

CLASSICS TO GO
FAR OFF THINGS



ARTHUR MACHEN

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Arthur Machen

DEDICATION

TO ALFRED TURNER

This is a book, my dear Turner, which I had in my heart to write for many years. The thought of it came to me with that other thought that I was growing—rather, grown—old; that the curtain had definitely been rung down on all the days of my youth. And so I got into the way of looking back, of recalling the far gone times and suns of the 'seventies and early 'eighties when the scene of my life was being set. I made up my mind that I would write about it all—some day.

Some day would undoubtedly have been Never; if it had not been for you. I had not spoken of the projected book to you or anyone else; but one fine morning in 1915 you ordered me to write it! You were then, you will remember, editing the London Evening News, and as a reporter on your staff I had nothing to do but to obey. The book was written, appeared in the paper as "The Confessions of a Literary Man," and now reappears as "Far Off Things."

So far, good. I enjoyed writing the book enormously; and, I frankly confess, I enjoy reading it. In a word, I am not grumbling. But there is one little point that I do not mean to neglect. My complacent views as to "Far Off Things" may not be shared by other and, possibly, more competent judges. And what I want to impress on you is this: that if there is to be trouble, "you are going to have your share of it." You ordered the book to be written, you printed it in your paper, you have urged me to reprint it, not once or twice, but again and again.

Now, you remember Johnson on advising an author to print his book. "This author," said the Doctor, "when mankind are hunting him with a canister at his tail can say, 'I would not have published, had not Johnson, or Reynolds, or Musgrave, or some other good judge commended the work!'"

Now you see the purpose of this Epistle Dedicatory. It is to make it quite clear that, if there is to be any talk of canisters and tails, the order will run:

"Canisters for two!"

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Chapter I

One night a year or so ago I was the guest of a famous literary society. This society, or club, it is well known, believes in celebrating literature—and all sorts of other things—in a thoroughly agreeable and human fashion. It meets not in any gloomy hall or lecture room, it has no gritty apparatus of blackboard, chalk, and bleared water-bottle. It summons its members and its guests to a well-known restaurant of the West End, it gives them red and white roses for their button-holes, and sets them down to an excellent dinner and good red wine at a gaily decked table, flower garlanded, luminous with many starry lamps.

Well, as I say, I found myself on a certain night a partaker of all this cheerfulness. I was one guest among many; there were explorers and ambassadors and great scientific personages and judges, and the author who has given the world the best laughter that it has enjoyed since Dickens died: in a word, I was in much more distinguished company than that to which I am accustomed. And after dinner the Persians (as I will call them) have a kindly and courteous custom of praising their guests; and to my astonishment and delight the speaker brought me into his oration and said the kindest and most glowing things imaginable about a translation I once made of the "Heptameron" of Margaret of Navarre. I was heartily pleased; I hold with Foker in "Pendennis" that every fellow likes a hand. Praise is grateful, especially when there has not been too much of it; but it is not to record my self-complacence that I have told this incident of the Persian banquet. As I sat at the board and heard the speaker's kindly compliments, I was visited for a twinkling part of a moment by a vision; by such a vision as

they say comes to the spiritual eyes of drowning men as they sink through the green water. The scene about me was such as one will find nowhere else but in London. The multitude of lights, the decoration of the great room and the tables, above all the nature of the company and something in the very air of the place; all these were metropolitan in the sense in which the word is opposed to provincial. This is a subtlety which the provinces cannot understand, and it is natural enough that they are unable to do so. The big town in the Midlands or the North will tell you of its picture galleries, of its classical concerts, and of the serious books taken out in great numbers from its flourishing free libraries. It does not see, and, probably, will never see, that none of these things is to the point.

Well, from the heart of this London atmosphere I was suddenly transported in my vision to a darkling, solitary country lane as the dusk of a November evening closed upon it thirty long years before. And, as I think that the pure provincial can never understand the quiddity or essence of London, so I believe that for the born Londoner the country ever remains an incredible mystery. He knows that it is there—somewhere—but he has no true vision of it. In spite of himself he Londonises it, suburbanises it; he sticks a gas lamp or two in the lanes, dots some largish villas of red brick beside them, and extends the District or the Metropolitan to within easy distance of the dark wood. But here was I carried from luminous Oxford Street to the old deep lane in Gwent, which is on the borders of Wales. Nothing that a Londoner would call a town within eight miles, deep silence, deep stillness everywhere; hills and dark wintry woods growing dim in the twilight, the mountain to the west a vague, huge mass against a faint afterlight of the dead day, grey and heavy clouds massed over all the sky. I saw myself, a lad of twenty-one or thereabouts, strolling along this solitary lane on a daily errand, bound for

a point about a mile from the rectory. Here a footpath over the fields crossed the road, and by the stile I would wait for the postman. I would hear him coming from far away, for he blew a horn as he walked, so that people in the scattered farms might come out with their letters if they had any. I lounged on the stile and waited, and when the postman came I would give him my packet—the day's portion of "copy" of that Heptameron translation that I was then making and sending to the publisher in York Street, Covent Garden. The postman would put the parcel in his bag, cross the road, and go striding off into the dim country beyond, finding his way on a track that no townsman could see, by field and wood and marshy places, crossing the Canthwr brook by a narrow plank, coming out somewhere on the Llanfrechfa road, and so entering at last Caerleon-on-Usk, the little silent, deserted village that was once the golden Isca of the Roman legions, that is golden for ever and immortal in the romances of King Arthur and the Graal and the Round Table.

So, in an instant's time, I journeyed from the lighted room in the big Oxford Street restaurant to the darkening lane in far-away Gwent, in far-away years. I gathered anew for that little while the savour of the autumnal wood beside which the boy of thirty years before was walking, and also the savour of his long-forgotten labours, of his old dreams of life and of letters. The speech and the dream came to an end: and the man on the other side of the table, who is probably the most skilful and witty writer of musical comedy "lyrics" in England, was saying that once on a time he had tried to write real poetry.

I shall always esteem it as the greatest piece of fortune that has fallen to me, that I was born in that noble, fallen Caerleon-on-Usk, in the heart of Gwent. My greatest fortune, I mean, from that point of view which I now more especially

have in mind, the career of letters. For the older I grow the more firmly am I convinced that anything which I may have accomplished in literature is due to the fact that when my eyes were first opened in earliest childhood they had before them the vision of an enchanted land. As soon as I saw anything I saw Twyn Barlwm, that mystic tumulus, the memorial of peoples that dwelt in that region before the Celts left the Land of Summer. This guarded the southern limit of the great mountain wall in the west; a little northward was Mynydd Maen—the Mountain of the Stone—a giant, rounded billow; and still to the north mountains, and on fair, clear days one could see the pointed summit of the Holy Mountain by Abergavenny. It would shine, I remember, a pure blue in the far sunshine; it was a mountain peak in a fairy tale. And then to eastward the bedroom window of Llanddewi Rectory looked over hill and valley, over high woods, quivering with leafage like the beloved Zacynthus of Ulysses, away to the forest of Wentwood, to the church tower on the hill above Caerleon. Through a cleft one might see now and again a bright yellow glint of the Severn Sea, and the cliffs of Somerset beyond. And hardly a house in sight in all the landscape, look where you would. Here the gable of a barn, here a glint of a whitewashed farm-house, here blue wood smoke rising from an orchard grove, where an old cottage was snugly hidden; but only so much if you knew where to look. And of nights, when the dusk fell and the farmer went his rounds, you might chance to see his lantern glimmering a very spark on the hillside. This was all that showed in a vague, dark world; and the only sounds were the faint distant barking of the sheepdog and the melancholy cry of the owls from the border of the brake.

I believe that I have seen at all events the main streets of London at every hour of the day and night. I have viewed, for example, Leicester Square between four and five of a summer morning, and have marvelled at its dismal disarray

and quite miserable shabbiness of aspect. With the pure morning sun shining upon its gay places in clear splendour they are infinitely more "shocking" than they can appear at night-time to the narrowest of provincials. The Strand is a solemn street at two in the morning, Holborn has a certain vastness and windiness about it as the sky grows from black to grey, and at six the residential quarters seem full of houses of mourning, their white blinds most strictly drawn.

And at one time I had almost as full a knowledge of my native country, though not so much with respect to the category of time as to that of place. I have, it is true, seen the sky above the dark stretch of Wentwood Forest redden to the dawn, and I have lost my way and strayed in a very maze of unknown brooks and hills and woods and wild lands in the blackest hours after midnight. But the habits of the country, unlike those of London, generally fail to give reason or excuse for night wanderings. If you stayed in friendly and hospitable company much after ten of the night, it was usually a case of the spare room, newly aired sheets, one pipe more, and so to bed. This at all events on nights that were very black or tempestuous with wind and rain; for on such nights it is difficult to make out the faint footpath from stile to stile, and only the surest sense of locality will enable one to strike the felled tree or the narrow plank that, hidden by a dense growth of alders, crosses the winding of the brook. But from very early years indeed I became an enchanted student of the daylight country, which, I think, for me never was illuminated by common daylight, but rather by suns that rose from the holy seas of faery and sank down behind magic hills. I was an only child, and as soon as I could walk beyond the limits of the fields and orchards about the rectory, my father would take me with him on such parish visitations as were fairly within the stretch and strength of short legs. Indeed, I began my peregrinations at a still earlier period, for I can remember a

visit to the mill, that was paid when I was a passenger in a perambulator, and aged, I suppose, about three.

Later these travels became more frequent, and I have recollections, still fresh and pleasant, of sitting still in old farm-house kitchens while my father was about his ghostly business. Always, even in the full blaze of summer, there would be a glint of fire on the cavernous hearth and a faint blue spire of wood smoke mounting the huge hollow of the chimney. The smell of this wood smoke scented and sweetened the air, in which there was usually a hint of apples stored away in loft or cellar, somewhere behind one or other of the black tarred doors that opened from every wall in the long, low room, and here and there bevelled what should have been an angle. By the hearth stood a big curving settle on one side, on the other there was usually an armchair for the farmer's wife. One small window, with square leaded panes, with solid oaken mullions, looked out on the garden, and so thick were the walls—they were always heavily "battered," or sloped outward towards the ground—that there was a depth of at least three feet between the window panes and the inner wall of the room. There was whitewash within and without, renewed every spring, and it is one of the most beautiful circumstances in Gwent that this custom of whitewash prevails. To look up to a mountain side and to see the pure white of the walls of the farms and cottages established there, fronting great winds, but nestling too in a shelter of tossing trees, gives me even now the keenest pleasure. And if on a summer day one climbs up amidst those brave winds and looks down on all the rolling land of Gwent, it is dotted with these white farms, that shine radiant in the sunlight.

And these farm-house kitchens were floored with stone, which was so purely and exquisitely kept that people said "one could eat bread and butter off Mrs. Morgan's kitchen

floor." Such a place was, and still is, my notion of comfort, of the material surroundings which are fit to house a man. Now and then, in these later days, my business—never my pleasure—calls me to our Hôtel Glorieux or our Hôtel Splendide; to the places where the rooms are fifty feet high, where the walls are marble, and mirrors and gilding, where there are flowery carpets and Louis Quinze chairs and the true American heat. I think then of the kitchens of Pantyreos and Penyrhaul, as Israel in exile remembered Syon.

But it is not in summer-time that it is best to remember these places, excellent though the thought of their coolness and refreshment may be. I like to think of them as set in a framework of late autumn or deep mid-winter. I will be more curious than De Quincey: no mere bitter wind or frost, not even snow will serve my turn, though each of these has its admirable uses.

But let me have a night late in November, let us say. Every leaf has long been down, save that the beech hedgerow in the sheltered forest road will keep its tawny copper all through the winter. Rain has been sweeping along the valleys for days past in giant misty pillars, the brooks are bank high with red, foaming water; down every steep field little hedgerow streams come pouring. In the farmyards the men go about their work clad in sacks, and if they may will shelter under penthouses and find work to do in the barns.

Give me a night in the midst of such weather, and then think of the farm atop the hill, to which two good miles of deep, wandering lane go climbing, and mix the rain with a great wind from the mountain: and then think of entering the place which I have described, set now for the old act of winter. The green shutters are close fastened without the window, the settle is curved about the hearth, and that great cavern is ablaze and glorious with heaped wood and coals, and the white walls golden with the light of the

leaping flames. And those within can hear the rain dashing upon shutter and upon closed door, and the fire hisses now and again as stray drops fall down the chimney; and the great wind shakes the trees and goes roaring down the hillside to the valley and moans and mutters about the housetop.

A man will leave his place, snug in shelter, in the deepest glow of the fire, and go out for a moment and open but a little of the door in the porch and see all the world black and wild and wet, and then come back to the light and heat and thank God for his home, wondering whether any are still abroad on such a night of tempest.

Looking back on my native country as I first remember it, I have often regretted that I was not born say twenty or thirty years earlier. I should then have seen more of a singular social process, which I can only call the Passing of the Gentry. In my father's parish this had taken place very long before my day, or his either. Indeed, I am not quite sure that any armigerous families had ever inhabited Llanddewi; though I have a dim notion that certain old farm-houses were pointed out to me as having been "gentlemen's houses." But an adjoining parish had once held three very ancient families of small gentry. One was still in existence well within my recollection, another became extinct in the legitimate line soon after I was born, and the third had been merged in other and larger inheritances.

There were no Perrotts left, and their house had been "restored," and was occupied as a farm. I often sat under their memorials in the little church, and admired their arms, three golden pears, and their crest, a parrot; altogether a pretty example of *heraldia cantans*, or punning heraldry. Of the other two houses one was a pleasant, rambling, mouldering place, yellow-washed, verandahed, and on the whole more like a *petit manoir* in Touraine than a country