**The Monocle**

Aldous Huxley

THE drawingroom was on the first floor. The indistinct, inarticulate noise of many voices floated down the stairs, like the roaring of a distant train. Gregory took off his greatcoat and handed it to the parlourmaid.

“Don’t trouble to show me up,” he said. “I know the way.”

Always so considerate! And yet, for some reason, servants would never do anything for him; they despised and disliked him.

“Don’t bother,” he insisted.

The parlourmaid, who was young, with high colours and yellow hair, looked at him, he thought, with silent contempt and walked away. In all probability, he reflected, she had never meant to show him up. He felt humiliated—yet once more.

A mirror hung at the bottom of the stairs. He peered at his image, gave his hair a pat, his tie a straightening touch. His face was smooth and egg-shaped; he had regular features, pale hair and a very small mouth, with cupid’s bow effects in the upper lip. A curate’s face. Secretly, he thought himself handsome and was always astonished that more people were not of his opinion.

Gregory mounted the stairs, polishing his monocle as he went. The volume of sound increased. At the landing, where the staircase turned, he could see the open door of the drawingroom. At first he could see only the upper quarter of the tall doorway and, through it, a patch of ceiling; but with every step he saw more—a strip of wall below the cornice, a picture, the heads of people, their whole bodies, their legs and feet. At the penultimate step, he inserted his monocle and replaced his handkerchief in his pocket. Squaring his shoulders, he marched in—almost militarily, he flattered himself. His hostess was standing near the window, at the other side of the room. He advanced towards her, already, though she had not yet seen him, mechanically smiling his greetings. The room was crowded, hot, and misty with cigarette smoke. The noise was almost palpable; Gregory felt as though he were pushing his way laboriously through some denser element. Neck-deep, he waded through noise, still holding preciously above the flood his smile. He presented it, intact, to his hostess.

“Good evening, Hermione.”

“Ah, Gregory. How delightful! Good evening.”

“I adore your dress,” said Gregory, conscientiously following the advice of the enviably successful friend who had told him that one should never neglect to pay a compliment, however manifestly insincere. It wasn’t a bad dress, for that matter. But, of course, poor dear Hermione contrived to ruin anything she put on. She was quite malignantly ungraceful and ugly—on purpose, it always seemed toGregory.“Toolovely,”he cooed in his rather high voice.

Hermione smiled with pleasure. “I’m so glad,” she began. But before she could get any further, a loud voice, nasally chanting, interrupted her.

“Behold the monster Polypheme, behold the monster Polypheme,” it quoted, musically, from Acis and Galatea.

Gregory flushed. A large hand slapped him in the middle of the back, below the shoulder blades. His body emitted the drumlike thud of a patted retriever.

“Well, Polypheme”; the voice had ceased to sing and was conversational—“well, Polypheme, how are you?”

“Very well, thanks,” Gregory replied, without looking round. It was that drunken South African brute, Paxton. “Very well, thanks, Silenus,” he added.

Paxton had called him Polypheme because of his monocle: Polypheme, the one-eyed, wheel-eyed Cyclops. Tit for mythological tat. In future, he would always call Paxton Silenus.

“Bravo!” shouted Paxton. Gregory winced and gasped under a second, heartier slap. “Pretty high-class, this party. Eh, Hermione? Pretty cultured, what? It isn’t every day that a hostess can hear her guests shooting Greco-Roman witticisms at one another. I congratulate you, Hermione.” He put his arm round her waist. “I congratulate you on us.”

Hermione disengaged herself. “Don’t be a bore, Paxton,” she said impatiently.

Paxton laughed theatrically. “Ha, ha!” A villain’s laugh on the melodrama stage. And it was not his laughter only that was theatrical; his whole person parodied the old-time tragedian. The steep aquiline profile, the deeply sunken eyes, the black hair worn rather long—they were characteristic. “A thousand apologies”: he spoke with an ironical courtesy. “The poor colonial forgets himself. Boozy and ill-mannered boor!”

“Idiot!” said Hermione, and moved away.

Gregory made a movement to follow her, but Paxton caught him by the sleeve. “Tell me,” he inquired earnestly, “why do you wear a monocle, Polypheme?”

“Well, if you really want to know,” Gregory answered stiffly, “for the simple reason that I happen to be short-sighted and astigmatic in the left eye and not in the right.”

“Short-sighted and astigmatic?” the other repeated in tones of affected astonishment. “Short-sighted and astigmatic? God forgive me—and I thought it was because you wanted to look like a duke on the musical-comedy stage.”

Gregory’s laugh was meant to be one of frankly amazed amusement. That any one should have imagined such a thing! Incredible, comical! But a note of embarrassment and discomfort sounded through the amusement. For in reality, of course, Paxton was so devilishly nearly right. Conscious, only too acutely, of his nullity, his provincialism, his lack of successful arrogance, he had made the oculist’s diagnosis an excuse for trying to look smarter, more insolent, and impressive. In vain. His eyeglass had done nothing to increase his self-confidence. He was never at ease when he wore it. Monocle-wearers, he decided, are like poets: born, not made. Cambridge had not eradicated the midland grammar-school boy. Cultured, with literary leanings, he was always aware of being the wealthy boot manufacturer’s heir. He could not get used to his monocle. Most of the time, in spite of the oculist’s recommendations, it dangled at the end of its string, a pendulum when he walked and involving itself messily, when he ate, in soup and tea, in marmalade and the butter. It was only occasionally, in specially favourable circumstances, that Gregory adjusted it to his eye; more rarely still that he kept it, once adjusted, more than a few minutes, a few seconds even, without raising his eyebrow and letting it fall again. And how seldom circumstances were favourable to Gregory’s eyeglass! Sometimes his environment was too sordid for it, sometimes too smart. To wear a monocle in the presence of the poor, the miserable, the analphabetic is too triumphantly pointed a comment on their lot. Moreover, the poor and the analphabetic have a most deplorable habit of laughing derisively at such symbols of superior caste. Gregory was not laughter-proof; he lacked the lordly confidence and unawareness of nature’s monocle-wearers. He did not know how to ignore the poor, to treat them, if it were absolutely necessary to have dealings with them, as machines or domestic animals. He had seen too much of them in the days when his father was alive and had compelled him to take a practical interest in the business. It was the same lack of confidence that made him almost as chary of fixing his eyeglass in the presence of the rich. With them, he never felt quite sure that he had a right to his monocle. He felt himself a parvenu to monocularity. And then there were the intelligent. Their company, too, was most unfavourable to the eyeglass. Eyeglassed, how could one talk of serious things? “Mozart,” you might say, for example, “Mozart is so pure, so spiritually beautiful.” It was unthinkable to speak those words with a disk of crystal screwed into your left eye-socket. No, the environment was only too rarely favourable. Still, benignant circumstances did sometimes present themselves. Hermione’s half-Bohemian parties, for example. But he had reckoned without Paxton.

Amused, amazed, he laughed. As though by accident, the monocle dropped from his eye. “Oh, put it back,” cried Paxton, “put it back, I implore you,” and himself caught the glass, where it dangled over Gregory’s stomach, and tried to replace it.

Gregory stepped back; with one hand he pushed away his persecutor, with the other he tried to snatch the monocle from between his fingers. Paxton would not let it go.

“I implore you,” Paxton kept repeating.

“Give it me at once,” said Gregory, furiously, but in a low voice, so that people should not look round and see the grotesque cause of the quarrel. He had never been so outrageously made a fool of.

Paxton gave it him at last. “Forgive me,” he said, with mock penitence. “Forgive a poor drunken colonial who doesn’t know what’s done in the best society and what isn’t. You must remember I’m only a boozer, just a poor, hard-working drunkard. You know those registration forms they give you in French hotels? Name, date of birth and so on. You know?”

Gregory nodded, with dignity.

“Well, when it comes to profession, I always write ‘ivrogne’. That is, when I’m sober enough to remember the French word. If I’m too far gone, I just put ‘Drunkard.’ They all know English, nowadays.”

“Oh,” said Gregory coldly.

“It’s a capita! profession,” Paxton confided. “It permits you to do whatever you like—any damned thing that comes into your head. Throw your arms round any woman you fancy, tell her the most gross and fantastic impertinences, insult the men, laugh in people’s faces—everything’s permitted to the poor drunkard, particularly if he’s only a poor colonial and doesn’t know any better. Verb. sap. Take the hint from me, old boy. Drop the monocle. It’s no damned good. Be a boozer; you’ll have much more fun. Which reminds me that I must go and find some more drink at all costs. I’m getting sober.”

He disappeared into the crowd. Relieved, Gregory looked round in search of familiar faces. As he looked, he polished his monocle, took the opportunity to wipe his forehead, then put the glass to his eye.

“Excuse me.” He oozed his way insinuatingly between the close-set chairs, passed like a slug (“Excuse me”) between the all but contiguous backs of two standing groups. “Excuse me.” He had seen acquaintances over there, by the fireplace: Ransom and Mary Haig and Miss Camperdown. He joined in their conversation: they were talking about Mrs Mandragore.

All the old familiar stories about that famous lion-huntress were being repeated. He himself repeated two or three, with suitable pantomime, perfected by a hundred tellings. In the middle of a grimace, at the top of an elaborate gesture, he suddenly saw himself grimacing, gesticulating, he suddenly heard the cadences of his voice repeating, by heart, the old phrases. Why does one come to parties, why on earth? Always the same boring people, the same dull scandal, and one’s own same parlour tricks. Each time. But he smirked, he mimed, he fluted and bellowed his story through to the end. His auditors even laughed; it was a success. But Gregory felt ashamed of himself. Ransom began telling the story of Mrs Mandragore and the Maharajah of Pataliapur. He groaned in the spirit. Why? he asked himself, why, why, why? Behind him, they were talking politics. Still pretending to smile at the Mandragore fable, he listened.

“It’s the beginning of the end,” the politician was saying, prophesying destructions in a loud and cheerful voice.

“‘Dear Maharajah,’” Ransom imitated the Mandragore’s intense voice, her aimed and yearning gestures, “‘if you knew how I adore the East.’ ”

“Our unique position was due to the fact that we started the industrial system before any one else. Now, when the rest of the world has followed our example, we find it’s a disadvantage to have started first. All our equipment is old-fash-”

“Gregory,” called Mary Haig, “what’s your story about the Unknown Soldier?”

“Unknown Soldier?” said Gregory vaguely, trying to catch what was being said behind him.

“The latest arrivals have the latest machinery. It’s obvious. We …”

“You know the one. The Mandragore’s party; you know.”

“Oh, when she asked us all to tea to meet the Mother of the Unknown Soldier.”

“… like Italy,” the politician was saying in his loud, jolly voice. “In future, we shall always have one or two millions more population than we can employ. Living on the State.”

One or two millions. He thought of the Derby. Perhaps there might be a hundred thousand in that crowd. Ten Derbies, twenty Derbies, all half-starved, walking through the streets with brass bands and banners. He let his monocle fall. Must send five pounds to the London Hospital, he thought. Four thousand eight hundred a year. Thirteen pounds a day. Less taxes, of course. Taxes were terrible. Monstrous, sir, monstrous. He tried to feel as indignant about taxes as those old gentlemen who get red in the face when they talk about them. But somehow, he couldn’t manage to do it. And after all, taxes were no excuse, no justification. He felt all at once profoundly depressed. Still, he tried to comfort himself, not more than twenty or twenty-five out of the two million could live on his income. Twenty-five out of two millions—it was absurd, derisory! But he was not consoled.

“And the odd thing is,” Ransom was still talking about the Mandragore, “she isn’t really in the least interested in her lions. She’ll begin telling you about what Anatole France said to her and then forget in the middle, out of pure boredom, what she’s talking about.”

Oh, God, God, thought Gregory. How often had he heard Ransom making the same reflections on the Mandragore’s psychology! How often! He’d be bringing out that bit about the chimpanzees in half a moment. God help us!

“Have you ever watched the chimpanzees at the Zoo?” said Ransom. “The way they pick up a straw or a banana skin and examine it for a few seconds with a passionate attention.” He went through a simian pantomine. “Then, suddenly, get utterly bored, let the thing drop from their fingers and look round vaguely in search of something else. They always remind me of the Mandragore and her guests. The way she begins, earnestly, as though you were the only person in the world; then all at once . .

Gregory could bear it no longer. He mumbled something to Miss Camperdown about having seen somebody he must talk to, and disappeared, “Excuse me,” slug-like, through the crowd. Oh, the misery, the appalling gloom of it all! In a corner, he found young Crane and two or three other men with tumblers in their hands.

“Ah, Crane,” he said, “for God’s sake tell me where you got that drink.”

That golden fluid—it seemed the only hope. Crane pointed in the direction of the archway leading into the back drawingroom. He raised his glass without speaking, drank, and winked at Gregory over the top of it. He had a face that looked like an accident. Gregory oozed on through the crowd. “Excuse me,” he said aloud; but inwardly he was saying, “God help us.”

At the further end of the back drawingroom was a table with bottles and glasses. The professional drunkard was sitting on a sofa near by, glass in hand, making personal remarks to himself about all the people who came within earshot.

“Christ!” he was saying, as Gregory came up to the table. “Christ! Look at that!” That was the gaunt Mrs Labadie in cloth of gold and pearls. “Christ!” She had pounced on a shy young man entrenched behind the table.

“Tell me, Mr Foley,” she began, approaching her horse-like face very close to that of the young man and speaking appealingly, “you who know all about mathematics, tell me …”

“Is it possible?” exclaimed the professional drunkard. “In England’s green and pleasant land? Ha, ha, ha!” He laughed his melodramatic laugh.

Pretentious fool, thought Gregory. How romantic he thinks himself! The laughing philosopher, what? Drunk because the world isn’t good enough for him. Quite the little Faust.

“And Polypheme too,” Paxton soliloquized on, “funny little Polypheme!” He laughed again. “The heir to all the ages. Christ!”

With dignity, Gregory poured himself out some whisky and filled up the glass from the siphon—with dignity, with conscious grace and precision, as though he were acting the part of a man who helps himself to whisky and soda on the stage. He took a sip; then elaborately acted the part of one who takes out his handkerchief and blows his nose.

“Don’t they make one believe in birth control, all these people,” continued the professional drunkard. “If only their parents could have had a few intimate words with Stopes! Heigh ho!” He uttered a stylized Shakespearean sigh.

Buffoon, thought Gregory. And the worst is that if one called him one, he’d pretend that he’d said so himself, all the time And so he has, of course, just to be on the safe side. But in reality, it’s obvious, the man thinks of himself as a sort of Musset or up-to-date Byron. A beautiful soul, darkened and embittered by experience. Ugh!

Still pretending to be unaware of the professional boozer’s proximity, Gregory went through the actions of the man who sips.

“How clear you make it!” Mrs Labadie was saying, point blank, into the young mathematician’s face. She smiled at him; the horse, thought Gregory, has a terribly human expression.

“Well,” said the young mathematician nervously, “now we come on to Riemann.”

“Riemann!” Mrs Labadie repeated, with a kind of ecstasy. “Riemann!” as though the geometrician’s soul were in his name.

Gregory wished that there were somebody to talk to, somebody who would relieve him of the necessity of acting the part of unaware indifference before the scrutinizing eyes of Paxton. He leaned against the wall in the attitude of one who falls, all of a sudden, into a brown study. Blankly and pensively, he stared at a point on the opposite wall, high up, just below the ceiling. People must be wondering, he reflected, what he was thinking about. And what was he thinking about? Himself. Vanity, vanity. Oh, the gloom, the misery of it all!

“Polypheme!”

He pretended not to hear.

“Polypheme!” It was a shout this time.

Gregory slightly overacted the part of one who is suddenly aroused from profoundest meditation. He started; blinking, a little dazed, he turned his head.

“Ah, Paxton,” he said. “Silenus! I hadn’t noticed that you were there.”

“Hadn’t you?” said the professional drunkard. “That was damned clever of you. What were you thinking about so picturesquely there?”

“Oh, nothing,” said Gregory, smiling with the modest confusion of the Thinker, caught in the act.

“Just what I imagined,” said Paxton. “Nothing. Nothing at all. Jesus Christ!” he added, for himself.

Gregory’s smile was rather sickly. He averted his face and passed once more into meditation. It seemed, in the circumstances, the best thing he could do. Dreamily, as though unconscious of what he was doing, he emptied his glass.

“Crippen!” he heard the professional drunkard muttering. “It’s like a funeral. Joyless, joyless.”

“Well, Gregory.”

Gregory did another of his graceful starts, his dazed blinkings. He had been afraid, for a moment, that Spiller was going to respect his meditation and not speak to him. That would have been very embarrassing.

“Spiller!” he exclaimed with delight and astonishment. “My dear chap.” He shook him heartily by the hand.

Square-faced, with a wide mouth and an immense forehead, framed in copious and curly hair, Spiller looked like a Victorian celebrity. His friends declared that he might actually have been a Georgian celebrity but for the fact that he preferred talking to writing.

“Just up for the day,” explained Spiller. “I couldn’t stand another hour of the bloody country. Working all day. No company but my own. I find I bore myself to death.” He helped himself to whisky.

“Jesus! The great man! Ha, ha!” The professional drunkard covered his face with his hands and shuddered violently.

“Do you mean to say you came specially for this?” asked Gregory, waving his hand to indicate the party at large.

“Not specially. Incidentally. I heard that Hermione was giving a party, so I dropped in.”

“Why does one go to parties?” said Gregory, unconsciously assuming something of the embittered Byronic manner of the professional drunkard.

“To satisfy the cravings of the herd instinct.” Spiller replied to the rhetorical question without hesitation and with a pontifical air of infallibility. “Just as one pursues women to satisfy the cravings of the reproductive instinct.” Spiller had an impressive way of making everything he said sound very scientific; it all seemed to come straight from the horse’s mouth, so to speak. Vague-minded Gregory found him most stimulating.

“You mean, one goes to parties just in order to be in a crowd?”

“Precisely,” Spiller replied. “Just to feel the warmth of the herd around one and sniff the smell of one’s fellow-humans.” He snuffed the thick, hot air.

“I suppose you must be right,” said Gregory. “It’s certainly very hard to think of any other reason.”

He looked round the room as though searching for other reasons. And surprisingly, he found one: Molly Voles. He had not seen her before; she must have only just arrived.

“I’ve got a capital idea for a new paper,” began Spiller.

“Have you?” Gregory did not show much curiosity. How beautiful her neck was, and those thin arms!

“Art, literature, and science,” Spiller continued. “The idea’s a really modern one. It’s to bring science into touch with the arts and so into touch with life. Life, art, science—all three would gain. You see the notion?”

“Yes,” said Gregory, “I see.” He was looking at Molly, hoping to catch her eye. He caught it at last, that cool and steady grey eye. She smiled and nodded.

“You like the idea?” asked Spiller.

“I think it’s splendid,” answered Gregory with a sudden warmth that astonished his interlocutor.

Spiller’s large severe face shone with pleasure. “Oh, I’m glad,” he said, “I’m very glad indeed that you like it so much.”

“I think it’s splendid,” said Gregory extravagantly. “Simply splendid.” She had seemed really glad to see him, he thought.

“I was thinking,” Spiller pursued, with a rather elaborate casualness of manner, “I was thinking you might like to help me start the thing. One could float it comfortably with a thousand pounds of capital.”

The enthusiasm faded out of Gregory’s face: it became blank in its clerical roundness. He shook his head. “If I had a thousand pounds,” he said regretfully. Damn the man! he was thinking. Setting me a trap like that.

“If,” repeated Spiller. “But, my dear fellow!” He laughed. “And besides, it’s a safe six per cent, investment. I can collect an extraordinarily strong set of contributors, you know.”

Gregory shook his head once more. “Alas,” he said, “alas!”

“And what’s more,” insisted Spiller, “you’d be a benefactor of society.”

“Impossible.” Gregory was firm; he planted his feet like a donkey and would not be moved. Money was the one thing he never had a difficulty in being firm about.

“But come,” said Spiller, “come. What’s a thousand pounds to a millionaire like you? You’ve got—how much have you got?”

Gregory stared him glassily in the eyes.

“Twelve hundred a year,” he said. “Say fourteen hundred.” He could see that Spiller didn’t believe him. Damn the man! Not that he really expected him to believe; but still … “And then there are one’s taxes,” he added plaintively, “and one’s contributions to charities.” He remembered that fiver he was going to send to the London Hospital. “The London Hospital, for example—always short of money.” He shook his head sadly. “Quite impossible, I’m afraid.” He thought of all the unemployed; ten Derby crowds, half starved, with banners and brass bands. He felt himself blushing. Damn the man! He was furious with Spiller.

Two voices sounded simultaneously in his ears: the professional drunkard’s and another, a woman’s—Molly’s.

“The succubus!” groaned the professional drunkard. ‘II ne manquait que ça!”

“Impossible?” said Molly’s voice, unexpectedly repeating his latest word. “What’s impossible?”

“Well—” said Gregory, embarrassed, and hesitated.

It was Spiller who explained.

“Why, of course Gregory can put up a thousand pounds,” said Molly, when she had learned what was the subject at issue. She looked at him indignantly, contemptuously, as though reproaching him for his avarice.

“You know better than I, then,” said Gregory, trying to take the airy jocular line about the matter. He remembered what the enviably successful friend had told him about compliments. “How lovely you look in that white dress, Molly!” he added, and tempered the jocularity of his smile with a glance that was meant to be at once insolent and tender. “Too lovely,” he repeated, and put up his monocle to look at her.

“Thank you,” she said, looking back at him unwaveringly. Her eyes were calm and bright. Against that firm and penetrating regard his jocularity, his attempt at insolent tenderness, punctured and crumpled up. He averted his eyes, he let fall his eyeglass. It was a weapon he did not dare or know how to use—it made him look ridiculous. He was like horse-faced Mrs Labadie flirting coquettishly with her fan.

“I’d like to discuss the question in any case,” he said to Spiller, glad of any excuse to escape from those eyes. “But I assure you I really can’t… . Not the whole thousand, at any rate,” he added, feeling despairingly that he had been forced against his will to surrender.

“Molly!” shouted the professional drunkard.

Obediently she went and sat down beside him on the sofa.

“Well, Tom,” she said, and laid her hand on his knee. “How are you?”

“As I always am, when you’re anywhere about,” answered the professional drunkard tragically: “insane.” He put his arm round her shoulders and leaned towards her. “Utterly insane.”

“I’d rather we didn’t sit like this, you know.” She smiled at him; they looked at one another closely. Then Paxton withdrew his arm and leaned back in his corner of the sofa.

Looking at them, Gregory was suddenly convinced that they were lovers. We needs must love the lowest when we see it. All Molly’s lovers were like that: ruffians.

He turned to Spiller. “Shouldn’t we go back to my rooms?” he suggested, interrupting him in the midst of a long explanatory discourse about the projected paper. “It’ll be quieter there and less stuffy.” Molly and Paxton, Molly and that drunken brute. Was it possible? It was certain: he had no doubts. “Let’s get out of this beastly place quickly,” he added.

“All right,” Spiller agreed. “One last lashing of whisky to support us on the way.” He reached for the bottle.

Gregory drank nearly half a tumbler, undiluted. A few yards down the street, he realized that he was rather tipsy.

“I think I must have a very feebly developed herd instinct,” he said. “How I hate these crowds!” Molly and Silenus-Paxton! He imagined their loves. And he had thought that she had been glad to see him, when first he caught her eye.

They emerged into Bedford Square. The gardens were as darkly mysterious as a piece of country woodland. Woodland without, whisky within, combined to make Gregory’s melancholy vocal. Che farò senz’ Euridice? he softly sang.

“You can do without her very well,” said Spiller, replying to the quotation. “That’s the swindle and stupidity of love. Each time you feel convinced that it’s something immensely significant and everlasting: you feel infinitely. Each time. Three weeks later you’re beginning to find her boring; or somebody else rolls the eye and the infinite emotions are transferred and you’re off on another eternal week-end. It’s a sort of practical joke. Very stupid and disagreeable. But then nature’s humour isn’t ours.”

“You think it’s a joke, that infinite feeling?” asked Gregory indignantly. “I don’t. I believe that it represents something real, outside ourselves, something in the structure of the universe.”

“A different universe with every mistress, eh?”

“But if it occurs only once in a lifetime?” asked Gregory in a maudlin voice. He longed to tell his companion how unhappy he felt about Molly, how much unhappier than anybody had ever felt before.

“It doesn’t,” said Spiller.

“But if I say it does?” Gregory hiccoughed.

“That’s only due to lack of opportunities, Spiller replied in his most decisively scientific, ex cathedra manner.

“I don’t agree with you,” was all that Gregory could say, feebly. He decided not to mention his unhappiness. Spiller might not be a sympathetic listener. Coarse old devil!

“Personally,” Spiller continued, “I’ve long ago ceased trying to make sense of it. I just accept these infinite emotions for what they are—very stimulating and exciting while they last—and don’t attempt to rationalize or explain them. It’s the only sane and scientific way of treating the facts.”

There was a silence. They had emerged into the brilliance of the Tottenham Court Road. The polished roadway reflected the arc lamps. The entrances to the cinema palaces were caverns of glaring yellow light. A pair of buses roared past.

“They’re dangerous, those infinite emotions,” Spiller went on, “very dangerous. I once came within an inch of getting married on the strength of one of them. It began on a steamer. You know what steamers are. The extraordinary aphrodisiac effects sea voyaging has on people who aren’t used to it, especially women! They really ought to be studied by some competent physiologist. Of course, it may be simply the result of idleness, high feeding and constant proximity—though I doubt if you’d get the same results in similar circumstances on land. Perhaps the total change of environment, from earth to water, undermines the usual terrestrial prejudices. Perhaps the very shortness of the voyage helps—the sense that it’s so soon coming to an end that rosebuds must be gathered and hay made while the sun shines. Who knows?” He shrugged his shoulders. “But in any case, it’s most extraordinary. Well, it began, as I say, on a steamer.”

Gregory listened. A few minutes since the trees of Bedford Square had waved in the darkness of his boozily maudlin soul. The lights, the noise, the movement of the Tottenham Court Road were now behind his eyes as well as before them. He listened, grinning. The story lasted well into the Charing Cross Road.

By the time it had come to an end, Gregory was feeling in an entirely jolly and jaunty mood. He had associated himself with Spiller; Spiller’s adventures were his. He guffawed with laughter, he readjusted his monocle, which had been dangling all this time at the end of its string, which had been tinkling at every step against the buttons of his waistcoat. (A broken heart, it must be obvious to any one who has the slightest sensibility, cannot possibly wear an eyeglass.) He too was a bit of a dog, now. He hiccoughed; a certain suspicion of queasiness tempered his jollity, but it was no more than the faintest suspicion. Yes, yes; he too knew all about life on steamers, even though the longest of his sea voyages had only been from Newhaven to Dieppe.

When they reached Cambridge Circus, the theatres were just disgorging their audiences. The pavements were crowded; the air was full of noise and the perfume of women. Overhead, the skysigns winced and twitched. The theatre vestibules brightly glared. It was an inaristocratic and vulgar luxury, to which Gregory had no difficulty in feeling himself superior. Through his Cyclopean monocle, he gazed inquiringly at every woman they passed. He felt wonderfully reckless (the queasiness was the merest suspicion of an unpleasant sensation), wonderfully jolly and—yes, that was curious—large: larger than life. As for Molly Voles, he’d teach her.

“Lovely creature, that,” he said, indicating a cloak of pink silk and gold, a close-cropped golden head.

Spiller nodded, indifferently. “About that paper of ours,” he said thoughtfully. “I was thinking that we might start off with a series of articles on the metaphysical basis of science, the reasons, historical and philosophical, that we have for assuming that scientific truth is true.”

“H’m,” said Gregory.

“And concurrently a series on the meaning and point of art. Start right from the beginning in both cases. Quite a good idea, don’t you think?”

“Quite,” said Gregory. One of his monocular glances had been received with a smile of invitation; she was ugly, unfortunately, and obviously professional. Haughtily he glared past her, as though she were not there.

“But whether Tolstoy was right,” Spiller was meditatively saying, “I never feel sure. Is it true, what he says, that the function of art is the conveyance of emotion? In part, I should say, but not exclusively, not exclusively.” He shook his large head.

“I seem to be getting tipsier,” said Gregory, more to himself than to his companion. He still walked correctly, but he was conscious, too conscious, of the fact. And the suspicion of queasiness was becoming well founded.

Spiller did not hear or, hearing, ignored the remark. “For me,” he continued, “the main function of art is to impart knowledge. The artist knows more than the rest of us. He is born knowing more about his soul than we know of ours, and more about the relations existing between his soul and the cosmos. He anticipates what will be common knowledge in a higher state of development. Most of our moderns are primitives compared with the most advanced of the dead.”

“Quite,” said Gregory, not listening. His thoughts were elsewhere, with his eyes.

“Moreover,” Spiller went on, “he can say what he knows, and say it in such a way that our own rudimentary, incoherent, unrealized knowledge of what he talks about falls into a kind of pattern—like iron filings under the influence of the magnet.”

There were three of them—ravishingly, provocatively young—standing in a group at the pavement’s edge. They chattered, they stared with bright derisive eyes at the passers-by, they commented in audible whispers, they burst into irrepressible shrill laughter, Spiller and Gregory approached, were spied by one of the three, who nudged her fellows.

“Oh, Lord!”

They giggled, they laughed aloud, they were contorted with mockery.

“Look at old Golliwog!” That was for Spiller, who walked bareheaded, his large grey hat in his hand.

“And the nut!” Another yell for the monocle.

“It’s that magnetic power,” said Spiller, quite unaware of the lovely derision of which he was the object, “that power of organizing mental chaos into a pattern, which makes a truth uttered poetically, in art, more valuable than a truth uttered scientifically, in prose.”

Playfully reproving, Gregory wagged a finger at the mockers. There was a yet more piercing yell. The two men passed; smilingly Gregory looked back. He felt jauntier and jollier than ever; but the suspicion was ripening to a certainty.

“For instance,” said Spiller, “I may know well enough that all men are mortal. But this knowledge is organized and given a form, it is even actually increased and deepened, when Shakespeare talks about all our yesterdays having lighted fools the way to dusty death.”

Gregory was trying to think of an excuse for giving his companion the slip and turning back to dally with the three. He would love them all, simultaneously.

The Mallarméan phrase came back to him, imposing on his vague desires (old man Spiller was quite right, old imbecile!) the most elegant of forms. Spiller’s words came to him as though from a great distance.

“And the Coriolan overture is a piece of new knowledge, as well as a composer of existing chaotic knowledge.”

He would suggest dropping in at the Monico, pretext a call of nature, slip out and never return. Old imbecile, maundering on like that! Not but what it mightn’t have been quite interesting, at the right moment. But now … And he thought, no doubt, that he was going to tap him, Gregory, for a thousand pounds! Gregory could have laughed aloud. But his derision was tinged with an uneasy consciousness that his tipsiness had definitely taken a new and disquieting form.

“Some of Cézanne’s landscapes,” he heard Spiller saying.

Suddenly, from a shadowed doorway a few yards down the street in front of them, there emerged, slowly, tremulously, a thing: a bundle of black tatters that moved on a pair of old squashed boots, that was topped by a broken, dog’s-eared hat. It had a face, clay-coloured and emaciated. It had hands, in one of which it held a little tray with match-boxes. It opened its mouth, from which two or three of the discoloured teeth were missing; it sang, all but inaudibly. Gregory thought he recognized “Nearer, my God, to Thee.” They approached.

“Certain frescoes of Giotto, certain early Greek sculptures,” Spiller went on with his interminable catalogue.

The thing looked at them, Gregory looked at the thing. Their eyes met. Gregory expanded his left eye-socket. The monocle dropped to the end of its silken tether. He felt in his right-hand trouser pocket, the pocket where he kept his silver, for a sixpence, a shilling even. The pocket contained only four half-crowns. Half a crown? He hesitated, drew one of the coins halfway to the surface, then let it fall again with a chink. He dipped his left hand into his other trouser pocket, he withdrew it, full. Into the proffered tray he dropped three pennies and a halfpenny.

“No, I don’t want any matches,” he said.

Gratitude interrupted the hymn. Gregory had never felt so much ashamed in his life. His monocle tinkled against the buttons of his waistcoat. Deliberately, he placed one foot before the other, walking with correctness, but as though on a tight-rope. Yet another insult to the thing. He wished to God he were sober. He wished to God he hadn’t desired with such precision that “dishevelled tuft of kisses”. Threepence-halfpenny! But he could still run back and give half a crown, two half-crowns. He could still run back. Step by step, as though on the tight-rope, he advanced, keeping step with Spiller. Four steps, five steps … eleven steps, twelve steps, thirteen steps. Oh, the unluckiness! Eighteen steps, nineteen… . Too late; it would be ridiculous to turn back now, it would be too conspicuously silly. Twenty-three, twenty-four steps. The suspicion was a certainty of queasiness, a growing certainty.

“At the same time,” Spiller was saying, “I really don’t see how the vast majority of scientific truths and hypotheses can ever become the subject of art. I don’t see how they can be given poetic, emotive significance without losing their precision. How could you render the electro-magnetic theory of light, for example, in a moving literary form? It simply can’t be done.”

“Oh, for God’s sake,” shouted Gregory with a sudden outburst of fury, “for God’s sake, shut up! How can you go on talking and talking away like this?” He hiccoughed again, more profoundly and menacingly than before.

“But why on earth not?” asked Spiller with a mild astonishment.

“Talking about art and science and poetry,” said Gregory tragically, almost with tears in his eyes, “when there are two million people in England on the brink of starvation. Two million.” He meant the repetition to be impressive, but he hiccoughed yet once more; he was feeling definitely rather sick. “Living in stinking hovels,” he went on, decrescendo, “promiscuously, herded together, like animals. Worse than animals.”

They had halted; they confronted one another.

“How can you?” repeated Gregory, trying to reproduce the generous indignation of a moment since. But anticipations of nausea were creeping up from his stomach, like a miasma from a marsh, filling his mind, driving out from it every thought, every emotion except the horrid apprehension of being sick.

Spiller’s large face suddenly lost its monumental, Victorian celebrity’s appearance; it seemed to fall to pieces. The mouth opened, the eyes puckered up, the forehead broke into wrinkles and the deep lines running from either side of the nose to the corners of the mouth expanded and contracted wildly, like a pair of demented glove-stretchers. An immense sound came out of him. His great body was shaken with gigantic laughter.

Patiently—patience was all that was left him, patience and a fading hope—Gregory waited for the paroxysm to subside. He had made a fool of himself; he was being derided. But he was past caring.

Spiller so far recovered as to be able to speak. “You’re wonderful, my dear Gregory,” he said, gasping. The tears stood in his eyes. “Really superb.” He took him affectionately by the arm and, still laughing, walked on. Gregory perforce walked too; he had no choice.

“If you don’t mind,” he said after a few steps, “I think we’ll take a taxi.”

“What, to Jermyn Street?” said Spiller.

“I think we’d better,” Gregory insisted.

Climbing into the vehicle, he managed to entangle his monocle in the handle of the door. The string snapped: the glass dropped on the floor of the cab. Spiller picked it up and returned it to him.

“Thank you,” said Gregory, and put it out of harm’s way into a waistcoat pocket.