Two Stories

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BY

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It was a Sunday and the first day of spring, the first day on which one felt at any rate spring in the air. It blew in at my window with its warm breath, with its inevitable little touch of sadness. I felt restless, and I had nowhere to go to; everyone I knew was out of town. I looked out of my window at the black trees breaking into bud, the tulips and the hyacinths that even London could not rob of their reds and blues and yellows, the delicate spring sunshine on the asphalt, and the pale blue sky that the chimney pots broke into. I found myself muttering "damn it" for no very obvious reason. It was spring, I suppose, the first stirring of the blood.

I wanted to see clean trees, and the sun shine upon grass; I wanted flowers and leaves unsoiled by soot; I wanted to see and smell the earth; above all I wanted the horizon. I felt that something was waiting for me beyond the houses and the chimney-pots: I should find it where earth and sky meet. I didn't of course but I took the train to Kew.

If I did not find in Kew the place where earth and sky meet or even the smell of the earth, I saw at any rate the sun upon the brown bark of trees and the delicate green of grass. It was spring there, English spring with its fresh warm breath, and its pale blue sky above the trees. Yes, the quiet orderly English spring that embraced and sobered even the florid luxuriance of great flowers bursting in white cascades over strange tropical trees.

And the spring had brought the people out into the gardens, the quiet orderly English people. It was the first stirring of the blood. It had stirred them to come out in couples, in family parties, in tight matronly black dresses, in drab coats and trousers in dowdy skirts and hats. It had stirred some to come in elegant costumes and morning suits and spats. They looked at the flaunting tropical trees, and made jokes, and chaffed one another, and laughed not very loud. They were happy in their quiet orderly English way, happy in the warmth of the sunshine, happy to be among quiet trees, and to feel the soft grass under their feet. They did not run about or shout, they walked slowly, quietly, taking care to keep off the edges of the grass because the notices told them to do so.

It was very warm, very pleasant, and very tiring. I wandered cut at last through the big gates, and was waved by a man with a napkin—he stood on the pavement—through a Georgian house into a garden studded with white topped tables and dirty ricketty chairs. It was crowded with people, and I sat down at the only vacant table, and watched them eating plum-cake and drinking tea quietly, soberly, under the gentle apple-blossom.

A man came up the garden looking quickly from side to side for an empty place. I watched him in a tired lazy way. There was a bustle and roll and energy in his walk. I noticed the thickness of his legs above the knee, the arms that hung so loosely and limply by his sides as they do with people who wear loose hanging clothes without sleeves, his dark fat face and the sensual mouth, the great curve of the upper

lip and the hanging lower one. A clever face, dark and inscrutable, with its large mysterious eyes and the heavy lids which went into deep folds at the corners.

He stopped near my table, looked at the empty chair and then at me, and said:

"Excuse me, Sir, but d'you mind my sitting at your table?"

I noticed the slight thickness of the voice, the overemphasis, and the little note of assertiveness in it. I said I didn't mind at all.

He sat down, leaned back in his chair, and took his hat off. He had a high forehead, black hair, and well-shaped fat hands.

"Fine day," he said, "wonderfully fine day, the finest day I ever remember. Nothing to beat a fine English spring day."

I saw the delicate apple-blossom and the pale blue sky behind his large dark head. I smiled. He saw the smile, flushed, and then smiled himself.

"You are amused," he said, still smiling, "I believe I know why."

"Yes," I said, "You knew me at once and I knew you. We show up, don't we, under the apple-blossom and this sky. It doesn't belong to us, do you wish it did?"

"Ah," he said seriously, "that's the question. Or rather we don't belong to it. We belong to Palestine still, but I'm not sure that it doesn't belong to us for all that."

"Well, perhaps your version is truer than mine. I'll take it, but there's still the question, do you wish *you* belonged to *it*?"

He wasn't a bit offended. He tilted back his chair, put one thumb in the arm-hole of his waistcoat, and looked round the garden. He showed abominably concentrated, floridly intelligent, in the thin spring air and among the inconspicuous tea-drinkers. He didn't answer my question; he was thinking, and when he spoke, he asked another:

"Do you ever go to Synagogue?"

"No."

"Nor do I, except on Yom Kippur. I still go then every year—pure habit. I don't believe in it, of course; I believe in nothing—you believe in nothing—we're all sceptics. And yet we belong to Palestine still. Funny, ain't it? How it comes out! Under the apple-blossom and blue sky, as you say, as well as—as—among the tombs."

"Among the tombs?"

"Ah, I was thinking of another man I met. He belongs to Palestine too. Shall I tell you about him?"

I said I wished he would. He put his hand's in his pockets and began at once.

* * * * * * * * *

The first time I saw him, I remember the day well, as well as yesterday. There was no apple-blossom then, a November day, cold, bitter cold, the coldest day I remember. It was the anniversary of my poor wife's death. She was my first wife, Rebecca. She made me a good wife, I tell you—we were very happy. (He took out a

white silk pocket handkerchief, opened it with something of a flourish, and blew his nose long and loudly. Then he continued.)

I buried her at the cemetery in K—Road. You know it? What? No? You must know it, the big cemetery near the hospital. You know the hospital at any rate? Well, you turn down by it coming from the station, take the first turning to the right and the second to the left, and there you are. It's a big cemetery, very big, almost as big as Golders Green, and they keep the gardens very nicely. Well, my poor wife lies there—my first wife, I've married again, you see, and she's living and well, thank God—and I went on the first anniversary to visit the grave and put flowers on it.

There you are now, there's another curious thing. I often wonder why we do it. It's not as if it did anyone any *good*. I don't believe in immortality, nor do you, nor do any of us. But I go and put flowers on her grave though it won't do her any good, poor soul. It's sentiment, I suppose. No one can say we Jews haven't got that, and family affection. They're among our very strongest characteristics.

Yes, they don't like us. (He looked round at the quiet tea-drinkers.) We're too clever perhaps, too sharp, too go-ahead. *Nous*, that's what we've got, *Nous*, and they don't like it, eh? But they can't deny us our other virtues—sentiment and family affection. Now look at the Titanic disaster: who was it refused to get into the boats, unless her husband went too? Who met death hand in hand with him? Eh? A Jewess! There you are! Her children rise up and call her blessed: her husband also and he praiseth her!

I put that verse from Proverbs on my poor wife's tombstone. I remember standing in front of it, and reading it over and over again that day, the day I'm talking about. My dear Sir, I felt utterly wretched, standing there in that cold wet cemetery, with all those white tombstones round me and a damp yellow November fog. I put some beautiful white flowers on her grave.

The cemetery-keeper had given me some glass gallipots to stand the flowers in, and, as I left, I thought I would give him a shilling. He was standing near the gates. By Jove! You couldn't mistake him for anything but a Jew. His arms hung down from his shoulders in that curious, loose, limp way—you know it?—it makes the clothes look as if they didn't belong to the man who is wearing them. Clever cunning grey eyes, gold pince-nez, and a nose, by Jove, Sir, one of the best, one of those noses, white and shiny, which, when you look at it full face, seems almost flat on the face, but immensely broad, curving down, like a broad highroad from between the bushy eye-brows down over the lips. And side face, it was colossal; it stood out like an elephant's trunk with its florid curves and scrolls.

I was, as I say, utterly wretched. I wanted someone to talk to, and though I didn't expect to get much comfort out of a cemetery-keeper, I said by way of conversation, as I gave him a shilling:

"You keep these gardens very nicely."

He looked at me over the gold rims of his glasses:

"We do our best. I haven't been here long, you know, but I do my best. And a man can't do more, now *can* he?"

"No" I said, "he can't."

He put his head on one side, and looked at a tombstone near by: it was tilted over to one side, blackened by the soot to a dirty yellow colour, the plaster peeling off. There was one dirty scraggy evergreen growing on the grave. There was a text on the stone, I remember, something about the righteous nourishing like the bay-tree.

"Of course one can't do everything. Look at that now. Some people don't do anything, never come near the place, don't spend a penny on their graves. Then of course they go like that. It will get worse and worse, for we only bury reserves here now. Sometimes it ain't anyone's fault: families die out, the graves are forgotten. It don't look nice, but well, I say, what does it matter after all? When I'm dead, they may chuck me on the dung-hill, for all I care."

He looked down his nose at the rows and rows of dirty white grave-stones, which were under his charge, critically, with an air of hostility, as if they had done him some wrong.

"You don't perhaps believe in a life after death?" I said.

He pushed his hands well down into the pockets of his long overcoat, hugged himself together, and looked up at the yellow sky and dirty yellow houses, looming over the cemetery.

"No I don't," he said with conviction. "It ain't likely. Nobody knows anything about it. It ain't likely, is it?"

"No, but what about the Bible?"

His cold grey eyes looked at me steadily over the gold pince-nez.

"I'm not sure there's much in the Bible about it, eh? And one can't believe everything in the Bible. There's the Almighty of course, well, who can say? He may exist, he may not—I say I don't know. But a life hereafter, I don't believe in it. One don't have to believe everything now: it was different when I was young. You had to believe everything then; you had to believe everything they told you in Schul. Now you may think for yourself. And *mind you*, it don't *do* to think too much: if you think too much about those things, you go mad, raving mad. What I say is, lead a pure clean life here, and you'll get your reward here. I've seen it in my own case: I wasn't always in a job like this. I had a business once, things went wrong through no fault of mine, and I lost everything—everything sold up except an old wooden bed. Ah, those were hard times, I can tell you! Then I got offered this job—it ain't very good, but I thought to myself: well, there'll be a comfortable home for my wife and my two boys as long as I live. I've tried to live a clean life, and I shall have better times now, eh?

I thought of my own wife and my motherless children: my sadness increased. And I thought of our race, its traditions and its faith, how they are vanishing in the life that surrounds us. The old spirit, the old faith, they had kept alive hot and vigorous—for how many centuries?—when we were spat upon, outcasts. But now they are cold

and feeble, vanishing in the universal disbelief. I looked at the man under the shadow of the dirty yellow London fog and the squalid yellow London houses. "This man," I thought to myself, "a mere keeper of graves is touched by it as much as I am. He isn't a Jew now any more than I am. We're Jews only externally now, in our black hair and our large noses, in the way we stand and the way we walk. But inside we're Jews no longer. Even *he* doesn't believe, the keeper of Jewish graves! The old spirit, the ancient faith has gone out of him."

I was wrong; I know now, and I'll tell you how I came to see it. The spirit's still there all right; it comes out under the apple-blossom, eh?, and it came out among the tombs too.

The next time I saw him was another November day, an English, a London day; O Lord, his nose showed in it very white and florid under the straight houses and the chimney-pots and the heavy, melancholy dripping sky. I had married in the meantime, and my wife—like the good soul that she is—had come with me to put flowers on my poor Rebecca's grave—another anniversary you see. Yes, I was happy—I don't mind telling you so—even at my poor Rebecca's graveside.

He was standing there in the same place, in a black top-hat and a great black overcoat, looking at the tombstones over the top of his gold-rimmed glasses. All the cares of the world seemed to be weighing down his sloping shoulders.

"Good day", he said to me, just touching the brim of his hat.

"Well", I said, "and how's the world going with you?"

He fixed me with his hard grey eyes that had a look of pain in them, and said in a tone which had neither reverence nor irony in it, nor indeed any feeling at all:

"The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord. I buried my poor wife last Thursday".

There was an awkward silence.

"I'm very sorry to hear that," I said, "very sorry."

"Yes" he said, "The righteous flourish like the bay-tree: they tell us that: you see it there on the tombstone."

He put his head on one side and stared at it.

"Vell," he said—and I noticed for the first time the thick Jewish speech—"vell, its there, so I suppose its true, ain't it? But its difficult to see, y' know always. I've often said the only thing we can do is to lead a clean life here, a pure life, and we'll get our reward. But mine seems to be pretty long in coming," he sighed, "yes pretty long, I tell you. I had hard times before: we both of us did, my poor wife and I. And then at last I got this job; I thought she was going to have a happy peaceful life at last. Nothing very grand in pay, but enough to keep us and the two boys. And a nice enough house for her. And then as soon as we come here she takes ill and dies, poor soul."

He wiped his eyes.

"I don't know why I should call her poor soul. She's at rest any way. And she made me the best, the very best wife a man could have."

He put his hands well down in the pockets of his overcoat, drew his arms to his sides so that he looked like a great black bird folding its wings round itself, and rocked himself backwards and forwards, first on his toes and then on his heels, looking up at me sideways with wrinkled forehead.

"Vell," he said, "EI've got my two boys. I wish you could see 'em. Fine young fellows. One earning 30/- a week, though he's only eighteen. He'll do well, I tell you; all right up here." He tapped his forehead. "And the other, though I'm his father I'm not afraid to tell anyone, he's a genius—he draws, draws beautiful, and paints too, real artistic pictures. Ah they're good lads—a bit wild, the elder one—" he lowered his voice and showed his teeth in a grin, "he's got an eye for the petticoats, but then boys will be boys. I daresay I was the same myself."

I didn't altogether like the grin, with my wife standing there, so I gave him a shilling and went. I've seen him once more: the day came round again, and I took my boy this time, dear little chap, to see his mother's grave. And Fanny came too,—ah, she's a mother to those motherless children.

There he was standing in the same place, in his top-hat and seedy black coat. I saw at once that things were not right with him. His clothes seemed to hang on him as if he were merely an old clothes prop; his old bowed shoulders sloped more than ever. His face was grey, pasty, terribly lined, and his nose more white and shiny than ever. Seedy was the word for him, seedy inside and out, seedy through and through. He was beaten, degraded, down, gone under, gone all to bits. And yet somehow he looked as if that was just what hadn't happened—he hadn't gone all to bits: there was something in him that still stood up and held him together, something like a rock which, beaten and buffeted, still held out indomitable.

"Well, and how are you?" I asked.

"Poorly," he said in a flat voice, "poorly—I'm not what I was."

"Nothing serious, I hope?"

"Vell, I'm not on my back yet."

"And the boys? They're still doing well, I hope."

A sort of rigidity came over him: he eyed me furtively and yet sternly.

"Boys? I've only one boy."

"Ah, I'm sorry, very sorry to—"

"No, no, it's not what you think, not that. I've had trouble, but not that. That eldest boy of mine, he's no longer my son——I have done with him; I have only one son now."

There was nothing dejected, nothing humble in him now. He seemed to draw himself together, to become taller. A stiff-necked race, I thought!

"If you ask me how many sons I've got, I say only one, only one. That fellow isn't my son at all. I had a servant girl here working in my house, a Christian serving

girl—and he married her behind my back. He asks me to sit down to meat with a girl, a Christian girl, who worked in my house—I can't do it. I'm not proud, but there are some things—If he had come to me and said: "Dad, I want to marry a girl"—a really nice girl—"but she's not one of us: will you give me your permission and blessing?" Well I don't believe in it. Our women are as good, better than Christian women. Aren't they as beautiful, as clever, as good wives? I know my poor mother, God rest her soul, used to say: "My son," she said, "if you come to me and say you want to marry a good girl, a Jewess, I don't care whether she hasn't a chemise to her back, I'll welcome her—but if you marry a Christian, if she's as rich as Solomon, I've done with you—don't you ever dare to come into my house again." Vell, I don't go as far as that, though I understand it. Times change: I might have received his wife, even though she was a Goy. But a servant girl who washed my dishes! I couldn't do it. One must have some dignity."

He stood there upright, stern, noble: a battered scarred old rock, but immovable under his seedy black coat. I couldn't offer him a shilling; I shook his hand, and left him brooding over his son and his graves.

THE MARK ON THE WALL

By

VIRGINIA WOOLF

Perhaps it was the middle of January in the present year that I first looked up and saw the mark on the wall. In order to fix a date it is necessary to remember what one saw. So now I think of the fire; the steady film of yellow light upon the page of my book; the three chrysanthemums in the round glass bowl on the mantelpiece. Yes, it must have been the winter time, and we had just finished our tea, for I remember that I was smoking a cigarette when I looked up and saw the mark on the wall for the first time. I looked up through the smoke of my cigarette and my eye lodged for a moment upon the burning coals, and that old fancy of the crimson flag flapping from the castle tower came into my mind, and I thought of the cavalcade of red knights riding up the side of the black rock. Rather to my relief the sight of the mark interrupted the fancy, for it is an old fancy, an automatic fancy, made as a child perhaps. The mark was a small round mark, black upon the white wall, about six or seven inches above the mantelpiece.

How readily our thoughts swarm upon a new object, lifting it a little way, as ants carry a blade of straw so feverishly, and then leave it . . . . . If that mark was made by a nail, it can't have been for a picture, it must have been for a miniature—the miniature of a lady with white powdered curls, powder-dusted cheeks, and lips like red carnations. A fraud of course, for the people who had this house before us would have chosen pictures in that way—an old picture for an old room. That is the sort of people they were—very interesting people, and I think of them so often, in such queer places, because one will never see them again, never know what happened next. She wore a flannel dog collar round her throat, and he drew posters for an oatmeal company, and they wanted to leave this house because they wanted to change their style of furniture, so he said, and he was in process of saying that in his opinion art should have ideas behind it when we were torn asunder, as one is torn from the old lady about to pour out tea and the young man about to hit the tennis ball in the back garden of the suburban villa as one rushes past in the train.

But as for that mark, I'm not sure about it; I don't believe it was made by a nail after all; its too big, too round for that. I might get up, but if I got up and looked at it, ten to one I shouldn't be able to say for certain; because once a thing's done, no one ever knows how it happened. O dear me, the mystery of life! The inaccuracy of thought! The ignorance of humanity! To show how very little control of our possessions we have—what an accidental affair this living is after all our civilisation—let me just count over a few of the things lost in one lifetime, beginning, for that seems always the most mysterious of all loses—what cat would gnaw, what

rat would nibble—three pale blue canisters of book-binding tools? Then there were the bird cages, the iron hoops, the steel skates, the Queen Anne coal-scuttle, the bagatelle board, the hand organ—all gone, and jewels too. Opals and emeralds, they lie about the root of turnips. What a scraping paring affair it is to be sure! The wonder is that I've any clothes on my back, that I sit surrounded by solid furniture at this moment. Why, if one wants to compare life to anything, one must liken it to being blown through the Tube at fifty miles an hour—landing at the other end without a single hair pin in one's hair! Shot out at the feet of God entirely naked! Tumbling head over heels in the asphodel meadows like brown paper parcels pitched down a shoot in the post office! With one's hair flying back like the tail of a race horse. Yes, that seems to express the rapidity of life, the perpetual waste and repair; all so casual, all so haphazard. . . .

But after life. The slow pulling down of thick green stalks so that the cup of the flower as it turns over deluges one with purple and red light. Why, after all, should one not be born there as one is born here, helpless, speechless, unable to focus one's eyesight, groping at the roots of the grass, at the toes of the Giants? As for saying which are trees, and which are men and women, or whether there are such things, that one won't be in a condition to do for fifty years or so. There will be nothing but spaces of light and dark, intersected by thick stalks, and rather higher up perhaps, rose-shaped blots of an indistinct colour—dim pinks and blues—which will, as time goes on, become more definite, become—I don't know what.

And yet that mark on the wall is not a hole at all. It may even be caused by some round black substance, such as a small rose leaf, left over from the summer, and I, not being a very vigilant house-keeper—look at the dust on the mantelpiece, for example, the dust which, so they say, buried Troy three times over, only fragments of pots utterly refusing annihilation, as one can believe. But I know a house-keeper, a woman with the profile of a policeman, those little round buttons marked even upon the edge of her shadow, a woman with a broom in her hand, a thumb on picture frames, an eye under beds and she talks always of art. She is coming nearer and nearer; and now, pointing to certain spots of yellow rust on the fender, she becomes so menacing that to oust her, I shall have to end her by taking action: I shall have to get up and see for myself what that mark—

But no. I refuse to be beaten. I will not move. I will not recognise her. See, she fades already. I am very nearly rid of her and her insinuations, which I can hear quite distinctly. Yet she has about her the pathos of all people who wish to compromise. And why should I resent the fact that she has a few books in her house, a picture or two? But what I really resent is that she resents me—life being an affair of attack and defence after all. Another time I will have it out with her, not now. She must go now. The tree outside the window taps very gently on the pane. I want to think quietly, calmly, spaciously, never to be interrupted, never to have to rise from my chair, to slip

easily from one thing to another, without any sense of hostility, or obstacle. I want to sink deeper and deeper, away from the surface, with its hard separate facts. To steady myself, let me catch hold of the first idea that passes. Shakespeare. Well, he will do as well as another. A man who sat himself solidly in an arm-chair, and looked into the fire, so—A shower of ideas fell perpetually from some very high Heaven down through his mind. He leant his forehead on his hand, and people looking in through the open door, for this scene is supposed to take place on a summer's evening,—But how dull this is, this historical fiction! It doesn't interest me at all. I wish I could hit upon a pleasant track of thought, a track indirectly reflecting credit upon myself, for those are the pleasantest thoughts, and very frequent even in the minds of modest mouse-coloured people, who believe genuinely that they dislike to hear their own praises. They are not thoughts directly praising oneself; that is the beauty of them; they are thoughts like this.

"And then I came into the room. They were discussing botany. I said how I'd seen a flower growing on a dust heap on the site of an old house in Kingsway. The seed, I said, must have been sown in the reign of Charles the First. What flowers grew in the reign of Charles the First? I asked—(but I don't remember the answer). Tall flowers with purple tassels to them perhaps. And so it goes on. All the time I'm dressing up the figure of myself in my own mind lovingly, stealthily, not openly adoring it, for if I did that, I should catch myself out, and stretch my hand at once for a book in self protection. Indeed, it is curious how instinctively one protects the image of oneself from idolatry or any other handling that could make it ridiculous, or too unlike the original to be believed in any longer. Or is it not so very curious after all? It is a matter of great importance. Suppose the looking glass smashes, the image disappears, and the romantic figure with the green of forest depths all about it is there no longer, but only that shell of a person which is seen by other people—what an airless shallow, bald, prominent world it becomes! A world not to be lived in. As we face each other in omnibuses and underground railways we are looking into the mirror; that accounts for the expression in our vague and almost glassy eyes. And the novelists in future will realise more and more the importance of these reflections, for of course there is not one reflection but an almost infinite number; those are the depths they will explore, those the phantoms they will pursue, leaving the description of reality more and more out of their stories, taking a knowledge of it for granted, as the Greeks did and Shakespeare perhaps; but these generalisations are very worthless. The military sound of the word is enough. It recalls leading articles, cabinet ministers—a whole class of things indeed which as a child one thought the thing itself, the standard thing, the real thing, from which one could not depart save at the risk of nameless damnation. Generalisations bring back somehow Sunday in London, Sunday afternoon walks, Sunday luncheons, and also ways of speaking of the dead, clothes and habits—like the habit of sitting all together in one room until a certain hour, although nobody liked it. There was a rule for everything. The rule for

tablecloths at that particular period was that they should be made of tapestry with little yellow compartments marked upon them, such as you may see in photographs of the carpets in the corridors of the royal palaces. Tablecloths of a different kind were not real tablecloths. How shocking and yet how wonderful it was to discover that these real things, Sunday luncheons, Sunday walks, country houses, and tablecloths were not entirely real, were indeed half phantoms, and the damnation which visited the disbeliever in them was only a sense of illegitimate freedom. What now takes the place of those things, I wonder, those real standard things? Men perhaps, should you be a woman; the masculine point of view which governs our lives, which sets the standard, which establishes Whitaker's Table of Precedency, which has become, I suppose, since the war half a phantom to many men and women, which soon one may hope will be laughed into the dustbin where the phantoms go, the mahogany sideboards and Landseer prints, Gods and Devils, Hell and so forth, leaving us all with an intoxicating sense of illegitimate freedom—if freedom exists.

In certain lights, that mark on the wall seems actually to project from the wall. Nor is it entirely circular. I cannot be sure, but it seems to cast a perceptible shadow, suggesting that if I ran my finger down that strip of the wall it would at a certain point mount and descend a small tumulus, a smooth tumulus like those barrows on the South Downs which are, they say, either tombs or camps. Of the two I should prefer them to be tombs, desiring melancholy like most English people and finding it natural at the end of a walk to think of the bones stretched beneath the turf. There must be some book about it. Some antiquary must have dug up those bones and given them a name. What sort of man is an antiquary, I wonder? Retired colonels for the most part, I daresay, leading parties of aged labourers to the top here, examining clods of earth and stone, and getting into correspondence with the neighbouring clergy, which being opened at breakfast time gives them a feeling of importance, and the comparison of arrowheads necessitates cross country journeys to the county towns, an agreeable necessity both to them and to their elderly wives, who wish to make plum jam, or to clean out the study, and have every reason for keeping that great question of the camp or the tomb in perpetual suspension, while the Colonel himself feels agreeably philosophic in accumulating evidence on both sides of the question. It is true that he does finally incline to believe in the camp; and, being opposed, casts all his arrowheads into one scale, and being still further opposed, indites a pamphlet which he is about to read at the quarterly meeting of the local society when a stroke lays him low, and his last conscious thoughts are not of wire or child, but of the camp and that arrow-head there which is now in the case at the local museum, together with the hand of a Chinese murderess, a handful of Elizabethan nails, a great many Tudor clay pipes a piece of Roman pottery, and the wine-glass that Nelson drank out of—proving I really don't know what.

No, no, nothing is proved, nothing is known. And if I were to get up at this very moment and ascertain that the mark on the wall is really—what shall we say?—the head of a gigantic old nail, driven in two hundred years ago which has now, owing to the patient attrition of many generations of housemaids, revealed its head above the coat of paint, and is taking its first view of modern life in the sight of a white-walled fire-lit room, what should I gain? Knowledge? Matter for further speculation? I can think sitting still as well as standing up. And what is knowledge? What are our learned men save the descendants of witches and hermits who crouched in caves and in woods brewing herbs, interrogating shrew-mice, and writing down the language of the stars? And the less we honour them as our superstitions dwindle and our respect for beauty and health of mind increases. . . . . Yes, one could imagine a very pleasant world. A quiet spacious world, with the flowers so red and blue in the open fields. A world without professors or specialists or house-keepers with the profiles of policemen, a world which one could slice with ones thought as a fish slices the water with his fin, grazing the stems of the water-lilies, and hanging suspended over nests of white sea eggs. . . . . How peaceful it is down here, rooted into the centre of the world and gazing up through the gray waters, with their sudden gleams of light, and their reflections—If it were not for Whitakers Almanack—if it were not for the Table of Precedency!

I must jump up and see for myself what that mark on the wall really is—a nail, a rose-leaf, a crack in the wood?

Here is Nature once more at her old game of self-preservation. This train of thought, she perceives, is threatening mere waste of energy, even some collision with reality, for who will ever be able to lift a finger against Whitaker's Table of Precedency? The Archbishop of Canterbury is followed by the Lord High Chancellor; the Lord High Chancellor is followed by the Archbishop of York. Everybody follows somebody, such is the philosophy of Whitaker; and the great thing is to know who follows whom. Whitaker knows, and let that, so Nature counsels, comfort you, instead of enraging you; and if you can't be comforted, if you must shatter this hour of peace, think of the mark on the wall.

I understand Nature's game—her prompting to take action as a way of ending any thought that threatens to excite or to pain. Hence, I suppose, comes our slight contempt for men of action, men, we assume, who don't think. Still, there's no harm in putting a full stop to one's disagreeable thoughts by looking at a mark on the wall.

Indeed, now that I have fixed my eyes upon it, I feel I have grasped a plank in the sea; I feel a satisfying sense of reality which at once turns the two Archbishops and the Lord High Chancellor to the shadows of shades. Here is something definite, something real. Thus, waking from a midnight dream of horror one hastily turns on the light and lies quiescent, worshipping the chest of drawers, worshipping solidity, worshipping reality, worshipping the impersonal world which is a proof of some

existence other than ours. That is what one wants to be sure of.... Wood is a pleasant thing to think about. It comes from a tree; and trees grow and we don't know how they grow. For years and years they grow without paying any attention to us, in meadows, in forests and by the side of rivers—all things one likes to think about. The cows swish their tails beneath them on hot afternoons; they paint rivers so green that when a moor-hen dives one expects to see its feathers all green when it comes up again. I like to think of the fish balanced against the stream like flags blown out; and of water-beetles slowly raising domes of mud upon the bed of the river. I like to think of the tree itself; first the close dry sensation of being wood; then there is the grinding of the storm; then the slow, delicious ooze of sap. I like to think of it too on winter's nights standing in the empty field with all leaves close-furled, nothing tender exposed to the iron bullets of the moon, a naked mast upon an earth that goes tumbling, tumbling, all night long. The song of birds must sound very loud and strange in June; and how cold the feet of insects must feel upon it, as they make laborious progresses up the creases of the bark, or sun themselves upon the thin green awning of the leaves, and look straight in front of them with huge diamond-cut red eyes. One by one the fibres snap beneath the immense cold pressure of the earth; then the last storm comes and, falling, the highest branches drive deep into the ground again. Even so, life isn't done with; there are a million patient, watchful lives still for a tree, all over the world, in bed-rooms, in ships, on the pavement, lining rooms where men and women sit after tea smoking their cigarettes. It is full of peaceful thoughts, happy thoughts, this tree. I should like to take each one separately—but something is getting in the way ... Where was I? What has it all been about? A tree? A river? The Downs, Whitaker's Almanack, the fields of asphodel? I can't remember a thing. Everything's moving, falling, slipping, vanishing... There is a vast upheaval of matter. Someone is standing over me and saying—

"I'm going out to buy a newspaper."

"Yes?"

"Though it's no good, buying newspapers..... Nothing ever happens. Curse this war! God damn this war!... All the same, I don't see why we should have a snail on our wall."

Ah, the mark on the wall! For it was a snail.