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**J. B. PRIESTLEY**

# Essays of To-day and Yesterday

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ESSAYS OF  
TO-DAY AND YESTERDAY

J. B.  
PRIESTLEY



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## INTRODUCTORY NOTE

THE essayists, if we are to take them at their own valuation, and neglect the amount of their accomplishment, are idle fellows indeed. Stevenson, you will remember, made the classic apology for the idler. The genial "Alpha of the Plough" confesses openly that he is a very lazy person, though he admits that he does not expect to be believed. And so with most of the others. They protest too much, however. The sum of their achievements shows that, as a rule, they are prosaically industrious men such as Samuel Smiles might have venerated, rather than the romantic vagabonds they would have us think them. And here is Mr J. B. Priestley singing loudly the delights of doing nothing—delights to which he can have helped himself but sparingly. For in an incredibly short space of time he has done work which for quality and quantity might well move many of his elder brethren to envy. Add to three books of essays, and some volumes of sound criticism, anthologies that give evidence of wide reading and singularly correct judgment and you have not yet caught up with him. While you are in the very act of reckoning there comes from the press an illuminating study of George Meredith—one of the latest additions to the notable "English Men of Letters" series. There is, too, the promise of a volume on *Talking* by him, destined to form one of a promising new series, "These Diversions," to be issued under his editorship. No mean achievement this for a man who was born no longer ago than 1894. But as Mr Arthur

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Waugh says, our author "displays by instinct the qualities which other men develop through the toil and tribulation of years."

Thanks are due to Messrs Bowes and Bowes for permission to reprint "A Mad Shepherd," "On Cartomancy," "On Being Kind to the Old," and "A Road to Oneself," from *Papers from Lilliput*; and to Messrs John Lane, the Bodley Head, Ltd., for "This Insubstantial Pageant," "The Prophets," and "A Beetonian Reverie," from *I for One*.

F. H. P.

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## A MAD SHEPHERD

THE world is at once saner and yet more given to lunacy than it used to be, for the people outside asylums are saner than their grandfathers were, yet there are greater numbers under some sort of treatment, or at least under lock and key, for madness. I do not know whether it is because there is increasing harbourage for lunatics in our time, or because it is merely becoming more difficult, every year, in the face of specialists whose own sanity is never questioned, to prove that one is not yet ready for the mad-house; but it is clear that the eccentrics and half-wits who chuckled and grimaced in our older literature, through the long tales of our grandparents, are fast disappearing. A host of notable figures in Shakespeare, from Hamlet to Petruchio, would not be suffered to walk abroad these days unless they piped in a lower key. It is a great pity that all the crack-brained, whimsical fellows are leaving us; we need a little variety in our experiments with existence, for there is a danger that we are all crazed and have only decided for unanimity, that we are Mad Hatters who will not suffer a March Hare; and these others, extravagant but harmless, have their own visions of life and we cannot prove them wrong, but can only point to the majority—a trick unworthy of us.

These bold experimentalists, the crack-brained, are now so few and so precious, that I travel with one eye open for them; for a man is as well, if not better, occupied collecting eccentric essays in life, as he is casting about for ancient coins or earthenware. Remote towns or villages make the most promising hunting-

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grounds, and only a short time ago my search was well rewarded in a certain small market-town. I had been in the place several days, and had come to know most of its prominent figures well by sight, when one fellow, whom I was always seeing, here, there, and everywhere, began to excite my curiosity. He was an oldish man, with a close-shaven, tanned face, and always dressed in gaiters and what seemed to be a long smock, with a curiously shaped cap, of the same material as his smock, pressed down upon his head. These and other particulars I noted with interest, but what intrigued me most was a long pole, roughly shaped like a shepherd's crook, which he always carried in his hand, and which seemed to be some implement of his trade. But what his trade was, I could not guess; I never saw him employed in any way, never caught him piloting beasts toward the market or making any kind of use of the mysterious pole. Yet whenever I ran across him, which I did frequently, he always seemed to be fully occupied, neither rushing heedlessly nor yet loitering, but resolutely pressing forward to some important piece of business—a sober man of affairs. Even in a little market-town there are many ways of earning bread and beer that fall outside the scope of a stranger's knowledge, tiny trades that are commonplaces in one shire and unknown in the next, and I might easily have contented myself with assuming that my man was thus engaged. But the archaic costume and the quaintly fashioned pole, now so familiar, were too provocative, and led me to question my landlady, whose talk was fluent and full of good matter, though rather obscure. I had scarcely begun my description of the man before she had snatched the subject from me and panted forth the whole tale.

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In spite of his quaint figure, I had set my man down as a sober busy citizen, engaged in some obscure little trade of his own. He was nothing of the kind. He was even more fantastic than his clothes, more mysterious than his own strange implement. For it appeared that this fellow was nothing more nor less than a crack-brained idler, one who had—in my landlady's words—"gone soft in the head." Up to a few years ago a lonely quiet man, expecting nothing from the world, he had suddenly come into a fortune, and the surprise and joy that followed this stroke of luck had turned his brain; thenceforward he blossomed madly and ran to amazing whims and crotchets, harmless enough, but strangely odd and diverting. His greatest and most delectable fantasy was this, that he took upon himself, from time to time, the duty of acting in a definite character, usually one of the ancient trades of the world; he would dress himself for the part, and, so far as it was possible, take over the habits, the interests, the mode of speech of the particular type he copied. Thus, he would be a sailor for some time, then a fisherman, and after that maybe a gamekeeper or forester; always dressing himself accordingly and keeping strictly to the type, and not declining to the actual indistinguishable characters of our own day, but presenting in his attire, as it were, the ideal sailor or forester; and so, tricked out in such homely yet symbolic vestments, perhaps thinking to take a place with the poet, "in the calm and proud procession of eternal things."

When I saw him he was a shepherd; indeed, a shepherd appeared to be his favourite character, for he had maintained the part for some time, and, according to report, showed no signs of changing. There are few shepherds in that part of the country, and the few there

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are do not wear smocks or carry a crook as he did. But he followed his usual practice, looked back to a simpler, smaller, and more clearly defined world, and dressed the part to mark it off from all other trades. It was the least he could do, seeing that he did no actual work and devoted all his energies to the masquerade. His apparent busyness was all moonshine. The sheep he herded could not be driven to any mart in this world, for they were nothing but drifting phantoms. When he walked the sunlit streets, his grotesque shadow pursued by laughter, he hurried to mythical appointments, moved in shadowy markets, and trafficked in thin air. At the end of the day, after being urged here and there by his lively fancy, doubtless he returned home as tired and as well content with his day's unsubstantial labour as any sober man of business; sometimes maybe he would return elated, at others mortified, for there must be triumphs and grievous losses even in this matter of phantoms. Then, in the evening, his crook laid aside, perhaps he would make his plans for the next day; but what such plans could be no man can imagine, for they must be dreams within a dream and shadows of a shadow. So he would pass his time, hurting no man, his life, like that of all such quaint fellows, only marred by loneliness. Nor would he lack a companion, supposing his present whimsy holds, if I had my way; for somewhere in a large and dirty city there is a sheepdog that I once knew, a dog that had never known the life it was meant to lead, never seen the hills with the sheep scattered upon them, and yet, in the yard of a warehouse, it spent its days herding invisible sheep, running round bales and barking furiously at barrels. Were that dog mine, the crazy shepherd should have him, so that the two might walk the streets together, happily

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pursuing their mythical flocks and otherwise busying themselves in their dream-pastures.

The maggots of the brain are not to be enumerated and labelled: what led this harmless fellow to such fantasies, no man can know. Perhaps after the sudden stroke of fortune sent his wits wandering he had been mastered by some old thought, some half-forgotten protest against the drab formlessness of labour in our day, against the absence of any marks of distinction between men of one trade and men of another; he had reverted to a more ordered, clear-cut time, when every man was stamped with the sign of one or other of the ancient industries. Only in some such way can one attempt to explain this strange masquerade of his. He has his own vision of life, his own idea of that poetry which transfigures the mechanism of blood and bone; and I trust that he will be left to himself to go his own way, for when he is weary of a shepherd's life there are still many time-old tradesmen, from tinker to tailor, that he can personate. Nor will it be long before I see him again, caring little whether he is still a shepherd or metamorphosed into a fisherman or cobbler, so long as he is still with us, going his own fantastic gait.

*From "Papers from Lilliput"*

## ON CARTOMANCY

A SHORT time ago, in a strange town, evil chance confined me in a dingy room overlooking a dismal little street and then, having done this, left me to my own devices, without company and with few books. A grey tide of boredom and depression was already threatening and would have soon engulfed me, had I not come across a little volume in a corner of the bookshelf. It was—to set forth the full title—*Cartomancy, or Occult Divination by Cards*. The identity of the writer was not revealed; he or she was shrouded in true oracular fashion. I had heard of fortune-telling by cards; indeed, I had vague memories of having my destiny unfolded, in the dim past, by elderly ladies who tapped the assembled cards impressively and talked of letters, journeys by land, and dark ladies. But I had no idea such occult knowledge could be gleaned from books. If I had thought about the matter at all (which is doubtful), I had probably imagined that the art of Cartomancy was preserved by oral tradition, handed down through generations of maiden aunts; or that the clue to its mysteries was the inalienable property of a League of Decayed Gentlewomen. But no, here it was in a trumpery little volume, sold everywhere for a shilling. Truly, this is an age of books.

So I lost no time in making myself acquainted with the art, and boredom fled. Nor could I have found a better preceptor, for in this little book all was revealed; with fitting gravity and wealth of detail, it set forth the meaning of the cards and the various methods of laying them out. Each card had a distinct meaning,

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which was modified by the presence of other cards. All this was made clear, but the instructions were delightfully free from pedantry: "If intuition leads you to give a different meaning, do so" was the advice it tendered—and what could be better? There was good reason attached to the meaning of some few of the cards, which had a very pretty symbolism. What else could the Queen of Hearts be but a fair woman? What could be a better symbol of death than the ace of spades reversed? Never again shall I see that innocent piece of pasteboard without feeling a sudden chill. But the symbolism of most of the cards was not so obvious. Why—it might be asked—should the eight of diamonds represent a roadway journey, the nine of spades disappointment and tears, the ace of clubs a letter of good news? These are mysteries, and not to be lightly comprehended. All the cards, however, are alike in this: they stand for the life that the centuries leave unchanged, the eternal verities of human existence, the things that are significant alike to the emperor and the clown; they do not adapt themselves to any pale, half-hearted way of living, but are downright and talk boldly of birth, death, and marriage, of jealousy, love, and anger, of quarrels, accidents, and sudden endings. As to the various methods of shuffling, cutting, and laying out the cards, the little book dealt with all these matters with high seriousness and at some length; and no sooner was I acquainted with one or two of the methods than I began to put them into practice. "These coloured scraps of pasteboard," I said to myself, as I ranged the cards, "shall be the tiny windows through which I will stare at the past, and peer wonderingly into the future. And I shall be as a god."

As no other person was near, I decided to read my

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own fortunes, past, present, and future. I learned from the book that this was a difficult thing to do, and so I found it. True it is that through the medium of the cards, "the gay triumph-assuring scarlets—the contrasting deadly killing sables"—as Lamb called them, my fortunes appeared to take on richer hues, to run to more passionate extremes, than I had imagined; and in the vague mass, both my past and future took on the aspect of a riotous, crowded pageant of love and intrigue, of tremendous sins and strange virtues. All this was heart-stirring enough, but there were difficulties waiting upon any sort of direct interpretation. Though I lived splendidly, and appeared to swagger through an existence crowded with incident, the whole fifty-two, hearts and all, seemed to combine to make me out a rascal, whose mind must have been corroded with the "motiveless malignity" of an Iago. Why, for example, should I rejoice at the death of a dark boy in a railway accident? Why should I hound a white-haired old gentleman to his grave? And why—for there were numerous other incidents of this kind foreshadowed—should my villainy always take this vile form? Was I this kind of man, I asked myself and the cards, after each new instance of my calculated knavery, and if not, at what precise moment in the near future were all the forces of evil to take command of my soul. So I abandoned the attempt to discover my own fortunes and, turning to the book, found that if one "thought strongly of one's absent friends" it was possible to dip into their past and future.

For some little time I shrank from this course. To pry into their past was bad enough, but to attempt to look into their future, which even Time has the decency to keep covered for a while, seemed positively immoral,

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an action compared with which the publication of a man's love-letters was a mark of friendship. It was not long, however, before I had stifled this feeling by some sophistry about warning them of dangers and so forth; and so I proceeded to satisfy my curiosity. As I shuffled and laid out the cards I saw myself as the sinister magician of lurid fiction, and relished the part. I had only to take up the cards and the stage was set for great dramas, bravely tricked out in crimson and sable for one secret spectator. If this is not puissance, then where is it to be found among men? What were books when one could spell out the narrative of the cards, and make each friend in turn the hero or heroine of the pictured story. Or if books were to continue, what magnificent plots could be evolved from these strange combinations of coloured pasteboard! But if, through the cards, my own existence had assumed brave proportions, though everywhere smirched by villainy, that of my friends was no less highly coloured and crowded with incident. As I ranged the cards, and spied into the secret life, past and future, of one friend after another, I was dumbfounded, aghast at my former ignorance. Men who had been hidden away, for the last twenty years, in college rooms and lecture-halls, whose outward existence had appeared as smooth and unruffled as the immemorial lawns outside their windows, now seemed to be moving in a violent Elizabethan drama. They made love to dark ladies, and were in turn adored by fair ones; they lost and gained great sums of money, aroused the jealousy of dark men, wrecked innumerable homes, and lived in a constant whirl of good and evil tidings, sea-voyages, railway journeys, and strong passions. Here was a set of men who had been living like this (and were to go on doing

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so) for years, and yet I, who counted myself as one of their friends, had been kept in ignorance. What consummate actors!—to present an unruffled front to the world, and even to their friends, and yet all the while to know, in secret, a life that resembled nothing so much as a thunderstorm. Could such things be? In truth, I came, in the end, to doubt the cards.

But though I have forsworn Cartomancy, and hold such occult practices in abhorrence, I will say to every man who has suddenly found that life is one long piece of boredom, dull grey in warp and weft: Go to the cards, and see existence woven madly in black and crimson—The life they present knows nothing of boredom, for no card in all the pack stands for such a thing—Go read the cards! As for myself, I have but one confession to make: I dare not play at cards now, for they are fraught with such significance to me that I could not trifle with them in a mere game. I cannot rid them of their meanings, and while others are thinking of nothing but winning tricks I see myself, and my unconscious colleagues, playing havoc with the destinies of dark ladies and fair men. I cannot trump an opponent's Queen but I feel that I am probably bringing misfortune upon some unknown innocent woman. If I fling down the ace of spades upon the King, it is not unlikely that I am consigning some dark man—a good fellow probably—to his grave. This would be murder, and an odd trick is not worth it. So there is nothing for it but to leave the cards alone.

*From "Papers from Lilliput"*

## ON BEING KIND TO THE OLD

ENGLAND, it is said, is cruel to the young and kind to the old. The remark usually takes on the tone of an accusation; we who hear it from a critical foreigner find ourselves struggling against a sense of shame; we are quick to denounce something or other, the House of Lords, Sentimentality, Meat-eating, the Educational System, and we uproot and demolish, and are clearly filled with a noble public spirit. If, then, the remark is always construed as a criticism, and if it nearly always succeeds in touching us on the raw, there must be something in it. Apparently, being kind to the old is no excuse for being cruel to the young. Perhaps this kindness itself is wrong. Let us be nice in our ethics, and look a little more closely at the question.

The remark refers, of course, to our English habit of relying upon experience or even mere weight of years. We are—or have been—so apt to listen to a man only when he is tottering on the verge of senility. In politics the clean young enthusiast has been discouraged, and only the old intriguers have been respected. We have begun to take an artist seriously when he was past his prime. Pantaloon is our national hero. Even Mr Bernard Shaw, who ought to know better, would have politicians living for two or three hundred years to acquire wisdom, as if there was not folly enough in the world to delude a man for thrice three hundred years if he should choose to live and look for it. As for the young, they have not been given a hearing amongst us. If one of them, of more courage and energy than his

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fellows, pushed his way forward and told us something we did not know, we murmured "Oh, it's only young So-and-So," and turned our backs upon him. We could afford to wait until his ideals and enthusiasms were gone, his energy sapped, and his body and mind shivering in their late autumn, before we listened to him. Such is our English attitude, which you and I have loudly deplored when we have met the sneers of men from newer countries. But actually there is a good deal to be said for it. In the last resort it does us credit.

But mark, this attitude of ours does not bring us any profit. We shall not try to defend it as a useful thing. When we are kind to the old, and put none but the aged and infirm in places of responsibility and trust, we are not better served; and we know it. The young, whom we put aside, would do the work much better. That, I fancy, is the ground of the criticism against us; but we are regarding it as an ethical question, and the very fact that our attitude works against our profit only makes our ethics shine more brightly. In order that we may give to the old, we have to deny the young some measure of power and substance, but whereas we are certainly kind to the one, it does not follow that we are cruel to the other.

We can afford to be hard upon the young, for youth itself is hard. The young are not dependent in any way upon what we think of them, for they are still convinced that the powers of the universe plotted amicably to fill them with greatness, so that whether the lesser mortals that encompass them think well or ill of them matters little. They are still living in Eternity, and, unlike the old, do not understand the need of claiming some measure of applause while there is yet time for it. Their hours are spacious, golden, crammed with

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promise. If we should put a young man into high office, it is unlikely that he would think any better of us: he owes us nothing; he has received only his deserts; he has got one office, but he might have had any one of a hundred others that were shining before his path. The world appears to him so fruitful of glorious opportunities that even to thrust him into a post of honour is to do him an injury by limiting his choice. And as for the young who scribble and paint and write music (and they are legion), what can be done for them? They are all geniuses whose work is above the understanding and taste of the age, and as such are beyond our ministrations, for your misunderstood young genius is perhaps the only completely independent, self-satisfied thing in the universe. What are little paragraphs in the papers, invitations to dinner, and the like, to him when he is the man for whom the century has been waiting to give it voice. He can exist, as a young friend of mine did, on stale cake and cocoa, and yet march about the world like an emperor, attended by the glittering cohorts of his vain and heated fancy. If it were possible to measure and tax youthful vanity; if young men could be imprisoned for egotism; if it were a hanging matter to imagine oneself a genius; then we might have a chance of being cruel to the young. Short of that, we cannot reach them. In order to protect ourselves from their dreadful efficiency, we may deny them place and profit, but what are our trumpery rewards to the largess of a fond imagination. So our gifts go where they are appreciated—to the old.

If our so-called cruelty is a myth, our kindness is yet real enough. When we put an old man into power, and give praise to mere persistence in living, our charity

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has taken no wrong turn. The very inefficiency, helplessness, and wistful vanity of the old make them, unequalled objects of our Christian virtues. It would be easy enough to be cruel to them, for, unlike the young, they are at our mercy. They have lost all that goes to sustain youth, which could be careless of the world while it was still dreaming dreams, making love, and able to shout and sing, while life stepped out to the quick drumming of the blood. To the old, Eternity is no longer about them, and the far horizons have vanished. Their hours are remorselessly ticked away. There is no longer time to do everything and be everything: he will be a fortunate man who has rounded off even one little piece of work before the light goes. It is a monstrously silly fable that the aged are indifferent to praise, position, and honour, that they have outgrown the little vanities of the world. The fact that a few old men have retired from the world because they were weary and infirm does not support the legend; and one has only to listen to their talk to discover how far such ancients have got beyond vanity. As for your active old men, they ceaselessly bestir themselves in pursuit of notice and applause. And well they might. With the dwindling of time and the shedding of illusions, their imagination has ceased to minister to their vanity. They require some confirmation from the world of their good opinion of themselves. Now that the far horizons, infinitely beguiling in youth, have vanished, the world itself shines more brightly against the steadily deepening background, and a dedication, a respectful hearing, a salute here, some little notice there, these become matters of some moment; they warm the heart when all other fires are being heaped with pale ashes. Consider the position of an

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old man. His lines are fixed and he cannot begin again; all his argosies left the quayside long ago, and if some of them do not bring him some return he will find cold comfort now in his tales of their setting out. Now that he is no longer a potential Shakespeare, Beethoven, or Lincoln, as he was in youth, your ageing man will try hard to become Deputy-Mayor of Suddleton: he will have the cash in hand. Deny him that, and he has nothing left.

This being so, what is there to be said against this habit of ours. We are not cruel to the young, but we are certainly kind to the old. Nothing could be better, for even supposing that a few youngsters here and there suffer from our neglect, they have only to grow old to remedy it, and if they have not persistence enough to keep on steadily increasing their ages, they are not the men for us. The pity is, not that we have such a habit, but that, having had it for centuries, we are now letting it go at the bidding of mere popular prejudice. Our old English habit of mind wants fortifying: we should push back the age at which a man is entitled to public notice and let our youngsters do their swaggering in private or among their brother fledglings. With some little contriving, it ought to be possible to make this a land in which every man under sixty has his future before him and no past to brood over, every office and place of profit is filled with an elder, and the cackling of gratified senile vanity is heard night and day. Make way for Justice Shallow, and give an ear to Polonius, and be content, for your Prince Hal can look after himself, and as for your Hamlets, their maladies are past your doctoring and their felicity is beyond the shouting of a mob or the solemn foolery of a committee.

*From "Papers from Lilliput"*

## ON MAN'S EXTRAVAGANCE

MY friend C., the short-story writer, was telling me of some visit to the opera. He had gone in the company of another man, and had, it appeared, paid more for seats than he usually did. His wife broke in to chaff him because on the one occasion when she had not been with him he had paid more for the seats. Then some one present remarked that it was strange, seeing that men generally spend most money when they are in the company of their womenfolk. "No," I said, with that air of finality, which has made me so universally disliked, "that is only a legend. Men are most extravagant in the company of other men." And, of course, I was right. They have their moments when they wish to dazzle some female or other, but by far the greater number of their really expensive moments occur when they are in the company of other men. In this respect they differ greatly from women, I think. (I also think that all these generalizations about men and women are very wild, and I have a certain amount of sympathy with those persons, such as Miss Rose Macaulay, on the one hand, and Mr Gerald Gould, on the other, who are infuriated at the very sight of such generalizations. But though they are wild they are not necessarily false. They work, in the main, and they have the additional advantage of being entertaining.)

Women may be economical or extravagant, parsimonious or spendthrift—and they usually err on one side or the other, very definitely—but whichever they are by nature, so they remain in all companies. The presence of another woman does not disturb them at

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all. A mean woman remains mean, though her companion should shower money all over the place. Two women spending a day together, shopping, sight-seeing, lunching and dining, theatre-going, and so forth, seem to act just as they would if they were each independent. They are not ashamed to keep a firm hand upon the purse-strings. And one may even see them carefully dividing the expenditure, handing one another six-pences and shillings, or each paying her own bus fare. There has been no kind of economic coalition.

With men, however, it is very different. When two men spend some time together, lunching, dining, theatre-going, holiday-making, and so forth, there is formed, by some mysterious process, a kind of third person who is commonly different from either. He, this third person, this mysterious spirit of the festive male, is the soul of generosity. He does not count the silver and pence. Money, as people say, is no object. He never dreams of forgoing anything that can possibly be paid for at all. He is always ready for "just another"; he only dines in the best restaurants and sits in the most expensive seats; he is a prince in disguise. Under the dominion of this shadowy holiday captain, our two men each spend a great deal more than they would if they were alone. Even the very mean man desperately attempts at least to appear less mean. Neither of them dares to suggest economy, to hint at a prudent restraint, or even to suggest for a moment that there is such a thing as limiting one's expenditure. When they are by themselves, a bus is sufficiently speedy and dignified mode of transport, but only a taxi will serve the coalition. A three-and-sixpenny dinner, a seat in the upper circle, a half-bottle of very modest Beaune, a nine-penny cigar, and so forth, will content the solitary

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masculine reveller, but let another join him and the dinner is trebled in price, the seats are stalls, the wine has a year attached to its name and is flanked by cocktails and liqueurs, and the cigars are those by means of which companies are promoted and merged and dissolved, so that before they have done each man has probably spent at least three times his usual festive allowance.

Nor is it a matter of ordinary hospitality. We are not describing one man entertaining another, playing the lavish host, but two (or three or four) men merely spending the day or the evening together. It is true that what actually happens is that both men entertain one another, alternately playing host. But it is the presence of the intangible but very real third man, this festive spirit evoked when our two men come together, that makes the difference. He it is who blows away, with one contemptuous breath, the customary scale of expenditure, and puts in its place what we might call the 'coalition' scale, which demands the best of everything and always "just another" something or other. This spirit is not evoked when male goes out with female. At certain seasons, when mating is in the air and the male seeks to dazzle, to astonish, to take by storm and to capture, he may be extravagant enough, emptying his pocket in the lordliest fashion under her bright eyes, but this is only one of the whimsies of the mating season. The mood does not last. A man often spends a good deal of money when a woman accompanies him because he knows that, though she may protest, she will be secretly delighted, admiring his magnificence, and because he enjoys her pleasure (the capacity for rapturous enjoyment being at least one-half of woman's charm) in the host of little extrava-

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gances. This being so, he is spending money to some purpose, buying something that is worth every farthing of the price asked for it, for what is he doing but brightening the loveliest eyes, flooding with colour the softest cheek, and curling into a smile the most beautiful mouth in the world? This is money well spent, simply a sound investment.

But with another man, there is no question of taking pleasure in the spectacle of the other's happiness. The two revellers are either slaves of some queer unwritten convention or are being enchanted. The extra money they spend is not soundly invested but is simply conjured out of their pockets. When they have shaken hands, slapped backs and roared and guffawed together for a few minutes, the spell begins to work. Their two personalities contrive to create this other being, the grand, careless prince of men about town. Once he takes charge, pass-books fade into the distance, the taxes are an old unhappy dream, rent and school-fees and the last instalment for the car all vanish and leave no trace behind them, and the world is their oyster. With a few kingly gestures he conjures out of their pocket-cases all the notes that have been lying there, snugly awaiting the next domestic financial crisis. I do not know if this mysterious creature has a name, for he certainly can be evoked without any name being pronounced. But I suspect that his customary title is "Dash-it-all." I suspect this because I have noticed that when our revellers have warmed to the work and are trampling economy underfoot, it is this title that comes most often to their lips. Flushed and hot-eyed, under the spell of this enchanter, at every new step they pronounce his name. "Dash-it-all," one of them cries, "we might as well dine at the Cræsus, where we

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can get a decent feed." "Dash-it-all," cries the other, "we might as well order two bottles." Then after they have dash-it-alled through eighty-year-old brandy and very large Coronas, one of them will say, "Dash-it-all! We might as well finish up at the Rotunda." And Dash-it-all whispers that it might as well be a box. Great is Dash-it-all!

## A CURIOUS GRUMBLE

ALTHOUGH we all have genuine and colossal grievances to air now, we have carried over from the years before the War the habit of grumbling about all manner of little things and making grievances out of trifles lighter than the passing gusts of wind. This absurd habit is best seen in that race apart—the newspaper correspondents: Yours, Disgusted; Indignant Ratepayer; Lover of Fair Play; and Uncle Pro Bono and all. I believe that if the sun grew cold, the stars withered out of the sky, and the seas gave up strange monsters, these gentlemen would still be discovered sitting down to write to the paper about this or that ‘nuisance,’ the shape of women’s hats or the height of lamp-posts. The fact is, of course, that they are for the most part literary men in embryo, persons with the writer’s itch, who take a delight, comparatively innocent as our pleasures go, in seeing themselves in print. But it must be admitted that their grievances are often fantastic beyond belief. There came lately into my hands, by some chance or other, probably in the packing of some parcel, a page of a newspaper I never read; and at the head of the correspondence column there was a bold heading “The Catalogue Nuisance.” Then followed a most extraordinary complaint from a correspondent.

This gentleman had been away for three weeks from his flat, and on his return he had discovered a number of catalogues that had been sent to him through the post. He is a bachelor, and it appears that many of these catalogues were addressed to his imaginary wife,

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a fact that seems to have made him particularly bitter. He goes on to condemn the whole business; declares that it may be good for the printing trade and the Post Office, but that it "constitutes a particular nuisance, especially to bachelors." And this is "The Catalogue Nuisance."

It seems to me a most astonishing grievance. There is something downright ungrateful, even perverse and morbid, in such a grumble. Here is a man who has been away for three weeks, probably on holiday, and returns once more to the workaday world, the office and the dingy streets and his cheerless bachelor flat. It is a depressing business, this returning; everything is over; nothing can happen. But stay, something has happened. A number of commercial gentlemen, those much-maligned persons, have gone to the trouble and expense of sending quantities of quite good reading matter, illustrated, in many instances, by amusing pictures. There they lie, these bright catalogues, on the hall-floor just behind the door. They are not like our friends' books, they do not demand to be read; they await their host's pleasure, and he may read them or burn them just as he pleases. They are not like the books of the season, for even if they are read, there will be no necessity to pass an opinion on them. People will not ask "What do you think of So-and-So's new catalogue?"—and stare at you if you say the wrong thing in reply. What could be better on this first evening, which promised to be such a dismal affair, than a few minutes given to unpacking and so forth, a good meal, a bright fire, some slippers and tobacco and an arm-chair, and then a pleasant dreamy hour or so with the catalogues. This would be to return to an ideal city, to shop in a commercial Utopia, for in the catalogues

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the real can be forgotten and the ideal is ever present; nothing is useless or ugly or badly contrived; there are no sneering or scraping shop-assistants at one's elbow; whole shops are turned into neat little books for our good pleasure. But no, our man kicks these gifts about the hall and then sits down, in a towering rage, to write to the paper about "The Catalogue Nuisance." It is this kind of treatment that sours commercial men and turns them into politicians.

The fact that many of these catalogues were addressed to a wife that does not exist seems all in their favour to any reasonable man. To make it the basis of an additional grievance argues downright misogyny on the part of the grumbler. If the firms in question did it unintentionally, in ignorance of the circumstances, then they can hardly be said to have committed a crime. If, on the other hand, they knew what they were doing (as I suspect), then surely it was a pretty fancy to send news from the feminine kingdom to this ghostly lady. There is nothing at once more grossly and yet more subtly feminine than the catalogues from women's shops; their furs, gowns, hats, stockings, perfumes, jewellery, and strange little knickknacks, these things speak of a world in which man is only a rumour, an uncouth shape on the horizon; any man, not a misogynist, coming unexpectedly upon such gay tidings, fluting to all the Eves in London, must be suddenly possessed by a queer sense of wonder and a curious quick rush of tenderness, for behind all this lovely frippery is woman, unchanging and steady-eyed, dying daily that men might live. Would not that pleasant dreamy hour or so with the catalogues have been touched with sentiment, even a mild poetry, if the imaginary wife had been there too, looking over our man's shoulder as he

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laughingly turned the pages of her cunning lists. After such delicate play-acting, mellowing his savage and brutish state of bachelordom, if only for a little while, and allowing him, undeserving as he is, a tiny peep into the territories of Eve, if he had a spare pound-note or two, a man might very well have a generous little impulse to buy some woman something, to put his finger on some place in a catalogue, go to his writing desk, and see that some young niece or cousin is suddenly made happy by an unexpected un-birthday present. But no, the catalogues are addressed to his wife, and he has no wife, and it is all a waste of (other people's) money and trouble, and a dreadful litter about the place, and it is time he wrote to the papers about it.

I do not wish to be offensive to this gentleman, upon whose way of life I reflect more in sorrow than in anger, but I make so bold as to declare that it is perhaps as well that he is not married. I say this because it is clear from his conduct on this occasion that he would never understand or sympathize with a woman, for he has obviously no conception of that pleasure in little things (except writing to the papers) that plays such a part in feminine psychology. If he had he would have enjoyed the catalogues, which give practically all women pleasure and not a few men. For my own part, I am ready to admit that I can enjoy glancing through lists and prices of things that I have no intention of buying. It is true that I get even more pleasure from catalogues of things that I might possibly buy, at some time or other. Any thickhead, of course, can chase through a catalogue or price-list of things that he is not only willing but anxious to buy. That is mere shopping, commerce of the grosser kind; there is no poetry in it. But I, for one, who buy very little and dislike the pro-

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cedure and routine of purchase, will stare happily for hours at big catalogues of ironmongery, furniture, toys, motor-cars, sailing-boats, fishing-tackle, garden seeds, and carpenters' tools, particularly if they are illustrated, as they usually are. (I deliberately exclude lists of books, music, tobacco, and wine, because there is always a chance of my being a purchaser of such things.) And best of all are the catalogues from the big stores, the places that have departments for everything. The big stores should only be encountered in book form. In person, as it were, they are peculiarly distasteful to me. I have been dragged round them by members of that sex which is supposed to have been beaten down and crushed by ours for centuries; but only the sternest feminine command will get me there again. Left to myself, I should never buy anything in them, for they are so gross, opulent, bewildering, cosmopolitan, and, somehow, characterless, with all their crowds of liveried attendants, their lifts and staircases, their suggestion of a music-hall without its geniality, that I only want to escape and not to buy. Their goods are not tempting; they do not ask to be bought, but have the air of being in some unholy kind of museum. I feel that the assistants may have been trained in the sinister art of salesmanship, but have not that love of the goods they sell that one finds among second-hand booksellers, tobacconists, and men in little tool shops. Buying a book or a cigar in such places is just the same sordid transaction that it is in a railway station; it is one degree better than the automatic machine, and that is all. The airs and graces, the gentle poetry, of the older ways of commerce, particularly in artistic and lovable things, is not for big stores.

But in book form they are admirable. The very

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extent and variety of their range of goods, so bewildering in actuality, is decidedly an asset when we come to the catalogues, which are crowded with pictures, prices, descriptions, and numbered lists. If you are tired of one department, you have but to turn a page or so and you are in the next. You may suit your mood. If you feel somewhat sad and stern, a man not to be trifled with, you may wander at will among the ironmongery. If you are frivolously inclined, you may choose either the confectionery or the parasol sections; or even go so far, as some do, as the lamp-shades or bentwood chairs. There was a time when Messrs Gamage (to whom I willingly dedicate this essay) produced a catalogue that was like an epic written in the morning of the world; it was endless and had a million pictures; it was brimming over with cooking-stoves and boxes of carpenters' tools and sets of conjuring tricks; and for any boy, or man who was still a boy at heart, this catalogue occupied a place next to *Robinson Crusoe* (itself an artful catalogue) and *Treasure Island*. Yet I should not be surprised if within this next few years some monstrous schoolboy, having received one of these magnificent volumes from Messrs Gamage or another, does not sit down to write to the papers, which will head the column "Catalogue Nuisance Again." Let us hope he too will grow up a misogynist so that his race may be extinct.

## ON DOING NOTHING

I HAD been staying with a friend of mine, an artist and delightfully lazy fellow, at his cottage among the Yorkshire fells, some ten miles from a railway-station; and as we had been fortunate enough to encounter a sudden spell of really warm weather, day after day we had set off in the morning, taken the nearest moorland track, climbed leisurely until we had reached somewhere about two thousand feet above sea-level, and had then spent long golden afternoons lying flat on our backs—doing nothing. There is no better lounging place than a moor. It is a kind of clean bare antechamber to heaven. Beneath its apparent monotony that offers no immediate excitements, no absorbing drama of sound and colour, there is a subtle variety in its slowly changing patterns of cloud and shadow and tinted horizons, sufficient to keep up a flicker of interest in the mind all day. With its velvety patches, no bigger than a drawing-room carpet, of fine moorland grass, its surfaces invite repose. Its remoteness, its permanence, its old and sprawling indifference to man and his concerns, rest and cleanse the mind. All the noises of the world are drowned in the one monotonous cry of the curlew.

Day after day, then, found us full-stretched upon the moor, looking up at the sky or gazing dreamily at the distant horizon. It is not strictly true, of course, to say that we did absolutely nothing, for we smoked great quantities of tobacco, ate sandwiches and little sticks of chocolate, drank from the cold bubbling streams that spring up from nowhere, gurgle for a few

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score yards, then disappear again. Occasionally we exchanged a remark or two. But we probably came as close to doing nothing as it is possible for two members of our race. We made nothing, not even any plans; not a single idea entered our heads; we did not even indulge in that genial boasting which is the usual pastime of two friendly males in conference. Somewhere, far away, our friends and relatives were humming and bustling, shaping and contriving, planning, disputing, getting, spending; but we were as gods, solidly occupied in doing nothing, our minds immaculate vacancies. But when our little hour of idling was done and we descended for the last time, as flushed as sunsets, we came down into this world of men and newspaper owners only to discover that we had just been denounced by Mr Gordon Selfridge.

When and where he had been denouncing us I do not know. Nor do I know what hilarious company had invited and received his confidences. Strange things happen at this season, when the unfamiliar sun ripens our eccentricities. It was only last year or the year before that some enterprising person who had organized a conducted tour to the Continent arranged, as a bait for the more intellectual holiday-makers, that a series of lectures should be given to the party by eminent authors at various places *en route*. The happy tourists set out, and their conductor was as good as his word, for behold—at the very first stopping-place Dean Inge gave them an address on the modern love of pleasure. But whether Mr Selfridge had been addressing a crowd of holiday-makers or a solemn conference of emporium owners, I do not know, but I do know that he said that he hated laziness more than anything else and held it the greatest of sins. I believe too that

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he delivered some judgment on persons who waste time, but I have forgotten his reasons and instances and, to be frank, would count it a disgraceful waste of time to discover again what they were. Mr Selfridge did not mention us by name, but it is hardly possible to doubt that he had us in mind throughout his attack on idleness. Perhaps he had had a frantic vision of the pair of us lying flat on our backs on the moor, wasting time royally while the world's work waited to be done, and, incidentally, to be afterwards bought and sold in Mr Selfridge's store. I hope he had, for the sight should have done him good; we are a pleasing spectacle at any time, but when we are doing nothing it would do any man's heart good to see us, even in the most fragmentary and baffling vision. Unfortunately, Mr Selfridge had probably already made up his mind about the sin, as he would call it, of laziness, and so was not open to conviction, was not ready to be pleased. It is a pity, and all the more so because his views seem to me to be wrong and quite definitely harmful.

All the evil in this world is brought about by persons who are always up and doing, but do not know when they ought to be up nor what they ought to be doing. The devil, I take it, is still the busiest creature in the universe, and I can quite imagine him denouncing laziness and becoming angry at the smallest waste of time. In his kingdom, I will wager, nobody is allowed to do nothing, not even for a single afternoon. The world, we all freely admit, is in a muddle, but I for one do not think that it is laziness that has brought it to such a pass. It is not the active virtues that it lacks but the passive ones; it is capable of anything but kindness and a little steady thought. There is still plenty of energy in the world (there never were more fussy

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people about), but most of it is simply misdirected. If, for example, in July 1914, when there was some capital idling weather, everybody, emperors, kings, archdukes, statesmen, generals, journalists, had been suddenly smitten with an intense desire to do nothing, just to hang about in the sunshine and consume tobacco, then we should all have been much better off than we are now. But no, the doctrine of the strenuous life still went unchallenged; there must be no time wasted; something must be done. And, as we know, something was done. Again, suppose our statesmen, instead of rushing off to Versailles with a bundle of ill-digested notions and a great deal of energy to dissipate, had all taken a fortnight off, away from all correspondence and interviews and what not, and had simply lounged about on some hillside or other, apparently doing nothing for the first time in their energetic lives, then they might have gone to their so-called Peace Conference and come away again with their reputations still unsoiled and the affairs of the world in good trim. Even at the present time, if half the politicians in Europe would relinquish the notion that laziness is a crime and go away and do nothing for a little space, we should certainly gain by it. Other examples come crowding into the mind. Thus, every now and then, certain religious sects hold conferences; but though there are evils abroad that are mountains high, though the fate of civilization is still doubtful, the members who attend these conferences spend their time condemning the length of ladies' skirts and the noisiness of dance bands. They would all be better employed lying flat on their backs somewhere, staring at the sky and recovering their mental health.

The idea that laziness is the primary sin and the

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accompanying doctrine of the strenuous life are very prevalent in America, and we cannot escape the fact that America is an amazingly prosperous country. But neither can we escape the fact that society there is in such a condition that all its best contemporary writers are satirists. Curiously enough, most of the great American writers have not hesitated to praise idleness, and it has often been their faculty for doing nothing and praising themselves for doing it, that has been their salvation. Thus, Thoreau, without his capacity for idling and doing nothing more than appreciate the Milky Way, would be a cold prig; and Whitman, robbed of his habit of lounging round with his hands in his pockets and his innocent delight in this pastime, would be merely a large-sized ass. Any fool can be fussy and rid himself of energy all over the place, but a man has to have something in him before he can settle down to do nothing. He must have reserves to draw upon, must be able to plunge into strange slow rivers of dream and reverie, must be at heart a poet. Wordsworth, to whom we go when most other poets fail us, knew the value of doing nothing; nobody, you may say, could do it better; and you may discover in his work the best account of the matter. He lived long enough to retract most of his youthful opinions, but I do not think that he ever went back on his youthful notion that a man could have no healthier and more spiritualizing employment than idling about and staring at Nature. (It is true that he is very angry in one poem with some gipsies because they had apparently done absolutely nothing from the time he passed them at the beginning of his walk to the time when he passed them again, twelve hours later. But this is racial prejudice, tinged, I suspect, with envy, for though he had not

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done much, they had done even less.) If he were alive to-day I have no doubt he would preach his doctrine more fervently and more frequently than ever, and he would probably attack Mr Selfridge and defend us (beginning "Last week they loitered on a lone wide moor") in a series of capital sonnets, which would not, by the way, attract the slightest attention. He would tell us that the whole world would be better off if it spent every possible moment it could, these next ten years, lying flat on its back on a moor, doing nothing. And he would be right.

## THIS INSUBSTANTIAL PAGEANT

S I was riding home on a bus, the other afternoon, I made a discovery, or what at least seemed to be a discovery at the time. I shall not be at all surprised if it will not stand being dragged out into the daylight; the occasion was propitious for a little pleasant self-deception; and it might well be that my so-called discovery was merely a piece of fancy spun out of the blue dusk, the magical changing lights, and the mild intoxication (cheaply purchased at threepence) that comes with rapid motion at a height somewhere between the pavement and the chimney-pots. Ideas have a trick of taking to themselves some of the glamour of the time when they were first conceived. A man who suddenly struck out a new theory about the Reformation while walking through the fields with his first love, would be loath to let it go and would probably defend it for years on quite illogical grounds. Poets are, on the whole, less apt than most of us to make fools of themselves simply because they know that they are poets and that life is poetical stuff; while the rest of us, similarly moved by colour and sound, secretly moon-struck with the witchery of things, deceive ourselves into thinking that we are creatures of a few simple axioms and proceed to act upon a consistent plan that is always doomed to break down. So that I shall not be surprised if my discovery, my theory, if you will, adds nothing to the sum of knowledge; but if, in approaching it, I can send us all spinning westward on the top of a bus at the close of a fine afternoon in late winter, the mood and the moment may flower again, and so

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carry with them, unquestioned, unopposed, the fragile little thought they created.

To the man who wishes to savour his journey and does not merely want to be sent, like some piece of merchandise, from one place to another, London can offer nothing better than the top of a bus, particularly if the day is fine and the hour is somewhere about dusk. The unusual height at which one travels changes the whole city; one sits on the deck of a queer kind of ship, and the streets become rivers and the open spaces dim lagoons. Moreover, one is outside in the open, in the dusk, seated in a darkened moving auditorium, ready for the show, and not cut off from the world by being enclosed in a lighted travelling hutch. Inside a bus one is shaken and jolted and sees nothing but staring eyes that try to rid themselves of any meaning; it is like being in some ghastly little drawing-room in hell. A journey on the Underground and tube trains is simply a brief nightmare, or, if you prefer it, a triumphant effort of the will, which masters the protesting senses and hurls the tortured body from one spot to another. In a taxi one is too close to the ground and moves too quickly, so that lights and sounds merely assail the windows and one travels through a screaming chaos. Such experiences may occasionally be necessary, but they can hardly be enjoyed by anybody except those who deliberately go in search of morbid sensations. On the other hand, I enjoyed my ride on the bus so much, the other afternoon, that I nearly decided to join that company of writers who do nothing but produce coloured little essays about London, who bid us note the rich Brahms-like quality of Bayswater, and show us Commercial Road East in amethyst and gold. It was just twilight when I mounted the bus; the shapes of the

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buildings could still be seen hanging against the sky, but they no longer looked solid; all the lights were blazing away, but they were set not in the thick background of night, but in the delicate greys and blues of dusk. Piccadilly Circus was a mad little universe, in which purple constellations flamed to the glory of somebody's port and a multi-coloured host of moons spun and flickered in praise of some one else's soap. The crowds on the pavement were nothing but a blurred piece of decoration, with here and there a face sharply outlined by a passing light. I was carried through the air so quickly along Piccadilly that, on my left, the Park faded into a dim sea, and on the other side the lighted windows of the clubs all joined on to each other and formed a kind of golden frieze of armchairs and tiny waiters and lounging clubmen. At Hyde Park Corner a swarm of little lights ran hither and thither, and high above them, breathed upon the sky, were great fantastic shapes. And then we passed into Knightsbridge and Brompton Road and came to the big shops, blazing, opulent, riotous, and sometimes we seemed to be tearing through bright gardens, sometimes splashing upon opalescent seas. They were no more shops, as we know shops, than was Aladdin's cave; their shimmering fabrics foamed about our wheels; their ceilings glittered with jewels; and Harrod's, as it loomed, blazed for a few moments, then faded, was a glimpse of an Arabian Night's entertainment. Then all the lights flickered out and all the sounds died away, and we passed into the mournful spaces of South Kensington, a desolate region at that hour, and indeed a strange one at any hour. We crept, the bus and I, past the vast crouching Museums, and to placate them we gloomed and pretended to mourn

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over Albert, so that they let us pass in safety. And so home.

During this journey, as I remarked how all the sounds lost their ordinary significance and flowed into a kind of vague symphony, how all the sights became a sort of decoration and could be made into anything by the wandering fancy, I suddenly realized why we provincials are able to endure London, why we are not afraid of it, why we can sometimes even browbeat it a little. It ought to be unendurable, it ought to frighten us; for we come up from, say, Little Todlington, and are immured, with five miles of brick between us and the nearest field, in a vast human ant-heap; millions of our fellow-creatures swarm about us, and millions of strange eyes scan our figures and faces; the streets are bursting with life, comedies and tragedies ripening under every chimney-pot, and there are miles and miles of them in every direction we turn; the thing is monstrous, a nightmare. But it weighs so lightly upon us simply because we do not conceive of London as a reality in the same sense as we conceive of Little Todlington as a reality. In Little Todlington we know every inch of ground and are aware that something or other happened round every corner; all its inhabitants are known to us by sight, most of them by name and fame, and a great many we know quite intimately. To us its streets bristle with personalities and problems, solid human souls and questions that cannot be ignored: Little Todlington is real. If London came to our minds clothed in the same startling reality we should go mad in a fortnight; but fortunately London to most of us never becomes real at all; it is merely a dream, a phantasmagoria, a changing pattern of sight and sound, with little bits of reality here and there, like currants

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in a vague and enormous pudding. We may look very bustling and businesslike, but one-half of our time, as we descend from buses and taxis, go up and down in lifts, push our way through the crowded streets, "we move among shadows a shadow and wander by desolate streams." If we go, let us say, from our own rooms to those of a friend in another part of the city, then we move from one tiny bit of reality to another through an uneasy dream: we close our door and find ourselves in the roaring streets and immediately everything becomes more and more unsubstantial; we keep company with our thoughts and the bright images that flicker across the mind, and these are more solid than all the life stirring about us; we know in a vague sort of way that we have pushed a few coins under a window and received a slip of pasteboard in return, that we have descended into the bowels of the earth, that we have jammed ourselves into some queer lighted place that has suddenly screeched and rushed away into the darkness, that we have seen a familiar name in bright letters and ascended into the upper air again; but what a strange, shadowy panorama it has all been! Not until we have walked among those unreal scenes of dim colour, movement, and blended sound, those scenes that frame a thousand masks, that we call streets, do we begin to emerge from our thoughts and notice the faint traces of a real world about us. A little farther and we come upon a door we know; it is opened to us, and we see a familiar friendly face and hear a familiar friendly voice, and then our dream is at an end and we are back into reality again, where we know we cannot mould and colour everything to suit our mood, where there is something objective, something definite outside ourselves. It is no wonder that so many dreamers have

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trod these streets, that so much high imaginative literature has been written here, the very place for visionaries. The realists, if they would survive, must return to Little Todlington, and leave the rest of us to London and our fond imaginings.

*From "I for One"*

## THE PROPHETS

THERE were four of them, three men and one woman, and I saw them in the public forum in Hyde Park. In the nineties, which were crowded with professional Cockney humorists who gave us 'glimpses of life' and jested desperately in and out of season, it was, I fancy, the fashion to regard these public meetings in Hyde Park as a magnificent free banquet of absurdity; the whole staff of *Punch* might have been seen any fine Sunday afternoon, pulling out their notebooks in the shadow of the Marble Arch; and women would titter and grow moist-eyed and men would roll about in their chairs and almost suffocate with laughter at the very mention of Hyde Park. In these days, now that we have exploded nearly everything, our gun-cotton, our ideals, and even our standard jokes, it is probably a sign of extreme youth or sentimental old age to think of these public meetings in the park as a glorious feast of fun. For my part, I have little interest in them, for they are usually conducted now by experienced tub-thumpers, old hands, and there is nobody more tedious after a first acquaintance than your old hand with his bag of cheap oratorical tricks, his face and voice of brass, his patched, sordid dialectic. On the occasion when I saw this little group of four that I shall call the prophets, I walked round the assembled crowds without stopping to listen to any of the speakers. There seemed to be the usual meetings in progress: some orators roaring out their approval of God, others noisily assigning limits to His prestige and power, and others again loudly denying His existence; the philosophers, the saints,

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and the angels were all being butchered by some one to make an artisan's holiday; and any idler present had the choice of some five or six entirely different universes. I was just turning away when I caught sight of the three men and the woman, the prophets, standing in a little empty space between two great knots of people. One was speaking, and the other three were supporting him, and apparently they had no audience at all. Something about them, perhaps their pathetic isolation, rather attracted me, and I moved forward; but as I knew that if I planted myself boldly in front of them all their eloquence would be directly addressed to me, I merely walked forward to the outskirts of the adjoining crowd and drew as near to my four as I could without appearing to listen to them.

This was sheer cowardice on my part and I suffered for it (as one always does), for I could not hear a word they said. On one side there was a noisy political meeting and a great deal of heckling and shouting and booing, and on the other where I was standing everybody was singing a very objectionable hymn under the leadership of a perspiring Salvation Army official. I had to content myself with watching my little group, apparently ignored by everybody else and at once absurd and pathetic in its isolation. All three men had beards. This was no mere coincidence, for there was something about these beards that suggested they were there on principle; they were all long beards that had obviously been allowed to go their own way, beards that had demanded and obtained self-determination. Two of the men were elderly and their beards were fairly full and satisfying, but the other, an under-nourished fellow with bulging eyes, was much younger, and his beard, though longish, was thin, patchy and straggling.

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horrid sight. No doubt it was a rule in the tiny sect to which they obviously belonged that all male members should grow their beards. Many tiny religious sects have, I fancy, some such rule. There is nothing odd in this, because if a sect is only small enough all its members become prophets, and prophecy demands that the chins in its service should not wag uncovered. Indeed, there is a type of beard, long and full, that belongs to the prophet alone. This old and honourable connexion between prophecy and beards is easily explained. Growing a long beard is the simplest way of going into the wilderness. The man who shaves is the man who has come to terms with this world. He who has foreseen the impending Doomsday cannot be expected to lather his face briskly every morning or come out of his apocalyptic vision in order to strop a razor; nor can a prophet, no matter how minor, consort with barbers, who care only for sport and sixpences and not at all for the wrath to come. Thus the tiny sects, made up almost entirely of prophets, are right to insist upon beards, and these three men, in letting themselves be overrun by their strange growths, were only doing their duty.

When I first drew near one of the two elderly men was taking a turn on the little wooden soap-box and addressing a heedless world, but after some time he was relieved by the others. They were all much less vehement (as far as my eyes could judge of the matter) and more restrained in manner than the general run of park orators; they gave me the impression of men who knew that it was their duty not to denounce, not to argue furiously, not to challenge and criticize, but to testify, without unnecessary violence, to the truth that was in them, a truth, I imagine, of which they had

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almost a monopoly. Every now and again the little chorus of three, supporting the speaker, would nod their heads and make some exclamation to show their approval. The younger man, he of the vile beard and the under-nourished look, was the most interesting. When he mounted the soap-box there happened to be a moment's quietness on either side, where the hymn-singing and heckling were still in progress, and I did actually catch the first two words of his discourse. In a thin, reedy voice, the very tones of one who is nourished chiefly on starry and insubstantial fare, who feeds on tea and bread-and-butter and visions, he cried, "We believe . . ." And then the noise began again, and I did not catch another word, nor do I know to this day what they do believe. In all probability the doctrines of their microscopic sect are based on some strange little heresy that has persisted in odd corners, among bakers and saddlers in obscure towns, for centuries; and it is more than likely that there is much talk of the end of the world and the coming reign of the saints in the meetings of the sect. For all their quietness and mild glances, however, there was an apocalyptic gleam in their eyes, particularly in those of the younger man, and their beards had not sprouted on behalf of any shallow, time-serving sort of creed. Perhaps they knew the very date when the world was to be withered away and the stars were to drop from the sky like rotten fruit, and had travelled many a league with their soap-box to give us warning; perhaps they were there ready to barter an eternity of bliss for half an hour of our attention, and, because we did not choose to listen, already saw the angel of death making ready his sword above our heads. But no, if they believed that things were at such a desperate pass, surely

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they would not have been so calm, surely they would have raised their voices and not allowed every roaring fool in the Park to catch the attention of the doomed city.

The woman did not speak, though, like the rest, she occasionally nodded her head in approbation. She was a sturdy middle-aged woman, who looked better fed and more sensible than her menfolk. Undoubtedly she had come with one of the men, and was probably his mother, wife, or sister; she had accepted the creed when she accepted the personal relation, and, being a motherly sort, she probably not only mothered the man, but mothered his poor little creed too. Against the background of these bearded fantastics, with all their starry folly, she looked robust and earthy, as solid as a hill. If her man had taken to drink instead of prophecy, she would have seen him through with that too, and would have gone with him into public-houses to see that he did not take too much and get himself into trouble. As it was, she had come to Hyde Park to stand by the soap-box and nod her head with the rest, but doubtless all in a dream, her mind being busy with hurrying little images, with shifting faces, vague cries from the past, and the remembered grasp of little children; while outside the sun went down the sky, the crowds sang or cheered or heckled or drifted away, the voice just above her head droned on in the old way she knew so well, and she stood there ("like a fool," perhaps she thought) with aching feet, still nodding her head though no one listened or stopped to look.

As I watched this ineffectual quartet, in their motives like gods and in their wit like sheep, I pestered myself with vain questions. Where had they come from and where would they go to? To what strange

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place would they carry themselves, their beards, and their soap-box? What did they do for a living? Did they go to workshops and factories and quietly endure the rough chaff of the others, comforted by the knowledge that they were men set apart, men guided miraculously by an inner light to the truth? Were they the only members of their sect or were they merely the few who had volunteered for this particular duty? Where did they meet and what did they do? Of what would they talk when they were on their way home from the Park? Were they always conscious of their mission, their great destiny, or did they relapse, on ordinary days, into commonplace artisans or shop-keepers, strangely bearded? Were they moved to come to this place by an ecstasy of conviction that left them no choice but to express themselves in public, whether they made converts or not? And supposing, I said to myself, that these people, whom you think absurd, whose beliefs you actually know nothing about, are in the right after all, that by some miracle they have stumbled on the key to the universe and were busy on the soap-box tearing the problem of good and evil to shreds, that the date when these three men first met will be celebrated down the ages, that the younger one with the bulging eyes will ultimately turn human history in a new direction . . . what then? And I went on 'supposing' and 'what then'-ing to myself for some time, but nevertheless while I was doing this I was hurrying away from the three prophets and the woman, for I knew that time was getting on, and I was anxious not to be late for tea.

*From "I for One"*

## A BEETONIAN REVERIE

THERE are only three books in the room. *The Foundling* by Mrs Porcherson, *The Magazine of Domestic Economy* for 1848, and *Mrs Beeton's Cookery Book*. I am for Mrs Beeton. *The Foundling* is one of that poisonous brood of little evangelical stories for children which appeared, I fancy, during the seventies; it has a frontispiece, a gloomy drawing, depicting an enormous bearded policeman staring down at a little ragged boy; if I remember rightly all these stories had frontispieces of bearded policemen and little ragged boys under dismal gas-jets. Such drawings are strangely depressing, and the stories themselves are even worse. *The Magazine of Domestic Economy* appears to have been a signally unattractive publication (at least in 1848), and so I put it aside at once for Mrs Beeton. Not that I can read Mrs Beeton, for her solemn counsels fall a little heavily upon my ear, but I can look at her bright pictures and dream over her. She is not very well represented, though, in this volume, published in 1909, for it appears to be only an abstract or abridgement of the great original, intended, I learn, to meet "the requirements of smaller households than those in which such a very comprehensive volume as *Mrs Beeton's Household Management* is a necessity." No doubt, no doubt; these parsimonious smaller householders must be catered for; but I must say that I do not admire such cutting and carving of Mrs Beeton, though she herself was such a cutter and carver, nor do I admire the persons, however small their households might be, for whose benefit such a transformation has been brought

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about. They lack poetry, a feeling for atmosphere, to be thus willing to accept in place of the great original work, that cosy and luscious epic, a mere dry abridgement—Mrs Beeton, as it were, as a cook's mate and not as a great lady. I am disappointed indeed to discover that this is not the massive *Book of Household Management*, for it was that volume which we had at home in the old days (though we were a small enough household), and it was that volume over which I used to pore for hours when I was a small boy. By turning these pages I had hoped to recover some fleeting emotions of my childhood, but I am afraid that the difference between the two versions, between the Mrs Beeton I once knew and this shadow of her old self, is too marked. At best, I can only titillate my memory and perhaps evoke the ghosts of my former emotions.

There was something, I remember, about the appearance of our old copy of Mrs Beeton as it stood on the bookshelves (for we kept it among our books, Shakespeare, Scott, and the rest, and did not exile it into the kitchen) that always attracted my attention, as I stood on tiptoe before our tall bookcase. It was easily the fattest book on its shelf, as indeed it ought to have been, and still handsome in the crimson and gilt of its binding, it had a look of fatness and richness, an air of opulence, that inevitably won my regard. Reaching up, a little dangerously, I would clutch at the top of the book and swing it rather than take it down, to pass a solitary hour or so, lying outstretched and face downward on the rug like the young savage I was, turning its pages and dreaming over its brightly coloured plates. Occasionally, no doubt, I read a few lines of letterpress, but the pictures were my joy. Unless my memory deceives me, this present volume I have in my hand has

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nothing like the number of coloured pictures that our old book had, and the few that it has do not seem so bright, so ideal, but seem to have come to terms with sad reality, showing us the pudding as it is and not as it ought to be. The best picture this later book can offer me is that of the cheeses, the twenty great cheeses, and very fine it is too, nobly coloured, with great golden hulks of Double Gloucester and Cheshire flanked by the exotic Parmesan and the sinister Schabzieger. But our old volume had a score of plates infinitely richer in colouring and grander in composition; it spread for the mind a feast that was opulent beyond Roman dreams and yet not too gross for the most delicate appetite, a feast that left one not a well-filled animal but a dazed and wondering poet; it laid the world in ruins and rebuilt it in *entrées*, garnishes, and creams. In the days when I brooded over such things I was, be it understood, a well-nourished child, allowed to risk a third or even a fourth helping of suet pudding; but nevertheless, in the company of Mrs Beeton and her enthusiastic artists and lithographers, I discovered a new world. Page after page revealed the most enchanting confections, coloured like a May morning and luscious even in their printer's ink; there would be Pyramid Cream, I fancy, and certainly there was Gâteau à la Ceylon, in a white and crimson, and Rose Meringue, a most delicate and harmonious invention, and Imperial Topsy Cake, dark, flushed, and imperial indeed, the very sweet for bull-necked Cæsars, and after them a riot of *gâteaux*, trifles, and pastries; and then perhaps best of all, for its flawless image floats triumphantly into the port of memory, a raised pigeon-pie, massive and golden, raised in very truth above time and mutability, a pie that never was on land or sea.

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And when I had done with these bright comestibles, having feasted on them as Ariel might have done, was there not a fine coloured picture of a dinner-table, a gorgeous perspective of napery and cutlery and carefully ordered flowers, that for all its tameness had something in it to awaken a child's wonder?

I am much too lazy to inquire into these things, but I trust that there really was once a Mrs Beeton, a super-housewife who sat down some sixty or so years ago to tell us everything, and that we have not been fobbed off with a crafty publisher's invention, a name merely covering a synod of cooks. I like to think that there was a Mrs Beeton, and that therefore there was too a Mr Beeton. If there was, he would probably play the G. H. Lewes to her George Eliot—that is, he would look after her affairs, arrange her *salon*, and shield her from adverse criticism. That he would live in a splendid whirl of sweetbreads in aspic and iced pudding and never know a dish that contained less than ten eggs and a pint of cream, as some people have imagined, seems to me very doubtful, for you cannot compile a gigantic volume on housekeeping and keep house at the same time. I should not be at all surprised to learn that all the time that his wife was writing her book Beeton himself was living a spare life on bottled porter and half-cooked chops. Perhaps he starved that we might feast: life is like that. I can see him, a little wistful man, with something of the visionary's look stamped upon his partially emaciated features, rising, with a half-suppressed sigh, from his cold mutton and lumpy potatoes to visit his wife in her study and to inquire, a little timidly, how she is progressing. I can see the light in his eyes when she answers, her natural dignity tempered by the exuberance

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of the author who has done some work, and tells him that she is already half-way through the chapter on Poultry and has indeed just finished her notes on Mayonnaise of Chicken. And as he goes tiptoeing away, perhaps to finish up the cold rice pudding, little Beeton seems to me at once a touching and noble figure, to be honoured by posterity.

It is, however, the lady herself, the authoress, who commands our attention. Her book, at least in its old form, is something more than a collection of recipes and notes on marketing, kitchen utensils, and table decoration; it is a social document, a glimpse of a vanished world; it has an atmosphere, a flavour, of its own. Not merely on account of what they put in, but also on account of what they leave out, all such big books composed strictly in one key have their own particular atmosphere, something upon which it is difficult to lay a finger, something not to be found in this chapter or that, but which pervades the whole, which calls up to the wandering and sensitive mind associations enough to form the material of a whole world. And our pleasure arises from the recognition of this peculiar atmosphere, this suggested world that lies behind the book itself; although such an atmosphere or world may not be particularly pleasing to us in itself. To give such pleasure, however, the book must be quite useless to us, so that our æsthetic sense is set free, just as Mrs Beeton's book is useless to me. Thus her famous prodigality, her habit of "taking" scores of eggs, pints of cream, and the roes of strange fish, and so forth, in order to make even a fairly simple dish, is irritating to women, who really go to her for advice; but to me, who ask for no advice, such prodigality is simply delightful, and I would not have the

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grand old lady deprived of a single egg. We may look back upon this great work of hers, with its chapters on the dignity and worth of housekeeping, its multifarious marketing, its solemn pages on the management of servants, its diagrams of table-decoration and napkin folding, and discover that a whole age, idealized, it is true, but still recognizable, has been suggested to our mind. The enchantress has only to wave her salad-bowl or touch our eyes with one of her folded table-napkins, and lo! time has rolled back, and once more we are all cosy and superbly fed, all intent upon small social matters, and beyond the torment of ideas; Victoria, that comfortable-looking one of the middle period, is on the throne; Darwin has been heard of but is not believed, and we are still specially created, brought into the world to occupy our stations, to demolish Salmi of Duckling and Almond Pudding, and do good to the poor; none of the 'isms' have yet arrived and would not be tolerated if they had; and Father is in the counting-house counting out his money; and Sister is in the drawing-room reading the *Idylls of the King*; and the Rector is coming to lunch, so Mother and Cook are in the kitchen, Mrs Beeton in hand, "taking" twenty-four eggs and a quart of cream.

*From "I for One"*

## A ROAD TO ONESELF

SOMETIMES, on one of these sunny autumn mornings, when I turn my back on the town and take to the highway, I seem to have the world to myself. I walk forward, as it were, into a great sunlit emptiness. Once I am a little way out of the town it is as if the world had been swept clean of men. I pass a few young mothers, who are proudly ushering their round-eyed, solemn babes into the presence of the morning sun, a lumbering cart or two, and maybe a knot of labourers, who look up from their task with humorous resignation in their faces; these and others I overtake and pass by, and then there is often an end of my fellows. I alone keep a lounging tryst with the sun, himself, I fancy, a mighty, genial idler and the father of all dreamers and idlers among men.

A light mist covers the neighbouring hills, which are almost imperceptible, their shapes and colours showing but faintly, so that they seem to stand aloof—things of dream. As I go further along the shining road I seem to be lounging into a vast, empty room. There are sights and sounds in plenty; cows looking over the walls with their great, mournful eyes; here and there a thin blue column of smoke; the cawing of rooks about the decaying woods; and, distantly sounding, the creak of a cart, a casual shout or two, a vague hammering, and, more distant still, the noise of the town, now the faint murmur of a hive. Yet to me, coming from the crowded, tumultuous streets, it seems empty because I meet no one by the way. The road, for all its thick drift of leaves, deep gold and brown, at either side, seems to

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lie naked in the sunshine, and I drink in this unexpected solitude as eagerly as a dusty traveller takes his ale. For a time, it comes as a delectable and quickening draught, and though outwardly a sober, meditative, almost melancholy pedestrian, I hold high festival in the spirit, drink deep, and revel with the younger gods.

One of the greatest dangers of living in large towns is that we have too many neighbours and human fellowship is too cheap. We are apt to become wearied of humanity; a solitary green tree sometimes seems dearer to us than an odd thousand of our fellow-citizens. Unless we are hardened, the millions of eyes begin to madden us; and for ever pushed and jostled by crowds we begin to take more kindly to Malthus, and are even willing to think better of Herod and other wholesale depopulators. We begin to hate the sight of men who would appear as gods to us if we met them in Turkestan or Patagonia. When we have become thoroughly crowd-sick we feel that the continued presence of these thousands of other men and women will soon crush, stamp, or press our unique, miraculous individuality into some vile pattern of the streets; we feel that the spirit will perish for want of room to expand in; and we gasp for an air untainted by crowded humanity.

Some such thoughts as these come to me, at first, in my curious little glimpse of solitude. I am possessed by an ampler mood than men commonly know, and feel that I can fashion the world about me to my changing whims; my spirit overflows, and seems to fill the quiet, drooping countryside with sudden light and laughter; the empty road and vacant fields, the golden atmosphere and blue spaces are my kingdoms, and I can people them at will with my fancies. Beautiful snatches of poetry come into my head, and I repeat a few words, or even

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only one word, aloud and with passionate emphasis, as if to impress their significance and beauty upon a listening host. Sometimes I break into violent little gusts of laughter, for my own good pleasure. At other times I sing, loudly and with abandon : to a petrified audience of one cow and three trees I protest melodiously that Phyllis has such charming graces that I could love her till I die, and I believe it, too, at the time. I brag to myself, and applaud and flatter myself. I even indulge in one or two of those swaggering daydreams of boyhood in which one finds oneself suddenly raised to some extraordinary eminence, the idol of millions, a demi-god among men, from which height one looks down with kindly scorn on those myopic persons who did not know true greatness when they saw it, sarcastic schoolmasters and jeering relatives for the most part.

Only by such heightened images, seemingly more applicable to centuries of riotous life than half an hour's sauntering, can I suggest in stubborn words the swelling mood that first comes to me with this sudden, unexpected seclusion.

But as the morning wears away the jubilation arising from this new expansion of oneself dwindles and perishes; the spirit wearies of its play. The road stretches out its vacant length, a few last leaves come fluttering down, and the sun grows stronger, sharpening the outline of the hills. The day is lovelier than ever. But I meet no one by the way, and even the distant sounds of men's travail and sport have died down. After a time the empty road and silent valley become vaguely disquieting, like a great room spread for a feast, blazing with lights, opulent in crimson and gold, and yet all deserted and quiet as the grave. I ask myself if all men have been mewed up in offices and underground warehouses, by

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some ghastly edict, unknown to me, which has come into force this very morning. Have I alone escaped? Or I wonder if the Last Day has dawned, and been made plain to men not by sound of trump, but by some sign in the sky that I have overlooked; a vast hand may have beckoned to all men or the heavens may have opened while I was busy lighting my pipe. Have all but one of the weary children of earth been gathered to their long rest? I walk in loneliness.

Suddenly, I see a tiny moving figure on the road before me, and immediately it focuses my attention. What are walls, fields, trees, and cows compared with this miraculous thing, a fellow human being, played upon by the same desires and passions, his head stuffed with the same dreams and fluttering thoughts? In one of the world's greatest romances is not the most breathless moment concerned with the discovery of a human footprint in the sand? Does not the world's story begin with one human being meeting another? As I keep my eyes fixed on the nearing figure the last of my vague fancies and egotistical imaginings are blown away; my mind is engrossed by the solidly romantic possibilities of the encounter. Just as I was glad to escape from the sight and sound of men, so I am eager now to break my solitude; the circle is complete. And as we come up together, the stranger and I, I give him a loud greeting, and he, a little startled, returns the salute; and so we pass on, fellow-travellers and nameless companions in a great adventure, knowing no more of each other than the brief sight of a face, the sound of a voice can tell us. We only cry out a Hail and Farewell through the mist, yet I think we go on our way a little heartened.

*From "Papers from Lilliput"*

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