

THE HYPOTHETICAL HOUSEHOLDER

We have read of some celebrated philosopher who was so absent-minded that he paid a call at his own house. My own absent-mindedness is extreme, and my philosophy, of course, is the marvel of men and angels. But I never quite managed to be so absent-minded as that. Some yards at least from my own door, something vaguely familiar has always caught my eye; and thus the joke has been spoiled. Of course I have quite constantly walked into another man's house, thinking it was my own house; my visits became almost monotonous. But walking into my own house and thinking it was another man's house is a flight of poetic detachment still beyond me. Something of the sensations that such an absent-minded man must feel I really felt the other day; and very pleasant sensations they were. The best parts of every proper romance are the first chapter and the last chapter; and to knock at a strange door and find a nice wife would be to concentrate the beginning and end of all romance.

Mine was a milder and slighter experience, but its thrill was of the same kind. For I strolled through a place I had imagined quite virgin and unvisited (as far as I was concerned), and I suddenly found I was treading in my own footprints, and the footprints were nearly twenty years old.

It was one of those stretches of country which always suggests an almost unnatural decay; thickets and heaths that have grown out of what were once great gardens. Garden flowers still grow there as wild flowers,

as it says in some good poetic couplet which I forget; and there is something singularly romantic and disastrous about seeing things that were so long a human property and care fighting for their own hand in the thicket. One almost expects to find a decayed dog-kennel; with the dog evolved into a wolf.

This desolate garden-land had been even in my youth scrappily planned out for building. The half-built or empty houses had appeared quite threateningly on the edge of this heath even when I walked over it years ago and almost as a boy. I was astonished that the building had gone no farther; I suppose somebody went bankrupt and somebody else disliked building. But I remember, especially along one side of this tangle or coppice, that there had once been a row of half-built houses. The brick of which they were built was a sort of plain pink; everything else was a blinding white; the houses smoked with white dust and white sawdust; and on many of the windows were rubbed those round rough disks of white which always delighted me as a child. They looked like the white eyes of some blind giant.

I could see the crude, parched pink-and-white villas still; though I had not thought at all of them for a quarter of my life; and had not thought much of them even when I saw them. Then I was an idle, but eager youth walking out from London; now I was a most reluctantly busy middle-aged person, coming in from the country. Youth, I think, seems farther off than childhood, for it made itself more of a secret. Like a prenatal picture, distant, tiny, and quite distinct, I saw this heath on which I

stood; and I looked around for the string of bright, half-baked villas. They still stood there; but they were quite russet and weather-stained, as if they had stood for centuries.

I remembered exactly what I had done on that day long ago. I had half slid on a miry descent; it was still there; a little lower I had knocked off the top of a thistle; the thistles had not been discouraged, but were still growing. I recalled it because I had wondered why one knocks off the tops of thistles; and then I had thought of Tarquin; and then I had recited most of Macaulay's VIRGINIA to myself, for I was young. And then I came to a tattered edge where the very tuft had whitened with the sawdust and brick-dust from the new row of houses; and two or three green stars of dock and thistle grew spasmodically about the blinding road.

I remembered how I had walked up this new one-sided street all those years ago; and I remembered what I had thought. I thought that this red and white glaring terrace at noon was really more creepy and more lonesome than a glimmering churchyard at midnight. The churchyard could only be full of the ghosts of the dead; but these houses were full of the ghosts of the unborn. And a man can never find a home in the future as he can find it in the past. I was always fascinated by that mediaeval notion of erecting a rudely carpentered stage in the street, and acting on it a miracle play of the Holy Family or the Last Judgment. And I thought to myself that each of these glaring, gaping, new jerry-built boxes was indeed a rickety stage erected for the acting of a real

miracle play; that human family that is almost the holy one, and that human death that is near to the last judgment.

For some foolish reason the last house but one in that imperfect row especially haunted me with its hollow grin and empty window-eyes. Something in the shape of this brick-and-mortar skeleton was attractive; and there being no workmen about, I strolled into it for curiosity and solitude. I gave, with all the sky-deep gravity of youth, a benediction upon the man who was going to live there. I even remember that for the convenience of meditation I called him James Harrogate.

As I reflected it crawled back into my memory that I had mildly played the fool in that house on that distant day. I had some red chalk in my pocket, I think, and I wrote things on the unpapered plaster walls; things addressed to Mr. Harrogate. A dim memory told me that I had written up in what I supposed to be the dining-room:

James Harrogate, thank God for meat,
Then eat and eat and eat and eat,

or something of that kind. I faintly feel that some longer lyric was scrawled on the walls of what looked like a bedroom, something beginning:

When laying what you call your head,
O Harrogate, upon your bed,

and there all my memory dislimns and decays. But I could still see quite vividly the plain plastered walls and the rude, irregular writing, and the places where the red chalk broke. I could see them, I mean, in memory; for when I came down that road again after a sixth of a century the house was very different.

I had seen it before at noon, and now I found it in the dusk. But its windows glowed with lights of many artificial sorts; one of its low square windows stood open; from this there escaped up the road a stream of lamplight and a stream of singing. Some sort of girl, at least, was standing at some sort of piano, and singing a song of healthy sentimentalism in that house where long ago my blessing had died on the wind and my poems been covered up by the wallpaper. I stood outside that lamplit house at dusk full of those thoughts that I shall never express if I live to be a million any better than I expressed them in red chalk upon the wall. But after I had hovered a little, and was about to withdraw, a mad impulse seized me. I rang the bell. I said in distinct accents to a very smart suburban maid, "Does Mr. James Harrogate live here?"

She said he didn't; but that she would inquire, in case I was looking for him in the neighbourhood; but I excused her from such exertion. I had one moment's impulse to look for him all over the world; and then decided not to look for him at all.