying the past, scenting the future. Close to home, the first little eddy of wind stirred, and the song of dripping twigs began; an owl hooted, honey-soft, in the fog. We came on two farm hands mending the lane at the turn of the avenue, and, curled on the top of the bank, their cosy red collie pup, waiting for them to finish work for the day. He raised his sharp nose and looked at us dewily. We turned down, padding softly in the wet fox-red drifts under the beechtrees, whereon the last leaves still flickered out in the darkening whiteness, that now seemed so little eerie. We passed the grey-green skeleton of the farm-yard gate. A hen ran across us, clucking, into the dusk. The maze drew her long, home-coming snuffle, and stood still.

1910.

THE PROCESSION

In one of those corners of our land canopied by the fumes of blind industry, there was, on that day, a lull in darkness. A fresh wind had split the customary heaven, or roof of hell; was sweeping long drifts of creamy clouds across a blue still pallid with reek. The sun even shone – a sun whose face seemed white and wondering. And under that rare sun all the little town, among its slag heaps and few tall chimneys, had an air of living faster. In those continuous courts and alleys, where the women worked, smoke from each little forge rose and dispersed into the wind with strange alacrity; amongst the women, too, there was that same eagerness, for the sunshine had crept in and was making pale all those dark-raftered, sooted ceilings which covered them in, together with their immortal comrades, the small open furnaces. About their work they had been busy since seven o'clock; their feet pressing the leather lungs which fanned the conical heaps of glowing fuel, their hands poking into the glow a thin iron rod till the end could be curved into a fiery hook; snapping it with a mallet; threading it with tongs on to the chain; hammering, closing the link; and; without a second's pause, thrusting the iron rod again into the glow. And while they worked they chattered, laughed sometimes, now and then sighed. They seemed of all ages and all types; from her who looked like a peasant of Provence, broad, brown, and strong, to the weariest white consumptive wisp; from old women of seventy, with straggling grey hair, to fifteen-year-old girls. In the cottage forges there would be but one worker, or two at most; in the shop forges four, or even five, little glowing heaps; four or five of the grimy, pale lung-bellows; and never a moment without a fiery hook about to take its place on the growing chains, never a second when the thin smoke of the forges, and of those lives consuming slowly in front of them, did not escape from out of the dingy, whitewashed spaces past the dark rafters, away to freedom.

But there had been in the air that morning something more than the white sunlight. There had been anticipation. And at two o'clock began fulfilment. The forges were stilled, and from court and alley forth came the women. In their ragged working clothes, in their best clothes – so little different; in bonnets, in hats, bareheaded; with babies born and unborn, they swarmed into the high street and formed across it behind the band. A strange, magpie, jay-like flock; black, white, patched with brown and green and blue, shifting, chattering, laughing, seeming unconscious of any purpose. A thousand and more of them, with faces twisted and scored by those myriad deformings which a desperate town-toiling and little food fasten on human visages; yet with hardly a single evil or brutal face. Seemingly it was not easy to be evil or brutal on a wage that scarcely bound soul and body. A thousand and more of the poorest-paid and hardest-worked human beings in the world.

On the pavement alongside this strange, acquiescing assembly of revolt, about to march in protest against the conditions of their lives, stood a young woman without a hat and in poor clothes, but with a sort of beauty in her rough-haired, high cheek-boned, dark-eyed face. She was not one of them; yet, by a stroke of Nature's irony, there was graven on her face alone of all those faces, the true look of rebellion; a haughty, almost fierce, uneasy look – an untamed look. On all the other thousand faces one could see no bitterness, no fierceness, not even enthusiasm; only a half-stolid, half-vivacious patience and eagerness as of children going to a party.

The band played; and they began to march.

Laughing, talking, waving flags, trying to keep step; with the same expression slowly but surely coming over every face; the future was not; only the present – this happy present of marching behind the discordance of a brass band; this strange present of crowded movement and laughter in open air.

We others – some dozen accidentals like myself, and the tall, grey-haired lady interested in “the people,” together with those few kind spirits in charge of “the show” – marched too, a little self-conscious, desiring with a vague military sensation to hold our heads up, but not too much, under the eyes of the curious bystanders. These – nearly all men – were well-wishers, it was said, though

their faces, pale from their own work in shop or furnace, expressed nothing but apathy. They wished well, very dumbly, in the presence of this new thing, as if they found it queer that women should be doing something for themselves; queer and rather dangerous. A few, indeed, shuffled along between the column and the little hopeless shops and grimy factory sheds, and one or two accompanied their women, carrying the baby. Now and then there passed us some better-to-do citizen—a housewife, or lawyer's clerk, or ironmonger, with lips pressed rather tightly together and an air of taking no notice of this disturbance of traffic, as though the whole thing were a rather poor joke which they had already heard too often.

So, with laughter and a continual crack of voices our jay-like crew swung on, swaying and thumping in the strange ecstasy of irreflection, happy to be moving they knew not where, nor greatly why, under the visiting sun, to the sound of murdered music. Whenever the band stopped playing, discipline became as tatterdemalion as the very flags and garments; but never once did they lose that look of essential order, as if indeed they knew that, being the worst-served creatures in the Christian world, they were the chief guardians of the inherent dignity of man.

Hatless, in the very front row, marched a tall slip of a girl, arrow-straight, and so thin, with dirty fair hair, in a blouse and skirt gaping behind, ever turning her pretty face on its pretty slim neck from side to side, so that one could see her blue eyes sweeping here, there, everywhere, with a sort of flower-like wildness, as if a secret embracing of each moment forbade her to let them rest on anything and break this pleasure of just marching. It seemed that in the never-still eyes of that anaemic, happy girl the spirit of our march had elected to enshrine itself and to make thence its little excursions to each ecstatic follower. Just behind her marched a little old woman – a maker of chains, they said, for forty years – whose black slits of eyes were sparkling, who fluttered a bit of ribbon, and reeled with her sense of the exquisite humour of the world. Every now and then she would make a rush at one of her leaders to demonstrate how immoderately glorious was life. And each time she spoke the woman next to her, laden with a heavy baby, went off into squeals of laughter. Behind her, again, marched one who beat time with her head and waved a little bit of stick, intoxicated by this noble music.

For an hour the pageant wound through the dejected street, pursuing neither method nor set route, till it came to a deserted slag-heap, selected for the speech-making. Slowly the motley regiment swung into that grim amphitheatre under the pale sunshine; and, as I watched, a strange fancy visited my brain. I seemed to see over every ragged head of those marching women a little yellow flame, a thin, flickering gleam, spiring upward and blown back by the wind. A trick of the sunlight, maybe? Or was it that the life in their hearts, the inextinguishable breath of happiness, had for a moment escaped prison, and was fluttering at the pleasure of the breeze?

Silent now, just enjoying the sound of the words thrown down to them, they stood, unimaginably patient, with that happiness of they knew not what gilding the air above them between the patchwork ribands of their poor flags. If they could not tell very much why they had come, nor believe very much that they would gain anything by coming; if their demonstration did not mean to the world quite all that oratory would have them think; if they themselves were but the poorest, humblest, least learned women in the land – for all that, it seemed to me that in those tattered, wistful figures, so still, so trustful, I was looking on such beauty as I had never beheld. All the elaborated glory of things made, the perfected dreams of aesthetes, the embroideries of romance, seemed as nothing beside this sudden vision of the wild goodness native in humble hearts.

1910.

A CHRISTIAN

One day that summer, I came away from a luncheon in company of an old College chum. Always exciting to meet those one hasn't seen for years; and as we walked across the Park together I kept looking at him askance. He had altered a good deal. Lean he always was, but now very lean, and so upright that his parson's coat was overhung by the back of his long and narrow head, with its dark grizzled hair, which thought had not yet loosened on his forehead. His clean-shorn face, so thin and oblong, was remarkable only for the eyes: dark-browed and lashed, and coloured like bright steel, they had a fixity in them, a sort of absence, on one couldn't tell what business. They made me think of torture. And his mouth always gently smiling, as if its pinched curly sweetness had been commanded, was the mouth of a man crucified – yes, crucified!

Tramping silently over the parched grass, I felt that if we talked, we must infallibly disagree; his straight-up, narrow forehead so suggested a nature divided within itself into compartments of iron.

It was hot that day, and we rested presently beside the Serpentine. On its bright waters were the usual young men, sculling themselves to and fro with their usual sad energy, the usual promenaders loitering and watching them, the usual dog that swam when it did not bark, and barked when it did not swim; and my friend sat smiling, twisting between his thin fingers the little gold cross on his silk vest.

Then all of a sudden we did begin to talk; and not of those matters of which the well-bred naturally converse – the habits of the rarer kinds of ducks, and the careers of our College friends, but of something never mentioned in polite society.

At lunch our hostess had told me the sad story of an unhappy marriage, and I had itched spiritually to find out what my friend, who seemed so far away from me, felt about such things. And now I determined to find out.

"Tell me," I asked him, "which do you consider most important – the letter or the spirit of Christ's teachings?"

"My dear fellow," he answered gently, "what a question! How can you separate them?"

"Well, is it not the essence of His doctrine that the spirit is all important, and the forms of little value? Does not that run through all the Sermon on the Mount?"

"Certainly."

"If, then," I said, "Christ's teaching is concerned with the spirit, do you consider that Christians are justified in holding others bound by formal rules of conduct, without reference to what is passing in their spirits?"

"If it is for their good."

"What enables you to decide what is for their good?"

"Surely, we are told."

"Not to judge, that ye be not judged."

"Oh! but we do not, ourselves, judge; we are but impersonal ministers of the rules of God."

"Ah! Do general rules of conduct take account of the variations of the individual spirit?"

He looked at me hard, as if he began to scent heresy.

"You had better explain yourself more fully," he said. "I really don't follow."

"Well, let us take a concrete instance. We know Christ's saying of the married that they are one flesh! But we know also that there are wives who continue to live the married life with dreadful feelings of spiritual revolt wives who have found out that, in spite of all their efforts, they have no spiritual affinity with their husbands. Is that in accordance with the spirit of Christ's teaching, or is it not?"

"We are told – " he began.

"I have admitted the definite commandment: 'They twain shall be one flesh.' There could not be, seemingly, any more rigid law laid down; how do you reconcile it with the essence of Christ's

teaching? Frankly, I want to know: Is there or is there not a spiritual coherence in Christianity, or is it only a gathering of laws and precepts, with no inherent connected spiritual philosophy?”

“Of course,” he said, in his long-suffering voice, “we don’t look at things like that – for us there is no questioning.”

“But how do you reconcile such marriages as I speak of, with the spirit of Christ’s teaching? I think you ought to answer me.”

“Oh! I can, perfectly,” he answered; “the reconciliation is through suffering. What a poor woman in such a case must suffer makes for the salvation of her spirit. That is the spiritual fulfilment, and in such a case the justification of the law.”

“So then,” I said, “sacrifice or suffering is the coherent thread of Christian philosophy?”

“Suffering cheerfully borne,” he answered.

“You do not think,” I said, “that there is a touch of extravagance in that? Would you say, for example, that an unhappy marriage is a more Christian thing than a happy one, where there is no suffering, but only love?”

A line came between his brows. “Well!” he said at last, “I would say, I think, that a woman who crucifies her flesh with a cheerful spirit in obedience to God’s law, stands higher in the eyes of God than one who undergoes no such sacrifice in her married life.” And I had the feeling that his stare was passing through me, on its way to an unseen goal.

“You would desire, then, I suppose, suffering as the greatest blessing for yourself?”

“Humbly,” he said, “I would try to.”

“And naturally, for others?”

“God forbid!”

“But surely that is inconsistent.”

He murmured: “You see, I have suffered.”

We were silent. At last I said: “Yes, that makes much which was dark quite clear to me.”

“Oh?” he asked.

I answered slowly: “Not many men, you know, even in your profession, have really suffered. That is why they do not feel the difficulty which you feel in desiring suffering for others.”

He threw up his head exactly as if I had hit him on the jaw: “It’s weakness in me, I know,” he said.

“I should have rather called it weakness in them. But suppose you are right, and that it’s weakness not to be able to desire promiscuous suffering for others, would you go further and say that it is Christian for those, who have not experienced a certain kind of suffering, to force that particular kind on others?”

He sat silent for a full minute, trying evidently to reach to the bottom of my thought.

“Surely not,” he said at last, “except as ministers of God’s laws.”

“You do not then think that it is Christian for the husband of such a woman to keep her in that state of suffering – not being, of course, a minister of God?”

He began stammering at that: “I – I – ” he said. “No; that is, I think not-not Christian. No, certainly.”

“Then, such a marriage, if persisted in, makes of the wife indeed a Christian, but of the husband – the reverse.”

“The answer to that is clear,” he said quietly: “The husband must abstain.”

“Yes, that is, perhaps, coherently Christian, on your theory: They would then both suffer. But the marriage, of course, has become no marriage. They are no longer one flesh.”

He looked at me, almost impatiently as if to say: Do not compel me to enforce silence on you!

“But, suppose,” I went on, “and this, you know; is the more frequent case, the man refuses to abstain. Would you then say it was more Christian to allow him to become daily less Christian

through his unchristian conduct, than to relieve the woman of her suffering at the expense of the spiritual benefit she thence derives? Why, in fact, do you favour one case more than the other?”

“All question of relief,” he replied, “is a matter for Caesar; it cannot concern me.”

There had come into his face a rigidity – as if I might hit it with my questions till my tongue was tired, and it be no more moved than the bench on which we were sitting.

“One more question,” I said, “and I have done. Since the Christian teaching is concerned with the spirit and not forms, and the thread in it which binds all together and makes it coherent, is that of suffering – ”

“Redemption by suffering,” he put in.

“If you will – in one word, self-crucifixion – I must ask you, and don’t take it personally, because of what you told me of yourself: In life generally, one does not accept from people any teaching that is not the result of firsthand experience on their parts. Do you believe that this Christian teaching of yours is valid from the mouths of those who have not themselves suffered – who have not themselves, as it were, been crucified?”

He did not answer for a minute; then he said, with painful slowness: “Christ laid hands on his apostles and sent them forth; and they in turn, and so on, to our day.”

“Do you say, then, that this guarantees that they have themselves suffered, so that in spirit they are identified with their teaching?”

He answered bravely: “No – I do not – I cannot say that in fact it is always so.”

“Is not then their teaching born of forms, and not of the spirit?”

He rose; and with a sort of deep sorrow at my stubbornness said: “We are not permitted to know the way of this; it is so ordained; we must have faith.”

As he stood there, turned from me, with his hat off, and his neck painfully flushed under the sharp outcurve of his dark head, a feeling of pity surged up in me, as if I had taken an unfair advantage.

“Reason – coherence – philosophy,” he said suddenly. “You don’t understand. All that is nothing to me – nothing – nothing!”

1911

WIND IN THE ROCKS

Though dew-dark when we set forth, there was stealing into the frozen air an invisible white host of the wan-winged light – born beyond the mountains, and already, like a drift of doves, harbouring grey-white high up on the snowy skycaves of Monte Cristallo; and within us, tramping over the valley meadows, was the incredible elation of those who set out before the sun has risen; every minute of the precious day before us – we had not lost one!

At the mouth of that enchanted chine, across which for a million years the howdahed rock elephant has marched, but never yet passed from sight, we crossed the stream, and among the trees began our ascent. Very far away the first cowbells chimed; and, over the dark heights, we saw the thin, sinking moon, looking like the white horns of some devotional beast watching and waiting up there for the god of light. That god came slowly, stalking across far over our heads from top to top; then, of a sudden, his flame-white form was seen standing in a gap of the valley walls; the trees flung themselves along the ground before him, and censers of pine gum began swinging in the dark aisles, releasing their perfumed steam. Throughout these happy ravines where no man lives, he shows himself naked and unashamed, the colour of pale honey; on his golden hair such shining as one has not elsewhere seen; his eyes like old wine on fire. And already he had swept his hand across the invisible strings, for there had arisen, the music of uncurling leaves and flitting things.

A legend runs, that, driven from land to land by Christians, Apollo hid himself in Lower Austria, but those who ever they saw him there in the thirteenth century were wrong; it was to these enchanted chines, frequented only by the mountain shepherds, that he certainly came.

And as we were lying on the grass, of the first alp, with the star gentians – those fallen drops of the sky – and the burnt-brown dandelions, and scattered shrubs of alpen-rose round us, we were visited by one of these very shepherds, passing with his flock – the fiercest-looking man who ever, spoke in a gentle voice; six feet high, with an orange cloak, bare knees; burnt as the very dandelions, a beard blacker than black, and eyes more glorious than if sun and night had dived and were lying imprisoned in their depths. He spoke in an unknown tongue, and could certainly not understand any word of ours; but he smelled of the good earth, and only through interminable watches under sun and stars could so great a gentleman have been perfected.

Presently, while we rested outside that Alpine hut which faces the three sphinx-like mountains, there came back, from climbing the smallest and most dangerous of those peaks, one, pale from heat, and trembling with fatigue; a tall man, with long brown hands, and a long, thin, bearded face. And, as he sipped cautiously of red wine and water, he looked at his little conquered mountain. His kindly, screwed-up eyes, his kindly, bearded lips, even his limbs seemed smiling; and not for the world would we have jarred with words that rapt, smiling man, enjoying the sacred hour of him who has just proved himself. In silence we watched, in silence left him smiling, knowing somehow that we should remember him all our days. For there was in his smile the glamour of adventure just for the sake of danger; all that high instinct which takes a man out of his chair to brave what he need not.

Between that hut and the three mountains lies a saddle – astride of all beauty and all colour, master of a titanic chaos of deep clefts, tawny heights, red domes, far snow, and the purple of long shadows; and, standing there, we comprehended a little of what Earth had been through in her time, to have made this playground for most glorious demons. Mother Earth! What travail undergone, what long heroic throes, had brought on her face such majesty!

Hereabout edelweiss was clinging to smoothed-out rubble; but a little higher, even the everlasting plant was lost, there was no more life. And presently we lay down on the mountain side, rather far apart. Up here above trees and pasture the wind had a strange, bare voice, free from all outer influence, sweeping along with a cold, whiffing sound. On the warm stones, in full sunlight, uplifted over all the beauty of Italy, one felt at first only delight in space and wild loveliness, in the

unknown valleys, and the strength of the sun. It was so good to be alive; so ineffably good to be living in this most wonderful world, drinking air nectar.

Behind us, from the three mountains, came the frequent thud and scuffle of falling rocks, loosened by rains. The wind, mist, and winter snow had ground the powdery stones on which we lay to a pleasant bed, but once on a time they, too, had clung up there. And very slowly, one could not say how or when, the sense of joy began changing to a sense of fear. The awful impersonality of those great rock-creatures, the terrible impartiality of that cold, clinging wind which swept by, never an inch lifted above ground! Not one tiny soul, the size of a midge or rock flower, lived here. Not one little "I" breathed here, and loved!

And we, too, some day would no longer love, having become part of this monstrous, lovely earth, of that cold, whiffling air. To be no longer able to love! It seemed incredible, too grim to bear; yet it was true! To become powder, and the wind; no more to feel the sunlight; to be loved no more! To become a whiffling noise, cold, without one's self! To drift on the breath of that noise, homeless! Up here, there were not even those little velvet, grey-white flower-comrades we had plucked. No life! Nothing but the creeping wind, and those great rocky heights, whence came the sound of falling-symbols of that cold, untimely state into which we, too, must pass. Never more to love, nor to be loved! One could but turn to the earth, and press one's face to it, away from the wild loveliness. Of what use loveliness that must be lost; of what use loveliness when one could not love? The earth was warm and firm beneath the palms of the hands; but there still came the sound of the impartial wind, and the careless roar of the stories falling.

Below, in those valleys amongst the living trees and grass, was the comradeship of unnumbered life, so that to pass out into Peace, to step beyond, to die, seemed but a brotherly act, amongst all those others; but up here, where no creature breathed, we saw the heart of the desert that stretches before each little human soul. Up here, it froze the spirit; even Peace seemed mocking – hard as a stone. Yet, to try and hide, to tuck one's head under one's own wing, was not possible in this air so crystal clear, so far above incense and the narcotics of set creeds, and the fevered breath of prayers and protestations. Even to know that between organic and inorganic matter there is no gulf fixed, was of no peculiar comfort. The jealous wind came creeping over the lifeless limestone, removing even the poor solace of its warmth; one turned from it, desperate, to look up at the sky, the blue, burning, wide, ineffable, far sky.

Then slowly, without reason, that icy fear passed into a feeling, not of joy, not of peace, but as if Life and Death were exalted into what was neither life nor death, a strange and motionless vibration, in which one had been merged, and rested, utterly content, equipoised, divested of desire, endowed with life and death.

But since this moment had come before its time, we got up, and, close together, marched on rather silently, in the hot sun.

1910.

MY DISTANT RELATIVE

Though I had not seen my distant relative for years – not, in fact, since he was obliged to give Vancouver Island up as a bad job – I knew him at once, when, with head a little on one side, and tea-cup held high, as if, to confer a blessing, he said: “Hallo!” across the Club smoking-room.

Thin as a lath – not one ounce heavier – tall, and very upright, with his pale forehead, and pale eyes, and pale beard, he had the air of a ghost of a man. He had always had that air. And his voice – that matter-of-fact and slightly nasal voice, with its thin, pragmatical tone – was like a wraith of optimism, issuing between pale lips. I noticed; too, that his town habiliments still had their unspeakable pale neatness, as if, poor things, they were trying to stare the daylight out of countenance.

He brought his tea across to my bay window, with that wistful sociability of his, as of a man who cannot always find a listener.

“But what are you doing in town?” I said. “I thought you were in Yorkshire with your aunt.”

Over his round, light eyes, fixed on something in the street, the lids fell quickly twice, as the film falls over the eyes of a parrot.

“I’m after a job,” he answered. “Must be on the spot just now.”

And it seemed to me that I had heard those words from him before.

“Ah, yes,” I said, “and do you think you’ll get it?”

But even as I spoke I felt sorry, remembering how many jobs he had been after in his time, and how soon they ended when he had got them.

He answered:

“Oh, yes! They ought to give it me,” then added rather suddenly: “You never know, though. People are so funny!”

And crossing his thin legs, he went on to tell me, with quaint impersonality, a number of instances of how people had been funny in connection with jobs he had not been given.

“You see,” he ended, “the country’s in such a state – capital going out of it every day. Enterprise being killed all over the place. There’s practically nothing to be had!”

“Ah!” I said, “you think it’s worse, then, than it used to be?”

He smiled; in that smile there was a shade of patronage.

“We’re going down-hill as fast as ever we can. National character’s losing all its backbone. No wonder, with all this molly-coddling going on!”

“Oh!” I murmured, “molly-coddling? Isn’t that excessive?”

“Well! Look at the way everything’s being done for them! The working classes are losing their self-respect as fast as ever they can. Their independence is gone already!”

“You think?”

“Sure of it! I’ll give you an instance – ” and he went on to describe to me the degeneracy of certain working men employed by his aunt and his eldest brother Claud and his youngest brother Alan.

“They don’t do a stroke more than they’re obliged,” he ended; “they know jolly well they’ve got their Unions, and their pensions, and this Insurance, to fall back on.”

It was evidently a subject on which he felt strongly.

“Yes,” he muttered, “the nation is being rotted down.”

And a faint thrill of surprise passed through me. For the affairs of the nation moved him so much more strongly than his own. His voice already had a different ring, his eyes a different look. He eagerly leaned forward, and his long, straight backbone looked longer and straighter than ever. He was less the ghost of a man. A faint flush even had come into his pale cheeks, and he moved his well-kept hands emphatically.

“Oh, yes!” he said: “The country is going to the dogs, right enough; but you can’t get them to see it. They go on sapping and sapping the independence of the people. If the working man’s to be looked after, whatever he does – what on earth’s to become of his go, and foresight, and perseverance?”

In his rising voice a certain piquancy was left to its accent of the ruling class by that faint twang, which came, I remembered, from some slight defect in his tonsils.

“Mark my words! So long as we’re on these lines, we shall do nothing. It’s going against evolution. They say Darwin’s getting old-fashioned; all I know is, he’s good enough for me. Competition is the only thing.”

“But competition,” I said, “is bitter cruel, and some people can’t stand against it!” And I looked at him rather hard: “Do you object to putting any sort of floor under the feet of people like that?”

He let his voice drop a little, as if in deference to my scruples.

“Ah!” he said; “but if you once begin this sort of thing, there’s no end to it. It’s so insidious. The more they have, the more they want; and all the time they’re losing fighting power. I’ve thought pretty deeply about this. It’s shortsighted; it really doesn’t do!”

“But,” I said, “surely you’re not against saving people from being knocked out of time by old age, and accidents like illness, and the fluctuations of trade?”

“Oh!” he said, “I’m not a bit against charity. Aunt Emma’s splendid about that. And Claud’s awfully good. I do what I can, myself.” He looked at me, so queerly deprecating, that I quite liked him at that moment. At heart – I felt he was a good fellow. “All I think is,” he went on, “that to give them something that they can rely on as a matter of course, apart from their own exertions, is the wrong principle altogether,” and suddenly his voice began to rise again, and his eyes to stare. “I’m convinced that all this doing things for other people, and bolstering up the weak, is rotten. It stands to reason that it must be.”

He had risen to his feet, so preoccupied with the wrongness of that principle that he seemed to have forgotten my presence. And as he stood there in the window the light was too strong for him. All the thin incapacity of that shadowy figure was pitilessly displayed; the desperate narrowness in that long, pale face; the wambling look of those pale, well-kept hands – all that made him such a ghost of a man. But his nasal, dogmatic voice rose and rose.

“There’s nothing for it but bracing up! We must cut away all this State support; we must teach them to rely on themselves. It’s all sheer pauperisation.”

And suddenly there shot through me the fear that he might burst one of those little blue veins in his pale forehead, so vehement had he become; and hastily I changed the subject.

“Do you like living up there with your aunt?” I asked: “Isn’t it a bit quiet?”

He turned, as if I had awakened him from a dream.

“Oh, well!” he said, “it’s only till I get this job.”

“Let me see – how long is it since you – ?”

“Four years. She’s very glad to have me, of course.”

“And how’s your brother Claud?”

“Oh! All right, thanks; a bit worried with the estate. The poor old gov’nor left it in rather a mess, you know.”

“Ah! Yes. Does he do other work?”

“Oh! Always busy in the parish.”

“And your brother Richard?”

“He’s all right. Came home this year. Got just enough to live on, with his pension – hasn’t saved a rap, of course.”

“And Willie? Is he still delicate?”

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Easy job, his, you know. And even if his health does give out, his college pals will always find him some sort of sinecure. So jolly popular, old Willie!”

“And Alan? I haven’t heard anything of him since his Peruvian thing came to grief. He married, didn’t he?”

“Rather! One of the Burleys. Nice girl – heiress; lot of property in Hampshire. He looks after it for her now.”

“Doesn’t do anything else, I suppose?”

“Keeps up his antiquarianism.”

I had exhausted the members of his family.

Then, as though by eliciting the good fortunes of his brothers I had cast some slur upon himself, he said suddenly: “If the railway had come, as it ought to have, while I was out there, I should have done quite well with my fruit farm.”

“Of course,” I agreed; “it was bad luck. But after all, you’re sure to get a job soon, and – so long as you can live up there with your aunt – you can afford to wait, and not bother.”

“Yes,” he murmured. And I got up.

“Well, it’s been very jolly to hear about you all!”

He followed me out.

“Awfully glad, old man,” he said, “to have seen you, and had this talk. I was feeling rather low. Waiting to know whether I get that job – it’s not lively.”

He came down the Club steps with me. By the door of my cab a loafer was standing; a tall tatterdemalion with a pale, bearded face. My distant relative fended him away, and leaning through the window, murmured: “Awful lot of these chaps about now!”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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