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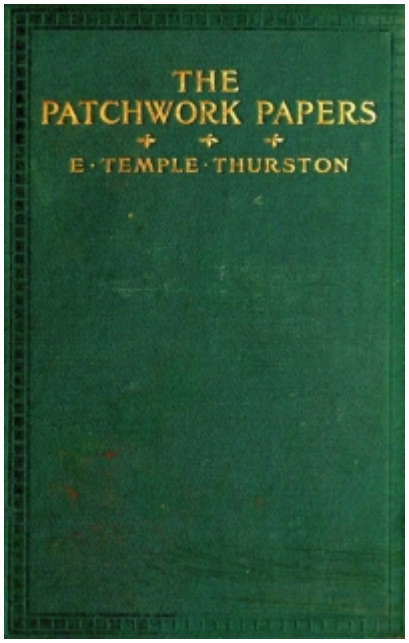
Transcriber’s Notes:

The original spelling, hyphenation, and punctuation have been retained, with the exception of apparent typographical errors which have been corrected.

In the original, the Table of Contents does not contain the entries to Chapters XI, XII, and XIII. However, in the electronic version, they have been added.



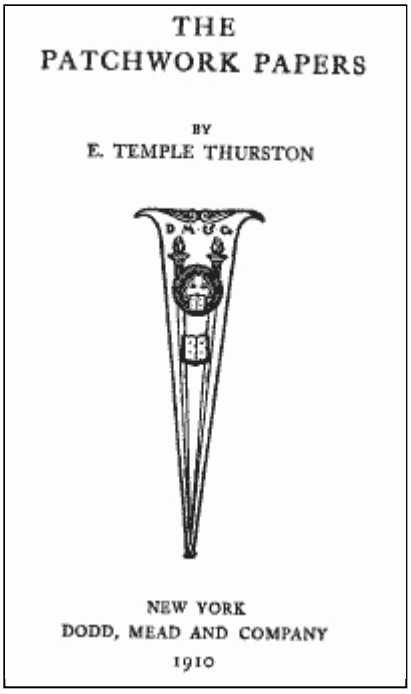
THE PATCHWORK PAPERS [i]

BY THE SAME AUTHOR [ii]

The Apple of Eden

Mirage

The City of Beautiful Nonsense



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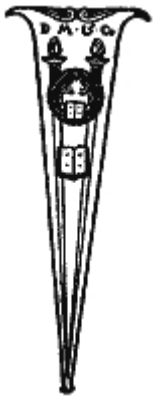
THE PATCHWORK PAPERS

BY

E. TEMPLE THURSTON



NEW YORK
DODD, MEAD AND COMPANY
1910

[iv]

Some eight of these papers appear in print for the first time. For those which have been published before, my thanks are due to the Editors of "The Onlooker" and "The Ladies' Field" for permission to reprint.

THE AUTHOR.

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E. TEMPLE THURSTON

Published February 1911

To [v]
NORMAN FORBES ROBERTSON

MY DEAR NORMAN, [vii]

Here are my Patchwork Papers for you to unpick at your leisure. I have not presumed to call them essays, since it is nowadays unseemly for a novelist to attempt anything worthy of the name of letters—moreover, would any one read them? By the same token, I have not dared to call them short stories, and that, mainly because the so-called essential love interest is conspicuous by its absence. Really they are illustrated essays. What better name then than papers can be given them?

It may, for example, be pardonable in a paper to split an infinitive for the sake of euphony, as I have done in "From my Portfolio,"—but to split an infinitive in an essay! It were better to rob a church, or speak out one's mind about the monarchy. All such things as these are treasonable. To call them papers then will save me much from my [viii] friends.

When they appeared serially, it was under the title "Beauties which are Inevitable." I altered that when I thought of you trying to remember what the book was called, as you recommended it with a twinkle in your eye to your friends. But that title still stands justified in my mind, since these papers express the things which latterly have become realities to me. For wheresoever you may go in this world—whether it be striving to the highest heights, or descending, as some would have it, to the deepest depths—life is just as ugly or just as beautiful as you are inclined to find it.

In all my early work, until, in fact, I wrote "Sally Bishop," I was inclined to find it ugly enough in all conscience. But now beauty does seem inevitable and, what is more, the only reality we have. For if, as they say, God made man in His own image, then to [ix] call the ugliness of man a reality is to curse the sight of God; in which case, it were as well to die and have done with this business of existence altogether.

To see nothing but ugliness then, or, as the modern school would have it, to see nothing but realism, is a form of mental suicide which, thank God, no longer appeals to me. For when every year I find the daffodils bringing up their glory of colour and beauty of line with unfailing perfection, I cannot but think that man, made in God's image, was meant to be still more beautiful in his thoughts and deeds even than they. Then surely what man was meant to be must be the only true reality of what he is. All else happens to him. That is all.

Wherefore, when, in these pages, you read of Bellwattle and of Emily the housemaid, of my little old pensioner, or of the poor woman in Limehouse; when, too, [x]

you read my attempt to give words to the maternal instinct; then you will see realities as I have seen them over the past two years and I dedicate this true record of them to you, because I know that you will take them to be as real as the beauty of Livy, the manliness of Nod, or the colour of those wall-flowers which bloom by the little red-brick paths in that graceful garden of yours in Kent.

Yours always,
E. Temple Thurston.

Eversley, 1910.

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[1]

I

THE PENSION OF THE PATCHWORK QUILT

I

[3]

THE PENSION OF THE PATCHWORK QUILT

So much more than you would ever dream lies hidden behind the beauty of "The Blue Bird," by Maurice Maeterlinck. Beauty may be the first of its qualities. By the same token, beauty may be the last. But in the midst, in the heart of it, there is set a deep well of truth—fathomless almost—one of those natural wells which God, with His omnipotent disregard of limitations, has sunk into the heart of the world.

That utter annihilation of death must be confusion to many when expressed in terms of St. Joseph lilies. Ninety per cent. of people will be likely to say, "How pretty!" That is the worst of it. They ought to be feeling, "How true!"

Yet what is a man to do? He can only express the immortality that he knows in [4] terms of the material things he sees. St. Joseph lilies are as good as, if not better than anything else. But they might as well have been artichokes, which come up every year. Artichokes would have done just as well, only that people who object to artichokes would have said, "How silly!"

No one can object to St. Joseph lilies. Yet, whatever they are, you will never be able to persuade the world to see the immortal truth behind the mortal and material fact.

It was the chance of circumstance which gave me an example of that amazing truth that old people, when they have passed away, are given life whenever the young people think of them. To the hundreds and thousands who have been to see "The Blue Bird" there are hundreds and thousands to say, "How charming that idea is—the old people [5] coming to life again whenever any one thinks of them!"

"And how amazingly true," said I to one who had made the remark to me.

The lady looked at me as at one who has made a needless jest and then she laughed. Being a lady, she was polite.

But I hated that politeness. I hated the laugh which expressed it. If chance should make her eye to fall upon this page, she will see how I hated it. She will see also how earnestly I had meant what I said. For I have found a proof of the truth. I know now that the old people live. What is more, they know it too. When it comes that they pass that Rubicon which takes them into the shadow of those portals beneath which all the old people must wait until the Great Gates are opened—when once they near the three-score years and ten—then they know. But they may not speak. They may not say they know. They can only hint.

It was that an old lady hinted to me. Oh, such a broad hint it was! And that is how I [6] know.

She was close on seventy. Another summer, another winter, and yet another spring, would see her three-score years and ten. The pension of the country would be given her then and this great ambition had leapt into the heart of her:

"I want to leave off work then, sir," she said and a smile parted her thin, wrinkled lips, lit two fires in her eyes, making her whole face sparkle. "I want to leave off work then, sir, and I want to take a little cottage. I only work now so that my sons shan't have the expense of keeping me. They've got expenses enough of their own." Then her little brown eyes, like beads in the deep hollows, took into them a tender look as she thought of the trials and troubles which they had to bear.

"Will you ever be able to get a cottage and keep yourself alive on five shillings a week?" I asked. [7]

She set her little mouth. She was a wee, tiny creature, shrivelled with age. Everything about her was little and crumpled and old.

"It doesn't need much to keep me alive now, sir," she said. "The cottage I can get for half a crown a week; and, of course, my sons are real good boys—they send me a little now and then."

I gazed at her—at her wee, withered body, wasted away to nothing in tireless energy.

"You know you won't care to leave off work when it comes to the time," said I; "you'll hate to have nothing to do."

She looked back at me with a cunning twinkle in her bright brown eyes. As if she were fool enough to think that life would be bearable with nothing to do! As if she had ever dreamed that the hands could be idle while the heart was beating! As if she did not know that each must labour until death stilled them both! [8]

"I shan't have nothing to do, sir," she said when she had said it already with her eyes. "Why, it's just the time I've been looking for. I'm too busy now."

"What are you going to do?" I asked.

"Make a patchwork quilt."

"A patchwork quilt?"

"Yes."

"What for?"

"So that I can leave something behind me for people to remember me when I'm gone."

She said it quite cheerfully, quite happily. Her bright eyes glistened like a wink of light in an old brown china tea-pot. She said it, too, in that half-reserved way as though there were more to tell, but she was not allowed even to whisper it.

Of course, there was more to tell! She never would be gone! Not really gone! Every time you thought of her, the light of the other life would start back into her eyes, the wrinkled lips would smile again. She would never be really gone! And this was a hint—just a hint to let me at least, for one, make sure about it. [9]

"Then every night they go to bed," said I, "and pull the patchwork quilt tight round them——"

"Yes—and every time they throw it off in the morning——" said she.

"They'll think of you?"

"They'll think of me," and she chuckled like a little child to think how clever it was of her.

"Supposing," said I, suddenly, in a whisper as the thought occurred to me —"supposing you could do without any assistance from your boys——"

"I wish I could," she said; "p'raps I can."

"You wait and see," said I.

Her seventieth birthday came round, and the evening before I posted to her my little present. I made her my pensioner as long as she lives, and on the twentieth day of each month she receives her tiny portion, and on the twenty-first day of that month I get back in return a wee bunch of flowers tied with red Angola wool. [10]

"In payment of the Pension of the Patchwork Quilt," I write, just on a slip of paper; then off it goes every month. And as I drop it in the letterbox, I can see her surrounded with all sorts of materials in divers colours. I can hear the scratching of her needle as

she sews them together. I can picture her little eyes bent eagerly upon the stitches for fear it might not be done in time.

And I take her gentle hint.

I know.

II

[11]

THE MOUSE-TRAP, HENRIETTA STREET

II

[13]

THE MOUSE-TRAP, HENRIETTA STREET

In Henrietta Street, Covent Garden, there is a mouse-trap, a cunningly devised contrivance in which many a timid little mouse is caught. You will find them in other streets than this. They are set in exactly the same way, the same alluring bait, the same doors that open with so generous an admission of innocence, the same doors that close with so final and irrevocable a snap.

I have never watched the other ones at work. But I have seen four mice caught at different times in Henrietta Street. Therefore, it is about the mouse-trap in Henrietta Street that I feel qualified to speak.

[14] One of these little mice I knew well. I knew her by name, where she lived—the little hole in this great labyrinth of London down which she vanished when the day's work was done, or when any one frightened her little wits and made her scamper home for safety. She even came once and sat in my room, just on the edge of an armchair, taking tea and cake in that frightened way, eyes ever peering, head ever on the alert, as mice will eat their food.

So you will see I knew a good deal about her. It was through no accident of chance that I saw her walk into the trap. I had heard that such an event was likely. I was on the lookout for it.

During the day-time, she waited at the tables in an A.B.C. shop. Don't ask me what they paid her for it. I marvel at the wage for manual labour when sometimes I am compelled to do a little job for myself. I wonder why on earth the woman comes to tidy my rooms for ten shillings a week. But she does. What is more, I find myself on the [15] very point of abusing her when she breaks a piece of my Lowestoft china, coming with tears in her eyes to tell me of it.

Whatever it was they paid this little mouse of a child, she found it a sufficient inducement to come there day after day, week after week, with just that one short, marvellous evening in the six days and the whole of the glorious seventh in which to do what she liked.

I suppose it would have gone on like that for ever. She would have continued creeping in and out amongst the tables, her body on tip-toe, her voice on tip-toe, the whole personality of her almost overbalancing itself as it worked out its justification on the very tip of its toes.

She would have continued waiting on her customers, writing her little checks in a wholly illegible handwriting, which only the girl at the desk could read. She would have continued supplying me with the three-pennyworth of cold cod steak for my [16] kitten until I should have been ordering five cold cod steaks for the entire family that was bound to come. All these things would have gone on just the same, had not the tempter come to lure her into the mouse-trap in Henrietta Street, Covent Garden.

I saw him one morning, a dandy-looking youth from one of the hosier's shops in the Strand near by. He was having lunch—a cup of coffee and some stewed figs and cream. Taste is a funny thing. And she was serving him. She had served him. He was already hustling the food into his mouth as he talked to her. But it was more than talking. He was saying things with a pair of large calf eyes and she was laughing as she listened.

I would sooner see a woman serious than see her laugh; that is, if some one else were making love to her. For when she is serious there are two ways about it; but when [17] she laughs there is only time for one.

When she saw me, the little mouse came at once to the counter and took down the piece of cold cod steak without a word. As she handed me the bag and the little paper check, she said—

"How's the kitten to-day?"

Then I knew she felt guilty, and was trying to distract my mind from what she knew I had seen.

"Why are you ashamed of talking to the young man?" I asked.

"I'm not," said she.

"Did you notice his eyes?" said I.

She looked at me for a moment, quite frightened, then she scampered away into a corner and began wetting her pencil with her lips and scribbling things. When the young man tapped his coffee-cup, she pretended not to hear. But as soon as I stepped out into the street, I turned round and saw her hurrying back to his table.

You guess how it went along. He asked her to marry him—then—there—at once. [18] You might have known he was a man of business.

She told me all about it when she came on one of those short evenings, and nibbled a little piece of cake as she sat on the edge of my chair.

He wanted to marry her at once, but he was earning only eighteen shillings a week and, as far as I could see, spent most of that on neckties, socks and hair oil. He would no doubt begin to save it directly they were married; but eighteen shillings was not enough to keep them both.

"He'd better wait, then," said I.

"He's so afraid he'd lose me," she whispered.

"And would he?" I asked.

She picked up a crumb from the floor, seeming thereby to suggest that it was not in the nature of her to waste anything.

"Then I suppose you'll be married in secret and go on just the same?" [19]

She nodded her head.

"Where does he propose you should be married?"

"At the registry office in Henrietta Street."

"The mouse-trap," said I.

"No; the registry office," she replied.

"And when's it to be?" I asked.

"My next evening after this."

Well, it came to that next evening. I got permission from a firm of book-buyers to occupy a window opposite. And there I observed that little parlour tragedy which you can see in the corner of any old wainscotted room if only you keep quiet long enough.

It did not happen successfully that first time. For half an hour he walked her up and down Henrietta Street. I saw my publisher come out of his door, little dreaming of the comedy that was being played as he passed them by. And every time they stopped [20] outside the Registry Office windows, she stood and read the notices of soldiers deserted the army, of children that were lost, while he talked of the great things that life was offering to them both just inside those varnished doors.

After a time they walked away and I came out from my hiding-place. Something must have upset her, I thought, and I went across to look at the notices in the window. There was nothing to frighten her there; yet she had scampered away home to that little hole in Clapham, and there vanished out of sight.

But it came at last. It came the very next of her short evenings. I was on the lookout again. I saw them march up to the door. No hesitation this time. He must have been eloquent indeed to have led her so surely as that.

I saw him lift the spring of the trap. I saw her enter with tip-toe steps, but more full [21] of confidence now. Then I heard the sharp snap of the door as it fell.

"They've caught a mouse," said I to the book-buyer as I came downstairs.

"'Tis a good thing," said he; "they're the very devil for eating my bindings."

III [23]
THE WONDERFUL CITY

III [25]
THE WONDERFUL CITY

I saw a wonderful city to-day. Rows of houses there were. Domes of great buildings with their dull brown roofs lifted silently into the sky. Long streets in tireless avenues led from one cathedral to another; some with the straightness of an arrow, others twisting and turning in devious ways, yet all leading, as a well-planned street should lead, to the crowning glory of some great edifice.

By the chance of Destiny I stood above it all and looked down. It was strange that only the night before I had been dreaming that I was in the City of New York, with its vast maze of buildings leaping to the sky. In my dream I had stood wrapt in amazement. But I was silent with a greater astonishment here. For as I gazed upon it, [26] there had come a man to my side and, seeing the direction of my eyes, he had said—

"There warn't a trace o' that there last night."

"Not a trace?" said I. And I said it in amazement, for frankly I disbelieved him.

"Not a trace," he repeated solemnly.

"All that built in one night?" I asked again.

"In one night," said he.

"But doesn't it astound you?" said I. I tried to lift his lethargy to the wonderment and admiration that was thrilling in my mind.

"It do seem strange," he replied, "when yer come to think of it."

"Well, then, come to think of it!" I exclaimed. "You can't do better than find the world strange. Come to think of it and, finding it strange, you'll come to believe in it!"

He stared at me with solemn eyes. [27]

"Look at the dome of that cathedral," I went on. "Could you set to work and, in a single night, build a vast piece of architecture like that, so many times higher than yourself?"

"That ain't no cathedral," said he.

"Have you ever seen a cathedral?" I asked.

"No."

"Well, then, how do you know it isn't?"

He could give me no reply and I continued in my enthusiasm—

"Look at that street, cut through all obstacles, leading straight as though a thousand instruments of latter-day science had been used in the making of it. Look at this avenue turning to right and to left. Do you see that great cluster of buildings, a very parliament of houses, set round a vast space that would shame the great square of St. Peter's, in Rome. Only look at the——"

I turned round and he had gone. I could see his figure retreating in the distance. [28] Every moment he turned his head, looking round, as one who is pursued yet fears to show his cowardice by running away. He thought I was mad, I have no doubt. Every one thinks you mad when you say the moon is a dead world or the sun is a fiery furnace. To be sane, you must only remark upon the coldness of the moon, or the warmth of the sun. To be sane, you must speak of the things of this world only in terms of people's bodies. They do not understand unless.

And so, when the man left me, I was alone, looking over the wonderful city. For an hour then, I amused myself by naming the different streets, by assigning to the various buildings the uses to which it seemed they might be put.

That huge edifice with the cupola of bronze was the Cathedral of Shadows, where [29] prayers were said in darkness and never a lamp was lit. The street which led to its very steps, that was called the Street of Sighs. Here, in a lighter part of the city, approached to its silent doors by Tight Street, was the Bat's Theatre, where you could hear, but never see the performance as it progressed. A little further on there was Blind Alley—a cul-de-sac, terminating in a tiny building, the Chapel of Disappointment. There was the Avenue of Progress, the Church of Whispers, the Bridge of Stones and a thousand other places, the names of which went from me no sooner than they crossed my mind.

It may be possible to build a wonderful city in a night. I only know how utterly impossible it is to name all its streets and its palaces in one day.

And then, while I was still thus employed, I saw the man returning with a jug of beer.

I nodded to the vessel which he carried in his hand. [30]

"You don't need to think about that," said I, "to understand it."

A broad grin spread across his face. He had found me sane after all. I had talked about beer in terms of bodily comfort.

"I need to drink it," said he with a laugh.

"You do," said I.

Then, as if to appease me for the moment e'er he passed on his way, he returned to our former subject and, with a serious voice, he said—

"When yer come to think of it," said he, "it do seem wonderful that them moles is blind."

"Not so blind," said I, looking down at the wonderful city, "not so blind as those who can see."

He thought I had gone mad again, and he walked away with his jug of beer.

IV
BELLWATTLE AND THE LAWS OF GOD

[31]

IV
BELLWATTLE AND THE LAWS OF GOD

[33]

I often wonder why God evolved a creature so antagonistic to all His laws as woman. I must tell you what I mean.

Bellwattle—she is named Bellwattle for the simple reason that one day in an inspired moment, she called her husband Cruikshank, and he replied giving her the name Bellwattle, quite foolish except between husband and wife—Bellwattle has the genuine mother's heart for animals. Everything that crawls, walks or flies, Bellwattle loves. Some things, certainly, she loves more than others; but for all she has the deep-rooted, protective instinct. Spiders, for example, terrify her; flies and beetles she loathes, but would not kill one of them even if they crawled upon her dress. And they do.

[34]

Now Bellwattle has a garden which she loves. You can see already, if you have but the mind for it, the tragic conflict which, with that love of her flowers, she must wage between her own soul and the laws of God.

For this, I must tell you, is a lovely garden—not one of those prim-set portions, with well-cut hedges and beds in orthodox array. It is an old garden that has been allowed to run to ruin and Bellwattle, possessing it in the nick of time, has planted primroses amongst the nettles; has carved a little herbaceous border where once potatoes grew. She has thrown roses here, there, and everywhere and, in soap and sugar boxes covered with glass at the bottom of the garden under the nut trees, she forces the old-fashioned flowers that we knew—you and I—in the long-ago days when sweet-william and candytuft were things to boast about and foxgloves grew like beanstalks up to heaven.

[35]

But perhaps the most glorious thing in Bellwattle's garden, that also in which she takes the greatest pride, is her hedges of sweet pea. They grow in great walls of dazzling colour, and the bees hum about them all day long. But they are the devil and all to raise.

Now this is where the tragic conflict comes in, between the mice and the birds and the slugs and Bellwattle's kitten and Bellwattle's heart. It is a terrible conflict, I can tell

you; for the laws of God are unalterable, and so is the heart of Bellwattle.

This, then, is what happens: Bellwattle forgot to cover the sweet pea seeds with red lead. It is just the sort of thing a woman would forget. I doubt if I could think of it myself. Then followed the natural result. A shrew-mouse got hold of one or two of [36] them, and Bellwattle wondered why on earth God ever made shrew-mice.

“But they’re dear little things,” I told her.

“I can’t help that,” said she. “What’s the sense in making a thing that goes and eats up other things?”

Which, of course, was unanswerable.

Two days after this had happened, the kitten was seen playing with a live shrew-mouse.

Bellwattle screamed.

“Oh, the little wretch! If I could only catch it!”

“What—the mouse?” shouted Cruikshank.

“No, no; the wretched little kitten! Look at the way she’s torturing it! Oh, I never saw such a cruel little beast in all my life!” and her face grew rosy red.

Now, Cruikshank is a dutiful husband. Moreover, he knows positively nothing about women. Perhaps that is why. When, therefore, he realised that it was the kitten [37] who was the cruel little beast, and a sense of duty claiming him, he chased it all over the garden, picking up stones as he ran.

“Make her drop it!” cried Bellwattle.

“I will, if I can hit her,” replied Cruikshank and, like a cowboy throwing a lasso from a galloping horse, he flung a stone. The kitten was struck upon the flank and in its terror it dropped the mouse and fled. Cruikshank approached it and, he assures me, with much pride in his prowess picked up the poor little mouse by the hind leg. Then he looked up and saw Bellwattle’s face. It was white—ashen white.

“You’ve hurt her,” she said, half under her breath.

“It’s better than hurt,” said Cruikshank—“it’s dead.”

“No—the kitten—you hit it with a stone.”

“’Twas a jolly good shot,” said Cruikshank.

“I never meant you to hit her,” said Bellwattle. [38]

Cruikshank looked disappointed. To hit a flying object whilst one is in a tornado of motion one’s self is no mean feat. Failing an appreciation of the woman herself, I am not surprised he was disappointed.

“I made her drop it, anyhow,” he said.

“You’ve frightened her out of her life and now perhaps she’ll never come back,” said Bellwattle, and in and out of the garden she went, all through the forests of rhododendra—where the kitten, I should tell you, hunts for big game—and with the gentlest, the softest, the most wooing voice in the world, she cried the kitten’s name. Cruikshank was at a loss to understand it. When he met her down one of the paths still calling, with tears in her eyes, he assures me he felt so ashamed of himself that he began, in a feeble way, calling for the kitten too. When they met again, still [39] unsuccessful in their search, he dared not look her in the face.

Now this is only one of the conflicts that take place in Bellwattle’s soul. She worships the birds, but they eat the young shoots of the sweet peas. Then she hates them; then the kitten catches one. And now, Cruikshank tells me, he will have no hand in the matter.

“You leave it to God,” I advised.

“I do,” said he; “it’s too difficult for me.”

I believe myself it is too difficult for God.

Only the other day, in the farmyard, Bellwattle saw two cocks fighting—fighting for the supremacy of the yard. Cruikshank and I looked on, really enjoying the sport of it in our hearts, yet deadly afraid of saying so.

"Can't you stop them?" exclaimed Bellwattle. "They're hurting each other!"

We neither of us moved a hand.

"If you don't, I shall have to go and do it myself," said she. [40]

"Much better leave it to God," said I. "They're settling matters that have nothing to do with you."

But do you think logic so profound as that deterred her? Not a bit of it! Out she ran into the farmyard, throwing her arms about in the air—as women will when they wish to interfere with the laws of God.

"Shoo! shoo! shoo!" shouted Bellwattle.

And one of the cocks, at the critical moment of victory, reluctantly leaving go of its opponent's comb, looked up with considerable annoyance into her face and shrieked back—

"Cock-a-doodle-do!"

Cruikshank glanced at me out of the corner of his eye, and out of the corner of his mouth he whispered—

"We shan't have any eggs to-morrow."

V [41]
REALISM

V [43]
REALISM

This word—realism—has lost its meaning. So, for that matter, has many another word in the language. Sentiment is one and, as a natural consequence, the word sentimental is another. Realism and sentiment, in fact, have got so shuffled about, for all the world like the King and Queen in a pack of cards that now, instead of sentiment being hand in hand with reality, they have become almost opposed. To express a sentiment is now tantamount to ignoring a reality.

Joseph Surface may be responsible for this. It would not seem unlikely. But wherever the responsibility lies, it is an everlasting pity; no one has had the common politeness to replace or even create a substitute for the thing which they have taken away. [44]

Realism, which now means an expression of things as they happen without any relation to things as they immortally are, is robbed of its true significance. But no word is left in its place. Sentiment, which now means an expression of momentary emotionalism, instead of what one perceives to be true in the highest moments of one's

thoughts, has left a blank in the language which no one seems willing to or capable of filling up.

Now all this is an irreparable loss. How great a loss it is can be seen by the fact that no two people's terminology is the same when they are discussing a subject wherein these words must be employed. In the space of five minutes both are at cross purposes; in a tangle from which they find it well-nigh impossible to extricate themselves.

I do not for one instant propose to supply here a solution to the difficulty; nor can I [45] coin two words to repair the loss sustained. All I wish to do is to tell a real story, one that happened only a short while ago, to illustrate what seems to me to be realism in comparison with what realism is supposed to be.

Our little servant-girl was married—married to the young man who brought the milk of a morning. The courtship had been going on for some time before I realised the glorious things that were happening. Then, when I was told about it, I used to peep out of my bedroom window. As soon as I heard that cry of his—impossible to write—when he opened the gate and rattled with his can down the area steps, then up I jumped from my bed and lifted the window.

They must have been wonderful moments for Emily, those early mornings when, with heart beating at the sound of his cry, she had run for the big white jug, then [46] dragged out the time lest he should think she had opened the door too eagerly.

Many a time have I seen them down at the bottom of those area steps; she leaning up against the pillar of the door watching him, rapt in admiration, while he filled up the big white jug.

It is a fine thing for you when your little maid has eyes for the milkman. You get a good measure, I can tell you. He would not seem stingy to her for the world. I have seen him dipping his little half-pint measure times and again into the big can as he talked to her and, as she held out the white jug, just trickling it in till our two pints were more than accounted for.

All this went on for weeks together. Emily sang like a lark in the morning when she rose betimes to do her work. The worst of the scrubbing was all finished with and Emily's hair was tidy long before there came that weird falsetto cry, or the sound of the [47] milk cans rattled down the area steps. Oh, I can assure you, it is an excellent thing when your little maid has eyes for the milkman. She never gets up late of a morning.

And then, at last, with great to-doings in Emily's home out at Walham Green, they were married. I asked Emily what she would like for a wedding present and she said:

"I'd like one o' them old brass candlesticks—same as what you 'ave in your study."

You see Emily had acquired some taste. I call it taste because it is mine. Good or bad, she had acquired it.

"Wouldn't you prefer silver?" I asked, thinking I knew what silver would mean in Walham Green.

But she only replied:

"No—I like the brass ones—'cos they're old. I've a fancy for old things." [48]

So a pair of old brass candlesticks was what I gave her. She wrote and thanked me for them. She said they looked just lovely on George's writing table and that one of these days, when I was passing that way, I ought to go and look at them.

I did pass through Walham Green eventually. It was some months later. She had probably forgotten all about having asked me, but I paid my visit all the same.

For a moment or so, as I stood on the doorstep, I felt a twinge of trepidation. I could not remember her married name. But it was all right. She opened the door herself. Then, as she stood there, with a beaming smile lighting her face from ear to

ear, reminding me so well of those early mornings when I used to peep out of my bedroom window and peer into the area below, I saw that soon there would be another little Emily or another perky little George to bring a smile or a cry into the world. [49]

"You're happy?" said I.

"Oh—sir!" said she.

She showed me up then to the sitting-room where was George's writing table and the pair of old brass candlesticks. She pointed to the table.

"'E made it 'imself," she said, not meaning it in explanation; but it did explain the queer shape. "'E made it out of an old box and I covered it with felt. Ain't it splendid?"

I agreed with my whole heart. Everything was splendid. The whole room might have been made out of an old box. And yet I could see what a joy it was to her. There was her acquired taste in evidence everywhere, but except for my poor pair of candlesticks, everything was imitation. It made no matter. She thought they were really old and liked them immeasurably better than the things I had collected with such care at home. [50]

"Could anything be nicer than this?" said I with real enthusiasm.

"I don't believe it could, sir," said she.

And then, in little half-amused, half-curious, half-frightened whispers, she told me how they were going to call the baby after me.

"Supposing it's a girl," said I.

No—they had not reckoned on that. When you make up your mind properly to a boy—a boy it is up to the last moment. After that, you forget how you made up your mind, you are so wildly delighted that it is alive at all.

I walked across to the window.

"So you're radiantly happy," I said.

"'E's just wonderful," she replied; "I thought it couldn't last at first—but it's just the same."

I gazed out of the window—envious, perhaps.

"What does this look on to?" I asked. [51]

"A slaughter-house, sir."

She said it full of cheerfulness, full of the joy of her own life. I stared and stared out of the window. A slaughter-house! A slaughter-house! and here was a little slip of a woman passing through those trembling hours before the birth of her first child!

Now *that* is what your realist would call a chance! He would make a fine subject out of that. He would show you the growth of that idea in the woman's mind. He would picture her drawn to gaze out of that awesome window whenever they dragged the lowing, frightened cattle to their doom. And last of all, with wonderful photographic touches, he would describe for you the birth of a *still-born* child. Then with a feeling of sickness in the heart of you, you would lay down the story and exclaim, "How real!"

That is what is meant by realism to-day. [52]

Yet somehow or other I prefer my Emily; not because the boy *is* called after me—but because, whatever he may be called, he is alive, he is well, and he kicks his little legs like wind-mills.

Now *that* is an immortal truth.

VI
THE SABBATH

[53]

VI
THE SABBATH

[55]

When I was a little boy—younger even than I am now—my father had strict ideas upon Sabbath behaviour. We might read nothing, I remember, but what was true. Now, if you come to think of it, that limits your range of literary entertainment in a terrible way. It drove me to such books as “Little Willie’s Promise—a True Story” or “What Alice Found—Taken from Life.”

One Sunday afternoon, perched high in the mulberry-tree, I was found with a copy of the Saturday’s daily paper. It was smeared with the bloodstains of many mulberries, whose glorious last moments had been with me.

“What have you got there?” asked my father from below. [56]

I told him. It was Sunday. My story at least was true.

“Come down at once!” said he.

I descended, finding many more difficulties to overcome than I had discovered in my ascent.

My father waxed impatient.

“Can’t you get down any quicker than that?” he asked. He had a book on rose-growing in his hand, which, being quite true, he was taking out on that glorious afternoon to read and enjoy in the garden.

With all respect, I told him that I did not want to break my neck and I continued slowly with my laborious descent. When I reached the ground, he eyed me suspiciously.

“How dare you read the paper on Sunday?” he asked.

“I was only reading the police reports,” said I, humbly; “I thought they were true.” [57]

He held out his hand expressively. I timidly put forth mine, thinking he wanted to congratulate me on my taste.

“The paper!” said he, emphatically.

I yielded, without a word.

“Now, if you want to read on Sunday,” said he, “go into the house and learn the Collect for the third Sunday after Trinity. And never let me see a boy of your age reading the paper again.”

“Not on week-days?” said I.

“No, never!” he replied, and, as he walked away, he scanned the Stock Exchange quotations with a stern and unrelenting face.

I do not want to argue about the justice of this, for now that I am a little older, the after effect, though not what my father expected, has proved quite admirable. If the newspaper was not true enough to read on week-days, let alone Sundays, I came to the conclusion that it must be very full of lies indeed. And all this has been very helpful to me ever since. I think of it now as I open my daily paper in the morning, and I thank [58]

my father for it from the bottom of my heart. It has saved me a deal of unnecessary credulity.

I remember, too, that all games—all games but chess—were strictly forbidden. That also has left an impression on my mind—an ineffaceable impression about the game of chess. It seems a very stern game to me—a game rigid in its expression of the truth. The King and Queen are always real people, moving—far be it from me to allude to Royalty—in straightened paths; the Queen impulsively, the King in staid dignity, one step at a time. I always behold the Knight as one, erratic and Quixotic in all he does; the Bishop swift and to the point, thereby connecting himself in my mind with the days when the Bishops went out to war and brought the Grace of God with them on [59] to the battlefield, rather than with the Bishops of to-day, who keep the Grace of God at home.

So I think of the game of Chess—the only game we were ever allowed to play on Sunday—the game my father loved so well above all others.

I don't know what it is about the observance of the Sabbath, but to me it seems a beautiful idea, like a beautiful bell; yet a bell that has been cracked and rings with a strange, false, unmeaning note. No one seems to be able to get the true tone of it. Heaven knows they ring it enough. The Church and such followers of the Church as my father are always pealing its message for the world to hear; yet I wonder how many people detect in it the sound of that discordant note of hypocrisy.

Nevertheless, there is something grand in that conception of One creating a vast [60] universe in six days or six ages—whichever you will—and resting at His ease upon the seventh. Nor is it less grand to work throughout a common week, making a home, and on the Sabbath to cease from labour. The whole world is agreed that that day of rest is needed; but are they to lay down a law that what is rest for one man is rest for another?

If that is the only way they can think of doing it; if that is the only interpretation of the word—rest—which they can find, then, so far as the Sabbath is concerned, we shall be a nation of hypocrites or lawbreakers for the rest of our days. And of the two, may I be one who breaks the law. For, do what you will with it, human nature has reached that development when it insists upon thinking for itself and, one man, thinking it all out most carefully, will declare that a game of chess is not an abomination of the [61] Sabbath, while another will read the police reports in the daily papers because they are true.

Fifty years ago, Charles Kingsley, that strenuous apostle of health, urged that it was better to play cricket on the Green at Eversley than stay at home and be a hypocrite—or a gambler, which is much the same thing. But his was only one honest voice amongst the thousands of others who have preached a very different gospel to that.

Only a short while ago, at a little tennis club in the suburbs of London, there came up before the committee the question as to whether play should not be allowed on Sunday. The club was composed of city clerks, of members of the Stock Exchange, of men labouring the daily round to keep together those homes of which both the Church and the nation are so justly proud.

Every one seemed in favour of it, until the Vicar of the parish rose and said that [62] seeing there was a high fence all round the ground, and that the players would be hidden from the sight of the public at large, he saw no reason why play should not be allowed out of Church hours—that was to say, from two till six.

"But," said he, "I must most vehemently protest against any playing of the game of croquet."

A member of the committee, one with a lame leg, who was debarred from tennis, but was known to make his ten hoop break at croquet, asked immediately for the reason of this protest.

"I work all the week in the city," said he; "I have no other chance for playing except late on Saturday and on Sunday. Why should you prevent croquet?"

"Because," said the Vicar, "the sound of the croquet balls would reach the ears of people passing by. And what do you imagine they'd think if they heard people playing croquet? I make no objection to tennis because, if played in a gentlemanly way, no one outside need know that a game was going on—but croquet! You must remember we have to consider others as well as ourselves." [63]

"You think it would make them feel envious?" asked the lame man.

"I mean nothing of the kind," said the Vicar.

"Then what do you imagine they would think?"

"They would realise that the Sabbath—the day of rest—was being broken."

"Then we have your consent to break it with tennis," said the Chairman.

"It seems to me," said the Vicar, "that this discussion is being carried into the region of absurdity."

"I quite agree with the Vicar," said the lame man.

VII
HOUSE TO LET

[65]

VII
HOUSE TO LET

[67]

If I only knew more about women than I do—if I only knew anything about them at all—I might be able to understand the vagarious indetermination of the lady who is contemplating the occupation of a little house quite close to me here in the country.

But I know nothing about the sex—well, next to nothing. That is as near to the truth as a man will get on this subject. His next to nothing, in fact, is next to the truth. And so, with this open confession of ignorance, I can explain nothing about this lady. I can only tell you all the funny things she does.

There is this house to let. Well, it is less than a house. An agent, flourishing his pen over the book of orders to view, would call it a maisonette—what is more, he would be right. It is a little house—a little, tiny house. The view from the balcony round the top of it is beautiful; but from inside, I doubt if you can see anything at all. I have never been inside, but that is what I imagine. [68]

Now, the strange thing about this lady's attraction for it is that she has occupied it once before. There her children were brought up. From there they were sent out into the world upon that hazardous journey of fortune: that same journey in quest of the golden apple for which the three sons have always set forth, ever since the first fairy tale was written. And so the little house is filled with recollections for her.

She remembers—I have heard her speak of it—the day when Dicky, the youngest boy, fell out from one of the windows. Not a long fall, but it was the devil and all to [69]

carry him back into the house. She did not say it was the devil and all. I say it for her, because I know when she was telling it, that was the way she wanted to put it. But a woman can look a little phrase like that, which is so much better than saying it.

She remembers also the day when they had nothing in the house to eat and she, saying such things to her husband as God has given him memory for the rest of his life, had to go out and scrape together whatever she could find. It was a cold day. There was snow on the ground. Snow in the beginning of May! Heaven only knows how she managed. But she succeeded.

There is that about women. They will get food for their children, even when famine is in the land, or they will die. I know that much about them. They have died in Ireland.

Well, all these things she remembers; things which, softened by time, are no doubt [70] pleasant memories ere this. And yet she cannot make up her mind. Where she has been since they went away, I do not know. Travelling, I imagine. But here she is back once more, doubtless worrying the life out of the house agent, who is continually being jostled in the balance of thinking he has, then thinking he has not, let a very doubtful property.

Every morning she comes and looks over the old place. I suppose she is staying in the neighbourhood. From every side she views it and all the while she talks to herself. Now, women do this more than you would think. They do it when they are going to bed at night. They do it when they are getting up in the morning. It always seems as if there were some one inside them to whom they must tell the truth, because, I believe, they are the most truthful beings in the world—to themselves.

Only yesterday, when she thought she was absolutely alone, I heard her saying— [71]

"You wouldn't like it, you know, once you were fixed up there again. It's out of the way, of course, quiet, but you wouldn't like it."

And then, having told herself the truth, she began immediately to contradict it.

Why they do this is more than I can tell you. The only people who can tell the truth, they seemingly dislike it more than any one else. A man loves the truth, lives for it, dies for it, but seldom tells it. With a woman it is just the opposite, and I cannot for the life of me tell you why.

"You'd be a fool if you took it," she said to herself as she went away to the house agent's. "You don't know who you'll have for neighbours. They might be disgusting people."

I followed her to the house agent's, and this, if you please, was the first question [72] she put to him—

"What sort of people do you think'll take the house over the way?"

I pitied the house agent from the bottom of my heart, because how on earth could he know? Yet upon his answer hung all his chances of letting. I thought he replied very cleverly.

"They're sure to be good people," said he; "we only get the best class round here."

And then, just listen to her retort—

"But you can't tell," said she. "What's the good of pretending you know. It might be a butcher and his family. You couldn't stop them if they wanted the house."

The agent leaned back in his chair, then leaned forward over his desk, turning over pages and pages of a ledger.

"Well, will you take an order to view this one?" said he. "Same rent—a little more accommodation."

"No, I don't want to see any more," she replied. "This is the one I like best." [73]

"Well, would you like to settle on that?" said the agent. "I'll write to the landlord to-night."

"I'll let you know to-morrow," said she.

For three weeks she has gone on just like this.

And it is still to let, that little house in the bowl of my old apple tree. But every morning she comes just the same and, sitting on the topmost branch, she chatters to herself incessantly for half an hour, as starlings and women do—for she is a lady starling. I shall be curious to know when she makes up her mind, but, knowing nothing about women and less than nothing about starlings, I cannot say when or what it will be.

VIII
A SUFFRAGETTE

[75]

VIII
A SUFFRAGETTE

[77]

She thanked God, she told me, that she had never been married.

She was quite old—well, quite old? Can you ever say that of a woman? Women are quite old for five years, but that is all. They are quite old between the ages of thirty-five and forty. Then, if God has given them a heart and they have taken advantage of the gift, youth comes back again. It is not the youth under the eyes, perhaps; it is the youth in the eyes. It is not the youth around the lips; it is the youth of the words that issue from them.

Between thirty-five and forty a woman is trying to remember her youth and forget her age. That makes her quite old—quite, quite old. After that—well, I have said, it rests with God and her. [78]

So Miss Taviner was not quite old. She was quite young. She was sixty-three. Her eyes twinkled, even when she thanked God for her spinsterdom.

"You've got," said I, "a poor opinion of men."

"'Tisn't my opinion—'tis my mother's," said she.

I felt there was nothing to be said to that. It would have been unseemly on my part—who have only just found my own youth—to disagree with an opinion of such long standing.

You must understand that Miss Taviner could never have been beautiful. God may have meant her to be; I don't know anything about that. I am only aware how Nature interfered. For when she was young—a child not more, I think, than six—she was struck by lightning, paralysed for a time, and, when she recovered, her eyes were at loggerheads. They looked every way but one. [79]

But I like her little shrivelled face, nevertheless. It is crafty, perhaps. She looks as if she counts every apple on the trees in her old garden. Why shouldn't she? She has a poor opinion of men. Besides, the apples at Beech House Farm—where her father lived and his father before him—those apples are part of the slender income by which

she manages to cling to the old home. Who could blame her for counting them? I don't even blame her for having the cunning look of it in her eyes.

No—I suppose, though I do like her face, it is because I haven't got to love it. Possibly that is why she has so poor an opinion of men. Some man found that he could not love her face and broke his faith with her. At least, I thought that then. Some heartless wretch has jilted her, I thought—taught her to love, and then caught sight of a [80] prettier pair of eyes. I must admit he need not have been on the lookout for them.

"But," said I presently, when these ideas had passed away, "don't you admit men have their uses?"

"None!" she said emphatically.

"Then why," I asked, "do you hang up that old top hat of your father's on a peg in the kitchen, so that the first tramp, as you open the door to him, may see it?"

"So that he'll think I've got a man in the house, I suppose," she replied.

"That's why you have a couple of glasses and a whiskey bottle on the table in the evening?"

"Yes."

"Then a man is useful," said I, "as far as his hat is concerned?"

She winked her crooked eyes at me and she said, "Yes, so long as there isn't a head inside of it."

I laughed. "Then really," I concluded, "you do hate men?" [81]

"I suppose I do," said she.

"Why?"

I thought I was going to hear of her little romance with its pitiable ending.

But no, she merely shrugged her shoulders, stuck an old tam-o'-shanter on her head, and went out to see if the gardener was doing his fair share of work.

I might never have thought of this again, but it chanced that I bought from her, amongst her old relics of the family property, a mahogany box, with brass lock and brass handle. Inlaid, it was, round the edge of the lid. Quite a handsome thing. She had lost its key. It was locked and, seeing that she did not want to go to the expense of getting a key made, she sold it to me.

I got a key made. I opened it. It was empty, but for one thing. There was a letter at the bottom. It is unquestionable that I had no right to read it. It is also unquestionable [82] that I did.

> "*My dear Miss Taviner,*" it ran, "*these evenings that it is so light they may be playing cricket on the green. Shall we meet at the Cross beyond the forge? —Yrs. in haste, Henry Yeoman.*"

"That's the man," said I to myself. "He was ashamed of being seen with her even then. No wonder she has a poor opinion of men." My anger went out to Henry Yeoman on the spot.

But I did him an injustice. For, inquiring at the forge, which I happened to pass some days later, I stopped and asked the smith about him.

"Henry Yeoman," said he, "why he's left these parts nigh fifteen years. He's gone to live at Reading."

"Is he married?" I asked.

"Yes; married Miss Taviner."

"Miss Taviner?"

"Yes; sister of her down at Beech House Farm." [83]

"Never knew she had a sister," said I.

"Yes. Oh, she had three; all married, they are."

"Why did she never marry?" I asked, for then I knew the letter was not to her.

"Why?" He tapped the anvil with his hammer and he laughed a bass accompaniment to its ring. "Because no one 'ud ever look at her, I suppose."

I saw it then. I saw why she had so poor opinion of men. I saw why she thanked God she had never married.

No man had ever taught her what love was. No man had ever even jilted her. No wonder she hated them. No wonder she counted her apples.

IX
BELLWATTLE AND THE LAWS OF NATURE

[85]

IX
BELLWATTLE AND THE LAWS OF NATURE

[87]

It is not mine to distinguish between the laws of God and the laws of Nature. This is a distinction peculiar to Bellwattle.

It would be difficult to give precise definition to her conception of the subtle and imaginary line which divides the two, but, so far as I can grasp it, it would seem to be this: The laws of God determine those things which happen despite themselves and to the confusion of all Bellwattle's pre-conceived opinions. When, for example, a caterpillar, in its hazardous struggle for existence, eats into the heart of her favourite rosebud, that is, for Bellwattle, one of the laws of God.

[88] Now, the laws of Nature are quite different to this. The laws of Nature—so Bellwattle, I fancy, would tell you—command those things which happen of their own accord and to the satisfaction of all Bellwattle's pre-conceived anticipations. When, for example, a rose tree bears a thousand blossoms from May to the end of December; when the peas are ready to pick in the first week in June, and the delphiniums have grown yet another inch when, every morning, she steps out into the garden to look at them—these are, for Bellwattle, the orderly workings of the laws of Nature.

I see her point. I sympathise with her distinction and I wish—oh, *how* I wish!—that I could think as she does. For it is a fixed idea with her. Nothing will shake it. And I have never met any one whose appreciation of Nature is as great as hers.

[89] Only the other day—so Cruikshank, her husband, tells me—they came across a wild flower in one of the hedges. In blossom and general appearance it bore so close a relation to Shepherd's Needle that at first sight of it, he dubbed it straight away. On closer examination it was found that there were no needles; neither could it be Shepherd's Purse, for there were no purses.

"Perhaps it's a Shepherd's Needle gone wrong?" suggested Bellwattle, and Cruikshank tells me he left it at that. The sublime conception of it was beyond the highest reaches of his imagination.

On another occasion, when I had the honour to accompany her on her walk, we heard the raucous note of a bird from somewhere away in the meadows.

"I bet you don't know what that is!" said I, to test her knowledge; but she answered quite easily—

"It's a partridge."

"No," said I, a little disappointed at her mistake, "that's a pheasant."

"Oh, the same thing," said Bellwattle, unperturbed. [90]

"Of course; they both begin with a P," said I.

And then she looked at me out of the corner of her eyes and blinked. I thank God I did not smile. She would never have believed in me again.

But it is when Bellwattle puts out her gentle hand to help Nature in her schemes that I think she is most lovable of all. This is the way with all true women when they love Nature for Nature's sake. In fact, it sometimes seems to me, when I watch Bellwattle forestalling God at every turn, that she is Eve incarnate, the mother of all living. For to see her in the garden and the country, you would feel that she almost believes she has suffered the labours of maternity for every single thing that lives, from the first snowdrop opening its eyes to the spring to the last little tremulous calf, with its quaking knees, which the old cow in the farmyard presents to our neighbour over the way. [91]

"The poor wee mite," she says, and she gives it the tips of her fingers with which to ease its toothless gums.

But sometimes, as woman will, she carries this motherdom to excess. You may aid Nature to a point. Men do it in their pre-eminently practical way, which has science for the dry heart of it. Watch them pruning rose trees. I believe they take a positive pleasure in the knife. I am perfectly sure Bellwattle's garden would be a forest of briars were it not that Cruikshank keeps locked within a little drawer a knife with a handle of horn, which he takes out in the month of March, when Bellwattle goes to pay a visit to her mother up in town. In fact, the visit is arranged for that purpose.

"I suppose it has to be done," she says, packing her trunk. "But it seems a silly business to me that you should have to cut the arms and legs off a thing before it can grow properly. They bore roses last year. Why not this?" [92]

But where Nature needs no aid, there is Bellwattle ready with her ever-helping hand. She constitutes herself in the capacity of nurse to all the birds in the garden.

Only this spring a linnet built its nest in the yew tree that grows in our hedge. In an unwise moment Cruikshank informed her of it. She ran off at once and counted the eggs. Five there were. She had seen eggs before, but these were the most beautiful that any bird had ever laid in its life.

From that moment she became so fussy and excitable that Cruikshank was at a loss to know what to do with her.

"She'll drive the bird away," said Cruikshank to me.

"Well, tell her so," said I.

"I did."

"Well?" [93]

"She simply said, 'The bird must know that I don't mean to do any harm.'"

"No doubt she's right," said I. "I don't suppose there's an animal in the whole of creation that doesn't recognise the maternal instinct when it sees it."

That was all very well while there were only eggs to be reckoned with. But when one morning Bellwattle went to the nest and found five black little heads, like five little Hottentots grown old and grizzled, with shrivelled tufts of grey hair, there was no containing her.

She clapped her hands. She danced up and down and—

"Oh, the dears!" she cried. "Oh, the little dears! I must give them something to eat. What will they eat?"

I looked at Cruikshank. I had come round that morning to count his rosebuds with him—a weakness of his to which he always succumbs. He tells me it is the only way [94] he can justify his use of the knife. I looked at him and he looked at me.

"This is going too far," he whispered. "Can't we put a stop to it?"

"Leave it to me," said I, and Bellwattle, hearing our whispers, turned round and stared at us.

"What is it?" she asked.

"We were talking," said I.

"Yes, but what about?"

She was fired with suspicion.

"We were wondering the best thing you could feed them with."

Suspicion fell from her.

"What do you think?" she asked. "Would corn be any good?"

Cruikshank blew his nose.

"A little bit solid," he said dubiously.

"You can't do better than give them the same as their mother does," I suggested.

"What's that?" she asked.

"Small worms," I replied, and I watched her face; "those little thin, red, raw ones." [95]

She walked away, saying nothing. She hates worms. Well, naturally—every woman does.

Cruikshank laid an appreciative hand on my shoulder.

"That's done it," he said. "I was afraid she'd go worrying about till she made the poor little beast desert, but that's done it."

I was not so sure myself. Therefore it surprised me not at all the next morning when, arriving unexpectedly in the garden, I came upon her unawares, carrying at arm's length two little wriggling worms. There was an expression on her face which will live in my memory for ever. I concealed myself behind a tree and watched. I could see nothing, but this is what I heard—

"Oh, you funny little mites! Bless your little hearts! Here, take it—take it! Open your mouth, you silly! Not so wide—not so wide. Well, if you all sit up like that you'll [96] fall out, you know. Lie down, you silly little fools; lie down! lie down! Now shut your mouth on it and you'll find it. Shut your mouth!"

And so on and so on, till my laughter gave me away.

"Were you listening all the time?" she asked.

I nodded my head.

"So was the mother linnet," said I, "up in that lilac tree. What do you think she'll do now? She'll think you've been trying to kill them."

"No, she won't," said Bellwattle. "I left a big worm on the edge of the nest for her, so that she'll know I've been feeding them."

But something worse than that happened. With all this attention paid to that which by every law of Nature should have been kept a dead secret, the attention of Bellwattle's cat was attracted to the spot. Next morning the nest was found empty and [97] one of those brown little Hottentots hung dangling in the branches.

Bellwattle came running down the garden, wringing her hands, the tears glittering in her eyes, her lips quivering as she told us what had happened.

"That comes of meddling with Nature," began Cruikshank, but I stopped him very quickly.

"If you stop her tears and make her angry," I whispered, "she'll never forgive you. Let her cry; it's the way women learn."

X
MAY EVE

[99]

X
MAY EVE

[101]

I was told that some one wanted to see me.

"Who is it?" I asked.

They told me it was an old lady, who would give no name. I inquired of her appearance. "She is an old lady," they replied, "and very, very small." I think I must have guessed, for I asked no further questions. I told them to show her in.

If I could only describe to you the way she came into the room! She was so wee and so tiny. Her eyes sparkled with such brilliancy, she might have been seven instead of seventy. Then, when she bobbed me a curtsey as she entered, I could have believed she was a fairy come from the uttermost ends of the earth to attend a christening. [102]

There was every good reason for my belief, not the least of which was that it was May Eve. In Ireland, as you know, the folk dare not go out after dark on this eventful day. The fairies are in the fields, fairies good and bad, and heaven only knows what you may not come across if you wander through the boreens or across the hillside when once the evening has put on her mantle of grey.

Not only will you meet them in the fields, moreover; they come to your very door and milk they ask of you, and fire and water. Now, except that she asked for nothing, but rather brought a gift to me, my wee visitor might have been a fairy come out of the land beyond the edge of Time; come ten million miles to this old farmhouse which hugs itself so close to the land in the valley between the hills.

For the moment I felt my heart in my throat. I had added things together so quickly [103] in my mind that I was sure my belief was right. She was a fairy. May Eve—the very time of day, when the grey mist is creeping over the meadows, and the river runs *blip, blip* between the reeds—the strange and youthful glitter in her wee brown eyes, set deep in the hollows of that old and wrinkled face; then last of all, her bobbing curtsey and the way she smiled at me as though she had a blessing in her pocket—these were the things I added so swiftly together in my mind. The result was inevitable. Undoubtedly she was a fairy. Now see how strange the tricks life plays with you; for, whereas I had believed in fairies before, I knew now that my belief had been vain. I had only believed in the idea of them—that was all. I had only said I believed because I knew I should never see one to contradict the doubt which still lingered in my heart. [104] That is the way most of us say our credo.

"I've brought you your travelling-rug," said she, and she bobbed again.

"What travelling-rug?" I asked.

And then, what happened, do you think? I could hardly believe my eyes. She took from off her arm what seemed at first to me some garment, lined richly with orange-coloured sateen. My eyes grew wider in wonder as she laid it down and spread it out upon the floor.

It was a patchwork quilt!

Oh, you never did see such a galaxy of colours in all your life! Blues and reds, greens, yellows and purples, they all jostled each other for a place upon that square of orange-coloured sateen. All textures they were, too; some velvet, some silk, and some brocade. It was as if the caves of Aladdin had been thrown open to me, and I were allowed just for one moment to peep within.

But that was not all.

For when I said: "You've finished it, then?" I saw to what purpose that completion had been made. Right in the centre of all those dazzling patches was a square of purple —purple that the Emperors used to wear—while worked across in regal letters of gold there were my own initials. [105]

I stared at them. I went down on my knees, looking close into the stitches to make sure that there was no mistake. Then I gazed up at her.

"But it's for me?" said I.

She nodded her head and her whole face was lighted up with pride and satisfaction. She was so excited, too. Her eyes danced with excitement. You know the quaint little twisted attitudes that children get into when they are giving you a present which they have made themselves; they are half consumed with fear that you are going to laugh at them and half consumed with pride in their own handiwork. She was just like that. [106]

Lest you do not know already, I should tell you that I had made her my pensioner as long as she lives, in order to enable her to leave off work and make this patchwork quilt whereby she might be remembered by those who slept beneath it when she had gone to sleep. But I had thought to myself, surely it will be in the family. I had wondered who would become the proud possessor of it. Imagine my amazement, then, when I realised that it was my very own.

"And you'll think of me when I'm gone, won't you, sir—when you go to bed at night?" she said.

"Think of you?" said I. "You may well call it a travelling-rug. I only have to wrap this round me and, with the mere wish of it, I shall be in the land of dreams—millions and millions of miles away."

"P'raps I shall be there, too," said she, clasping her hands. [107]

"And then we'll meet," said I.

She began folding it up with just that care which she had used in the making of it. She folded it one way.

"It's nice and warm," said she.

She doubled it another way.

"Every one of the squares is lined with sateen."

She redoubled it once more.

"And it's all padded with cotton wool."

When she said that, she stood up with her face all beaming with smiles, and she laid it in my hands.

Then I did what I had wanted to do from the very first moment I saw her. I took her little face in my hands and I kissed the soft, warm, wrinkled cheeks.

"When I was very unhappy," said I, "I used to entertain what is called a belief in fairies. Now that I know what it is to be happy, I find them. It's a very different thing."

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[109]

XI
THE FLOWER BEAUTIFUL

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[111]

XI
THE FLOWER BEAUTIFUL

Limehouse, Plaistow, and the East India Docks—these are places in the world to wonder about. Yet even there beauty manages to creep in and grow in a soil where there would seem to be nothing but decay.

There are societies, I believe, which exist in those quarters, whose endeavour it is to lift the mind of the East End inhabitant to an appreciation of what the West End knows to be Art. I am sure that all their intentions are the sincerest in the world. But what is the good of Art to a dock labourer and his wife?

[112] We have only arrived at Art ourselves after generations and generations of a knowledge of what is beautiful. So absolutely have we arrived, moreover, that we care no longer for what is beautiful; we only care for Art.

That, however, is another question too long to enter into here. But to teach Art to the East India dock labourer when he knows so little of beauty, that is a process of putting carts before horses—a reduction to absurdity which can be seen at once.

Now when I was a journalist—that is to say, when I wrote lines of words for a paper which paid me so much per line for the number of lines which the chief sub-editor was good enough to use—I was one day despatched to the East End to see if there were any stuff—I speak colloquially—in a poor people's flower show.

"It may be funny," said the editor.

"It might be," said I.

"Well, make it funny," said he, for I think he caught the note in my voice.

[113] I pocketed my notebook and set off for the East End. Oh, there were all sorts of flowers and doubtless it looked the funniest of flower shows you would ever have seen. For example, the qualification necessary for exhibition was that your plant had been grown in a pot and on a window sill. It was a qualification not difficult to fulfil. In all my wanderings there to find the place, no plot of ground did I see, save a graveyard around a church. But the only things that grew there were the stones in memory of the dead; and they, begrimed with soot and dirt, were sorry flowers to grace a tomb.

You can imagine the pitiful, shrivelled little things that had struggled to maintain life on the window sills of the houses in those dingy courts and darksome alleys. Never did I see such an array in all my life. They would almost, when you thought of country gardens where the daffodils stand up and brave the April winds, they would almost [114] have brought the tears to your eyes.

Little geraniums there were, blinking their poor, tired eyes at the light. One woman brought a plant of sweet pea, which was climbing so wearily, yet so anxiously out of its little pot of red up a wee thin stake of wood. You knew it would never reach the light of the heaven it so yearned to see. The two faint blossoms that it bore were pale, like fragile slum children. What would I not have given then to wrench it out of its poor bed and give it to the great generous sweep of an open field, with a hedge of hawthorn perhaps on which to lean its tired arms.

The woman saw my eyes in its direction and she beamed with conscious pride.

"It doesn't look very healthy," said I.

She gazed at it and then at me with open wonder in her eyes. [115]

"Not 'ealthy?" she said—"why, I've never seen none looking better. Look at that pansy over there—it can't 'old its 'ead up."

"But why compare it with the worst one in the show?" I asked—"I didn't mean it as a personal criticism when I said it wasn't healthy. I'm sure you've taken a tremendous amount of care over it."

"Care!" she exclaimed—"I should just think I 'ave. It's 'ad all the scrapin's off the road in front of our 'ouse."

I passed on, for the judges were coming round and the young curate just down from the university has not a proper respect for the Press. He has probably written for it. Now the young curate of the parish was the principal judge.

I did not hear what he said about the sweet pea. I had gone further on to where a [116] woman was standing with her hand affectionately round a pot from which rose a fine, healthy plant, with rich, deep purple flowers nestling in the leaves that grew to the very pinnacle of the stem. There I waited. I wanted to hear what the judges were going to say about this one. I wanted to hear very much indeed.

This woman, too, seeing my interest in her exhibit, smiled with generous satisfaction.

"Think I've got a chanst, sir?"

"I don't know," said I—"it's fine and strong."

"And look at all the blossoms," said she with enthusiasm—"you wouldn't believe it, but my son brought that from the country last year when 'e went for the houtin'. 'E brought it back, dragged up almost to the roots it was—an' it was in flower then. 'Put it in a vawse,' I says, but my ole man, 'e says—'Shove it in a bloomin' pot,' 'e says, [117] 'that'll grow,' 'e says—'it's got roots to it.' So we puts it in a pot and sticks it out on a window sill, and there it is. It died down to nothin' last winter, but my ole man, 'e wouldn't let me throw the pot away. 'Give it a chanst of the spring,' 'e says—'give it a chanst of the spring.' And bless my soul, if we didn't see little bits of green sticking up through the mould before the beginning of last March."

"It's been a constant interest since then?" said I.

"Hinterest! Why my ole man said as I was killin' it, the way I watered it and looked after it."

"And what do you call it?" I asked.

"I don't know what it is," she said. "Nobody seems to know. We call it—William."

I laughed. "There is a flower called Sweet William," said I.

"Perhaps that's it," she answered, thoughtfully. "But it don't smell—leastways, I've [118] never smelt nothin' from it."

I stood aside as the judges came up. When he saw the plant, standing so bravely and so healthily, and so beautifully in its bright red pot, the curate laughed out loud.

"Look here," said he to one of the other judges, who came up and laughed as well.

"Do you know what you've got here, my good woman?" asked the curate.

She shook her head.

"Well, we can't give you anything for this—it's only a common nettle—a red dead nettle."

"But it's a beautiful colour—ain't it?" said she, with a flame of red in her face.

"Oh—it's a beautiful colour, no doubt," replied the curate easily—"so, I hope, is every plant that grows in the highways and the byways."

"Well, then, why shouldn't it get a prize?" she demanded.

"Because it's only a common dead nettle," said the curate, very softly, turning away wrath. [119]

"But it's 'ealthier and stronger and finer than any o' them other flowers," said she.

"Quite so—no doubt—you might expect that. These others are cultivated flowers, you see. This is only a common dead nettle."

I saw the editor when I returned.

"No stuff worth having," said I—disconsolately, for I was thinking of my few short lines.

"Nothing funny at all?" he asked.

"Nothing," said I, and I told him about the red dead nettle.

"But I think that's dammed funny," he said.

"Do you?" I said.

XII [121]

THE FEMININE APPRECIATION OF MATHEMATICS

XII [123]

THE FEMININE APPRECIATION OF MATHEMATICS

If I could approach mathematics with the same spirit as do ninety-eight women out of a hundred, I might be rather good at them. As it is, my power of will in face of algebraical figures, in face even of numbers that exceed the functions of the simplest forms of arithmetic, my power of will stands aghast. I can do nothing.

Now, ninety-eight women out of a hundred are far more ignorant of the mere rudiments of mathematics than am I; yet with an instinct which I would give my soul to possess they can solve problems and carry on the ordinary business of life with an ability that is little short of marvellous.

Truly, a little learning is a dangerous thing, and most especially when that learning is of mathematics. If once you have tried to weigh hydrogen on an agate-balanced scale, you are for ever unfitted for the common-or-garden mathematical exigencies of life. Now this is where a woman has all the pull. The most that she has ever had to calculate the weight of is a pound of flour or seven and a half pounds of sirloin already weighed and attested by the butcher. When, then, it comes to weighing the baby on the [124]

scale-pans in the kitchen, she will fling on the weights with such a degree of confidence that the result is bound to be correct. You and I, on the other hand, would approach the matter with such delicacy of touch—believing, and quite rightly, that a baby was of far more importance than all the immeasurable quantities of hydrogen in the world—with such delicacy and care should we approach it that the poor infant would have caught its death of cold and be in a comatose condition of exhaustion [125] before we had decided that the scale-pan was clean or the weights were in proper condition to be used.

This smattering of general education is a fatal business. It unfits men for all the real and useful demands of life.

Only the other day, my friend Cruikshank broke a brass candlestick and looked up helplessly from the wreck.

"Where on earth can I get any solder from?" said he.

"What's solder?" asked Bellwattle, his wife.

The question was so direct that, for the moment, it confused him.

"Solder?" he repeated. "Solder? Oh, it's stuff to mend metal with."

"I'll do it with sealing-wax," said Bellwattle.

Cruikshank laughed and, as he said to me afterwards—

"I gave it to her to do. It's best to let women learn by experience. Sealing-wax!" [126] And he laughed knowingly at me. I knew he meant it kindly, so I laughed with him; but the next day I made inquiries about the candlestick.

"How did she get on?" I asked.

"By Jove, she's done it," said he. "It won't bear much knocking about, of course, but it stands as firm as a rock. It's only a woman," he added, "who'd think of mending a brass candlestick with sealing-wax."

"It's only a woman who'd succeed," said I.

But this has nothing to do with mathematics, and it is of mathematics that I want to speak.

If you have any interest in photography, you know how tricksy a matter is the exposure of a plate. It is tricksy to you and I will tell you why. It is because your academic study of the process has taught you that the two-thousandth part of a second [127] is sufficient exposure in order to get cloud effects. Conceive, then, how your brain whirls with figures when you come to take a photograph of an interior or a portrait of some one sitting in a room. I will not remind you of the tortures which your mind must suffer, nor the result of such torture when at last you develop the plate in the dark-room —both are too painful to speak about. Now, a woman knows nothing about this two-thousandth part of a second. She would not believe there were such a measurable fraction of time if you told her. She just exposes the plate; that is all.

One day I had to get a photograph taken in a hurry. I marched into a photographer's in the Strand. There was first a narrow passage, hung with frames filled with photos of young men and young women looking their worst in their best. Then I was confronted by a flight of stairs which I mounted, to find myself in a great big room hung also with [128] photographs—photographs of family groups, of babies in their characteristic attitudes as their mothers had given them to the world. Every conceivable sort of photograph was there, but the room, except for an American roll-topped desk near the window, was empty.

I coughed, and the head of a young girl—not more than twenty years of age—popped up above the desk.

"Can Mr. Robinson take my photograph this morning?" I asked.

"Mr. Robinson is not in at present," she replied.

"I rather wanted my photograph taken in a hurry," said I.

"Oh, you can have it taken," said she. "Would you like it done at once?"

"At once, if you please," I answered.

She rose from her seat behind the roll-topped desk and she walked to the door. [129]

"Then will you step into the waiting-room?" she asked.

I obeyed. The waiting-room had a mirror and a pair of brushes. When I thought of the families whose portraits I had seen within—I refrained.

"I shall do," said I, "as I am."

After a few moments' delay there was a knock on the door. I opened it. There again was the little lady waiting for me.

"Will you step up to the studio, please?" she said, and I received the impression from her voice of anxious assistants waiting in rows to receive me, ready to take my features and record them upon a photographic plate for the benefit of posterity.

Up into the studio, then, I went; a gaunt, great place with white-blinded windows that stared up to the dull, grey sky. But it was empty. I looked in vain for the assistants [130] —there were none. And when she began to wheel the camera into place I stood amazed.

"Are you the whole business of Robinson and Co.?" I asked.

She smiled encouragingly.

"Mr. Robinson is out," said she.

"I don't believe there is a Mr. Robinson," I replied.

She laughed gleefully at that and repeated that there was such a person, but he was out.

"And does he leave you to the responsibility of the entire premises?" I asked.

"Yes," said she.

"What do you do if any one comes into the portrait gallery downstairs while you're up here?"

"Oh, that's all right," she replied confidently; "they don't often come."

I let her fix that abominable instrument of torture at the back of my neck. Her fingers tickled me as she did it, but I said nothing. I was trying in my mind to assess [131] the value of this business of Mr. Robinson. It was no easy job. I had not got beyond single figures when she walked back to the camera.

I glanced up at the leaden sky.

"It's rather dull," said I; "what exposure are you going to give?"

"Oh, I think once will be enough."

"Once what?" I asked.

"Just once," said she.

"But, good heavens!" I exclaimed, and I thought of the two-thousandth part of a second—"it must be one of something. Is it seconds or minutes or half-hours or what?"

She burst out laughing.

"I don't know what it is," she replied, as if it were the simplest matter in the world, "only Mr. Robinson says my once is as good as his twice."

"Is it?" said I. "As good as his twice? What a splendid once it must be!"

Now that is what I mean. That is the feminine appreciation of mathematics. I wish I [132] had it. It may not be of much service on the office stool, but in a world of men and women it is invaluable.

XIII
THE MATERNAL INSTINCT

[133]

XIII
THE MATERNAL INSTINCT

[135]

Some things there are which you may count upon for ever. The fittest will always survive, despite the million charities to aid the incompetent; the maternal instinct will always be the deepest human incentive, no matter who may gibe at the sentiment which clings about little children.

Now, if it be true that Art is the voice of the Age in which we live; that the painter paints what the eye of the Age has seen, the singer sings the songs which the Age has heard, the man of letters writes the thoughts which have passed through the mind of the Age—if all this is true, then how strange and unreal an Age this must be.

[136] For if for one moment you chose to consider it, there are but few painters, few singers, few writers who express the immutable laws of life. Among writers most of all, perhaps, this is an age which devotes itself to the unfittest. The physically unfit, the morally unfit, the socially unfit—these are the characters which fill the pages of those who write to-day.

The old hero, the man of great strength, of great honour, of great courage, he no longer exists in literature. I am told he is old-fashioned, a copy-book individual, a puppet set in motion with no subtle movements of character, but with wires too plainly seen, worked by a hand too obviously visible. There is no Art in him, I am told. I am glad there is not. He would lose all the qualities of heroship for me if there were.

[137] In times gone by, though, this old-fashioned hero was just as real a man as is the hero of to-day. In times gone by this hero was not unnatural, not wanting in character or humanity when he slept with the maid of his choice, a naked sword between them guarding the pricelessness of her virginity. But now—to-day—how wanting in character do you imagine would he be thought for such a deed as that? How painfully unreal?

Is this the fault of the Age? Or is it the fault of the writer? Is it that the Age cannot produce a real hero? Or is it that he is there in numbers in the midst of us and the man of letters has not the clearness of vision to see him? For it is not the fittest, but the unfittest who survives in the pages of literature now.

And thus it is also when you find treatment in fiction of that immutable law, the maternal instinct. If in the novel of to-day you meet the character of a woman with a child, you may be fairly confident that it will be shown to you sooner or later in the [138] ensuing pages how easily she will desert it for the love of some man other than her husband, or how, loving that man, her soul will be wracked ere she bids it farewell. But, tortured or not, she will go. No matter how skilfully she is shown to repent of it later, still she will go.

Now, is that the fault of the Age, or is it the fault of the writer? In danger or in love, do women desert their children? It may happen that they do, but that is a very different matter. All that glitters is not gold—all that happens is not real. Yet it seems to be the choice of the modern writer to seize upon these isolated happenings, give them a coating of reality, and offer them to the public as life.

But life is not a narrow business where things just happen and that is all. Life is the length and breadth of this great universe where things are, in relation to the whole [139] system of suns and moons and stars. Now the maternal instinct is a law without which this wonderfully regulated system would shatter and crumble into a thousand little pieces.

But no one extols it in this age of ours. Talk of it and you are dubbed a sentimentalist at once. Write of it and the cheap irony of critics is heaped upon you. Yet there seems no greater and no grander struggle to me than when these inevitable laws march through the invading army of vermin and of parasites to their inevitable end of victory.

The other day I witnessed a most thrilling spectacle: a mother defending her child from death—a duel where the odds against victory were legion.

In the hedge that shields my garden from the road there is a thrush's nest. I saw her build it. She was very doubtful about me at first; played all sorts of tricks to deceive [140] me; decoyed my attention away while her mate was a-building; sent him to distract my mind while she was putting those finishing touches to the house of which only a woman knows the secret—and knows it so well.

I think before it was completed she had lost much of her distrust in me, for I did nothing to disturb her. It was not in my mind to see what she would do if things happened. I just wanted everything to be—that was all. And so, after a time, she would hop about the lawn where I was sitting, taking me silently thereby into her confidence, making me feel that I was not such an outcast of Nature as she had supposed me to be at first.

I tried to live up to that as well as I could. Whenever I passed the nest and saw her uplifted beak, her two watchful eyes gazing alert over the rim of it, I assumed ignorance at the expense of her thinking what an unobservant fool I must be. But there [141] were always moments when she was away from home and I, stealing to the nest, found opportunity for discovering how things were going on. Five fine blue eggs were laid at last. I think she must have guessed that I counted them, for one morning she caught me with my hand in the nest. I slunk away feeling a sorry sort of fool for my clumsy interference. She flew at once to see what I had done. I guess the terror that must have filled her heart. But when she had counted them herself and found her house in order, she came out on to the lawn and looked at me as though I were one of those strange enigmas which life sometimes offers to every one of us.

At length one day, when I called and gently put in my hand—leaving my card, as you might say—the eggs were there no longer. In place of them was a soft, warm mass [142] like a heap of swan's-down, palpitating with life.

I met her later on the lawn, when she perked her head up at me and as good as said:

"I suppose you know I've got other things to do now, besides looking beautiful."

But I thought she looked splendid. What is more, I told her so, and it seemed just for the moment as if she understood, as if there came back into her eyes that look of grateful vanity which she wore last spring when her mate was wooing her with his songs from the elm tree across the way. But the next moment she had put all flattery behind her and was haggling with a worm, not as to price no doubt, but haggling nevertheless for possession.

Well, the household went on splendidly, until one day I saw my cat sitting on the path below the nest staring up into the bushes.

"You little devil!" I shouted, and she went galloping down the garden with a stone [143] trundling at her heels.

I kept a closer watch after that and, one morning, hearing a great noise as of the songs of many birds while I was at my breakfast, I just stepped out to see what was

happening.

I was held spellbound by what I saw. For there, on the path again below the nest, sat the cat and two yards from her—scarcely more—stood my little mother-thrush, her eyes dilated with terror, her feathers ruffled and swelling on her throat, singing—singing—singing, as though her heart would burst.

It can only last a moment, I thought. One spring and the cat will have her. But, no! Before the greatness of that courage, before the glory of that song, the cat was silenced and made impotent to move. There, within a few feet of her was her prey. With one swift rush, with one fell stroke of her velvet paw, she could have laid it low. But she [144] was up against a law greater than that which nerves the hunter to his cunning.

For five minutes, with throat swelling and eyes like little pins of fire, the mother sang her song of fearless maternity. The glorious notes rang from her in ceaseless trills and tireless cadences. I have heard a singer at Covent Garden, when the whole house rose as one person and applauded her to the very roof, but never have I heard such a song as this, which put to silence the very laws of God that His greatest law might triumph.

For five minutes she sang and then, with crouching steps, the cat turned tail and crawled away into the garden. The thrush ceased her singing and fluttered exhausted up to the nest.

And they write of women deserting their children!

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XIV
FROM MY PORTFOLIO

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XIV
FROM MY PORTFOLIO

He has just reached his eightieth year. Eighty times—not conscious perhaps of them all—he has seen the wall-flowers blossom in his old garden; well-nigh eighty times has he thinned out his lettuces and his spring onions, pruned his few rose trees, weeded his gravel paths.

Now he is bent with rheumatism; his rounded back and stooping head, his tremulous knees in their old corduroy breeches, are but sorry promises of what he was. Yet with what I have been told and what I can easily imagine, it is plainly that I can see the fine stalwart fellow he has been. Until the age of seventy-two he was the carrier for our village. How many journeys he made, fair weather or foul, always up to the stroke [148] of time, never forgetting the message for this person, the purchase for that, they will all tell you here in the village. I know nothing of his life as a carrier. It is of an old man I give you my picture—an old man awaiting the coming of death with a clear eye and a sturdy heart, enjoying the last moments of life while he may, and facing those sorrows and deprivations which come with old age in a way that many a younger man might learn and profit from.

Only a short time since, his wife departed upon her last journey. The winter came and snatched her from him just as the first frost nips the last of the autumn flowers. Her frail white petals drooped and then they fell. He was left to press them between the leaves of that book of Life which, with trembling fingers, he still clutched within his hand.

He was too ill to follow her body to its quiet little bed in that corner of God's acre [149] where it was made; but I can feel the loneliness in the heart of him when he turned and turned with wakeful eyes that night, stretching out his knotted fingers to the empty place beside him—the place in that bed which had been hers for so many happy years and was hers no longer.

They thought he would never pull through that winter after his loss; and indeed he must have fought manfully with that undaunted courage of a man who clings to life, no matter what misfortune, because it is his right—his heritage. For imagine the long, sleepless nights which must have followed the departure of his gentle bed-fellow! Think of those weary, endless silences which once had been filled by the whisperings of their voices! For in bed and at night-time, the old people always whisper. It is as though they were deeply conscious of the invisible presence of God and His angels. [150] They talk in hushed voices as though they were in church.

I can hear her saying—

"John."

"Yes," I can hear him reply.

"Are you awake?"

"Yes—are you?"

"I am. Isn't it a windy night?"

"'Tis a fine storm—and I never put in they pea-sticks. I was going to do 'en to-morrow."

And then I can hear her little whisper of consolation—

"Maybe they'll be safe till then. They're sturdy plants." At which I can see him turning over in his bed and passing into one of those short hours of sleep into which Nature so gently divides the night for the old people.

Then think of the long and weary silences through which he must have endured before he grew accustomed to the absence of his bed-fellow. For there seem to me few [151] things more pathetic yet more beautiful than two old people who have long passed the passions of youth, sharing their bed together, with the simplicity and innocence of little children. I can, too, so readily conceive how dread the terror of the night becomes when one of them is taken and the other left. I can hear the sounds at night that frighten, the storms that rattle the tiles on the old roof making the one who is left behind stretch out his groping hand for the trembling touch of another hand in vain.

Yet through all this he survived. Cruelly though his heart had been dealt with, he still retained the whole spirit of courage in his soul. With all its chill winds and bitter frosts, he braved out that winter and two years have passed now since his wife died.

I see him nearly every day in his garden, walking up and down the paths, picking out a weed here, a weed there. Two walking-sticks he has to help him on his journeys. [152] They are called simply, number one and number two. And when it is a fine morning, with the sun riding fiercely in a cloudless sky, his daughter will say to him—

"You need only take number one to-day."

So he takes number one and a look comes into those child's eyes of his as though he would say—

"Ah—you see I'm not done for yet. There's many an old fellow of eighty can't get along without two sticks to help him."

One day, too, this summer, I found him working with a bill-hook in his garden. The grass had grown up high under the quick-set hedge on one of the paths. He was clearing it all away.

"Must keep the little place tidy, sir," he said, with a bright twinkle in his eye. "They grasses do grow up so quick there'd be no seeing the path at all." Then with little [153] suppressed grunts of his breath to every swing of the bill-hook, he went on steadily with his work, leaning heavily upon number one with the other hand.

Rather strenuous labour you would think for an old man of eighty to be doing. But as he worked, I saw that all the stems of the grass had been cut for him beforehand with a scythe. He was only sweeping it together into heaps with the aid of a bill-hook. So long as it was a bill-hook it seemed man's labour to him.

I try sometimes to find out what he thinks about life and its swiftly approaching end. But he is very reticent to speak of it—so unlike our little serving-maid, who takes her evenings out alone, and when I asked her why she did not prefer company, replied —

"I like to think, sir."

"What of?" said I.

"Of life and the night," said she.

But if he thinks of life and the night, as indeed I am sure he must, he tells his [154] thoughts to no one. It was only once, when I was praising the scent and the show of his glorious wall-flowers, that he said to me—

"I like to think they're the best this year that I've ever had. I grow them all from our own seed, sir. I save it up myself every year. And I like to think this year that they're the very best, because you know, sir, I may not see them again."

I tried to imagine what would be the state of my own mind, if I thought I should never see wall-flowers again. I wondered could I say it with such courage, such resignation as he.

To never see wall-flowers again! It seems in a nonsensical, childish way to me to sum up the whole tragedy—if tragedy there really be—in Death. It seems, moreover, to give just that little stroke of the brush, that little line of the pen in completion of this [155] thumb-nail portrait of mine. An old man in an old garden that he loves, telling himself that his wall-flowers are the best that year of all—telling himself bravely night after night when he goes to bed, morning after morning when he rises to the new day—which is one more day nearer the end—telling himself that they are the best this year of all, because he may not see them any more.

To never see wall-flowers again!

XV

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AN OLD STRING BONNET

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AN OLD STRING BONNET

I care not what it is, so long as it be old; but if an object has passed through other hands than mine, it gathers an indefinable charm about it. Old china, old cups and saucers, whether they be ugly or beautiful, are priceless by reason of that faint murmuring of other lives which clings around them. In the mere tinkling of the china as it is brought in upon the tray, I can hear a thousand conversations and gossipings coming dimly to my ears out of the wealth of years which is heaped upon them.

For this reason would I always use the old china which it is my good fortune to possess. A breakfast-table, a tea-table spread with china which can tell you nothing [160] than that it has but lately come from the grimy potteries, makes poor company to sit down with. Yet let it be but Spode, or Worcester, or Lowestoft, and every silence that falls upon you is filled with the whisperings of these priceless companions.

I have no sympathy with the collector who locks his china away because it is rare and worth so much in pounds and shillings and pence. He is no more than a gaoler, incarcerating in an eternal prison the very best friends he has, and just, if you please, because they are his.

What if there is the risk of their being broken! A rivet here, a rivet there will make them speak again. I have a Spode milk-jug with forty-five rivets in it and it is more eloquent to me than all the modern china you could find, however perfect it may be. In fact, I would sooner have a piece that has been mended. It shows that in those long-ago [161] days, where all romance lies hiding for us now, it shows that they cared for their treasures and would not let them be discarded because they happened upon evil times. I have also an old blue and white tea-pot with a silver spout. A dealer sniffed at it the other day.

"May have been good once," said he.

"'Tis better now," said I. "So would you and I be if we'd been through the wars."

"Do you mean to say you'd prefer me with a wooden arm?" he asked.

"I would," said I. "You'd be a better man. You couldn't grasp so much."

But the other day I found a treasure. Miss B——, the old spinster lady in whose farm I have my little dwelling, is by way of being the reincarnation of a jackdaw. She has cupboards and chests in every room in which lie hidden a thousand old things which have been in her family for years. Yesterday, in turning out an old drawer, I came across a quaint little contrivance that looked like a string bag, only it was [162] beautifully made in three parts, all composed of a wonderful lace-work of fine string and knitted together, each one by a delicate stitching of white horsehair.

I brought it out into the kitchen, tenderly in my hand.

"Whatever is this?" I asked.

She took it in her fingers and looked at it for a moment, then, inconsequently, she laid it down upon the kitchen table.

"That—" said she, "that was my great, great grandmother's bonnet. She wore it up till the time she died."

"Why, it's nearly two hundred years old!" I exclaimed.

"If it's a day," said she.

I gazed at it for some moments. Then suddenly it seemed to move, to raise itself from the table. Another instant and it was spread out, decked with a tiny piece of pink ribbon, on the head of an old lady—but oh, so old! Her silvery white hair thrust out in [163] little curls and coils through the mesh of the string, and there she was, with a great broad skirt and big puff sleeves bobbing me a curtsey before my very eyes.

I turned to Miss B——

"Do you see?" I asked.

"See what?" said she.

"Your great, great grandmother."

"I never saw her in my life," she replied.

"But under the string bonnet!" I exclaimed.

"Goodness! That 'ud fall to pieces if any one tried to put it on now. It's no good to me. You can have it if you like."

Then I understood why she could not see her great, great grandmother, and, with a feeling of compassion for her loneliness, I took the old lady into my arms. Miss B—— went to the sink to peel some potatoes.

"You're perfectly beautiful," I whispered, and her old face wrinkled all over with smiles. [164]

"They used to tell me that when I was a girl," said she.

"You're more beautiful now," said I.

"What's that you're saying?" asked Miss B—— over her shoulder.

"What I should have said," said I, "if I'd lived two hundred years ago."

XVI
THE NEW MALADY

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THE NEW MALADY

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In every age there is a new disease—there is a new malady—a strange sickness. The whole army of medical science goes out to meet it and there is pitched a battle wherein lives are sacrificed, honour made and lost. But in the end the glorious banner of medical skill is generally carried triumphant from the field. Some old foes truly there are who are not conquered yet, with whom a guerilla warfare is continuously being waged. Never can they be brought into the open field; never can they be come upon at close quarters. Sometimes in a skirmish they are routed and put to flight; yet ever they return, lessened in numbers, no doubt, weakened in strength, but still a marauding enemy to mankind. [168]

Then apart from these, there is that new malady, which, with its stern inevitability, the age always brings amidst its retinue of civilisation.

It would seem, notwithstanding the dictum of the Bab Ballad-maker, that they are not always blessings which follow in Civilisation's train. One disease after another has come amongst us from out the ranks of civilisation. And now appears the latest of all, seizing upon its victims under the very walls of that fortress of medical science.

It is the disease of bearing children, the disease of making life.

We all know how science with its anæsthetics, with its deftly made instruments and its consummate skill, is attacking the enemy from every quarter. Yet the fatality of the sickness is steadily growing. More women die in childbirth now than ever fell its

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victims in the days when the services of a common mid-wife were all that were at their disposal.

It is terrible sometimes to think how rapidly this most natural of all functions—since upon it hangs the existence of all people in the world—it is terrible to think how rapidly it is shaping into the awesome features of a disease. Women are as ashamed of its conditions now as they would be if smallpox had pitted their delicate skins. They speak of it as of some dreadful operation—which indeed it has become—and, instead of glorying over a possession which they alone command, they will talk of it as a curse which, suffering alone, they should be given compensation for. They ask for the vote! Great God! As if the vote could compensate them for the loss of bearing children as the God of nature meant they should be borne! As if any form of compensation could ease such a loss as that!

Success and civilisation—these are the two subtle poisons from the effects of which we are all suffering. Nothing fails like success! Nothing degrades so much as civilisation! [170]

A little while ago a woman who had given birth to a fine child told me quite frankly that she herself was not going to feed it.

"Do you mean suckle it?" said I.

She did not like that word and she shuddered.

"You object to the use of the word?" I suggested.

"Is it *quite* nice?" she asked.

I shrugged my shoulders.

"Words are only ugly," said I, "when they express ugly deeds. I can understand if you find the deed ugly you don't like the word."

She answered that she did not mind the thing itself. "You see," said she, "it's quite impossible for me to do it. We've been asked up—my husband and I—to Chatsworth to meet the King, and it would be foolish to lose such an opportunity—wouldn't it? I can't go up like this, so I must have a sort of operation." [171]

"So you've made up your mind?" said I.

She screwed up her eyes as her conscience faltered in her breast.

"Practically," she replied.

"Well, if not quite," I suggested, "write to the King, and ask him whether he would sooner meet you at Chatsworth or have a stalwart son given to the country."

She told me I made the most absurd remarks she had ever heard from any one and she walked away. "Besides," said she, over her shoulder, "it's a daughter."

I found her name amongst those invited to Chatsworth to meet the King. I saw her picture in a photograph of the Chatsworth group and she looked beautiful. Her figure was that of a child who had never known maternity. [172]

There are traitors even in the camp of medical science, thought I. Nothing degrades science so much as the march of civilisation—no social woman fails so utterly as when she succeeds in meeting the King.

I have a friend, in the tiny chintz parlour of whose cottage in the country a certain collection of prints adorn the walls. For the most part they are steel engravings, valuable enough in their way. But it is the subject common to them all, rather than the intrinsic value of each picture, which has persuaded my friend to their collection. One and all, with the tenderest treatment you can imagine, they portray a baby feeding at the gentle breast of its mother. No other pictures in the room are there but these, and there must at least be a fair dozen of them. You cannot fail but notice them. The similarity of their subject alone would force itself upon your mind. [173]

Yet, would you believe it, the ladies who come there to call upon my friend's wife, regard them with horror and alarm. As their eyes fall upon them, they turn sharply away, only to be met with yet another of those improper pictures upon an opposite wall. With far greater equanimity and even interest would they look upon a series of Hogarth's prints. The vicar of the parish, too, was alarmed. He asked my friend whether he did not think that such pictures did harm.

"Of course I know," said he, "it is a natural function and is all right in its proper place. I don't mean to say that it would do harm to you or to me, of course—we're old enough to discriminate. But younger people are apt to look at these things in a different light."

"Do you know that as a fact?" asked my friend quietly.

Now, the vicar was a truthful man, who had read that the devil is the father of all liars. He held his head thoughtfully for a moment. [174]

"It is what I imagine would be the case," said he. "On which account I always disapprove of those pictures which, what you might say, expose the body of a woman in the so-called interests of Art. With a man and his wife—if I may say so—such things are different; but to make a show of a woman's nakedness, that is to me a form of prostitution at which honestly I shudder every time it comes my way."

"I see—I see your point," said my friend. "If there is to be prostitution, let it be that of the wife. I see your point. But why call marriage a sacrament? And why solemnise it in a church? I should have thought the meat-market had been a better place."

Great heavens! No wonder the disease is spreading! No wonder is it that women approach the hour of deliverance in fear and trembling, for neither do they fit themselves for it, nor are they proud of the birthright which is theirs alone. For the sake of appearances, because they are not well enough off, because of inconvenience, they will give up all they possess for the mess of pottage. Civilisation indeed has made a strange place of the world. There are few men and women left in it now. [175]

Now and again you may run across a true mother, but all the rest of women that you meet are only fit to be called by a name that is indeed too ugly to write.

A true woman I heard of only the other day. She was brought to her bed of childbirth. In the room there was that still hush, the hush of awe when out of the "nowhere into here" the something which is life is about to be conjured out of the void of nothingness which is death. For long, trembling moments all was still. The faint whispers and muffled sounds only made the quietness yet more potent. And then, suddenly, out of the silence, came the shrill living, trumpet-cry of a new voice—the voice of a little child. [176]

The woman stretched her arms and smiled, as if in that cry she had heard the voice of God.

"You must lie still," they whispered in her ear—"there is yet another child."

"Thank God!" she moaned, and the silence fell round them once more.

XVII [177]

BELLWATTLE AND THE DIGNITY OF MEN

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BELLWATTLE AND THE DIGNITY OF MEN

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We were all sitting out in the garden having tea under the nut trees—Bellwattle, Cruikshank and I. They use the old Spode tea-service—apple green and gold and black—whenever tea is taken out of doors, and I would give anything to describe to you the pictures that rise in my mind with the sight of that quaint old tea-service, the smell of the sweetbriars and the scent of the stocks. They are indescribable, those pictures. No one will ever paint them to my satisfaction, neither with colours nor with words. They are composed with such historical accuracy, are so redolent of their time, that it would need somebody with a memory reaching over one hundred and fifty years to trace them as they appear to me. Now, if my memory reaches over five minutes it is doing well—and many there are the same as I.

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The characters I see are arrayed in costumes so befitting to their period, they speak of things so faithful to their day, that no man, unless he had lived in the eighteenth century, could possibly reproduce them. I see their dainty costumes—I hear their quaint speech, but not one jot or one tittle of it all could I put down upon paper. Yet I know those pictures are true as true can be.

Why is this? Is there a memory within us which harks back to lives we have lived before? Is it by the same reason we feel that certain incidents have come to us again out of the far-off past? I was pondering over it all that afternoon, when suddenly Bellwattle broke the silence which surrounded us.

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“Why were elephants called elephants?” she asked.

Cruikshank—of whom, if it cannot be said that he knows the woman in his wife, at least knows her queer little habits—passed his cup without amazement for more tea. But I—well, it took my breath away.

“Whatever made you ask that?” I inquired.

She shrugged her shoulders as eloquently as she could, being occupied with Cruikshank’s third cup of tea.

“I don’t know,” she replied—“Who called them elephants, anyhow?”

To this second question, Cruikshank was as ready as if he were at Sunday school.

“Adam,” said he. “Adam named all the beasts and he called them elephants.”

“But why elephants?” asked Bellwattle.

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Cruikshank looked at me across the little garden table. There was an appeal in his eyes, as though he would say, “Go on—I’ve answered mine. It’s your turn now. Don’t let her think we don’t know.”

For you must understand that, in their dealings with women, there is a certain freemasonry amongst men. If by nature their sex is debarred from the greatest of all functions, they must at least steal dignity by the assumption of great wisdom. No man may ever admit ignorance to a woman. So long as her questions have nothing to do with instinct, he will answer them, whether or no he tells her the greatest balderdash you ever heard. All men in their vows of masonry must swear to do this. We should be in a sorry way if women did not look up to us for knowledge.

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When then I received this secret sign from Cruikshank, I did the best thing I could for the sex—I answered at a hazard.

“He called it an elephant,” said I, “because the impression he received of its size may have suggested that word to his mind. He may for example have been trodden upon by one of those huge brutes—in which case,” said I, “the impression would have been a vivid one.”

"If one of them trod on me, it wouldn't suggest the word elephant," said Bellwattle. "I should think of squash."

"Probably you would," said Cruikshank; "but then you're not Adam." By which I think he meant to convey the mental superiority of his sex.

Therefore—"She might be Eve," said I.

Bellwattle closed one eye and looked at me.

I met her gaze steadily and then, as suddenly, she put another question to us.

"Did Adam name everything?" [184]

"Every single thing," said Cruikshank.

"All the insects?"

"Every blessed one."

"Why did he call it Daddy Long Legs, then?"

Cruikshank seized the opportunity.

"That was what its long legs suggested to him."

"But why Daddy?" said Bellwattle very quickly.

Cruikshank dipped into his third cup of tea, drowning all possible answer.

"Why Daddy?" she repeated.

"Because," said I, "Adam was the father of all living."

For the moment Cruikshank forgot his table manners and choked. It took a great deal of serious assurance on our part then to convince Bellwattle that we were in earnest. For we were in earnest. No man is so serious, or so put upon his mettle as when a woman bows to him for knowledge. There comes that look into his face as well [185] I remember would creep into the face of the master when I was at school. No doubt it is the same now. The vanity of men does not alter in ten years, or in ten thousand for that matter.

I can see now the German master—that is to say the stolid Englishman who taught us German—I can see him now reading out a sentence for us to translate into the language.

"My heart," read he, most solemnly, "my heart is in the Highlands—my heart is not here."

And there was such pathos, such a tone of exile in his voice, that I was prompted to ask him whether, under the circumstances, he could give his proper attention to the class.

"Might we not shut up our books," said I—"straight away?"

The look that came into his face then was the look—exaggerated a little perhaps—which comes into the faces of most men when the dignity of their great wisdom is [186] upset. Cruikshank and I, then, were struggling for our dignity against the fire of Bellwattle's questions. It was no good talking about the evolution of language to her. She would never have understood a word of it. Now, when a man tells a woman anything which she does not understand, she is just as likely to think him a consummate fool. And a man will always be a fool rather than be thought one.

We were trying, therefore, to answer Bellwattle as she would have answered herself. In other words, we were making fools of ourselves in order that Bellwattle should think us wise.

It was here that Cruikshank tempted providence. Doubtless he thought we were getting on so well that we could afford to be generous with our information, for in quite an uncalled-for way he volunteered to tell her more.

"Is there anything else," said he, "that you want to know?" [187]

She nodded her head and around the corners of her lips I believe I caught the suspicion of a smile.

"If Adam called it a cow," she began——

"He did," interrupted Cruikshank. "In those days it probably made that sort of noise."

"Then why," said Bellwattle, giving him never a moment to retract, "why do they call it a *vache* in France?"

We all looked at each other—I at Cruikshank, Cruikshank at me, and Bellwattle alternately at both of us.

After a pregnant pause, Cruikshank began to temporise.

"That's very like a woman," said he—"you're going into another issue altogether."

"Now," said I, "you're coming to Bible history."

"Yes, that's Bible history," repeated Cruikshank, "you're going back to the Tower of Babel." [188]

"Is that where they wanted to get up to Heaven?" she asked.

We nodded our heads emphatically.

"And it all smashed up, and they began talking like a crowd of tourists?"

"Something like that," we agreed.

"Then, don't you see," went on Cruikshank, finding his feet once more. "Then they all separated, went into different countries, and when they saw a cow in France they called it *vache*—it's quite simple."

"Oh, yes, I see that part of it," said Bellwattle. You have only to say to a woman—and moreover be it in the proper tone of voice—that a thing is quite simple and she will see it through and through. I have known Bellwattle understand a proposition of Euclid by telling her it was quite simple.

As I say, "If that point is the centre of this circle, all lines drawn from that point to the circumference must be equal; that's quite simple, isn't it?" [189]

And she has replied, "Oh—quite—I see that—but who says it's the centre?"

If I say Euclid, she then asks me if I believe everything which people tell me.

In this manner she saw Cruikshank's point about the people in France calling a cow *vache*. But after seeing it, she was silent for a long time. She was giving it due consideration. I knew that another question was to come. At last she looked up.

"But can you explain," said she, "how they happened to hit upon the same animal? I know *vache* means cow, but how did the people in France know that it should be that particular animal that they were to call *vache*? They might have called a pig *vache*, and then we should all have been topsy-turvy."

I ran my fingers through my hair.

"My God!" said I—— [190]

"It's no good swearing," said Bellwattle, "I can see you don't know."

XVIII [191]

THE NIGHT THE POPE DIED

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THE NIGHT THE POPE DIED

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It comes back into my mind now, as an echo that is lost among the hills, that night in Ardmore in Ireland, that night when they heard the Pope was dead. I can hear the low, deep note of the sea, monotonous and even as the beating of a heavy drum when the waves rolled up the boat cove, or leapt upon the rocks that crouch to meet the sea beneath the Holy Well. I can see the clouds, great banks of grey, as though a furnace were smouldering below the horizon, I can see them hanging in sullen wet masses, hanging low over the white crests that were breaking away by Helvic Head. I can see the dank, dark coils of seaweed lying, like the hair of women that are drowned, along [194] the dim curved line of the strand. And around the first head, where the bay spreads wide into the great Atlantic, the sound of a rushing wind, muted by the hills, dimly reaches my ears.

It seems fitting that when any great catastrophe falls upon the trembling little people of this world there should be sounded an ominous note—a discord struck upon that great orchestra of the elements. It is the only true accompaniment to the sorrows of mankind, when the thunder bursts, the lightning rends the raiment of the sky and the winds play wildly on their shrillest instruments.

There was no thunder, no lightning that night, but all across the bay and round the headlands you might have felt the despairing sense of foreboding, the heavy hour before a storm, when the very ground seems angry beneath your feet.

Such was the night in Ardmore when they heard the Pope was dead. [195]

In one moment the whole Roman Catholic world had been robbed of its father; the great Church of Christ was without its head on earth. From that moment and for the anxious days to come they were as orphans, knowing not where to turn. The Pope was dead. But there was none to cry in the market-place, there was none to stand upon the chapel steps and shout, “Long live the Pope!”

The Pope was dead. There was no Pope.

You must have seen the silent, questioning faces to have known what such a loss could mean. Around the counters in the public-houses the fishermen sat, afraid to drink. The women crept into their cottages and shut the doors. Presently little flickers of light glowed from each window—candle flames trembling as the draughts of wind [196] caught their feeble glow.

It was as though the spirit of that old aristocrat, with his death-like head and piercing eyes, were making its way to Heaven through the little street of Ardmore, and these few feeble glimmers were set out, tiny beacons, to point his road.

For an hour they were burning before there came from the village courthouse the sounds of instruments being blown, all those weird, unearthly noises which tell you that a village band is about to play.

In ten minutes they were ready—the public-houses were empty. In ten minutes they were putting their instruments to their lips; their cheeks were swelling with the first ready breath to start. A little crowd of boys and girls were surrounding them ready to march by their sides; and then, with a one—two—three, they began. The little solemn, [197] serious crowd strode forth.

Up by the post-office they went, round by the Protestant Church, along down Coffee Lane to where stands the seawall hung with its festoons of red-brown nets. Then through the main street they marched and round again the same route as before.

And ever as they marched, like the band of an army playing the death march at the funeral of their chief, they played the same grim tune—the grimmest tune at such a

time I think I have ever heard—"Good-bye, Dolly, I must leave you." It was the only tune they knew.

After the second round of their journey, the playing ceased while the players gained their breath. In silence then, they tramped over the same ground, the little crowd, eager for the music again, still following at their heels.

When they reached the top of Coffee Lane once more, where the road runs up to meet the Holy Well and wanders from there in a thin straggling path around the wild cliff-heads, there came an elderly woman and a child out of the darkness. [198]

Seven miles they had walked around that dangerous path from the little fishing hamlet of Whiting Bay—seven miles over a way where a goat must choose its steps, where at moments the sheer cliff rushes down four hundred feet to meet the sea—seven miles in that chill darkness with never a lantern's light to guide their feet—seven miles with hearts throbbing, hope rising and falling, whispering a word to each other now and then, always straining on—seven miles just to learn the truth.

As they came out of the shadows, the woman stopped. The clarionet-player was wetting his lips, fitting his fingers with infinite care upon the notes of his instrument. She caught his arm before he could raise it to his mouth. [199]

"What is ut?" she asked.

"Shure, the Pope's dead," he whispered back.

And then, with its one—two—three once more, the band struck up again. The woman and the child stood there silently under a cottage window, the light of the burning candle within making pin-points in their eyes, while in their ears echoed and re-echoed the words, "The Pope is dead," mingling with the refrain, "Good-bye, Dolly, I must leave you."

XIX [201]
ART

XIX [203]
ART

It was explained to me the other day, the meaning of this elusive little word of three letters. All my pre-conceived opinions were dashed to the ground and, in the space of half an hour, I was taught the modern appreciation of the meaning of that word—Art.

It chanced I wanted a copy of that picture by Furze, "Diana of the Uplands"—Furze whom the gods loved or envied, I don't know which. I wanted a copy of it to hang in my bedroom in a little farmhouse in the country. I wanted to hang it near my bed so that when I woke of a morning, I could start straight away across the Uplands, feeling the generous give of the heather beneath my feet, tasting the freshening draught of wind in my nostrils, taking into my limbs the energy of those hounds ever ready to strain away from their leash and leave their mistress a speck upon a dim horizon. [204]

It chanced that I wanted all that—which is not a little. But these are the real good things of life which are so seldom bought because they are so cheap. A small print-seller's in Regent Street was good enough for me.

I walked in. On the threshold I was met by a little serving-maid with a chubby red face and a brand-new green apron.

"Yes?" said she.

It opened the conversation excellently.

"I want a coloured print of 'Diana of the Uplands,'" said I.

She hurried to a portfolio and began turning over coloured prints at an incredible speed. Before she had found it, she looked up. [205]

"Will you have it plain?" she asked, "or with a B.A.M.?"

"A B.A.M.?" said I. I could not describe to you the effect of those three mysterious letters. It sounded almost improper. "You ought not to say things like that to me," I continued solemnly. "Supposing I said that you were a V.P.G."

She became at a loss between confusion and amusement.

"I forgot," she said, apologetically. "I'm new here, and that's what we call them. It means British Art Mount."

At that moment there came another serving-maid in a green apron.

"What is it you want, sir?" she asked.

"Oh, I'm being attended to, thank you," I replied.

"Yes, but this young lady's new to the shop," she said; "she's not quite used to serving yet." [206]

"She's doing very well indeed," said I. "She's already nearly persuaded me to buy a thing I don't want—a thing I don't even know the meaning of."

The little girl with the chubby cheeks wriggled her shoulders with delight.

"I asked him if he wanted a B.A.M.," she explained.

The other looked quite shocked.

"You know I've told you not to say that," she said. "You'd better go up to Miss Nelson, she wants you upstairs."

The little maid departed. I was left with her more elderly and more experienced sister in trade. In a moment she had discovered the picture in question and had laid it out for my approval. I did approve; and then she asked me if I wanted it framed.

"If you do framing here, I shall be very glad," said I.

"Then what sort of frame would you like?" she asked. [207]

I hesitated. I was trying to see it in my mind's eye on that bedroom wall; see it when the sun was pouring in through the open window; when the rain was pattering against the panes, and the sky was grey. Therefore, while I made up my mind—just, perhaps, to conceal from her the fact that I could be in doubt about such a matter—I asked her what she would suggest.

She drew herself up, conscious of the state of importance which she had attained with my question.

"Well," she said, and her head hung thoughtfully on one side—"that depends on what room it's for. Is it for the dining-room or the drawing-room?"

Now what possessed me, I do not know; but when I thought of that little farmhouse in the valley between the Uplands, the words dining-room and drawing-room sounded ridiculous. There is just a sitting-room—and a small sitting-room—that is all. This dining-room and drawing-room seemed nonsensical, and what with one thing and another it put me in a nonsensical mood. [208]

"'Tis for the cook's bedroom," said I.

If only you had seen her face! It fell like a stone over a cliff and, what is more, it never seemed to reach the bottom of that expression of bewilderment.

"Oh," she replied—"I see. Well, then, I'm sure I couldn't advise you. Tastes differ—don't they?"

"So I've heard," said I. "But I wish you would advise me, all the same. I'm quite ignorant about these things. I'm only a farmer. I've just come up to London for the day and I've been given this commission for—well, she's more than the cook—she's the housekeeper. She didn't tell me anything about the frame. What frame would you suggest? I thought a nice rosewood one; but you know much better about these sort of things than I do." [209]

"A rosewood one won't be bad," said she, in a quaint little tone of voice that gently patronised me. "A rosewood one'll do," she repeated; "but it's not Art."

That phrase had an electrical sound to me; and when I say electrical, I mean, beside the shock of it, something which neither you nor I nor any of us understand.

"Why isn't it Art?" I asked quickly. "You mustn't think me foolish," I added, "but really I suppose I'm what you call a country bumpkin; I know nothing about these things. Why isn't it Art?"

"Just——it isn't," she replied, and she took down a sample of black moulding and a sample of gold; then she laid a sample of rosewood on one side of the picture. "There," she said, "that's your cook's taste." She did not quite like to call it mine. Then she laid the other two samples on the other sides of the print—"and that's Art." [210]

I looked at the picture, then I looked at her. Then I looked back at the picture again.

"But how do you know it's Art?" said I.

She pulled herself up still straighter and she answered, with all the confidence in the world—

"Because I've been taught—that's why. Because I've been educated to it. I haven't spent five years here amongst all these pictures without learning what's Art and what isn't."

"And now you know?" said I.

She nodded her head heavily with wisdom.

"But are you sure you've been taught right?" I went on. "How are you to know that the people who taught you knew?"

"'Cos they've been in the business all their lives," she replied. "'Cos they've found out what the public like and they give it to them. It's like one person learning music on a grand piano and another learning music on a cheap cottage piano. Do you mean to tell me that the one as learns on the grand piano isn't going to be a better musician than the one as learns on the cottage?" [211]

"It's more likely that they'd be a better judge of pianos," said I.

She told me I was talking silly and which frame would I have.

"I'm trying not to talk silly," I assured her. "I mean every word I say, only I haven't been educated as you have. You must remember that, and make allowances. I only said that about the piano because I knew a lady who had a satinwood Blüthner grand piano, and she never played on it from one day to another, so that she did not even know what a good piano was, and much less did she know about music."

"I wish she'd give it to me," said the little serving-maid. [212]

"I wish she would," said I; "then perhaps you'd admit that there was something in what I said, after all. But, joking aside, if you've been taught what is Art and what isn't, couldn't you teach me? I love the country. I think the fields of corn that grow up on my land every year are beautiful. And when I see them getting ripe and being gathered, then going out to feed the whole world—you here in the cities, who don't know the gold of a ripening field of corn—every single one of you, all fed from those

wonderful fields that have waves like the sea when the winds blow across them—things like that I know about—things like that I appreciate."

"Oh—well—that's Nature," said she. "We were talking about Art. Art's holdin' the mirror up to Nature—see."

"Then what's the matter with the mirror?" I asked. [213]

"What mirror?"

"The mirror of Art?"

"Why there's nothing the matter with it."

"Well—I don't know," said I, "but it seems to me as if so many people have been taught to look into it, that it has become dulled with their breath and won't reflect anything now."

"I don't know what you mean," she said.

"I don't believe I know myself," I replied. "I haven't been taught like you have."

"Well—which frame would you like?" she asked a little testily.

"I'm afraid my housekeeper'll be annoyed if I don't take the rosewood one," said I.

XX
THE VALUE OF IDLENESS

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THE VALUE OF IDLENESS

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"If you want to be quiet," said my friend, "you had better go and sit up in the old mill."

I acquiesced at once.

"Just give me a table and a chair," said I. "I shall be quite comfortable."

"Are you going to write?" he asked.

I nodded my head.

"What?"

"An essay."

"On what?"

"The Value of Idleness."

"You'll do that well," said he, and he told the gardener to take up to the mill all that I required.

So here am I, writing the Value of Idleness in the little oak-beamed loft of an old mill. [218]

To do nothing is to be receptive of everything. Idleness of the body alone will serve you not at all. It is only when the mind—but to follow the mood, to understand the drift of this philosophy of idleness, you must see, as I see it, this old white mill in which I sit and write.

Last night, as we walked out in the garden, the moon was in her chariot, whirling in a mad race through the heavens. In and out of a thousand clouds she rode recklessly.

She carries news, thought I, and were she the daughter of Nimshi, she could not drive more furiously.

And there, under her shifting light, with great arms raised appealingly into the wind, stood the old wind-mill, just at the end of the little red-brick path which runs through an avenue of gnarled apple trees.

I touched my friend's arm and pointed. [219]

"She's very beautiful," said I.

"She's very old," said he.

Then I suddenly saw in her the figure of a patient woman, who has given up her youth, appealing with passionate arms to God to grant her rest. Another moment and there came a faint moaning sigh falling upon my ears—a sigh like the fluttering of an autumn leaf that eddies slowly to the ground.

"What is that?" I asked.

"The wind-mill," said my friend. "She's crying to be set free, to have her arms unloosed."

As he said that, I saw her as a tired woman no longer. She became majestic in her agony then. So it seemed to me must the women in Siberia cry at night with faces turned, and hands stretched forth towards their native Russia.

"How long has she been idle?" I inquired.

"Oh—many, many years," said he. [220]

It was this which made me think of writing the Value of Idleness. So here am I, writing my essay on Idleness in the little oak-beamed loft of an old mill.

You cannot think how silent it is. I feel away and above the world. From the wee square window between the beams I can see the miller's cottage with its broad sloping roof of old red tiles, leaning down until it nearly touches the ground. But beyond that, on one side, stretches the whole weald of Kent and, on the other, lie the Romney marshes spreading forth to meet the sea. And there is the sea—that faint, far margin of blue—a chaplet upon the smooth, broad forehead of the world.

Yet silent and still as it all is, I can nevertheless hear voices. Upon the great oak shaft, the tireless vertebra of this goddess of the wind, there are two initials carved by some patient hand. L.B. are the letters cut, and following them comes the date—1790. [221] There is a voice to be heard from that, if you do but listen well. I can see one of those young millers who, when never a leaf was rustling on the trees and the air was still in a breathless calm, I can see him sitting there in a moment of idleness, carving out his initials and the date in deep, bold characters. Then saying aloud to himself, "Maybe there'll be some as'll read that in a hundred years, and wonder who be I."

I can hear the incisions of his knife as he cut into the stern hard oak, the little silences, the little grunts of his breath as he laboured over each letter. No—for all its stillness, there are voices in this old mill. Up the oak ladder that leads through the ceiling to another floor I can just see the great heavy wheel that turned the shaft. It is grey even now with the dust of flour and, as its sharp teeth gleam down at me out of [222] the darkness, the echoes of those rumbling sounds when the wind was high and the sails were racing round, comes faintly to my ears like thunder afar off.

So here am I, in the midst of these silent voices of the mill—here am I, writing an essay on the Value of Idleness.

"Idleness of the body," I had begun, "will serve you not at all. It is only when the mind is yielding to the drug of laziness as well, that your ears are attuned to the silent voices and you can speak——"

What was that?

A sudden clatter, a beating of sudden wings around my head!

Only a bat. I watch it as it circles round the old loft. The evening is beginning to fall; I see the cows being driven home along the road. A soft greyness is wrapping its fine web about the world and this little creature is venturing forth from its hiding-place [223] before the day is yet quite dead.

What a wonderful house to live in—this old, old mill! I scarcely wonder at the beauty and simplicity of the "Lettres de mon Moulin" as I sit here with the upper half of the creaking door wide open, and the far hills stretching out to sleep as the night draws round about them.

But now, as the grey light grows deeper and twilight hangs upon a frail thread ere it drops into the lap of darkness; now, as though it were a herald of the night to come, a wind springs up across the land. I hear it as its first whispers begin to tell their secrets in the corners and the crevices. Yet it whispers not for long. Soon, with a loud, insistent voice, it is crying its importunate passion to the mill. But she is chained. The fetters cling unmercifully to her arms. She cannot move. Again and again the wind envelops her in its embrace, but she makes no answer to its passion. Only now and again there [224] comes her faint, despairing cry—the cry of a woman in pain—the cry of a woman in prison. I feel so sorely tempted to set her free, just to see her great generous arms sweeping in a joyous abandonment of life before the wind she loves so well.

And here am I, in this old, old silent mill, writing an essay on the Value of Idleness.

Night is on the verge now. The words run into one another upon the paper. It is so dark that my pen wanders from the faint ruled line and sets out on its own account across the dim grey page.

At last comes the voice of my friend far below.

"Have you finished your idleness yet?"

"It's finished," say I with a sense of loss of the moments that have been mine— [225] mine and this dear, sad woman's in prison. I bolt the doors and come down.

"Come and read it to me now," says he.

And I read it all.

* * * * *

"But there's nothing about idleness," he said. "Where's the Value of Idleness?"

"Here," said I, and I threw the papers across to him. "It's all Idleness. To do nothing is to be receptive of everything. I've been doing nothing."

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XXI

THE SPIRIT OF COMPETITION

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THE SPIRIT OF COMPETITION

Not a few are there to applaud this spirit of competition, this modern endeavour to do things well, not because they are worth doing, but from the desire to do them better than other people.

Yet it is a canker that eats its way into the heart of everything. Bellwattle, in her happiest mood of distinction, would call it one of the laws of God. But whether it be a law of God or of Nature; whether, in fact, it be a law at all and not simply one of these fungoid growths of civilisation, it is a deceptive matter whichever way you look at it.

You would imagine, whether you were Jesuit or not, that the end would justify the [230] means in such a question as this. You might believe that, so long as the thing were done well, it would matter little, if at all, the motive which prompted its well-doing. Yet this is just where the subtle poison of it lurks. For it is not of necessity doing a thing well, to do it better than any one else. The moment you begin to work like this, you create a false standard, lowering the value of everything you do. It is not the spirit of charity to give more than your next door neighbour. That is the spirit of competition. The spirit of charity it is to give the last penny you can spare. The widow's mite is charity. The millionaire's thousand is bombast.

But this confusion of terms—this confusion of motives is so growing into the language we speak that words, which once were so priceless, are become like weapons worn out and blunted. There is but little edge left to any words now. They will cut [231] nothing.

And so this spirit of competition is a fetish to-day. We do not speak of having done a thing as well as we can do it, but of having done it better than this man or that.

"I bet you," says the actor, "I could play that part better than the man who plays it now."

"Do you mean to tell me," says the politician, "that the speech I made last Friday wasn't as good as Disraeli at his best?"

"That last book of mine," says the writer, "was nearly as good as 'The Old Curiosity Shop.' I think myself that the death-scene was better in a way."

Ah! but if we only did say these things aloud, instead of thinking them in silence. For 'tis only in silence now—as they would understand it in Ireland—that we say what [232] we really mean.

So is it that there creeps this spirit of working by comparison into the soul and tissue of everything we do. Yet you would think, would you not, that the Church had kept herself free of it? But the Church is more eaten away with the spirit of competition than is many a humble labourer, driven to earn his living wage by making his work better than the rest.

Take this story for what it is worth; apply it as you will. It has only one meaning for me.

In Ireland, they call the wandering beggars, who live an itinerant existence, living from one town to another—they call them tinkers. A certain tinker woman, then, came into the city of Cork. Down one of the quays, seeking the scraps that fall in these places, dragging three wretched children at the frayed hem of her skirt, she was seen [233] by a Protestant vicar.

Shifting one bare foot behind the other, she bobbed him a curtesy.

"For the love an' honour av God, yeer riv'rance, give a poor 'ooman a copper, that the Almighty blessin's av God may discind on ye, yeer riv'rance. Oh, sure, God Almighty give ye grace."

The Vicar stopped.

"Where do you come from?" he asked.

"I'm after walkin' all the ways from Macroon, yeer riv'rance—an' I in me feet."

She held up a bare blistered foot, at the sight of which the Vicar shudderingly closed his eyes.

"Where's your husband?" he inquired.

"Me husband, yeer riv'rance? Shure, glory be, I haven't had a sight or a sound av him these two years. 'Twas the day Ginnet's circus was in Dingarvin, an' he along wid [234] 'em clanin' the horses, and faith that was the last I saw av him, good or bad. I'm thinkin' he's gone foreign—he has indeed."

"Why don't you go to a priest? He's the person to help you—not me. I'm a Protestant clergyman."

"Shure, I know that yeer riv'rance—an' why would I be goin' to a preyst, an' I wid me three little children here—the poor darlin's—they've had divil a bit to eat this whole day."

The competitive instincts of the Vicar cried aloud with a resonant voice in his ear.

"Do you mean to say they haven't been brought up in the Roman Catholic Church?" he asked quickly.

"They have not indeed. Shure, what good would that be doin' them?"

"Haven't they been baptised at all into any Church?"

"They have not." [235]

The Vicar felt in his pocket and produced a sixpence.

"Get them something to eat," said he, "and then come and see me. I shudder when I think they haven't been baptised. Have you?"

"I was when I was a child," said she, "but I haven't been to Mass these fifteen years. Glory be to God, what'ud I be doin' at Mass when I might be gettin' charity from a grand gintleman like yeerself?"

"My poor woman," said the Vicar, "it was Christ's wish that we should help the poor. I'm thinking, too, of the hereafter of those poor little children of yours. What hope of salvation do you think there is for them if they have never been baptised?"

"If 'tis as difficult in this world as it is to get a bite or a sup, 'tis a hard thing indeed. But what good would I be getting to baptise 'em?"

"If you let them come to my church and be baptised, I'll see that you won't be [236] forgotten."

"Will yeer riv'rance give me something the way I cud be goin' on with?"

"I will, of course."

"An' how much?"

"I'll give you five shillings, my poor woman. You can get a week's lodging and food with that."

"Oh—shure I'd want five shillings for each wan of them," she replied quickly.

The Vicar paused. The tone of this bargaining jarred upon his ears; but yet, as he thought of it—three little souls saved—three little souls caught from the grasp of the Roman Church—three more names upon his baptismal register. And only fifteen shillings! It was money nobly spent, honourably set aside for the great interest and reward hereafter.

"I'll give you fifteen shillings," said he, "if you bring them to the church to- [237] morrow morning to be baptised."

She clasped her hands in ecstasy.

"May the Almighty God give ye the blessings of his Holy Name, and may all the saints be wid ye in the hour of need. Faith, I niver met a finer Christian or a grander gintleman in all me life."

She caught her children round her and told them the great things that were in store for them. With a warm feeling that the day had not passed in vain, the Vicar hurried away.

Directly he was out of sight, the woman made her way to the presbytery of the first Roman Catholic church she could find.

"I want to see the preyst," said she, when they opened the door to her knocking.

They looked at her ragged clothes. It was with difficulty that she gained an audience.

"Go round into the chapel," they said, "and Father —— will be with you in a minute." [238]

She plunged quickly into her story directly he came.

"Indeed, he was a nice gintleman," she concluded, "and 'twas fifteen shillings he offered me if I'd bring the three of them to the church to-morrow morning."

She gazed down at them and they gazed up at her. In some vague way they realised that they were under discussion. Their little mouths were open in wonder.

"'Tis a disgraceful thing, indeed!" said the priest in wrath, "to think ye'd go and sell the souls of yeer own children to one of those Protestant fellas who'd only be too glad the way they could be counting three more names in their Church. I'm ashamed of ye—I am indeed! If I give ye twelve shillings now, will ye bring them here to me?"

"Oh—glory be to God, Father—shure that's only four shillings for each wan of the pore t'ings. I thought 'twas the way ye'd have offered me a poond at least to save the pore creatures the way they wouldn't be havin' their souls damned." [239]

"Yeer a disgraceful woman," said he, "to barter the souls of yeer children like that. I'll give ye seventeen shillings, and I won't give ye a penny more."

She clasped her hands again and the tears rolled down her cheeks.

"The blessing av God and av the Blessed Mother be wid ye," she cried. "Ye've saved the souls of three pore creatures this blessed day."

XXII [241]

BELLWATTLE ON THE HIGHER MATHEMATICS

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BELLWATTLE ON THE HIGHER MATHEMATICS

I have already been at some pains in a few of these pages to give an idea of the feminine appreciation of mathematics. Undoubtedly it is more practical than that of many an eminent mathematician. For let it at once be understood that the first function of a higher mathematician is to express himself in terms of mathematics, just as an artist expresses himself in the colours he lays upon his canvas, or a musician by the little black and white dots he writes between and through the lines.

"Nobody"—so a scientist once said to me—"nobody seems to understand this. They have never learnt the language we talk in and they fancy that we only fit our [244] place in the universe so long as we are useful. If I were to talk to you now of the things I am doing in my laboratory, using the terms and the technicalities that I use there, you'd probably think I was endeavouring to be scientifically brilliant in my conversation, stringing together all the most exaggerated words to get an effect which you could not understand; whereas, in reality, I should be talking the most ordinary commonplaces which even the boy who cleans out the vessels and the flasks can probably understand. Let a man invent a talking machine, or a calculating machine, and they call him a great scientist. Good heavens! If you knew how the real scientists and the real mathematicians despise him. Why, I've seen a mathematician express the soul in himself so absolutely by the solution of an abstruse problem, that he has cried with joy like a child—like an artist when he has finished his masterpiece, a writer when he has ended his book." [245]

"May I never burst into tears, if ever I write a book," said I.

"Well—you know what I mean," said he.

And I suppose I did know. Utility is the prostitution of most things as well as science and mathematics. But that is just where women are more practical mathematicians than men. I have never known a woman set out to express herself in mathematics yet. What is more, I pray God, most fervently, I never shall. She will employ the wildest means of expression in the world, but nothing so wild or incoherent as mathematics.

I try to conceive a woman in a fit of jealousy sitting down to express her emotions through the medium of the binomial theorem—which I must tell you I know to be a method of expanding X and Y, bracketed to the Nth power, to an infinite series of [246] powers—I try to conceive her doing that, but my conception always fails. Far more readily can I see her inviting to tea the creature who is the cause of her jealousy, and evincing the sweetest friendship for her. Now that is expression, if you like, bracketed, moreover, without any necessity for your binomial theorem, to the Nth power, and expanded to an infinite expression of femininity.

To give you just the simplest example of this matter of the practicality of women in mathematics, I must tell you that Cruikshank and I the other evening were recalling our prowess at Euclid; setting each other problems to prove—well, you know the routine of the propositions of Euclid.

In the midst of darning some socks and, having listened to us in silence for at least an hour, Bellwattle looked up.

"Was Euclid mad?" she asked, quite seriously. [247]

There was something in the nature of a ricochet in that question. It touched not only Euclid, for whom we have infinite respect, but also ourselves, for whom we have more.

"The sanest person that ever lived," said Cruikshank, shortly.

"Then why did he waste his time inventing all that rubbish? What's the good of it, anyhow?"

I put away my pencil with which from memory I had just been drawing the diagram for the fourth proposition of the second book.

"It develops," I answered, "the reasoning power in the human animal—a not unworthy or wholly unnecessary purpose."

She darned a few stitches in silence.

"Has it ever done any good besides that?" she inquired presently.

"Well," said Cruikshank, "it teaches you, for example, how, without measuring and [248] purely by the light of reason, to construct an equilateral triangle on a given finite

straight line."

Bellwattle laid down her sock with the knob of wood inside it and she looked at both of us as though we were creatures from another world.

"And what in the name of goodness," said she, "is an equi—whatever-you-call-it triangle?"

Cruikshank went on with his explanation quite cheerily. On this proposition he was so sure of himself that confidence was actually glowing in his face.

"Well," said he, "you know what a triangle is, don't you?"

She nodded her head promisingly.

"One of those things they sometimes play in bands."

The look of confidence dropped heavily from Cruikshank's face; but I seized the opportunity. She understood. At least she had grasped the shape of it. It mattered not at all that in her mind its functions were to play a tune. She appreciated the shape of it. That served its end. [249]

"You're quite right," said I quickly. "They have it in an orchestra. It has three sides to it—hasn't it?"

She nodded her head vivaciously.

"Yes, and two little curly bits at the top where they tie the string on to hang it up by."

"My God!" said Cruikshank in despair.

But I acceded her the little curly bits. She had grasped the shape of a triangle.

"Well, try and forget the curly bits," said I. "They have three sides—haven't they?"

She acquiesced.

"Like this," I went on hurriedly, and, dragging out my pencil again, I drew a triangle on a piece of paper.

"That's it," said she; "but they don't meet at the top." [250]

"Some do," I replied; "the ones that Euclid made did."

"Well, go on," she said, with greater interest. "What's an equitriangle?"

"An equilateral triangle," said Cruikshank, now stepping in when I had done all the hard work for him, "is a triangle which has all its sides of equal length. That side,"—he pointed to my drawing—"that side and that side all equal. Now Euclid'll show you," he continued, "how to construct an equilateral triangle on a given finite straight line. You needn't measure anything. You only want a compass to make a couple of circles, and he'll prove to your reason that all the lines of that triangle are one and the same length as this line you see on the paper now."

He turned to me.

"Lend me a ha'penny," said he.

I gave him the only one I had and he set to work to draw the most beautiful circles, though they had but little relation to A as their centre and B as their circumference, which were the letters he had written at each end of his given finite straight line. [251]

"Nevertheless, that'll do," said he.

And then, forthwith, he began to prove it to her.

I went out to get myself a cigar in the dining-room, and while there, cutting off the end of it and smiling gently to myself as I did so, I heard the voice of Cruikshank raised in the passion of despair.

"My God! my dear child," I heard him say. "I proved those two were equal because they both came from the centre of this circle—B.F.G. to the circumference. You don't remember anything."

I lit my cigar with a trembling hand. Then I walked to the window of the dining-room and looked out into the garden. There were the tom-tits pecking away at the [252] cocoa-nut shell which Bellwattle had hung up with such infinite trouble; there were the kittens, lapping from a saucer of milk as Bellwattle and their mother had taught them; there were the sweet peas in great walls of colour with the old pieces of red flannel still clinging to the pea-sticks, those same pieces of flannel which Bellwattle had tied to keep off the birds when the shoots were young and green; there was the little robin which Bellwattle fed every afternoon at tea-time; there, in fact, were all the signs of Bellwattle's beautiful and wonderful and practical utility.

I came back into the other room at the sound of Cruikshank's voice as he called me.

"She sees it!" he exclaimed in an ecstasy. "She understands it all right. I made it clear, didn't I, Bellwattle?"

"Oh, quite," said she. "I understand it now right enough. But I never knew Euclid [253] made instruments for bands."

Cruikshank tore up his piece of paper and flung it in the grate.

So you see, if she really knew, I've no doubt she'd return to question Euclid's sanity once more. I feel inclined to question it myself, but then that is because I know he did not make instruments for bands. He only expressed himself—that was all.

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XXIII
THE MYSTERY OF THE VOTE

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THE MYSTERY OF THE VOTE

I never knew how really splendid a possession was this of the vote until the last election. It is no wonder to me now that women throw dignity to the four winds of heaven, leaving it to chance and the grace of God whether it ever blows back to them again. It is no wonder to me that, for the moment, they can forget their glorious heritage in order to obtain this mysterious joy of recording their vote on a little slip of paper in the secrecy of the ballot-box.

As a mystery—and all mysteries are power—it had never appealed to me. As a means of urging the laws of the country in such direction as one was pleased to [258] consider for that country's good, it did once seem to me to be invaluable. I know by now what a hopeless fallacy that is. But at that time, nursing a political conviction that Home Rule would be good for Ireland as a people, much as I am led to believe food is good to a starving man, or a sense of religion to a drifting woman, I listened to the eloquent appeal of a canvasser for a Unionist candidate.

When he had finished telling me much more than either of us knew about Tariff Reform, and had built such a Navy before my eyes as would have frightened the whole German Government and any single English ratepayer out of their wits, I asked him what the Unionist candidate felt about Home Rule.

"Home Rule?" said he, carefully—"You approve of Home Rule?"

I walked gently and easily into the canvasser's trap.

"You don't denationalise a country," said I, "because you conquer it. You can't cut [259] the soul out of Ireland any more than you can wash a nigger white. You can only boycott it. You can only paint a nigger. But boycotting won't starve the soul of any nation. If it can't get food for itself from the nation's stores, it will still live, feeding from the country-side on the wild herb of endurance. But there is that which you can do. You *can* boycott it."

"And you think that Home Rule will encourage the development of the Irish people?" said he.

I admitted that the idea had occurred to me.

"Well, Mr. —— is quite of your way of thinking," he replied.

"He would support it with his vote in the House?" said I.

"Most assuredly!" he declared.

"I shall vote for Mr. ——," said I.

And so I should, had I not gone to one of his meetings in the Town Hall. He, too, [260] spoke eloquently about Tariff Reform and a Navy that would keep our country what it was; but in the midst of it, a cockney voice endeavoured to heckle him from the back of the hall.

"'Ow about 'Ome Rule?" shouted the voice.

The Unionist candidate had been heckled before.

"How about it?" he asked sharply, like the crack of a pistol.

"Are you going to let the Roman Catholics get the 'old in Ireland?"

"And make them a menace to England, too—do you think it's likely?" replied the candidate.

I walked away. "The vote," said I to myself, "the vote is only a catchpenny title for a popular game. It would be much better to gamble than vote. You might get something for your money if you backed the right man with a shilling; but you get nothing for [261] backing him with your vote. In future," said I, "I shall bet."

Yet only a little while afterwards I was to learn what a glorious thing the vote is.

In my village there is an amiable labourer with that cast of countenance upon which, as on the possessions of his great country, the sun never sets. And with it all, he has that placidity of manner, that evenness of gait which suggest that he is always going to or coming from a service at his chapel.

No one would ever dream of consulting him upon anything, though, indeed, I once did ask him the name of a certain plant.

"There be some as call it the Deadly shade," said he, "and some as call it the Nightly shade, but I don't know rightly which it be."

When later on, for my own foolish amusement, I said I had heard it was called the [262] Deadly shade, he replied in precisely the same fashion. I tried him once more, by saying that I had looked up a book on the subject and found it to be the Nightly shade. Again he replied, word for word, as before.

At last, a few weeks later, I came to him and said—

"You know we were all wrong about that plant. I find at South Kensington Museum that the proper name for it is the Deadly Nightshade."

And what do you think he replied? "There be some," said he, "as call it the Deadly shade, and some as call it the Nightly shade, but I don't know rightly which it be."

Now that man's wife had no respect for him, and truly I'm not surprised. I found out, too, that he knew it—it would not, of course, be a difficult fact to ascertain—and I

felt sorry for him.

And then one day—the day before the polling in our village—all my pity for him was ended. I met him on the road, carrying home his bag of tools. [263]

"Well," said I, "are you going to vote to-morrow?"

His face broadened with a beaming smile.

"I am that," said he.

"Who are you going to vote for?" I asked.

A cunning look crept into his little twinkling eyes, and he said—

"Ah—that's telling."

I admitted that there was that to it and asked him to tell me.

He shook his head.

"I keeps that to myself," said he. "We're not supposed to tell who we vote for. All they votes is counted secret."

"Do you mean to say you don't tell anybody?" I asked.

"No," he replied—"I don't tell none."

"But you tell your wife," said I.

He shook his head again, and his smile was broader and his eyes more cunning than ever. [264]

"Surely she wants to know," I exclaimed.

"Ah—she may want to know, but that ain't my tellin' her—is it?"

Then I suddenly realised what a glorious weapon he possessed. A weapon which, when everything else—even intelligence—failed, would make him master in his own house.

"That must give you a splendid sense of importance in your own home," said I —"Don't they think you're a fine fellow?"

"P'raps they do."

"And all because you've got the mystery of a vote."

"I can't think of no other reason," said he.

So whenever the question of giving women the vote is raised, I can think, too, of no other reason for their wanting it. A woman will bow her head before a mystery when all sense of worship has left her. It is this which gives her so much respect for the priesthood; it is this perhaps which gives her her desire for the vote. [265]

XXIV
SHIP'S LOGS

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XXIV
SHIP'S LOGS

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There is a yard by the river-side in London—opposite Lambeth or somewhere thereabouts, I think it must be—where you may come so close in touch with Romance as will set your fancy afire and transport you thousands of miles away upon the far-off seas of the Orient.

You may talk in disbelieving tones of wishing-rings, of seven-leagued boots and magic carpets, counting them as fairy tales, food only for the minds of children; but they are after all only the poetic materialisation of those same subtle things in life which give wings to our own imagination, or bring to eyes tired with reality the gentle sleep of a day dream.

Nearly every one must know the place I write of. It is where they break up into logs [270] the timber of those ships which have had their day—the ships that have ridden fearless and safe through a thousand storms, that have set forth so hopefully into the dim horizon of the unknown and evaded to the last the grim, grasping fingers of the hungry sea.

And there you will see their death masks, those silent figureheads which, for so many nights and so many days with untiring, ever-watchful eyes have faced the mystery of the deep waters unafraid. There is something pathetic—there is something majestic, too—about those expressionless faces. They seem so wooden and so foolish when first you look at them; but as your fancy sets its wings, as your ears become attuned to the inwardness that can be found in all things, however material, you will catch the sound of dim, faint voices that have a thousand tales of the sea to tell, a [271] thousand yarns to spin, a thousand adventures to relate.

Nothing is silent in this world. There is only deafness.

It has always appealed to me as the most noble of human conceptions, that burial of the Viking lord. The grandeur of it is its simplicity. There is a fine spectacular element in it, too, but never a trace of bombast. The modern polished oak coffin with its gaudy brass fittings, the super-ornate hearse, the prancing black stallions, the butchery of a thousand graceful flowers—all this is bombast if you wish. It no more speaks of death than speaks the fat figure of Britannia on the top of the highest circus car of England. Funerals to-day have lost all the grandeur of simplicity. But that riding forth in a burning ship, stretched out with folded hands upon the deck his feet had paced so oft; [272] riding forth towards that far horizon which his eyes had ever scanned, there is a generous nobility in that form of burial. You can imagine no haggling with an undertaker over the funeral about this. Here was no cutting down of the prices, saving a little on the coffin here, there a little on the hearse.

No—this was the Viking's own ship—the most priceless possession that he had. Can you not see it plainly, with sails set, speeding forth upon its last voyage—the last voyage for both of them? And then, as the lapping, leaping flames catch hold upon the bellied canvas, I can see her settling down in the swinging cradle of the waves. I can see the dense column of smoke mingling with and veiling the tongues of orange flame, until she becomes like a little Altar set out upon a vast sea, offering up its sacrifice of a human soul to the ever-implacable gods.

Now every time you burn a ship's log you attend a Viking's burial. In those flames [273] of green and gold, of orange, purple and blue, there is to be found, if you will use but the eyes for it, all the romance, all the spirit and colour of that majestic human sacrifice —the burial of a Viking lord. As you sit through the long evenings, while the rain is beating in sudden, whipping gusts upon the streaming window pane and the drops fall spitting and hissing down the chimney into the fire below, then the burning of a ship's log is company enough for any one. With every spurt of flame as the tar oozes out from the sodden wood, and the water, still clinging in the tenacious timber, bubbles and boils, you can distinguish but faintly the stirring voice of Romance telling of thrilling enterprise and of great adventure. There are few sailors can spin a yarn so much to

your liking. Never was there a pirate ship so fleet or so bold; there were never escapes so miraculous, or battles so stern, as you can see when in those long-drawn evenings you sit alone in the unlighted parlour and watch a ship's log burning on the fire. [274]

Pay no heed to them when they tell you the green flames come from copper, the blue from lead, the pale purple from potassium. The chemist's laboratory has its own romance, but it shares nothing in common with the high seas of imagination upon which you are riding now. Let the green flames come from copper! They are the emeralds, the treasure of the Orient to you. Let the blue flames come from lead, the pale purple from potassium! In your eyes as you sit there in that darkened room, with the flame-light flickering upon the ceiling and the shadows creeping near to listen to it all, they are the blue sash around the waist, the purple 'kerchief about the head of the bravest and the most bloodthirsty pirate that ever stepped. [275]

At all times a fire is a companion. Yet set but a ship's log upon the flames and I warrant you will lose yourself and all about you; lose yourself until the last light flickers, the last red ember falls, and the good ship that has borne you so safely over a thousand seas sinks down into the grey ashes of majestic burial.

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