

SOMETHING BEYOND

I

“AN UNSUBSTANTIAL FAERY PLACE”

My father was a horse-dealer. An industrious person, he was at the age of eighty still peering into horses' mouths, and he once told me that he started to earn his living when but twelve years old.

He was a man of some force of character and had risen from poverty to a considerable degree of affluence. But he was no miser. In middle age he freely scattered what he had so painfully gathered.

He had a turn for games of “let's pretend”, and had persuaded himself that on three days in the week, while summer reigned, he must run a stage coach between a West London hotel and what was then a sequestered village in Kent.

Behold him, then, in a fawn-coloured livery adorned with an unnecessary number of buttons (his tilted chin defying criticism), driving his team of chestnuts through the Kentish lanes, and rousing each little village that dozed in the sunshine with the notes of the post-horn which he had learned to blow—in all the glory of “let's pretend”.

Sometimes I accompanied him, sitting by his side, my small legs dangling from the high box seat, when, as often happened, there were no other passengers. I think that a love of country sights and sounds (a love that has grown with the lapse of years) was first awakened in me by my visits to

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the noble park, deep set in the heart of Kent, in which, on these occasions, I used to wander.

In the haze of June lay those smooth lawns, those glades where the deer moved silently, those dim avenues beechen-shaded, the vistas that opened into fairyland.

I once saw a magnificent stag, erect and motionless, near the southern entrance of the mansion. I conceived that the owner had caused to be commemorated in stone some patriarch of the neighbouring herd. I drew nigh to see, whereupon the statue came to life, and, with a toss of the head, glided away and merged into the shadows.

Through a chance-open wicket I looked into the walled garden and held my breath at sight of the massed glories of colour. Here, beside the grass walks you had the Euphuist's jillyflowers, carnations, sops-in-wine, sweet Johns. Towering above was the Tudor mansion, dreaming in the sunshine, a haunt of immemorial peace.

The pleasance was undisturbed by clap of shears or plunge of spade, for even the gardeners appeared to have succumbed to the genius of the place. Bees' murmur and doves' low croon were almost a part of the hush that had fallen on that happy plot. It was not of the world I knew; an enchantment lay upon it. It seemed sun-kissed into silence, awaiting the touch of some magic wand which would bring upon the scene those who had planned it all and looked upon it lovingly three hundred years ago.

I never saw this place except in the tranced stillness of summer afternoons and vaguely I imagined it ever thus, preserving a serene content within its nest of sheltering trees. . . .

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Then the return journey, the beat of hoofs deadened by the powdered dust of mid-June; the rattle of harness suggesting odd rhymes to the sleepy little boy.

The twilight lanes gradually gave way to miles of streets, the glare, and the harsh confused noises of the swarming city.

I had been ill for some time with a childish complaint. The turning-point came when I awoke to consciousness one sunny morning after a long refreshing slumber. The sound of soft music broke very pleasantly on my drowsy senses. My brother, in a distant room, was playing an old Welsh air, with a merry lilting iteration resolving into chords which touched some spring of emotion within me, and I repeated over and over to myself lovingly, like a refrain, the name of the little melody, "The Bells of Aberdovey". And at the repetition of these sounds there broke upon my mind's eye the vision of a dewy landscape, fresh as Eden and tremulous with awed anticipation at the opening of a cloudless summer day... One flash of glory and it was gone...

The period of my convalescence was granted magic privilege by the gift of a book of Breton fairy legends, illustrated with engravings after the style of Gustave Doré. I would close my eyes, bedazzled by these wondrous pages, and see with the inward eye enchanted castles clinging to the summits of precipitous rocks, their turrets catching the rays of the setting sun, whilst far beneath, forests clothed the lower hills. Beyond, into infinite distance stretched a wide champaign, half the Breton land of legend and story and half the realm that existed within my own mind.

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These glimpses of mysteries hinted in flashes so transient and beyond all power to convey their splendours are so closely interwoven with what I suppose were the purely objective experiences of my younger days, that, looked back upon across the silence of forty years, I seem indeed to have lived in two worlds.

My father's turn of mind was romantic, and this fact coloured what theological ideas he possessed. He once remarked that he derived greater benefit from listening to an opera than from hearing a sermon. I gather that his hazy theology was of a liberal order. Full of an argument in which he had been engaged, he once called me to his bedside, and, indicating a position on the counterpane, he explained that that was Heaven. Then, with eager forefinger he drew a number of lines all converging upon the point previously marked and bade me observe by how many different roads one could journey to Paradise. I might justly have enquired by which road he considered himself to be travelling, for at that time he was carrying on an intrigue with a woman for whom he afterwards deserted my mother.

His was an incurable romanticism. He had brought up a family with unceasing toil. Affluence came to him in middle life and a new world opened to him. Had my mother shared his buoyant spirits, his pleasure-loving disposition, and his zest for fresh ventures in the art of enjoyment, all might have been different. But she, dear soul, next to her God, loved her children and the quiet duties of home. My father looked for companionship elsewhere, ignorant of the fact that youth's raptures cannot be revived in after years. They had

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once been spontaneous and came by the way; they could not be bought with money and arranged at will.

The moth fluttered for a time before the final and inevitable leap. At length flight was agreed upon. But my father, whether depressed by the gloom of a sombre mid-winter day, or moved by some feeling of compunction, almost at the last hour despatched from the hotel at which he was waiting a letter which cancelled the arrangement made. This done, he sat gazing for some time at the dying embers of the neglected fire.

Presently he heard the sound of an approaching cab, scarcely audible though it was, for snow had been falling heavily. He hastened to the window. A gas jet flared from the hotel doorway, and through the flurry of snowflakes he discerned that the appointment was to be kept after all. The deep snowfall had delayed his messenger; the letter had not been received.

His chivalry prevented my father from speaking of the message he had sent. She had taken the risk; he would do the same, but roses and rapture must have been far to seek as darkness shrouded the close of that winter day.

What might be anticipated duly followed; business was neglected, and consequent upon the poverty that resulted for him and his, I did not become the prosperous tradesman, but was forced by hard necessity to strike out into other paths leading to undreamed-of opportunities.

A grandmother lives in my memory; a bright-eyed little woman, upright and alert, her cap-strings a-quiver at any imagined inattention; shrewd, worldly, and almost un-

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touched by religion. My father was kind to her, especially during her last illness. Once he sent her a barrel of oysters. "They may say what they like of your father", she remarked to me, "but I am sure his principles are good, or would he have done so much for his mother? Above all, would he have sent me oysters?"

A question worthy to be discussed together with that subtle point which Charles Lamb tells us used to be so pleasantly debated at Saint Omer. . . .

A kindly professor was presenting a book to each of the men who had attended his lectures. When he was told my name for the purpose of inscribing it on the flyleaf, he said, "Wolfe? A great name that! Wolfe—Guelph. You may read of the origin of the feud between your family and the Ghibellines (a quarrel which rent Europe) in the *Novelle* of Ser Giovanni Fiorentino". It is possible that my ancestors ruffled it with the best, in mediæval Germany, and pitted Pope against Emperor, but, if so, the family glory has departed. My paternal grandfather, a shrivelled, weather-worn personage with face and head encircled by a fringe of white hair, and crowned with a black velvet smoking cap gaudily embroidered and tasselled, drove, in his younger days, a cab or an omnibus. That, at least, is the idea that lingers in my mind. I have never taken the trouble to verify it.

I was born in a noisy thoroughfare in Camberwell—one of the many place-names of London which preserve so pathetically the memory of bygone rusticity. When William Blake knew it Camberwell was "a large and pleasant

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village". I passed the first twenty-six years of my life mainly in London, the City and its suburbs. I am imbued, therefore (being what I am), with a loathing of town life.

Late-Victorian happenings are bound up with the memories of my young days, and from the conversation of my elders I knew something of mid- and early-Victorian times, which probably accounts for the fact that, mixed in my mind with the dreams and fancies of childhood, this period possesses for me something of that strange charm which invests antiquity.

When my father's coach journeyed to that village (not in Kent, but in fairyland) on those bygone summer days it did not take so long to pass the farthest tentacle of the monster city as it took me lately when I travelled over the same ground, although I moved more rapidly. Gone is the country inn I looked for, the ostler who always carried a flower in his mouth, the neat, pretty barmaid with clustered ringlets (my early love), who mixed for me one chilly evening my first and only glass of hot shrub. Was there ever such a room as the bar-parlour of the "Beehive" on a cool, dark evening! The ruby and amber of sunsets in those lands from which they came hovered yet (a Shechinah glory) about decanted port and sherry; the fire crackled and spluttered; the little boy warmed his hands around the tumbler in which steamed the generous (though prudently diluted) cordial.

Instead of these delights I found a vast red-brick structure bearing still (in mockery) the old name, but not the old sign, and not the charm of other days.

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Could I be transported, by some spell, back into the surroundings of my childhood, would they produce upon me anything of the feeling of mystery and wonder which they then inspired? That scrap of back garden in the suburban street to which I returned one autumn, after three months' absence, and found a forest of sunflowers, their broad discs yellow-rayed towering above the jungle of stalks and leaves—which I ranged incredulous—would it now hint things unutterable?

A passing scent has power to cross the gulf of almost half a century. The odour of a certain sort of paint recalls a scrapbook, the pictures in which, gaudily coloured by some oily pigment, opened magic casements.

The fragrance of violets re-creates a wood in springtime where, one evening, holding my mother's hand, I first heard in my heart the birds sing. From a childhood's experience I assumed that the sickly, undertakerish odour of polished wood was natural to churches, and when I come across it now I am again in the ugly mid-Victorian, suburban building. A smell of hot painted tin—and I am back forty years, trimming the wicks of the footlights of a cardboard Theatre Royal. In front of the stage is an alert but silent orchestra, the leader conducting with graceful gesture an endless overture. On either side of the stage rise tiers of boxes containing whiskered gentlemen and rose-wreathed ladies whose dress begins beneath their shoulders.

The stage itself, viewed with half-closed eyes, and head held level with it, presented scenes of wonder (cut out, and painted with no sparing brush by myself):

“Scene: ‘The Pirates’ Lair” (the entrance of a cavern

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screened by palms; the black ship at anchor in a sea of ultramarine). "Scene: Sherwood Forest. Enter Robin Hood", which he did, attached to a flat piece of tin propelled by a wire, and invariably falling over in the process.

Another scene, where two cloaked bravoës stood communing in a patch of sunlight deep in an avenue of giant oaks, gave my imagination wings. I feel the spell as I recall it now. Again, I press on in thought far down that mysterious pathway out towards a land beyond.

My mother's maiden name was Berkeley. The labours of a painstaking genealogist might, therefore, provide me with a noble ancestry on her side as well as a royal one on that of my father. My immediate forbears, however, claimed no ancestral dignities. I recollect hearing some relation reverently spoken of as "a gentleman who had never soiled his hands with work". The relatives whom I knew were tradesfolk.

One day in early summer (being then about nine years old), I left London for a three months' visit to my maternal relatives who lived in a town in Gloucestershire. I have never seen the place since, and although I have an urgent longing to re-visit it, I am afraid of destroying a little country of the mind in which I have enjoyed pleasures now for over forty years.

So frequently are dreams compacted of the things that chiefly interest us in waking life that I am not surprised that in sleep I often re-visit the Gloucestershire town. Alas! I cannot present to the student of psychic phenomena a case of travelling clairvoyance, for the scenes I pass through in

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my dreams have little resemblance to those I treasure in my memory.

Although this visit gave me for the first time several weeks of rural life, my relatives did not live in the country, but in a wide, paved street on the outskirts of the town.

I was introduced to my maternal grandmother, who sat in state on a high-backed armchair in a room which I now know to have been filled with a curious and valuable assortment of furniture, prints, miniatures, and ornaments—the still unravished brides of quietness, uncontaminated by the dealer's calculating gaze, and not yet dissipated by an owner unconscious of their worth.

Two only, out of all those treasures, are mine. One is a sampler upon which a verse of a hymn is displayed amid the appropriate surroundings of six strictly symmetrical trees, certain crimson animals supposed by imaginative persons to represent dogs, and a cottage, from the two chimneys of which plumes of smoke float in opposite directions. To establish the whole as the authentic work of my grandmother there appears along the lower border a legend in green silk lettering: "Anne Roberts, aged 11 years, her work. Staverton House Academy. 1823".

The other treasure is a spoon which, since it was used only to stir the pigs' pot, was black with the accumulated slime of many decades. I cleaned it, and discovered a silver spoon of Charles the Second's reign. *Ex pede Herculem!*

My grandmother, when first I saw her, fitted her surroundings as hand to glove. She was dressed in black with a white lace collar and cap; the latter, tied with lilac ribbon and adorned with a row of little lilac silken balls, framed a