

## THE ABUSE OF THE SUPERNATURAL IN FICTION.

The primary object of the story-teller is to attract our attention. He sits down by the fireside and begins to recount something. If it seems to be amusing or thrilling, we listen; if not, we go away. But nowadays there are so many tellers and so many tales that the anxiety of the novelist becomes almost painfully apparent. He is so afraid that we shall not attend to him that he uses every subterfuge to excite us at the outset. If he is a realist, he puts in the squalid details on his first page; if he is a romanticist or a satirist, he tries to do the tricks of his business the very moment that he catches our eye. And as the ground becomes more and more crowded, and the novel situation taken from real life more and more difficult to find, the writer of fiction is tempted to return to the congenial hunting-ground of his forefathers, and try to interest us in what never was and never could be. Within the last two or three years we have seen a revival among us of the supernatural in fiction; we have had quite a crop of noticeable books the plots of which run counter to all existing experience. There is no objection to this practice in principle, but some of the novelists do not seem to perceive what the rules and limitations of it are.

The first law of romantic invention must be not to overstep the boundaries of belief. In the Ages of Credulity it was easy to keep this law. The world was so wide and dim, man's knowledge of it so imperfect, nature still so mysterious, that if a specially bold man said that he had seen a green dragon chewing little children in his jaws, and puffing flames from his nostrils, he was widely credited. I suppose that there were always some sceptics, but they were likely to be of the class of the sailor's mother, who easily believed in mountains of cake and rivers of rum, but was not to be persuaded that there were fishes which could fly. It was just the absolutely impossible which found an easy path to the mediæval imagination. As experience became wider and calmer, preposterous fancy obtained less and less ready entrance into the mind, but its extravagances lingered among the igno-

rant. To this very day, in the wilder parts of Ireland, the people will tell you that fairies and witches exist and do marvellous things; they will sometimes aver that they themselves have seen such beings. Here is the mediæval condition in full survival; and to these people, if their fancies were properly approached, nothing too monstrous could be told. They would believe the magic wonders with the simplicity of children. We have to remember that, up to three or four hundred years ago, every one, except a few learned men, was in this condition, in order to realise how facile an appeal was made to terror and awe by the hotch-potch of supernatural romance in the Middle Ages.

But to-day people abide no longer in this ignorance. Science has invaded every section of the world, and there is scarcely a dark corner left into which the imagination can flit like a bat and rest itself in the twilight. Nevertheless, the use of supernatural or extra-experimental elements increases in fiction, and is accepted without demur. Why is this? Primarily, of course, it is because we have accepted the convention of being interested in a story even though we are perfectly aware that it cannot be "true." For instance, there are incidents familiar to every reader of Hawthorne which are outside the limits of prosaic belief. But no reader objects to these, or to the brilliant flights of Oriental magic in Mr. George Meredith's *Shaving of Shagpat*, or to the monstrous adventures of Mr. Frank Stockton's heroes. The reason is that these authors have the art to awaken in us the curious condition of mind which we may call temporary credence. That is to say, they form such an atmosphere around their creations, and make the movements of the latter so consistent and in such harmony with one another that we resign ourselves, as in a dream, to complete belief as long as the story lasts.

With this must not be confounded the treatment of the Unexplained in fiction. Some of the stories which we most naturally think of in connection with the supernatural really belong to this class, and most prominently the blood-curd-

ling tales of the once famous Mrs. Radcliffe, who has lately found in Professor Walter Raleigh so able a defender. In the awful romances of this lady everything which appeared to be mysteriously sinister was always comfortably cleared up on natural grounds in the last chapter of the book. In the thrilling productions of the first Lord Lytton there is usually a pretence of explaining away or of suggesting a loophole for explanation. But his real successes, and particularly *A Strange Story*, with its splendid invention of the Skinleka or luminous banshee vision, sail boldly away from these safer shores. When I was a child, the author who was most in request for giving readers "the creeps" was Mrs. Crowe. I suppose that if we were now to read *The Night Side of Nature* and *Light and Darkness* in the garish light of middle life we might find them poor enough. But they thrilled us in the early sixties, and they were pre-eminently stories of the Unexplained. Mrs. Crowe went the length of pretending that they were all "founded on fact," and she usually left herself a chance of escape on physical grounds. Even as a child, I remember being much more impressed by her when she was mysterious than when she made a coarse use of the palpably and revoltingly impossible.

The subterfuge of the Explainable Mysterious has not found much favour among recent English novelists. The great objection to it is that a romance which accepts its aid is obliged to be built up on the lines of a detective story. Under the influence of Gaboriau and Conan Doyle we have come to prefer detective stories that are straightforward tales of crime or social embarrassment. Every now and then the newspapers present us in real life with humble imitations of *The Castle of Otranto*, in which spoons are snatched out of old ladies' hands and coals are showered on babies' cradles by an unseen force. These events, styled "The Macclesfield Mystery" or "Panic in a Shropshire Village," usually turn out in the course of a few days to be the work either of naughty little girls or of rats. They have grown somewhat too obvious and vulgar for the modern romance writer, although they were quite good enough for those old-fashioned favourites of the public, *St. Leon* and *The Mysteries of*

*Udolpho*. Our idealists and romanticists of to-day are anxious to press the genuine supernatural into their service, but they are not all of them sufficiently considerate of the laws that govern this difficult province of constructive art. It is not enough for me, while I am telling a story of middle-class life in Bayswater, because I feel that the plot is getting a little dull, suddenly to say: "As Maria was leaving Mr. Whiteley's shop, with two small brown-paper parcels under her arm, she was somewhat surprised to see that a large blue Unicorn was threading its way between the omnibuses, and that, as it caught her eye, it touched its horn." Yet Miss Marie Corelli is hardly less artless than this in her appeal to the impossible as an exciting element in fiction. The error of this *naïveté* can perhaps be best comprehended by a reference to its opposite, an artful and successful appeal to the incredible.

A little book has just come into my hands which strikes me as exemplifying the right use of the supernatural to a remarkable degree. It is a story by that very interesting young novelist Mr. H. G. Wells, and it is called *The Invisible Man*. This is a pure extravaganza—a young adventurer of science hits upon a plan by which his own living tissues are made absolutely undetectable by human vision. The mode in which the invention of Mr. Wells has worked is obviously this. He has created the notion of a man made chemically invisible by a scientific discovery, and then he has considered how a man in such a condition would act. The poor wretch has no protection for his naked body. He catches a violent cold; he is knocked over in the street; dogs sniff at him and track him; he has to steal clothes and food like a savage, and the clothes he puts on can never hide him sufficiently, even though he wears a false nose, whiskers, blue goggle spectacles, a wig, and copious bandages. Mr. Wells rightly sees that such an existence, though comical at the outset, must become infinitely painful, and must end tragically. So, in fact, we are quickly led to a scene of murderous violence which ends in the death of the Invisible Man, who slowly comes to sight as his life ebbs away.

Nothing of the supernatural order could run more violently counter to ex-

perience than this. No man has been or ever will be invisible; the idea is absolutely grotesque. But the author commands our belief while we read, by the consistency and inevitability of his details. We have to grant him one admission—and, of course, it is a huge one—namely, that any chemical action could make the flesh of a living and healthy person inappreciable to vision. But, having made that demand upon us, he makes no more; for the rest of the story he accepts all the responsibility. We are asked to believe no other impossibilities, but, on the contrary, everything is made as easy to belief as possible. Just the same is true of those delightful, grotesque romances of Mr. Frank Stockton, *The Transferred Ghost* and *Negative Gravity*. The imagination has to accept one monstrous outrage upon experience, and then all is perfectly straightforward.

But other modern novelists who use the supernatural do not seem to perceive the importance of thus keeping to the rules of the game. That delightful writer, Stevenson, in a little book which has had hundreds of thousands of readers, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, missed this initial simplicity. You were asked to believe in the possession of two bodies by a single soul, the good qualities of it inhabiting the handsome frame, the bad ones that which was loathsome and hideous. I do not say that so outrageous a supposition might not have been supported, but I do say that it was not. The little work is beautifully written, and it has a fascinating moral fervour, and it teems with mystery. But that mystery is not legitimately supported. All the cleverness of the author does not make us absolutely credit the occurrences; and when the final explanation comes we reject it. No, we reply as we put down the book, that is no real way out of the extraordinary difficulties which the narrator has raised. The overpowering improbabilities have only been evaded, not really faced, as Mr. Wells, for instance, would have faced them.

A more recent case of the abuse of the supernatural occurs in a clever novel which has been widely read this summer—*Flames*, by Mr. Hitchens. Here we have what purports to be a story of middle-class life in London to-day. There are two friends, one of whom is older

and more authoritative than the other, of a cooler temperament, and possessing a will more fully under control. For a reason ill-explained they get weary of the conditions of their friendship and determine to “exchange souls.” For this purpose they shut themselves up in a dark room and perform a sort of table-turning on successive occasions, until at last there is a violent nervous crisis, and small blue flames cross the floor in the silence of the night, and we are asked to believe that these are the “souls” of the two young men changing house, like two soldier-crabs in a tidal pool, each creeping into the shell the other has just left. Then follow excited scenes, and a plot, the intrigue of which depends on the temperament expected from the one man manifesting itself in the other, and *vice versa*. I will not charge Mr. Hitchens here with what I think a fatal lack of simplicity, and therefore of credibility, in the succeeding evolution of his story, but I will venture to maintain that this initial incident is an abuse of the supernatural. Why should the temperament—for that is all that Mr. Hitchens means by “the soul”—take the form of a little flame? There is absolutely no reason suggested. And why should this “soul” be limited to one or two of the infinitely complex qualities of which the moral nature of a man is composed? To these questions, and to many others, there is given no reply. We are left vaguely, sceptically, to endeavour to believe that all souls are like blue flames, and could be detached by an effort of the will in a dark room. The initial principle by which an abnormality can be made credible to the imagination—namely, insistence on its being definitely abnormal, has been neglected. The result is that while the careful reader firmly believes in Mr. Wells’s *Invisible Man* and shares the agonies of that poor creature’s existence, he is apt to toss Mr. Hitchens’s *Flames* aside as the mere caprice of a clever, hasty writer.

But no more striking example of the abuse of the supernatural in fiction can be pointed to than is to be found in a book which has just been placed in everybody’s hand—*The Martian* of George Du Maurier. In this story a being from the planet Mars is introduced into realistic scenes of every-day life in London and Paris, and is repre-

sented as able to endow her favourites with every species of personal charm and executive talent. After she has lived for some years as the wife of one of the characters, whom she has made the most eminent English (and also French) author of his time, she chooses to become reincarnated in the ninth baby of one of her husband's friends, and she starts on another career of fatuous disturbance of the laws of nature and of art. For my own part, I do not see why Mr. Du Maurier should have limited himself to the moral vagaries of his creation. If he had presented to us an image with three heads or a luminous monster without any limbs whatever, we should have been neither more grateful to him nor less. For our belief, our temporary intellectual credence would have been untouched, as it remains untouched by the preposterous *Martia*. We should have skimmed the pages and have put them down absolutely unenthralled. Yet Mr. Wells and Mr. Stockton, describing things quite as completely foreign to experience, carry us captive with them wherever they will.

A wise novelist will be very cautious how he makes use of supernatural agency to help himself out of a difficulty. No one will blame him if, to heighten the effect of his fable and give it intensity, he introduces what we call incredible incidents with success; only he must remember that we, his readers, will judge success by the degree in which at the time he makes his marvels credited by us. In the old Greek criticism the poets were forbidden to represent the coming of storms in the halcyon days, on the ground that "it would be

an affront to the power of the gods to ascribe to them such a force as contradicts poetical probability." Once admit, for special purposes, that such a force as "negative gravity" exists, and there is no contradiction to poetical probability in describing what the effects of its exercise would be on ordinary human beings. Once admit that the tissues of a living man can be made transparent (which seems scarcely more fabulous than the exercise of the Röntgen rays would have seemed two years ago), and there is nothing poetically improbable about the discomforts and adventures of a man reduced to that condition. But to be so unskilful as to have to produce a personage from Mars in order to account for the sudden celebrity of a commonplace man, this is to sin against the laws of supernatural machinery, and to show real poverty of invention.

Perhaps a safe rule would be: Never use supernatural agency to gain an effect which could with the exercise of more ingenuity be produced by natural agency. And a rider on this would be, Never employ a supernatural agency without having thoroughly made up your mind what you mean its exact action to be. Whether you take the reader into your confidence about this limit of action is a matter for your own judgment, but that you should understand it yourself is unquestionably necessary. Many of our latter-day purveyors of the mysterious seem to be as doubtful about the nature of the bogeys they introduce as the most credulous of their readers can be.

*Edmund Gosse.*

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## A HUNDRED BOOKS FOR A VILLAGE LIBRARY.

Asked to name what I think the best hundred books for a village library, I am at a somewhat different standpoint from one who would name the best hundred books that literature has given us. This latter task would be but to put on paper the name of volume after volume that no one now reads, that no one to-day would derive any profit from reading. Sir John Lubbock once named the hundred books that he thought most interesting and most desirable of study,

and he was addressing a workingman's club. If Sir John Lubbock has read all of these himself, he has read some sad trash. One of them is the *Nibelungen Lied*, which it may be presumed he did not expect the workingmen he addressed to study in Old German or Modern German. The book is available in English only in an absurd translation. If he had quietly mentioned Carlyle's essays as a source from which an English reader can obtain some knowledge of