

**JEROME  
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JEROME**

THE SECOND THOUGHTS  
OF AN IDLE FELLOW

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of an Idle Fellow**

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# Jerome K. Jerome

## The Second Thoughts of an Idle Fellow

### ON THE ART OF MAKING UP ONE'S MIND

“Now, which would you advise, dear? You see, with the red I shan't be able to wear my magenta hat.”

“Well then, why not have the grey?”

“Yes – yes, I think the grey will be *more useful*.”

“It's a good material.”

“Yes, and it's a *pretty* grey. You know what I mean, dear; not a *common* grey. Of course grey is always an *uninteresting* colour.”

“It's quiet.”

“And then again, what I feel about the red is that it is so warm-looking. Red makes you *feel* warm even when you're *not* warm. You know what I mean, dear!”

“Well then, why not have the red? It suits you – red.”

“No; do you really think so?”

“Well, when you've got a colour, I mean, of course!”

“Yes, that is the drawback to red. No, I think, on the whole, the grey is *safer*.”

“Then you will take the grey, madam?”

“Yes, I think I'd better; don't you, dear?”

“I like it myself very much.”

“And it is good wearing stuff. I shall have it trimmed with – Oh! you haven't cut it off, have you?”

“I was just about to, madam.”

“Well, don't for a moment. Just let me have another look at the red. You see, dear, it has just occurred to me – that chinchilla would look so well on the red!”

“So it would, dear!”

“And, you see, I've *got* the chinchilla.”

“Then have the red. Why not?”

“Well, there is the hat I'm thinking of.”

“You haven't anything else you could wear with that?”

“Nothing at all, and it would go so *beautifully* with the grey. – Yes, I think I'll have the grey. It's always a safe colour – grey.”

“Fourteen yards I think you said, madam?”

“Yes, fourteen yards will be enough; because I shall mix it with – One minute. You see, dear, if I take the grey I shall have nothing to wear with my black jacket.”

“Won't it go with grey?”

“Not well – not so well as with red.”

“I should have the red then. You evidently fancy it yourself.”

“No, personally I prefer the grey. But then one must think of *everything*, and – Good gracious! that's surely not the right time?”

“No, madam, it's ten minutes slow. We always keep our clocks a little slow!”

“And we were too have been at Madame Jannaway's at a quarter past twelve. How long shopping does take! Why, whatever time did we start?”

“About eleven, wasn't it?”

“Half-past ten. I remember now; because, you know, we said we’d start at half-past nine. We’ve been two hours already!”

“And we don’t seem to have done much, do we?”

“Done literally nothing, and I meant to have done so much. I *must* go to Madame Jannaway’s. Have you got my purse, dear? Oh, it’s all right, I’ve got it.”

“Well, now you haven’t decided whether you’re going to have the grey or the red.”

“I’m sure I don’t know what I *do* want now. I had made up my mind a minute ago, and now it’s all gone again – oh yes, I remember, the red. Yes, I’ll have the red. No, I don’t mean the red, I mean the grey.”

“You were talking about the red last time, if you remember, dear.”

“Oh, so I was, you’re quite right. That’s the worst of shopping. Do you know I get quite confused sometimes.”

“Then you will decide on the red, madam?”

“Yes – yes, I shan’t do any better, shall I, dear? What do *you* think? You haven’t got any other shades of red, have you? This is such an *ugly* red.”

The shopman reminds her that she has seen all the other reds, and that this is the particular shade she selected and admired.

“Oh, very well,” she replies, with the air of one from whom all earthly cares are falling, “I must take that then, I suppose. I can’t be worried about it any longer. I’ve wasted half the morning already.”

Outside she recollects three insuperable objections to the red, and four unanswerable arguments why she should have selected the grey. She wonders would they change it, if she went back and asked to see the shop-walker? Her friend, who wants her lunch, thinks not.

“That is what I hate about shopping,” she says. “One never has time to really *think*.”

She says she shan’t go to that shop again.

We laugh at her, but are we so very much better? Come, my superior male friend, have you never stood, amid your wardrobe, undecided whether, in her eyes, you would appear more imposing, clad in the rough tweed suit that so admirably displays your broad shoulders; or in the orthodox black frock, that, after all, is perhaps more suitable to the figure of a man approaching – let us say, the nine-and-twenties? Or, better still, why not riding costume? Did we not hear her say how well Jones looked in his top-boots and breeches, and, “hang it all,” we have a better leg than Jones. What a pity riding-breeches are made so baggy nowadays. Why is it that male fashions tend more and more to hide the male leg? As women have become less and less ashamed of theirs, we have become more and more reticent of ours. Why are the silken hose, the tight-fitting pantaloons, the neat kneebreeches of our forefathers impossible to-day? Are we grown more modest – or has there come about a falling off, rendering concealment advisable?

I can never understand, myself, why women love us. It must be our honest worth, our sterling merit, that attracts them – certainly not our appearance, in a pair of tweed “dittos,” black angora coat and vest, stand-up collar, and chimney-pot hat! No, it must be our sheer force of character that compels their admiration.

What a good time our ancestors must have had was borne in upon me when, on one occasion, I appeared in character at a fancy dress ball. What I represented I am unable to say, and I don’t particularly care. I only know it was something military. I also remember that the costume was two sizes too small for me in the chest, and thereabouts; and three sizes too large for me in the hat. I padded the hat, and dined in the middle of the day off a chop and half a glass of soda-water. I have gained prizes as a boy for mathematics, also for scripture history – not often, but I have done it. A literary critic, now dead, once praised a book of mine. I know there have been occasions when my conduct has won the approbation of good men; but never – never in my whole life, have I felt more proud, more satisfied with myself than on that evening when, the last hook fastened, I gazed at my full-length Self in the cheval glass. I was a dream. I say it who should not; but I am not the only one

who said it. I was a glittering dream. The groundwork was red, trimmed with gold braid wherever there was room for gold braid; and where there was no more possible room for gold braid there hung gold cords, and tassels, and straps. Gold buttons and buckles fastened me, gold embroidered belts and sashes caressed me, white horse-hair plumes waved o'er me. I am not sure that everything was in its proper place, but I managed to get everything on somehow, and I looked well. It suited me. My success was a revelation to me of female human nature. Girls who had hitherto been cold and distant gathered round me, timidly solicitous of notice. Girls on whom I smiled lost their heads and gave themselves airs. Girls who were not introduced to me sulked and were rude to girls that had been. For one poor child, with whom I sat out two dances (at least she sat, while I stood gracefully beside her – I had been advised, by the costumier, *not* to sit), I was sorry. He was a worthy young fellow, the son of a cotton broker, and he would have made her a good husband, I feel sure. But he was foolish to come as a beer-bottle.

Perhaps, after all, it is as well those old fashions have gone out. A week in that suit might have impaired my natural modesty.

One wonders that fancy dress balls are not more popular in this grey age of ours. The childish instinct to “dress up,” to “make believe,” is with us all. We grow so tired of being always ourselves. A tea-table discussion, at which I once assisted, fell into this: – Would any one of us, when it came to the point, change with anybody else, the poor man with the millionaire, the governess with the princess – change not only outward circumstances and surroundings, but health and temperament, heart, brain, and soul; so that not one mental or physical particle of one's original self one would retain, save only memory? The general opinion was that we would not, but one lady maintained the affirmative.

“Oh no, you wouldn't really, dear,” argued a friend; “you *think* you would.”

“Yes, I would,” persisted the first lady; “I am tired of myself. I'd even be you, for a change.”

In my youth, the question chiefly important to me was – What sort of man shall I decide to be? At nineteen one asks oneself this question; at thirty-nine we say, “I wish Fate hadn't made me this sort of man.”

In those days I was a reader of much well-meant advice to young men, and I gathered that, whether I should become a Sir Lancelot, a Herr Teufelsdröckh, or an Iago was a matter for my own individual choice. Whether I should go through life gaily or gravely was a question the pros and cons of which I carefully considered. For patterns I turned to books. Byron was then still popular, and many of us made up our minds to be gloomy, saturnine young men, weary with the world, and prone to soliloquy. I determined to join them.

For a month I rarely smiled, or, when I did, it was with a weary, bitter smile, concealing a broken heart – at least that was the intention. Shallow-minded observers misunderstood.

“I know exactly how it feels,” they would say, looking at me sympathetically, “I often have it myself. It's the sudden change in the weather, I think;” and they would press neat brandy upon me, and suggest ginger.

Again, it is distressing to the young man, busy burying his secret sorrow under a mound of silence, to be slapped on the back by commonplace people and asked – “Well, how's ‘the hump’ this morning?” and to hear his mood of dignified melancholy referred to, by those who should know better, as “the sulks.”

There are practical difficulties also in the way of him who would play the Byronic young gentleman. He must be supernaturally wicked – or rather must *have been*; only, alas! in the unliterary grammar of life, where the future tense stands first, and the past is formed, not from the indefinite, but from the present indicative, “to have been” is “to be”; and to be wicked on a small income is impossible. The ruin of even the simplest of maidens costs money. In the Courts of Love one cannot sue in *formâ pauperis*; nor would it be the Byronic method.

“To drown remembrance in the cup” sounds well, but then the “cup,” to be fitting, should be of some expensive brand. To drink deep of old Tokay or Asti is poetical; but when one's purse

necessitates that the draught, if it is to be deep enough to drown anything, should be of thin beer at five-and-nine the four and a half gallon cask, or something similar in price, sin is robbed of its flavour.

Possibly also – let me think it – the conviction may have been within me that Vice, even at its daintiest, is but an ugly, sordid thing, repulsive in the sunlight; that though – as rags and dirt to art – it may afford picturesque material to Literature, it is an evil-smelling garment to the wearer; one that a good man, by reason of poverty of will, may come down to, but one to be avoided with all one's effort, discarded with returning mental prosperity.

Be this as it may, I grew weary of training for a saturnine young man; and, in the midst of my doubt, I chanced upon a book the hero of which was a debonnaire young buck, own cousin to Tom and Jerry. He attended fights, both of cocks and men, flirted with actresses, wrenched off door-knockers, extinguished street lamps, played many a merry jest upon many an unappreciative night watch-man. For all the which he was much beloved by the women of the book. Why should not I flirt with actresses, put out street lamps, play pranks on policemen, and be beloved? London life was changed since the days of my hero, but much remained, and the heart of woman is eternal. If no longer prizefighting was to be had, at least there were boxing competitions, so called, in dingy back parlours out Whitechapel way. Though cockfighting was a lost sport, were there not damp cellars near the river where for twopence a gentleman might back mongrel terriers to kill rats against time, and feel himself indeed a sportsman? True, the atmosphere of reckless gaiety, always surrounding my hero, I missed myself from these scenes, finding in its place an atmosphere more suggestive of gin, stale tobacco, and nervous apprehension of the police; but the essentials must have been the same, and the next morning I could exclaim in the very words of my prototype – “Odds crickets, but I feel as though the devil himself were in my head. Peste take me for a fool.”

But in this direction likewise my fatal lack of means opposed me. (It affords much food to the philosophic mind, this influence of income upon character.) Even fifth-rate “boxing competitions,” organized by “friendly leads,” and ratting contests in Rotherhithe slums, become expensive, when you happen to be the only gentleman present possessed of a collar, and are expected to do the honours of your class in dog's-nose. True, climbing lamp-posts and putting out the gas is fairly cheap, providing always you are not caught in the act, but as a recreation it lacks variety. Nor is the modern London lamp-post adapted to sport. Anything more difficult to grip – anything with less “give” in it – I have rarely clasped. The disgraceful amount of dirt allowed to accumulate upon it is another drawback from the climber's point of view. By the time you have swarmed up your third post a positive distaste for “gaiety” steals over you. Your desire is towards arnica and a bath.

Nor in jokes at the expense of policemen is the fun entirely on your side. Maybe I did not proceed with judgment. It occurs to me now, looking back, that the neighbourhoods of Covent Garden and Great Marlborough Street were ill-chosen for sport of this nature. To bonnet a fat policeman is excellent fooling. While he is struggling with his helmet you can ask him comic questions, and by the time he has got his head free you are out of sight. But the game should be played in a district where there is not an average of three constables to every dozen square yards. When two other policemen, who have had their eye on you for the past ten minutes, are watching the proceedings from just round the next corner, you have little or no leisure for due enjoyment of the situation. By the time you have run the whole length of Great Titchfield Street and twice round Oxford Market, you are of opinion that a joke should never be prolonged beyond the point at which there is danger of its becoming wearisome; and that the time has now arrived for home and friends. The “Law,” on the other hand, now raised by reinforcements to a strength of six or seven men, is just beginning to enjoy the chase. You picture to yourself, while doing Hanover Square, the scene in Court the next morning. You will be accused of being drunk and disorderly. It will be idle for you to explain to the magistrate (or to your relations afterwards) that you were only trying to live up to a man who did this sort of thing in a book and was admired for it. You will be fined the usual forty shillings; and on the next occasion

of your calling at the Mayfields' the girls will be out, and Mrs. Mayfield, an excellent lady, who has always taken a motherly interest in you, will talk seriously to you and urge you to sign the pledge.

Thanks to your youth and constitution you shake off the pursuit at Notting Hill; and, to avoid any chance of unpleasant *contretemps* on the return journey, walk home to Bloomsbury by way of Camden Town and Islington.

I abandoned sportive tendencies as the result of a vow made by myself to Providence, during the early hours of a certain Sunday morning, while clinging to the waterspout of an unpretentious house situate in a side street off Soho. I put it to Providence as man to man. "Let me only get out of this," I think were the muttered words I used, "and no more 'sport' for me." Providence closed on the offer, and did not let me get out of it. True, it was a complicated "get out," involving a broken skylight and three gas globes, two hours in a coal cellar, and a sovereign to a potman for the loan of an ulster; and when at last, secure in my chamber, I took stock of myself – what was left of me, – I could not but reflect that Providence might have done the job neater. Yet I experienced no desire to escape the terms of the covenant; my inclining for the future was towards a life of simplicity.

Accordingly, I cast about for a new character, and found one to suit me. The German professor was becoming popular as a hero about this period. He wore his hair long and was otherwise untidy, but he had "a heart of steel," occasionally of gold. The majority of folks in the book, judging him from his exterior together with his conversation – in broken English, dealing chiefly with his dead mother and his little sister Lisa, – dubbed him uninteresting, but then they did not know about the heart. His chief possession was a lame dog which he had rescued from a brutal mob; and when he was not talking broken English he was nursing this dog.

But his speciality was stopping runaway horses, thereby saving the heroine's life. This, combined with the broken English and the dog, rendered him irresistible.

He seemed a peaceful, amiable sort of creature, and I decided to try him. I could not of course be a German professor, but I could, and did, wear my hair long in spite of much public advice to the contrary, voiced chiefly by small boys. I endeavoured to obtain possession of a lame dog, but failed. A one-eyed dealer in Seven Dials, to whom, as a last resource, I applied, offered to lame one for me for an extra five shillings, but this suggestion I declined. I came across an uncanny-looking mongrel late one night. He was not lame, but he seemed pretty sick; and, feeling I was not robbing anybody of anything very valuable, I lured him home and nursed him. I fancy I must have over-nursed him. He got so healthy in the end, there was no doing anything with him. He was an ill-conditioned cur, and he was too old to be taught. He became the curse of the neighbourhood. His idea of sport was killing chickens and sneaking rabbits from outside poulterers' shops. For recreation he killed cats and frightened small children by yelping round their legs. There were times when I could have lamed him myself, if only I could have got hold of him. I made nothing by running that dog – nothing whatever. People, instead of admiring me for nursing him back to life, called me a fool, and said that if I didn't drown the brute they would. He spoilt my character utterly – I mean my character at this period. It is difficult to pose as a young man with a heart of gold, when discovered in the middle of the road throwing stones at your own dog. And stones were the only things that would reach and influence him.

I was also hampered by a scarcity in runaway horses. The horse of our suburb was not that type of horse. Once and only once did an opportunity offer itself for practice. It was a good opportunity, inasmuch as he was not running away very greatly. Indeed, I doubt if he knew himself that he was running away. It transpired afterwards that it was a habit of his, after waiting for his driver outside the Rose and Crown for what he considered to be a reasonable period, to trot home on his own account. He passed me going about seven miles an hour, with the reins dragging conveniently beside him. He was the very thing for a beginner, and I prepared myself. At the critical moment, however, a couple of officious policemen pushed me aside and did it themselves.

There was nothing for me to regret, as the matter turned out. I should only have rescued a bald-headed commercial traveller, very drunk, who swore horribly, and pelted the crowd with empty collar-boxes.

From the window of a very high flat I once watched three men, resolved to stop a runaway horse. Each man marched deliberately into the middle of the road and took up his stand. My window was too far away for me to see their faces, but their attitude suggested heroism unto death. The first man, as the horse came charging towards him, faced it with his arms spread out. He never flinched until the horse was within about twenty yards of him. Then, as the animal was evidently determined to continue its wild career, there was nothing left for him to do but to retire again to the kerb, where he stood looking after it with evident sorrow, as though saying to himself – “Oh, well, if you are going to be headstrong I have done with you.”

The second man, on the catastrophe being thus left clear for him, without a moment’s hesitation, walked up a bye street and disappeared. The third man stood his ground, and, as the horse passed him, yelled at it. I could not hear what he said. I have not the slightest doubt it was excellent advice, but the animal was apparently too excited even to listen. The first and the third man met afterwards, and discussed the matter sympathetically. I judged they were regretting the pig-headedness of runaway horses in general, and hoping that nobody had been hurt.

I forget the other characters I assumed about this period. One, I know, that got me into a good deal of trouble was that of a downright, honest, hearty, outspoken young man who always said what he meant.

I never knew but one man who made a real success of speaking his mind. I have heard him slap the table with his open hand and exclaim —

“You want me to flatter you – to stuff you up with a pack of lies. That’s not me, that’s not Jim Compton. But if you care for my honest opinion, all I can say is, that child is the most marvellous performer on the piano I’ve ever heard. I don’t say she is a genius, but I have heard Liszt and Metzler and all the crack players, and I prefer *her*. That’s my opinion. I speak my mind, and I can’t help it if you’re offended.”

“How refreshing,” the parents would say, “to come across a man who is not afraid to say what he really thinks. Why are we not all outspoken?”

The last character I attempted I thought would be easy to assume. It was that of a much admired and beloved young man, whose great charm lay in the fact that he was always just – himself. Other people posed and acted. He never made any effort to be anything but his own natural, simple self.

I thought I also would be my own natural, simple self. But then the question arose – What was my own natural, simple self?

That was the preliminary problem I had to solve; I have not solved it to this day. What am I? I am a great gentleman, walking through the world with dauntless heart and head erect, scornful of all meanness, impatient of all littleness. I am a mean-thinking, little-daring man – the type of man that I of the dauntless heart and the erect head despise greatly – crawling to a poor end by devious ways, cringing to the strong, timid of all pain. I – but, dear reader, I will not sadden your sensitive ears with details I could give you, showing how contemptible a creature this wretched I happens to be. Nor would you understand me. You would only be astonished, discovering that such disreputable specimens of humanity contrive to exist in this age. It is best, my dear sir, or madam, you should remain ignorant of these evil persons. Let me not trouble you with knowledge.

I am a philosopher, greeting alike the thunder and the sunshine with frolic welcome. Only now and then, when all things do not fall exactly as I wish them, when foolish, wicked people will persist in doing foolish, wicked acts, affecting my comfort and happiness, I rage and fret a goodish deal.

As Heine said of himself, I am knight, too, of the Holy Grail, valiant for the Truth, reverent of all women, honouring all men, eager to yield life to the service of my great Captain.

And next moment, I find myself in the enemy's lines, fighting under the black banner. (It must be confusing to these opposing Generals, all their soldiers being deserters from both armies.) What are women but men's playthings! Shall there be no more cakes and ale for me because thou art virtuous! What are men but hungry dogs, contending each against each for a limited supply of bones! Do others lest thou be done. What is the Truth but an unexploded lie!

I am a lover of all living things. You, my poor sister, struggling with your heavy burden on your lonely way, I would kiss the tears from your worn cheeks, lighten with my love the darkness around your feet. You, my patient brother, breathing hard as round and round you tramp the trodden path, like some poor half-blind gin-horse, stripes your only encouragement, scanty store of dry chaff in your manger! I would jog beside you, taking the strain a little from your aching shoulders; and we would walk nodding, our heads side by side, and you, remembering, should tell me of the fields where long ago you played, of the gallant races that you ran and won. And you, little pinched brats, with wondering eyes, looking from dirt-encrusted faces, I would take you in my arms and tell you fairy stories. Into the sweet land of make-believe we would wander, leaving the sad old world behind us for a time, and you should be Princes and Princesses, and know Love.

But again, a selfish, greedy man comes often, and sits in my clothes. A man who frets away his life, planning how to get more money – more food, more clothes, more pleasures for himself; a man so busy thinking of the many things he needs he has no time to dwell upon the needs of others. He deems himself the centre of the universe. You would imagine, hearing him grumbling, that the world had been created and got ready against the time when he should come to take his pleasure in it. He would push and trample, heedless, reaching towards these many desires of his; and when, grabbing, he misses, he curses Heaven for its injustice, and men and women for getting in his path. He is not a nice man, in any way. I wish, as I say, he would not come so often and sit in my clothes. He persists that he is I, and that I am only a sentimental fool, spoiling his chances. Sometimes, for a while, I get rid of him, but he always comes back; and then he gets rid of me and I become him. It is very confusing. Sometimes I wonder if I really am myself.

## ON THE DISADVANTAGE OF NOT GETTING WHAT ONE WANTS

Long, long ago, when you and I, dear Reader, were young, when the fairies dwelt in the hearts of the roses, when the moonbeams bent each night beneath the weight of angels' feet, there lived a good, wise man. Or rather, I should say, there had lived, for at the time of which I speak the poor old gentleman lay dying. Waiting each moment the dread summons, he fell a-musing on the life that stretched far back behind him. How full it seemed to him at that moment of follies and mistakes, bringing bitter tears not to himself alone but to others also. How much brighter a road might it have been, had he been wiser, had he known!

"Ah, me!" said the good old gentleman, "if only I could live my life again in the light of experience."

Now as he spoke these words he felt the drawing near to him of a Presence, and thinking it was the One whom he expected, raising himself a little from his bed, he feebly cried,

"I am ready."

But a hand forced him gently back, a voice saying, "Not yet; I bring life, not death. Your wish shall be granted. You shall live your life again, and the knowledge of the past shall be with you to guide you. See you use it. I will come again."

Then a sleep fell upon the good man, and when he awoke, he was again a little child, lying in his mother's arms; but, locked within his brain was the knowledge of the life that he had lived already.

So once more he lived and loved and laboured. So a second time he lay an old, worn man with life behind him. And the angel stood again beside his bed; and the voice said,

"Well, are you content now?"

"I am well content," said the old gentleman. "Let Death come."

"And have you understood?" asked the angel.

"I think so," was the answer; "that experience is but as of the memory of the pathways he has trod to a traveller journeying ever onward into an unknown land. I have been wise only to reap the reward of folly. Knowledge has ofttimes kept me from my good. I have avoided my old mistakes only to fall into others that I knew not of. I have reached the old errors by new roads. Where I have escaped sorrow I have lost joy. Where I have grasped happiness I have plucked pain also. Now let me go with Death that I may learn.."

Which was so like the angel of that period, the giving of a gift, bringing to a man only more trouble. Maybe I am overrating my coolness of judgment under somewhat startling circumstances, but I am inclined to think that, had I lived in those days, and had a fairy or an angel come to me, wanting to give me something – my soul's desire, or the sum of my ambition, or any trifle of that kind I should have been short with him.

"You pack up that precious bag of tricks of yours," I should have said to him (it would have been rude, but that is how I should have felt), "and get outside with it. I'm not taking anything in your line to-day. I don't require any supernatural aid to get me into trouble. All the worry I want I can get down here, so it's no good your calling. You take that little joke of yours, – I don't know what it is, but I know enough not to want to know, – and run it off on some other idiot. I'm not priggish. I have no objection to an innocent game of 'catch-questions' in the ordinary way, and when I get a turn myself. But if I've got to pay every time, and the stakes are to be my earthly happiness plus my future existence – why, I don't play. There was the case of Midas; a nice, shabby trick you fellows played off upon him! making pretence you did not understand him, twisting round the poor old fellow's words, just for all the world as though you were a pack of Old Bailey lawyers, trying to trip up a witness; I'm ashamed of the lot of you, and I tell you so – coming down here, fooling poor unsuspecting mortals

with your nonsense, as though we had not enough to harry us as it was. Then there was that other case of the poor old peasant couple to whom you promised three wishes, the whole thing ending in a black pudding. And they never got even that. You thought that funny, I suppose. That was your fairy humour! A pity, I say, you have not, all of you, something better to do with your time. As I said before, you take that celestial 'Joe Miller' of yours and work it off on somebody else. I have read my fairy lore, and I have read my mythology, and I don't want any of your blessings. And what's more, I'm not going to have them. When I want blessings I will put up with the usual sort we are accustomed to down here. You know the ones I mean, the disguised brand – the blessings that no human being would think were blessings, if he were not told; the blessings that don't look like blessings, that don't feel like blessings; that, as a matter of fact, are not blessings, practically speaking; the blessings that other people think are blessings for us and that we don't. They've got their drawbacks, but they are better than yours, at any rate, and they are sooner over. I don't want your blessings at any price. If you leave one here I shall simply throw it out after you."

I feel confident I should have answered in that strain, and I feel it would have done good. Somebody ought to have spoken plainly, because with fairies and angels of that sort fooling about, no one was ever safe for a moment. Children could hardly have been allowed outside the door. One never could have told what silly trick some would-be funny fairy might be waiting to play off on them. The poor child would not know, and would think it was getting something worth having. The wonder to me is that some of those angels didn't get tarred and feathered.

I am doubtful whether even Cinderella's luck was quite as satisfying as we are led to believe. After the carpetless kitchen and the black beetles, how beautiful the palace must have seemed – for the first year, perhaps for the first two. And the Prince! how loving, how gallant, how tender – for the first year, perhaps for the first two. And after? You see he was a Prince, brought up in a Court, the atmosphere of which is not conducive to the development of the domestic virtues; and she – was Cinderella. And then the marriage altogether was rather a hurried affair. Oh yes, she is a good, loving little woman; but perhaps our Royal Highness-ship did act too much on the impulse of the moment. It was her dear, dainty feet that danced their way into our heart. How they flashed and twinkled, eased in those fairy slippers. How like a lily among tulips she moved that night amid the over-gorgeous Court dames. She was so sweet, so fresh, so different to all the others whom we knew so well. How happy she looked as she put her trembling little hand in ours. What possibilities might lie behind those drooping lashes. And we were in amorous mood that night, the music in our feet, the flash and glitter in our eyes. And then, to pique us further, she disappeared as suddenly and strangely as she had come. Who was she? Whence came she? What was the mystery surrounding her? Was she only a delicious dream, a haunting phantasy that we should never look upon again, never clasp again within our longing arms? Was our heart to be for ever hungry, haunted by the memory of – No, by heavens, she is real, and a woman. Here is her dear slipper, made surely to be kissed. Of a size too that a man may well wear within the breast of his doublet. Had any woman – nay, fairy, angel, such dear feet! Search the whole kingdom through, but find her, find her. The gods have heard our prayers, and given us this clue. "Suppose she be not all she seemed. Suppose she be not of birth fit to mate with our noble house!" Out upon thee, for an earth-bound, blind curmudgeon of a Lord High Chancellor. How could a woman, whom such slipper fitted, be but of the noblest and the best, as far above us, mere Princelet that we are, as the stars in heaven are brighter than thy dull old eyes! Go, search the kingdom, we tell thee, from east to west, from north to south, and see to it that thou findest her, or it shall go hard with thee. By Venus, be she a swineherd's daughter, she shall be our Queen – an she deign to accept of us, and of our kingdom.

Ah well, of course, it was not a wise piece of business, that goes without saying; but we were young, and Princes are only human. Poor child, she could not help her education, or rather her lack of it. Dear little thing, the wonder is that she has contrived to be no more ignorant than she is, dragged up as she was, neglected and overworked. Nor does life in a kitchen, amid the companionship of

peasants and menials, tend to foster the intellect. Who can blame her for being shy and somewhat dull of thought? not we, generous-minded, kind-hearted Prince that we are. And she is very affectionate. The family are trying, certainly; father-in-law not a bad sort, though a little prosy when upon the subject of his domestic troubles, and a little too fond of his glass; mamma-in-law, and those two ugly, ill-mannered sisters, decidedly a nuisance about the palace. Yet what can we do? they are our relations now, and they do not forget to let us know it. Well, well, we had to expect that, and things might have been worse. Anyhow she is not jealous – thank goodness.

So the day comes when poor little Cinderella sits alone of a night in the beautiful palace. The courtiers have gone home in their carriages. The Lord High Chancellor has bowed himself out backwards. The Gold-Stick-in-Waiting and the Grooms of the Chamber have gone to their beds. The Maids of Honour have said “Good-night,” and drifted out of the door, laughing and whispering among themselves. The clock strikes twelve – one – two, and still no footstep creaks upon the stair. Once it followed swiftly upon the “good-night” of the maids, who did not laugh or whisper then.

At last the door opens, and the Prince enters, none too pleased at finding Cinderella still awake. “So sorry I’m late, my love – detained on affairs of state. Foreign policy very complicated, dear. Have only just this moment left the Council Chamber.”

And little Cinderella, while the Prince sleeps, lies sobbing out her poor sad heart into the beautiful royal pillow, embroidered with the royal arms and edged with the royal monogram in lace. “Why did he ever marry me? I should have been happier in the old kitchen. The black beetles did frighten me a little, but there was always the dear old cat; and sometimes, when mother and the girls were out, papa would call softly down the kitchen stairs for me to come up, and we would have such a merry evening together, and sup off sausages: dear old dad, I hardly ever see him now. And then, when my work was done, how pleasant it was to sit in front of the fire, and dream of the wonderful things that would come to me some day. I was always going to be a Princess, even in my dreams, and live in a palace, but it was so different to this. Oh, how I hate it, this beastly palace where everybody sneers at me – I know they do, though they bow and scrape, and pretend to be so polite. And I’m not clever and smart as they are. I hate them. I hate these bold-faced women who are always here. That is the worst of a palace, everybody can come in. Oh, I hate everybody and everything. Oh, god-mamma, god-mamma, come and take me away. Take me back to my old kitchen. Give me back my old poor frock. Let me dance again with the fire-tongs for a partner, and be happy, dreaming.”

Poor little Cinderella, perhaps it would have been better had god-mamma been less ambitious for you, dear; had you married some good, honest yeoman, who would never have known that you were not brilliant, who would have loved you because you were just amiable and pretty; had your kingdom been only a farmhouse, where your knowledge of domestic economy, gained so hardily, would have been useful; where you would have shone instead of being overshadowed; where Papa would have dropped in of an evening to smoke his pipe and escape from his domestic wrangles; where you would have been *real* Queen.

But then you know, dear, you would not have been content. Ah yes, with your present experience – now you know that Queens as well as little drudges have their troubles; but *without* that experience? You would have looked in the glass when you were alone; you would have looked at your shapely hands and feet, and the shadows would have crossed your pretty face. “Yes,” you would have said to yourself – “John is a dear, kind fellow, and I love him very much, and all that, but – ” and the old dreams, dreamt in the old low-ceilinged kitchen before the dying fire, would have come back to you, and you would have been discontented then as now, only in a different way. Oh yes, you would, Cinderella, though you gravely shake your gold-crowned head. And let me tell you why. It is because you are a woman, and the fate of all us, men and women alike, is to be for ever wanting what we have not, and to be finding, when we have it, that it is not what we wanted. That is the law of life, dear. Do you think as you lie upon the floor with your head upon your arms, that you are the only woman whose tears are soaking into the hearthrug at that moment? My dear Princess, if you could creep

unseen about your City, peeping at will through the curtain-shielded windows, you would come to think that all the world was little else than a big nursery full of crying children with none to comfort them. The doll is broken: no longer it sweetly squeaks in answer to our pressure, "I love you, kiss me." The drum lies silent with the drumstick inside; no longer do we make a brave noise in the nursery. The box of tea-things we have clumsily put our foot upon; there will be no more merry parties around the three-legged stool. The tin trumpet will not play the note we want to sound; the wooden bricks keep falling down; the toy cannon has exploded and burnt our fingers. Never mind, little man, little woman, we will try and mend things to-morrow.

And after all, Cinderella dear, you do live in a fine palace, and you have jewels and grand dresses and – No, no, do not be indignant with *me*. Did not you dream of these things *as well as* of love? Come now, be honest. It was always a prince, was it not, or, at the least, an exceedingly well-to-do party, that handsome young gentleman who bowed to you so gallantly from the red embers? He was never a virtuous young commercial traveller, or cultured clerk, earning a salary of three pounds a week, was he, Cinderella? Yet there are many charming commercial travellers, many delightful clerks with limited incomes, quite sufficient, however, to a sensible man and woman desiring but each other's love. Why was it always a prince, Cinderella? Had the palace and the liveried servants, and the carriages and horses, and the jewels and the dresses, *nothing* to do with the dream?

No, Cinderella, you were human, that is all. The artist, shivering in his conventional attic, dreaming of Fame! – do you think he is not hoping she will come to his loving arms in the form Jove came to Danae? Do you think he is not reckoning also upon the good dinners and the big cigars, the fur coat and the diamond studs, that her visits will enable him to purchase?

There is a certain picture very popular just now. You may see it, Cinderella, in many of the shop-windows of the town. It is called "The Dream of Love," and it represents a beautiful young girl, sleeping in a very beautiful but somewhat disarranged bed. Indeed, one hopes, for the sleeper's sake, that the night is warm, and that the room is fairly free from draughts. A ladder of light streams down from the sky into the room, and upon this ladder crowd and jostle one another a small army of plump Cupids, each one laden with some pledge of love. Two of the Imps are emptying a sack of jewels upon the floor. Four others are bearing, well displayed, a magnificent dress (a "confection," I believe, is the proper term) cut somewhat low, but making up in train what is lacking elsewhere. Others bear bonnet boxes from which peep stylish toques and bewitching hoods. Some, representing evidently wholesale houses, stagger under silks and satins in the piece. Cupids are there from the shoemakers with the daintiest of *bottines*. Stockings, garters, and even less mentionable articles, are not forgotten. Caskets, mirrors, twelve-buttoned gloves, scent-bottles and handkerchiefs, hair-pins, and the gayest of parasols, has the God of Love piled into the arms of his messengers. Really a most practical, up-to-date God of Love, moving with the times! One feels that the modern Temple of Love must be a sort of Swan and Edgar's; the god himself a kind of celestial shop-walker; while his mother, Venus, no doubt superintends the costume department. Quite an Olympian Whiteley, this latter-day Eros; he has forgotten nothing, for, at the back of the picture, I notice one Cupid carrying a rather fat heart at the end of a string.

You, Cinderella, could give good counsel to that sleeping child. You would say to her – "Awake from such dreams. The contents of a pawnbroker's store-room will not bring you happiness. Dream of love if you will; that is a wise dream, even if it remain ever a dream. But these coloured beads, these Manchester goods! are you then – you, heiress of all the ages – still at heart only as some poor savage maiden but little removed above the monkeys that share the primeval forest with her? Will you sell your gold to the first trader that brings you *this* barter? These things, child, will only dazzle your eyes for a few days. Do you think the Burlington Arcade is the gate of Heaven?"

Ah, yes, I too could talk like that – I, writer of books, to the young lad, sick of his office stool, dreaming of a literary career leading to fame and fortune. "And do you think, lad, that by that road you will reach Happiness sooner than by another? Do you think interviews with yourself in penny

weeklies will bring you any satisfaction after the first halfdozen? Do you think the gushing female who has read all your books, and who wonders what it must feel like to be so clever, will be welcome to you the tenth time you meet her? Do you think press cuttings will always consist of wondering admiration of your genius, of paragraphs about your charming personal appearance under the heading, 'Our Celebrities'? Have you thought of the Uncomplimentary criticisms, of the spiteful paragraphs, of the everlasting fear of slipping a few inches down the greasy pole called 'popular taste,' to which you are condemned to cling for life, as some lesser criminal to his weary tread-mill, struggling with no hope but not to fall! Make a home, lad, for the woman who loves you; gather one or two friends about you; work, think, and play, that will bring you happiness. Shun this roaring gingerbread fair that calls itself, forsooth, the 'World of art and letters.' Let its clowns and its contortionists fight among themselves for the plaudits and the halfpence of the mob. Let it be with its shouting and its surging, its blare and its cheap flare. Come away, the summer's night is just the other side of the hedge, with its silence and its stars."

You and I, Cinderella, are experienced people, and can therefore offer good advice, but do you think we should be listened to?

"Ah, no, my Prince is not as yours. Mine will love me always, and I am peculiarly fitted for the life of a palace. I have the instinct and the ability for it. I am sure I was made for a princess. Thank you, Cinderella, for your well-meant counsel, but there is much difference between you and me."

That is the answer you would receive, Cinderella; and my young friend would say to me, "Yes, I can understand *your* finding disappointment in the literary career; but then, you see, our cases are not quite similar. *I* am not likely to find much trouble in keeping my position. *I* shall not fear reading what the critics say of *me*. No doubt there are disadvantages, when you are among the ruck, but there is always plenty of room at the top. So thank you, and goodbye."

Besides, Cinderella dear, we should not quite mean it – this excellent advice. We have grown accustomed to these gew-gaws, and we should miss them in spite of our knowledge of their trashiness: you, your palace and your little gold crown; I, my mountebank's cap, and the answering laugh that goes up from the crowd when I shake my bells. We want everything. All the happiness that earth and heaven are capable of bestowing. Creature comforts, and heart and soul comforts also; and, proud-spirited beings that we are, we will not be put off with a part. Give us only everything, and we will be content. And, after all, Cinderella, you have had your day. Some little dogs never get theirs. You must not be greedy. You have *known* happiness. The palace was Paradise for those few months, and the Prince's arms were about you, Cinderella, the Prince's kisses on your lips; the gods themselves cannot take *that* from you.

The cake cannot last for ever if we will eat of it so greedily. There must come the day when we have picked hungrily the last crumb – when we sit staring at the empty board, nothing left of the feast, Cinderella, but the pain that comes of feasting.

It is a naïve confession, poor Human Nature has made to itself, in choosing, as it has, this story of Cinderella for its leading moral: – Be good, little girl. Be meek under your many trials. Be gentle and kind, in spite of your hard lot, and one day – you shall marry a prince and ride in your own carriage. Be brave and true, little boy. Work hard and wait with patience, and in the end, with God's blessing, you shall earn riches enough to come back to London town and marry your master's daughter.

You and I, gentle Reader, could teach these young folks a truer lesson, an we would. We know, alas! that the road of all the virtues does not lead to wealth, rather the contrary; else how explain our limited incomes? But would it be well, think you, to tell them bluntly the truth – that honesty is the most expensive luxury a man can indulge in; that virtue, if persisted in, leads, generally speaking, to a six-roomed house in an outlying suburb? Maybe the world is wise: the fiction has its uses.

I am acquainted with a fairly intelligent young lady. She can read and write, knows her tables up to six times, and can argue. I regard her as representative of average Humanity in its attitude towards

Fate; and this is a dialogue I lately overheard between her and an older lady who is good enough to occasionally impart to her the wisdom of the world —

“I’ve been good this morning, haven’t I?”

“Yes – oh yes, fairly good, for you.”

“You think Papa *will* take me to the circus to-night?”

“Yes, if you keep good. If you don’t get naughty this afternoon.”

A pause.

“I was good on Monday, you may remember, nurse.”

“Tolerably good.”

“*Very* good, you said, nurse.”

“Well, yes, you weren’t bad.”

“And I was to have gone to the pantomime, and I didn’t.”

“Well, that was because your aunt came up suddenly, and your Papa couldn’t get another seat.

Poor auntie wouldn’t have gone at all if she hadn’t gone then.”

“Oh, wouldn’t she?”

“No.”

Another pause.

“Do you think she’ll come up suddenly to-day?”

“Oh no, I don’t think so.”

“No, I hope she doesn’t. I want to go to the circus to-night. Because, you see, nurse, if I don’t it will discourage me.”

So, perhaps the world is wise in promising us the circus. We believe her at first. But after a while, I fear, we grow discouraged.

## ON THE EXCEPTIONAL MERIT ATTACHING TO THE THINGS WE MEANT TO DO

I can remember – but then I can remember a long time ago. You, gentle Reader, just entering upon the prime of life, that age by thoughtless youth called middle, I cannot, of course, expect to follow me – when there was in great demand a certain periodical ycleped *The Amateur*. Its aim was noble. It sought to teach the beautiful lesson of independence, to inculcate the fine doctrine of self-help. One chapter explained to a man how he might make flower-pots out of Australian meat cans; another how he might turn butter-tubs into music-stools; a third how he might utilize old bonnet boxes for Venetian blinds: that was the principle of the whole scheme, you made everything from something not intended for it, and as ill-suited to the purpose as possible.

Two pages, I distinctly recollect, were devoted to the encouragement of the manufacture of umbrella stands out of old gaspiping. Anything less adapted to the receipt of hats and umbrellas than gas-piping I cannot myself conceive: had there been, I feel sure the author would have thought of it, and would have recommended it.

Picture-frames you fashioned out of ginger-beer corks. You saved your ginger-beer corks, you found a picture – and the thing was complete. How much ginger-beer it would be necessary to drink, preparatory to the making of each frame; and the effect of it upon the frame-maker's physical, mental and moral well-being, did not concern *The Amateur*. I calculate that for a fair-sized picture sixteen dozen bottles might suffice. Whether, after sixteen dozen of ginger-beer, a man would take any interest in framing a picture – whether he would retain any pride in the picture itself, is doubtful. But this, of course, was not the point.

One young gentleman of my acquaintance – the son of the gardener of my sister, as friend Ollendorff would have described him – did succeed in getting through sufficient ginger-beer to frame his grandfather, but the result was not encouraging. Indeed, the gardener's wife herself was but ill satisfied.

“What's all them corks round father?” was her first question.

“Can't you see,” was the somewhat indignant reply, “that's the frame.”

“Oh! but why corks?”

“Well, the book said corks.”

Still the old lady remained unimpressed.

“Somehow it don't look like father now,” she sighed.

Her eldest born grew irritable: none of us appreciate criticism!

“What does it look like, then?” he growled.

“Well, I dunno. Seems to me to look like nothing but corks.”

The old lady's view was correct. Certain schools of art possibly lend themselves to this method of framing. I myself have seen a funeral card improved by it; but, generally speaking, the consequence was a predominance of frame at the expense of the thing framed. The more honest and tasteful of the framemakers would admit as much themselves.

“Yes, it is ugly when you look at it,” said one to me, as we stood surveying it from the centre of the room. “But what one feels about it is that one has done it oneself.”

Which reflection, I have noticed, reconciles us to many other things beside cork frames.

Another young gentleman friend of mine – for I am bound to admit it was youth that profited most by the advice and counsel of *The Amateur*: I suppose as one grows older one grows less daring, less industrious – made a rocking-chair, according to the instructions of this book, out of a couple of beer barrels. From every practical point of view it was a bad rocking-chair. It rocked too much, and it rocked in too many directions at one and the same time. I take it, a man sitting on a rocking-

chair does not want to be continually rocking. There comes a time when he says to himself – “Now I have rocked sufficiently for the present; now I will sit still for a while, lest a worse thing befall me.” But this was one of those headstrong rocking-chairs that are a danger to humanity, and a nuisance to themselves. Its notion was that it was made to rock, and that when it was not rocking, it was wasting its time. Once started nothing could stop it – nothing ever did stop it, until it found itself topsy turvy on its own occupant. That was the only thing that ever sobered it.

I had called, and had been shown into the empty drawing-room. The rocking-chair nodded invitingly at me. I never guessed it was an amateur rocking-chair. I was young in those days, with faith in human nature, and I imagined that, whatever else a man might attempt without knowledge or experience, no one would be fool enough to experiment upon a rocking-chair.

I threw myself into it lightly and carelessly. I immediately noticed the ceiling. I made an instinctive movement forward. The window and a momentary glimpse of the wooded hills beyond shot upwards and disappeared. The carpet flashed across my eyes, and I caught sight of my own boots vanishing beneath me at the rate of about two hundred miles an hour. I made a convulsive effort to recover them. I suppose I over-did it. I saw the whole of the room at once, the four walls, the ceiling, and the floor at the same moment. It was a sort of vision. I saw the cottage piano upside down, and I again saw my own boots flash past me, this time over my head, soles uppermost. Never before had I been in a position where my own boots had seemed so all-pervading. The next moment I lost my boots, and stopped the carpet with my head just as it was rushing past me. At the same instant something hit me violently in the small of the back. Reason, when recovered, suggested that my assailant must be the rocking-chair.

Investigation proved the surmise correct. Fortunately I was still alone, and in consequence was able, a few minutes later, to meet my hostess with calm and dignity. I said nothing about the rocking-chair. As a matter of fact, I was hoping to have the pleasure, before I went, of seeing some other guest arrive and sample it: I had purposely replaced it in the most prominent and convenient position. But though I felt capable of schooling myself to silence, I found myself unable to agree with my hostess when she called for my admiration of the thing. My recent experiences had too deeply embittered me.

“Willie made it himself,” explained the fond mother. “Don’t you think it was very clever of him?”

“Oh yes, it was clever,” I replied, “I am willing to admit that.”

“He made it out of some old beer barrels,” she continued; she seemed proud of it.

My resentment, though I tried to keep it under control, was mounting higher.

“Oh! did he?” I said; “I should have thought he might have found something better to do with them.”

“What?” she asked.

“Oh! well, many things,” I retorted. “He might have filled them again with beer.”

My hostess looked at me astonished. I felt some reason for my tone was expected.

“You see,” I explained, “it is not a well-made chair. These rockers are too short, and they are too curved, and one of them, if you notice, is higher than the other and of a smaller radius; the back is at too obtuse an angle. When it is occupied the centre of gravity becomes – ”

My hostess interrupted me.

“You have been sitting on it,” she said.

“Not for long,” I assured her.

Her tone changed. She became apologetic.

“I am so sorry,” she said. “It looks all right.”

“It does,” I agreed; “that is where the dear lad’s cleverness displays itself. Its appearance disarms suspicion. With judgment that chair might be made to serve a really useful purpose. There are mutual acquaintances of ours – I mention no names, you will know them – pompous, self-satisfied, superior persons who would be improved by that chair. If I were Willie I should disguise the mechanism with

some artistic drapery, bait the thing with a couple of exceptionally inviting cushions, and employ it to inculcate modesty and diffidence. I defy any human being to get out of that chair, feeling as important as when he got into it. What the dear boy has done has been to construct an automatic exponent of the transitory nature of human greatness. As a moral agency that chair should prove a blessing in disguise.”

My hostess smiled feebly; more, I fear, from politeness than genuine enjoyment.

“I think you are too severe,” she said. “When you remember that the boy has never tried his hand at anything of the kind before, that he has no knowledge and no experience, it really is not so bad.”

Considering the matter from that point of view I was bound to concur. I did not like to suggest to her that before entering upon a difficult task it would be better for young men to *acquire* knowledge and experience: that is so unpopular a theory.

But the thing that *The Amateur* put in the front and foremost of its propaganda was the manufacture of household furniture out of egg-boxes. Why egg-boxes I have never been able to understand, but egg-boxes, according to the prescription of *The Amateur*, formed the foundation of household existence. With a sufficient supply of egg-boxes, and what *The Amateur* termed a “natural deftness,” no young couple need hesitate to face the furnishing problem. Three egg-boxes made a writing-table; on another egg-box you sat to write; your books were ranged in egg-boxes around you – and there was your study, complete.

For the dining-room two egg-boxes made an overmantel; four egg-boxes and a piece of looking-glass a sideboard; while six egg-boxes, with some wadding and a yard or so of cretonne, constituted a so-called “cosy corner.” About the “corner” there could be no possible doubt. You sat on a corner, you leant against a corner; whichever way you moved you struck a fresh corner. The “cosiness,” however, I deny. Egg-boxes I admit can be made useful; I am even prepared to imagine them ornamental; but “cosy,” no. I have sampled egg-boxes in many shapes. I speak of years ago, when the world and we were younger, when our fortune was the Future; secure in which, we hesitated not to set up house upon incomes folks with lesser expectations might have deemed insufficient. Under such circumstances, the sole alternative to the egg-box, or similar school of furniture, would have been the strictly classical, consisting of a doorway joined to architectural proportions.

I have from Saturday to Monday, as honoured guest, hung my clothes in egg-boxes.

I have sat on an egg-box at an egg-box to take my dish of tea. I have made love on egg-boxes. – Aye, and to feel again the blood running through my veins as then it ran, I would be content to sit only on egg-boxes till the time should come when I could be buried in an egg-box, with an egg-box reared above me as tombstone. – I have spent many an evening on an egg-box; I have gone to bed in egg-boxes. They have their points – I am intending no pun – but to claim for them cosiness would be but to deceive.

How quaint they were, those home-made rooms! They rise out of the shadows and shape themselves again before my eyes. I see the knobbly sofa; the easy-chairs that might have been designed by the Grand Inquisitor himself; the dented settle that was a bed by night; the few blue plates, purchased in the slums off Wardour Street; the enamelled stool to which one always stuck; the mirror framed in silk; the two Japanese fans crossed beneath each cheap engraving; the piano cloth embroidered in peacock’s feathers by Annie’s sister; the tea-cloth worked by Cousin Jenny. We dreamt, sitting on those egg-boxes – for we were young ladies and gentlemen with artistic taste – of the days when we would eat in Chippendale dining-rooms; sip our coffee in Louis Quatorze drawing-rooms; and be happy. Well, we have got on, some of us, since then, as Mr. Bumpus used to say; and I notice, when on visits, that some of us have contrived so that we do sit on Chippendale chairs, at Sheraton dining-tables, and are warmed from Adam’s fireplaces; but, ah me, where are the dreams, the hopes, the enthusiasms that clung like the scent of a March morning about those gim-crack second floors? In the dustbin, I fear, with the cretonne-covered egg-boxes and the penny fans. Fate is so terribly even-handed. As she gives she ever takes away. She flung us a few shillings and

hope, where now she doles us out pounds and fears. Why did not we know how happy we were, sitting crowned with sweet conceit upon our egg-box thrones?

Yes, Dick, you have climbed well. You edit a great newspaper. You spread abroad the message – well, the message that Sir Joseph Goldbug, your proprietor, instructs you to spread abroad. You teach mankind the lessons that Sir Joseph Goldbug wishes them to learn. They say he is to have a peerage next year. I am sure he has earned it; and perhaps there may be a knighthood for you, Dick.

Tom, you are getting on now. You have abandoned those unsaleable allegories. What rich art patron cares to be told continually by his own walls that Midas had ass's ears; that Lazarus sits ever at the gate? You paint portraits now, and everybody tells me you are the coming man. That "Impression" of old Lady Jezebel was really wonderful. The woman looks quite handsome, and yet it is her ladyship. Your touch is truly marvellous.

But into your success, Tom – Dick, old friend, do not there creep moments when you would that we could fish up those old egg-boxes from the past, refurnish with them the dingy rooms in Camden Town, and find there our youth, our loves, and our beliefs?

An incident brought back to my mind, the other day, the thought of all these things. I called for the first time upon a man, an actor, who had asked me to come and see him in the little home where he lives with his old father. To my astonishment – for the craze, I believe, has long since died out – I found the house half furnished out of packing cases, butter tubs, and egg-boxes. My friend earns his twenty pounds a week, but it was the old father's hobby, so he explained to me, the making of these monstrosities; and of them he was as proud as though they were specimen furniture out of the South Kensington Museum.

He took me into the dining-room to show me the latest outrage – a new book-case. A greater disfigurement to the room, which was otherwise prettily furnished, could hardly be imagined. There was no need for him to assure me, as he did, that it had been made out of nothing but egg-boxes. One could see at a glance that it was made out of egg-boxes, and badly constructed egg-boxes at that – egg-boxes that were a disgrace to the firm that had turned them out; egg-boxes not worthy the storage of "shop 'uns" at eighteen the shilling.

We went upstairs to my friend's bedroom. He opened the door as a man might open the door of a museum of gems.

"The old boy," he said, as he stood with his hand upon the door-knob, "made everything you see here, everything," and we entered. He drew my attention to the wardrobe. "Now I will hold it up," he said, "while you pull the door open; I think the floor must be a bit uneven, it wobbles if you are not careful." It wobbled notwithstanding, but by coaxing and humouring we succeeded without mishap. I was surprised to notice a very small supply of clothes within, although my friend is a dressy man.

"You see," he explained, "I dare not use it more than I can help. I am a clumsy chap, and as likely as not, if I happened to be in a hurry, I'd have the whole thing over:" which seemed probable.

I asked him how he contrived. "I dress in the bath-room as a rule," he replied; "I keep most of my things there. Of course the old boy doesn't know."

He showed me a chest of drawers. One drawer stood half open.

"I'm bound to leave that drawer open," he said; "I keep the things I use in that. They don't shut quite easily, these drawers; or rather, they shut all right, but then they won't open. It is the weather, I think. They will open and shut all right in the summer, I dare say." He is of a hopeful disposition.

But the pride of the room was the washstand.

"What do you think of this?" cried he enthusiastically, "real marble top –"

He did not expatiate further. In his excitement he had laid his hand upon the thing, with the natural result that it collapsed. More by accident than design I caught the jug in my arms. I also caught the water it contained. The basin rolled on its edge and little damage was done, except to me and the soap-box.

I could not pump up much admiration for this washstand; I was feeling too wet.

“What do you do when you want to wash?” I asked, as together we reset the trap.

There fell upon him the manner of a conspirator revealing secrets. He glanced guiltily round the room; then, creeping on tip-toe, he opened a cupboard behind the bed. Within was a tin basin and a small can.

“Don’t tell the old boy,” he said. “I keep these things here, and wash on the floor.”

That was the best thing I myself ever got out of egg-boxes – that picture of a deceitful son stealthily washing himself upon the floor behind the bed, trembling at every footstep lest it might be the “old boy” coming to the door.

One wonders whether the Ten Commandments are so all-sufficient as we good folk deem them – whether the eleventh is not worth the whole pack of them: “that ye love one another” with just a common-place, human, practical love. Could not the other ten be comfortably stowed away into a corner of that! One is inclined, in one’s anarchic moments, to agree with Louis Stevenson, that to be amiable and cheerful is a good religion for a work-a-day world. We are so busy *not* killing, *not* stealing, *not* coveting our neighbour’s wife, we have not time to be even just to one another for the little while we are together here. Need we be so cocksure that our present list of virtues and vices is the only possibly correct and complete one? Is the kind, unselfish man necessarily a villain because he does not always succeed in suppressing his natural instincts? Is the narrow-hearted, sour-souled man, incapable of a generous thought or act, necessarily a saint because he has none? Have we not – we unco guid – arrived at a wrong method of estimating our frailer brothers and sisters? We judge them, as critics judge books, not by the good that is in them, but by their faults. Poor King David! What would the local Vigilance Society have had to say to him? Noah, according to our plan, would be denounced from every teetotal platform in the country, and Ham would head the Local Vestry poll as a reward for having exposed him. And St. Peter! weak, frail St. Peter, how lucky for him that his fellow-disciples and their Master were not as strict in their notions of virtue as are we to-day.

Have we not forgotten the meaning of the word “virtue”? Once it stood for the good that was in a man, irrespective of the evil that might lie there also, as tares among the wheat. We have abolished virtue, and for it substituted virtues. Not the hero – he was too full of faults – but the blameless valet; not the man who does any good, but the man who has not been found out in any evil, is our modern ideal. The most virtuous thing in nature, according to this new theory, should be the oyster. He is always at home, and always sober. He is not noisy. He gives no trouble to the police. I cannot think of a single one of the Ten Commandments that he ever breaks. He never enjoys himself, and he never, so long as he lives, gives a moment’s pleasure to any other living thing.

I can imagine the oyster lecturing a lion on the subject of morality.

“You never hear me,” the oyster might say, “howling round camps and villages, making night hideous, frightening quiet folk out of their lives. Why don’t you go to bed early, as I do? I never prowls round the oyster-bed, fighting other gentlemen oysters, making love to lady oysters already married. I never kill antelopes or missionaries. Why can’t you live as I do on salt water and germs, or whatever it is that I do live on? Why don’t you try to be more like me?”

An oyster has no evil passions, therefore we say he is a virtuous fish. We never ask ourselves – “Has he any good passions?” A lion’s behaviour is often such as no just man could condone. Has he not his good points also?

Will the fat, sleek, “virtuous” man be as Welcome at the gate of heaven as he supposes?

“Well,” St. Peter may say to him, opening the door a little way and looking him up and down, “what is it now?”

“It’s me,” the virtuous man will reply, with an oily, self-satisfied smile; “I should say, I – I’ve come.”

“Yes, I see you have come; but what is your claim to admittance? What have you done with your three score years and ten?”

“Done!” the virtuous man will answer, “I have done nothing, I assure you.”

“Nothing!”

“Nothing; that is my strong point; that is why I am here. I have never done any wrong.”

“And what good have you done?”

“What good!”

“Aye, what good? Do not you even know the meaning of the word? What human creature is the better for your having eaten and drunk and slept these years? You have done no harm – no harm to yourself. Perhaps, if you had you might have done some good with it; the two are generally to be found together down below, I remember. What good have you done that you should enter here? This is no mummy chamber; this is the place of men and women who have lived, who have wrought good – and evil also, alas! – for the sinners who fight for the right, not the righteous who run with their souls from the fight.”

It was not, however, to speak of these things that I remembered *The Amateur* and its lessons. My intention was but to lead up to the story of a certain small boy, who in the doing of tasks not required of him was exceedingly clever. I wish to tell you his story, because, as do most true tales, it possesses a moral, and stories without a moral I deem to be but foolish literature, resembling roads that lead to nowhere, such as sick folk tramp for exercise.

I have known this little boy to take an expensive eight-day clock to pieces, and make of it a toy steamboat. True, it was not, when made, very much of a steamboat; but taking into consideration all the difficulties – the inadaptability of eight-day clock machinery to steamboat requirements, the necessity of getting the work accomplished quickly, before conservatively-minded people with no enthusiasm for science could interfere – a good enough steamboat. With merely an ironing-board and a few dozen meat-skewers, he would – provided the ironing-board was not missed in time – turn out quite a practicable rabbit-hutch. He could make a gun out of an umbrella and a gas-bracket, which, if not so accurate as a Martini-Henry, was, at all events, more deadly. With half the garden-hose, a copper scalding-pan out of the dairy, and a few Dresden china ornaments off the drawing-room mantelpiece, he would build a fountain for the garden. He could make bookshelves out of kitchen tables, and crossbows out of crinolines. He could dam you a stream so that all the water would flow over the croquet lawn. He knew how to make red paint and oxygen gas, together with many other suchlike commodities handy to have about a house. Among other things he learned how to make fireworks, and after a few explosions of an unimportant character, came to make them very well indeed. The boy who can play a good game of cricket is liked. The boy who can fight well is respected. The boy who can cheek a master is loved. But the boy who can make fireworks is revered above all others as a boy belonging to a superior order of beings. The fifth of November was at hand, and with the consent of an indulgent mother, he determined to give to the world a proof of his powers. A large party of friends, relatives, and school-mates was invited, and for a fortnight beforehand the scullery was converted into a manufactory for fireworks. The female servants went about in hourly terror of their lives, and the villa, did we judge exclusively by smell, one might have imagined had been taken over by Satan, his main premises being inconveniently crowded, as an annex. By the evening of the fourth all was in readiness, and samples were tested to make sure that no contretemps should occur the following night. All was found to be perfect.

The rockets rushed heavenward and descended in stars, the Roman candles tossed their fiery balls into the darkness, the Catherine wheels sparkled and whirled, the crackers cracked, and the squibs banged. That night he went to bed a proud and happy boy, and dreamed of fame. He stood surrounded by blazing fireworks, and the vast crowd cheered him. His relations, most of whom, he knew, regarded him as the coming idiot of the family, were there to witness his triumph; so too was Dickey Bowles, who laughed at him because he could not throw straight. The girl at the bun-shop, she also was there, and saw that he was clever.

The night of the festival arrived, and with it the guests. They sat, wrapped up in shawls and cloaks, outside the hall door – uncles, cousins, aunts, little boys and big boys, little girls and big girls, with, as the theatre posters say, villagers and retainers, some forty of them in all, and waited.

But the fireworks did not go off. Why they did not go off I cannot explain; nobody ever *could* explain. The laws of nature seemed to be suspended for that night only. The rockets fell down and died where they stood. No human agency seemed able to ignite the squibs. The crackers gave one bang and collapsed. The Roman candles might have been English rushlights. The Catherine wheels became mere revolving glow-worms. The fiery serpents could not collect among them the spirit of a tortoise. The set piece, a ship at sea, showed one mast and the captain, and then went out. One or two items did their duty, but this only served to render the foolishness of the whole more striking. The little girls giggled, the little boys chaffed, the aunts and cousins said it was beautiful, the uncles inquired if it was all over, and talked about supper and trains, the “villagers and retainers” dispersed laughing, the indulgent mother said “never mind,” and explained how well everything had gone off yesterday; the clever little boy crept upstairs to his room, and blubbered his heart out in the dark.

Hours later, when the crowd had forgotten him, he stole out again into the garden. He sat down amid the ruins of his hope, and wondered what could have caused the fiasco. Still puzzled, he drew from his pocket a box of matches, and, lighting one, he held it to the seared end of a rocket he had tried in vain to light four hours ago. It smouldered for an instant, then shot with a swish into the air and broke into a hundred points of fire. He tried another and another with the same result. He made a fresh attempt to fire the set piece. Point by point the whole picture – minus the captain and one mast – came out of the night, and stood revealed in all the majesty of flame. Its sparks fell upon the piled-up heap of candles, wheels, and rockets that a little while before had obstinately refused to burn, and that, one after another, had been thrown aside as useless. Now with the night frost upon them, they leaped to light in one grand volcanic eruption. And in front of the gorgeous spectacle he stood with only one consolation – his mother’s hand in his.

The whole thing was a mystery to him at the time, but, as he learned to know life better, he came to understand that it was only one example of a solid but inexplicable fact, ruling all human affairs —*your fireworks won’t go off while the crowd is around.*

Our brilliant repartees do not occur to us till the door is closed upon us and we are alone in the street, or, as the French would say, are coming down the stairs. Our after-dinner oratory, that sounded so telling as we delivered it before the looking-glass, falls strangely flat amidst the clinking of the glasses. The passionate torrent of words we meant to pour into her ear becomes a halting rigmarole, at which – small blame to her – she only laughs.

I would, gentle Reader, you could hear the stories that I meant to tell you. You judge me, of course, by the stories of mine that you have read – by this sort of thing, perhaps; but that is not just to me. The stories I have not told you, that I am going to tell you one day, I would that you judge me by those.

They are so beautiful; you will say so; over them, you will laugh and cry with me.

They come into my brain unbidden, they clamour to be written, yet when I take my pen in hand they are gone. It is as though they were shy of publicity, as though they would say to me – “You alone, you shall read us, but you must not write us; we are too real, too true. We are like the thoughts you cannot speak. Perhaps a little later, when you know more of life, then you shall tell us.”

Next to these in merit I would place, were I writing a critical essay on myself, the stories I have begun to write and that remain unfinished, why I cannot explain to myself. They are good stories, most of them; better far than the stories I have accomplished. Another time, perhaps, if you care to listen, I will tell you the beginning of one or two and you shall judge. Strangely enough, for I have always regarded myself as a practical, commonsensed man, so many of these still-born children of my mind I find, on looking through the cupboard where their thin bodies lie, are ghost stories. I suppose the hope of ghosts is with us all. The world grows somewhat interesting to us heirs of all

the ages. Year by year, Science with broom and duster tears down the moth-worn tapestry, forces the doors of the locked chambers, lets light into the secret stairways, cleans out the dungeons, explores the hidden passages – finding everywhere only dust. This echoing old castle, the world, so full of mystery in the days when we were children, is losing somewhat its charm for us as we grow older. The king sleeps no longer in the hollow of the hills. We have tunnelled through his mountain chamber. We have shivered his beard with our pick. We have driven the gods from Olympus. No wanderer through the moonlit groves now fears or hopes the sweet, death-giving gleam of Aphrodite's face. Thor's hammer echoes not among the peaks – 'tis but the thunder of the excursion train. We have swept the woods of the fairies. We have filtered the sea of its nymphs. Even the ghosts are leaving us, chased by the Psychological Research Society.

Perhaps of all, they are the least, however, to be regretted. They were dull old fellows, clanking their rusty chains and groaning and sighing. Let them go.

And yet how interesting they might be, if only they would. The old gentleman in the coat of mail, who lived in King John's reign, who was murdered, so they say, on the outskirts of the very wood I can see from my window as I write – stabbed in the back, poor gentleman, as he was riding home, his body flung into the moat that to this day is called Tor's tomb. Dry enough it is now, and the primroses love its steep banks; but a gloomy enough place in those days, no doubt, with its twenty feet of stagnant water. Why does he haunt the forest paths at night, as they tell me he does, frightening the children out of their wits, blanching the faces and stilling the laughter of the peasant lads and lasses, slouching home from the village dance? Instead, why does he not come up here and talk to me? He should have my easy-chair and welcome, would he only be cheerful and companionable.

What brave tales could he not tell me. He fought in the first Crusade, heard the clarion voice of Peter, met the great Godfrey face to face, stood, hand on sword-hilt, at Runny-mede, perhaps. Better than a whole library of historical novels would an evening's chat be with such a ghost. What has he done with his eight hundred years of death? where has he been? what has he seen? Maybe he has visited Mars; has spoken to the strange spirits who can live in the liquid fires of Jupiter. What has he learned of the great secret? Has he found the truth? or is he, even as I, a wanderer still seeking the unknown?

You, poor, pale, grey nun – they tell me that of midnights one may see your white face peering from the ruined belfry window, hear the clash of sword and shield among the cedar-trees beneath.

It was very sad, I quite understand, my dear lady. Your lovers both were killed, and you retired to a convent. Believe me, I am sincerely sorry for you, but why waste every night renewing the whole painful experience? Would it not be better forgotten? Good Heavens, madam, suppose we living folk were to spend our lives wailing and wringing our hands because of the wrongs done to us when we were children? It is all over now. Had he lived, and had you married him, you might not have been happy. I do not wish to say anything unkind, but marriages founded upon the sincerest mutual love have sometimes turned out unfortunately, as you must surely know.

Do take my advice. Talk the matter over with the young men themselves. Persuade them to shake hands and be friends. Come in, all of you, out of the cold, and let us have some reasonable talk.

Why seek you to trouble us, you poor pale ghosts? Are we not your children? Be our wise friends. Tell me, how loved the young men in your young days? how answered the maidens? Has the world changed much, do you think? Had you not new women even then? girls who hated the everlasting tapestry frame and spinning-wheel? Your father's servants, were they so much worse off than the freemen who live in our East-end slums and sew slippers for fourteen hours a day at a wage of nine shillings a week? Do you think Society much improved during the last thousand years? Is it worse? is it better? or is it, on the whole, about the same, save that we call things by other names? Tell me, what have *you*

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