

A: B: O.

By Walter De la Mare

I looked up over the top of my book at the portrait of my great-grandfather and listened in astonishment to the sudden peal of the bell, which clanged and clanged in straggling decisive strokes until, like a dog gone back to his kennel, it slowed, slackened and fell silent again. A bell has an unfriendly tongue; it is a router of wits, a messenger of alarms. Even in the quiet of twilight it may resemble a sour virago's din. At a late hour, when the world is snug in night-cap and snoring is the only harmony, it is the devil's own discordancy. I looked over my book at my placid ancestor, I say, and listened on even after the sound had been stilled.

To tell the truth, I was more than inclined to pay no heed to the summons, and, secure in the kind warmth and solitude of my room, to ignore so rude a remembrancer of the world. Before I could decide either way, yet again the metal tongue clattered, as icily as a martinet. It pulled me to my feet. Then, my tranquillity, my inertia destroyed, it was useless and profitless to take no heed. I vowed vengeance. I would pounce sourly upon my visitor, thought I. I would send him back double-quick into the darkness of the night, and, if this were some timid feminine body (which God forefend) an antic and a grimace would effectually put such an one to route.

I rose, opened the door, and slid cautiously in my slippers to the bolted door. There I paused to climb up on a chair in an endeavour to spy out on the late-corner from the fanlight, to take his size, to analyze his intentions, but standing there even on tiptoe I could see not so much as the crown of a hat. I clambered down and, after a dismal rattling of chain and shooting of bolts, flung open the door.

Upon my top step (eight steps run down from the door to the garden and two more into the street) stood a little boy. A little boy with a ready tongue in his head, I perceived by the smirk at the corner of his mouth; a little boy of spirit too, for the knees of his knickerbockers were patched. This I perceived by the light of a lamp-post which stands over against the doctor's house. Grimaces were wasted on this sturdy youngster in his red flannel neckerchief. I eyed him with pursed lips.

"Mr. Pelluther?" said the little boy, his fists deep in the pockets of his jacket.

"Who asks for Mr. Pelluther?" said I pedagogically.

"Me," said the little boy.

"What does me want with Mr. Pelluther at so untoward an hour, eh, my little man? What the gracious do you mean by making clangour with my bell and waking the stars when all the world's asleep, and fetching me out of the warmth to this windy doorstep? I have a mind to pull your ear."

Such sudden eloquence somewhat astonished the little boy. His "boy-ness" seemed, I fancied, to leave him in the lurch; he was at school out of season; he retrogressed a few steps.

"Please sir, I've got a letter for Mr. Pelluther, the gentleman said," he turned his back on me, "but as he ain't here I'll take it back." He skipped down the step and at the bottom lustily set to whistling the *Marseillaise*.

My dignity was hurt. "Come, come, my little man," I called, "I myself am Mr. Pelluther."

"*Le jour de gloire . . .*" whistled the little boy.

"Give me the letter," said I peremptorily.

"I've got to give it into the gentleman's own hands," said the little boy.

“Come, give me the letter,” said I persuasively.

“I’ve got to give it into the gentleman’s own hands,” said the little boy doggedly, “and you don’t see a corner of the envelope.”

“Come, my boy, here’s a sixpence.”

He eyed me suspiciously, “Chestnuts,” said he, retiring a step or two.

“See, a silver sixpence for the honest messenger,” said I.

“Honest be blowed!” said he. “Put it on the step and go behind the door. I’ll come up for the tanner and put the letter on the step. Catch a weasel?”

I wanted the letter; I trusted my boy; so I put the sixpence on the top step and retired behind the door. He was true to his word. With a wary eye and a whoop of triumph he made the exchange. He doubled his fist on the sixpence and retired into the garden. I came like a felon out of the stocks for my letter.

The letter was addressed simply “Pelluther,” in uncommon careless handwriting, so careless indeed that I hardly recognized the scholarly penmanship of my friend Dugdale. Forgetful of the messenger, who yet lingered upon my garden path, I shut the door and bustled into my study. I was reminded of his presence and of my discourtesy by a rattling shower of stones upon the panels of my door and by the sound of the *Marseillaise* startling the distant trees of the quiet square.

“Dear, dear me,” said I, perching my spectacles most unskilfully. Indeed, I was not a little perturbed by this untimely letter. For only a few hours ago I had walked and smoked with dear old Dugdale in his own pleasant garden, in his own gentle twilight. For twilight seems to soothe to sleep the flowers of my old friend’s garden with gentler hands than she can have vouchsafed even to the gardens of Solomon.

I opened my letter in trepidation, only a little reassured of Dugdale’s safety by the superscription written in his own handwriting. This is the burden of the letter—“Dear Friend Pell. I am writing, in a fever. Come at once—*Antiquities!*—the lumber—a mere scrawl—Come at once, or I begin without you. R. D.”

“Antiquities” was the peak of the climax of this summons—the golden word. All else might be meaningless; as indeed it was, “Come at once. *Antiquities!*”

I bustled into my coat and was pelting at perilous speed down my eight steps, before the *Marseillaise* had ceased to echo from the adjacent houses. Isolated wayfarers no doubt imagined me to be a doctor, bent on enterprise of life or death. Truly an unvenerable appearance was mine, but Dugdale was itching to begin, and haste spelt glory.

His white house lay not a mile distant, and soon the squeal of his gate upon its hinges comforted my heart and gave my lungs pause. Dugdale himself, also, the noise brought flying down into his drive to greet me. He was without his coat. Under his arm was clumsily tucked a spade, his cheeks were flushed with excitement. Even his firm lips, children of science, were trembling, and his grey eyes, wives of the microscope, were agog behind the golden-rimmed spectacles set awry on his magnificent nose.

I squeezed his left hand and thus together we hurried up the steps. “Have you begun?” said I.

“Just on the move when you came round the corner,” said he. “Who would believe it, Old Roman, or Druidical, God knows.”

Excitement and panting made me totter and I was dismayed at the thought of my digestion. We hurried down the passage to his study, which was in great disorder and filled with a vexing dust, hardly reminiscent of his admirable housemaid, and with a most unpleasant mouldy odour, of damp paper I conjecture.

Dugdale seized a ragged piece of parchment which lay upon the table and pressed it into my hand. He sank back into his well-worn leather armchair, the spade resting against his knee, and energetically set to polishing his glasses.

I looked fixedly at him. He flourished his long forefinger at me fussily, shaking his head, eager for me to get on.

Rudely scrawled upon the chart was a diagram rectangular in shape with divers scrawls in red ink, and crazy figures. I drove my brains into the open, with vain threats and cudgelling; no, I could make nothing of it. A small chest or coffer upon the floor, of a curious workmanship, overflowing with dusty and stained papers and parchments, betrayed whence the chart had come.

I looked at Dugdale. "What does it mean?" said I, a little disappointed, for many a trick of the foolish and of the fraudulent has sent me on an idle errand in search of "Antiquities."

"My garden," said Dugdale, sweeping his hand towards the window, then triumphantly pointing to the chart in my hand. "I have studied it. My uncle, the antiquarian; it *is* genuine. I have had suspicions, ah! yes, every one of yours; I'm not blind. It may be anything. I dig at once. Come and help or go to the—"

He shouldered his spade, in which action he shivered a precious little porcelain cup upon a cabinet. He never so much as blinked at the calamity. He slackened not an inch his triumphant march to the door. Well, what is a five-pound note in one's pocket to a sixpence discovered in a gutter?

I caught up the pick and another shovel. "Bravo, Pelluther," said he, and we strutted off arm and arm into the pleasant and spacious garden which lay at the back of the house. I felt proud as a drummer-boy.

In the garden Dugdale whipped out of his pocket a yard measure, and having lighted a wax candle stuck it with its own grease in a recess of the wall. After which he knelt down upon the mould with transparent sedateness and studied the chart by the candle-light, very clear and conspicuous in the darkness.

"Yes tree ten yards N. by seven E. three—semicir—um—square. It's mere A.B.C., 'pon my word."

He darted away to the bottom of the garden. I followed in a canter by the path between the darkened roses. All was blackness except where the candle-light bleached the old bricks of Dugdale's wall and glittered upon the dewy trees. At the squat old yew tree he beckoned me. I had repeatedly beseeched him to fell the ugly thing—but he would not.

"Hold the reel," said he, with trembling fingers offering me the yard-measure. Away we went. "Ten yards by how much?"

"Five, I think," said I.

"Spellicans," said Dugdale, and bustled away to the house for the chart. His shirt-sleeves winked between the bushes. He fetched back with him the chart and another candle stick.

"Do wake up, Pelluther, wake up! Oh, 'seven,' wake up?"

I was shivering with excitement and my teeth sounded like a skeleton swaying in the wind. He measured the yards and marked the place on the soil with his spade.

"Now then to work," said he, and set the example by a savage slash at a pensive *Gloire de Dijon*.

Exceedingly solemn, yet gurgling with self-conscious laughter, I also began to pick and dig. The sweat was cold upon my forehead after a quarter of an hour's hard labour. I sat on the grass and panted.

"City dinners, orgies," muttered Dugdale, slaving away like a man in search of his soul.

“No wind, thank goodness. See that flint flash? Good exercise! Gentenartans and all the better for it. I am no chicken either. Phugh! the place is black as a tiger’s throat. I’ll swear someone’s been here before. Thumb that time!—bless the blister!”

Even in my own abject condition I had time to be amazed at his sinewy strokes and his fanatical energy. He was sexton, and I the owl! Exquisitely, suddenly, Dugdale’s pick struck heavily and hollowly.

“Oh God!” said he scrambling like a rat out of the hole. He leaned heavily on his pick and peered at me with round eyes. A great silence was over the place. I seemed to hear the metallic ring of the pick cleaving its way to the stars. Dugdale crept very cautiously and extinguished the candle with damp fingers.

“Eh, now,” whispered he, “you and I, old boy, d’ye hear. In the hole—it’s desecration, it’s as glum a trade as body-snatching. Hush! who’s that?”

His hand pounced on my shoulder. We craned our necks. A plaintive howl grew out of the silence and faded into the silence. A black cat leapt the fence and disappeared with a flutter of leaves.

“That black beast!” said I, gazing into the wormy hole. “I would like to wait—and think.”

“No time,” said Dugdale, doubtfully bold. “The hole must be filled up before dawn or Jenkinson will make enquiries. Tut, tut, what’s that noise of thumping. Oh, yes, all right!” He clapped his hand on his chest, “Now, Rattie, like mice!”

Rattie had been my nickname a very long time ago.

We set to work again, each tap of pick or shovel chased a shiver down my spine. And after great labour we excavated a metallic chest.

“Pell, you’re a brick—I told you so!” said Dugdale.

We continued to gaze at our earthly spoil. One strange and inexplicable discovery we made was this: a thickly rusted iron tube ran out from the top of the chest into the earth, and thence by surmise we traced it to the trunk of the dwarfed yew tree; and, with the light of our candles eventually discovered its termination imbedded in a boss between two gnarled encrusted branches a few feet up. We were unable to drag out the chest without first disinterring the pipe.

I eyed it with perplexity.

“Come and get a saw,” said Dugdale. “It’s strange, eh?”

He turned a mottled face to me. The air seemed to be slightly phosphorescent. Whether he had suspicions that I should force open the lid in his absence I know not. At any rate, I willingly accompanied him to the tool-house. We brought back a handsaw, Dugdale greased it plentifully with the candle, and I held the pipe while he sawed. What the purpose or use of the pipe might be I puzzled my brains in vain to discover.

“Perhaps,” said Dugdale, pausing, saw in hand, “perhaps it’s delicate merchandise, eh, and needs fresh air.”

“Perhaps it is not,” said I, unaccountably vexed at his halting speech.

He seemed to expect no different answer and again set busily to work. The pipe vibrated at his vigour, dealing me little shocks and numbing my fingers. At last the chest was free, we tapped it with our fingers. We scraped off flakes of mould and rust with our nails. I knelt and put my eye to the end of the pipe. Dugdale pushed me aside and did likewise.

I am assured that passing in his brain was a sequence of ideas exactly similar to my own. We nursed our excitement, we conceived the wildest fantasies, we brought forth litters of surmises. Perhaps just the shadow of apprehension lurked about us. Possibly a familiar spirit may have tapped our shoulders.

Then, at the same instant we both began to pull and push vigorously at the chest; but, in such a confined space (for the hole was ragged and unequal) its weight was too great for our strength.

“A rope,” said Dugdale, “let’s go together again. Two ‘old boys’ in the plot.” He laughed hypocritically.

“Certainly,” said I, amused at his suspicions and wiles.

Again we stepped away to the tool-shed, and returned with a coil of rope. The pick being used as a lever, we were soon able to haul the chest out of its hole.

“Duty first,” said Dugdale, shovelling the loose earth into the cavity. I imitated him. And over the place of the disturbance we planted the dying rose bush, already hanging drooping leaves.

“Jenkinson’s eyes are not microscopes, but he’s damned inquisitive.”

Jenkinson, incidentally, was an old gentleman who lived in the house next to Dugdale. One who having no currants in his own bun must needs pick and steal his neighbours! But he is dumb in the grave now, and out of hearing of any cavilling tongue.

Dugdale swore, but a man would be a saint or a fool who could refrain from swearing under the circumstance. Even I displayed blasphemous knowledge and was not ashamed.

Dugdale took one end and I the other side of the chest. Together we carried it with immense difficulty (for the thing was prodigiously weighty) to the study. We cleared away all the furniture to the sides of the room. We placed the chest in the middle of the floor so that we might gloat upon it at our ease. With the fire-shovel, for we had neglected to bring the spade, Dugdale scraped away mould and rust and upon the top of the chest appeared three letters, initial to a word, I conjectured, which originally ran the whole width of the side, but the greater part of which had been rendered illegible by the action of the soil. “A-B-O” were the letters.

“I have no idea,” said Dugdale peering at this barely perceptible record. “I have no idea,” I echoed vaguely.

And would to God we had forewith carried the chest unopened to the garden and buried it deeper than deep!

“Let us open it,” said I, after arduous examination of the inscription. The fire flames glittered upon dear old Dugdale’s glasses. He was a chilly man and at a suggestion of east wind would have a fire set blazing. The room was snug and cozy. I remember the carved figure of a Chinese God grinning at me in a very palpable manner as I handed Dugdale his chisel. (May he forgive me!) The intense silence was ominous. In a cranny at the lid of the chest he inserted the tool. He looked at me queerly, at the second jerk the steel snapped.

“Dugdale,” said I, eyeing the Chinese God, “let’s leave well alone.”

“Eh,” said he in an unfamiliar voice.

“Have nought to do with the thing.”

“What, eh?” said he sucking his finger, the nail of which he had broken in his digging. He hesitated an instant. “We must get another chisel,” said he, laughing.

But somehow I cared for the laugh not at all. It was not the fair bleak laugh of Dugdale. He took my arm in his and for the third time we made our way to the tool-shed.

“It’s fresh and sweet,” said I, sniffing the air of the garden. My eyes beseeched Dugdale.

“Ay, so it is, it is,” said he.

When he again set to work upon the chest he prised open the lid at the first effort. The scrap of broken steel rang upon the metal of the chest. A faint and unpleasant odour became perceptible. Dugdale remained in the position the sudden lift of the lid had given his body, his head bent slightly forward, over the open chest. I put one hand upon the side of the chest. My fingers touched a little cake of hard stuff. I looked into the chest. I took a step forward and looked in.

Yellow cotton wool lined the leaden sides and was thrust into the interstices of the limbs of the creature which sat within. I will speak without emotion. I saw a flat malformed skull and meagre arms and shoulders clad in coarse fawn hair. I saw a face thrown back a little, bearing hideous and ungodly resemblance to the human face, its lids heavy blue and closely shut with coarse lashes and tangled eyebrows. This I saw, this the monstrous antiquity hid in the chest which Dugdale and I dug out of the garden. Only one glimpse I took at the thing, then Dugdale had replaced the lid, had sat down on the floor and was rocking to and fro with hands clasped over his knees.

I made my way to the window feeling stiff and sore with unaccustomed toil; I threw open the window and leaned far out into the scented air. The sweetness of the flowers eddied into the room. The night was very quiet. For many minutes so I stood counting a row of poplars at the far end of the garden. Then I returned to Dugdale.

“It’s the end of the business,” said I. “My gorge rises with despair of life. Swear it! my dear old Dugdale. I implore you to swear that this shall be the end of the business. We will go bury it now.”

“I swear it, Pelluther. Pell! Pell!” The bitterness of his childish cry is venomous even now. “But hear me old friend,” he said. “I am too weak now. Come tomorrow at this time and we will bury it together.”

The chest stood in front of the fire. The metal was green with verdigris.

We went out of the room leaving the glittering candles to their watch, and in my presence Dugdale turned the key in the lock of the door. He walked with me to the Church and there we parted company.

“A damnable thing,” said Dugdale, shaking my hand.

I wagged my head woefully.

The next day, being Wednesday, the charwomen invaded my house, as was customary upon that day, and to be free of the steam and the stench of soap I took my way to Kew. Throughout the day I wandered through the gardens striving to enjoy the luxuriance and the flowers.

In the first coolness of evening I turned my back upon the gorgeous west and made my way home again. I met the women red and flustered leaving the house.

“Has any one called?” said I.

“The butcher, sir,” said Mrs. Rodd.

“Thank you,” said I and entered my house.

Now in the twilight as I sat down at my own fireside, my surroundings recalled most vividly the scene of the night. I leaned heavily in my chair feeling faint and sick, and in so doing was much inconvenienced by some hard thing in the pocket of my jacket pressed to my side by the arm of the chair. I rummaged in my pocket and brought out the little cake of hard green substance which had been in the mouth of the chest. I suppose that my fingers had clutched it when they had come in contact with it the night before and unknowingly I had deposited it in my pocket.

Deeming it prudent to have care in the matter, I rose and locked up the stuff in my little medicine chest, which is hanged above the mantelpiece in the room which looks out upon the garden. For to analyze or examine the stuff I feared. This done I came again to my chair and composed myself to reading.

Supper had been prepared by the women and was set upon the table for me in my study. It has been my custom since the death of my sister to dine at mid-day at my club.

True! I sat with the book upon my knee but all my thoughts were with Dugdale. A rectangular shape obtruded itself upon my retina and floated upon the white page. The hours dragged wearily. My head drooped and my chin tapped my chest. In fact I was dreaming, when I was awakened by a doubtful knock upon the front door. My senses were alert in an instant. The sound, just as though something were scraping the paint, was repeated.

I rose stealthily. A vague desire to flee out into the garden seized upon me.

The sound was repeated.

I went very slowly to the door. Again I climbed the chair (I loved the little boy now.) But I could see nothing. I peeped through the keyhole but something obscured the opening upon the other side. A faint odour—unpleasant—was in the house. With desperation of terror I flung open the door. I fancied I heard the sound of panting. I fancied something brushing my arm; then I found myself staring down the hallway listening to the echo of the click of the latch of the door of the room which overlooks my garden. In this unseemly rhythm and this succession of words I write with intent. Thus my thoughts ran then; thus then I write now. Many years ago when I was a young man I was nearly burnt alive. I felt then an honest fear. This was a dim skulking horror of soul and an inhuman depravity. It is impossible for me to tell of my horrid strivings of brain. I staggered into my room; I sat down in my chair; I took my book upon my knee; I put my spectacles upon my nose; but all the time all my senses were dead save that of hearing. Distinctly I felt my ears move and twitch, with the help of some ancient muscle, I conjecture, long disused by humanity. And as I sat, my brain cried out with fear.

For ten minutes (I slowly counted each sounding ‘cluck’ of my clock) I sat so. At last my limbs began to quake, solitude was driving me to perilous ravines of thought. I crept with guilty tread into the garden. I climbed the fence which separates the next house from mine. This house, No. 17, was inhabited by a caretaker, a rude uncouth fellow who used for his living room only the kitchen, and who had tied all the bells together so that he might not be disturbed. He was a cad of a man. But for companionship I cried out.

I went to the garden door keeping my eyes fixedly turned away from the window. I hammered at the garden door of the house. I hammered again. A sullen footstep resounded in the empty place and the door was cautiously opened a few inches. A scared face looked out at me through the chink.

“For God’s sake,” said I, “come and sup with me. I have a leg of good meat, my dear fellow, come and sup with me.”

The door opened wider. Curiosity took the place of apprehension. “Say, Master, what is moving in the house?” said the fellow. “Why is my ’ead all damp, and my ’ands a shiverin’. I tell you there’s a thing gone wrong in the place. I sits with my back to the wall and somebody steps quick and quiet on the other side. Why am I sick like so? I ask yer why?”

The man almost wept.

“You silly fellow! May a sick man not pace his mansion. I will give you a five-pound note to come and sit with me,” said I. “Be neighbourly, my good fellow. I fear that a fit will overtake me. I am weak—the heat—epileptical too. Rats crowd in the walls, I often hear their tumult. Come, sup with me.

The cad shook his villainous head sagely.

“A five-pound note—two,” said I.

“I was chaffin’,” said he, and returned into the house to fetch a poker.

We climbed the fence and crept like thieves towards the house. But not an inch beyond my door would the fellow come. I expostulated. He blasphemed. He stubbornly stuck to his purpose.

“I don’t budge till I’ve ‘glimpsed’ through that window,” said he.

I argued and entreated; I doubled my bribe; I tapped him upon the shoulder and twitted him of cowardice; I performed a pirouette about him; I entreated him to sit with me.

“I don’t budge till I’ve glimpsed through that window.”

I fetched a little ladder from the greenhouse which stands to the left of the house, and the caretaker carried it to the window, the ledge of which is about five feet from the ground. He climbed laboriously step by step, stretching his neck so as to *see* into the black room beyond, while I, simply to be near him, climbed behind him.

He had got halfway and was breathing loudly when suddenly a long arm, thin as its bone, clad in tawny hair, pallid in the dim starlight, pounced across the window and dragged the curtains together—an arm thin as its bone. The fellow above me groaned, threw up his hands and tumbled headlong off the ladder, bringing me to the ground in his fall.

For a moment I lay dazed; then, lifting my head from the soil and the sweet lilies I perceived him clambering over the fence in savage hurry. I remember that the dew glistened upon his boots as he flung his heels over the fence.

Presently I was upon my feet and pelting after him, but he was a younger man, and when I reached the door at the back of his house he had already bolted and barred it. To all of my prayers and knockings he paid no attention. Notwithstanding, I feel certain that he sat listening upon the other side, for I discerned a hoarse breathing like the breathing of an asthmatic.

“You have left the poker. I bring you the poker,” I bellowed, but he made no answer.

Again I climbed the fence, now determined to leave the house free for the thing to roam and to ravage, nor to return till daylight was come. I crept quietly through the haunted place. As I passed the room, I distinguished a sound—like the sound of a humming top—of incessant gabble. Iran and opened the front door and just then, as I peered out upon the street, a beggar clothed in rags shuffled past the garden gate. I leapt down the steps.

“Here my good man,” said I speaking with difficulty for my tongue seemed stiff and glutinous.

He turned with an odd whine and shuffled towards me.

“Are you hungry?” said I. “Have you an appetite—just a stubborn yearning for a delicate snack of prime Welsh lamb?”

The scraggy wretch nodded and gesticulated with warty hands.

“Come in, come in,” I screamed. “You shall eat a meal, poor man. How dire is civilization in rags—Evil fortune! Socialism! Millionaires! I’ll be bound. Come in, come in.”

I was weeping with delight. He squinted at me with suspicion and again waved his hands. By these movements and by his articulate cries, I fancied the man was dumb. (He was vexed with a serious impediment in his speech I now conjecture.) He was manifesting mistrust. He snuffled.

“No, no” said I. “Come in, my man and welcome. I am lonely—a Bohemian. Ancient books are musty company. Come sit and cheer me with an honest appetite. Take a glass of wine with me.”

I patted the wretch on the back. I gripped his arm. In my tragic acting, moreover, I hummed a little song to prove my indifference. He tottered upon my steps in front of me—his shoes were mended with brown paper and the noise of his footsteps was like the rustle of a lady’s silk dress. I blithely followed him into the house leaving the door wide open so that the clean night air might go through the house, so that the clatter of the railroad which lies behind the doctor’s house might prove the reality of the world. I sat the beggar down in an arm-chair. I plied him with meat and drink. He luxuriated in the good fare, he guzzled my claret, he gnawed bones and crust like a bony beast, considering me the while, apprehensive of being reft of his meal. He

snarled and he gobbled, he puffed, he mouthed and chewed. He was a bird of prey, a cat, a wild beast, and a man. His belly was the only truth. He had chanced on heaven, and awaited the archangel's trump of banishment. Yet in the midst of his ravenous feeding, terror was netting him, too. Full of my own fear, in watching his hands shivering, and the pallor overspreading his grimy face, I took delight. Still he ate furiously, flouting his fears.

All the while I was thinking desperately of the horrid creature which was in my house. The while I sat grinning at my guest, the while I was inciting him to eat, drink, and be merry, the while I analyzed each deplorable action of the rude fellow and sickened at his beastliness, the vile consciousness of that thing on its secret errand prowling within scent, never left me—that abortion—A-B-O, abortion; I knew then.

On a sudden, just as the tramp, having lifted the lamb bone, had set his teeth to gnawing at the gristly knuckle, there came to my ears the sound of breaking glass and then a rustling, (no extraordinary sound), a rustling sound of a hand wandering upon the panel of a door. But the beggar had heard what speech cannot make intelligible. I felt younger on that day than I have since my childhood. I was drunken with terror.

My beggar, dropping his tumbler of wine but still clutching the lamb bone, scrambled to his feet and eyed me with pale grey pupils set in circles of white. His dirty bleached face was stained with his meal. Dirt seamed his skin. I took his hand in mine. I caught up the lamp and held it on high. The beggar and I stood in the doorway gazing into the darkness; the lamplight faintly lit the familiar passage. It gleamed on the door of the room whose window overlooks my garden. The handle of the door was silently turning. The door was opening—almost imperceptibly. The beggar's pulse throbbed furiously; my elbow was pressed against his arm. And a very thin abnormal thing—a fawn shadow—came out of the room and pattered past the beggar and me.

My jaws fell asunder, nor could I shut them so that I might speak. Tighter I clutched the beggar and we fled out together. Standing upon the topmost of the steps, we peered down the street; afar off with ponderous tread walked a policeman, playing the light of his lantern upon the windows of the houses and the doors. Presently he drew near to a lamp, to where flitted a monstrous shadow. I saw the policeman turn suddenly round about. With fluttering coat-tails he ran furiously down a little lane which leads to many bright shops.

The beggar and I spent the rest of the night upon the doorstep. Sometimes he made vain splutterings of speech and vexed gesticulations, but generally we waited speechless and motionless as two stuffed owls.

At the first faint ray of dawn, which leapt above the doctor's house opposite, the beggar flung away my hand, hopped blindly down the steps and, pausing not to open the gate, vaulted over it and was immediately gone. I scarcely felt surprise. The green-shaded lamp which stood upon the doorstep slowly burned itself out. The sun rose gladly, the sparrows made the morning noisy as they fluttered and fought in their busy foraging. I think my round eyes vaguely watched them.

Soon after eight the postman brought me a letter. And this was the letter—"God forgive me, friend, and help me to write sanely. A miserable curiosity has proved too strong for me. I went back to my house, now woefully strange to me. I could not sleep. Now pacing with me in my own bedroom, now wrapped in its unholy sleep, the thing as always with me. Each picture, indeed each chair, however severely I strove to discipline my thoughts, carried with it a pregnant suggestion. In the middle of the night I took my way downstairs and opened the door of my study. My books seemed to me disconsolate friends offended. The case stood as we had left it—we, you and I, when we locked the door upon the tragedy. In fear and trembling I went a little farther into the room. Two steps had I taken when I discovered that the lid no longer shut the

thing from the stars, that the lid was gaping open. Oh! Pelluther, how will you credit so astounding a statement. I saw (I say it solemnly though I have to labour vigorously to drive back a horde of thoughts) I saw the wretched creature, which you and I had raised from the belly of the earth, lying upon the floor; its meagre limbs were coiled in front of the fire. Had the heat roused him from his long sleep? I know not, I dare not think. He—he, Pelluther—lay upon the hearth-rug sunken in slumber soundlessly breathing. Oh, my friend, I stand eyeing insanity, face to face. My mind is mutinous. There lay the wretched abortion:—it seems to me that this thing is like a pestilent secret sin, which lies hid, festering, weaving snares, befouling the wholesome air, but which, some day, creeps out and goes stalking midst healthy men, a leprous child of the sinner. Ay, and like a sin perhaps of yours and of mine. Pelluther! But, being heavy with such a woesome burden it becomes us alone to bear it. I left the thing there in its sleep. Its history the world shall never know. I write this to warn you of the awful terror of the event which has come upon you and me. When you come,¹ we will make our plans to destroy utterly this horrid memory. And if this be not our lot we must exist but to hide our discovery from the eyes of the sane. If any suffer, it is you and I who must suffer. If murder can be just, the killing of this creature—neither man nor beast, this vile symbol—must be accounted to us a virtue. Fate has chosen her tools. Come, my old friend! I have sent away my servants and locked my door; and my prayer is that this thing may sleep until darkness comes down to cloak our horrid task from the eyes of the world. Science is slunk away shamefaced; religion is a withered flower. Oh, my friend, what shall I say! How shall I regain myself?”

From the slender record of this letter I leave you to deduce whatever conclusions you may. I may suppose that at some time of the second day (perhaps, while I was rambling through the green places of Kew!) Dug-dale had again visited the thing and found it awake, alert, vigilant in his room. No man spied upon my friend in those hours. (Sometimes in the quietude,, I fancy I hear an odd footfall upon my threshold!)

In the brilliant sunshine I drove in a four-wheeled cab to Dugdale’s house, for my limbs were weak and would hardly bear my body. I limped up the garden path and the familiar steps with the help of two sticks. The door was ajar—I entered. I found Dugdale in his study. He was sitting in the chest with a Bible resting on one of the sides.

He looked at me. “ ‘For we are but of yesterday and know nothing because our days upon earth are a shadow.’ What is life, Pelluther? A vain longing for death. What is beauty? A question of degree. And sin is in the air,—child of disease and death and springing-up and hatred of life. Fawn hair has beauty and as for bones; surely less for the worms. Worms! through lead? Pelluther, my dear old Pell. Through lead?”

He gazed at me like a child gazing at a bright light.

“Come!” said I, “the air is bland and the sun is fierce and warm. Come!” I could say no more.

“But the sunlight has no meaning to me now,” said he. “That breeder of corruption, tall here and a monstrous being, walks under my skull strangling all the other beings, puny and sapless. I have one idea, conception, vivid faintness, a fierce red horrid idea—and a phenomenon, too. You see, it is when a deep abstract belief rots into loathing, when hope is eaten away by horrors of sleep and a mad longing for sleep—Mad! Yet fawn hair is not without beauty; provided, Pelluther, provided—through lead?” . . .

A vain idle report has been set about by the malicious. Oh, was there not reason and logical sequence in his conversation with me? I give it for demonstration’s sake. I swear that he is not

¹ I perceive that Dugdale omitted to post this letter in time to reach me on the second evening. I bitterly deplore the omission.

mad—a little eccentric (surely all clever men are eccentric), a little aged. I swear solemnly that my dear friend Dugdale was not mad. He was just a man. He wronged no one. He was a benevolent kindly gentleman and fine in intellect. Say you that he was eccentric—not mad. Tears ran down my cheeks as I looked at him.