

Guinevere & Lancelot And Others

by ARTHUR MACHEN



Edited by Michael T. Shoemaker & Cuyler W. Brooks Jr.



Suinevere and Lancelot

& Others

by

Arthur Machen

with art by

Stephen Fabian

Being a selection
of essays and stories
too long out-of-print

Edited by

Michael T. Shoemaker

and

Cuyler W. Brooks Jr.

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Introduction

Guinevere and Lancelot

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Savages, excerpted from "Concealed Savages of Tudor England"

The Academy and Literature, Vol. LXXXI, December 9, 1911

Gipsies

Path and Pavement, selected by John Rowland, Eric Grant, London, 1937

Ritual

The Dragon of the Alchemists, by Frederick Carter,

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Introduction

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Bridles And Spurs, The Rowfant Club, Cleveland, 1951

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Local Colour

The Independent, Vol. I, November 25, 1933

Art and Luck

Afterglow: Pastels of Greek Egypt 69 B.C., by Mitchell S. Buck,

Nicholas L. Brown, New York, 1924

Preface

The illustration used as a tailpiece to **The Grande Trouvaille** was found by chance in **The Art of Horror Stories** by Peter Haining, Chartwell Books, Secaucus NJ, 1986, (originally **Terror**, Souvenir Press, London, 1976). It is assumed that this is a page from the book referred to in that story.

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The Unknown Machen

Arthur Machen, author, actor, newspaperman, creator of *The Hill of Dreams* and of classic tales of horror and mysticism, should not need any introduction to most of the readers of this book. But there is another Machen, virtually unknown, who does need to be introduced. This is Machen, the great essayist, whose work in that form is generally known only from a single volume, *Dog and Duck*.

The essay was probably Machen's natural mode of expression, for he was a master of short exposition, but seems to have had difficulty with longer pieces. Machen himself apparently realized this, and so devoted most of his later efforts to short non-fiction. He produced an enormous quantity of essays and reviews. Some critics argue that this shows a flagging imagination and a need to hack, but the general excellence of the work belies the critics' harsh judgment.

To read these forgotten essays is to experience a series of revelations. The most important revelation is the strong similarity between Machen and G. K. Chesterton. Machen often used a paradoxical style of argument that is very "Chestertonian"; and, like Chesterton, he delighted in smashing the new icons of his age, while upholding traditional values. Machen seems to have developed this style independently. The similarity apparently resulted from parallels of character and intellect. Both men were conservative in their religion, without being priggish; both were romantics who celebrated the wonder in the ordinary; both loved the medieval era, theater, and many of the same authors; and both spoke strongly against industrialism and social injustice, while denouncing socialism.

Another revelation is the source for the title of *The Three Impostors*, which turns out to be an esoteric joke. It derives from a famous non-existent book, *De Tribus Impostoribus*, which was a favorite item for forgers in the 17th and 18th centuries. In an article in *Walford's Antiquarian*, Machen gives evidence for its possible existence.

Although the high quality of Machen's literary criticism is *not* a revelation, its quantity is. His essays on Stevenson, Dickens, ghost stories, and more, deserve a book of their own. The same can be said of his many theater memoirs, which were only partially cannibalized for his autobiographical volumes.

The essays also clarify some of Machen's views. The foremost example of this is his attitude toward supernatural phenomena. Machen's profound mysticism is often equated with a belief in occultism. But this is wrong. He regarded occultism as humbug, because he believed the mysteries of the universe were either unknowable, or, in the case of enlightenment, ineffable. In

various essays, he comments on telepathy, poltergeists, precognition, and other phenomena, which he tended to accept with a shrug. He did not regard them as deeply significant, because he felt that their meaning would remain forever elusive. Thus, their existence or non-existence had no bearing on his beliefs.

The works in this collection have been chosen because of their excellence, but they are also representative of the principal genres in Machen's oeuvre. We lack only an example of his theater memoirs, the best of which are too long to be included here.

Two stories, long out of print, represent his fiction. "Guinevere and Lancelot" may be the oddest of all Arthurian romances, but it sounds like an authentic tradition. This leads me to wonder whether Machen based it on obscure Welsh legends. I cannot find any antecedent, however, for his depiction of Guinevere as a bewitching temptress. (In all fairness to Guinevere, I should mention that the best modern scholarship indicates that she was probably a warrior queen and not an adulteress at all — see Norma Lorre Goodrich's *King Arthur*.) Original or not, "Guinevere and Lancelot" is a convincing imitation of an archaic romance; and it grows better with each re-reading, as the reader becomes accustomed to its language. The other story, "Ritual", is apparently the last that Machen wrote. It exhibits his reportorial verisimilitude in a variation on one of his favorite themes: the fearful mysteries hidden in the midst of everyday life.

The "Introduction" to *Notes and Queries* and "Bridles and Spurs", both from rare collections of Machen's essays, are two of his most powerful pieces of social commentary.

"Gipsies" and "The Grande Trouvaille" recount two of Machen's walking-adventures. The first combines vivid description with a serious moral; while the second, a clever introduction for a bookseller's catalogue, shows Machen in a lighthearted mood.

"Local Colour" and "Art and Luck" are typical of Machen's iconoclastic literary criticism. They remain as relevant as when they were written.

Three pieces illustrate Machen's mystical and religious views. The "Introduction" to *The Dragon of the Alchemists* contains perhaps his best description of what mysticism means. In "Savages", we have a succinct summary of why Machen despised Puritanism. And his "Preface" to *Afterglow* presents a highly original and elegant argument for religious faith.

This volume gives only a glimpse of the forgotten treasure. Enough gems remain for several more collections.

— Michael T. Shoemaker

The Introduction

From Notes and Queries

It is an odd sensation to rummage in old drawers, and to read once more forgotten writings of long ago. I have been rummaging in such a drawer, and have read again articles written in 1908-9. Here they are — some of them. They are about all sorts of matters: Mr. Wells, as lively then as he is now; Democracy and Socialism; the art of Casuistry; the obscure instincts and superstitions of man; the power of the imagination to change pure water into virulent poison; the everlasting question of the moth and the flame; and so on to a great variety of topics.

Now it is said that if a man thinks at forty as he does at twenty, he is either a genius or a fool. I do not know whether this dictum applies to forty and sixty; but if it does, I deny it altogether. I know I am not a genius; and I don't think I am absolutely a fool. I find myself in pretty general agreement with every opinion, or almost every opinion, that I advanced nearly twenty years ago; and avoiding all extremes, conclude that I was then and am now a fairly sensible fellow.

To take one instance: there is an essay entitled, "England and Revolution". The writer of the book which I was reviewing had some phrase about "backward and undeveloped peoples", which seems to have annoyed me a great deal, and I am glad to find that it annoys me still. I have drawn the picture of a little valley as it was in its backward and undeveloped days and as it is now when its natural resources have been developed. On the one hand: peace, pure air, plenty of rough work in the fields in fair weather and foul, small means, and clean food grown in the valley: bacon and beans and potatoes and an occasional trout from the brook. On the other hand, a vastly increased population, the air filthy or even poisonous, so that the people turn yellow and the green things perish from the earth; serried rows of mean, detestable houses on the old hill-sides, nasty shops dispensing nastiness, chilled or tinned: the whole place a horror, and the people within it seething with an obscure fury which they themselves do not understand; a fury which leads them to call themselves Radicals, Socialists, Communists, Bolsheviki, to rage against the masters, to believe that everything would suddenly become quite

delightful if a Soviet were substituted for the doddering but quite amiable magistrate in the nearest town.

I refused to call this change civilization in 1909; and I still refuse with even greater emphasis. I allow that by the development of the natural resources of this valley — which is at once imaginary and actual — five thousand people are kept alive for fifty who formerly lived there. I allow this; and I declare that I am sorry for it. There is no sense, no reason in breeding men for damnation. There is no good in life unless there be reasonable possibilities of happiness; and there is no possibility of happiness in the hell of industrialism. Every year when I change the air of London for that of Pembroke, I pass through industrial Glamorgan. For a great part of the way the scene is an enchantment. Never elsewhere have I seen such wondrous domed hills, such magic woods hanging on high places, such steepes glittering with bracken in the sunlight, such prospects of the entrances to secret valleys, such wild lands rising far away into the unknown. And high on those domed hills, the little whitewashed farms and cottages shining in light that appears to be of the eternal world: here is glory, here enchantment and immortal joy. And yet all this beauty is defiled and cursed with black chimneys and the obscene apparatus of industrialism: clustering around the bases of the happy, mystic hills are serried settlements, rows on rows on rows of ugly houses that seem to swarm like lice on the earth, vile heaps of refuse, stinks and stenches and smoke that hides the sun, Calvinist meeting-houses that cry to Heaven for vengeance. And there can only be the profoundest pity for the people who live amidst these horrors. They are quite right in holding that all the circumstances of their lives are hideously wrong; it is a matter for tears, not for anger, that they also hold that everything can be put right by returning Ramsay Macdonald to the House of Commons. Once they held that Mr. Bright and Mr. Gladstone would do this famous trick, especially if the Church were disestablished. Now, I believe, they are beginning to have their doubts as to the magic powers of Mr. Ramsay Macdonald, and to suspect that Dowlais, the Rhondda, and the Neath Valley will never turn into heaven on earth till Tomsy, Trotsky, and Rotsky tackle them. Poor people: but how is the world better for such places and such people? But there it is: filth, ugliness unspeakable, and a black smoke and a black stench of burning rage in the heart of the people: that is progress.

And here is another point on which I find the myself of 1926 in profound agreement with the myself of 1908. In the essay called

"Rouge et Noire -- and the Unknown" I find that I wrote:

If little boys did not waste their money and imperil their positions in life by taking an interest in "all the winners and S.P." -- well, in the first place there would be fewer evening papers in London, and secondly, there never would have been a Homer, a Shakespeare, or a Turner; and the autumn poets, who are now being reviewed in scores, would never have written a line. You cannot imagine a bee backing the winner (or, more probably, the loser) and an ant playing Blind Hookey is a mere nightmare; but then it would be equally ridiculous to imagine the bee writing a book and the ant modelling in clay. In other words, our vices and follies come from the same stock as do our gifts and graces; and the name of that stock certainly is not reason. It is unreasonable to put ten thousand pounds on a horse; it is unreasonable to volunteer on a forlorn hope; it is unreasonable to make lyric poetry or to enjoy it.

And, I would add, it is unreasonable to row yourself blue in the face on the Thames, or to face imminent risk of death in climbing an Alpine precipice: all the things that give a relish to life, all the things that make life splendid are quite outside the dominion of reason, and indeed violently opposed to it. It is, of course, to be noted that "reason" is not used here in the sense which Coleridge gave to the word. With him it is the highest spiritual faculty bestowed on man; we are using the term as it is commonly used in the street and in the market-place; the reason of Mr. Gradgrind of Coketown, the reason (by the way) which has called into existence those horrors of industrialism at which we have just been shuddering. Again let us say it: what men want of the world and in the world is happiness: and to gain happiness we must be profoundly irrational. We must thoroughly understand that if we were to pull down Westminster Abbey and St Paul's, and to give the price of their sites to the poor, we should do very ill indeed. I once created some little disturbance at a lecture by asserting that Judas was the first Protestant. I still hold to this opinion; and I will add that he was an early Rationalist, though, perhaps, not the first of that unfortunate sect.

And all this is highly fanciful? On the contrary, it is highly practical. We have seen that the other way has been tried and has broken down in a lamentable and, indeed, terrific manner. We have

gone far to ruin our beautiful land with factories. We have allowed no "sentiment", no "aesthetic nonsense" to stand in our way. As it happens, I am a citizen of what was once no mean city; though the population of it, if I remember, was somewhere between a thousand and twelve hundred souls. This city is Caerleon-on-Usk, once the splendid Isca Silurum, the headquarters of the Second Augustan Legion. And, then, again a golden mist of legend grew about it; it became the capital of King Arthur's court of faerie and enchantment, the chief city of a cycle of romance that has charmed all the world. I remember it as it was fifty-six years ago: dreaming in the sun by the yellow Usk, as it always seemed to me; its streets all silent, so that a rare footstep echoed in them, and people came to their windows and doorsteps to spy out who the stranger might be. It was all white, set in its level meadows by the river, the hills fencing it about, and northwards there appeared the wooded heights and slopes of Wentwood, "quivering with leaves, very conspicuous". A wonderful old town for all that it was such a tiny place; and wonderful was it to stand in the evening on the green circle of the Roman amphitheatre, and see the sun flame above Twyn Barlwm, the mystic tumulus on the mountain wall of the west. So the old town dreamed the long years away, not forgetful of the Legions and the Eagles, murmuring scraps of broken Latin in its aeonian sleep, speaking of a certain bridge as Pont Sadwrn (Pons Saturni), and of the hamlet across the river as Caerleon-ultra-Pontem.

* * *

The dream is broken. They have built a high, horrible, huge, damnable mad-house in blaring, shrieking red brick at the very gates of the city. They are going to put up an electric power-house and workmen's dwellings in the heart of the city, close to the Roman amphitheatre. It is all over. Caerleon is to be another pustule on the corrupt body of industrialism. But, I say again, all this is not practical; unless it be practical to create seed-beds and forcing-houses for misery and raging discontent, to make the way ready for the Soviet of Caerleon-on-Usk.

And then there is another matter treated in one of these old Papers that still interests me very strongly; that is the case of the bad little boy of Drury Lane. To recapitulate the adventure: a certain corn chandler of the Lane had bins outside his shop containing samples of the different sorts of grain to be sold within. The youth of old Drury,

naturally frolicsome, had made itself a pretty sport of lurking latent for a while near the shop and then rushing violently past it, grabbing grain, *manibus plenis*, as they went by. The Chandler was human; he was irritated. He laid in wait and at last grasped a virulent offender, and hauled him off at once to the chemist whose shop stood at the corner of the way leading into Broad Court. With his prisoner in his fist (as it were) the Chandler bent over the counter and confabulated with his old friend the chemist. Then this latter went about his dreadful business. He took a glass vessel graven with strange symbols — the measuring glass with the signs of drachms and scruples — flitted before bottles which had signatures in an unknown tongue; went apart into his dark and secret place at the back of the shop, and came forth, his horrible vessel filled with a clear fluid.

"Now," said he, to the wretched boy, "drink that, and you'll remember it to the last day of your life."

The lad drank, trembling, and tottered away. He all but died in the night. It was as if all the black purging purges of all the helleborist, calomelist, and jalapist physicians from the days of Galen even unto this present had been exhibited to him. But the chemist, the assistant, and the corn-Chandler convinced the boy's furious mother the next morning that the glass had merely held *aqua pura distillata*.

Now here, it seems to me, should be the taking-off place of a new school of medicine. Christian Science, I suppose, is one attempt at such a method. New Thought is another, and Coueism is a third. It would be tedious to examine these systems in detail, but I find in none of them any analogy to the shock of horror and malady that was administered to the boy in his glass of distilled water. What we want is a corresponding shock of health and happiness. We all know what it is to wake up from the terrors of a torturing and fearful dream; such dreams as seem more real and poignant than life itself. Nay, they are so real that they haunt us for many years. I remember that such a dream so possessed me that I never lost the date of it, and can still shudder a little at the recollection of its unutterable, irremediable horror. It was in 1868, and I was five years old. I was straying in my sleep by a bit of wild brake that bordered the lane by the rectory. In an instant, the horrible thing happened. There came along the road the Iron Coach, a black vehicle lined with strong metal, so that no assault on it could prevail. In it were two awful women, with gaunt and deadly features, and through an opening in the iron they threw

darts, venommed and tipped with fire, as they sped to and fro. I was helpless, frozen still with horror, so that I could not hide in the thicket: and then I awoke.

And it was from dreams as dread as this (which are not dreams) that I call on the new medicine to arouse us. The Drury Lane chemist had strong and efficacious magic and black enchantments: where is the white incantation which will suddenly make us forget the heavy years, the weary body, and the fainting heart, and bid us arise gladly in the morning and go on our happy way, hardly remembering the terrors and the anguish of the night?



Guinevere and Lancelot

Upon a morning in May a man kept his master's sheep on the hills that are above the Forest of Dendreath, in the midst of the dole of Britain. It was very early in the morning when the man came out of the shelter that he had made between two rocks, and the dew was thick upon the short grass, and at the sun rising all the land glittered as if it had been the Shining Isle beyond the waves of ocean, and an odor of sweetness rose up from the regions of the leaves. Then the sun ascended in his splendour, and the mists in the forests vanished away, and the shepherd saw before him all the wonders of the Forest of Dendreath. In the west he beheld the Road of the Eagle that issues from the waste land of Cameliard; and suddenly he was amazed, for far away he saw a red flame and a white flame advancing side by side along the alley of the wood.

Now, these flames were indeed nothing but that famous knight of high worship, Sir Lancelot, the principal warrior of the Order of the Round Table, and beside him Guinevere, that was to be Arthur's queen. When the shepherd far on the wild hill had seen them they had but come forth from a shade of beechen leaves, and as they appeared suddenly in the open glade the sunbeams smote upon them, and so bright was Lancelot's armour made that it was as if it spouted fire, and Guinevere was as the burning of vehement flames. Upon her head she bore a cap of golden cloth, curiously adorned with jewels such as rubies and carbuncles and chrysoprases, and her cotehardie was of red samite. And about her she held a cloak of flame-coloured satin, and her belt was of gold and crystals. Golden was the glory of her hair. So they rode through the alleys of the forest in the sweetness of the May morning, amidst the glittering of many leaves stirred by the winds of heaven. And at their passing by all the choir of the birds of the wood exulted. Deep from the shade in the heart of the forest Eos the nightingale chanted the melody of lovers with unwearied antiphons; to him gladly replied the blackbird, a master of song; the blackcap was of their chorus; from the throats of smaller birds there rose a sweet sound like that of the pipes of faerie. So journeyed Sir Lancelot and the lady by the ways of the happy forest, one glancing gently on the other as they rode at a merry pace.

Now, when Sir Lancelot brought Guinevere from her father's castle in Cameliard, they rode for a day and found no adventure. But as

night fell, and the sun went down, and it grew dark, they heard a noise as of crackling flames, and the sky grew red; and they saw a high hill before them, and on the height of it a fair castle was built, with lofty walls and many springing towers and pinnacles. But a black smoke swelled up from it, and great flames encompassed it, and as they looked there was a roaring and a riving as of thunder; and then that fair and goodly place fell apart, and was dashed down into the dust, being consumed with fire. "Alas, fair lord," said Guinevere, "what castle was this, and who was the lord of it? What evil chance hath so piteously destroyed it all?" "Lady," replied Sir Lancelot, "that I may scarcely tell. Let be awhile, and it may be that we shall fall in with some men who shall advise us." And then they pressed a little forward, and Sir Lancelot found a poor man hidden amongst the thorns and bushes by the way, and he asked the man what enemy had come upon the castle, and for what cause it had thus been burned and ruined. "Sir," said the poor man, "ye are to understand that this castle was the castle of Sir Sagramour of the Fair Mount, that was a knight of great worship, and a noble warrior, and the lord of all these lands. And it fell out by evil chance that he saw Eglaise, the daughter of King Ryon of the Rugged Island, as she went forth from her chamber to hear mass, and the hearts of these two became inflamed with love, and so they fled away together and dwelt happily at that castle for a year and a day. Then cometh King Ryon against Sir Sagramour and taketh his castle and burneth it as ye have seen, and Sir Sagramour is slain, and his wife with him, and no living man is left therein." Then Sir Lancelot and Guinevere, the queen that was to be, marvelled, and went on their way; and said Guinevere: "I see very well that this love is both piteous and cruel, since by it husband and wife are slain, and a fair hold has its portion with ashes and destruction." "Will ye say so, lady?" answered Lancelot. "Consider well that by this same love is all the round earth ordered, with the shining of the stars at night, and with all the sphere of the heavens, and with the perpetual choirs of Paradise. And without this love ye are to understand right as the doctors teach us, that there were no brightness of the sun at all, nor any light of the moon, nor should there be any green thing upon the earth, nor any bird of the wood, nor beast of the rocks, nor fishes in ocean; nay, when love shall pass, then passeth man also. And ye shall not say that this knight and his sweetheart were unhappy nor of an ill end, for to our lord Love they did great worship and great honour, and were well rewarded of him, so that they dwelt for a year and a day in the estate of gladness, and now praise God in Paradise, in the bliss that is perdurable and everlasting." "Oh, knight,"



said then Guinevere, "I see well that ye are a great lover and a high master — yea, a very doctor of love; and well I wit that in the King's court at Camelot ye have the love of many ladies and bear the palm of all amorous knights." "Lady, ye judge falsely, since never yet have I loved maid nor wife." "Is this as ye say, of very truth?" "It is as I have said, lady, and ye must know that I am none of the knights of the bower, but of the stricken field, where I do battle for my lord, King Arthur, against his enemies, and against the foes of all the land." "Nevertheless, sir knight, of love ye speak very honestly and fairly, and ye hold love in great worship, as is plain to see, and so at last ye shall doubtless receive the high guerdon and reward of that lord Love whose lauds and offices ye so well recite." And then that fair lady looked on Sir Lancelot with right good liking. And as they passed on their way they came to a lake, and all about it there were yew-trees set as a high hedge, and from the shadow of these trees they heard issuing a noise of lamentation. "What is this?" said Guinevere. "Let us delay and listen." And there was a sound of a man who wept, and after his weeping they saw him take a lute, and he sang this melody:

I make an incantation against the brightness of the sky:
I make an incantation against the shining of the sun:
I make an incantation against the wind of heaven.

I utter a spell against the boughs of the oak,
Against the aspen and the alder, the willow and the birch,
Against the budding of every tree that is in the wood.

I bind a charm against the rose that it blossom not:
May my magic bring darkness on the generation of the flowers:
May blackness consume the grass of the fields.

Let there be a mighty spell upon the melody of the birds,
Let the green perpetual choir be silent,
Let the song of fairyland be heard no more.

For in Gwenllian was the brightness of the sky,
She was the splendour of the heavenly sun,
She imparted sweetness to the breeze from on high.

In her were contained the delight of the woods,
The sweetness of the rose, the pleasure of the flowers.

Her voice gave rapture to the song of the birds.

The joys of the world have departed with her to Paradise.

And Guinevere and Sir Lancelot went on their way, considering the sad estate of this desolate lover, and again the lady spoke and said: "What say ye, sir knight? Will ye still be so hardy as to praise this love that bringeth men into so piteous a case? Heard ye not how he spoke, saying that all joys had departed with the lady that death has taken from him?" "Lady," said he, "there shall come a day when ye shall understand well that, albeit lovers may die and perish, yet love remaineth ever immortal, since no pangs of death may ever assail him." And a second time, Guinevere looked gently on Sir Lancelot, and in her heart she had him in right good liking.

After this fashion Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere passed through the regions of Britain, till they drew near to Camelot, where King Arthur held his court with his Knights of the Round Table. And as they passed through the Forest of Dendreath they could see through the boughs of the trees the open country shining before them, and Sir Lancelot said, "Lady, in a day's journey we shall come to Camelot, and there we shall find King Arthur and all his Knights of the Round Table, and the ladies of his court, and the saint that shall make you King Arthur's queen." And she knew not what she should have said to this, and her heart grew sad; and then she bethought her of an old tale and matter of wizardry, or so men say. And she gazed at the trees of the wood, searching for a tree that she knew of; and as they came to the wood's verge she saw her desire, and broke off a little bough from a wych-elm that grew by the way. Then she has broken this bough in twain, and one she has hidden about her, and the other she has given to the knight, saying: "I wit well that all of my lord's knights are men of truth and gentle dealing, and I think that of them all ye be not the least. Wherefore, whatsoever ye swear to me, sure am I that ye will perform your oath and keep it, and never gainsay it not so long as ye live." "Ye say rightly, lady. What will ye that I swear to you?" "I will have you swear that evermore while ye be quick and in this life ye keep this bough that I give you, for to be a token of this wayfaring and of my wedding of my lord, King Arthur." "So shall it be, very willingly," and Lancelot swore this by holy rood. Then at the end of their way they came to high Camelot, the golden and glorious city of King Arthur, and by the high saint were King Arthur and the Lady Guinevere made man and wife.

There was a day when Queen Guinevere, that now is married to King Arthur, sat with her ladies in her bower, and they were at sport, devising of certain flowers, that were their lovers, and of their divers properties. Said one damosel: "I know a rose-tree that rises not too tall, and it grows in a low garden, and four shining waters are about this garden, and five lions keep watch over this garden, and six thorns there be on this rose-tree, and one blossom only. Tell me where my rose is hidden." Then, by computing of numbers, the other ladies made out a name of a knight and spoke it, and they all laughed with glee; and so sped their sport very merrily. But all the while the Queen sat silent, and she looked out of the window of the high tower, and saw far away the green trees in the wood, and the road by which she had passed from Cameliard to Camelot. And whereas her ladies spoke of flowers and of the knights their lovers, so her thoughts fell on the bough of the wych-elm which she had broken with Lancelot; and fervently did she desire the love of this knight in her heart. Then did she wholly burn, then did her heart become as a coal of fire, and forthwith she went apart and wrote a scroll, and sent the writing to one that dwelt in Camelot, being a man reputed a sorcerer and a great clerk in the art magic. So it fell out that Guinevere stole away in the night-time, and came to a hidden place in a wood that was near to Camelot, and there the wizard had already his cauldron of sorcery and incantation. And he had made set about this cauldron a ring of fires, and a shining smoke went up from the vessel as it were quick glass, and within the ring you might see divers puppets and images in wax and in wood, shamefully devised and foully wrought, having on their foreheads and their breasts the signs and marks of the devils of hell and of the cursed gods and goddesses of heathen men. And with the wizard there was a lad that all the while made the fires to burn with spices and gums of Satan, and a black smoke rose up from these flames. Then came the Queen into the ring, and at the wizard's bidding she doffed all her clothes and stood naked by the cauldron, and so she dipped the elm wand into the bubbling of the cauldron, right as the wizard commanded her. Forthwith ye might hear a noise and a rushing sound amongst the black branches and thickets of the wood, the great boughs of the trees tossed one on other, and said the wizard: "Now, madam, the Hosts of the Air draw near; now is at hand the Army of Tzabaoth." Then, in the shimmering and in the shining of the glassy smoke that rose from the cauldron there showed the shapes of the Mighty Ones, and to the Mightiest did Guinevere there make offering of herself; and, this done, "Now," said the wizard, "is the time come." Then drew forth Queen Guinevere the wych-bough from

its place and again dipped it down three times into the cauldron of incantation and drew it forth, saying –

One was one in the wood,
On the tree of old enchantment;
One was made twain in the wood,
A word of wisdom was uttered.
Now, one calleth to one,
One tree cannot be dissevered.
By the sign of union
Let the parted be joined together.

Then, with the great word of incantation, the lady made the sign, and forth came flying in the air Sir Lancelot, in his ghostly body. And from that night Sir Lancelot, that was the flower and crown of all King Arthur's warriors, durst not deny the Queen Guinevere in anything, but loved her from that time forth.

Now at that time it is to be understood that Camelot was the wonder and prize of all the cities in the Isle of Britain, nay, of the whole world. For, like that city of Syon, it was set on a high hill, and encompassed on every side by rich gardens and bowers of delight and orchards and pleasure places. And on high were the palaces of the warriors and the choirs and altars of the saints, and the most lordly palace of the Emperor Arthur, as it were a mountain on a mountain. And here were assembled all the rarities and precious things of the whole world, and all the instruments of wisdom, and all the books in which the secret things were written, which Merlin had gathered together from all the coasts of the world. In this city did Sir Lancelot and the Queen have their pleasure and delight and dalliance, and by art magic no eye could discern their pleasures, while they lived in wantonness. And even Sir Lancelot, that was a loyal knight in his heart, must grieve and mourn for his piteous transgression against his lord, and ever must he weep and lament in his chamber for this mortal sin, and ever must he strive that it be put from him. Yet, by virtue of the spell and by the cauldron of incantation, he was without succour and relief, and what the Queen would that must he do. And it fell out that one night he strove against the word of incantation and magic, and it was as if his heart was bursten within him, and down fell he on the floor of his chamber, as though he were stark dead. Then came his squire, and to him it seemed that the spirit was



departed from Sir Lancelot, and he made a lamentable crying, and still Sir Lancelot lay there like a dead man. And when the life returned to him, he that was the mightiest of all King Arthur's knights of the Round Table was, as it were, a little child, and no strength nor virtue was there left in his body. And while he lay there, there came without his window one of Guinevere's damsels, taught by the Queen, and thus she sang to him:

All through the nightertale I longed for thee,
In loneliness, and harkened for the door
To open, or a footstep on the floor.

O lief sweetheart, I pray thee pity me,
I hunger for thy kisses evermore;
All through the nightertale I longed for thee.

Delight is turned to woe, and misery
Is my solace, certes, my heart is sore,
Yet these poor lips a smile at morning bore,
Though all the nightertale I longed for thee.

Wherefore henceforth Sir Lancelot strove no more, but lived deliciously in the golden meshes of the Queen's desires. And so to them twain the fruits of the orchards of Camelot were as apples of Avalon and golden delights, and the gardens were as walks of Paradise, and the feasts in King Arthur's hall were like the perpetual entertainment of the Blessed and Venerable Head of Bran Vendigeid, and the singing of the birds was as the song of the Three Fairy Birds of Rhiannon.

And one year King Arthur kept the feast of Pentecost at Camelot, as his custom was for the most part, and thirteen churches were set apart wherein King Arthur and his court heard mass. And afterwards, when they were in hall, suddenly there fell a silence, and each man looked on other and was afraid. Then there was a noise like thunder, and the roof was all afire; and then they heard in that place a melody as of the choirs of Paradise and the rejoicing of the angels, and ye would have said that there was an odour in that hall as of all the spicery of the world. And all the knights fell down on their knees together, and they saw as it were a hand pass from one end of the hall to the other and go forth; and the hand bore up the holy and blessed Vessel of the Sangraal, wrapt about in veils of red samite, and

there was a shining of light that made the sun darkness; and to Sir Lancelot, because of his deadly sin, it was as if a sword had pierced his body, for his flesh began to tremble when he beheld the spiritual things. Yet he might not put his sin from him, but ever again returned to his dalliance with the Queen, for the spell that she had set upon him could not yet be broken.

Now, with the passing of the years, it happened that the bough of wych-elm that Queen Guinevere had severed in the wood withered and shrank, and, though the Queen and Sir Lancelot might keep each other their portion never so well, the leaves that were on the boughs fell off. And when a leaf fell off then it vanished away, and as it vanished there flew forth a great bird, black as a coal; and these birds perched on the trees of the wood, and cried out as men passed by, "Guinevere is the leman of Sir Lancelot." And so this sin could no longer be covered, and all the court of King Arthur had knowledge of these birds and of what their message was, and some believed it and some not, but all looked strangely on Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere. And it fell out at last that Guinevere took out her portion of the bough and set it before her, counting the leaves that remained; and suddenly she must go forth from her chamber to sit in hall; and by ill chance she had forgotten the bough, so that one of her damsels cometh in, and seeing it, casteth it into the fire. And in that moment was Sir Lancelot set free from the virtue of the enchantment and the wizardry that had been done upon him; and in that moment came the lad that had prepared the fires of the sorcery, and confessed all to the King, and the report of this was made known to all the city of Camelot. Then the anger of King Arthur was like to burning of fire, and he sent ten knights, that were the mightiest that he had, to waylay Sir Lancelot, that they might slay him forthwith and hew his body in pieces. So these knights went forth, and they came upon Sir Lancelot as he walked in his garden, and he had no arms, but only a short sword, upon him. Then they cried: "Now shall ye surely die, thou foul and disloyal knight, for the deep dishonor that ye have done our lord the King," and they ran at him to kill him. But, for all their mail, five of them did he leave for dead in that garden, since he was the most valorous and most mightiest of all the knights that ever have been in this world; and so the five knights that were left in life fled away from before Sir Lancelot. Then would Sir Lancelot endeavour to bring forth the Queen harmless, but he might not, she was so closely kept; and so Sir Lancelot fled north from Camelot, and gathered his kinsfolk about him, if haply he might deliver the Queen from prison.



For Arthur swore that for wizardry and disloyalty she would be burnt. But afterward King Arthur repented his oath, and Guinevere dwelt, as all men know, in an abbey of nuns at Amesbury, and in due time was Sir Lancelot hallowed Bishop of Canterbury. And so, having repented of their sins, they both departed from this life: on whose souls may God have pity.



Savages

. . . It called itself Puritanism, and perhaps believed that its fury of destruction was due to religious zeal. You smashed a glowing stained-glass window and burned the painted and carved rood-screen, and enjoyed the work heartily; but at the same time you had the additional enjoyment of believing that both objects were superstitious, and that by destroying them you did God service. Essentially, the dark figures that ran about England in those days came from the underworld of destruction; but they put on the masks and disguises of their time. Thus, once a week they ordained a day of black gloom and horror, because their delight was in darkness. But they called this observance "keeping the Sabbath". Nearly a hundred years ago my mother lived for some time in Scotland, and always kept a vivid memory of the blinds being pulled down and the household sitting in darkness all through "the Sabbath Day". It is interesting to note how the instinctive horror of the sun and the light of day, of all the sensible beauties of the world, masquerade as religious devotion. The painted windows had all been smashed and the golden statues burnt long ago; but one could still sit in darkness and curse the splendor of the sun.



Gipsies

During the last few months we have had some odd strangers in our midst; certain Galician or Ruthenian gipsies who have been "moved on" from one place to another in the southern outskirts of London, who at last, I believe, have passed over seas to Ireland, impelled partly by our zealous sanitary authorities, partly by their own ineradicable love of wandering. For these folks the world is a wilderness with a long white road, ever vanishing into the distance before them; they are pilgrims and wayfarers, and they must go on and on. Well, as I say, they have been at Wandsworth and Mitcham for the last five or six months, and we have had plenty of opportunities of seeing them and of finding out whatever there was to be found out. I have seen several mentions of these gipsy folks in the press, and I discovered that there is exactly this to be said of them — that they are very dirty and have a peculiar knack of their own in mending old pots and pans. There is nothing else it seems, and I am reminded of an Englishwoman whom I once encountered in the streets of an old and beautiful French town. "I call this a dirty, smelly place," she said, "but they make very nice cakes."

As it happens, it fell to my lot a week or two ago to visit these gipsies. I crossed a wide and bare expanse of level land — Mitcham Common, I suppose — on a grey day vexed with a fierce wind from the north-east. At a corner of this waste country I came upon a group of gipsies taking shelter from the weather on the leeward of a tavern. I had been inside, and had talked to the landlord about the tribe, and he spoke well of them. He said that they did not steal or maraud the hencoops of the neighbours; they came into his place and pulled out gold by the handful, and drank the best brandy. And he talked of them as bearing great joints of veal and huge jugs of cream to their camp; it was altogether a bold and jovial picture of wild fellows who ate of the fat and drank of the strong, and knew the pleasure of handling the red gold and chinking it in pocket. The love of money is not, as we know it now, a commendable or comely matter; but here were fellows for whom it was almost a jewel; they liked to see the gold and hear its music, and feel it heavy in their hands. Then came the clatter and clang of some wild language, and outside stood the gipsy group, four or five big, well-built fellows with dark olive skins and glossy, black beards; beards of sumptuousness that flowed down over their breasts. They wore an elaborate costume of dark blue,

oddly ornamented with black braiding and strange bulbous ornaments in white metal, and I think that they had top-boots. And one or two carried canes or wands, the heads of which were adorned with curiously chased silver.

One of these men guided me to the camp. We crossed another stretch of windy common, and then waded through the black and unctuous mud of a narrow lane. Then; a high bank, and beyond, the wild forms of high tents of any shape or no shape, with crooked boughs sticking out at their tops. There was the clank, clank, clank of metalwork, and smoke curling up from the tents; the whole impression was wild, Oriental, remote from modern England in time as well as in place; above the mudbank of the Mitcham lane there was another world and another age in miniature. My guide led me among the tents of the wanderers, and lifted up a flap, and introduced me. In the centre of the tent – twenty feet long by fifteen broad and twenty high – there was a fire of wood burning on the ground. Before the fire there was a kind of divan, covered with some material that blazed with all the bright colours imaginable; and all round the canvas walls those bright-hued divans and cushions were lying. Blue and green and red and orange and yellow and crimson and purple; the place flamed with colour. And on the divan by the smoking, crackling sticks of wood, an old woman squatted. She was attired in rainbow-coloured vesture, her black hair was in long plaits, and her neck tinkled with ornaments and charms.

She proceeded to tell my fortune; and here, I must say, the tent of the Egyptians was as futile as the first floor in Bond Street. But while the usual formulæ – “You think too much”, “You will have a letter soon from the Far East”, “You will live till ninety” – were being uttered, the daughters of Egypt stole by ones and twos into the tent, and, gorgeously arrayed, squatted down on the gorgeous cushions, and gazed at the performance with glowing black eyes. The most interesting part of the show was the Boiling Water Trick. I have no doubt it is a very old one, but I have never seen it described. It is done as follows: – Cold water is brought in an ordinary glass, the glass is covered with a towel, and you are invited to press down the towel with your fingers and make sure that the water is really cold. This done, various conjurations follow. Some of the water from the glass is sprinkled abroad; hot ashes from the wood-fire are scattered in the air, and (the towel tightly held over the mouth) the vessel is whirled round and round. Then the old woman asked my name, and



having gathered the sounds as best she could, she chanted them and wailed them over fire and water; and suddenly leaning forward she held the glass against my ear, and the water bubbled vehemently; this, I was told, was a sure sign that I should be very fortunate. The noise was not the hissing of effervescence such as might be caused by dropping in some powder, but the true bubbling sound. I have not a notion of how the trick was done. Such was the little Egypt of Mitcham, such the tribe of incantations and dusky tents, and rainbow robes and divans, of handfuls of gold, fat meat, and strong drink, of wonderful daughters with glowing eyes and glowing olive skins. They stayed with us for awhile, and all that we had to say was that their habits were distinctly at variance with the laws of sanitary science.

Now for a different scene. A few days after visiting the tents I visited the Treasury, and heard the Chancellor of the Exchequer talking to a number of mistresses and maids about his Insurance Bill. The Chancellor told the deputation that he did not wish to argue: he was there to be instructed, to be put right as to facts. Nothing could be fairer, as it seemed to me; and presently a middle-aged servant rose and said that all the mistresses she had known had been most kind to their sick servants. Here was an undoubted fact, and yet Mr. Lloyd George, instead of welcoming it, answered in a jeering voice, "All the mistresses *you* have known!" And many members of the deputation laughed heartily, and I wondered. I wondered, because it was evident that the Chancellor thought that he had scored a point, and that many of those present agreed with him. And then I wondered what Mr. George would have said if the servant had tendered evidence concerning mistresses of whom she knew nothing. Let it be remarked that the utterer of this preposterous nonsense was not appearing in the character of an Old Bailey advocate briefed to win, instructed to humbug the jury by claptrap of any available and useful sort; he was at the Treasury, as he said, to elicit facts, so that a contemplated piece of legislation might be soundly based. And yet when he gets a fact which happens not to fit in with his scheme of things he replies with the shallowest answer of the shallowest sophistry — and nobody seems to notice that there is anything amiss.

As to the connection between the two scenes — the scene in the Treasury and the scene in the tent — it is a very simple one; it is to be sought in the circumstance which I have noted before, I think, in The Academy, that there is a distinct *nexus* between the logical faculty and the imaginative faculty. Here is a tribe of wild, wandering,

picturesque, primitive folk encamped on the verge of a London suburb; we poke our noses into their flaming tabernacles, and solemnly pronounce that there is a dreadful smell. We can gather, it seems, nothing else; we can only see a number of terrible people, without drains, who refuse to occupy any Jerry Row in any Jerryville on the outskirts of London, whose children have no part whatever in our modern system of education — in that system which spends millions of money and is, on every evidence, an utterly monstrous piece of futility, both practical and theoretical. We have seen nothing of the colour and the freedom of this gipsy life; we have noted that it is not the life of the "mean streets", and therefore that it is wholly contemptible. And then, on the other hand, we have listened to a great Minister of the Crown "arguing" in a fashion that would have brought the rod upon his back if he had been a little thirteen-year-old boy in a thirteenth-century school; and we have noted nothing in the least amiss. We discern neither the beauty of things nor the reason of things; we are going blind.



Ritual

Once upon a time, as we say in English, or *olim*, as the Latins said in their more austere and briefer way, I was sent forth on a May Monday to watch London being happy on their Whitsun holiday. This is the sort of appointment that used to be known in newspaper offices as an annual; and the difficulty for the men engaged in this business is to avoid seeing the same sights as those witnessed a year before and saying much the same things about them as were said on Whit-Monday twelvemonth. Queuing up for Madame Tussaud's waxworks, giving buns to diverse creatures in the Zoo, gazing at those Easter Island gods in the portico of the British Museum, waiting for all sorts of early doors to open; all these are spectacles of the day. And the patient man who boards the buses from suburbs may chance to hear a lady from Hornsey expounding to her neighbour on the seat, an inhabitant of Enfield Wash, the terrible gaieties that Piccadilly Circus witnesses when the electric signs are fairly lit.

On the Whit-Monday in question, I saw and recorded some of these matters; and then strolled westward along Piccadilly, by the palings of the Green Park. The conventional business of the day had been more or less attended to: now for the unsystematic prowling: one never knows where one may find one's goods. And then and there, I came across some boys, half-a-dozen or so of them, playing what struck me as a very queer game on the fresh turf of the Park, under the tender and piercing green of the young leaves. I have forgotten the preliminary elaborations of the sport; but there seemed to be some sort of dramatic action, perhaps with dialogue, but this I could not hear. Then one boy stood alone, with the five or six others about him. They pretended to hit the solitary boy, and he fell to the ground and lay motionless, as if dead. Then the others covered him up with their coats, and ran away. And then, if I remember, the boy who had been ritually smitten, slaughtered, and buried, rose to his feet, and the very odd game began all over again.

Here, I thought, was something a little out of the way of the accustomed doings and pleasures of the holiday crowds, and I returned to my office and embodied an account of this Green Park sport in my tale of Whit-Monday in London; with some allusion to the curious analogy between the boys' game and certain matters of a more serious nature. But it would not do. A spectacled Reader came down out of his glass cage, and held up a strip of proof.

"Hiram Abiff?", he queried in a low voice, as he placed the galley-slip on my desk, and pointed to the words with his pen. "It's not usual to mention these things in print."

I assured the Reader that I was not one of the Widow's offspring, but he still shook his head gravely, and I let him have his way, willing to avoid all *admiratio*. It was, I thought, a curious little incident, and to this day I have never heard an explanation of the coincidence — mere chance, very likely — between the pastime in the Park and those matters which it is not usual to mention in print.

But a good many years later, this business of the Green Park was recalled to me by a stranger experience in a very different part of London. A friend of mine, an American, who had travelled in many outland territories of the earth, asked me to show him some of the less known quarters of London.

"Do not misunderstand me, sir," he said, in his measured, almost Johnsonian manner, "I do not wish to see your great city in its alleged sensational aspects. I am not yearning to probe the London underworld, nor do I wish to view any opium joints or blind-pigs for cocaine addicts. In such matters, I have already accumulated more than sufficient experience in other quarters of the world. But if you would just shew me those aspects which are so ordinary that nobody ever sees them, I shall be greatly indebted to you."

I remembered how I had once awed two fellow-citizens of his by taking them to a street not very far from King's Cross Station, and shewing them how each house was guarded by twin plaster sphinxes of a deadly chocolate-red, which crouched on either side of the flights of steps leading to the doorways. I remembered how the late Arnold Bennett had come exploring in this region, and seen the sphinxes and had noted them in his dairy with a kind of dumb surmise, venturing no comment. So I said that I thought I understood. We set out, and soon we were deep in that unknown London which is at our very doors.

"Dickens had been here," I said in my part as Guide and Interpreter. "You know 'Little Dorrit'? Then this might be Mr. Casby's very street, which set out meaning to run down into the valley and up again to the top of the hill, but got out of breath and stopped still after twenty yards."

The American gentleman relished the reference and his surroundings. He pointed out to me curious work in some of the iron

balconies before the first floor windows in the grey houses, making a rough sketch of the design of one of them in his note-book. We wandered here and there, and up and down at haphazard, by strange wastes and devious ways, till I, in spite of my fancied knowledge, found myself in a part that I did not remember to have seen before. There were timber yards with high walls about them. There were cottages that seemed to have strayed from the outskirts of some quiet provincial town, off the main road. One of these lay deep in the shadow of an old mulberry, and ripening grapes hung from a vine on a neighbouring wall. The hollyhocks in the neat little front gardens were almost over; there were still brave displays of snapdragons and marigolds. But round the corner, barrows piled with pale bananas and flaming oranges filled the roadway, and the street market resounded with raucous voices, praise of fruit and fish, and loud bargainings, and gossip at its highest pitch. We pushed our way through the crowd, and left the street of the market, and presently came into the ghostly quiet of a square: high, severe houses, built of whitish bricks, complete in 1840 Gothic, all neat and well-kept, and for all sign of life or movement, uninhabited.

And then, when we had barely rested our ears from the market jangle, there came what I suppose was an overflow from that region. A gang of small boys surged into the square and broke its peace. There were about a dozen of them, more or less, and I took it that they were playing soldiers. They marched, two and two, in their dirty and shabby order, apparently under the command of a young ruffian somewhat bigger and taller than the rest. Two of them banged incessantly with bits of broken wood on an old meat tin and a battered iron tea tray, and all of them howled as barbarously as any crooner, but much louder. They went about and about, and then diverged into an empty road that looked as if it led nowhere in particular, and there drew up, and formed themselves into a sort of hollow square, their captain in the middle. The tin pan music went on steadily, but less noisily; it had become a succession of slow beats, and the howls had turned into a sort of whining chant.

But it remained a very horrible row, and I was moving on to get away from the noise, when my American interposed.

"If you wouldn't mind our tarrying here for a few moments," he said apologetically. "This pastime of your London boys interests me very much. You may think it strange, but I find it more essentially exciting than the Eton and Harrow Cricket Match of which I witnessed some part a few weeks ago."

So we looked on from an unobstrusive corner. The boys, evidently, agreed with my friend, and found their game absorbing. I don't think that they had noticed us or knew that we were there.

They went through their queer performance. The bangs or beats on the tin and the tray grew softer and slower, and the yells had died into a monotonous drone. The leader went inside the square, from boy to boy, and seemed to whisper into the ear of each one. Then he passed round a second time, standing before each, and making a sort of summoning or beckoning gesture with his hand. Nothing happened. I did not find the sport essentially exciting; but looking at the American, I observed that he was watching it with an expression of the most acute interest and amazement. Again the big boy went about the square. He stopped dead before a little fellow in a torn jacket. He threw out his arms wide, with a gesture of embrace, and then drew them in. He did this three times, and at the third repetition of the ceremony, the little chap in the torn jacket cried out with a piercing scream and fell forward as if dead.

The banging of the tins and the howl of the voices went up to heaven with a hideous dissonance.

My American friend was gasping with astonishment as we passed on our way.

"This is an amazing city," he said. "Do you know, sir, that those boys were acting all as if they'd been Asiki doing their Njoru ritual. I've seen it in East Africa. But there the black man that falls down stays down. He's dead."

A week or two later, I was telling the tale to some friends. One of them pulled an evening paper out of his pocket.

"Look at that," said he, pointing with his finger. I read the headlines:

MYSTERY DEATH IN NORTH LONDON SQUARE
HOME OFFICE DOCTOR PUZZLED
HEART VESSELS RUPTURED
"PLAYING SOLDIERS"
BOY FALLS DEAD
CORONER DIRECTS OPEN VERDICT



The Introduction

from The Dragon of the Alchemists

Edgar Allan Poe, who was so infinitely more wonderful and more admirable than his best lovers suppose, made one great mistake. He is contrasting prose and poetry, and says, strangely, that the object of the former is truth, and of the latter, beauty. This is strange, indeed, in Poe, for none knew better than he that at the last, truth and beauty meet together and are seen to be one. It is difficult, as we must all confess, to avoid confusion when we go down into these deep waters; but for once Poe fell into a compound error. For, be it remembered, he is speaking of literature and of nothing but literature. He is not referring to scientific textbooks — I am sure that he never supposed for a moment that his own "Manual of Testacious Malacology", or whatever it is called, was literature — but to the books which are real books. And yet, for the moment, he seems to confuse truth with science, or information about the surfaces of things; such as facts about the height of Mont Blanc, about the legs of the spider, about the reactions of sulphuric acid, water, and zinc, about the date of the accession of William IV, and the depth of the Atlantic. And I suppose the confusion, which is all but universal, has arisen from a fallacy of derivation. It is true that a spider has six legs, and that William IV ascended the throne of England in the year 1830; but neither these facts, nor any number of facts in the same order, are the truth, or have any relation, save the remotest, with the truth. What Poe probably meant was that poetry is not a suitable medium for the conveying of facts, information about surfaces — in other words, science. And the proposition is perfectly true; but it applies also to prose, that is to prose considered as a mode of literary expression. Here again is a stumbling block and a cause of confusion. For, while it is perfectly true that the Latin grammar and the chemistry handbook are not poetry; it is also equally true that they are not prose. They are language used as a vehicle of information; they are neither poetry nor prose. I remember, about fifty-five years ago or so, beginning the study of the history of my country with the lines:

"In 'fifty-five a Roman host
From Gaul assailed our southern coast."

I decline to argue the question of what *that* medium may be; I suspect that it is beyond all definition.

Let it not be supposed that I desire in any way to sneer at science. There are excellent souls whose vocation it is to know all about stamens and pistils, the geology of Snowdon, the date of the second Reform Bill, and the name of King Alfred's grandmother. Mankind is infinitely curious, even about trifles, and I would not have it otherwise. What I want to make clear is that these trifles are no affair of literature or painting or any of the arts. Art is not concerned with true things — the particular — but with the truth — the universal — which is but another aspect of Beauty.

And it has always appeared to me that this eternal and universal Beauty or Truth, which is the subject-matter of all Art, is also the eternal and universal mystery or secret. Here you have in the book before you by Frederick Carter images of the shapes of men and women, shapes of fire, shapes of water; shapes single and shapes in combination with other shapes. And I suppose I need not labour the point that Mr. Carter has not drawn his curious and significant figures with the object of offering us instruction in anatomy or in the detail of any other natural sciences. He sees the external, natural, visible world, no doubt, well and clearly — I am not an art critic — but he chiefly sees through that natural and visible and temporal array and order; and sees beyond it to the eternal and spiritual world within. And this is the real world as distinguished from the actual world; and only those who discern it have any claim to the title of realists.

This is true of all things; small or great, apparently trivial or apparently important. I was particularly struck by the picture which Mr. Carter has called "Blind Understanding", where groups and masses of people are assembled in a vast and ancient hall, a place of gloom and doom, as it appears to me; a hall of judgments that are devoid of light, or knowledge, or compassion. And oddly enough, it at once recalled to my mind a very different assemblage that I witnessed a few years ago, in the days when I was a newspaper reporter. It was in the black time of the war, and a great popular meeting was to be held in Trafalgar Square, by way of appeal to all of us to subscribe to the War Loan — if that were its title. I was sent to describe this meeting, and did so as well as I could, stressing, of course, the national and patriotic significance of the great gathering. But as I wrote, standing by the eastern parapet of the square, it all assumed for me quite

another aspect. There was, if I remember, some sort of platform or pavilion under the northern parapet of the square, where civic dignitaries were grouped in their robes, whence the great men spoke. Beneath them was the great mass and multitude of the people, thronged densely together. And then again, the paces and steps that form the base of the Nelson Column were occupied by line above line of men, as if arranged in a certain solemn order, according to their dignities and offices, according to the part assigned to them in some tremendous ritual. But that which chiefly caught at my heart was this. There are in Trafalgar Square lines of granite posts, between three and four feet high, as I suppose. On each of these posts a man was standing, so that he might get a better view of what was being done. But the impression, as I received it, was quite ineffable. Here were these men, high above the crowd, standing in regular and equal order, each in his set place; and I immediately named them in my mind the Witnesses, and wondered what sonorous and terrible proclamations they were presently to utter to the multitude. And so, it will be seen, I had gone far enough from the actual object of this huge gathering of men, and from the actuality of men who climbed as high as they could, on plinth or pillars, to see as well as possible. And yet the reality, as it was presented to me, was not out of all relation with the actualities of the scene. The rite or drama which I witnessed was, somehow, concerned with the awful war which then raged through all the world; and as I have mentioned the word "drama", I am reminded that I thought vaguely of the vast theatre at Athens and the multitudes that gathered there to hear how the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children, how terrible beings pursue the bloodguilty man, how the mighty are set down from their seat; and above all, perhaps, there was in my mind the drama of "The Persians", and of the ruin of the insolent king. And so I saw in Trafalgar Square, as Mr. Bonar Law, or Mr. Lloyd George, or the Lord Mayor of London asked for liberal subscriptions, some unearthly drama of the Great War, set with scenic apparatus of vast and awful significance.

And as I have said, this principle of *aliquid latet* — of there being something hidden beneath the surface of the world — applies equally to things small and to things great. Tennyson saw the hidden mystery of the universe in the tiny flower growing in a cranny of the wall; it may appear again if the gipsies light a fire of broken sticks on a dark hill in a wild land; it is seen in the splendour of the starry heavens; it is seen also in a well by the wayside, where the cold water bubbles up from the rock in burning weather, and the basin of rock

that contains it is decked with magic, delicate greenery, glittering from the drippings of the rock. And note the word "magic". It is not a vague flourish. It is used deliberately to signify that in such a wayside well there is much more than meets the eye, and a satisfaction of the spirit that is above the satisfaction of the body when its thirst is quenched by the cold bubbleings of the well. We know that there is another road where the sun burns wearily and the dust is thick and bitter on our lips in this way of our pilgrimage: and on this road also are wells of wonderful refreshment, and there is cool greenness to rejoice tired and sorrowful eyes. We pass through, we perceive sensibly, temporal things in order that we may gain eternal things, the everlasting essences that are at once hidden in the visible and tangible and audible universe and communicated by it.

All things are because they are wonderful: I wrote that sentence many long years ago, and every year teaches me how true a saying it is. If this wonder, which is another name for the hidden secret of which I have spoken, were taken away, then our race would have fallen a second time. Nothing would have changed, but everything would have changed. Water would quench thirst as before, but after the manner in which it quenches the thirst of a horse or a dog. The green things would grow as richly as ever about the over-runnings of the well, but they would be invisible to us — unless, indeed, they were good to eat. All the arts would become impossible and incredible, for the arts only exist to manifest the secret mystery. I suppose that if you put a picture before a cat or a dog, there is a sense in which the animal may be said to see it; and yet in our sense it does not see it at all. In short, the wonder of the world once removed, the whole world as we know it would cease to exist, for it exists and subsists in wonder. And we should have fallen from the place of man to the place of the beasts.

It is thus, I think, that Mr. Carter's symbols, and all truly-conceived symbols are to be justified. It is clearly the duty of all of us to see the truth and then to tell it — if the gift of tongues has been bestowed upon us. And the only way of telling the truth is by means of the symbol: the part that is put for the whole; that whole which for our lips is ineffable. The world is a cypher. He does best who hints most closely at the secret message latent in the signs exhibited to us.

The Grande Trouvaille

A Legend of Pentonville

Once upon a time — it is the fairy tale beginning, and therefore a very good one — I was walking up Pentonville with my old friend, A. E. Waite. It was a grey afternoon; one must always choose a grey afternoon if one would walk fitly up Pentonville. I think we were setting out on a journey to explore Stoke Newington, with the view of determining whether Edgar Allan Poe's school were still in existence. This was a matter which had engaged us both, at odd intervals, for years, and we had set out many times on the adventure, but had always wandered away on quite alien trails and on haphazard quests; and to this day the matter remains so doubtful that I am not quite sure whether Waite and I ever discovered the school in the dim English village which Poe describes in "William Wilson". The fact was that both of us had so many interests, which led us astray. Waite, perhaps, thought that he might find the Holy Grail, disguised, disgraced and dishonoured in some back shop of a back street; while I have always had the great and absorbing desire of going the other way. The other way? That is the secret.

Anyhow, on this long-ago afternoon we were lounging up the weary-all hill of Pentonville, when Waite stopped suddenly. I looked at him in some curiosity. There was a singular expression on his face. His eye — I think — became fixed. His nostrils — to the best of my belief — twitched. Otherwise, there was an odd fixity about his position. I believe in a certain kind of sporting dog this attitude is called "making a point". I did not say anything: the Order generally known as the Companions of the Eighties knows how and when to preserve silence, but there was, I fancy, an interrogative expression in my eyebrow. Frater Sacramentum — I mean A. E. Waite — stood still to gaze for a moment or two, staring eagerly at the opposite side of the road — the right-hand side, as you go up to the Angel — and said at last:

"Machen, I feel that I must go into that shop over the way. I know there's something there for me!"

And so we crossed over. It was a small and quite

undistinguished shop on the side of the grey hill. I think it sold inkpots, pens, pencils, exercise books, comic songs on long sheets, the evening paper, and the miscellaneous; otherwise the infinite oddments of small shoppery. I couldn't imagine what Waite could expect to find there.

We went in. Somewhere in the back of the shop there was a row or two of dingy, greasy, tattered old books; and a fire glowed in Waite's eye as he beheld them. The scent held.

"Have you any old bound volumes of boys' stories?" he asked the ancient man of the shop. "There were two or three left," said the man, a little astonished I thought at the enquiry. There used to be a small lending library here, he explained, and he had taken over the stock.

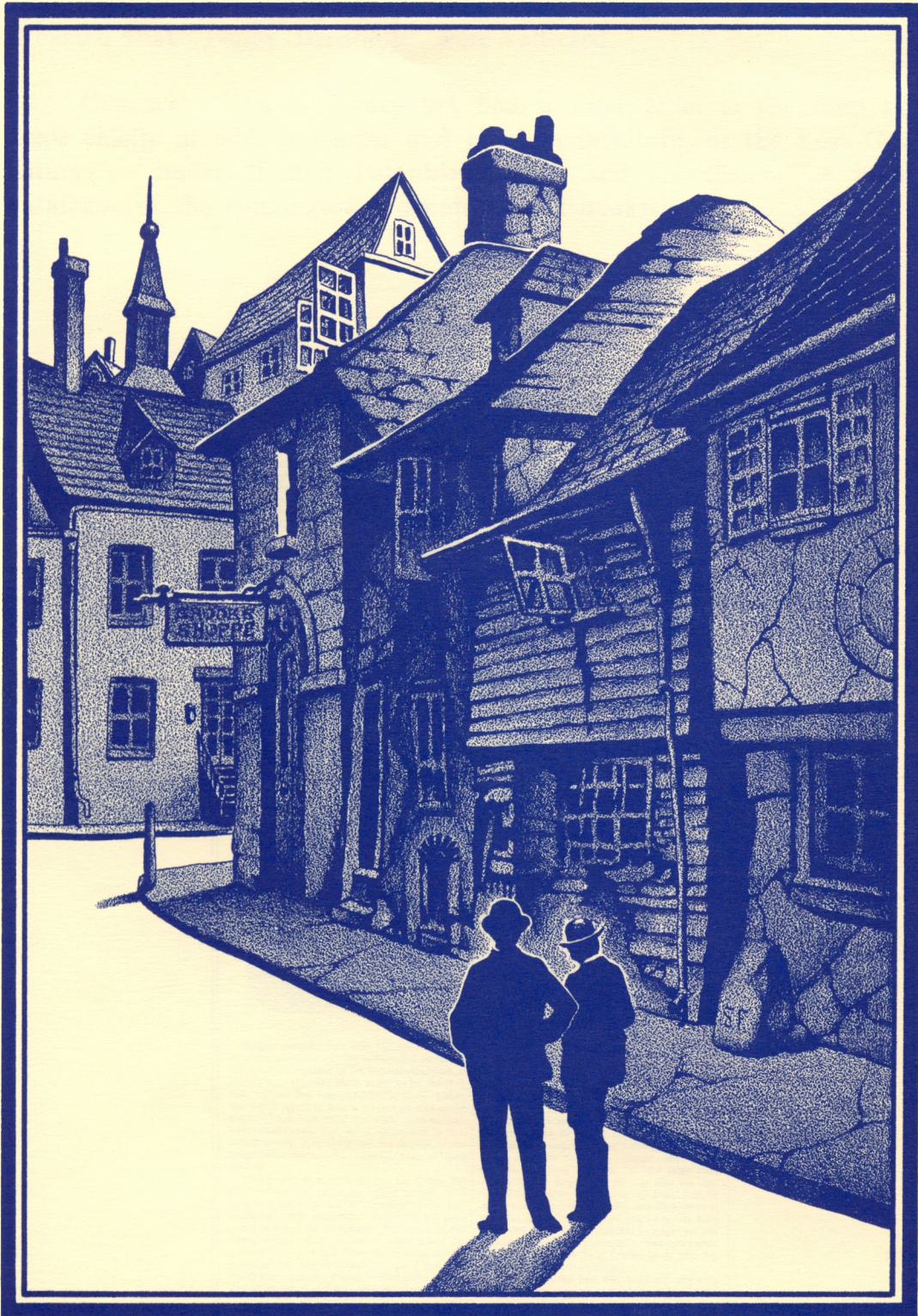
And, to cut the story short, Waite went out into Pentonville, which, I am sure, had now become for him not grey but radiant, with a copy of "The Old House in West Street" under his arm.

Perhaps I should explain. My friend Waite, besides taking over all mysticism, occultism, alchemy, and transcendentalism for his province, has a hobby, like most good men. In his case, this hobby is the collecting of "Penny Dreads" of ancient date: the 'forties and early 'fifties are, I believe, the golden age of this adventure. And amongst those "Penny Dreadfuls" as they are affectionately called, one of the choicest prizes is "The Old House in West Street". And Waite had got it for eighteen pence or half-a-crown: a greasy, old bound volume of the old weekly parts, vilely printed on wretched paper with amazing woodcuts: and yet a find, a delight.

Then, if recollection serves, we had some gin. It was an occasion.

There are two morals to this story. Firstly, whether you dabble in stalls or shops or catalogues, you must have the scent of the business. They say, inside the newspaper offices, "So-and-So has a nose for news." So it is in book collecting.

Then, and this is even more soothing, the booksellers are not omniscient. They may think they are very clever; and indeed they may know everything that is to be known about "Alpine", "Americana",




"County Histories", "Medical", and so forth: but depend upon it, there is a weak spot in the armour somewhere. The old man of Pentonville knew all about exercise books and comic songs, but he had never dreamed that "Penny Dreadfuls" were collected.

Courage! You or I may yet find a First Folio in the shop that deals chiefly in odd fire-irons and bamboo furniture, or the Lost Celtic Liturgy – under "Bound Pamphlets, MSS. and Miscellanea" – in the catalogue of the cunningest of second-hand booksellers.

THE OLD HOUSE OF WEST STREET. 425

tressed by constant disappointments, that he knew not how to console her. Indeed, he began to despair almost as much as herself. It now appeared that the villain Haggerty had indeed spoken the truth, when he asserted that there was no other person but himself who was acquainted with the secret of Marian's birth, and thus all chance of the discovery, so important to them, being made, seemed utterly at an end. It was not easily that they could persuade themselves, after the lapse of so many years, that Mrs. Walton was still living, and, consequently, they could see no probability of the mystery being unravelled.



and self-reproach constantly tortured her to a degree almost beyond endurance.

Mrs. Selby remained in the same melancholy state of mind, and although the disclosure she had made of her errors had somewhat relieved her conscience, and she was sincerely penitent, yet she felt that she had so greatly sinned, that she could scarcely hope for pardon, and her heart revolted at the idea of continuing a burthen upon those on whom she had no claim, although they did all they could to make her mind easy upon that subject, and behaved with the utmost kindness and consideration towards her. Rose also freely pardoned her for the injuries she had inflicted upon her, and behaved to her with the greatest respect; greatly indebted as she felt to her for having been the means of revealing the mystery of her birth, which, but for her, might never have been penetrated.

The circumstance of the unexpected meeting with Clarrington frequently occupied their thoughts, and while Rose regretted that she had inadvertently made known to him who she really was, she could not but feel satisfied that she had been the means of saving his life; for although he was the assassin of her father, and no one could entertain a greater disgust and horror towards him than she did, at the same time she could not forget that he was also the brother of her mother. Sincerely she hoped that he might not be apprehended, for she shuddered at the idea of the ignominious fate he would then meet with; and she trusted that he might yet live to repent of his atrocious crimes, and ultimately die a natural death in a foreign land, and his offences be buried in oblivion.

The pursuit after him was still continued with unabated vigilance, but, as has been shown, with-

Many a pang did this poor Valentine and our heroine: all the bright hopes they had formed of being united together in the indissoluble bonds of matrimony, appeared fated never to be realized, and, without that consummation of their wishes, the world would in future present no charms for them. Their love daily increased, even as their hopes diminished, and when alone, and in each others society, they could not but deplore, in the most bitter terms, the untowardness of their destiny.

Deeply did Mrs. Melvin feel for them, but alas! what relief could she afford them? And this, coupled with her own painful secret, rendered her truly miserable. Could she but have found courage to unburthen her mind of the heavy weight which had for so many years oppressed it, she might have found some amelioration of her anguish; but she could not, she dared not; and the gloomy retrospection of the past filled her bosom with the bitterest remorse,

Bridles and Spurs

One of the most tiresome men I ever knew was always talking about nature. I don't know what he meant by nature. I don't believe that he knew what he meant by nature. Usually, I think, he spoke of it as something good and just and beautiful, discerning and dividing the true from the false. Thus, a very wealthy man of his acquaintance became ill, and was glad of the company of my tiresome friend. "In spite of all his money," said the tiresome one, "when Dame Nature gave him a tap on the shoulder — there he was." I have no notion of what this means. I doubt whether it means anything at all. I told the fellow that he was talking nonsense; that nature simply meant the sum of things; everything that is; that if a sunset was nature, so also was a louse; in short that if nature were "a holy thing" in the words of philosophic Snawley, she was also "a rum one," in the definition of philosophic Squeers.

It has always struck me as marvellous that Johnson was afforded grace — I would almost say — to give Rousseau the lie, to cast down his false doctrine and stamp upon it. For Rousseau, as we all know, preached to foolish and too-attentive ears the doctrine of the state of nature, and of the return to nature. He saw that things were very much amiss; and, indeed, he was right, since they always are amiss. But he went on to say that they were amiss because man had departed from the state of nature, and might be put right by man's returning to the state of nature. And what did he mean? I don't think Rousseau was in so hopeless a state as the tiresome man: he had a meaning in what he said. By a state of nature, so far as can be gathered, he meant the state of savagery; a condition of things in which man lives without laws or institutions of any kind, civil or ecclesiastical; in which there are no conventions, no customs, no immemorial traditions, no usual habits which have grown by long and general consent to have the force of law. For example, supposing yourself to be the guest of a Duchess: there is no law in England that I know of to prohibit your spitting on Her Grace's drawing-room carpet, if you be so inclined. Yet, I am very sure that there are many people who will rob and swindle their neighbour, and covet his goods, and bear false witness against him, and injure him in body, soul, and spirit gaily and freely, who would be quite incapable of defiling that noble carpet. And I spoke of long consent as giving custom the force of law. It need not be so very long. When Dr. Johnson was in Paris amidst the exquisite elegancies and politenesses of the old regime, he

saw a lady of quality spit on her drawing-room floor, and rub out the spittle with her foot.

But at all events: when Rousseau preached that gospel of a return to nature, he was thinking of savagery, a state of things free from all law, all custom, all convention, all hierarchy, all rule and all rulers. It was pretty much the state that Shelley viewed, when he wrote:

Sceptreless, free, uncircumscribed, but man
Equal, unclassed, tribeless, and nationless,
Exempt from awe, worship, degree, the king
Over himself.

And, as I say, Johnson would have none of it. He knew that it was all poisonous nonsense, and declared that it would give him very great pleasure to sign Rousseau's sentence of transportation, as a bad man, as one of the worst of men. And here is the marvel: that Johnson believed that Rousseau's picture of the savage state was a true one; that there were people living in these conditions, without king, priest, custom, or law. "Very well," said the Doctor in effect, "I allow that there are such men, and I say that they are no better than wild beasts." We know better. There are no such men. The farther back we go, the more elaborate the structure of human society becomes; the more complicated the vast *corpus* of rules and regulations, ordering not only public actions and transactions, but also the most domestic, private, and intimate details of every day life.

Take the case of Mrs. Green, the wife of the South African missionary. Mrs. Green went into her kitchen to confer with her two black servants as to the work and business of the day; the subject of dinner naturally being included in the discussion. A basket of fruit was produced: would it do for a tart? "No," said the mistress. "I think it's too green."

The two girls turned ashen grey, and waited for the bolt of heaven to fall. Mrs. Green had been guilty of a frightful infraction of their law. She had uttered the name of her husband: a horrid transgression. She should have varied her phrase, and said: "It's not ripe enough." In extreme cases, in which no paraphrase would serve, the proper course would be to summon a boy of under five years,

whisper the tremendous name of Green into his ear, and bid him whisper it in turn to the person concerned.

That is real savagery; about as remote from the false and idle dreams of Rousseau and Shelley as anything that the mind can conceive. No doubt, the levee of King Louis XV was a complicated business, a highly ceremonial business, a business of many intricate rubrics, rules and regulations. But courtiers are a limited class, and levees come to an end, and wigs and court dress can be exchanged for loose caps, soft slippers, and easy gowns. The life of a savage is a perpetual levee, in which every minute detail of his life is ordered. Civilisation may be good or bad; this, perhaps, is uncertain. But it is very certain that civilisation is a process which makes more and more for simplicity. I can remember the days of frilled shirt fronts, and, later, the splendid liveries of the Row.

What Rousseau really meant, then, was that man might gain happiness by ceasing to be a man and becoming a beast. This, no doubt, is a false proposition; but, yet worse, it is a loose proposition. What sort of a beast? An antelope, or an ant? An antelope, I suppose, has perfect liberty, till a lion, also enjoying the blessings of freedom, makes a dinner of him. Is that the life which Rousseau and Shelley had in mind; or did they propose to subject man to the iron, inevitable, merciless discipline of an ant's nest? Likely enough: it must be remembered that when the Pilgrim Fathers hanged Quakers, they called it the enjoyment of liberty of conscience. It was not only Habbakuk who was *capable de tout*.

But to return to that nature, from which we started: can we say more of it than this: that it is really Pan, the sum of everything that is, from Wordsworth's *Ode on Intimations of Immortality* to the untrapped bacillus of influenza, still roaming free from the tyranny of man: "equal, unclassed, tribeless, and nationless, exempt from awe, worship, degree, the king over himself."

Is that all we can say of this famous nature; beyond the fact that the word has been the fruitful parent of more intolerable drivel and nonsense than any other word to be found in the dictionary? I think there is one thing to be said, at all events; and that is that in nature there is a boundless and persistent difference, inequality, or, in Bacon's phrase, strangeness of proportion. One oak leaf is very like any other oak leaf; but it is never a replica of any other oak leaf.

You can see the difference if you will take any two oak leaves, and examine them closely. So with mountains, so with minds: there are no two mountains, no two minds exactly alike. It is quite certain, then, that whatever sense you give the word equality, there is no such thing in nature.

There is a saying often quoted. I have forgotten who first uttered it, and I quote from memory; but it goes something like this: "I can never believe that one set of men is born, saddled and bridled, ready to be ridden; while another set of men is born, booted and spurred, and ready to ride them." I am sorry that the gentleman, whoever he may have been, was never able to believe this – since it happens to be the exact and certain truth. A melancholy truth, perhaps; it is a melancholy truth that water drowns and fire burns; but it is true. You have only to turn into any history book, or into any industrial town, or open any newspaper to be convinced of the truth of the proposition which the man couldn't believe. Of course, there are good riders and bad riders, kind rulers and cruel tyrants, amongst the kings of the earth and of big business. But as to the dictum of the riders and the ridden; one may say that it is the truth:

Megis yr oedd yn y dechreu, y
mae yr awr hon, ac yn y
wastad, ac yn oes oesodd."

From the beginning of all beginnings, and at this hour, and into the waste of time, and to the age of the ages.

Local Colour

A certain French artist of the realistic school, when he wished to paint a sea-beach, carried zeal for accuracy from his end to his means, and plastered real sand upon his canvas. So runs a story which, if not true, is at least smartly invented. It is typical of the spirit in which not a few modern novelists go about their business. One of the most artistic amongst these devotees of local colour has lately been overtaken by his proper Nemesis. Mr. H. G. Wells gains some of his finest effects by the Defoe-like vigour with which he weaves the common-place happenings of every day into his most imaginative embroideries. In "The War of the Worlds" this trick was especially marked; no one can doubt that the newsboys and ginger-beer sellers on Horsell Common heightened the horror of the Martians. But an ingenious Yankee has seen Mr. Wells, and gone one better — to speak in American. It seems that the editor of a Boston paper, which published "The War of the Worlds" as a serial, saw the excellence of Mr. Wells' method, and carried it a little further by the simple expedient of translating all the scenes in the story from London and Surrey to Boston and its environs. Mr. Wells is annoyed at this; but on reflection he ought to see in it the sincerest flattery and a compliment to his literary method. Perhaps, as an English critic suggests, the future will be with the novelist who will make his local colour adaptable to every town or country in which his work is published; possibly such a condition will one day find its way into the law of international copyright.

To turn from the particular to the general, we must confess that we view this *reductio ad absurdum* of the "local colour" doctrine with but a chastened grief. Like most good things, that doctrine is apt nowadays to be carried too far. It will be remembered that Mr. Balfour lately adverted with apparent approval to this tendency of the day. He drew a pleasing picture of our novelists ransacking the world for unused "local colour", and raised in his hearers' minds a vision of the unfortunate novelist who has been born a little too late, seeking, like Alexander, for new worlds to conquer, and forced to place his characters in "lands undiscoverable in the unheard-of West", or to fly with them, like Mr. Wells and his predecessors, across the zodiac. It is true that the novelists who are already at work might regard this state of things with some complacency. A tendency has already been displayed to divide the map of the United Kingdom amongst them — to every man a parish or two — and to threaten trespassers with all the terrors of the Society of Authors. Yet it is but few such copyholds

that are good in literary law, and the poppy scattered by the equity of oblivion (as most of us will call it in this case) soon covers up the old title-deeds. Even the novelists of to-day, in spite of the din of adulation that seems to deafen the successful among them, are dimly conscious of this. Otherwise we could hardly understand the zeal with which they pursue "local colour", as invalids travel for health, good men pursue virtue, or Charles Lamb toiled after the art of smoking tobacco. No one who is duly attentive to the daily or weekly paragraphs of "literary gossip" can ignore this. We learn that the popular Mr. A. has spent some months in exploring the Roman Catacombs, where the scene of his forthcoming novel is laid; that the eminent Mr. B. has set off to Klondike in order to correct the three last chapters of a book which he has on the stocks; that the justly-celebrated Mr. C. has made some equally dark and frigid vigils at stagedoors in order to free his theatrical episodes from any suspicion of staginess; and so one might run through the alphabet. One competitor for fame goes up in a balloon in order to write about an aeronaut; another descends a coal-mine in search of the advertisement which Sheridan knew an easier way to obtain. Sometimes the system is attended with more than physical difficulties. A novelist who has been too faithful in his local colour has been known to become as unpopular in an English village as M. Daudet was at Tarascon. However, it is a poor enthusiasm that can be stopped by such trifles; and if Prince Posterity ever undertakes the gigantic task of completing Dunlop's "History of Fiction", he will certainly label the present generation as "the age of local colour" — if he remembers it at all.

In moderation, of course, and as an aid to, rather than a substitute for, imagination, this anxiety to be true to nature in the setting of a tale is good enough. As Mr. Blackwood told Miss Psyche Zenobia, "Nothing so well assists the fancy as an experimental knowledge of the matter in hand." But he carried his theory to a length to which one regretfully recognizes that not even the most energetic of modern novelists can be expected to go. M. Zola is said to have petitioned for leave to be present at an experimental collision when he was engaged on his great railway novel. The story is credible, though one has no better authority to offer than M. Forain; but even M. Zola might have blenched if his request had been granted on condition that he took a seat on the engine. "If you cannot conveniently tumble out of a balloon," Miss Zenobia was told, "or be swallowed up in an earthquake, or get stuck fast in a chimney, you will have to be contented with simply imagining some similar misadventure."

Short of this heroic counsel, the hunt for local colour is commendable. A very moderate acquaintance with biography shows that it was the practice of our best novelists. One's clearest memory in the Vale of Forth is of Scott galloping across the lea to fix the time for Fitz-James' ride. In the note which closes "Denis Duval" we learn how conscientiously Thackeray strove to keep as near truth in feigning as he could. "How many young novelists are there," asked its writer in 1864, "who . . . if they desired to set down their hero in Winchelsea a hundred years ago . . . would take the trouble to learn how the town was built, and what gate led to Rye, and who were its local magnates, and how it was governed?" Thackeray did all this, and "most can raise the flowers now, for all have got the seed." In the same way FitzGerald has told us with what anxious care Carlyle pottered about the field of Naseby till he was quite sure that he had found the right grouping of the forces. Macauley walked up Killiecrankie Pass to verify the speed of the English army, though he seems to have omitted to hire a Highlander to chase him back. This is a graceful conscientiousness, and attention to it might have saved Scott from making the sun set over the sea on the coast of Fife. But the matter appears in a truer light when we remember that Scott would have answered this, like other complaints, in Prior's words, "Odzooks, must one swear to the truth of a song?"

The fact is that the passion for accurate local colour, like most subaltern virtues, may be overdone. Thackeray put it in its right place when he observed that he would like to have a "competent, respectable and rapid clerk" for the business part of his novels, who might be instructed to kill the archbishop in about five pages and "colour in with local colouring." This, in fact, is the carpenter's and joiner's part of the business, and too many of our contemporary novelists have set up as architects on the strength of nothing more. It is a natural consequence that "local colour" has been exalted unreasonably among the various ingredients that go to the making of a good novel. In the hands of the puffers, at least, it is made to do duty for all the rest; they even forget that colour should be "mixed with brains"; and so many people are incapable of distinguishing between puffery and criticism that this is to be regretted. When one sees a novelist openly eulogized on the score of the time and expense that he has devoted to the accumulation of local colour, it is time to make a protest. One is even inclined to prefer the followers of Mr. Bayes, "fellows that scorn to imitate Nature, but are given altogether to elevate and surprise." Happily Nature has provided a remedy. The "sweet voices" of the

puffers soon die away, and true popularity or permanence is not to be won by their aid, nor by the most painstaking and fresh local colour. Deliberately to "cram" that, indeed, is usually fatal. To take a single instance, George Eliot spent years in thus adorning "Romola", yet her Florentines leave us "more than usual calm", while her homely Mrs. Poyser and Caleb Garth go straight to the reader's heart. Stevenson has told us, in his account of the genesis of "Treasure Island", how much he relied upon a map; but then the map was his own invention, and to compare the wanderings of Alan and David among his familiar Highland hills with those of the Master in a foreign wilderness is to see at a glance the difference between the local colour which "gives itself, unasked, unsought", and that which is simply "crammed". To visit a place under a sense of duty is little better than to read it up on the plan adopted by Mr. Pott's critic of Chinese Metaphysics. A great writer may be as accurate or as incorrect as he pleases in his local colour; it is a matter of detail. He may give Bohemia a seaboard, or Cleopatra a billiard-table, place Newcastle on the Border or eclipse the sun for a full hour, and we care not a jot. What we demand is "four trestles, four boards, two actors, and a passion". The accessories are of trifling importance, but too many of our modern novelists are able to handle nothing else, and they make a virtue of necessity. They forget that a scene-painter cannot fill the theatre except at pantomime season.



Art and Luck

I am considering, like Mr. Squeers, where to have them. For, searching my memory, I cannot recall any specific instance in which a literary critic of repute has declared that the extraordinary event is inartistic, that the long arm of coincidence is a childish device, that the man who makes his lovers happy by a happy chance is beyond the pale of true literature. I cannot, I say, recall any particular case in which judgments to this effect have been pronounced; and yet it is not to be denied that a great deal of contemporary criticism is based on the doctrine that true art must not admit the strange event, the lucky chance, the queer coincidence.

And I want to know: why not?

Not, certainly, because the great masters of fiction have avoided all that sort of thing. Very odd things happen in the *Odyssey*. There are some strange coincidences in *OEdipus Tyrannus*. The plot of *Hamlet* turns on a revelation made by a ghost. The fate of Macbeth is determined by the prophecy of witches. The greatest of romances, *Don Quixote*, deals with an inspired madman. The steps of Gil Blas are dogged by queer encounters. Lavengro met strange people. The lives of Hardy's characters are often moulded by odd meetings and events.

We may safely say, then, that the example of the masters gives no encouragement to the doctrine of the moderns; that literature must be modelled to suit that character in *Mr. Polly*, who, it will be remembered, liked everything "very quiet".

And I hope that our critics will not tell us that all strangeness is bad, because nothing strange happens, because it is not lifelike. Because, if they say that, then I shall have them, as Squeers had Bolder. I shall have them, not because they are warty, as was Bolder; but because if they say that life is not strange, they lie. Life is full of the queerest, the oddest things. That long arm of coincidence is continually intruding. The highly improbable often happens.

It was only a week or two ago that I read in *The Independent* of the strange adventure that befell a quiet street in a quiet southern

suburb of London, in the course of the present year. When the decent inhabitants of the street awoke up one fine morning and prepared to set about the work of the day, they found that their by-way had been visited during the night by wild people. For some inexplicable and un conjectured reason these mysterious personages had wrenched the stone capitals or entablatures of ten or a dozen garden gateposts from their beds of mortar, and had hurled them to the ground. Too laborious a task for the merely mischievous or the gay drunkard, since each of these capitals weighed, it seems, 60 pounds. Was there some secret document, or, maybe, a jewel of fabulous value hidden under one of these stones? There is no end to the story; it is a matter for a strange surmise.

And as to coincidence: listen to this. On the fifth of September last a near relative of mine went for a walk from Amersham, in Buckinghamshire, towards the Chalfonts. On her way back she heard a queer noise proceeding from a roadside horse trough, a round horse trough, about four feet deep. She investigated, and found that a grey squirrel had fallen into the water and was trying vainly to get out. Every time the wretched beast struggled a few inches up it fell back again. It would certainly have been drowned if help had not come. For, of course, the compassionate Janet helped the squirrel out of the trough and saw it vanish into the hedgerow. She came home and told her story and was praised for the deed. The next morning the post brought her a present from a friend in Norfolk, a box containing a tiny squirrel in gold, hanging on a delicate golden chain. As far as I can gather, the Norfolk friend must have been attracted by the charm in a Yarmouth shop window just as Janet was drawing the grey squirrel out of the water; and I hold that here was a coincidence, and a strange one. Trifling enough; but it serves to show something of the concealed texture of life which lies beneath the apparent surface of the stuff; it serves as a hint, *aliquid latet*, that there is something profoundly strange hidden under the common current of our days. And, be it noted, there is no explanation, no "reason why" — for I reject the obvious moral that the gold squirrel was sent as the providential reward of virtue. This, too, is in accord with the canon of the mysterious world. Long ago, the Society for Psychical Research issued a volume containing a list and an account of well-warranted Apparitions of the Living. With the rarest exceptions, these visits were void of significance, of any discernible reason or meaning. They righted no wrongs, gave no signs of penitence or regret, evinced no emotion of any kind. So Dickens tells how he woke one morning and saw in the

daylight his father sitting beside the bed. Dickens wondered what the old man did there. He spoke to him more than once and got no answer; stretched out his hand to touch his shoulder – “and there was no such thing.” There was nothing the matter, the elder Dickens was not ill, nothing followed on this strange event.

But, let it be remembered, this apparition was just as much a part of life as the latest deputation to the Minister of Agriculture. It is mysterious; but then life is mysterious and full of awful surmise.

I think, then, that we are forced to conclude against the modern critical tendency to throw down the strange event, the queer encounter, the wild coincidence as childish things which do not concern the writer of fine fiction. Neither the example nor the precedent of the masters justifies them. The facts of life are dead against them.

Let me say that I know quite well what they mean. They mean that mystery does not interest them. They mean also that life as a whole does not interest them; but only that view of life which appeals to certain people who are pleased to call themselves intellectual. Very well, but that is not criticism; it is eccentricity – a different matter.



The Preface

from Afterglow

I

All words are more or less misconstrued and misunderstood; none more grievously than the word "Paganism". Paganism is conceived generally to be that state of the ancient world, Greek and Roman, but chiefly Greek, in which men lived in a kind of Abbey of Thelema, doing what they would, satisfying the flesh according to their desires, devoid of morals altogether, using the word "morals" in its customary modern sense. Insensibly, when anyone speaks of Paganism, one thinks of garlands and dances, of the Bacchic fury, of the breasts of the nymph in the brake, of the Satyrs lurking in the grove of dark ilexes. You could do as you pleased; there was no law to restrain you, from within or from without. As for the gods, they were but pleasing fictions, invented by the poets as a kind of gilt on the gingerbread of lechery; but nobody took the gods seriously. Such, we are apt to think, was Paganism.

It was nothing of the kind; that is, in the heroic age of Greece, certainly not in the age when Socrates, about to drink the hemlock, discoursed to his disciples of immortal life in the essence of the Godhead. They were no flowery and careless voluptuaries who listened to certain rituals of predestination that have survived to our days. We can read in them still of the doom that awaits proud and insolent men, owning no master in heaven or earth; of the manner in which the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children unto the third and fourth generation; of the vengeance that lies in wait for the spiller of blood; of the remorseless decrees of destiny; and of making atonement for transgression. Such are the topics of these sermons and rituals, which are known to us as Greek Plays. Paganism, in its pure and uncorrupted state, was, evidently, a good deal more than an elegant and poetic Bank Holiday, a perpetual riot, a rosy debauch. It had its austere side; perhaps it was, in its essence, as austere as New England in the seventeenth century; though, to be sure, it wore its robes with a better grace and had somewhat a different set of taboos and commands. The descendants of the Pilgrim Fathers hanged witches; the Athenians judged the men who profaned or divulged the holy Mysteries of Eleusis to be worthy of death.

Such then was Paganism in the days of its covenant; something more than a bedecked and fleshy revel. But in the time of its dissolution, I have no doubt that it had taken on some semblance of our popular notion of it.

The Alexandria which Mr. Buck has shown in such glowing and coloured pictures, on which the ancient and golden sunlight still shines and burns, was, in a sense, an Abbey of Thelema. Men did as they pleased, and all that pleased them was sensual pleasure. To be sure, they still talked of the gods. They talked of Aphrodite; but Aphrodite was only an excuse; just as, to the bad Mason, a certain very solemn and awful ceremony is only an excuse for the banquet which follows it.

II

Yet all the while there was a sense, sometimes conscious, sometimes sub-conscious, that it wouldn't do. In Mr. Buck's pages you will find this half-murmur of dissatisfaction, the sad murmur which finds its expression in the lines:

*Medio de fonte Eporum
Surgit amari aliquid.*

In the long run it was felt that mere pleasure failed to please. Men were evidently unable to live wholly in the body and by the body and for the body; there was some unknown element missing, and all became savourless, even deadly. Everywhere there was pleasure; nowhere was there joy. For this people had lost the old austere joys of true Paganism; they were nowise of the race of those Spartans who perished so splendidly in resisting the invasion of Greece by the Persian King; the Greek theatre had given place to the gaudy savagery of the Circus games; the old patriot city states were submerged by an orientalised cosmopolitanism. One got tired, it seemed, of wearing roses and worshipping Aphrodite; but what else was there to do? Really, it seemed, nothing; or nothing that was worth doing. One might say that Paganism was dissolving into a melancholy boredom, into that state of mind which afterwards was called *accidia* and accounted one of the deadly sins. Indeed, the sun had set. The sky was still lighted; but black clouds were gathering from all quarters of the heavens; and that red light in the west — was it not as if the roses were being



changed into burning flames? Well has Mr. Buck named these pastels of his "Afterglow".

III

One may say that the failure of this Paganism, which had become a decorated materialism, was the failure of a great experiment. The world of that day was endeavouring to live by bread alone; bread being understood to include:

"A profusion of meats and viands, oysters, lampreys, quails, roasted swans, wild boar, sauces and relishes, cakes of various grains mingled with honey, fruits and sherbets: all that the caprices of taste could suggest."

Add to this definition of bread: "Kraters of rich wine, cooled in snow brought laboriously from long distances", add even, "a group of slave girls . . . of selected beauty, nude except for their conventional girdles" — such was the bread on which the Alexandrian world tried to live. And, really, they did their best. They avoided the error of spoiling the ship for a ha'porth of tar. The Great Experiment was made completely, splendidly. The dough of this bread of theirs was of the very finest flour; it was served on a lordly dish, in a hall of great worship; it was brought to the board with all the daughters of music singing before it. I doubt whether this assay of bread can ever be conducted with such gorgeous circumstance again. And, besides, the whole thing was done without any self-consciousness. The company wore their wreathes of roses naturally, without the slightest sense of dressing-up or "making-believe" — or of making fools of themselves. In these days, the attempt at the revel is still made; but it is somewhat pathetic. We have lost the art of wearing garlands, and our attempts at revelry are more depressing than the spectacle of High School mistresses dancing the Morris. No; Alexandria did the thing in style; and yet, it seems, it was all a failure at best. Man found that he could not live on bread alone; that is, purely in the material world.

But let it not be supposed that I consider this Great Experiment as a self-evident absurdity, foredoomed to failure from the very nature of the quest. Very far from it. On the contrary, so much is the Alexandrian plan the obvious plan, that to this day many of us attempt to carry it out, in spite of its failure, in spite of the disadvantageous circumstances under which we must conduct our

operations, in spite of the fact that the kraters of rare wine cooled with snow have given place to whiskey that is dubious in England and not at all dubious in America. In spite of all, we do our best to be Alexandrians, since their way seems after all the certain way, the only way that is certain. Mr. Buck's Philosopher found the talk of the priests intolerable; and so many of us find the talk of our priests intolerable. After all, it is only the body and the things of the body which appear certain to the natural man. The philosophers may call them shadows and phantoms, but we are not philosophers. There is a legend that the great Newman was wont to regard his Cardinal's Hat and to murmur to himself: "Everything is uncertain except this: that there is a Holy Roman Catholic and Apostolic Church and that I am a Cardinal of it: for here is the hat — there is no doubt about that, at all events." The legend is, of course, a lie; but one understands the sentiment beneath it. We are quite sure of our bodies. We know that ginger is hot in the mouth. We may not know why it is hot; but as to the fact of the heat of the ginger, there is no room for argument about that. And that fact and other facts congruous therewith, the pleasant uses of wine and women, the delight of coolness afforded in summer, of a flaming hearth in winter, of a noble feast when one is hungry: these are beyond denial. And, as to all else, what do we know? "Is there a God?" asks St. Thomas Aquinas, opening his great treatise; and his answer is, "Apparently not". Mark the emphasis on "apparently"; but do not most of us live only in appearances, in phenomena, in the world wherein ginger is hot, and meat satisfies hunger, and drink quenches thirst, and women appease desire? All this we know certainly; beyond this we are in a world of conjecture, theory, dream, mystery, vague possibility. There may be a God, our bodies may be the mere veils of the spirit, the mind may be one of this spirit's instruments. All this may be so, but we do not know that it is so. We do know that when men who believe in these unseen realities, as they call them, begin to discuss matters of God, soul, mind or spirit, they immediately begin to differ violently, to enter into endless arguments, to start debates that endure for aeons and yet are never resolved. Now, we may urge, there is no argument, no quarrel, when it is a question of a hungry man eating or of a thirsty man quenching his thirst; here there are no two opinions but the undivided consent of all mankind; here, in a word, we are on sure ground. Why should we leave it for a territory which is all uncertain, misty, doubtful and, it is possible, fabulous? There are charts of the unknown ocean, it is true, but there are too many of them and no two are alike, and each pilot utterly derides and abhors the navigation of the others, and they only

agree in this: that the voyage is certainly dark and dangerous. Is it not better to remain on the firm land, in the sunlight, satisfying the desires of the body?

Such was the Alexandrian position. It seems to me a very strong one; almost, one would say, inexpugnable. Yet these people, who lived as they pleased, who were untroubled by ethical systems or the reproach of conscience, who could satisfy the desires of the body without fear of reproach from within or of censure and punishment from without, were ill at ease. As Mr. W. L. Courtney tells us, when the first century before Christ was drawing to its close, the whole of the Mediterranean shore was anxiously and restlessly seeking for something that it called *soteria* or salvation. And it seems clear that, whatever *soteria* may be, it is not good to eat or to drink. In fine, the red roses and the ivory flesh of the girls had alike grown grey; meat and drink were bitter in the mouth.

The only thing that can be urged against the Alexandrian theory of life is this: it didn't work.



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