

AN UNSUSPECTED MASTERPIECE

(AUTHORESS UNKNOWN)

He pushed it away from him.

"I felt as though I had disturbed the graves of the long departed," he said with a grimace, and then addressing the egg: "Forgive me the sacrilege: they sold you to me as new laid, a mere thing of yesterday. I had no idea I was opening the immemorial past. De mortuis nihil nisi bonum--to you at least the quotation will be novel. Or I might call you bad, you poor mummy.

"Unhappy, pent-up, ineffectual thing!" he said, waving his jilted bread and butter, and addressing the discarded inedible. "Poor old maid among eggs! And so it has come to this absolute failure with you. Why were you ever laid? Surely, since you were once alive, some lurking aspiration, some lowly, and yet not lowly, but most divine, striving towards the Higher and the Better, hath stirred within you. The warm sunlight shone through your translucent shell, the sweet air stirred the sweet hay of the nest, and life called you from your dreaming to awake, and join it in its interplay. And now! You might have been--what might you not have been? A prize hen, fountain of a broadening stream of hens, chicks, dozens of chicks, hundreds of chicks, a surging ocean of chickens. Had you been hatched among the early Victorian chickens that were, I presume, your contemporaries, by

now you might have been a million fowl, and the delight and support of hundreds of thousands of homes. You might have been worth thousands of pounds and have eaten corn by the ton. They might have written articles about you in half-crown reviews and devoted poultry farms to your sole support. And instead you have been narrowed down to this sordid back-street tragedy, a mere offence, tempting a struggling tradesman to risk the honour of my patronage of his books, for a paltry fraction of a pennyworth of profit. Why, I ask you, were you not hatched? Was it lack of courage? a fear of the unknown dangers that lie outside the shell?

"An indescribable pity wells up in me for this lost egg, this dead end in the tree of life, George. One thinks of the humble but deserving amoeba, the primordial metazoon, the first fish, the remote reptile ancestor, the countless generations of forefathers that, so far as this egg went, have lived and learnt and suffered in vain. The torrent of life had split and rushed by on either side of it. And you might," cried he, turning to the egg again, "have been a Variety, a novelty, and an improvement in chickens. No chick now will ever be exactly the chick you might have been. Only an Olive Schreiner could do full justice to your failure, you poor nun, you futile eremite, you absolute and hopeless impasse. Was it, I ask again, a lack of courage?

"Perhaps a lack of opportunity? It may be you stirred and hoped in the distant past, and the warmth to quicken you never came. Ambition may have fretted you. Indeed, now I think of it, there is something in the

flavour of you, singularly suggestive of disappointed ambition. In literature, and more particularly in criticism, I can assure you I have met the very fellow of your quality, from literary rotten eggs whose opening came too late. They are like the genii in the 'Arabian Nights' whom Solomon, the son of David, sealed in the pot. At first he promised infinite delights to his discoverer--and his discoverer lagged. In the end he was filled with unreasonable hatred against all the feeble free, and emerged as a malignant fume, eager to wreak himself upon the world.

"A sudden thought, George! I see my egg in a new light, and all my pity changes to respect. Surely it is a most potent egg, a gallinaceous Swift. After all, anything but pointless and childless, since it has this strange quality of being offensive and engendering thought. Food for the mind if not food for the body--didactic if not delightful--a bit of modern literature, earnest and fundamentally real. I must try and understand you, Ibsen Ovarum. Possibly it is a profound parable I have stumbled upon. Though I scarcely reckoned on a parable with my bread and butter. Frankly, I must confess I bought it for the eating."

Now that my uncle had at last begun to grasp the true greatness of his egg, he apparently considered it becoming to drop the tone of half-patronising pity he had previously adopted. "Come," said he, smiling, with a dash of raillery, over his coffee-cup; "admit you are a humbug, you whitened sepulchre of an anticipated chick! Until you

found a congenial soul and overwhelmed me with your confidence, what a career of deception--not mean, of course, but cynical--ironical--you have been leading. What a jest it must have been to you to be sold as new laid! How you laughed in your quiet way at the mockery of life. Surely it was a worthy pair to Swift in cassock and bands conducting a marriage service. I can well fancy your silent scorn of the hand that put you in the bag. New laid! But now I have the full humour of you. You must pardon my dulness of apprehension. I grasp your meaning now; your quiet insistent teaching that all life is decay and all decay is life. No forcing the accent, no crudity, but a pervading persuasion. A noble gospel!"

He paused impressively, placed the egg respectfully upon his bureau, and presently went off at a tangent to something else.

"Shall I throw this away?" said the girl.

"Good heavens! Throw it away? Certainly not. Put it in the library."
(The library used to be the corner of the room by the window.)

She stared at me with a certain attempt at confidence. She is a callous, impertinent kind of girl, and I fear inclined to be bold. "It do smell, sir," she said to him.

"That's the merit of it. It's irony. Go and put it on the fourth shelf near the window. There are some yellow-covered books there, and

Swift, some comedies by a gentleman named Ibsen, and a couple of novels by two gentlemen named George ----- . But there! you don't know one book from another! The fourth shelf from the top on the right-hand side."

As the girl did so she looked over her hand at me, and lifted her eyebrows very slightly.