

THE MAN-COVER

THE MAN-COVER*

I

THE flesh of the neck was much swollen, the little legs somewhat stiff ; the eyes wore a sad and tired expression. . . . I am referring to a pigeon. The swollen neck was hidden by a soft grey down, the legs still held their burden, the eyes looked ahead—yet the symptoms of fatigue were apparent to a connoisseur of pigeons.

And I am that. Once upon a time I was the happy proprietor of hundreds of carrier-pigeons. Misfortune and a short acquaintance with some faddists caused me to drown my ennui. I drank most of my pigeons—dozens at the time—or rather their equivalent in temperance drinks. I ruined my health. An illness followed, long and painful ; the doctor's bill took the rest. . . . But let us forget !

Now the pigeon came through my window, stood on the ledge and waited. It was a carrier, and it had a message. I took the pellucid note from the tube, and read its short contents, which aroused my curiosity.

“Kidnapped—Prisoner—have written report. Ignore where pigeon goes, but trust the recipient will read this and send back the pigeon with a note giving news of England. Are Radicals still in power ? Shall send the letter by return of carrier. Please fill up tubes with films. Extraordinary adventures !!!”

It was strange and it attracted me. I fed the bird, put a short answer of a few words—“*Courage. Send message ; there are no Radicals*”—and a supply of fresh films in the tubes, and, kissing its head, let it go with a sigh. Then my luck returned, and I forgot all about it until last week, when the pigeon came again. It was heavily loaded. I shall not reproduce all the notes, nor the whole of my correspondent's letter. I undertake all the responsibilities, and reserve, in consequence, my editorial right.

* We believe the author of this story to be as mad as his characters.—ED.

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However, and as a last preliminary, the reader will be glad to mark the following part of the letter :

“ I beg of you, sir,” concludes the Man-Cover, “ not to send me any proofs before publication. It would be but an unnecessary trouble to you ; to me such a mark of regard from an unknown benefactor would prove a burden and give occasion to my enemies for recrudescence of persecution. My mail is sure to be ransacked, if indeed I am to be blessed with any communication from the living. But when all the instalments are published and my name is flying from lip to lip, then, and then only, you, whoever you are, noble champion of the Men-Covers, please send me thirty-one copies to be given away.

“ I claim no royalty—no money—no consideration ! The creature who accumulates the most extremely interesting and highly noble characteristics of a cover and of a man can but shrink with horror from the very idea of a vulgar coinage. Only please send in a cheque for £1000 to the secretary of the S.P.T.B.P.* as an anonymous gift, to be nevertheless published in the records of the daily and periodical Press all over the world.”

It is a big order for a man who despises money. My correspondent seems to know the powers which rule the world : Capital and Publicity. Alas ! the puppies will keep on losing part of their tails in spite of the S.P.T.B.P., because of that third power, Fashion. As for the £1000, I may—or I may not. . . . But we are digressing. To use an expression from the French, somewhat slangy, but expressive, “ Je passe le crachoir à l'orateur.” I believe the author to be mad. I nevertheless think it necessary to state that I am *not* an authority on insanity.

Ever since long before my birth I led a peaceful existence. As I grew, Science attracted me, and Art, and Poetry ; my favourite recreation was the conversion of puppy-owners to the generous belief in the regeneration of the canine race by the preservation of their caudal appendage. Also the genius which breathed within me caused me to leave my house on the fifth of November. Passing a crowded street, I was surrounded by urchins who greeted me by the

* After a long and painful inquiry the present writer found out the society referred to by his correspondent. It is the Society for the Prevention of Tail-biting of Puppies, and stands in great need of generous contributions.

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name of Guy Fawkes. I hurried home through a torrent of rain.

A man was pacing my street, muttering strange words which I could not understand. The rain, which fell heavily, had apparently not the slightest effect in cooling his heated brain. As I passed him I spoke :

“What a wretched night !”

The sound of my voice startled him. He seized my arm and hurried me towards the lamp-post. Then he stared at me for a long time, and, speaking slowly, hammering every syllable in my ear, while the rain continued its monotonous lamentation, he began :

“I should be very much surprised if this were not the cover I am waiting for. No fallacies will induce me to free you now that at last I have found you. I was dead ; my life was nothing more than a spring without motion. Every twenty-one days, according to the calendar, I came, pacing the lonely streets of this remote spot. For two hours each time did I wait and wait, longing, eager, nervous, hopeful, hopeless, desperate, distressed, with gigantic thoughts crowding my mind. I almost despaired of seeing this moment ; at last it has come. I forgot the duties of art, the call of reason, the fear of uncertain meetings, the very natural care for the most precious existence on this planet. But I am well rewarded. You have come. My globe of transparent crystal had shown me the truth. You have come, escaping my enemies, and you are for the time to come at my disposition.”

I thought at first that the man was under the influence of drink and that it was useless to argue with him. Besides, I am not very daring with strangers, especially when they speak

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in such questionable riddles. Accordingly I said nothing, but tried gently to regain my liberty. Alas! his grasp was stronger than my desire of liberty, and the only result was that he pinched me closer.

"I was dead," he resumed, "and my beautiful and lofty thoughts were wandering through space, shapeless and without expression. The cover which enclosed the shrine in which they were kept had been stolen from me, and my foes were expecting my surrender. Happily an angel sent by God ordered me to come out every twenty-one days, and promised me that I should find here the cover which I needed. I have it now, and mean to keep it."

"But what are you talking about?" said I. "I am a man; here is my house; and I don't know anything about your cover. You are mistaking me for some unknown person or object, sir; pray let me go."

"Let you go! Abandon once more the cover which shall keep my thoughts in! *You are mad!* Besides, why do you speak? And how is it that you come in such a shape?"

"I tell you I am a man. Leave me alone, or I shall have to call for assistance and give you in charge. I am a savant and a nobleman, known all over the world, I daresay."

"I am no fool, and I shall keep you. Come, I must be off to Brighton to-night; I have left my thoughts in the coverless box there."

"I shall not go to Brighton, sir! Are you mad? Do I look like a piece of wood?"

"The appearance has nothing to do with the case. As to madness, I fear I *should* have gone mad *if* I had not found you at last. Come; my men are waiting, ready for any

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emergency, and I shall be compelled to use their strength if you refuse to follow me. We are off to Brighton, and I shall there put you in your proper place. Oh, my thoughts, my lofty thoughts," he went on, "you shall to-night be sequestered from the world of your enemies!"

I should like to know, dear unknown being to whom my winged friend will bring this letter, what you would have done in my place! How was I to escape? There was certainly not the slightest doubt that the man was a lunatic. Now, as it happens, lunatics have always been exceedingly interesting to me. Here was a case for my curiosity. This fellow, thought I, must have deceived the vigilance of his guardians, and I shall find no difficulty in having him arrested at the railway station, or at least on our arrival at Brighton. So I followed him. At the turning a big motor-car was waiting, and two men stood by on the pavement. They bowed silently before my companion, and made me enter the car.

One of them took charge of the driving, and the other followed us two in the back seats. The man said but one word, "Scat," and we started at a terrific speed and were soon off on the road.

I began to feel uneasy; but prudence stopped my speech in time, and the man next to me began to titter. Then he spoke; and though he may have uttered different words, this is what I understood:

"You are trying to deceive us. I always notice such an attempt, even when it has only reached its mental stage. Indeed, I cannot help noticing it. No doubt you have heard of me; I am *the-man-whose-nose-sings-at-will*. That power has been granted me ever since I felt a strong impulse to kill my

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wife with an axe. I mastered my impulse, and by a triumph of my logical faculties I cut my own right arm. Having no arm, I could no more kill my wife with an axe. God rewarded me by giving me the power of reading thought, which constitutes an extra sense for me; and to my nose He gave a voice of its own. I was a dentist. Indeed, I have found a new way of extracting teeth without gas. You merely press the neck of your patient, who faints in consequence, and you can then safely operate. How did *you* come to this? What caused you to take the attire of a man in place of the usual brown coat of a cover?"

His companion—friend or master—bade him keep silent for a while, and we journeyed in silence.

When we came in sight of Brighton the motor-car stopped suddenly in front of a large gate. The moment after we entered a park, and the door being opened, I was taken into the house.

The man whom, so unhappily for me, I had met in the street was now alone with me. Without leaving me a moment's peace, he began to take my measure with the utmost care and caution. Then, pointing to me a strong and broad cage, he ordered me to step in.

It would be very tiresome and quite useless for me to express here my various thoughts and the miserable consternation into which I was thrown. I would not live those hours again for anything in the world, and had the devil been within my reach I should decidedly have given my soul to him in order that he should see me safely home. But no one came to my rescue, and, though most unwilling, I had to submit to my terrible fate.

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When the cage, made of the strongest steel, was closed upon me, I found myself a prisoner in the most degrading state. I began to look around and to shake the bars of my grating, but in vain. The man-without-a-cover had gone.

My next step was to inspect the prison. And in so doing I discovered in the left corner a box, resembling a coffin in shape, though it was certainly not a coffin such as I delight in seeing daily in the windows of the undertakers. It was divided into compartments!

“Is this the box of lofty thoughts, I wonder?” said I to myself.

In that case the man must have had a certain degree of reason about him after all, for the box was far from being empty.

In the first compartment was a red flower, blushing deeply with all the purest carmine of Nature. The flower was certainly not freshly cut, but had preserved all its beauties and delectable perfume.

In the second compartment was a doll. Oh, not an extraordinary doll! A plain, common hand-made wooden doll, which you could open by the middle, to discover inside it a second doll presenting exactly the same appearance. Just like those figureless old women of white wood made by the Russian peasants during the long evenings of their winter season. From the first to the last there were twenty-one dolls, one inside the other. The last was scarcely bigger than a poppy-seed, but presented exactly all the particularities of the largest one.

In the third compartment were two books. You may judge of my surprise when I opened them and found that no

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black stain polluted the immaculate white of their leaves. Only the binding bore some words. They were the titles of those unwritten books. Thus they ran :

“ The book
which
contains all that I know
for
certain.”

“ Advice to
Mankind
for
a better use of their faculties.”

No name of author was to be seen.

In the fourth compartment was a little framed picture, and though I examined it very closely I was not able at first to realise what the subject of the picture was. From a shallow little boat a gigantic snake was seen to emerge, fiercely staring, and on the opposite corner was a round black spot. As, when a child throws a stone in a river, the waves extend farther and farther, shunning the bruises which the child has inflicted upon them, in a like manner waves of a grey lighter and lighter as they extended towards the snake were painted in methodically eccentric gyrations. The last wave was almost white, and stopped at the head of the monster.

In the fifth compartment was a skull.

In the sixth compartment was a white rose, with a delicious scent.

In the seventh compartment, as well as in the eighth and last, I saw nothing, but a sweet music struck on my ear when I bent over them. The tunes were very different at first, one tender and soft, the other furious and thundering. At the end, however, both melted in a whisper, to die suddenly in a piercing cry of laughter.

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And the man-who-lost-his-cover came into the room again.

“Well,” said he, “I thought that by now you would have found your way to submit to necessity and reintegrate your real personality. What did you see in my box?”

I told him, and instantly he grew pale and staggered. But after a moment he looked furiously at me, and resumed his former manner.

“By God!” he said, “I cannot believe you. How you have found out my secret and learned by heart the things which one ought to see in my box, but which one does not, I ignore. But you cannot possibly have seen them.”

I swore that I was no impostor. But he refused to listen to me, and called his two men. They came, and began verifying the measure he had taken of me.

“*Too long,*” said he, when it was completed. “You have grown out of shape. We shall have to cut out and plane you in order that you should exactly fit my mighty box. However, as you pretend to have seen in it things which a cover cannot possibly see, I must give myself a day to think it over.”

I felt instantly relieved, and began to hope again.

“Perhaps I shall not be cut out and planed after all,” thought I; and smiled humorously upon the man.

Fool! I felt almost certain that a crueller punishment could not be conceived by the morbid imagination of a madman. And now I am here, in this secluded spot, with no prospect but the most horrible of lives. . . . But, dear unknown reader of this history, you to whom a trustworthy messenger will deliver it, do not let my personal sorrow trouble you because

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of this incoherent anticipation of the rest of my story. I should raise no sympathy in your heart by whimpering over myself. It is true that I am inclined to run riot in self-lamentations ; but great men always are. And I shall try henceforth not to give way to that unwholesome tendency. I have much already to be forgiven.

In my cage, then, to resume, I was just passing from a state of dreadful mental agony to a more settled and hopeful disposition. For the second time the man-who-had-lost-his-cover left me alone ; and I felt more relieved. He will never dare, thought I ; and, after all, he does not look such a cold-blooded murderer. His eyes indicate some sort of inner life and his tone and voice are gentle at times. It is a joke, a mystification. . . . It must be.

Thus I tried to deceive myself, and I must admit that I utterly failed. Looking, then, around my prison, I began to feel a very peculiar sort of numbness coming over me. It was almost like intoxication, and I am not in the least ashamed to say that I know what intoxication is. I was drowsy ; my head seemed to weigh as heavy as if it contained lead in place of the keenest brains. The coffin appeared to me a most comfortable bedstead, and the skull a soft pillow. A horrible attraction bent me towards the box, and in a moment I lay, stiff, snoring, over the eight compartments.

There is here a blank in my memory. Under the influence of a powerful narcotic, I was cut out and planed to fit the coffin exactly. About that time my tormentors must have been interrupted, for they forgot to nail me on the coffin, and the cage was hurriedly put on a motor and carried somewhere on

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the South Coast to the private yacht which, no doubt, was awaiting us. This is my way of explaining it, but of course it is a mere suggestion. It might have been an airship that took me away, independent of terrestrial laws, regardless of Customs Duties—who knows, perhaps hovering over London and Scotland Yard and my dear old house in which I was so happy—but . . . *Nec scire fas est omnia.*

The only thing I am certain of is that I was either planed to fit the coffin, or the coffin to fit me; and then I woke up. I was on board a sea- or air-ship. Believe me, she was in great danger.

However, this would prove a useless narrative. The floating machinery suffered, was nearly wrecked; the crew suffered, nearly perished; I suffered, and nearly died. After the storm was over I found myself on the shore of this island with the box; a small cage out of which two carrier-pigeons, almost dead with hunger, were struggling to escape; three sailors of the crew; the man-whose-nose-sings-at-will, and a dog; while my tormentor and the other souls were drowned, I suppose, or thrown upon some other land. It seems now almost as if I should wish my tormentor to be here. I might cure him; and at all events he would be compelled by necessity to adopt a more lenient attitude towards me. Besides, now that he has made me to fit his box, the worst is over. . . .

Here takes place an incoherent discussion on the bitter taste of sea-water and the possibilities of its sweetening, after which the MS. comes to an end. I have sent back the pigeon, and expect to receive a new supply of facts—more precise than the vague and uncanny allegations contained in the first. If I may be allowed to make a personal suggestion, I am inclined to believe the writer to be as mad as any tormentor of his, real or imaginary. However, the MS. is human, and so . . . *imprimatur!*

II

CONSIDERING the bulk of the MSS. trusted to the carrier-pigeon by my correspondent, I decided to send an extra porter with the first bird, in case of the next message being of an equal or superior volume, and as I know something about pigeons, as before mentioned, I managed that in a very clever way.

I say clever because it is a very simple scheme in its cleverness, and nobody would say it if not I, but nevertheless it had to be found—like the egg of the late C.C. I bought a fine hen pigeon, and kept it with the Man-Cover's messenger, so that they could rub acquaintance. When I noticed the first symptoms of love I blessed the new pair and let them go. The new wife—as I thought she would—followed her husband.

They returned to me with the following strange document, and I think I must warn the reader against a certain feeling of sympathy towards the writer. The wickedness and cruelty with which he carries out his logical tendencies are too repulsive to permit of any sentiment of pity. His sufferings appear to be simply the consequences of a wild and unhindered imagination, and the real victims—the only ones to be pitied—are his unhappy companions.

That is, of course, in the case of the documents being an expression of reality. I am sure every one feels the necessity of clearing up this matter. Alas! there are no Radicals in this country—that is, persons acting in a radical manner—as I have written to the Man-Cover himself, and consequently I have little hope that H.M. Government will give any orders on the matter. I am afraid that if an expedition is sent over it will be commanded by some distinguished foreign officer. However, should the expedition cover itself with ridicule by not finding the Man-Cover or his island, it is perhaps safer for the British reputation that it should be a foreign expedition. But to business.

Considering our present advanced state of civilisation, and how the Torch of Science has been brandished and borne about, with more or less effect, for 5000 years and upwards, as

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Carlyle puts it; and considering—as I think necessary to conclude, contrary to the immortal Scotsman—considering how very little more we know about the most important questions which concern the human race than did our tailed ancestors, it might strike the reflective mind with some surprise that, however unpleasant they may be from a personal point of view, the most wondrous and striking experiences which I am undergoing will doubtless be of no little help to the *bond-fide* thinkers of our present day. Dean Swift and Samuel Butler stand, no one will deny it, as the greatest benefactors of humanity. If my sufferings could prove of any utility, in their turn, I should feel myself proud and most happy to describe at length the life I am now leading with three sailors, a dog, a musician, a box whose value I am learning every day to appreciate more and more, and our carrier-pigeons, in a distant island.

I must begin methodically and give a systematic account of my life here. I trust that the Authority presiding over our destinies will look upon me as the most logical of all men. As the surroundings play an important part in our life, my first duty is to describe them. The island is a large one. When I have gone round it myself I shall perhaps be able to give a rough estimate of its area. For the present I can but say: *it is a large island*. We have trees by thousands: water trees, from which, after the stems have been cut and slashed, the water pours down; kola-nut trees, papaw trees, with their flowers, male and female; dragon trees, fig trees, cocoa-nut palms, bread-fruit trees, and the rest. Beautiful birds are dwelling in the branches. All that is needed for life is abundant and easy to gather. The climate permits us

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to spend night and day in the open, and when I retire to sleep on the box whose cover I have turned out to be, my companions sleep in the trees.

No venomous or objectionable beast has yet dared to breathe the air of this balmy country. But it is not a deserted spot. The natives are black, but tame and pleasant, and one of my first steps will be to try and bring them into contact with the beauties of our civilisation. For this object the mighty box is of the utmost importance; and here I touch on the first difficulty which I encountered.

The destiny of man being precarious and unsettled, my soul was often wandering at large in its anxiety to provide for the future of the lofty thoughts of my late tormentor. I had banished all hatred and bitterness from my heart and forgiven my enemy. He had done me a great wrong, dragging me pitilessly away from the peaceful occupations of my life, cutting and planing my worthy form in order that I should fit his coffin. He had driven me to his ship, and was the cause of my present exile. Two young kittens had placed all their hope in me, and I was failing to fill my paternal duty towards them. I was working at my great work, in fifty-two volumes, on the various elements composing the shell of the oyster, and I had almost completed my Introduction, when I was thus deprived of my liberty by the man-who-had-lost-his-cover. Yet I bore him no grudge. He was right; I feel it more intensely every day. A box so mighty needed a cover. In consequence, knowing that the hour of my death might strike at any moment, I had to find a man-cover to replace me in that event; one who would never forget to reintegrate the box every night.

Proceeding in order, I looked around me; and at once

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discarded the two pigeons and the dog. I had only to choose between the three sailors and the man-whose-nose-sings-at-will. As the latter was of great help to us, and kept the negroes amused for hours with the harmonious though plaintive accords springing at will from his nasal organ, there remained only the sailors. The natives were, of course, totally unfit for such a fate. They could find no inner delectation in the perpetual sufferings occasioned by so dreadful an ordeal—or doom!

Of the three sailors, one was much too short to prove of any use. If I could easily shorten, lop, prune, and curtail a too big substitute, I could not possibly add anything to that small pattern of our race. I decided, in consequence, to slay him, during his sleep, so that a useless impediment be done away with. As the four men, since the wreck of our ship, were sunk in a state of torpor and only stared at me with vacant looks, it proved easy to settle this slight matter. I removed the body; and left to time and the natural dryness of the air the care of dividing its various elements.

The man-whose-nose-sings-at-will was the first to notice the absence of the sailor, but he said nothing to me. In fact, I believe him to be mad also. He is continually looking anxiously towards the east, and seems lost to this world, since his friend or master has disappeared in the wreck. From the middle of his face gushed a sad tune, and from his eyes many a bitter tear; but, as I said before, he addressed me not. I was not a little surprised, as he is the only one with me to know the secrets of the box. But I respected his silence.

The two others were more suitable for my purpose. One was a strongly built fellow, with a certain air of intelligence

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about him ; but he was yet too besotted with fear or moral distress to be made the recipient of my plans. So I had only one expedient left to me, and turned all my faculties towards the last of my companions.

He is not young by any means. His temples are already crowned with the grey silver of at least fifty years and his nose with the carmine of many gallons. But his remarkable acuteness renders him extremely valuable. When I opened my mind to him he simply lifted his eyes at me with a shrewd look and smiled gently with the smile of the Wise.

I told him the story of the meeting with my kidnapper ; and explained to him the operation I had to go through before I could fit the coffin of lofty thoughts. With the exception of the secret of the eight compartments, I opened my very soul to that worthy successor. He must possess a keen sense of humour ; for he began gently, and dry-humour-like, telling me a quite different story. His smile, of course, showed that he was only trying to entertain me. According to his version, I am a well-known surgeon who had lost his reason and was taken to the private yacht of a celebrated alienist. As I seemed to be always talking of a coffin without a cover, one had been made of my size. Unhappily, says the sailor, a wreck happened ; and the doctor who was to cure me has been drowned.

This narrative caused me to laugh heartily. I could scarcely keep my ribs together. I had no trouble in pointing out to him the contradictions in his story, and he soon agreed with me. When he saw, moreover, that I alone of us all was armed, and that the natives treated me with great respect, he put himself entirely at my disposal. I took advantage of this

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happy mood to offer him my services in order that he should be cut out and planed on the spot. But he looked gently in my eyes, and said that he himself would see to that. I told him of my experiments, and how I still had at times a certain illusion that my body was absolutely complete. But (he said) the case is common with all men amputated ; and he promised me that in case of my death he should at once prepare himself to take my place at night on the top of the coffin. My mind being thus at rest, I began studying more deeply the contents of that mighty box.

III

THE two carrier-pigeons have come to me. I am glad to say they look very happy. Though there is still much to be published before we arrive at the part of the Man-Cover's adventures with which this last message is concerned, he informs me of such surprising news that I think it my duty to let the readers share it at once. The news is startling. Having received my letter, he threatens to blow the island into the air, should any vessel approach within three miles. He informs me of his absolute decision never to leave the place, and never to allow any one to come within the distance mentioned. Provided he receives my pledge never to reveal the situation of his new landed property, he promises to keep me informed of all his doings. For the sake of the tale, I have made myself an accomplice of his crimes and follies. I am ashamed of myself, but curiosity is stronger than shame. The carrier-pigeons have fled back to him with my word of honour. I was too anxious to know more about the Man-Cover, and my duty as a reporter has made me forget the moral ideas painfully inculcated unto me by a life of hard experience and severely-paid-for mistakes. Scratch the man, you will find the beast. I must admit this has proved true for me also. It is the last time that I let my own personality come between the readers and the wickedly mad hero of history, and I apologise for this intrusion. I now give place to him, and will publish his notes as I receive them.

The contents of the coffin have not suffered from the wreck. Here they are all, the books and the skull, the roses white and red, the picture and the doll. From the seventh and eighth compartments sprang the same tunes. Truly, the sound reminded me of some hoarse singer, but the quantity of seawater absorbed during the floating journey from ship to land certainly accounts for it. I shall gather a few lemons and rub the wood carefully with their juices.

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Being a man of method and logic, I could not but begin with book-keeping. When they were dry the two books came very handy to me. I opened them at the first page, and started putting down with a blue pencil the most important among all the thoughts that came into my brain. In

“ The book
which
contains all that I know
for
certain ”

I began with these sentences :

“Your enemy, when his hatred and persecution lead you to a clearer perception of Life's secrets, becomes your benefactor.”

“The men living in my company being unable to realise that my body is nothing but an illusion of their deficient sight, it is useless for me to try and oblige them to recognise it as a mere wood cover.”

“Their error will appear even more plausible and explicable when one considers that a few days ago I was myself unaware of my real personality ; and that I am still at times under the influence of insufficiently keen senses.”

“The destiny of a Man-Cover being a case of exceptional scarcity, he cannot reasonably be bound by everyday morals and conventions. All that hampers him, all that comes in his way to prevent him from fulfilling his sacred duty, must be surmounted and overcome. What is crime in a man is often virtue in a cover.”

Having thus established a sound and most solid base of

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morality, which could be transmitted as a new gospel for the special use of the Men-Covers of future times, I opened the second book to put down in it some equally useful aphorisms. But as I took my pencil the white, immaculate page appeared covered with brown characters. I had scarcely time enough to read and they had vanished. But I remember what I saw.

“You must leave the study of the oyster-shells in order to perceive the invisible, to refine your senses and escape the delusions caused by them.”

“The duty of man is not to believe other men. They speak either truth or untruth; but if they speak truth, even then is it a falsehood.”

“All men are not necessarily obliged to kill their opponents or those who doubt them, or who are not of any use to them; but some men are—all Men-Covers are.”

I was interrupted in the profound meditation that followed this discovery by the approach of a strong party of natives. My heir-apparent, if I may be allowed to use that expression in regard to a Man-Cover, was absent; and our two other companions had also made themselves scarce.

These black men seemed to be frenzied with pugnacity, a very unusual disposition. After rapidly taking advice of the skull (the two books failing on the matter), I lay down in my usual place, protecting the lofty thoughts from impure contact, resolved to be pierced through and through rather than to let these black devils brush the holy books. To be pierced through could not do me much harm; and the holes would soon be stopped up by the skilful hand of my worthy under-study.

Evidently my attitude of passive resistance surprised the

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natives. They gathered around me and began singing a strange *mélodée*. One of their chiefs passed his hands over my face, and I became at once unconscious. . . .

When I awoke I was still covering the coffin, but the surroundings had changed. Over me was a huge canopy of magnificent trees in full bloom of youth. Nature had certainly not been helped in the forming of that beautiful corner of the world; nevertheless a Japanese gardener, master of his art, could not have done better. Two gaps at the foot of the coffin were apparently waiting for posts to be planted. Wild flowers of all colours, some of a shade quite unknown to me, perfumed the air. It was no more the sunny afternoon, but a morning splendid and enchanting. The dew covered the prairie, and it seemed as if the grass were weeping lukewarm tears. At intervals a gentle breeze came, softly caressing the head of each blade of grass, refreshing them with its breath. Then Father Sol moved also with sympathy, showed himself a while before he was due, drying the tears of the green blades.

It dried also my coffin, and from the musical compartments came the *roulades* of an invigorated voice. As I heard also the panting breath of the negroes, I looked for them, and saw that, quite unaware of the tune, they were sitting at a little distance, all talking at the same time, carolling and shouting. But they were not, I gather, plotting any serious mischief. They saluted me in a friendly manner when they saw me leave the box and walk towards them. I must have been a long time lying over it, a whole afternoon and night, maybe, during my unnatural sleep.

I bowed gracefully before them; but they seemed amazed

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at my forwardness. As I was going to address them an awful feeling passed over me. My old fancy took possession of my brains again, and I imagined myself made of flesh and bones. I began to suffer as if my body had in reality become stiff and benumbed. Happily it was enough for me to turn and see the coffin, and my delusion fled. Moreover, I noticed that I had forgotten one of the most important things. The very colour of the coffin ought to have told the truth to me long ago. Of course I was now of a dark brown complexion, almost black, and this was the reason of their surprise.

A movement which I detected among them made me turn quickly towards my box. Too late, alas! The scoundrels had taken advantage of my few steps towards them, and were pillaging the coffin, keeper of lofty thoughts.

The piercing cry I uttered perplexed them. One had already the skull in his hands, but on hearing me he put it back in the compartment instantly; and they all began chanting a slow prayer, which I could not understand. I went back straight to the box, and, kneeling over it, sought consolation in the sweet tune of the two last compartments. When I turned round again the miserable, unintelligent creatures had gone, all but two, who advanced towards me. They were women of a lovely type.

IV

I WAS a prisoner. An inextricable entanglement of tropical creepers encircled the little oasis. A small path had been managed, but it was severely guarded at the other end. What doom had been prepared for me? For what purpose had these two handsome creatures been left with me? I only reproduce here an infinitesimal part of the numberless thoughts which came to my mind in that moment.

However—for this should prove a too long narrative—I soon ceased ruminating upon the future, for the women began singing a sort of cheerless lay. “How, fah, fah, how, loh, hew, hew,” it went on, and I could foresee no end to the romance. In the meantime the maidens advanced towards me, and while their thoughts gave way to the noise referred to already, their hands soon began gently scratching my head, as if to prey upon my hair. I have always been rather sensitive to feminine beauty, and when they leant gracefully over me and began patting my cheeks I thought how simply delightful it would be to desert my duties, abandon my coffin, and live as a man who is not a cover. I was soon to feel ashamed of this intention.

After they had indulged in that little recreation they changed the tune of their lay and gave the same words with another air, which called at once to my mind the choir of the

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“Suppliants.” As a matter of fact they were asking me for some favour. At the sight of real tears rolling down the faces of these two most lovable creatures, so handsome and graceful, so perfect in all their proportions, my pity was set in motion ; and soon love was to follow, thought I. Though of a slightly dark complexion, they were none the less remarkably pretty, and very near the finest type of white womanhood. Alas ! their beauty was a trap, their sweet voices were meant to delude me ; the sirens had been sent by those who could not but mean persecution against me.

I found this out as soon as I understood them. They wanted my flowers. With a supple and harmonious gesture, they suggested that I should let them have the mystical roses. As soon as I perceived their intentions I felt the most intense impulse to murder them. We talked for a long time without being able to gather much of each other's thoughts. At last I turned to the books in the coffin, and in the book containing

“ Advice to
Mankind
for
a better use of their faculties ”

I saw, traced by an invisible hand, the following advice :

“ Be careful of womanly traps.”

“ Let the roses be planted ; they are meant for that purpose.”

“ A cover cannot fall in love except with boards and planks.
Beware of the fallacies of sense.”

As any one may understand, my mind was a pandemonium, but still I could not refuse to submit to so clear an order, and I handed the roses to the maidens. I had not to repent the

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concession. They clasped their hands and smiled upon me ; then planted them instantly in the two big holes of which I have spoken already. The result was immediate. The plants began growing and growing, blossoming in many parts of their stalk, and their odour delighted my nostrils.

But this meant no peace for me. The two females, truly, shrank from me, but my senses were speaking in a rough way. They sat at the other end of the oasis ; and looked on with wide-open eyes of delight as the two sweet and scented plants continued to grow. I could not detach my sight from the girls, and for the first time my ear did not perceive the music of the two compartments. It seemed to me as if there were two personalities in me, one simple and natural, as it becomes a wood cover, the other complex and full of passions, as if I were really the man whom I knew to be no more. I took the skull in my hands, and suddenly a light broke its way into my soul. How could I be deluded this time ? I had arms and hands ; I "SAW" them. I saw the women, I saw the coffin. It was not the feeling of a plain piece of brown wood. I went almost mad over the discovery. What was the meaning of all this ? I then opened the book again, but scarcely had I time to glance at the white page before a large band of negroes came again to me ; and this time I could not keep them at a distance. They chained me and drove me away. I fell unconscious.

At my awakening I found that I was alone by the shore with the old sailor, my willing successor. When he saw that I opened my eyes he spoke gently to me :

"Are you better now ?"

"What has happened ?" said I, instead of answering his question.

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“Oh, you have been very ill for many days with brain-fever. You must not speak too much.”

“What? Where is the coffin?”

“The negroes have it; they have carried it away into the interior. But I suppose you are cured now?” he added in an anxious tone.

I shall not repeat the conversation that ensued. Enough to mention that I discovered the old sailor to be absolutely mad. And being unable to persuade him that I was still firmly convinced of being the cover of the lost coffin, I found it better to agree with him. And soon he fell into the trap. Hiding the longing after my box and its contents, the doll and the skull and the mighty books, I spoke to him as if completely unconcerned about the loss, and unrolled a scheme for civilising the natives. He told me of a little hut under the canopy, where my two wives were waiting for my arrival, as soon as I could get up and walk there.

He did not expect me to do so before a long while, but he was wrong. With a cautious look around me, I began creeping slowly towards him; and before he could call any one I had jumped at his throat. I had my idea; and being a logical man, I wanted to carry it out faithfully, without losing an instant. We struggled a long time; and as I was getting exhausted, I succeeded at last in taking his knife, and sank it in his stomach.

It was not very pleasant for me to see his blood running black and hot on the sand; but I had to perform this execution, owing to his obstinacy. It was safer to destroy my understudy, as I had called him till then in my happy thoughts, and try afterwards to get another one to fill his place. His

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hint about my wives suggested to me that I might soon have a child whom I could bring up in the idea that he was to take my place. I could also shape an infant better than an old seaman. So I left him to the whales and other fishes, and proceeded towards the oasis. The two wives he had spoken of were the same women who caused my last illness. But their sweet smile prevented me from using any abusive language, which, in fact, they could not understand.

Well aware that I was fated to conceal my thoughts for a very long while, I allowed them to advance and attend upon me. In that way began my new life as master of a harem. At first the negroes treated me with a certain reserve, even with hostility; but they soon changed, seeing me so tame and amiable. As the story goes,

The King of France and forty thousand men
They drew their swords and put them back again.

But I now perceive that my narrative will appear almost incoherent if I do not at this point of the history pass over a few incidents and the daily toil of civilising, in order to state immediately the chief facts.

The negroes after a while submitted to me; my two wives are most attentive, and wait upon me with a laudable zeal. The strongly built sailor, who has recovered from his fear, is my most devoted lieutenant, and as his ideas are scarce he never asks for any explanations, and follows faithfully all my orders.

The man-whose-nose-sings-at-will I have put in irons. His mutism was beginning to upset me. The natives enjoy immensely their visit to the cage, where, as a canary should, he continually sings through his nasal appendage.

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The circumference of the island is somewhat over fifteen miles, and the first discovery I made was that of a broken-down sailing-boat, which the niggers had never dared approach since the wreck that brought it there. In the cabins I found gunpowder in large quantities, rum, matches, and tobacco ; I had all this carried to my oasis, together with a cannon ; and when the negroes had heard the voice of this powerful engine my authority was established on the most solid basis.

This event helped me to recover the coffin, and I am glad to say that nothing had been done to it to spoil it. I had two hundred natives hanged, and as many burned alive, for form's sake, and in order to show their fellow black men that my justice was impartial ; but apart from this unimportant little fact nothing followed the recovery of the mighty box.

I had undertaken the difficult task of civilising the negroes ; and as it would be quite impossible for me to lose for an instant the sight and thought of my personal mission, I was not a little perplexed at the duality it presented at first. But I soon found out the truth. Cut in the most precious wood of the island, a cover was made of my shape, and prepared to take my place every time my various duties should call me away. Acting upon the advice of my wives, I had the coffin hidden from sight ; and only once a month, when the moon breaks up with her thinnest crescent, are the natives admitted to the contemplation of its contents.

Before I take again to the main road of my history, which I shall neither leave again or follow further than necessary, I must give a word of praise to my wives. Of course the poor creatures think I am a mere man, but apart from this

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little error they treat me gently and worship me so much that they seem very much concerned every time I venture myself out of their sight. The sailor, my lieutenant, calls them "Nurse," but then he is such a simple fellow !

Remembering the Laws of Manu, and how it is there said that there are seven kinds of wife, *i.e.*, a wife like a thief, like an enemy, like a master, like a friend, like a sister, like a mother, like a slave, and that the last four are good and the last of all the best, I cannot quite agree with the ancient. My wives are of the best, and I am afraid they are like a master to me, though their authority is always tempered with sisterly manners. And what fine cooks they both are ! They will help me to civilise our negroes.

This task seems to me the most important. All the civilised world may disappear; and we must have cultured beings to put in its place. Have you never thought of the dreadful doom perhaps reserved to our race; of the very slight disturbance that might reduce to nothing all our proud civilisation, leaving only the puniest and less fitted amongst human beings? All to be begun anew! As perhaps it has begun again more than once in one or another planet—even in our own little one—along the past centuries. Nothing, nothing will be left, perhaps; not a book, even the Bible; not a statue, even "Demeter" or "La Vénus"; not a piece of art of any kind, save, mayhap, the skull of a monkey floating upon a new and fathomless Ocean. Worse even!—things may be preserved that would lead to serious blunders for our successors. Think of their extremity if the students of our times should find as the only documents a complete edition of the works of Miss Corelli or some of the numerous Utopias that are poured on us at the

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present time. Why, they would not then be surprised at our total disappearance.

I am afraid I am digressing again. But I must warn you against your intrusion upon me. I just have your message, and if you should at any time attempt to interfere with my mission, or try to have some one sent to my rescue, I would without the slightest hesitation blow our island in the air. And now let us back to my adventures.

I am sorry to say that no subsequent MSS. came to me from the Man-Cover.

GEORGE RAFFALOVICH.

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THE EQUINOX

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