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IF WINTER COMES

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BY A. S. M. HUTCHINSON

VI.

Here, in the effect upon him of beauty and of ideas communicated to his mind by his reading—first manifested to him by the Byron revelation—the mark and label of his individuality: it was the linking up of the boy who as Puzzlehead Sabre would wrinkle up his nut and say, "Well, I can't quite see that, sir," with the man in whom the same habit persisted; he saw much more clearly and infinitely more intensely with his mind than with his eye. Beauty of place imagined was to him infinitely more vivid than beauty seen. And so in all affairs: it was not what the eye saw or the ear heard that interested him; it was what his mind saw, questioning behind the scene and behind the speech, that interested him, and often, by the intensity of its perception, shook him. And precisely as beauty touched in him the most exquisite and poignant depths, so evil surroundings, evil faces dismayed him to the point of mysterious fear, almost terror.

On a Sunday of his honeymoon in London he had conceived with Mabel the idea of a bus ride through the streets,—"anywhere, the first bus that comes". The first bus that came took them through South London, dodged between main roads and took them through miles of mean and sordid dwelling houses. At open windows high up sat solitary women, at others solitary, shirt-sleeved men; behind closed windows were the faces of children. All staring,—women and men and children, impressively, coldly, impassively staring. Each house-door presented, one above the other, five or six iron bell-knobs, some hanging out and downwards, as if their necks were broken. On the pavements hardly a soul, just street upon street of these awful houses with their imprisoned occupants and the doors with their string of crazy bells.

An appalling and abysmal depression settled upon Sabre. He imagined himself pulling the dislocated neck of one of those bells and stepping into what festered behind those sinister doors; the dark and malodorous rooms, their prisoned occupants opening their prisons and staring at him—those women, those men, those children. He imagined himself in one of those rooms, saw it, felt it, smelt it. He imagined himself cutting his throat in one of those rooms.

At tea in their hotel on their return Mabel chattered animatedly on all they had seen. "I'm awfully glad we went. I think it's a very good thing to know for oneself just how that side of life lives. Those awful people at the windows!" she laughed. He noticed for the first time what a sudden laugh she had, rather loud.

Sabre agreed. "Yes, I think it's a good thing to have an idea of their lives. I can't say I'm glad I went, though. You've no idea how awfully depressed that kind of thing makes me feel."

She laughed again. "Depressed! How ever can it? How funny you must be!"

Then she said, "Yes, I'm glad I've seen for myself. You know, when those sort of people come into your service—the airts they give themselves and the way they demand the best of everything—and then when you see that kind of homes they come from—"

"Yes, it makes you think, doesn't it?"

"It does!"

"But what it made Sabre think was entirely different from what it made Mabel think."

VII.

"Puzzlehead" they had called him at his preparatory school. Old Puzzlehead Sabre, the chap who wrinkled up his nut over things and came out with the most extraordinary ideas. He had remained, and increasingly become, the puzzler. And precisely as he ceased to share a room with Mabel and carried himself with satisfaction to his own apartment, so, by this fifth year of his married life, he had come to know well that he shared no thoughts with her: he carried them, with increasing absorption in their interest, to the processes of his own mind.

An incident of those early school days had always remained with him, in its exact words. The exact words of a selectly famous professor of philosophy who, living the few years of his retirement in the neighborhood of the preparatory school, had given—for pure love of seeing young things and feeling the fresh and young minds—a weekly "talk on things" to the small schoolboys. And whatever the subject of his talk, he almost invariably would work off his familiar counsel:

"And a very good thing (he used to say), an excellent thing, the very best of practices, is to write a little every day. Just a little scrap, but cultivate the habit of doing it every day. I don't mean what is called keeping a diary, you know. Don't write what you do. There's no benefit in that. We do things for all kinds of reasons and it's the reasons, not the things, that matter. Let your little daily scrap be something you've thought. What you've done belongs partly to someone else; often you've made to do it. But what you think is you yourself; you write it down and there it is, a tiny little bit of you that you can look at and say, 'Well, really! You see, a little bit like this'—written every day, is a mirror in which you can see your real self and correct your real self. A looking-glass shows you your face is dirty or your hair rumpled, and you go and polish up. But it's ever so much more important to have a mirror that shows you how your looking. Just see if you can't do it. real self, your mind, your spirit, is looking. Just see if you can't do it. A little scrap. It's very steady; very steady."

And his small hearers desiring, like young colts in a field, nothing so little as anything steady, paid as much attention to this "jaw" as to any precept not supported by cane or imposition. They made of it, indeed, a popular school joke. "Oh, go and write a little every day and boil yourself, you ass!" But it appealed, dimly, to the reflective quality in the child Sabre's mind. He contracted the habit of writing, in a "bagged" exercise book, sentences beginning laboriously with "I thought to-day—". It remained with him, as he grew up, in the practice of writing sometimes ideas that occurred to him, as in the case of his feelings about his books and—much more strongly—in deliberately thinking out ideas.

"You yourself. The real you."

In the increasing solitariness of his married life, it came to be something into which he could retire, as into a private chamber; which he could put on, as a garment; and in the privacy of the chamber, or within the sleeves of the garment, he received a sense of detachment from normal life into which, vaguely, he pondered things.

VIII.

Vaguely,—without solution of most of the problems that puzzled him, and without even definite knowledge of the line along which solution might lie. Here, in these cloisters of another world—his own world—he paced among his ideas as a man might pace around the dismantled and scattered intricacies of an intricate machine, knowing the parts could be put together and the thing worked usefully, not knowing how on earth it could be done. "This goes in there, and that goes in there, but how on earth—"

Here, into these cloisters, he dragged the parts of all the puzzles that perplexed him; his relations with Mabel; his sense, in a hundred ways as they came up, of the odd business that life was; his strong interest in the social and industrial problems, and in the political questions, from time to time before the public attention.

He could be imagined assembling the parts, dragging them in, checking them over, slamming the door, and—"How on earth? What on earth?" There was a key to all these problems. There was a definite way of coordinating the parts of each. But what?

He began to have the feeling that in all the puzzles, not only, though particularly, of his own life as he had come to live it, but of life in general as it is lived, some mysterious part was missing.

That was as far as he could get. He was like a man groping with his hand through a hole in a great door for a key lying on the other side. Nothing was to be seen through the hole, and only the arm to the elbow could get through it. Not the shape, of the key nor its position was known.

But he was absolutely certain it was there.

One day he might put his hand on it.

CHAPTER IV.

I.

Mabel was two years younger than Sabre, twenty-five at the time of her marriage and just past her thirtieth birthday when the separate rooms were first occupied. Her habit of sudden laughter, rather loud, which Sabre first noticed in connection with their differing views on the mean streets visits, was rather characteristic of her. Her laugh came suddenly, and very abruptly, at anything that amused her, and without her first smiling or suggesting by any other sign that she was amused. And it came thus abruptly out of a face whose expression was normally rather severe. Probably of the same mentality was her habit of what Sabre called "flying up". She "flew up" without her speech first warming up; but of her flying up unlike her sudden burst of laughter, Sabre came to know certain premonitory symptoms in her face. Her face what he called "tightened." In particular he used to notice a curious little constriction of the sides of her nose, rather as though invisible tweezers were pinching it.

She had rather a long nose and this pleased her, for she once read somewhere that long noses were aristocratic. She stroked her nose as she read.

Her complexion was pale, though this was perhaps exaggerated by her coloring, which was dark. Her features were noticeably regular and noticeably refined, though her eyes were the least little bit inclined to be prominent; when Sabre married the Dean of T.borough's daughter, it was said that he had married "a good-looking girl"; also that he had married "a very nice girl"; those were the expressions used. She liked the company of men and she was much liked by men (the opinion of the garrulous Haggood may be recalled in this connection). She very much liked the society of women of her own age or older than herself and she was very popular with such. She did not like girls, married or unmarried.

II.

Mabel belonged to that considerable class of persons who, in conversation, begin half their sentences with "And just imagine"; or "And only fancy"; or "And do you know—". These exclamations, delivered with much excitement, are introductory to matters considered extraordinary. Their users might therefore be imagined somewhat easily astounded. But they have a compensatory steadiness of mind in regard to much that mystifies other people. To Mabel there was nothing mysterious in birth, or in living, or in death. She simply would not have understood had she been told there was any mystery in these things. One was born, one lived, one died. What was there odd about it? No did she see anything mysterious in the intense preoccupation of an insect, or the astounding placidity of a primrose growing at the foot of a tree. An insect—you killed it. A flower—you plucked it. What's the mystery?

Her life was living among people of her own class. Her measure of a man or of a woman was, were they of her class? If they were, she gladly accepted them and appeared to find considerable pleasure in their society. Whether they had attractive qualities or unattractive qualities or no qualities at all did not affect her. The only quality that mattered was the

quality of being well-bred. She called the classes beneath her own standard of breeding "the lower classes," and so long as they left her alone she was perfectly content to leave them alone. In certain aspects she liked them. She liked "a civil tradesman" immensely; she liked a civil charwoman immensely; and she liked a civil workman immensely. It gave her as much pleasure, real pleasure that she felt in all her emotions, to receive civility from the classes that ministered to her class—servants, tradespeople, gardeners, carpenters, plumbers, postmen, policemen—to meet any one in her own class. It never occurred to her to reckon up how enormously varied was the class whose happy fortune it was to minister to her class and she would not have been beyond their working years for them in the remotest degree interested if any one had told her how numerous the class was. It never occurred to her that any of these people had homes and it never occurred to her that the whole of the lower classes lived without any margin at all beyond keeping their homes together, or that if they stopped working they lost their homes, or that they looked forward to nothing beyond their working years because there was nothing beyond their working years for them to look forward to. Nor would it have interested her in the remotest degree to hear this. The only fact she knew about the lower classes was that they were disgustingly extravagant and spent every penny they earned. The woman across the Green who did her washing had six children and a husband who was an agricultural labourer and earned eighteen and sixpence a week. These eight lived in three rooms and "if you please" they actually bought a gramophone! Mabel instanced it for years after she first heard it. "The idea of that class of person spending money on anything to make their three rooms lively of an evening was scandalous to Mabel. She heard of the gramophone outrage in 1908 and she was still instancing it in 1912. "And those are the people, mind you," she said in 1912, "that we have to buy these National Insurance stamps for!"

III.

Mabel was not demonstrative. She had no enthusiasms and no sympathies. Enthusiasms and sympathies in other people made her laugh with her characteristic burst of sudden laughter. It was not, as with some persons, that matters calling for sympathy made her impatient,—as very robust people are often intensely impatient with sickness and infirmity. She never would say, "I have no patience with such and such or so and so." She had plenty of patience. It was simply that she had no imagination whatsoever. Whatever she saw or heard or read exactly as the thing presented itself. If she saw a door she saw merely a piece of wood with a handle and a keyhole. It may be argued that a door is merely a piece of wood with a handle and a keyhole, and that is what Mabel would have argued. But a door is in fact that most intriguing mystery in the world because of what may be the other side of it and of what goes on behind it. To Mabel nothing was on the other side of anything she saw and nothing went on behind it.

(To be Continued.)

WILLING to Try

A Highlander who prided himself on being able to play any tune on the pipes perched himself on the side of one of his native hills one Sunday morning and commenced blowing for all he was worth. Presently the minister came along and, going up to MacDougall with the intention of severely reprimanding him, asked in a very harsh voice: "MacDougall, do you know the Ten Commandments?" MacDougall scratched his chin for a moment, and then, in an equally harsh voice, said: "D'oe think you've beat me? Just whistle the first three or four bars, and I'll right direction, the harder it is to make it."

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