

Chapter 4. The Singular Speculation of the House-Agent

Lieutenant Drummond Keith was a man about whom conversation always burst like a thunderstorm the moment he left the room. This arose from many separate touches about him. He was a light, loose person, who wore light, loose clothes, generally white, as if he were in the tropics; he was lean and graceful, like a panther, and he had restless black eyes.

He was very impecunious. He had one of the habits of the poor, in a degree so exaggerated as immeasurably to eclipse the most miserable of the unemployed; I mean the habit of continual change of lodgings. There are inland tracts of London where, in the very heart of artificial civilization, humanity has almost become nomadic once more. But in that restless interior there was no ragged tramp so restless as the elegant officer in the loose white clothes. He had shot a great many things in his time, to judge from his conversation, from partridges to elephants, but his slangier acquaintances were of opinion that "the moon" had been not unfrequently amid the victims of his victorious rifle. The phrase is a fine one, and suggests a mystic, elvish, nocturnal hunting.

He carried from house to house and from parish to parish a kit which consisted practically of five articles. Two odd-looking, large-bladed spears, tied together, the weapons, I suppose, of some savage tribe, a green umbrella, a huge and tattered copy of the Pickwick Papers, a big game rifle, and a large sealed jar of some unholy Oriental wine. These always went into every new lodging, even for one night; and they went in quite undisguised, tied up in wisps of string or straw, to the delight of the poetic gutter boys in the little grey streets.

I had forgotten to mention that he always carried also his old regimental sword. But this raised another odd question about him. Slim and active as he was, he was no longer very young. His hair, indeed, was quite grey, though his rather wild almost Italian moustache retained its blackness, and his face was careworn under its almost Italian gaiety. To find a middle-aged man who has left the Army at the primitive rank of lieutenant is unusual and not necessarily encouraging. With the more cautious and solid this fact, like his endless flitting, did the mysterious gentleman no good.

Lastly, he was a man who told the kind of adventures which win a man admiration, but not respect. They came out of queer places, where a good man would scarcely find himself, out of opium dens and gambling hells; they had the heat of the thieves' kitchens or smelled of a strange smoke from cannibal incantations. These are the kind of stories which discredit a person almost

equally whether they are believed or no. If Keith's tales were false he was a liar; if they were true he had had, at any rate, every opportunity of being a scamp.

He had just left the room in which I sat with Basil Grant and his brother Rupert, the voluble amateur detective. And as I say was invariably the case, we were all talking about him. Rupert Grant was a clever young fellow, but he had that tendency which youth and cleverness, when sharply combined, so often produce, a somewhat extravagant scepticism. He saw doubt and guilt everywhere, and it was meat and drink to him. I had often got irritated with this boyish incredulity of his, but on this particular occasion I am bound to say that I thought him so obviously right that I was astounded at Basil's opposing him, however banteringly.

I could swallow a good deal, being naturally of a simple turn, but I could not swallow Lieutenant Keith's autobiography.

"You don't seriously mean, Basil," I said, "that you think that that fellow really did go as a stowaway with Nansen and pretend to be the Mad Mullah and--"

"He has one fault," said Basil thoughtfully, "or virtue, as you may happen to regard it. He tells the truth in too exact and bald a style; he is too veracious."

"Oh! if you are going to be paradoxical," said Rupert contemptuously, "be a bit funnier than that. Say, for instance, that he has lived all his life in one ancestral manor."

"No, he's extremely fond of change of scene," replied Basil dispassionately, "and of living in odd places. That doesn't prevent his chief trait being verbal exactitude. What you people don't understand is that telling a thing crudely and coarsely as it happened makes it sound frightfully strange. The sort of things Keith recounts are not the sort of things that a man would make up to cover himself with honour; they are too absurd. But they are the sort of things that a man would do if he were sufficiently filled with the soul of skylarking."

"So far from paradox," said his brother, with something rather like a sneer, "you seem to be going in for journalese proverbs. Do you believe that truth is stranger than fiction?"

"Truth must of necessity be stranger than fiction," said Basil placidly. "For fiction is the creation of the human mind, and therefore is congenial to it."

"Well, your lieutenant's truth is stranger, if it is truth, than anything I ever heard of," said Rupert, relapsing into flippancy. "Do you, on your soul, believe in all that

about the shark and the camera?"

"I believe Keith's words," answered the other. "He is an honest man."

"I should like to question a regiment of his landladies," said Rupert cynically.

"I must say, I think you can hardly regard him as unimpeachable merely in himself," I said mildly; "his mode of life--"

Before I could complete the sentence the door was flung open and Drummond Keith appeared again on the threshold, his white Panama on his head.

"I say, Grant," he said, knocking off his cigarette ash against the door, "I've got no money in the world till next April. Could you lend me a hundred pounds? There's a good chap."

Rupert and I looked at each other in an ironical silence. Basil, who was sitting by his desk, swung the chair round idly on its screw and picked up a quill-pen.

"Shall I cross it?" he asked, opening a cheque-book.

"Really," began Rupert, with a rather nervous loudness, "since Lieutenant Keith has seen fit to make this suggestion to Basil before his family, I--"

"Here you are, Ugly," said Basil, fluttering a cheque in the direction of the quite nonchalant officer. "Are you in a hurry?"

"Yes," replied Keith, in a rather abrupt way. "As a matter of fact I want it now. I want to see my--er--business man."

Rupert was eyeing him sarcastically, and I could see that it was on the tip of his tongue to say, inquiringly, "Receiver of stolen goods, perhaps." What he did say was:

"A business man? That's rather a general description, Lieutenant Keith."

Keith looked at him sharply, and then said, with something rather like ill-temper:

"He's a thingum-my-bob, a house-agent, say. I'm going to see him."

"Oh, you're going to see a house-agent, are you?" said Rupert Grant grimly. "Do you know, Mr Keith, I think I should very much like to go with you?"

Basil shook with his soundless laughter. Lieutenant Keith started a little; his brow blackened sharply.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "What did you say?"

Rupert's face had been growing from stage to stage of ferocious irony, and he answered:

"I was saying that I wondered whether you would mind our strolling along with you to this house-agent's."

The visitor swung his stick with a sudden whirling violence.

"Oh, in God's name, come to my house-agent's! Come to my bedroom. Look under my bed. Examine my dust-bin. Come along!" And with a furious energy which took away our breath he banged his way out of the room.

Rupert Grant, his restless blue eyes dancing with his detective excitement, soon shouldered alongside him, talking to him with that transparent camaraderie which he imagined to be appropriate from the disguised policeman to the disguised criminal. His interpretation was certainly corroborated by one particular detail, the unmistakable unrest, annoyance, and nervousness of the man with whom he walked. Basil and I tramped behind, and it was not necessary for us to tell each other that we had both noticed this.

Lieutenant Drummond Keith led us through very extraordinary and unpromising neighbourhoods in the search for his remarkable house-agent. Neither of the brothers Grant failed to notice this fact. As the streets grew closer and more crooked and the roofs lower and the gutters grosser with mud, a darker curiosity deepened on the brows of Basil, and the figure of Rupert seen from behind seemed to fill the street with a gigantic swagger of success. At length, at the end of the fourth or fifth lean grey street in that sterile district, we came suddenly to a halt, the mysterious lieutenant looking once more about him with a sort of sulky desperation. Above a row of shutters and a door, all indescribably dingy in appearance and in size scarce sufficient even for a penny toyshop, ran the inscription: "P. Montmorency, House-Agent."

"This is the office of which I spoke," said Keith, in a cutting voice. "Will you wait here a moment, or does your astonishing tenderness about my welfare lead you to wish to overhear everything I have to say to my business adviser?"

Rupert's face was white and shaking with excitement; nothing on earth would have induced him now to have abandoned his prey.

"If you will excuse me," he said, clenching his hands behind his back, "I think I should feel myself justified in--"

"Oh! Come along in," exploded the lieutenant. He made the same gesture of savage surrender. And he slammed into the office, the rest of us at his heels.

P. Montmorency, House-Agent, was a solitary old gentleman sitting behind a bare brown counter. He had an egglike head, froglike jaws, and a grey hairy fringe of aureole round the lower part of his face; the whole combined with a reddish, aquiline nose. He wore a shabby black frock-coat, a sort of semi-clerical tie worn at a very unclerical angle, and looked, generally speaking, about as unlike a house-agent as anything could look, short of something like a sandwich man or a Scotch Highlander.

We stood inside the room for fully forty seconds, and the odd old gentleman did not look at us. Neither, to tell the truth, odd as he was, did we look at him. Our eyes were fixed, where his were fixed, upon something that was crawling about on the counter in front of him. It was a ferret.

The silence was broken by Rupert Grant. He spoke in that sweet and steely voice which he reserved for great occasions and practised for hours together in his bedroom. He said:

"Mr Montmorency, I think?"

The old gentleman started, lifted his eyes with a bland bewilderment, picked up the ferret by the neck, stuffed it alive into his trousers pocket, smiled apologetically, and said:

"Sir."

"You are a house-agent, are you not?" asked Rupert.

To the delight of that criminal investigator, Mr Montmorency's eyes wandered unquietly towards Lieutenant Keith, the only man present that he knew.

"A house-agent," cried Rupert again, bringing out the word as if it were 'burglar'.

"Yes... oh, yes," said the man, with a quavering and almost coquettish smile. "I am a house-agent... oh, yes."

"Well, I think," said Rupert, with a sardonic sleekness, "that Lieutenant Keith

wants to speak to you. We have come in by his request."

Lieutenant Keith was lowering gloomily, and now he spoke.

"I have come, Mr Montmorency, about that house of mine."

"Yes, sir," said Montmorency, spreading his fingers on the flat counter. "It's all ready, sir. I've attended to all your suggestions er--about the br--"

"Right," cried Keith, cutting the word short with the startling neatness of a gunshot. "We needn't bother about all that. If you've done what I told you, all right."

And he turned sharply towards the door.

Mr Montmorency, House-Agent, presented a picture of pathos. After stammering a moment he said: "Excuse me... Mr Keith... there was another matter... about which I wasn't quite sure. I tried to get all the heating apparatus possible under the circumstances ... but in winter... at that elevation..."

"Can't expect much, eh?" said the lieutenant, cutting in with the same sudden skill. "No, of course not. That's all right, Montmorency. There can't be any more difficulties," and he put his hand on the handle of the door.

"I think," said Rupert Grant, with a satanic suavity, "that Mr Montmorency has something further to say to you, lieutenant."

"Only," said the house-agent, in desperation, "what about the birds?"

"I beg your pardon," said Rupert, in a general blank.

"What about the birds?" said the house-agent doggedly.

Basil, who had remained throughout the proceedings in a state of Napoleonic calm, which might be more accurately described as a state of Napoleonic stupidity, suddenly lifted his leonine head.

"Before you go, Lieutenant Keith," he said. "Come now. Really, what about the birds?"

"I'll take care of them," said Lieutenant Keith, still with his long back turned to us; "they shan't suffer."

"Thank you, sir, thank you," cried the incomprehensible house-agent, with an air of ecstasy. "You'll excuse my concern, sir. You know I'm wild on wild animals. I'm as wild as any of them on that. Thank you, sir. But there's another thing..."

The lieutenant, with his back turned to us, exploded with an indescribable laugh and swung round to face us. It was a laugh, the purport of which was direct and essential, and yet which one cannot exactly express. As near as it said anything, verbally speaking, it said: "Well, if you must spoil it, you must. But you don't know what you're spoiling."

"There is another thing," continued Mr Montmorency weakly. "Of course, if you don't want to be visited you'll paint the house green, but--"

"Green!" shouted Keith. "Green! Let it be green or nothing. I won't have a house of another colour. Green!" and before we could realize anything the door had banged between us and the street.

Rupert Grant seemed to take a little time to collect himself; but he spoke before the echoes of the door died away.

"Your client, Lieutenant Keith, appears somewhat excited," he said. "What is the matter with him? Is he unwell?"

"Oh, I should think not," said Mr Montmorency, in some confusion. "The negotiations have been somewhat difficult--the house is rather--"

"Green," said Rupert calmly. "That appears to be a very important point. It must be rather green. May I ask you, Mr Montmorency, before I rejoin my companion outside, whether, in your business, it is usual to ask for houses by their colour? Do clients write to a house-agent asking for a pink house or a blue house? Or, to take another instance, for a green house?"

"Only," said Montmorency, trembling, "only to be inconspicuous."

Rupert had his ruthless smile. "Can you tell me any place on earth in which a green house would be inconspicuous?"

The house-agent was fidgeting nervously in his pocket. Slowly drawing out a couple of lizards and leaving them to run on the counter, he said:

"No; I can't."

"You can't suggest an explanation?"

"No," said Mr Montmorency, rising slowly and yet in such a way as to suggest a sudden situation, "I can't. And may I, as a busy man, be excused if I ask you, gentlemen, if you have any demand to make of me in connection with my business. What kind of house would you desire me to get for you, sir?"

He opened his blank blue eyes on Rupert, who seemed for the second staggered. Then he recovered himself with perfect common sense and answered:

"I am sorry, Mr Montmorency. The fascination of your remarks has unduly delayed us from joining our friend outside. Pray excuse my apparent impertinence."

"Not at all, sir," said the house-agent, taking a South American spider idly from his waistcoat pocket and letting it climb up the slope of his desk. "Not at all, sir. I hope you will favour me again."

Rupert Grant dashed out of the office in a gust of anger, anxious to face Lieutenant Keith. He was gone. The dull, starlit street was deserted.

"What do you say now?" cried Rupert to his brother. His brother said nothing now.

We all three strode down the street in silence, Rupert feverish, myself dazed, Basil, to all appearance, merely dull. We walked through grey street after grey street, turning corners, traversing squares, scarcely meeting anyone, except occasional drunken knots of two or three.

In one small street, however, the knots of two or three began abruptly to thicken into knots of five or six and then into great groups and then into a crowd. The crowd was stirring very slightly. But anyone with a knowledge of the eternal populace knows that if the outside rim of a crowd stirs ever so slightly it means that there is madness in the heart and core of the mob. It soon became evident that something really important had happened in the centre of this excitement. We wormed our way to the front, with the cunning which is known only to cockneys, and once there we soon learned the nature of the difficulty. There had been a brawl concerned with some six men, and one of them lay almost dead on the stones of the street. Of the other four, all interesting matters were, as far as we were concerned, swallowed up in one stupendous fact. One of the four survivors of the brutal and perhaps fatal scuffle was the immaculate Lieutenant Keith, his clothes torn to ribbons, his eyes blazing, blood on his knuckles. One other thing, however, pointed at him in a worse manner. A short sword, or very long knife, had been drawn out of his elegant walking-stick, and lay in front of

him upon the stones. It did not, however, appear to be bloody.

The police had already pushed into the centre with their ponderous omnipotence, and even as they did so, Rupert Grant sprang forward with his incontrollable and intolerable secret.

"That is the man, constable," he shouted, pointing at the battered lieutenant. "He is a suspicious character. He did the murder."

"There's been no murder done, sir," said the policeman, with his automatic civility. "The poor man's only hurt. I shall only be able to take the names and addresses of the men in the scuffle and have a good eye kept on them."

"Have a good eye kept on that one," said Rupert, pale to the lips, and pointing to the ragged Keith.

"All right, sir," said the policeman unemotionally, and went the round of the people present, collecting the addresses. When he had completed his task the dusk had fallen and most of the people not immediately connected with the examination had gone away. He still found, however, one eager-faced stranger lingering on the outskirts of the affair. It was Rupert Grant.

"Constable," he said, "I have a very particular reason for asking you a question. Would you mind telling me whether that military fellow who dropped his sword-stick in the row gave you an address or not?"

"Yes, sir," said the policeman, after a reflective pause; "yes, he gave me his address."

"My name is Rupert Grant," said that individual, with some pomp. "I have assisted the police on more than one occasion. I wonder whether you would tell me, as a special favour, what address?"

The constable looked at him.

"Yes," he said slowly, "if you like. His address is: The Elms, Buxton Common, near Purley, Surrey."

"Thank you," said Rupert, and ran home through the gathering night as fast as his legs could carry him, repeating the address to himself.

Rupert Grant generally came down late in a rather lordly way to breakfast; he contrived, I don't know how, to achieve always the attitude of the indulged

younger brother. Next morning, however, when Basil and I came down we found him ready and restless.

"Well," he said sharply to his brother almost before we sat down to the meal. "What do you think of your Drummond Keith now?"

"What do I think of him?" inquired Basil slowly. "I don't think anything of him."

"I'm glad to hear it," said Rupert, buttering his toast with an energy that was somewhat exultant. "I thought you'd come round to my view, but I own I was startled at your not seeing it from the beginning. The man is a translucent liar and knave."

"I think," said Basil, in the same heavy monotone as before, "that I did not make myself clear. When I said that I thought nothing of him I meant grammatically what I said. I meant that I did not think about him; that he did not occupy my mind. You, however, seem to me to think a lot of him, since you think him a knave. I should say he was glaringly good myself."

"I sometimes think you talk paradox for its own sake," said Rupert, breaking an egg with unnecessary sharpness. "What the deuce is the sense of it? Here's a man whose original position was, by our common agreement, dubious. He's a wanderer, a teller of tall tales, a man who doesn't conceal his acquaintance with all the blackest and bloodiest scenes on earth. We take the trouble to follow him to one of his appointments, and if ever two human beings were plotting together and lying to every one else, he and that impossible house-agent were doing it. We followed him home, and the very same night he is in the thick of a fatal, or nearly fatal, brawl, in which he is the only man armed. Really, if this is being glaringly good, I must confess that the glare does not dazzle me."

Basil was quite unmoved. "I admit his moral goodness is of a certain kind, a quaint, perhaps a casual kind. He is very fond of change and experiment. But all the points you so ingeniously make against him are mere coincidence or special pleading. It's true he didn't want to talk about his house business in front of us. No man would. It's true that he carries a sword-stick. Any man might. It's true he drew it in the shock of a street fight. Any man would. But there's nothing really dubious in all this. There's nothing to confirm--"

As he spoke a knock came at the door.

"If you please, sir," said the landlady, with an alarmed air, "there's a policeman wants to see you."

"Show him in," said Basil, amid the blank silence.

The heavy, handsome constable who appeared at the door spoke almost as soon as he appeared there.

"I think one of you gentlemen," he said, curtly but respectfully, "was present at the affair in Copper Street last night, and drew my attention very strongly to a particular man."

Rupert half rose from his chair, with eyes like diamonds, but the constable went on calmly, referring to a paper.

"A young man with grey hair. Had light grey clothes, very good, but torn in the struggle. Gave his name as Drummond Keith."

"This is amusing," said Basil, laughing. "I was in the very act of clearing that poor officer's character of rather fanciful aspersions. What about him?"

"Well, sir," said the constable, "I took all the men's addresses and had them all watched. It wasn't serious enough to do more than that. All the other addresses are all right. But this man Keith gave a false address. The place doesn't exist."

The breakfast table was nearly flung over as Rupert sprang up, slapping both his thighs.

"Well, by all that's good," he cried. "This is a sign from heaven."

"It's certainly very extraordinary," said Basil quietly, with knitted brows. "It's odd the fellow should have given a false address, considering he was perfectly innocent in the--"

"Oh, you jolly old early Christian duffer," cried Rupert, in a sort of rapture, "I don't wonder you couldn't be a judge. You think every one as good as yourself. Isn't the thing plain enough now? A doubtful acquaintance; rowdy stories, a most suspicious conversation, mean streets, a concealed knife, a man nearly killed, and, finally, a false address. That's what we call glaring goodness."

"It's certainly very extraordinary," repeated Basil. And he strolled moodily about the room. Then he said: "You are quite sure, constable, that there's no mistake? You got the address right, and the police have really gone to it and found it was a fraud?"

"It was very simple, sir," said the policeman, chuckling. "The place he named was

a well-known common quite near London, and our people were down there this morning before any of you were awake. And there's no such house. In fact, there are hardly any houses at all. Though it is so near London, it's a blank moor with hardly five trees on it, to say nothing of Christians. Oh, no, sir, the address was a fraud right enough. He was a clever rascal, and chose one of those scraps of lost England that people know nothing about. Nobody could say off-hand that there was not a particular house dropped somewhere about the heath. But as a fact, there isn't."

Basil's face during this sensible speech had been growing darker and darker with a sort of desperate sagacity. He was cornered almost for the first time since I had known him; and to tell the truth I rather wondered at the almost childish obstinacy which kept him so close to his original prejudice in favour of the wildly questionable lieutenant. At length he said:

"You really searched the common? And the address was really not known in the district--by the way, what was the address?"

The constable selected one of his slips of paper and consulted it, but before he could speak Rupert Grant, who was leaning in the window in a perfect posture of the quiet and triumphant detective, struck in with the sharp and suave voice he loved so much to use.

"Why, I can tell you that, Basil," he said graciously as he idly plucked leaves from a plant in the window. "I took the precaution to get this man's address from the constable last night."

"And what was it?" asked his brother gruffly.

"The constable will correct me if I am wrong," said Rupert, looking sweetly at the ceiling. "It was: The Elms, Buxton Common, near Purley, Surrey."

"Right, sir," said the policeman, laughing and folding up his papers.

There was a silence, and the blue eyes of Basil looked blindly for a few seconds into the void. Then his head fell back in his chair so suddenly that I started up, thinking him ill. But before I could move further his lips had flown apart (I can use no other phrase) and a peal of gigantic laughter struck and shook the ceiling--laughter that shook the laughter, laughter redoubled, laughter incurable, laughter that could not stop.

Two whole minutes afterwards it was still unended; Basil was ill with laughter; but still he laughed. The rest of us were by this time ill almost with terror.

"Excuse me," said the insane creature, getting at last to his feet. "I am awfully sorry. It is horribly rude. And stupid, too. And also unpractical, because we have not much time to lose if we're to get down to that place. The train service is confoundedly bad, as I happen to know. It's quite out of proportion to the comparatively small distance."

"Get down to that place?" I repeated blankly. "Get down to what place?"

"I have forgotten its name," said Basil vaguely, putting his hands in his pockets as he rose. "Something Common near Purley. Has any one got a timetable?"

"You don't seriously mean," cried Rupert, who had been staring in a sort of confusion of emotions. "You don't mean that you want to go to Buxton Common, do you? You can't mean that!"

"Why shouldn't I go to Buxton Common?" asked Basil, smiling.

"Why should you?" said his brother, catching hold again restlessly of the plant in the window and staring at the speaker.

"To find our friend, the lieutenant, of course," said Basil Grant. "I thought you wanted to find him?"

Rupert broke a branch brutally from the plant and flung it impatiently on the floor. "And in order to find him," he said, "you suggest the admirable expedient of going to the only place on the habitable earth where we know he can't be."

The constable and I could not avoid breaking into a kind of assenting laugh, and Rupert, who had family eloquence, was encouraged to go on with a reiterated gesture:

"He may be in Buckingham Palace; he may be sitting astride the cross of St Paul's; he may be in jail (which I think most likely); he may be in the Great Wheel; he may be in my pantry; he may be in your store cupboard; but out of all the innumerable points of space, there is only one where he has just been systematically looked for and where we know that he is not to be found--and that, if I understand you rightly, is where you want us to go."

"Exactly," said Basil calmly, getting into his great-coat; "I thought you might care to accompany me. If not, of course, make yourselves jolly here till I come back."

It is our nature always to follow vanishing things and value them if they really

show a resolution to depart. We all followed Basil, and I cannot say why, except that he was a vanishing thing, that he vanished decisively with his great-coat and his stick. Rupert ran after him with a considerable flurry of rationality.

"My dear chap," he cried, "do you really mean that you see any good in going down to this ridiculous scrub, where there is nothing but beaten tracks and a few twisted trees, simply because it was the first place that came into a rowdy lieutenant's head when he wanted to give a lying reference in a scrape?"

"Yes," said Basil, taking out his watch, "and, what's worse, we've lost the train."

He paused a moment and then added: "As a matter of fact, I think we may just as well go down later in the day. I have some writing to do, and I think you told me, Rupert, that you thought of going to the Dulwich Gallery. I was rather too impetuous. Very likely he wouldn't be in. But if we get down by the 5.15, which gets to Purley about 6, I expect we shall just catch him."

"Catch him!" cried his brother, in a kind of final anger. "I wish we could. Where the deuce shall we catch him now?"

"I keep forgetting the name of the common," said Basil, as he buttoned up his coat. "The Elms--what is it? Buxton Common, near Purley. That's where we shall find him."

"But there is no such place," groaned Rupert; but he followed his brother downstairs.

We all followed him. We snatched our hats from the hat-stand and our sticks from the umbrella-stand; and why we followed him we did not and do not know. But we always followed him, whatever was the meaning of the fact, whatever was the nature of his mastery. And the strange thing was that we followed him the more completely the more nonsensical appeared the thing which he said. At bottom, I believe, if he had risen from our breakfast table and said: "I am going to find the Holy Pig with Ten Tails," we should have followed him to the end of the world.

I don't know whether this mystical feeling of mine about Basil on this occasion has got any of the dark and cloudy colour, so to speak, of the strange journey that we made the same evening. It was already very dense twilight when we struck southward from Purley. Suburbs and things on the London border may be, in most cases, commonplace and comfortable. But if ever by any chance they really are empty solitudes they are to the human spirit more desolate and dehumanized than any Yorkshire moors or Highland hills, because the

suddenness with which the traveller drops into that silence has something about it as of evil elf-land. It seems to be one of the ragged suburbs of the cosmos half-forgotten by God--such a place was Buxton Common, near Purley.

There was certainly a sort of grey futility in the landscape itself. But it was enormously increased by the sense of grey futility in our expedition. The tracts of grey turf looked useless, the occasional wind-stricken trees looked useless, but we, the human beings, more useless than the hopeless turf or the idle trees. We were maniacs akin to the foolish landscape, for we were come to chase the wild goose which has led men and left men in bogs from the beginning. We were three dazed men under the captaincy of a madman going to look for a man whom we knew was not there in a house that had no existence. A livid sunset seemed to look at us with a sort of sickly smile before it died.

Basil went on in front with his coat collar turned up, looking in the gloom rather like a grotesque Napoleon. We crossed swell after swell of the windy common in increasing darkness and entire silence. Suddenly Basil stopped and turned to us, his hands in his pockets. Through the dusk I could just detect that he wore a broad grin as of comfortable success.

"Well," he cried, taking his heavily gloved hands out of his pockets and slapping them together, "here we are at last."

The wind swirled sadly over the homeless heath; two desolate elms rocked above us in the sky like shapeless clouds of grey. There was not a sign of man or beast to the sullen circle of the horizon, and in the midst of that wilderness Basil Grant stood rubbing his hands with the air of an innkeeper standing at an open door.

"How jolly it is," he cried, "to get back to civilization. That notion that civilization isn't poetical is a civilised delusion. Wait till you've really lost yourself in nature, among the devilish woodlands and the cruel flowers. Then you'll know that there's no star like the red star of man that he lights on his hearthstone; no river like the red river of man, the good red wine, which you, Mr Rupert Grant, if I have any knowledge of you, will be drinking in two or three minutes in enormous quantities."

Rupert and I exchanged glances of fear. Basil went on heartily, as the wind died in the dreary trees.

"You'll find our host a much more simple kind of fellow in his own house. I did when I visited him when he lived in the cabin at Yarmouth, and again in the loft at the city warehouse. He's really a very good fellow. But his greatest virtue remains what I said originally."

"What do you mean?" I asked, finding his speech straying towards a sort of sanity. "What is his greatest virtue?"

"His greatest virtue," replied Basil, "is that he always tells the literal truth."

"Well, really," cried Rupert, stamping about between cold and anger, and slapping himself like a cabman, "he doesn't seem to have been very literal or truthful in this case, nor you either. Why the deuce, may I ask, have you brought us out to this infernal place?"

"He was too truthful, I confess," said Basil, leaning against the tree; "too hardly veracious, too severely accurate. He should have indulged in a little more suggestiveness and legitimate romance. But come, it's time we went in. We shall be late for dinner."

Rupert whispered to me with a white face:

"Is it a hallucination, do you think? Does he really fancy he sees a house?"

"I suppose so," I said. Then I added aloud, in what was meant to be a cheery and sensible voice, but which sounded in my ears almost as strange as the wind:

"Come, come, Basil, my dear fellow. Where do you want us to go?"

"Why, up here," cried Basil, and with a bound and a swing he was above our heads, swarming up the grey column of the colossal tree.

"Come up, all of you," he shouted out of the darkness, with the voice of a schoolboy. "Come up. You'll be late for dinner."

The two great elms stood so close together that there was scarcely a yard anywhere, and in some places not more than a foot, between them. Thus occasional branches and even bosses and boles formed a series of footholds that almost amounted to a rude natural ladder. They must, I supposed, have been some sport of growth, Siamese twins of vegetation.

Why we did it I cannot think; perhaps, as I have said, the mystery of the waste and dark had brought out and made primary something wholly mystical in Basil's supremacy. But we only felt that there was a giant's staircase going somewhere, perhaps to the stars; and the victorious voice above called to us out of heaven. We hoisted ourselves up after him.

Half-way up some cold tongue of the night air struck and sobered me suddenly. The hypnotism of the madman above fell from me, and I saw the whole map of our silly actions as clearly as if it were printed. I saw three modern men in black coats who had begun with a perfectly sensible suspicion of a doubtful adventurer and who had ended, God knows how, half-way up a naked tree on a naked moorland, far from that adventurer and all his works, that adventurer who was at that moment, in all probability, laughing at us in some dirty Soho restaurant. He had plenty to laugh at us about, and no doubt he was laughing his loudest; but when I thought what his laughter would be if he knew where we were at that moment, I nearly let go of the tree and fell.

"Swinburne," said Rupert suddenly, from above, "what are we doing? Let's get down again," and by the mere sound of his voice I knew that he too felt the shock of waking to reality.

"We can't leave poor Basil," I said. "Can't you call to him or get hold of him by the leg?"

"He's too far ahead," answered Rupert; "he's nearly at the top of the beastly thing. Looking for Lieutenant Keith in the rooks' nests, I suppose."

We were ourselves by this time far on our frantic vertical journey. The mighty trunks were beginning to sway and shake slightly in the wind. Then I looked down and saw something which made me feel that we were far from the world in a sense and to a degree that I cannot easily describe. I saw that the almost straight lines of the tall elm trees diminished a little in perspective as they fell. I was used to seeing parallel lines taper towards the sky. But to see them taper towards the earth made me feel lost in space, like a falling star.

"Can nothing be done to stop Basil?" I called out.

"No," answered my fellow climber. "He's too far up. He must get to the top, and when he finds nothing but wind and leaves he may go sane again. Hark at him above there; you can just hear him talking to himself."

"Perhaps he's talking to us," I said.

"No," said Rupert, "he'd shout if he was. I've never known him to talk to himself before; I'm afraid he really is bad tonight; it's a known sign of the brain going."

"Yes," I said sadly, and listened. Basil's voice certainly was sounding above us, and not by any means in the rich and riotous tones in which he had hailed us before. He was speaking quietly, and laughing every now and then, up there

among the leaves and stars.

After a silence mingled with this murmur, Rupert Grant suddenly said, "My God!" with a violent voice.

"What's the matter--are you hurt?" I cried, alarmed.

"No. Listen to Basil," said the other in a very strange voice. "He's not talking to himself."

"Then he is talking to us," I cried.

"No," said Rupert simply, "he's talking to somebody else."

Great branches of the elm loaded with leaves swung about us in a sudden burst of wind, but when it died down I could still hear the conversational voice above. I could hear two voices.

Suddenly from aloft came Basil's boisterous hailing voice as before: "Come up, you fellows. Here's Lieutenant Keith."

And a second afterwards came the half-American voice we had heard in our chambers more than once. It called out:

"Happy to see you, gentlemen; pray come in."

Out of a hole in an enormous dark egg-shaped thing, pendent in the branches like a wasps' nest, was protruding the pale face and fierce moustache of the lieutenant, his teeth shining with that slightly Southern air that belonged to him.

Somehow or other, stunned and speechless, we lifted ourselves heavily into the opening. We fell into the full glow of a lamp-lit, cushioned, tiny room, with a circular wall lined with books, a circular table, and a circular seat around it. At this table sat three people. One was Basil, who, in the instant after alighting there, had fallen into an attitude of marmoreal ease as if he had been there from boyhood; he was smoking a cigar with a slow pleasure. The second was Lieutenant Drummond Keith, who looked happy also, but feverish and doubtful compared with his granite guest. The third was the little bald-headed house-agent with the wild whiskers, who called himself Montmorency. The spears, the green umbrella, and the cavalry sword hung in parallels on the wall. The sealed jar of strange wine was on the mantelpiece, the enormous rifle in the corner. In the middle of the table was a magnum of champagne. Glasses were already set for us.

The wind of the night roared far below us, like an ocean at the foot of a lighthouse. The room stirred slightly, as a cabin might in a mild sea.

Our glasses were filled, and we still sat there dazed and dumb. Then Basil spoke.

"You seem still a little doubtful, Rupert. Surely there is no further question about the cold veracity of our injured host."

"I don't quite grasp it all," said Rupert, blinking still in the sudden glare.

"Lieutenant Keith said his address was--"

"It's really quite right, sir," said Keith, with an open smile. "The bobby asked me where I lived. And I said, quite truthfully, that I lived in the elms on Buxton Common, near Purley. So I do. This gentleman, Mr Montmorency, whom I think you have met before, is an agent for houses of this kind. He has a special line in arboreal villas. It's being kept rather quiet at present, because the people who want these houses don't want them to get too common. But it's just the sort of thing a fellow like myself, racketing about in all sorts of queer corners of London, naturally knocks up against."

"Are you really an agent for arboreal villas?" asked Rupert eagerly, recovering his ease with the romance of reality.

Mr Montmorency, in his embarrassment, fingered one of his pockets and nervously pulled out a snake, which crawled about the table.

"W-well, yes, sir," he said. "The fact was--er--my people wanted me very much to go into the house-agency business. But I never cared myself for anything but natural history and botany and things like that. My poor parents have been dead some years now, but--naturally I like to respect their wishes. And I thought somehow that an arboreal villa agency was a sort of--of compromise between being a botanist and being a house-agent."

Rupert could not help laughing. "Do you have much custom?" he asked.

"N-not much," replied Mr Montmorency, and then he glanced at Keith, who was (I am convinced) his only client. "But what there is--very select."

"My dear friends," said Basil, puffing his cigar, "always remember two facts. The first is that though when you are guessing about any one who is sane, the sanest thing is the most likely; when you are guessing about any one who is, like our host, insane, the maddest thing is the most likely. The second is to remember

that very plain literal fact always seems fantastic. If Keith had taken a little brick box of a house in Clapham with nothing but railings in front of it and had written 'The Elms' over it, you wouldn't have thought there was anything fantastic about that. Simply because it was a great blaring, swaggering lie you would have believed it."

"Drink your wine, gentlemen," said Keith, laughing, "for this confounded wind will upset it."

We drank, and as we did so, although the hanging house, by a cunning mechanism, swung only slightly, we knew that the great head of the elm tree swayed in the sky like a stricken thistle.