BENSON ARTHUR CHRISTOPHER

THE THREAD OF GOLD

Arthur Christopher Benson

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Benson A.

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Содержание

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PREFACE

I sate to-day, in a pleasant hour, at a place called *The Seven Springs*, high up in a green valley of the *Cotswold* hills. Close beside the road, seven clear rills ripple out into a small pool, and the air is musical with the sound of running water. Above me, in a little thicket, a full-fed thrush sent out one long-drawn cadence after another, in the joy of his heart, while the lengthening shadows of bush and tree crept softly over the pale sward of the old pasture-lands, in the westering light of the calm afternoon.

These springs are the highest head-waters of the *Thames*, and that fact is stated in a somewhat stilted Latin hexameter carved on a stone of the wall beside the pool. The so-called *Thames-head* is in a meadow down below *Cirencester*, where a deliberate engine pumps up, from a hidden well, thousands of gallons a day of the purest water, which begins the service of man at once by helping to swell the scanty flow of the *Thames* and *Severn Canal*. But *The Seven Springs* are the highest hill-fount of Father *Thames* for all that, streaming as they do from the eastward ridge of the great oolite crest of the downs that overhang *Cheltenham*. As soon as those rills are big enough to form a stream, the gathering of waters is known as the *Churn*, which, speeding down by *Rendcomb* with its ancient oaks, and *Cerney*, in a green elbow of the valley, join the *Thames* at *Cricklade*.

It was of the essence of poetry to feel that the water-drops which thus babbled out at my feet in the spring sunshine would be moving, how many days hence, beside the green playing-fields at *Eton*, scattered, diminished, travel-worn, polluted; but still, under night and stars, through the sunny river-reaches, through hamlet and city, by water-meadow or wharf, the same and no other. And half in fancy, half in earnest, I bound upon the heedless waters a little message of love for the fields and trees so dear to me.

What a strange parable it all made! the sparkling drops so soon lost to sight and thought alike, each with its own definite place in the limitless mind of God, all numbered, none forgotten; each drop, – bright, new-born, and fresh as it appeared, racing out so light-heartedly into the sun, – yet as old, and older, than the rocks from which it sprang! How often had those water-drops been woven into cloud-wreaths, through what centuries they had leapt and plunged among sea-billows, or lain cold and dark in the ocean depths, since the day when this mass of matter that we call the earth had been cut off and sent whirling into space, a molten drop from the fierce vortex of its central sun! And, what is the strangest thought of all, I can sit here myself, a tiny atom spun from drift of storms, and concourse of frail dust, and, however dimly and faintly, depict the course of things, trace, through some subtle faculty, the movement of the mind of God through the aeons; and yet, though I can send my mind into the past and the future, though I can see the things that are not and the things that are, I am denied the least inkling of what it all signifies, what the slow movement of the ages is all aimed at, and even what the swift interchange of light and darkness, pain and pleasure, sickness and health, love and hate, is meant to mean to me – whether there *is* a purpose and an end at all, or whether I am just allowed, for my short space of days, to sit, a bewildered spectator, at some vast and unintelligible drama.

Yet to-day the soft sunshine, the babbling springs, the valley brimmed with haze, the bird's sweet song, all seem framed to assure me that God means us well, urgently, intensely well. "My Gospel," wrote one to me the other day, whose feet move lightly on the threshold of life, "is the Gospel of contentment. I do not see the necessity of asking myself uneasy and metaphysical questions about the Why and the Wherefore and the What." The necessity? Ah, no! But if one is forced, against

one's will and hope, to go astray in the wilderness out of the way, to find oneself lonely and hungry, one must needs pluck the bitter berries of the place for such sustenance as one can. I doubt, indeed, whether one is able to compel oneself into and out of certain trains of thought. If one dislikes and dreads introspection, one will doubtless be happier for finding something definite to do instead. But even so, the thoughts buzz in one's ears; and then, too, the very wonder about such things has produced some of the most beautiful things in the world, such as *Hamlet*, or Keats' *Ode to the Nightingale*, things we could not well do without. Who is to decide which is the nobler, wiser, righter course? To lose oneself in a deep wonder, with an anxious hope that one may discern the light; or, on the other hand, to mingle with the world, to work, to plan, to strive, to talk, to do the conventional things? We choose (so we call it) the path that suits us best, though we disguise our motives in many ways, because we hardly dare to confess to ourselves how frail is our faculty of choice at all. But, to speak frankly, what we all do is to follow the path where we feel most at home, most natural; and the longer I live the more I feel that we do the things we are impelled to do, the works prepared for us to walk in, as the old collect says. How often, in real life, do we see any one making a clean sweep of all his conditions and surroundings, to follow the path of the soul? How often do we see a man abjure wealth, or resist ambition, or disregard temperament, *unexpectedly*? Not once, I think, to speak for myself, in the whole of my experience.

This, then, is the *motif* of the following book: that whether we are conquerors or conquered, triumphant or despairing, prosperous or pitiful, well or ailing, we are all these things through Him that loves us. We are here, I believe, to learn rather than to teach, to endure rather than to act, to be slain rather than to slay; we are tolerated in our errors and our hardness, in our conceit and our security, by the great, kindly, smiling Heart that bade us be. We can make things a little easier for ourselves and each other; but the end is not there: what we are meant to become is joyful, serene, patient, waiting momently upon God; we are to become, if we can, content not to be content, full of tenderness and loving-kindness for all the frail beings that, like ourselves, suffer and rejoice. But though we are bound to ameliorate, to improve, to lessen, so far as we can, the brutal promptings of the animal self that cause the greatest part of our unhappiness, we have yet to learn to hope that when things seem at their worst, they are perhaps at their best, for then we are, indeed, at work upon our hard lesson; and perhaps the day may come when, looking back upon the strange tangle of our lives, we may see that the time was most wasted when we were serene, easy, prosperous, and unthinking, and most profitable when we were anxious, overshadowed, and suffering. *The Thread of Gold* is the fibre of limitless hope that runs through our darkest dreams; and just as the water-drop which I saw break to-day from the darkness of the hill, and leap downwards in its channel, will see and feel, in its seaward course, many sweet and gentle things, as well as many hard and evil matters, so I, in a year of my pilgrimage, have set down in this book, a frank picture of many little experiences and thoughts, both good and evil. Sometimes the water-drop glides in the sun among mossy ledges, or lingers by the edge of the copse, where the hazels lean together; but sometimes it is darkened and polluted, so that it would seem that the foul oozings that infect it could never be purged away. But the turbid elements, the scum, the mud, the slime – each of which, after all, have their place in the vast economy of things – float and sink to their destined abode; and the crystal drop, released and purified, runs joyfully onwards in its appointed way.

A. C. B.

CIRENCESTER, 8*th April* 1907.

INTRODUCTION (1906)

I am glad to have the opportunity of saying a few words in my own name about this book, because the original introduction seems to have misled some of my readers; and as I have had many

kind, encouraging, and sacred messages about the book from very unexpected quarters, I should like to add a few further words of explanation.

One of the difficulties under which literary art seems to me to labour is that it feels bound to run in certain channels, to adopt stereotyped and conventional media of expression. What can be more conventional than the average play, or the average novel? People in real life do not behave or talk – at least, this is my experience – in the smallest degree as they behave or talk in novels or plays; life as a rule has no plot, and very few dramatic situations. In real life the adventures are scanty, and for most of us existence moves on in a commonplace and inconsequent way. Misunderstandings are not cleared up, complexities are not unravelled. I think it is time that more unconventional forms of expression should be discovered and used; and at least, we can try experiments; the experiment that I have here tried, is to present a sort of *liber studiorum*, a portfolio of sketches and impressions. The only coherence they possess is that, at the time when they were written, I was much preoccupied with the wonder as to whether an optimistic view of life was justified. The world is a very mysterious place, and at first sight it presents a sad scene of confusion. The wrong people often seem to be punished; blessings, such as those heaped upon the head of the patriarch Job, do not seem to be accumulated upon the righteous. In fact, the old epigram that prosperity is the blessing of the Old Testament, adversity the blessing of the New, seems frequently justified. But, after all, the only soul-history that one knows well enough to say whether or not the experience of life is adapted to the qualities of the particular soul, is one's own history; and, speaking for myself, I can but say, looking back upon my life, that it does seem to have been regulated hitherto by a very tender and intimate kind of guidance, though I did not always see how delicate the adaptation of it was at the time. The idea of this book, that there is a certain golden thread of hope and love interwoven with all our lives, running consistently through the coarsest and darkest fabric, was what I set out to illustrate rather than to prove. Everything that bore upon this fact, while the book was being written, I tried to express as simply and as lucidly as I could. The people who have thought the book formless or lacking in structure, are perfectly right. It is not, and it did not set out to be, a finished picture, with a due subordination of groups and backgrounds. To me personally, though a finished picture is a beautiful and an admirable thing, the loose, unconsidered sketches and studies of an artist have a special charm. Of an artist, I say; have I then a claim to be considered an artist? I cannot answer that question, but I will go further and say that the sketches of the humblest amateur have an interest for me, which their finished pictures often lack. One sees a revelation of personality, one sees what sort of things strike an individual mind as beautiful, one sees the method with which it deals with artistic difficulties. The most interesting things of the kind I have ever seen are the portfolios of sketches by Leonardo da Vinci in the Royal library at Windsor; outlines of heads, features, flowers, backgrounds, strange engines of war, wings of birds – the *débris*, almost, of the studio – are there piled up in confusion. And in a lesser degree the same is true of all such collections, though perhaps this shows that one is more interested in personality than in artistic performance.

A good many people, too, have a gift for presenting a simple impression of a beautiful thing, who have not the patience or the power of combination necessary for working out a finished design; and surely it is foolish to let the convention of art overrule a man's capacities? To allow that, to acquiesce in silence, to say that because one cannot express a thing in a certain way, one will not express it at all, seems to me to be making an instinct into a moral sanction. One must express whatever one desires to express, as clearly and as beautifully as possible, and one must take one's chance as to whether it is a work of art. To hold one's tongue, if anything appears to be worth saying, because one does not know the exact code of the professionals, is as foolish as if a man born in a certain class of society were to say that he would never go to any social gathering except those of his precise social equals, because he was afraid of making mistakes of etiquette. Etiquette is not a matter of principle; it was not one of the things of which Moses saw the pattern in the Mount! The

only rule is not to be pretentious or assuming, not to claim that one's efforts are necessarily worthy of admiration and attention.

There is a better reason too. Orthodoxy in art is merely compliance with the instinctive methods of great artists, and no one ever succeeded in art who did not make a method of his own. Originality is like a fountain-head of fresh water; orthodoxy is too often only the unimpeachable fluid of the water company. The best hope for the art and literature of a nation is that men should try to represent and express things that they have thought beautiful in an individual way. They do not always succeed, it is true; sometimes they fail for lack of force, sometimes for lack of a sympathetic audience. I have found, in the case of this book, a good deal of sincere sympathy; and where it fails, it fails through lack of force to express thoughts that I have felt with a profound intensity. I have had critics who have frankly disliked the book, and I do not in the least quarrel with them for expressing their opinion; but one does not write solely for the critics; and on the other hand, I can humbly and gratefully say that I have received many messages, of pleasure in, and even gratitude for, the book which leave me in no sort of doubt that it was worth writing; though I wish with all my heart that it had been worthier of its motive, and had been better able to communicate the delight of my visions and dreams.

ARTHUR CHRISTOPHER BENSON.
MAGDALENE COLLEGE,
CAMBRIDGE, 24*th November* 1906.

THE THREAD OF GOLD

INTRODUCTION

I have for a great part of my life desired, perhaps more than I have desired anything else, to make a beautiful book; and I have tried, perhaps too hard and too often, to do this, without ever quite succeeding; by that I mean that my little books, when finished, were not worthy to be compared with the hope that I had had of them. I think now that I tried to do too many things in my books, to amuse, to interest, to please persons who might read them; and I fear, too, that in the back of my mind there lay a thought, like a snake in its hole – the desire to show others how fine I could be. I tried honestly not to let this thought rule me; whenever it put its head out, I drove it back; but of course I ought to have waited till it came out, and then killed it, if I had only known how to do that; but I suppose I had a secret tenderness for the little creature as being indeed a part of myself.

But now I have hit upon a plan which I hope may succeed. I do not intend to try to be interesting and amusing, or even fine. I mean to put into my book only the things that appear to me deep and strange and beautiful; and I can happily say that things seem to me to be more and more beautiful every day. As when a man goes on a journey, and sees, in far-off lands, things that please him, things curious and rare, and buys them, not for himself or for his own delight, but for the delight of one that sits at home, whom he loves and thinks of, and wishes every day that he could see; – well, I will try to be like that. I will keep the thought of those whom I love best in my mind – and God has been very good in sending me many, both old and young, whom I love – and I will try to put down in the best words that I can find the things that delight me, not for my sake but for theirs. For one of the strangest things of all about beauty is, that it is often more clearly perceived when expressed by another, than when we see it for ourselves. The only difficulty that I see ahead is that many of the things that I love best and that give me the best joy, are things that cannot be told, cannot be translated into words: deep and gracious mysteries, rays of light, delicate sounds.

But I will keep out of my book all the things, so far as I can, which bring me mere trouble and heaviness; cares and anxieties and bodily pains and dreariness and unkind thoughts and anger, and all uncleanness. I cannot tell why our life should be so sadly bound up with these matters; the

only comfort is that even out of this dark and heavy soil beautiful flowers sometimes spring. For instance, the pressure of a care, an anxiety, a bodily pain, has sometimes brought with it a perception which I have lacked when I have been bold and joyful and robust. A fit of anger too, by clearing away little clouds of mistrust and suspicion, has more than once given me a friendship that endures and blesses me.

But beauty, innocent beauty of thought, of sound, of sight, seems to me to be perhaps the most precious thing in the world, and to hold within it a hope which stretches away even beyond the grave. Out of silence and nothingness we arise; we have our short space of sight and hearing; and then into the silence we depart. But in that interval we are surrounded by much joy. Sometimes the path is hard and lonely, and we stumble in miry ways; but sometimes our way is through fields and thickets, and the valley is full of sunset light. If we could be more calm and quiet, less anxious about the impression we produce, more quick to welcome what is glad and sweet, more simple, more contented, what a gain would be there! I wonder more and more every day that I live that we do not value better the thought of these calmer things, because the least effort to reach them seems to pull down about us a whole cluster of wholesome fruits, grapes of Eschol, apples of Paradise. We are kept back, it seems to me, by a kind of silly fear of ridicule, from speaking more sincerely and instantly of these delights.

I read the *Life* of a great artist the other day who received a title of honour from the State. I do not think he cared much for the title itself, but he did care very much for the generous praise of his friends that the little piece of honour called forth. I will not quote his exact words, but he said in effect that he wondered why friends should think it necessary to wait for such an occasion to indulge in the noble pleasure of praising, and why they should not rather have a day in the year when they could dare to write to the friends whom they admired and loved, and praise them for being what they were. Of course if such a custom were to become general, it would be clumsily spoilt by foolish persons, as all things are spoilt which become conventional. But the fact remains that the sweet pleasure of praising, of encouraging, of admiring and telling our admiration, is one that we English people are sparing of, to our own loss and hurt. It is just as false to refrain from saying a generous thing for fear of being thought insincere and what is horribly called gushing, as it is to say a hard thing for the sake of being thought straightforward. If a hard thing must be said, let us say it with pain and tenderness, but faithfully. And if a pleasant thing can be said, let us say it with joy, and with no less faithfulness.

Now I must return to my earlier purpose, and say that I mean that this little book shall go about with me, and that I will write in it only strange and beautiful things. I have many businesses in the world, and take delight in many of them; but we cannot always be busy. So when I have seen or heard something that gives me joy, whether it be a new place, or, what is better still, an old familiar place transfigured by some happy accident of sun or moon into a mystery; or if I have been told of a generous and beautiful deed, or heard even a sad story that has some seed of hope within it; or if I have met a gracious and kindly person; or if I have read a noble book, or seen a rare picture or a curious flower; or if I have heard a delightful music; or if I have been visited by one of those joyful and tender thoughts that set my feet the right way, I will try to put it down, God prospering me. For thus I think that I shall be truly interpreting his loving care for the little souls of men. And I call my book *The Thread of Gold*, because this beauty of which I have spoken seems to me a thing which runs like a fine and precious clue through the dark and sunless labyrinths of the world.

And, lastly, I pray God with all my heart, that he may, in this matter, let me help and not hinder his will. I often cannot divine what his will is, but I have seen and heard enough to be sure that it is high and holy, even when it seems to me hard to discern, and harder still to follow. Nothing shall here be set down that does not seem to me to be perfectly pure and honest; nothing that is not wise and true. It may be a vain hope that I nourish, but I think that God has put it into my heart to write this book, and I hope that he will allow me to persevere. And yet indeed I know that I am not fit for so holy a task, but perhaps he will give me fitness, and cleanse my tongue with a coal from his altar fire.

I
The Red Spring

Very deep in this enchanted land of green hills in which I live, lies a still and quiet valley. No road runs along it; but a stream with many curves and loops, deep-set in hazels and alders, moves brimming down. There is no house to be seen; nothing but pastures and little woods which clothe the hill-sides on either hand. In one of these fields, not far from the stream, lies a secluded spot that I visit duly from time to time. It is hard enough to find the place; and I have sometimes directed strangers to it, who have returned without discovering it. Some twenty yards away from the stream, with a ring of low alders growing round it, there is a pool; not like any other pool I know. The basin in which it lies is roughly circular, some ten feet across. I suppose it is four or five feet deep. From the centre of the pool rises an even gush of very pure water, with a certain hue of green, like a faintly-tinted gem. The water in its flow makes a perpetual dimpling on the surface; I have never known it to fail even in the longest droughts; and in sharp frosty days there hangs a little smoke above it, for the water is of a noticeable warmth.

This spring is strongly impregnated with iron, so strongly that it has a sharp and medical taste; from what secret bed of metal it comes I do not know, but it must be a bed of great extent, for, though the spring runs thus, day by day and year by year, feeding its waters with the bitter mineral over which it passes, it never loses its tinge; and the oldest tradition of the place is that it was even so centuries ago.

All the rest of the pool is full of strange billowy cloudlike growths, like cotton-wool or clotted honey, all reddened with the iron of the spring; for it rusts on thus coming to the air. But the orifice you can always see, and that is of a dark blueness; out of which the pure green water rises among the vaporous and filmy folds, runs away briskly out of the pool in a little channel among alders, all stained with the same orange tints, and falls into the greater stream at a loop, tinging its waters for a mile.

It is said to have strange health-giving qualities; and the water is drunk beneath the moon by old country folk for wasting and weakening complaints. Its strength and potency have no enmity to animal life, for the water-voles burrow in the banks and plunge with a splash in the stream; but it seems that no vegetable thing can grow within it, for the pool and channel are always free of weeds.

I like to stand upon the bank and watch the green water rise and dimple to the top of the pool, and to hear it bickering away in its rusty channel. But the beauty of the place is not a simple beauty; there is something strange and almost fierce about the red-stained water-course; something uncanny and terrifying about the filmy orange clouds that stir and sway in the pool; and there sleeps, too, round the edges of the basin a bright and viscous scum, with a certain ugly radiance, shot with colours that are almost too sharp and fervid for nature. It seems as though some diligent alchemy was at work, pouring out from moment to moment this strangely tempered potion. In summer it is more bearable to look upon, when the grass is bright and soft, when the tapestry of leaves and climbing plants is woven over the skirts of the thicket, when the trees are in joyful leaf. But in the winter, when all tints are low and spare, when the pastures are yellowed with age, and the hillside wrinkled with cold, when the alder-rods stand up stiff and black, and the leafless tangled boughs are smooth like wire; then the pool has a certain horror, as it pours out its rich juice, all overhung with thin steam.

But I doubt not that I read into it some thoughts of my own; for it was on such a day of winter, when the sky was full of inky clouds, and the wood murmured like a falling sea in the buffeting wind, that I made a grave and sad decision beside the red pool, that has since tinged my life, as the orange waters tinge the pale stream into which they fall. The shadow of that severe resolve still broods about the place for me. How often since in thought have I threaded the meadows, and looked with the inward eye upon the green water rising, rising, and the crowded orange fleeces of the pool! But stern

though the resolve was, it was not an unhappy one; and it has brought into my life a firm and tonic quality, which seems to me to hold within it something of the astringent savour of the medicated waters, and perhaps something of their health-giving powers as well.

II
The Deserted Shrine, The Manor House

I was making a vague pilgrimage to-day in a distant and unfamiliar part of the country, a region that few people ever visit, and saw two things that moved me strangely. I left the high-road to explore a hamlet that lay down in a broad valley to the left; and again diverged from the beaten track to survey an old grange that lay at a little distance among the fields. Turning a corner by some cottages, I saw a small ancient chapel, of brown weathered stone, covered with orange lichen, the roof of rough stone tiles. In the narrow graveyard round it, the grass grew long and rank; the gateway was choked by briars. I could see that the windows of the tiny building were broken. I have never before in England seen a derelict church, and I clambered over the wall to examine it more closely. It stood very beautifully; from the low wall of the graveyard, on the further side, you could look over a wide extent of rich water-meadows, fed by full streams; there was much ranunculus in flower on the edges of the water-courses, and a few cattle moved leisurely about with a peaceful air. Far over the meadows, out of a small grove of trees, a manor-house held up its enquiring chimneys. The door of the chapel was open, and I have seldom seen a more pitiful sight than it revealed. The roof within was of a plain and beautiful design, with carved bosses, and beams of some dark wood. The chapel was fitted with oak Jacobean woodwork, pews, a reading-desk, and a little screen. At the west was a tiny balustraded gallery. But the whole was a scene of wretched confusion. The woodwork was mouldering, the red cloth of the pulpit hung raggedly down, the leaves of the great prayer-book fluttered about the pavement, in the draught from the door. The whole place was gnawed by rats and shockingly befouled by birds; there was a litter of rotting nests upon the altar itself. Yet in the walls were old memorial tablets, and the passage of the nave was paved with lettered graves. It brought back to me the beautiful lines —

"En ara, ramis ilicis obsita,
Quae sacra Chryses nomina fert deae,
Neglecta; jamdudum sepultus
Aedituus jacet et sacerdos."

Outside the sun fell peacefully on the mellow walls, and the starlings twittered in the roof; but inside the deserted shrine there was a sense of broken trust, of old memories despised, of the altar of God shamed and dishonoured. It was a pious design to build the little chapel there for the secluded hamlet; and loving thought and care had gone to making the place seemly and beautiful. The very stone of the wall, and the beam of the roof cried out against the hard and untender usage that had laid the sanctuary low. Here children had been baptized, tender marriage vows plighted, and the dead laid to rest; and this was the end. I turned away with a sense of deep sadness; the very sunshine seemed blurred with a shadow of dreariness and shame.

Then I made my way, by a stony road, towards the manor-house; and presently could see its gables at the end of a pleasant avenue of limes; but no track led thither. The gate was wired up, and the drive overgrown with grass. Soon, however, I found a farm-road which led up to the house from the village. On the left of the manor lay prosperous barns and byres, full of sleek pigs and busy crested fowls. The teams came clanking home across the water-meadows. The house itself became more and more beautiful as I approached. It was surrounded by a moat, and here, close at hand, stood another ancient chapel, in seemly repair. All round the house grew dense thickets of sprawling laurels, which rose in luxuriance from the edge of the water. Then I crossed a little bridge with a broken parapet; and in front of me stood the house itself. I have seldom seen a more perfectly proportioned or exquisitely coloured building. There were three gables in the front, the central one holding a beautiful

oriel window, with a fine oak door below. The whole was built of a pale red brick, covered with a grey lichen that cast a shimmering light over the front. Tall chimneys of solid grace rose from a stone-shingled roof. The coigns, parapets and mullions were all of a delicately-tinted orange stone. To the right lay a big walled garden, full of flowers growing with careless richness, the whole bounded by the moat, and looking out across the broad green water-meadows, beyond which the low hills rose softly in gentle curves and dingles.

A whole company of amiable dogs, spaniels and terriers, came out with an effusive welcome; a big black yard-dog, after a loud protesting bark, joined in the civilities. And there I sat down in the warm sun, to drink in the beauty of the scene, while the moor-hens cried plaintively in the moat, and the dogs disposed themselves at my feet. The man who designed this old place must have had a wonderful sense of the beauty of proportion, the charm of austere simplicity. Generation after generation must have loved the gentle dignified house, with its narrow casements, its high rooms. Though the name of the house, though the tale of its dwellers was unknown to me, I felt the appeal of the old associations that must have centred about it. The whole air, that quiet afternoon, seemed full of the calling of forgotten voices, and dead faces looked out from the closed lattices. So near to my heart came the spirit of the ancient house, that, as I mused, I felt as though even I myself had made a part of its past, and as though I were returning from battling with the far-off world to the home of childhood. The house seemed to regard me with a mournful and tender gaze, as though it knew that I loved it, and would fain utter its secrets in a friendly ear. Is it strange that a thing of man's construction should have so wistful yet so direct a message for the spirit? Well, I hardly know what it was that it spoke of; but I felt the care and love that had gone to the making of it, and the dignity that it had won from rain and sun and the kindly hand of Nature; it spoke of hope and brightness, of youth and joy; and told me, too, that all things were passing away, that even the house itself, though it could outlive a few restless generations, was indeed *debita morti*, and bowed itself to its fall.

And then I too, like a bird of passage that has alighted for a moment in some sheltered garden-ground, must needs go on my way. But the old house had spoken with me, had left its mark upon my spirit. And I know that in weary hours, far hence, I shall remember how it stood, peering out of its tangled groves, gazing at the sunrise and the sunset over the green flats, waiting for what may be, and dreaming of the days that are no more.

III
Leucocholy

I have had to taste, during the last few days, I know not why, of the cup of what Gray called Leucocholy; it is not Melancholy, only the pale shadow of it. That dark giant is, doubtless, stalking somewhere in the background, and the shadow cast by his misshapen head passes over my little garden ground.

I do not readily submit to this mood, and I would wish it away. I would rather feel joyful and free from blame; but Gray called it a good easy state, and it certainly has its compensations. It does not, like Melancholy, lay a dark hand on duties and pleasures alike; it is possible to work, to read, to talk, to laugh when it is by. But it sends flowing through the mind a gentle current of sad and weary images and thoughts, which still have a beauty of their own; it tinges one's life with a sober greyness of hue; it heightens perception, though it prevents enjoyment. In such a mood one can sit silent a long time, with one's eyes cast upon the grass; one sees the delicate forms of the tender things that spring softly out of the dark ground; one hears with a poignant delight the clear notes of birds; something of the spring languors move within the soul. There is a sense, too, of reaching out to light and joy, a stirring of the vague desires of the heart, a tender hope, an upward-climbing faith; the heart sighs for a peace that it cannot attain.

To-day I walked slowly and pensively by little woods and pastures, taking delight in all the quiet life I saw, the bush pricked with points of green, the boughs thickened with small reddening buds, the slow stream moving through the pasture; all the tints faint, airy, and delicate; the life of the world seemed to hang suspended, waiting for the forward leap. In a little village I stood awhile to watch the gables of an ancient house, the wing of a ruined grange, peer solemnly over the mellow brick wall that guarded a close of orchard trees. A little way behind, the blunt pinnacles of the old church-tower stood up, blue and dim, over the branching elms; beyond all ran the long, pure line of the rising wold. Everything seemed so still, so serene, as a long, pale ray of the falling sun, which laboured among flying clouds, touched the westward gables with gold – and mine the only troubled, unquiet spirit. Hard by there was an old man tottering about in a little garden, fumbling with some plants, like Laertes on the upland farm. His worn face, his ragged beard, his pitifully-patched and creased garments made him a very type of an ineffectual sadness. Perhaps his thoughts ran as sadly as my own, but I do not think it was so, because the minds of many country-people, and of almost all the old, of whatever degree, seem to me free from what is the curse of delicately-trained and highly-strung temperaments – namely, the temptation to be always reverting to the past, or forecasting the future. Simple people and aged people put that aside, and live quite serenely in the moment; and that is what I believe we ought all to attempt, for most moments are bearable, if one only does not import into them the weight of the future and the regret of the past. To seize the moment with all its conditions, to press the quality out of it, that is the best victory. But, alas! we are so made that though we may know that a course is the wise, the happy, the true course, we cannot always pursue it. I remember a story of a public man who bore his responsibilities very hardly, worried and agonised over them, saying to Mr Gladstone, who was at that time in the very thick of a fierce political crisis: "But don't you find you lie awake at night, thinking how you ought to act, and how you ought to have acted?" Mr Gladstone turned his great, flashing eyes upon his interlocutor, and said, with a look of wonder: "No, I don't; where would be the use of that?" And again I remember that old Canon Beadon – who lived, I think, to his 104th year – said to a friend that the secret of long life in his own case was that he had never thought of anything unpleasant after ten o'clock at night. Of course, if you have a series of compartments in your brain, and at ten o'clock can turn the key quietly upon the room that holds the skeletons and nightmares, you are a very fortunate man.

But still, we can all of us do something. If one has the courage and good sense, when in a melancholy mood, to engage in some piece of practical work, it is wonderful how one can distract the great beast that, left to himself, crops and munches the tender herbage of the spirit. For myself I have generally a certain number of dull tasks to perform, not in themselves interesting, and out of which little pleasure can be extracted, except the pleasure which always results from finishing a piece of necessary work. When I am wise, I seize upon a day in which I am overhung with a shadow of sadness to clear off work of this kind. It is in itself a distraction, and then one has the pleasure both of having fought the mood and also of having left the field clear for the mind, when it has recovered its tone, to settle down firmly and joyfully to more congenial labours.

To-day, little by little, the cloudy mood drew off and left me smiling. The love of the peaceful and patient earth came to comfort me. How pure and free were the long lines of ploughland, the broad back of the gently-swelling down! How clear and delicate were the February tints, the aged grass, the leafless trees! What a sense of coolness and repose! I stopped a long time upon a rustic-timbered bridge to look at a little stream that ran beneath the road, winding down through a rough pasture-field, with many thorn-thickets. The water, lapsing slowly through withered flags, had the pure, gem-like quality of the winter stream; in summer it will become dim and turbid with infusorial life, but now it is like a pale jewel. How strange, I thought, to think of this liquid gaseous juice, which we call water, trickling in the cracks of the earth! And just as the fish that live in it think of it as their world, and have little cognisance of what happens in the acid, unsubstantial air above, except the occasional terror of the dim, looming forms which come past, making the soft banks quiver and stir, so it may be with us; there may be a great mysterious world outside of us, of which we sometimes see the dark manifestations, and yet of the conditions of which we are wholly unaware.

And now it grew dark; the horizon began to redden and smoulder; the stream gleamed like a wan thread among the distant fields. It was time to hurry home, to dip in the busy tide of life again. Where was my sad mood gone? The clear air seemed to have blown through my mind, hands had been waved to me from leafless woods, quiet voices of field and stream had whispered me their secrets; "We would tell, if we could," they seemed to say. And I, listening, had learnt patience, too – for awhile.

IV
The Flower

I have made friends with a new flower. If it had a simple and wholesome English name, I would like to know it, though I do not care to know what ugly and clumsy title the botany books may give it; but it lives in my mind, a perfect and complete memory of brightness and beauty, and, as I have said, a friend.

It was in a steep sea-cove that I saw it. Round a small circular basin of blue sea ran up gigantic cliffs, grey limestone bluffs; here and there, where they were precipitous, slanted the monstrous wavy lines of distorted strata, thrust up, God alone knows how many ages ago, by some sharp and horrible shiver of the boiling earth. Little waves broke on the pebbly beach at our feet, and all the air was full of pleasant sharp briny savours. A few boats were drawn up on the shingle; lobster-pots, nets, strings of cork, spars, oars, lay in pleasant confusion, by the sandy road that led up to the tiny hamlet above. We had travelled far that day and were comfortably weary; we found a sloping ledge of turf upon which we sat, and presently became aware that on the little space of grass between us and the cliff must once have stood a cottage and a cottage garden. There was a broken wall behind us, and the little platform still held some garden flowers sprawling wildly, a stunted fruitbush or two, a knotted apple-tree.

My own flower, or the bushes on which it grew, had once, I think, formed part of the cottage hedge; but it had found a wider place to its liking, for it ran riot everywhere; it scaled the cliff, where, too, the golden wall-flowers of the garden had gained a footing; it fringed the sand-patches beyond us, it rooted itself firmly in the shingle. The plant had rough light-brown branches, which were now all starred with the greenest tufts imaginable; but the flower itself! On many of the bushes it was not yet fully out, and showed only in an abundance of small lilac balls, carefully folded; but just below me a cluster had found the sun and the air too sweet to resist, and had opened to the light. The flower was of a delicate veined purple, a five-pointed star, with a soft golden heart. All the open blossoms stared at me with a tranquil gaze, knowing I would not hurt them.

Below, two fishermen rowed a boat quietly out to sea, the sharp creaking of the rowlocks coming lazily to our ears in the pauses of the wind. The little waves fell with a soft thud, followed by the crisp echo of the surf, feeling all round the shingly cove. The whole place, in that fresh spring day, was unutterably peaceful and content.

And I too forgot all my busy schemes and hopes and aims, the tiny part I play in the world, with so much petty energy, such anxious responsibility. My purple-starred flower approved of my acquiescence, smiling trustfully upon me. "Here," it seemed to say, "I bloom and brighten, spring after spring. No one regards me, no one cares for me; no one praises my beauty; no one sorrows when these leaves grow pale, when I fall from my stem, when my dry stalks whisper together in the winter wind. But to you, because you have seen and loved me, I whisper my secret." And then the flower told me something that I cannot write even if I would, because it is in the language unspeakable, of which St Paul wrote that such words are not lawful for a man to utter; but they are heard in the third heaven of God.

Then I felt that if I could but remember what the flower said I should never grieve or strive or be sorrowful any more; but, as the wise Psalmist said, be content to tarry the Lord's leisure. Yet, even when I thought that I had the words by heart, they ceased like a sweet music that comes to an end, and which the mind cannot recover.

I saw many other things that day, things beautiful and wonderful, no doubt; but they had no voice for me, like the purple flower; or if they had, the sea wind drowned them in the utterance, for their voices were of the earth; but the flower's voice came, as I have said, from the innermost heaven.

I like well to go on pilgrimage; and in spite of weariness and rainy weather, and the stupid chatter of the men and women who congregate like fowls in inn-parlours, I pile a little treasure of sights and sounds in my guarded heart, memories of old buildings, spring woods, secluded valleys. All these are things seen, impressions registered and gratefully recorded. But my flower is somehow different from all these; and I shall never again hear the name of the place mentioned, or even see a map of that grey coast, without a quiet thrill of gladness at the thought that there, spring by spring, blooms my little friend, whose heart I read, who told me its secret; who will wait for me to return, and indeed will be faithfully and eternally mine, whether I return or no.

V
The Fens

I have lately become convinced – and I do not say it either sophistically, to plead a bad cause with dexterity, or resignedly, to make the best out of a poor business; but with a true and hearty conviction – that the most beautiful country in England is the flat fenland. I do not here mean moderately flat country, low sweeps of land, like the heaving of a dying groundswell; that has a miniature beauty, a stippled delicacy of its own, but it is not a fine quality of charm. The country that I would praise is the rigidly and mathematically flat country of Eastern England, lying but a few feet above the sea, plains which were once the bottoms of huge and ancient swamps.

In the first place, such country gives a wonderful sense of expanse and space; from an eminence of a few feet you can see what in other parts of England you have to climb a considerable hill to discern. I love to feast my eyes on the interminable rich level plain, with its black and crumbling soil; the long simple lines of dykes and water-courses carry the eye peacefully out to a great distance; then, too, by having all the landscape compressed into so narrow a space, into a belt of what is, to the eye, only a few inches in depth, you get an incomparable richness of colour. The solitary distant clumps of trees surrounding a lonely farm gain a deep intensity of tint from the vast green level all about them; and the line of the low far-off wolds, that close the view many miles away, is of a peculiar delicacy and softness; the eye, too, is provided with a foreground of which the elements are of the simplest; a reedy pool enclosed by willows, the clustered buildings of a farmstead; a grey church-tower peering out over churchyard elms; and thus, instead of being checked by near objects, and hemmed in by the limited landscape, the eye travels out across the plain with a sense of freedom and grateful repose. Then, too, there is the huge perspective of the sky; nowhere else is it possible to see, so widely, the slow march of clouds from horizon to horizon; it all gives a sense of largeness and tranquillity such as you receive upon the sea, with the additional advantage of having the solid earth beneath you, green and fertile, instead of the steely waste of waters.

A day or two ago I found myself beside the lower waters of the Cam, in flat pastures, full of ancient thorn-trees just bursting into bloom. I gained the towing-path, which led me out gradually into the heart of the fen; the river ran, or rather moved, a sapphire streak, between its high green flood-banks; the wide spaces between the embanked path and the stream were full of juicy herbage, great tracts of white cow-parsley, with here and there a reed-bed. I stood long to listen to the sharp song of the reed-warbler, slipping from spray to spray of a willow-patch. Far to the north the great tower of Ely rose blue and dim above the low lines of trees; in the centre of the pastures lay the long brown line of the sedge-beds of Wicken Mere, almost the only untouched tract of fenland; slow herds of cattle grazed, more and more minute, in the unhedged pasture-land, and the solitary figure of a labourer moving homeward on the top of the green dyke, seemed in the long afternoon to draw no nearer. Here and there were the floodgates of a lode, with the clear water slowly spilling itself over the rim of the sluice, full of floating weed. There was something infinitely reposeful in the solitude, the width of the landscape; there was no sense of crowded life, no busy figures, intent on their small aims, to cross one's path, no conflict, no strife, no bitterness, no insistent voice; yet there was no sense of desolation, but rather the spectacle of glad and simple lives of plants and birds in the free air, their wildness tamed by the far-off and controlling hand of man, the calm earth patiently serving his ends. I seemed to have passed out of modern life into a quieter and older world, before men congregated into cities, but lived the quiet and sequestered life of the country side; and little by little there stole into my heart something of a dreamful tranquillity, the calm of the slow brimming stream, the leisurely herds, the growing grass. All seemed to be moving together, neither lingering nor making haste, to some far-off end within the quiet mind of God. Everything seemed to be waiting, musing, living the

untroubled life of nature, with no thought of death or care or sorrow. I passed a trench of still water that ran as far as the eye could follow it across the flat; it was full from end to end of the beautiful water violet, the pale lilac flowers, with their faint ethereal scent, clustered on the head of a cool emerald spike, with the rich foliage of the plant, like fine green hair, filling the water. The rising of these beautiful forms, by some secret consent, in their appointed place and time, out of the fresh clear water, brought me a wistful sense of peace and order, a desire for I hardly know what – a poised stateliness of life, a tender beauty – if I could but win it for myself!

On and on, hour by hour, that still bright afternoon, I made my slow way over the fen; insensibly and softly the far-off villages fell behind; and yet I seemed to draw no nearer to the hills of the horizon. Now and then I passed a lonely grange; once or twice I came near to a tall shuttered engine-house of pale brick, and heard the slow beat of the pumps within, like the pulse of a hidden heart, which drew the marsh-water from a hundred runlets, and poured it slowly seawards. Field after field slid past me, some golden from end to end with buttercups, some waving with young wheat, till at last I reached a solitary inn beside a ferry, with the quaint title: "*No hurry! five miles from anywhere.*" And here I met with a grave and kindly welcome, such as warms the heart of one who goes on pilgrimage: as though I was certainly expected, and as if the lord of the place had given charge concerning me. It would indeed hardly have surprised me if I had been had into a room, and shown strange symbols of good and evil; or if I had been given a roll and a bottle, and a note of the way. But no such presents were made to me, and it was not until after I had left the little house, and had been ferried in an old blackened boat across the stream, that I found that I had the gifts in my bosom all the while.

The roll was the fair sight that I had seen, in this world where it is so sweet to live. My cordial was the peace within my spirit. And as for the way, it seemed plain enough that day, easy to discern and follow; and the heavenly city itself as near and visible as the blue towers that rose so solemnly upon the green horizon.

VI
The Well and the Chapel

It is not often that one is fortunate enough to see two perfectly beautiful things in one day. But such was my fortune in the late summer, on a day that was in itself perfect enough to show what September can do, if he only has a mind to plan hours of delight for man. The distance was very blue and marvellously clear. The trees had the bronzed look of the summer's end, with deep azure shadows. The cattle moved slowly about the fields, and there was harvesting going on, so that the villages we passed seemed almost deserted. I will not say whence we started or where we went, and I shall mention no names at all, except one, which is of the nature of a symbol or incantation; for I do not desire that others should go where I went, unless I could be sure that they went with the same peace in their hearts that I bore with me that day.

One of the places we visited on purpose; the other we saw by accident. On the small map we carried was marked, at the corner of a little wood that seemed to have no way to it, a well with the name of a saint, of whom I never heard, though I doubt not she is written in the book of God.

We reached the nearest point to the well upon the road, and we struck into the fields; that was a sweet place where we found ourselves! In ancient days it had been a marsh, I think. For great ditches ran everywhere, choked with loose-strife and water-dock, and the ground quaked as we walked, a pleasant springy black mould, the dust of endless centuries of the rich water plants.

To the left, the ground ran up sharply in a minute bluff, with the soft outline of underlying chalk, covered with small thorn-thickets; and it was all encircled with small, close woods, where we heard the pheasants scamper. We found an old, slow, bovine man, with a cheerful face, who readily threw aside some fumbling work he was doing, and guided us; and we should never have found the spot without him. He led us to a stream, crossed by a single plank with a handrail, on which some children had put a trap, baited with nuts for the poor squirrels, that love to run chattering across the rail from wood to wood. Then we entered a little covert; it was very pleasant in there, all dark and green and still; and here all at once we came to the place; in the covert were half a dozen little steep pits, each a few yards across, dug out of the chalk. From each of the pits, which lay side by side, a channel ran down to the stream, and in each channel flowed a small bickering rivulet of infinite clearness. The pits themselves were a few feet deep; at the bottom of each was a shallow pool, choked with leaves; and here lay the rare beauty of the place. The water rose in each pit out of secret ways, but in no place that we could see. The first pit was still when we looked upon it; then suddenly the water rose in a tiny eddy, in one corner, among the leaves, sending a little ripple glancing across the pool. It was as though something, branch or insect, had fallen from above, the water leapt so suddenly. Then it rose again in another place, then in another; then five or six little freshets rose all at once, the rings crossing and recrossing. And it was the same in all the pits, which we visited one by one; we descended and drank, and found the water as cold as ice, and not less pure; while the old man babbled on about the waste of so much fine water, and of its virtues for weak eyes: "Ain't it cold, now? Ain't it, then? My God, ain't it?" – he was a man with a rich store of simple asseverations, – "And ain't it good for weak eyes neither! You must just come to the place the first thing in the morning, and wash your eyes in the water, and ain't it strengthening then!" So he chirped on, saying everything over and over, like a bird among the thickets.

We paid him for his trouble, with a coin that made him so gratefully bewildered that he said to us: "Now, gentlemen, if there's anything else that you want, give it a name; and if you meet any one as you go away, say 'Perrett told me' (Perrett's my name), and then you'll see!" What the precise virtue of this invocation was, we did not have an opportunity of testing, but that it was a talisman to unlock hidden doors, I make no doubt.

We went back silently over the fields, with the wonder of the thing still in our minds. To think of the pure wells bubbling and flashing, by day and by night, in the hot summer weather, when the smell of the wood lies warm in the sun; on cold winter nights under moon and stars, for ever casting up the bright elastic jewel, that men call water, and feeding the flowing stream that wanders to the sea. I was very full of gratitude to the pure maiden saint that lent her name to the well and I am sure she never had a more devout pair of worshippers.

So we sped on in silence, thinking – at least I thought – how the water leaped and winked in the sacred wells, and how clear showed the chalk, and the leaves that lay at the bottom: till at last we drew to our other goal. "Here is the gate," said my companion at last.

On one side of the road stood a big substantial farm; on the other, by a gate, was a little lodge. Here a key was given us by an old hearty man, with plenty of advice of a simple and sententious kind, until I felt as though I were enacting a part in some little *Pilgrim's Progress*, and as if *Mr Interpreter* himself, with a very grave smile, would come out and have me into a room by myself, to see some odd pleasant show that he had provided. But it was perhaps more in the manner of *Evangelist*, for our guide pointed with his finger across a very wide field, and showed us a wicket to enter in at.

Here was a great flat grassy pasture, the water again very near the surface, as the long-leaved water-plants, that sprawled in all the ditches, showed. But when we reached the wicket we seemed to be as far removed from humanity as dwellers in a lonely isle. A few cattle grazed drowsily, and the crisp tearing of the grass by their big lips came softly across the pasture. Inside the wicket stood a single ancient house, uninhabited, and festooned with ivy into a thing more bush than house; though a small Tudor window peeped from the leaves, like the little suspicious eye of some shaggy beast.

A stone's throw away lay a large square moat, full of water, all fringed with ancient gnarled trees; the island which it enclosed was overgrown with tiny thickets of dishevelled box-trees, and huge sprawling laurels; we walked softly round it, and there was our goal: a small church of a whitish stone, in the middle of a little close of old sycamores in stiff summer leaf.

It stood so remote, so quietly holy, so ancient, that I could think of nothing but the "old febel chapel" of the *Morte d'Arthur*. It had, I know not why, the mysterious air of romance all about it. It seemed to sit, musing upon what had been and what should be, smilingly guarding some tender secret for the pure-hearted, full of the peace the world cannot give.

Within it was cool and dark, and had an ancient holy smell; it was furnished sparely with seat and screen, and held monuments of old knights and ladies, sleeping peacefully side by side, heads pillowed on hands, looking out with quiet eyes, as though content to wait.

Upon the island in the moat, we learned, had stood once a flourishing manor, but through what sad vicissitudes it had fallen into dust I care not. Enough that peaceful lives had been lived there; children had been born, had played on the moat-edge, had passed away to bear children of their own, had returned with love in their hearts for the old house. From the house to the church children had been borne for baptism; merry wedding processions had gone to and fro, happy Christmas groups had hurried backwards and forwards; and the slow funeral pomp had passed thither, under the beating of the slow bell, bearing one that should not return.

Something of the love and life and sorrow of the good days passed into my mind, and I gave a tender thought to men and women whom I had never known, who had tasted of life, and of joyful things that have an end; and who now know the secret of the dark house to which we all are bound.

When we at last rose unwillingly to go, the sun was setting, and flamed red and brave through the gnarled trunks of the little wood; the mist crept over the pasture, and far away the lights of the lonely farm began to wink through the gathering dark.

But I had seen! Something of the joy of the two sweet places had settled in my mind; and now, in fretful, weary, wakeful hours, it is good to think of the clear wells that sparkle so patiently in the dark wood; and, better still, to wander in mind about the moat and the little silent church; and to wonder what it all means; what the love is that creeps over the soul at the sight of these places, so

full of a remote and delicate beauty; and whether the hunger of the heart for peace and permanence, which visits us so often in our short and difficult pilgrimage, has a counterpart in the land that is very far off.

VII
The Cuckoo

I have been much haunted, indeed infested, if the word may be pardoned, by cuckoos lately. When I was a child, acute though my observation of birds and beasts and natural things was, I do not recollect that I ever saw a cuckoo, though I often tried to stalk one by the ear, following the sweet siren melody, as it dropped into the expectant silence from a hedgerow tree; and I remember to have heard the notes of two, that seemed to answer each other, draw closer each time they called.

But of late I have become familiar with the silvery grey body and the gliding flight; and this year I have been almost dogged by them. One flew beside me, as I rode the other day, for nearly a quarter of a mile along a hedgerow, taking short gliding flights, and settling till I came up; I could see his shimmering wings and his long barred tail. I dismounted at last, and he let me watch him for a long time, noting his small active head, his decent sober coat. Then, when he thought I had seen enough, he gave one rich bell-like call, with the full force of his soft throat, and floated off.

He seemed loath to leave me. But what word or gift, I thought, did he bring with him, false and pretty bird? Do I too desire that others should hatch my eggs, content with flute-like notes of pleasure?

And yet how strange and marvellous a thing this instinct is; that one bird, by an absolute and unvarying instinct, should forego the dear business of nesting and feeding, and should take shrewd advantage of the labours of other birds! It cannot be a deliberately reasoned or calculated thing; at least we say that it cannot; and yet not Darwin and all his followers have brought us any nearer to the method by which such an instinct is developed and trained, till it has become an absolute law of the tribe; making it as natural a thing for the cuckoo to search for a built nest, and to cast away its foundling egg there, as it is for other birds to welcome and feed the intruder. It seems so satanically clever a thing to do; such a strange fantastic whim of the Creator to take thought in originating it! It is this whimsicality, the *bizarre* humour in Nature, that puzzles me more than anything in the world, because it seems like the sport of a child with odd inconsequent fancies, and with omnipotence behind it all the time. It seems strange enough to think of the laws that govern the breeding, nesting, and nurture of birds at all, especially when one considers all the accidents that so often make the toil futile, like the stealing of eggs by other birds, and the predatory incursions of foes. One would expect a law, framed by omnipotence, to be invariable, not hampered by all kinds of difficulties that omnipotence, one might have thought, could have provided against. And then comes this further strange variation in the law, in the case of this single family of birds, and the mystery thickens and deepens. And stranger than all is the existence of the questioning and unsatisfied human spirit, that observes these things and classifies them, and that yet gets no nearer to the solution of the huge, fantastic, patient plan! To make a law, as the Creator seems to have done; and then to make a hundred other laws that seem to make the first law inoperative; to play this gigantic game century after century; and then to put into the hearts of our inquisitive race the desire to discover what it is all about; and to leave the desire unsatisfied. What a labyrinthine mystery! Depth beyond depth, and circle beyond circle!

It is a dark and bewildering region that thus opens to the view. But one conclusion is to beware of seeming certainties, to keep the windows of the mind open to the light; not to be over-anxious about the little part we have to play in the great pageant, but to advance, step by step, in utter trustfulness.

Perhaps that is your message to me, graceful bird, with the rich joyful note! With what a thrill, too, do you bring back to me the brightness of old forgotten springs, the childish rapture at the sweet tunable cry! Then, in those far-off days, it was but the herald of the glowing summer days, the time of play and flowers and scents. But now the soft note, it seems, opens a door into the formless and uneasy world of speculation, of questions that have no answer, convincing me of ignorance and doubt, bidding me beat in vain against the bars that hem me in. Why should I crave thus for certainty, for

strength? Answer me, happy bird! Nay, you guard your secret. Softer and more distant sound the sweet notes, warning me to rest and believe, telling me to wait and hope.

But one further thought! One is expected, by people of conventional and orthodox minds, to base one's conceptions of God on the writings of frail and fallible men, and to accept their slender and eager testimony to the occurrence of abnormal events as the best revelation of God that the world contains. And all the while we disregard his own patient writing upon the wall. Every day and every hour we are confronted with strange marvels, which we dismiss from our minds because, God forgive us, we call them natural; and yet they take us back, by a ladder of immeasurable antiquity, to ages before man had emerged from a savage state. Centuries before our rude forefathers had learned even to scratch a few hillocks into earthworks, while they lived a brutish life, herding in dens and caves, the cuckoo, with her traditions faultlessly defined, was paying her annual visits, fluting about the forest glades, and searching for nests into which to intrude her speckled egg. The patient witness of God! She is as direct a revelation of the Creator's mind, could we but interpret the mystery of her instincts, as Augustine himself with his scheme of salvation logically defined. Each of these missions, whether of bird or man, a wonder and a marvel! But do we not tend to accept the eager and childish hopes of humanity, arrayed with blithe certainty, as a nearer evidence of the mind of God than the bird that at his bidding pursues her annual quest, unaffected by our hasty conclusions, unmoved by our glorified visions? I have sometimes thought that Christ probably spoke more than is recorded about the observation of Nature; the hearts of those that heard him were so set on temporal ends and human applications, that they had not perhaps leisure or capacity to recollect aught but those few scattered words, that seem to speak of a deep love for and insight into the things of earth. They remembered better that Christ blasted a fig-tree for doing what the Father bade the poor plant do, than his tender dwelling upon grasses and lilies, sparrow and sheep. The withering of the tree made an allegory: while the love of flowers and streams was to those simple hearts perhaps an unaccountable, almost an eccentric thing. But had Christ drawn human breath in our bleaker Northern air, he would have perhaps, if those that surrounded him had had leisure and grace to listen, drawn as grave and comforting a soul-music from our homely cuckoo, with her punctual obedience, her unquestioning faith, as he did from the birds and flowers of the hot hillsides, the pastoral valleys of Palestine. I am sure he would have loved the cuckoo, and forgiven her her heartless customs. Those that sing so delicately would not have leisure and courage to make their music so soft and sweet, if they had not a hard heart to turn to the sorrows of the world.

Yet still I am no nearer the secret. God sends me, here the frozen peak, there the blue sea; here the tiger, there the cuckoo; here Virgil, there Jeremiah; here St Francis of Assisi, there Napoleon. And all the while, as he pushes his fair or hurtful toys upon the stage, not a whisper, not a smile, not a glance escapes him; he thrusts them on, he lays them by; but the interpretation he leaves with us, and there is never a word out of the silence to show us whether we have guessed aright.

VIII
Spring-time

Yesterday was a day of brisk airs. The wind was at work brushing great inky clouds out of the sky. They came sailing up, those great rounded masses of dark vapour, like huge galleons driving to the West, spilling their freight as they came. The air would be suddenly full of tall twisted rain-streaks, and then would come a bright burst of the sun.

But a secret change came in the night; some silent power filled the air with warmth and balm. And to-day, when I walked out of the town with an old and familiar friend, the spring had come. A maple had broken into bloom and leaf; a chestnut was unfolding his gummy buds; the cottage gardens were full of squills and hepatica; and the mezereons were all thick with damask buds. In green and sheltered underwoods there were bursts of daffodils; hedges were pricked with green points; and a delicate green tapestry was beginning to weave itself over the roadside ditches.

The air seemed full of a deep content. Birds fluted softly, and the high elms which stirred in the wandering breezes were all thick with their red buds. There was so much to look at and to point out that we talked but fitfully; and there was, too, a gentle languor abroad which made us content to be silent.

In one village which we passed, a music-loving squire had made a concert for his friends and neighbours, and doubtless, too, for our vagrant delight; we stood uninvited to listen to a tuneful stir of violins, which with a violoncello booming beneath, broke out very pleasantly from the windows of a village school-room.

When body and mind are fresh and vigorous, these outside impressions often lose, I think, their sharp savours. One is preoccupied with one's own happy schemes and merry visions; the bird sings shrill within its cage, and claps its golden wings. But on such soft and languorous days as these days of early spring, when the body is unstrung, and the bonds and ties that fasten the soul to its prison are loosened and unbound, the spirit, striving to be glad, draws in through the passages of sense these swift impressions of beauty, as a thirsty child drains a cup of spring-water on a sun-scorched day, lingering over the limpid freshness of the gliding element. The airy voices of the strings being stilled, with a sort of pity for those penned in the crowded room, interchanging the worn coinage of civility, we stood a while looking in at a gate, through which we could see the cool front of a Georgian manor-house, built of dusky bricks, with coigns and dressings of grey stone. The dark windows with their thick white casements, the round-topped dormers, the steps up to the door, and a prim circle of grass which seemed to lie like a carpet on the pale gravel, gave the feeling of a picture; the whole being framed in the sombre yews of shrubberies which bordered the drive. It was hard to feel that the quiet house was the scene of a real and active life; it seemed so full of a slumberous peace, and to be tenanted only by soft shadows of the past. And so we went slowly on by the huge white-boarded mill, its cracks streaming with congealed dust of wheat, where the water thundered through the sluices and the gear rattled within.

We crossed the bridge, and walked on by a field-track that skirted the edge of the wold. How thin and clean were the tints of the dry ploughlands and the long sweep of pasture! Presently we were at the foot of a green drift-road, an old Roman highway that ran straight up into the downs. On such a day as this, one follows a spirit in one's feet, as Shelley said; and we struck up into the wold, on the green road, with its thorn-thickets, until the chalk began to show white among the ruts; and we were soon at the top. A little to the left of us appeared, in the middle of the pasture, a tiny round-topped tumulus that I had often seen from a lower road, but never visited. It was fresher and cooler up here. On arriving at the place we found that it was not a tumulus at all, but a little outcrop of the pure

chalk. It had steep, scarped sides with traces of caves scooped in them. The grassy top commanded a wide view of wold and plain.

Our talk wandered over many things, but here, I do not know why, we were speaking of the taking up of old friendships, and the comfort and delight of those serene and undisturbed relations which one sometimes establishes with a congenial person, which no lapse of time or lack of communication seems to interrupt – the best kind of friendship. There is here no blaming of conditions that may keep the two lives apart; no feverish attempt to keep up the relation, no resentment if mutual intercourse dies away. And then, perhaps, in the shifting of conditions, one's life is again brought near to the life of one's friend, and the old easy intercourse is quietly resumed. My companion said that such a relation seemed to him to lie as near to the solution of the question of the preservation of identity after death as any other phenomenon of life. "Supposing," he said, "that such a friendship as that of which we have spoken is resumed after a break of twenty years. One is in no respect the same person; one looks different, one's views of life have altered, and physiologists tell us that one's body has changed perhaps three times over, in the time, so that there is not a particle of our frame that is the same; and yet the emotion, the feeling of the friendship remains, and remains unaltered. If the stuff of our thoughts were to alter as the materials of our body alter, the continuity of such an emotion would be impossible. Of course it is difficult to see how, divested of the body, our perceptions can continue; but almost the only thing we are really conscious of is our own identity, our sharp separation from the mass of phenomena that are not ourselves. And, if an emotion can survive the transmutation of the entire frame, may it not also survive the dissolution of that frame?"

"Could it be thus?" I said. "A ray of light falls through a chink in a shutter; through the ray, as we watch it, floats an infinite array of tiny motes, and it is through the striking of the light upon them that we are aware of the light; but they are never the same. Yet the ray has a seeming identity, though even the very ripples of light that cause it are themselves ever changing, ever renewed. Could not the soul be such a ray, illuminating the atoms that pass through it, and itself a perpetual motion, a constant renewal?"

But the day warned us to descend. The shadows grew longer, and a great pale light of sunset began to gather in the West. We came slowly down through the pastures, till we joined the familiar road again. And at last we parted, in that wistful silence that falls upon the mood when two spirits have achieved a certain nearness of thought, have drawn as close as the strange fence of identity allows. But as I went home, I stood for a moment at the edge of a pleasant grove, an outlying pleasaunce of a great house on the verge of the town. The trees grew straight and tall within it, and all the underwood was full of spring flowers and green ground-plants, expanding to light and warmth; the sky was all full of light, dying away to a calm and liquid green, the colour of peace. Here I encountered another friend, a retiring man of letters, who lives apart from the world in dreams of his own. He is a bright-eyed, eager creature, tall and shadowy, who has but a slight hold upon the world. We talked for a few moments of trivial things, till a chance question of mine drew from him a sad statement of his own health. He had been lately, he said, to a physician, and had been warned that he was in a somewhat precarious condition. I tried to comfort him, but he shook his head; and though he tried to speak lightly and cheerfully, I could see that there was a shadow of doom upon him.

As I turned to go, he held up his hand, "Listen to the birds!" he said. We were silent, and could hear the clear flute-like notes of thrushes hidden in the tall trees, and the soft cooing of a dove. "That gives one," he said, "some sense of the happiness which one cannot capture for oneself!" He smiled mournfully, and in a moment I saw his light figure receding among the trees. What a world it is for sorrow! My friend was going, bearing the burden of a lonely grief, which I could not lighten for him; and yet the whole scene was full of so sweet a content, the birds full of hope and delight, the flowers and leaves glad to feel themselves alive. What was one to make of it all? Where to turn for light? What conceivable benefit could result from thus perpetually desiring to know and perpetually being baffled?

Yet, after all, to-day has been one of those rare days, like the gold sifted from the *débris* of the mine, which has had for me, by some subtle alchemy of the spirit, the permanent quality which is often denied to more stirring incidents and livelier experiences. I had seen the mysteries of life and death, of joy and sorrow, sharply and sadly contrasted. I had been one with Nature, with all her ardent ecstasies, her vital impulses; and then I had seen too the other side of the picture, a soul confronted with the mystery of death, alone in the shapeless gloom; the very cries and stirrings and joyful dreams of Nature bringing no help, but only deepening the shadow.

And there came too the thought of how little such easy speculations as we had indulged in on the grassy mound, thoughts which seemed so radiant with beauty and mystery, how little they could sustain or comfort the sad spirit which had entered into the cloud.

So that bright first day of spring shaped itself for me into a day when not only the innocent and beautiful flowers of the world rose into life and sunshine; but a day when sadder thoughts raised their head too, red flowers of suffering, and pale blooms of sadness; and yet these too can be woven into the spirit's coronal, I doubt not, if one can but find heart to do it, and patience for the sorrowful task.

IX
The Hare

I have just read a story that has moved me strangely, with a helpless bewilderment and a sad anger of mind. When the doors of a factory, in the heart of a northern town, were opened one morning, a workman, going to move a barrel that stood in a corner, saw something crouching behind it that he believed to be a dog or cat. He pushed it with his foot, and a large hare sprang out. I suppose that the poor creature had been probably startled by some dog the evening before, in a field close to the town, had fled in the twilight along the streets, frightened and bewildered, and had slipped into the first place of refuge it had found; had perhaps explored its prison in vain, when the doors were shut, with many dreary perambulations, and had then sunk into an uneasy sleep, with frequent timid awakenings, in the terrifying unfamiliar place.

The man who had disturbed it shouted aloud to the other workmen who were entering; the doors were shut, and the hare was chased by an eager and excited throng from corner to corner; it fled behind some planks; the planks were taken up; it made, in its agony of fear, a great leap over the men who were bending down to catch it; it rushed into a corner behind some tanks, from which it was dislodged with a stick. For half an hour the chase continued, until at last it was headed into a work-room, where it relinquished hope; it crouched panting, with its long ears laid back, its pretty brown eyes wide open, as though wondering desperately what it had done to deserve such usage; until it was despatched with a shower of blows, and the limp, bleeding body handed over to its original discoverer.

Not a soul there had a single thought of pity for the creature; they went back to work pleased, excited, amused. It was a good story to tell for a week, and the man who had struck the last blows became a little hero for his deftness. The old savage instinct for prey had swept fiercely up from the bottom of these rough hearts – hearts capable, too, of tenderness and grief, of compassion for suffering, gentle with women and children. It seems to be impossible to blame them, and such blame would have been looked upon as silly and misplaced sentiment. Probably not even an offer of money, far in excess of the market value of the dead body, if the hare could be caught unharmed, would have prevailed at the moment over the instinct for blood.

There are many hares in the world, no doubt, and *nous sommes tous condamnés*. But that the power which could call into being so harmless, pretty, and delicately organised a creature does not care or is unable to protect it better, is a strange mystery. It cannot be supposed that the hare's innocent life deserved such chastisement; and it is difficult to believe that suffering, helplessly endured at one point of the creation, can be remedial at another. Yet one cannot bear to think that the extremity of terror and pain, thus borne by a sensitive creature, either comes of neglect, or of cruel purpose, or is merely wasted. And yet the chase and the slaughter of the unhappy thing cannot be anything but debasing to those who took part in it. And at the same time, to be angry and sorry over so wretched an episode seems like trying to be wiser than the mind that made us. What single gleam of brightness is it possible to extract from the pitiful little story? Only this: that there must lie some tender secret, not only behind what seems a deed of unnecessary cruelty, but in the implanting in us of the instinct to grieve with a miserable indignation over a thing we cannot cure, and even in the withholding from us any hope that might hint at the solution of the mystery.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.