

# VIRTUAL VISIONS

At this moment the Fourth, who had not said anything so far, but seemed to have been listening, piped up: "I say! I believe I know what it is that makes that humming noise: it's something he has got in his clothes."

I could not resist this. "Right again," I said; "it's my watch, and you're very welcome to look at it." And I took it out and put it on the window-sill.

An awful horror and surprise came into their faces. In a second they had dived down like so many ducks. In another second I saw them walking across the grass, and each of them threw his arms round the waist or the neck of one of the elder people who were walking about among the houses. The person so attacked pulled himself up and listened attentively to what the boy was saying. The particular one I was watching looked towards my window and then burst out laughing, slapped the boy on the back, and resumed his walk. The boy went slowly off towards one of the houses. One of the other "men" came and stood nearer to the window, looking up. I thought I would venture a bow, and made one rather ceremoniously. It did not produce much effect, and I could not at the moment think of anything I could do that would show them quite clearly that I saw them. They went on looking at me quietly enough, and then I heard a deep low bell, seemingly very far off, toll five times. They heard it too. Soon after that the lights in the windows died down and everything became very still. I looked at my watch. It was ten o'clock.

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I waited for a while to see if anything would happen, but there was nothing; so I got then back out (which took a few minutes) and before I settled down to sleep I thought I would just take one more look out of the window, where were all the little houses? At the first glance I thought they had vanished, but it was not exactly so: I found I could still see the chimneys above the grass, but as I looked they too disappeared; it was done very neatly: there was no hole, the turf closed in upon the roofs as they sank down, just as if it was of india-rubber. There was not a trace left of houses or roads or playgrounds or anything.

I was strongly tempted to go out and walk over the site of the village, but I did not. For one thing I was afraid I might disturb the people of the house, and besides there was a mist coming up over the meadows which stopped away outside the garden. So I stopped where I was.

But what a very odd mist, I began to think. It was not coming in all in one piece as it should; it was more in patches or even pillars of a smoky grey which moved at different rates, some of them occasionally standing still, others even seeming to go to and fro. And now I began to hear something like a hollow whispering coming from their direction. It was not conversation, for it went on quite continuously in the same tone; it sounded more as if something was being recited, I did not like it.

Then I saw what I liked less. Seven of these pillars of mist, each about the size of a man, were standing in a row just outside the garden.

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