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**H. G. WELLS**

# **The Research Magnificent**

**H. G. Wells**

# ON FEAR AND ARISTOCRACY

1

The story of William Porphyry Benham is the story of a man who was led into adventure by an idea. It was an idea that took possession of his imagination quite early in life, it grew with him and changed with him, it interwove at last completely with his being. His story is its story. It was traceably germinating in the schoolboy; it was manifestly present in his mind at the very last moment of his adventurous life. He belonged to that fortunate minority who are independent of daily necessities, so that he was free to go about the world under its direction. It led him far. It led him into situations that bordered upon the fantastic, it made him ridiculous, it came near to making him sublime. And this idea of his was of such a nature that in several aspects he could document it. Its logic forced him to introspection and to the making of a record.

An idea that can play so large a part in a life must necessarily have something of the complication and protean quality of life itself. It is not to be stated justly in any formula, it is not to be rendered by an epigram. As well one might show a man's skeleton for his portrait. Yet, essentially, Benham's idea was simple. He had an incurable, an almost innate persuasion that he had to live life nobly and thoroughly. His commoner expression for that thorough living is "the aristocratic life." But by "aristocratic" he meant something very different from the quality of a Russian prince, let us say, or an English peer. He meant an intensity, a clearness.... Nobility for him was to get something out of his individual existence, a flame, a jewel, a splendour—it is a thing easier to understand than to say.

One might hesitate to call this idea “innate,” and yet it comes soon into a life when it comes at all. In Benham's case we might trace it back to the Day Nursery at Seagate, we might detect it stirring already at the petticoat stage, in various private struttings and valiant dreamings with a helmet of pasteboard and a white-metal sword. We have most of us been at least as far as that with Benham. And we have died like Horatius, slaying our thousands for our country, or we have perished at the stake or faced the levelled muskets of the firing party—“No, do not bandage my eyes”—because we would not betray the secret path that meant destruction to our city. But with Benham the vein was stronger, and it increased instead of fading out as he grew to manhood. It was less obscured by those earthy acquiescences, those discretions, that saving sense of proportion, which have made most of us so satisfactorily what we are. “Porphyry,” his mother had discovered before he was seventeen, “is an excellent boy, a brilliant boy, but, I begin to see, just a little unbalanced.”

The interest of him, the absurdity of him, the story of him, is that.

Most of us are—balanced; in spite of occasional reveries we do come to terms with the limitations of life, with those desires and dreams and discretions that, to say the least of it, qualify our nobility, we take refuge in our sense of humour and congratulate ourselves on a certain amiable freedom from priggishness or presumption, but for Benham that easy declension to a humorous acceptance of life as it is did not occur. He found his limitations soon enough; he was perpetually rediscovering them, but out of these interments of the spirit he rose again—remarkably. When we others have decided that, to be plain about it, we are not going to lead the noble life at all, that the thing is too ambitious and expensive even to attempt, we have done so because there were other conceptions of existence that

were good enough for us, we decided that instead of that glorious impossible being of ourselves, we would figure in our own eyes as jolly fellows, or sly dogs, or sane, sound, capable men or brilliant successes, and so forth—practicable things. For Benham, exceptionally, there were not these practicable things. He blundered, he fell short of himself, he had—as you will be told—some astonishing rebuffs, but they never turned him aside for long. He went by nature for this preposterous idea of nobility as a linnet hatched in a cage will try to fly.

And when he discovered—and in this he was assisted not a little by his friend at his elbow—when he discovered that Nobility was not the simple thing he had at first supposed it to be, he set himself in a mood only slightly disconcerted to the discovery of Nobility. When it dawned upon him, as it did, that one cannot be noble, so to speak, *IN VACUO*, he set himself to discover a Noble Society. He began with simple beliefs and fine attitudes and ended in a conscious research. If he could not get through by a stride, then it followed that he must get through by a climb. He spent the greater part of his life studying and experimenting in the noble possibilities of man. He never lost his absurd faith in that conceivable splendour. At first it was always just round the corner or just through the wood; to the last it seemed still but a little way beyond the distant mountains.

For this reason this story has been called *THE RESEARCH MAGNIFICENT*. It was a real research, it was documented. In the rooms in Westhaven Street that at last were as much as one could call his home, he had accumulated material for—one hesitates to call it a book—let us say it was an analysis of, a guide to the noble life. There after his tragic death came his old friend White, the journalist and novelist, under a promise, and found these papers; he found them to the extent of a crammed bureau, half a score of patent files quite distended and a writing-table drawer-full, and he was

greatly exercised to find them. They were, White declares, they are still after much experienced handling, an indigestible aggregation. On this point White is very assured. When Benham thought he was gathering together a book he was dreaming, White says. There is no book in it....

Perhaps too, one might hazard, Benham was dreaming when he thought the noble life a human possibility. Perhaps man, like the ape and the hyaena and the tapeworm and many other of God's necessary but less attractive creatures, is not for such exalted ends. That doubt never seems to have got a lodgment in Benham's skull; though at times one might suppose it the basis of White's thought. You will find in all Benham's story, if only it can be properly told, now subdued, now loud and amazed and distressed, but always traceable, this startled, protesting question, "BUT WHY THE DEVIL AREN'T WE?" As though necessarily we ought to be. He never faltered in his persuasion that behind the dingy face of this world, the earthy stubbornness, the baseness and dulness of himself and all of us, lurked the living jewels of heaven, the light of glory, things unspeakable. At first it seemed to him that one had only just to hammer and will, and at the end, after a life of willing and hammering, he was still convinced there was something, something in the nature of an Open Sesame, perhaps a little more intricate than one had supposed at first, a little more difficult to secure, but still in that nature, which would suddenly roll open for mankind the magic cave of the universe, that precious cave at the heart of all things, in which one must believe.

And then life—life would be the wonder it so perplexingly just isn't....

2

Benham did not go about the world telling people of this consuming research. He was not the prophet or preacher of

his idea. It was too living and intricate and uncertain a part of him to speak freely about. It was his secret self; to expose it casually would have shamed him. He drew all sorts of reserves about him, he wore his manifest imperfections turned up about him like an overcoat in bitter wind. He was content to be inexplicable. His thoughts led him to the conviction that this magnificent research could not be, any more than any other research can be, a solitary enterprise, but he delayed expression; in a mighty writing and stowing away of these papers he found a relief from the unpleasant urgency to confess and explain himself prematurely. So that White, though he knew Benham with the intimacy of an old schoolfellow who had renewed his friendship, and had shared his last days and been a witness of his death, read the sheets of manuscript often with surprise and with a sense of added elucidation.

And, being also a trained maker of books, White as he read was more and more distressed that an accumulation so interesting should be so entirely unshaped for publication. "But this will never make a book," said White with a note of personal grievance. His hasty promise in their last moments together had bound him, it seemed, to a task he now found impossible. He would have to work upon it tremendously; and even then he did not see how it could be done.

This collection of papers was not a story, not an essay, not a confession, not a diary. It was—nothing definable. It went into no conceivable covers. It was just, White decided, a proliferation. A vast proliferation. It wanted even a title. There were signs that Benham had intended to call it THE ARISTOCRATIC LIFE, and that he had tried at some other time the title of AN ESSAY ON ARISTOCRACY. Moreover, it would seem that towards the end he had been disposed to drop the word "aristocratic" altogether, and adopt some such phrase as THE LARGER LIFE. Once it was LIFE SET FREE. He had fallen away more and more from nearly

everything that one associates with aristocracy—at the end only its ideals of fearlessness and generosity remained.

Of all these titles THE ARISTOCRATIC LIFE seemed at first most like a clue to White. Benham's erratic movements, his sudden impulses, his angers, his unaccountable patiences, his journeys to strange places, and his lapses into what had seemed to be pure adventurousness, could all be put into system with that. Before White had turned over three pages of the great fascicle of manuscript that was called Book Two, he had found the word "Bushido" written with a particularly flourishing capital letter and twice repeated. "That was inevitable," said White with the comforting regret one feels for a friend's banalities. "And it dates... [unreadable] this was early...."

"Modern aristocracy, the new aristocracy," he read presently, "has still to be discovered and understood. This is the necessary next step for mankind. As far as possible I will discover and understand it, and as far as I know it I will be it. This is the essential disposition of my mind. God knows I have appetites and sloths and habits and blindnesses, but so far as it is in my power to release myself I will escape to this...."

3

White sat far into the night and for several nights turning over papers and rummaging in untidy drawers. Memories came back to him of his dead friend and pieced themselves together with other memories and joined on to scraps in this writing. Bold yet convincing guesses began to leap across the gaps. A story shaped itself....

The story began with the schoolfellow he had known at Minchinghampton School.

Benham had come up from his father's preparatory school at Seagate. He had been a boy reserved rather than florid in his acts and manners, a boy with a pale face, incorrigible



hair and brown eyes that went dark and deep with excitement. Several times White had seen him excited, and when he was excited Benham was capable of tensely daring things. On one occasion he had insisted upon walking across a field in which was an aggressive bull. It had been put there to prevent the boys taking a short cut to the swimming place. It had bellowed tremendously and finally charged him. He had dodged it and got away; at the time it had seemed an immense feat to White and the others who were safely up the field. He had walked to the fence, risking a second charge by his deliberation. Then he had sat on the fence and declared his intention of always crossing the field so long as the bull remained there. He had said this with white intensity, he had stopped abruptly in mid-sentence, and then suddenly he had dropped to the ground, clutched the fence, struggled with heaving shoulders, and been sick.

The combination of apparently stout heart and manifestly weak stomach had exercised the Minchinghampton intelligence profoundly.

On one or two other occasions Benham had shown courage of the same rather screwed-up sort. He showed it not only in physical but in mental things. A boy named Prothero set a fashion of religious discussion in the school, and Benham, after some self-examination, professed an atheistical republicanism rather in the manner of Shelley. This brought him into open conflict with Roddles, the History Master. Roddles had discovered these theological controversies in some mysterious way, and he took upon himself to talk at Benham and Prothero. He treated them to the common misapplication of that fool who "hath said in his heart there is no God." He did not perceive there was any difference between the fool who says a thing in his heart and one who says it in the dormitory. He revived that delectable anecdote of the Eton boy who professed disbelief

and was at once “soundly flogged” by his head master. “Years afterwards that boy came back to thank ——”

“Gurr,” said Prothero softly. “STEW—ard!”

“Your turn next, Benham,” whispered an orthodox controversialist.

“Good Lord! I'd like to see him,” said Benham with a forced loudness that could scarcely be ignored.

The subsequent controversy led to an interview with the head. From it Benham emerged more whitely strung up than ever. “He said he would certainly swish me if I deserved it, and I said I would certainly kill him if he did.”

“And then?”

“He told me to go away and think it over. Said he would preach about it next Sunday.... Well, a swishing isn't a likely thing anyhow. But I would.... There isn't a master here I'd stand a thrashing from—not one.... And because I choose to say what I think!... I'd run amuck.”

For a week or so the school was exhilarated by a vain and ill-concealed hope that the head might try it just to see if Benham would. It was tantalizingly within the bounds of possibility....

These incidents came back to White's mind as he turned over the newspapers in the upper drawer of the bureau. The drawer was labelled “Fear—the First Limitation,” and the material in it was evidently designed for the opening volume of the great unfinished book. Indeed, a portion of it was already arranged and written up.

As White read through this manuscript he was reminded of a score of schoolboy discussions Benham and he and Prothero had had together. Here was the same old toughness of mind, a kind of intellectual hardihood, that had sometimes shocked his schoolfellows. Benham had been one of those boys who do not originate ideas very freely, but who go out to them with a fierce sincerity. He believed

and disbelieved with emphasis. Prothero had first set him doubting, but it was Benham's own temperament took him on to denial. His youthful atheism had been a matter for secret consternation in White. White did not believe very much in God even then, but this positive disbelieving frightened him. It was going too far. There had been a terrible moment in the dormitory, during a thunderstorm, a thunderstorm so vehement that it had awakened them all, when Latham, the humourist and a quietly devout boy, had suddenly challenged Benham to deny his Maker.

“NOW say you don't believe in God?”

Benham sat up in bed and repeated his negative faith, while little Hopkins, the Bishop's son, being less certain about the accuracy of Providence than His aim, edged as far as he could away from Benham's cubicle and rolled his head in his bedclothes.

“And anyhow,” said Benham, when it was clear that he was not to be struck dead forthwith, “you show a poor idea of your God to think he'd kill a schoolboy for honest doubt. Even old Roddles—”

“I can't listen to you,” cried Latham the humourist, “I can't listen to you. It's—HORRIBLE.”

“Well, who began it?” asked Benham.

A flash of lightning lit the dormitory and showed him to White white-faced and ablaze with excitement, sitting up with the bed-clothes about him. “Oh WOW!” wailed the muffled voice of little Hopkins as the thunder burst like a giant pistol overhead, and he buried his head still deeper in the bedclothes and gave way to unappeasable grief.

Latham's voice came out of the darkness. “This ATHEISM that you and Billy Prothero have brought into the school—”

He started violently at another vivid flash, and every one remained silent, waiting for the thunder...

But White remembered no more of the controversy because he had made a frightful discovery that filled and blocked his mind. Every time the lightning flashed, there was a red light in Benham's eyes....

It was only three days after when Prothero discovered exactly the same phenomenon in the School House boothole and talked of cats and cattle, that White's confidence in their friend was partially restored....

4

“Fear, the First Limitation”—his title indicated the spirit of Benham's opening book very clearly. His struggle with fear was the very beginning of his soul's history. It continued to the end. He had hardly decided to lead the noble life before he came bump against the fact that he was a physical coward. He felt fear acutely. “Fear,” he wrote, “is the foremost and most persistent of the shepherding powers that keep us in the safe fold, that drive us back to the beaten track and comfort and—futility. The beginning of all aristocracy is the subjugation of fear.”

At first the struggle was so great that he hated fear without any qualification; he wanted to abolish it altogether.

“When I was a boy,” he writes, “I thought I would conquer fear for good and all, and never more be troubled by it. But it is not to be done in that way. One might as well dream of having dinner for the rest of one's life. Each time and always I have found that it has to be conquered afresh. To this day I fear, little things as well as big things. I have to grapple with some little dread every day—urge myself.... Just as I have to wash and shave myself every day.... I believe it is so with every one, but it is difficult to be sure; few men who go into dangers care very much to talk about fear....”

Later Benham found some excuses for fear, came even to dealings with fear. He never, however, admits that this universal instinct is any better than a kindly but

unintelligent nurse from whose fostering restraints it is man's duty to escape. Discretion, he declared, must remain; a sense of proportion, an "adequacy of enterprise," but the discretion of an aristocrat is in his head, a tactical detail, it has nothing to do with this visceral sinking, this ebb in the nerves. "From top to bottom, the whole spectrum of fear is bad, from panic fear at one extremity down to that mere disinclination for enterprise, that reluctance and indolence which is its lowest phase. These are things of the beast, these are for creatures that have a settled environment, a life history, that spin in a cage of instincts. But man is a beast of that kind no longer, he has left his habitat, he goes out to limitless living...."

This idea of man going out into new things, leaving securities, habits, customs, leaving his normal life altogether behind him, underlay all Benham's aristocratic conceptions. And it was natural that he should consider fear as entirely inconvenient, treat it indeed with ingratitude, and dwell upon the immense liberations that lie beyond for those who will force themselves through its remonstrances....

Benham confessed his liability to fear quite freely in these notes. His fear of animals was ineradicable. He had had an overwhelming dread of bears until he was twelve or thirteen, the child's irrational dread of impossible bears, bears lurking under the bed and in the evening shadows. He confesses that even up to manhood he could not cross a field containing cattle without keeping a wary eye upon them—his bull adventure rather increased than diminished that disposition—he hated a strange dog at his heels and would manoeuvre himself as soon as possible out of reach of the teeth or heels of a horse. But the peculiar dread of his childhood was tigers. Some gaping nursemaid confronted him suddenly with a tiger in a cage in the menagerie annexe of a circus. "My small mind was overwhelmed."

“I had never thought,” White read, “that a tiger was much larger than a St. Bernard dog.... This great creature!... I could not believe any hunter would attack such a monster except by stealth and with weapons of enormous power....

“He jerked himself to and fro across his cramped, rickety cage and looked over my head with yellow eyes—at some phantom far away. Every now and then he snarled. The contempt of his detestable indifference sank deeper and deeper into my soul. I knew that were the cage to vanish I should stand there motionless, his helpless prey. I knew that were he at large in the same building with me I should be too terror-stricken to escape him. At the foot of a ladder leading clear to escape I should have awaited him paralyzed. At last I gripped my nurse's hand. 'Take me away,' I whispered.

“In my dreams that night he stalked me. I made my frozen flight from him, I slammed a door on him, and he thrust his paw through a panel as though it had been paper and clawed for me. The paw got longer and longer....

“I screamed so loudly that my father came up from his study.

“I remember that he took me in his arms.

“‘It's only a big sort of pussy, Poff,' he said. 'FELIS TIGRIS. FELIS, you know, means cat.'

“But I knew better. I was in no mood then for my father's insatiable pedagogy.

“‘And my little son mustn't be a coward.'...

“After that I understood I must keep silence and bear my tigers alone.

“For years the thought of that tiger's immensity haunted my mind. In my dreams I cowered before it a thousand times; in the dusk it rarely failed me. On the landing on my way to bed there was a patch of darkness beyond a chest that became a lurking horror for me, and sometimes the

door of my father's bedroom would stand open and there was a long buff and crimson-striped shape, by day indeed an ottoman, but by night—. Could an ottoman crouch and stir in the flicker of a passing candle? Could an ottoman come after you noiselessly, and so close that you could not even turn round upon it? No!”

5

When Benham was already seventeen and, as he supposed, hardened against his fear of beasts, his friend Prothero gave him an account of the killing of an old labouring man by a stallion which had escaped out of its stable. The beast had careered across a field, leapt a hedge and come upon its victim suddenly. He had run a few paces and stopped, trying to defend his head with the horse rearing over him. It beat him down with two swift blows of its fore hoofs, one, two, lifted him up in its long yellow teeth and worried him as a terrier does a rat—the poor old wretch was still able to make a bleating sound at that—dropped him, trampled and kicked him as he tried to crawl away, and went on trampling and battering him until he was no more than a bloody inhuman bundle of clothes and mire. For more than half an hour this continued, and then its animal rage was exhausted and it desisted, and went and grazed at a little distance from this misshapen, hoof-marked, torn, and muddy remnant of a man. No one it seems but a horror-stricken child knew what was happening....

This picture of human indignity tortured Benham's imagination much more than it tortured the teller of the tale. It filled him with shame and horror. For three or four years every detail of that circumstantial narrative seemed unforgettable. A little lapse from perfect health and the obsession returned. He could not endure the neighing of horses: when he saw horses galloping in a field with him his heart stood still. And all his life thereafter he hated horses.

6

A different sort of fear that also greatly afflicted Benham was due to a certain clumsiness and insecurity he felt in giddy and unstable places. There he was more definitely balanced between the hopelessly rash and the pitifully discreet.

He had written an account of a private struggle between himself and a certain path of planks and rock edges called the Bisse of Leysin. This happened in his adolescence. He had had a bad attack of influenza and his doctor had sent him to a little hotel—the only hotel it was in those days—at Montana in Valais. There, later, when he had picked up his strength, his father was to join him and take him mountaineering, that second-rate mountaineering which is so dear to dons and schoolmasters. When the time came he was ready for that, but he had had his experiences. He had gone through a phase of real cowardice. He was afraid, he confessed, before even he reached Montana; he was afraid of the steepness of the mountains. He had to drive ten or twelve miles up and up the mountain-side, a road of innumerable hairpin bends and precipitous banks, the horse was gaunt and ugly with a disposition to shy, and he confesses he clutched the side of the vehicle and speculated how he should jump if presently the whole turnout went tumbling over....

“And afterwards I dreamt dreams of precipices. I made strides over precipices, I fell and fell with a floating swiftness towards remote valleys, I was assailed by eagles upon a perilous ledge that crumbled away and left me clinging by my nails to nothing.”

The Bisse of Leysin is one of those artificial water-courses which bring water from some distant source to pastures that have an insufficient or uncertain supply. It is a little better known than most because of a certain exceptional boldness in its construction; for a distance of a few score yards it runs supported by iron staples across the front of a sheer



precipice, and for perhaps half a mile it hangs like an eyebrow over nearly or quite vertical walls of pine-set rock. Beside it, on the outer side of it, runs a path, which becomes an offhand gangway of planking at the overhanging places. At one corner, which gives the favourite picture postcard from Montana, the rocks project so sharply above the water that the passenger on the gangway must crouch down upon the bending plank as he walks. There is no hand-hold at all.

A path from Montana takes one over a pine-clad spur and down a precipitous zig-zag upon the middle of the Bisse, and thither Benham came, fascinated by the very fact that here was something of which the mere report frightened him. He had to walk across the cold clear rush of the Bisse upon a pine log, and then he found himself upon one of the gentler interludes of the Bisse track. It was a scrambling path nearly two feet wide, and below it were slopes, but not so steep as to terrify. At a vast distance below he saw through tree-stems and blue haze a twisted strand of bright whiteness, the river that joins the Rhone at Sion. It looped about and passed out of sight remotely beneath his feet. He turned to the right, and came to a corner that overhung a precipice. He craned his head round this corner and saw the evil place of the picture-postcards.

He remained for a long time trying to screw himself up to walk along the jagged six-inch edge of rock between cliff and torrent into which the path has shrunken, to the sagging plank under the overhanging rock beyond.

He could not bring himself to do that.

“It happened that close to the corner a large lump of rock and earth was breaking away, a cleft was opening, so that presently, it seemed possible at any moment, the mass would fall headlong into the blue deeps below. This impending avalanche was not in my path along the Bisse, it was no sort of danger to me, but in some way its insecurity

gave a final touch to my cowardice. I could not get myself round that corner.”

He turned away. He went and examined the planks in the other direction, and these he found less forbidding. He crossed one precipitous place, with a fall of twoscore feet or less beneath him, and found worse ahead. There also he managed. A third place was still more disagreeable. The plank was worn and thin, and sagged under him. He went along it supporting himself against the rock above the Bisse with an extended hand. Halfway the rock fell back, so that there was nothing whatever to hold. He stopped, hesitating whether he should go back—but on this plank there was no going back because no turning round seemed practicable. While he was still hesitating there came a helpful intervention. Behind him he saw a peasant appearing and disappearing behind trees and projecting rock masses, and coming across the previous plank at a vigorous trot....

Under the stimulus of a spectator Benham got to the end of this third place without much trouble. Then very politely he stood aside for the expert to go ahead so that he could follow at his own pace.

There were, however, more difficulties yet to come, and a disagreeable humiliation. That confounded peasant developed a parental solicitude. After each crossing he waited, and presently began to offer advice and encouragement. At last came a place where everything was overhanging, where the Bisse was leaking, and the plank wet and slippery. The water ran out of the leak near the brim of the wooden channel and fell in a long shivering thread of silver. THERE WAS NO SOUND OF ITS FALL. It just fell—into a void. Benham wished he had not noted that. He groaned, but faced the plank; he knew this would be the slowest affair of all.

The peasant surveyed him from the further side.

“Don't be afraid!” cried the peasant in his clumsy Valaisian French, and returned, returning along the plank that seemed quite sufficiently loaded without him, extending a charitable hand.

“Damn!” whispered Benham, but he took the hand.

Afterwards, rather ignobly, he tried to explain in his public-school French. “Pas de peur,” he said. “Pas de peur. Mais la tete, n'a pas l'habitude.”

The peasant, failing to understand, assured him again that there was no danger.

(“Damn!”)

Benham was led over all the other planks, he was led as if he was an old lady crossing a glacier. He was led into absolute safety, and shamefacedly he rewarded his guide. Then he went a little way and sat down, swore softly, and watched the honest man go striding and plunging down towards Lens until he was out of sight.

“Now,” said Benham to himself, “if I do not go back along the planks my secret honour is gone for ever.”

He told himself that he had not a good head, that he was not well, that the sun was setting and the light no longer good, that he had a very good chance indeed of getting killed. Then it came to him suddenly as a clear and simple truth, as something luminously plain, that it is better to get killed than go away defeated by such fears and unsteadiness as his. The change came into his mind as if a white light were suddenly turned on—where there had been nothing but shadows and darkness. He rose to his feet and went swiftly and intently the whole way back, going with a kind of temperate recklessness, and, because he was no longer careful, easily. He went on beyond his starting place toward the corner, and did that supreme bit, to and fro, that bit where the lump was falling away, and he had to crouch, as gaily as the rest. Then he recrossed the Bisse upon the

pine log, clambered up through the pines to the crest, and returned through the meadows to his own hotel.

After that he should have slept the sleep of contentment, but instead he had quite dreadful nightmares, of hanging in frozen fear above incredible declivities, of ill-aimed leaps across chasms to slippery footholds, of planks that swayed and broke suddenly in the middle and headed him down and down....

The next day in the sunshine he walked the Bisse again with those dreams like trailing mists in his mind, and by comparison the path of the Bisse was nothing, it was like walking along a kerbstone, it was an exercise for young ladies....

## 7

In his younger days Benham had regarded Fear as a shameful secret and as a thing to be got rid of altogether. It seemed to him that to feel fear was to fall short of aristocracy, and in spite of the deep dreads and disgusts that haunted his mind, he set about the business of its subjugation as if it were a spiritual amputation. But as he emerged from the egotism of adolescence he came to realize that this was too comprehensive an operation; every one feels fear, and your true aristocrat is not one who has eliminated, but one who controls or ignores it. Brave men are men who do things when they are afraid to do them, just as Nelson, even when he was seasick, and he was frequently seasick, was still master of the sea. Benham developed two leading ideas about fear; one that it is worse at the first onset, and far worse than any real experience, and the other that fear is essentially a social instinct. He set himself upon these lines to study—what can we call it?—the taming of fear, the nature, care, and management of fear....

“Fear is very like pain in this, that it is a deterrent thing. It is superficial. Just as a man's skin is infinitely more sensitive

than anything inside.... Once you have forced yourself or have been forced through the outward fear into vivid action or experience, you feel very little. The worst moment is before things happen. Rowe, the African sportsman, told me that he had seen cowardice often enough in the presence of lions, but he had never seen any one actually charged by a lion who did not behave well. I have heard the same thing of many sorts of dangers.

“I began to suspect this first in the case of falling or jumping down. Giddiness may be an almost intolerable torture, and falling nothing of the sort. I once saw the face of an old man who had flung himself out of a high window in Rome, and who had been killed instantly on the pavement; it was not simply a serene face, it was glad, exalted. I suspect that when we have broken the shell of fear, falling may be delightful. Jumping down is, after all, only a steeper tobogganing, and tobogganing a milder jumping down. Always I used to funk at the top of the Cresta run. I suffered sometimes almost intolerably; I found it almost impossible to get away. The first ten yards was like being slashed open with a sharp sword. But afterwards there was nothing but joyful thrills. All instinct, too, fought against me when I tried high diving. I managed it, and began to like it. I had to give it up because of my ears, but not until I had established the habit of stepping through that moment of disinclination.

“I was Challoner's passenger when he was killed at Sheerness. That was a queer unexpected experience, you may have supposed it an agony of terror, but indeed there was no fear in it at all. At any rate, I do not remember a moment of fear; it has gone clean out of my memory if ever it was there. We were swimming high and fast, three thousand feet or so, in a clear, sweet air over the town of Sheerness. The river, with a string of battleships, was far away to the west of us, and the endless grey-blue flats of the Thames to the north. The sun was low behind a bank of

cloud. I was watching a motor-car, which seemed to be crawling slowly enough, though, no doubt, it was making a respectable pace, between two hedges down below. It is extraordinary how slowly everything seems to be going when one sees it from such an height.

“Then the left wing of the monoplane came up like a door that slams, some wires whistled past my head, and one whipped off my helmet, and then, with the seat slipping away from me, down we went. I snatched unavailingly for the helmet, and then gripped the sides. It was like dropping in a boat suddenly into the trough of a wave—and going on dropping. We were both strapped, and I got my feet against the side and clung to the locked second wheel.

“The sensation was as though something like an intermittent electric current was pouring through me. It's a ridiculous image to use, I can't justify it, but it was as if I was having cold blue light squirted through every pore of my being. There was an astonishment, a feeling of confirmation. 'Of course these things do happen sometimes,' I told myself. I don't remember that Challoner looked round or said anything at all. I am not sure that I looked at him....

“There seemed to be a long interval of intensely excited curiosity, and I remember thinking, 'Lord, but we shall come a smash in a minute!' Far ahead I saw the grey sheds of Eastchurch and people strolling about apparently unaware of our disaster. There was a sudden silence as Challoner stopped the engine....

“But the point I want to insist upon is that I did not feel afraid. I was simply enormously, terribly INTERESTED....

“There came a tremendous jolt and a lunge, and we were both tipped forward, so that we were hanging forehead down by our straps, and it looked as if the sheds were in the

sky, then I saw nothing but sky, then came another vast swerve, and we were falling sideways, sideways....

“I was altogether out of breath and PHYSICALLY astonished, and I remember noting quite intelligently as we hit the ground how the green grass had an effect of POURING OUT in every direction from below us....

“Then I remember a jerk and a feeling that I was flying up again. I was astonished by a tremendous popping—fabric, wires, everything seemed going pop, pop, pop, like a machine-gun, and then came a flash of intense pain as my arm crumpled up. It was quite impersonal pain. As impersonal as seeing intense colour. SPLINTERS! I remember the word came into my head instantly. I remember that very definitely.

“I thought, I suppose, my arm was in splinters. Or perhaps of the scraps and ends of rods and wires flying about us. It is curious that while I remember the word I cannot recall the idea....

“When I became conscious again the chief thing present in my mind was that all those fellows round were young soldiers who wouldn't at all understand bad behaviour. My arm was—orchestral, but still far from being real suffering IN me. Also I wanted to know what Challoner had got. They wouldn't understand my questions, and then I twisted round and saw from the negligent way his feet came out from under the engine that he must be dead. And dark red stains with bright red froth—

“Of course!

“There again the chief feeling was a sense of oddity. I wasn't sorry for him any more than I was for myself.

“It seemed to me that it was all right with us both, remarkable, vivid, but all right....”

“But though there is little or no fear in an aeroplane, even when it is smashing up, there is fear about aeroplanes. There is something that says very urgently, 'Don't,' to the man who looks up into the sky. It is very interesting to note how at a place like Eastchurch or Brooklands the necessary discretion trails the old visceral feeling with it, and how men will hang about, ready to go up, resolved to go up, but delaying. Men of indisputable courage will get into a state between dread and laziness, and waste whole hours of flying weather on any excuse or no excuse. Once they are up that inhibition vanishes. The man who was delaying and delaying half an hour ago will now be cutting the most venturesome capers in the air. Few men are in a hurry to get down again. I mean that quite apart from the hesitation of landing, they like being up there.”

Then, abruptly, Benham comes back to his theory.

“Fear, you see, is the inevitable janitor, but it is not the ruler of experience. That is what I am driving at in all this. The bark of danger is worse than its bite. Inside the portals there may be events and destruction, but terror stays defeated at the door. It may be that when that old man was killed by a horse the child who watched suffered more than he did....

“I am sure that was so....”

9

As White read Benham's notes and saw how his argument drove on, he was reminded again and again of those schoolboy days and Benham's hardihood, and his own instinctive unreasonable reluctance to follow those gallant intellectual leads. If fear is an ancient instinctive boundary that the modern life, the aristocratic life, is bound to ignore and transcend, may this not also be the case with pain? We do a little adventure into the “life beyond fear”; may we not also think of adventuring into the life beyond pain? Is pain



any saner a warning than fear? May not pain just as much as fear keep us from possible and splendid things? But why ask a question that is already answered in principle in every dentist's chair? Benham's idea, however, went much further than that, he was clearly suggesting that in pain itself, pain endured beyond a certain pitch, there might come pleasure again, an intensity of sensation that might have the colour of delight. He betrayed a real anxiety to demonstrate this possibility, he had the earnestness of a man who is sensible of dissentient elements within. He hated the thought of pain even more than he hated fear. His arguments did not in the least convince White, who stopped to poke the fire and assure himself of his own comfort in the midst of his reading.

Young people and unseasoned people, Benham argued, are apt to imagine that if fear is increased and carried to an extreme pitch it becomes unbearable, one will faint or die; given a weak heart, a weak artery or any such structural defect and that may well happen, but it is just as possible that as the stimulation increases one passes through a brief ecstasy of terror to a new sane world, exalted but as sane as normal existence. There is the calmness of despair. Benham had made some notes to enforce this view, of the observed calm behaviour of men already hopelessly lost, men on sinking ships, men going to execution, men already maimed and awaiting the final stroke, but for the most part these were merely references to books and periodicals. In exactly the same way, he argued, we exaggerate the range of pain as if it were limitless. We think if we are unthinking that it passes into agony and so beyond endurance to destruction. It probably does nothing of the kind. Benham compared pain to the death range of the electric current. At a certain voltage it thrills, at a greater it torments and convulses, at a still greater it kills. But at enormous voltages, as Tesla was the first to demonstrate, it does no

injury. And following on this came memoranda on the recorded behaviour of martyrs, on the self-torture of Hindoo ascetics, of the defiance of Red Indian prisoners.

“These things,” Benham had written, “are much more horrible when one considers them from the point of view of an easy-chair”;—White gave an assenting nod—“ARE THEY REALLY HORRIBLE AT ALL? Is it possible that these charred and slashed and splintered persons, those Indians hanging from hooks, those walkers in the fiery furnace, have had glimpses through great windows that were worth the price they paid for them? Haven't we allowed those checks and barriers that are so important a restraint upon childish enterprise, to creep up into and distress and distort adult life?...

“The modern world thinks too much as though painlessness and freedom from danger were ultimate ends. It is fear-haunted, it is troubled by the thoughts of pain and death, which it has never met except as well-guarded children meet these things, in exaggerated and untestable forms, in the menagerie or in nightmares. And so it thinks the discovery of anaesthetics the crowning triumph of civilization, and cosiness and innocent amusement, those ideals of the nursery, the whole purpose of mankind....”

“Mm,” said White, and pressed his lips together and knotted his brows and shook his head.

10

But the bulk of Benham's discussion of fear was not concerned with this perverse and overstrained suggestion of pleasure reached through torture, this exaggeration of the man resolved not to shrink at anything; it was an examination of the present range and use of fear that led gradually to something like a theory of control and discipline. The second of his two dominating ideas was that fear is an instinct arising only in isolation, that in a crowd

there may be a collective panic, but that there is no real individual fear. Fear, Benham held, drives the man back to the crowd, the dog to its master, the wolf to the pack, and when it is felt that the danger is pooled, then fear leaves us. He was quite prepared to meet the objection that animals of a solitary habit do nevertheless exhibit fear. Some of this apparent fear, he argued, was merely discretion, and what is not discretion is the survival of an infantile characteristic. The fear felt by a tiger cub is certainly a social emotion, that drives it back to the other cubs, to its mother and the dark hiding of the lair. The fear of a fully grown tiger sends it into the reeds and the shadows, to a refuge, that must be "still reminiscent of the maternal lair." But fear has very little hold upon the adult solitary animal, it changes with extreme readiness to resentment and rage.

"Like most inexperienced people," ran his notes, "I was astonished at the reported feats of men in war; I believed they were exaggerated, and that there was a kind of unpremeditated conspiracy of silence about their real behaviour. But when on my way to visit India for the third time I turned off to see what I could of the fighting before Adrianople, I discovered at once that a thousand casually selected conscripts will, every one of them, do things together that not one of them could by any means be induced to do alone. I saw men not merely obey orders that gave them the nearly certain prospect of death, but I saw them exceeding orders; I saw men leap out of cover for the mere sake of defiance, and fall shot through and smashed by a score of bullets. I saw a number of Bulgarians in the hands of the surgeon, several quite frightfully wounded, refuse chloroform merely to impress the English onlooker, some of their injuries I could scarcely endure to see, and I watched a line of infantry men go on up a hill and keep on quite manifestly cheerful with men dropping out and wriggling, and men dropping out and lying still until every

other man was down.... Not one man would have gone up that hill alone, without onlookers....”

Rowe, the lion hunter, told Benham that only on one occasion in his life had he given way to ungovernable fear, and that was when he was alone. Many times he had been in fearful situations in the face of charging lions and elephants, and once he had been bowled over and carried some distance by a lion, but on none of these occasions had fear demoralized him. There was no question of his general pluck. But on one occasion he was lost in rocky waterless country in Somaliland. He strayed out in the early morning while his camels were being loaded, followed some antelope too far, and lost his bearings. He looked up expecting to see the sun on his right hand and found it on his left. He became bewildered. He wandered some time and then fired three signal shots and got no reply. Then losing his head he began shouting. He had only four or five more cartridges and no water-bottle. His men were accustomed to his going on alone, and might not begin to remark upon his absence until sundown.... It chanced, however, that one of the shikari noted the water-bottle he had left behind and organized a hunt for him.

Long before they found him he had passed to an extremity of terror. The world had become hideous and threatening, the sun was a pitiless glare, each rocky ridge he clambered became more dreadful than the last, each new valley into which he looked more hateful and desolate, the cramped thorn bushes threatened him gauntly, the rocks had a sinister lustre, and in every blue shadow about him the night and death lurked and waited. There was no hurry for them, presently they would spread out again and join and submerge him, presently in the confederated darkness he could be stalked and seized and slain. Yes, this he admitted was real fear. He had cracked his voice, yelling

as a child yells. And then he had become afraid of his own voice....

“Now this excess of fear in isolation, this comfort in a crowd, in support and in a refuge, even when support or refuge is quite illusory, is just exactly what one would expect of fear if one believed it to be an instinct which has become a misfit. In the case of the soldier fear is so much a misfit that instead of saving him for the most part it destroys him. Raw soldiers under fire bunch together and armies fight in masses, men are mowed down in swathes, because only so is the courage of the common men sustained, only so can they be brave, albeit spread out and handling their weapons as men of unqualified daring would handle them they would be infinitely safer and more effective....

“And all of us, it may be, are restrained by this misfit fear from a thousand bold successful gestures of mind and body, we are held back from the attainment of mighty securities in pitiful temporary shelters that are perhaps in the end no better than traps....”

From such considerations Benham went on to speculate how far the crowd can be replaced in a man's imagination, how far some substitute for that social backing can be made to serve the same purpose in neutralizing fear. He wrote with the calm of a man who weighs the probabilities of a riddle, and with the zeal of a man lost to every material consideration. His writing, it seemed to White, had something of the enthusiastic whiteness of his face, the enthusiastic brightness of his eyes. We can no more banish fear from our being at present than we can carve out the fleshy pillars of the heart or the pineal gland in the brain. It is deep in our inheritance. As deep as hunger. And just as we have to satisfy hunger in order that it should leave us free, so we have to satisfy the unconquerable importunity of fear. We have to reassure our faltering instincts. There must

be something to take the place of lair and familiars, something not ourselves but general, that we must carry with us into the lonely places. For it is true that man has now not only to learn to fight in open order instead of in a phalanx, but he has to think and plan and act in open order, to live in open order....

Then with one of his abrupt transitions Benham had written, "This brings me to God."

"The devil it does!" said White, roused to a keener attention.

"By no feat of intention can we achieve courage in loneliness so long as we feel indeed alone. An isolated man, an egoist, an Epicurean man, will always fail himself in the solitary place. There must be something more with us to sustain us against this vast universe than the spark of life that began yesterday and must be extinguished to-morrow. There can be no courage beyond social courage, the sustaining confidence of the herd, until there is in us the sense of God. But God is a word that covers a multitude of meanings. When I was a boy I was a passionate atheist, I defied God, and so far as God is the mere sanction of social traditions and pressures, a mere dressing up of the crowd's will in canonicals, I do still deny him and repudiate him. That God I heard of first from my nursemaid, and in very truth he is the proper God of all the nursemaids of mankind. But there is another God than that God of obedience, God the immortal adventurer in me, God who calls men from home and country, God scourged and crowned with thorns, who rose in a nail-pierced body out of death and came not to bring peace but a sword."

With something bordering upon intellectual consternation, White, who was a decent self-respecting sceptic, read these last clamberings of Benham's spirit. They were written in pencil; they were unfinished when he died.