

The Other Night

By Fitz-James O'Brien

The other night we had a dream. We had been poring all day over Adam Eagle's volumes, laboriously deciphering a quaint essay on the moral principles of animals, in which the writer endeavored to prove that beasts possessed conscientiousness, and performed their various avocations as much from a sense of duty as from instinct. The writing was queer and cramped, and pained the eyes to read it. The pages were so soiled with mould and damp as to be entirely illegible in some places, and some idle urchin had been busy pricking architectural designs on the paper, some of which, though very ingenious in themselves, sadly interfered with the perusal of the manuscript. We grew very weary; yes, Adam! we absolutely grew drowsy over thy hallowed volumes! A sensation of cobwebs overspread our frame; a species of impalpable but tenacious threadwork seemed to encompass each limb, and weave itself around our long hair. It appeared as though a thousand busy little sprites were engaged in hanging a tiny leaden weight to each particular hair of our eyelashes. Little balls of sand were apparently stuffed into the corners of our eyes, making us blink terribly. We found our fingers constantly wandering over our eyelids, and poking themselves into all corners of our face. Our moustache suffered considerable persecution. We were fidgety, and twirled the ends into watch-springs over and over again. The room was certainly too hot! No; it is the dressing-gown! Off goes the offending garment, and we luxuriate in shirt-sleeves. What hideously tight shoes these are! Where are our slippers? Of course we never can find any thing when we want it. The slippers are not to be seen. A short search after them enlivens us a little. We then feel a sudden disposition to be reflective. Our head rests frequently on one hand, and we assume a pensive attitude. It is not that we are sleepy! oh, no; *that* has gone off long ago. We merely wish to—wish—to—in—to—to—Pshaw! this is really too absurd; dozing at this hour of night, with so much work before us. Nonsense! we will make an effort. A basin of cold water and a sponge will do it, and we shall be as brisk as a bee. We perform an ablution, and enter the study, endeavoring with faint success to look lively, as we pass the looking-glass. It is, however, a dreary effort. We notice that we look pale, and that our hair has a limp and tired aspect. There is work to be done, however, and we fasten our mental fangs into it furiously. It is very interesting, at least we try hard to persuade ourselves of the fact, and we devour it. Our eyebrows, however, annoy us a little, we do not very well know why; but we keep plucking at them, and passing our finger absently along our temples. But we still read on, read firmly and systematically. The words have sometimes an unaccountable inclination to fraternize, the tail of one intertwining itself with the head of another, and the effect is rather confusing, as thus: "Thenightwas-chillandcoldandrain," &c. It does not matter much, though. A little patience, and they will settle themselves down again in their proper places. The lamp is very annoying. One moment it looks bright and clear, the next it is as dull as a New-York gas-lamp on a dark night, or the City-Hall clock on every night. Thinking it may be something in ourselves, we keep our eyes wide open, and stare at it; but the sprites are again busy hanging their little weights on our eyelashes, and we feel our lids gradually dropping. We catch ourselves nodding, with a convulsive jerk, and hem and blow our nose audibly, in order to drown conscience. The noise has the effect of terrifying a mouse, who, emboldened by the silence, had come out from his hole, and was amusing himself with eating a corner off of "The Pilgrim's Progress." We feel pleased at inspiring such terror. The reflective mood comes on again; the chin

drops into the hollow of the hand, and we pretend to be speculating on the origin of fear. But nod—nod—nod. There seems to be a swaying of the universe. Room, book-shelves, lamp, furniture, all rock and nod, and we alone maintain a just equilibrium. All things get cloudy; but whether this arises from the atmosphere, or from our hair falling into our eyes, we cannot tell. Mist is every where; we seem to be sitting in mist; no, it is a sea; it looks like mist, it is so smooth and blue: we are sitting in an arm-chair, with brass nails, on a smooth blue sea. That is, it is very like a sea; but it can't be one exactly, for a sea has rocks, and all the rocks here are books—great, rugged folios, over which the waves of vapor burst and foam. Presently this ocean mist divides, and the book-rocks clang their huge covers with a noise like sea-shore thunder, and an aged figure emerges from the sea. It is the Solitary. It is Adam Eagle himself. Adam Anadoymene! He is clad in an old linsey-woolsey dressing-gown. There are papooshes on his feet, and his right hand, all thin and withered, is stained to the bone with ink. His countenance is noble and mild, with traces of suffering marked upon it. And the white hair falls back in rich masses from his forehead, like a cataract of snow. But his eyes are strange. They seem to behold nothing material. They do not even see me, the adorer, the worshipper of the seven volumes. Their gaze is illimitable. They seem to be striving even to pierce beyond the farthest beyond. They know no clouds or intervening mists. They spiritually tunnel mountains, and speed unheeding through the valleys far away. Were we standing on the outer edge of the disc of Neptune, straight in the focal line of those eyes, we would feel convinced that they saw not us, but were piercing through us into backward space. While we were watching the Solitary intently, a strange murmuring noise, like that which one makes when one springs a number of book-pages, keeping the thumb pressed against the edges, rustled around us, and again the smooth blue sea-mist divided, and straight in Adam Eagle's path an angelic form, of sculptured vapor, rose up and floated buoyantly. Never did mortal eyes behold a fairer thing, boy or woman, spirit or etherealized matter—we knew not which it was. Its beauty was not of sex or form, and lay not within lines. It was boundless and universal grace. It had scarce hovered an instant in the air, when the Solitary beheld it. That he did see it, could only be inferred from the sudden flaming of his eyes; for in all other respects, his gaze seemed to be as distant as before. But his eyeballs burned suddenly, and light seemed to scintillate from them, and make prismatic bows against the vapory outlines of the apparition. His lips moved as if in inward speech, and he extended his long, thin, transparent hand, as though he would magnetize and compel the spirit. Then the latter seemed to smile all over, and laugh even in the very folds of its impalpable drapery; and began with a slow even motion to describe a great circle. As if drawn by some viewless magnetic relation, the Solitary glided over the smooth, blue sea-mist, and followed its track. With extended hand, he glided after it in the great circle, burning with eagerness to increase his speed and overtake it, but restrained by some invisible law which regulated his motion. When the beautiful spirit had described the great circle, it commenced another of less diameter than the first, and moved with a slightly increased velocity, which communicated itself to Adam Eagle. The next circle was smaller still, and the velocity heightened. And still the disembodied Grace floated on before with its universal smile, and still the Solitary pursued it with imprisoned eagerness. Smaller and smaller grew the circles, swifter and swifter grew the pursuit, until at last both narrowed into a furious whirl. Adam's long white hair streamed back, as if some good spirit were trying to tear him from his vain pursuit, and his large reflective eyes were starting from their sockets, as though they would leap out and fasten themselves upon the vapor-shape. But always, even in the last swift eddies of the chase, when all features were confused into a dim outline, the Shape maintained the same unvarying and universal smile, that lightened its very drapery. Swift,

swift; round and round. The circles must end in a centre, where all motion ceases. Adam gasps for breath, as his transparent fingers almost touch the object of his pursuit—another whirl, and they are spinning on one pivot. A sudden stoppage. The Solitary opens wide his arms to grasp the Shape. The universal smile in which it is clothed deepens into a sun-burst of laughter; all is brightly dim for an instant; and then, Adam Eagle is alone! A moan breaks from his lips, as down from the upper sky there fall upon his beating temples a few gentle snow-flakes; his head drops upon his breast; the smooth, blue sea-mist divides again, and he sinks slowly, leaving behind him painted on my heart a picture of unutterable anguish. Then the rustling sound breaks forth again, the book-rocks clang their covers like sea-shore thunder, and I commence sailing over the blue sea-mist in my brass-nailed arm-chair. The voyage is pleasant enough, but somehow or other, owing to my steering improperly with a paper-cutter, we run ashore upon a reef of book-rocks. We feel that our last moment is come; the vapor of the sea-mist foams up about us, and our arm-chair is gradually sinking. We fire guns of distress with a gold pencil-case, and prepare a raft. But to our horror we discover that the blue sea-mist will support nothing but brass-nailed arm-chairs. We are slowly settling down; the sea-mist is on a level with our chin; another moment, and we are lost; when, oh! joy, an albatross comes floating by. We seize one of his wide wings, and are suddenly upborne into the highest heaven, and then dashed as suddenly against the earth. On recovering from the shock, we find that we have upset the ink-bottle, and are lying on the floor, embracing a folio edition of Vertol's Knights of Malta.