

THE ENCHANTED MAN

When I arrived to see the performance of the Buckinghamshire Players, who acted Miss Gertrude Robins's POT LUCK at Naphill a short time ago, it is the distressing, if scarcely surprising, truth that I entered very late. This would have mattered little, I hope, to any one, but that late comers had to be forced into front seats. For a real popular English audience always insists on crowding in the back part of the hall; and (as I have found in many an election) will endure the most unendurable taunts rather than come forward. The English are a modest people; that is why they are entirely ruled and run by the few of them that happen to be immodest. In theatrical affairs the fact is strangely notable; and in most playhouses we find the bored people in front and the eager people behind.

As far as the performance went I was quite the reverse of a bored person; but I may have been a boring person, especially as I was thus required to sit in the seats of the scornful. It will be a happy day in the dramatic world when all ladies have to take off their hats and all critics have to take off their heads. The people behind will have a chance then. And as it happens, in this case, I had not so much taken off my head as lost it. I had lost it on the road; on that strange journey that was the cause of my coming in late. I have a troubled recollection of having seen a very good play and made a very bad speech; I have a cloudy recollection of talking to all sorts of nice people afterwards, but talking to them jerkily and with half a head, as a man

talks when he has one eye on a clock.

And the truth is that I had one eye on an ancient and timeless clock, hung uselessly in heaven; whose very name has passed into a figure for such bemused folly. In the true sense of an ancient phrase, I was moonstruck. A lunar landscape a scene of winter moonlight had inexplicably got in between me and all other scenes. If any one had asked me I could not have said what it was; I cannot say now. Nothing had occurred to me; except the breakdown of a hired motor on the ridge of a hill. It was not an adventure; it was a vision.

I had started in wintry twilight from my own door; and hired a small car that found its way across the hills towards Naphill. But as night blackened and frost brightened and hardened it I found the way increasingly difficult; especially as the way was an incessant ascent. Whenever we topped a road like a staircase it was only to turn into a yet steeper road like a ladder.

At last, when I began to fancy that I was spirally climbing the Tower of Babel in a dream, I was brought to fact by alarming noises, stoppage, and the driver saying that "it couldn't be done." I got out of the car and suddenly forgot that I had ever been in it.

From the edge of that abrupt steep I saw something indescribable, which I am now going to describe. When Mr. Joseph Chamberlain delivered his great patriotic speech on the inferiority of England to the Dutch parts

of South Africa, he made use of the expression "the illimitable veldt."
The word "veldt" is Dutch, and the word "illimitable" is Double Dutch.
But the meditative statesman probably meant that the new plains gave him
a sense of largeness and dreariness which he had never found in England.
Well, if he never found it in England it was because he never looked for
it in England. In England there is an illimitable number of illimitable
veldts. I saw six or seven separate eternities in cresting as many
different hills. One cannot find anything more infinite than a finite
horizon, free and lonely and innocent. The Dutch veldt may be a little
more desolate than Birmingham. But I am sure it is not so desolate as
that English hill was, almost within a cannon-shot of High Wycombe.

I looked across a vast and voiceless valley straight at the moon, as if
at a round mirror. It may have been the blue moon of the proverb; for on
that freezing night the very moon seemed blue with cold. A deathly frost
fastened every branch and blade to its place. The sinking and softening
forests, powdered with a gray frost, fell away underneath me into an
abyss which seemed unfathomable. One fancied the world was soundless
only because it was bottomless: it seemed as if all songs and cries
had been swallowed in some unresisting stillness under the roots of the
hills. I could fancy that if I shouted there would be no echo; that if
I hurled huge stones there would be no noise of reply. A dumb devil had
bewitched the landscape: but that again does not express the best or
worst of it. All those hoary and frosted forests expressed something so
inhuman that it has no human name. A horror of unconsciousness lay on
them; that is the nearest phrase I know. It was as if one were looking

at the back of the world; and the world did not know it. I had taken the universe in the rear. I was behind the scenes. I was eavesdropping upon an unconscious creation.

I shall not express what the place expressed. I am not even sure that it is a thing that ought to be expressed. There was something heathen about its union of beauty and death; sorrow seemed to glitter, as it does in some of the great pagan poems. I understood one of the thousand poetical phrases of the populace, "a God-forsaken place." Yet something was present there; and I could not yet find the key to my fixed impression. Then suddenly I remembered the right word. It was an enchanted place. It had been put to sleep. In a flash I remembered all the fairy-tales about princes turned to marble and princesses changed to snow. We were in a land where none could strive or cry out; a white nightmare. The moon looked at me across the valley like the enormous eye of a hypnotist; the one white eye of the world.

There was never a better play than POT LUCK; for it tells a tale with a point and a tale that might happen any day among English peasants. There were never better actors than the local Buckinghamshire Players: for they were acting their own life with just that rise into exaggeration which is the transition from life to art. But all the time I was mesmerised by the moon; I saw all these men and women as enchanted things. The poacher shot pheasants; the policeman tracked pheasants; the wife hid pheasants; they were all (especially the policeman) as true as death. But there was something more true to death than true to life

about it all: the figures were frozen with a magic frost of sleep or fear or custom such as does not cramp the movements of the poor men of other lands. I looked at the poacher and the policeman and the gun; then at the gun and the policeman and the poacher; and I could find no name for the fancy that haunted and escaped me. The poacher believed in the Game Laws as much as the policeman. The poacher's wife not only believed in the Game Laws, but protected them as well as him. She got a promise from her husband that he would never shoot another pheasant. Whether he kept it I doubt; I fancy he sometimes shot a pheasant even after that. But I am sure he never shot a policeman. For we live in an enchanted land.