

***JEROME  
K. JEROME***

A photograph of a man sitting on a concrete ledge in a narrow hallway with brick walls. He is wearing a dark t-shirt, dark pants, and dark shoes. He is looking down at something in his hands. The lighting is warm and focused on the man and the ledge. A small sign with the number '4' is visible on the wall to the left.

***THE SECOND  
THOUGHTS  
OF AN IDLE  
FELLOW***

**Jerome K. Jerome**

# **The Second Thoughts of an Idle Fellow**

EAN 8596547374374

DigiCat, 2022

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# ON THE ART OF MAKING UP ONE'S MIND

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"Now, which would you advise, dear? You see, with the red I shan't be able to wear my magenta hat."

"Well then, why not have the grey?"

"Yes—yes, I think the grey will be *more useful*."

"It's a good material."

"Yes, and it's a *pretty* grey. You know what I mean, dear; not a *common* grey. Of course grey is always an *uninteresting* colour."

"It's quiet."

"And then again, what I feel about the red is that it is so warm-looking. Red makes you *feel* warm even when you're *not* warm. You know what I mean, dear!"

"Well then, why not have the red? It suits you—red."

"No; do you really think so?"

"Well, when you've got a colour, I mean, of course!"

"Yes, that is the drawback to red. No, I think, on the whole, the grey is *safer*."

"Then you will take the grey, madam?"

"Yes, I think I'd better; don't you, dear?"

"I like it myself very much."

"And it is good wearing stuff. I shall have it trimmed with — Oh! you haven't cut it off, have you?"

"I was just about to, madam."

"Well, don't for a moment. Just let me have another look at the red. You see, dear, it has just occurred to me—that chinchilla would look so well on the red!"

“So it would, dear!”

“And, you see, I’ve *got* the chinchilla.”

“Then have the red. Why not?”

“Well, there is the hat I’m thinking of.”

“You haven’t anything else you could wear with that?”

“Nothing at all, and it would go so *beautifully* with the grey.—Yes, I think I’ll have the grey. It’s always a safe colour—grey.”

“Fourteen yards I think you said, madam?”

“Yes, fourteen yards will be enough; because I shall mix it with—One minute. You see, dear, if I take the grey I shall have nothing to wear with my black jacket.”

“Won’t it go with grey?”

“Not well—not so well as with red.”

“I should have the red then. You evidently fancy it yourself.”

“No, personally I prefer the grey. But then one must think of *everything*, and—Good gracious! that’s surely not the right time?”

“No, madam, it’s ten minutes slow. We always keep our clocks a little slow!”

“And we were too have been at Madame Jannaway’s at a quarter past twelve. How long shopping does take! Why, whatever time did we start?”

“About eleven, wasn’t it?”

“Half-past ten. I remember now; because, you know, we said we’d start at half-past nine. We’ve been two hours already!”

“And we don’t seem to have done much, do we?”

“Done literally nothing, and I meant to have done so much. I *must* go to Madame Jannaway’s. Have you got my purse, dear? Oh, it’s all right, I’ve got it.”

“Well, now you haven’t decided whether you’re going to have the grey or the red.”

“I’m sure I don’t know what I *do* want now. I had made up my mind a minute ago, and now it’s all gone again—oh yes, I remember, the red. Yes, I’ll have the red. No, I don’t mean the red, I mean the grey.”

“You were talking about the red last time, if you remember, dear.”

“Oh, so I was, you’re quite right. That’s the worst of shopping. Do you know I get quite confused sometimes.”

“Then you will decide on the red, madam?”

“Yes—yes, I shan’t do any better, shall I, dear? What do *you* think? You haven’t got any other shades of red, have you? This is such an *ugly* red.”

The shopman reminds her that she has seen all the other reds, and that this is the particular shade she selected and admired.

“Oh, very well,” she replies, with the air of one from whom all earthly cares are falling, “I must take that then, I suppose. I can’t be worried about it any longer. I’ve wasted half the morning already.”

Outside she recollects three insuperable objections to the red, and four unanswerable arguments why she should have selected the grey. She wonders would they change it, if she went back and asked to see the shop-walker? Her friend, who wants her lunch, thinks not.

“That is what I hate about shopping,” she says. “One never has time to really *think*.”

She says she shan’t go to that shop again.

We laugh at her, but are we so very much better? Come, my superior male friend, have you never stood, amid your wardrobe, undecided whether, in her eyes, you would appear more imposing, clad in the rough tweed suit that so admirably displays your broad shoulders; or in the orthodox black frock, that, after all, is perhaps more suitable to the figure of a man approaching—let us say, the nine-and-twenties? Or, better still, why not riding costume? Did we not hear her say how well Jones looked in his top-boots and breeches, and, “hang it all,” we have a better leg than Jones. What a pity riding-breeches are made so baggy nowadays. Why is it that male fashions tend more and more to hide the male leg? As women have become less and less ashamed of theirs, we have become more and more reticent of ours. Why are the silken hose, the tight-fitting pantaloons, the neat kneebreeches of our forefathers impossible to-day? Are we grown more modest—or has there come about a falling off, rendering concealment advisable?

I can never understand, myself, why women love us. It must be our honest worth, our sterling merit, that attracts them—certainly not our appearance, in a pair of tweed “dittos,” black angora coat and vest, stand-up collar, and chimney-pot hat! No, it must be our sheer force of character that compels their admiration.

What a good time our ancestors must have had was borne in upon me when, on one occasion, I appeared in character at a fancy dress ball. What I represented I am

unable to say, and I don't particularly care. I only know it was something military. I also remember that the costume was two sizes too small for me in the chest, and thereabouts; and three sizes too large for me in the hat. I padded the hat, and dined in the middle of the day off a chop and half a glass of soda-water. I have gained prizes as a boy for mathematics, also for scripture history—not often, but I have done it. A literary critic, now dead, once praised a book of mine. I know there have been occasions when my conduct has won the approbation of good men; but never—never in my whole life, have I felt more proud, more satisfied with myself than on that evening when, the last hook fastened, I gazed at my full-length Self in the cheval glass. I was a dream. I say it who should not; but I am not the only one who said it. I was a glittering dream. The groundwork was red, trimmed with gold braid wherever there was room for gold braid; and where there was no more possible room for gold braid there hung gold cords, and tassels, and straps. Gold buttons and buckles fastened me, gold embroidered belts and sashes caressed me, white horse-hair plumes waved o'er me. I am not sure that everything was in its proper place, but I managed to get everything on somehow, and I looked well. It suited me. My success was a revelation to me of female human nature. Girls who had hitherto been cold and distant gathered round me, timidly solicitous of notice. Girls on whom I smiled lost their heads and gave themselves airs. Girls who were not introduced to me sulked and were rude to girls that had been. For one poor child, with whom I sat out two dances (at least she sat, while I stood gracefully beside her—I had been



advised, by the costumier, *not* to sit), I was sorry. He was a worthy young fellow, the son of a cotton broker, and he would have made her a good husband, I feel sure. But he was foolish to come as a beer-bottle.

Perhaps, after all, it is as well those old fashions have gone out. A week in that suit might have impaired my natural modesty.

One wonders that fancy dress balls are not more popular in this grey age of ours. The childish instinct to “dress up,” to “make believe,” is with us all. We grow so tired of being always ourselves. A tea-table discussion, at which I once assisted, fell into this:—Would any one of us, when it came to the point, change with anybody else, the poor man with the millionaire, the governess with the princess—change not only outward circumstances and surroundings, but health and temperament, heart, brain, and soul; so that not one mental or physical particle of one’s original self one would retain, save only memory? The general opinion was that we would not, but one lady maintained the affirmative.

“Oh no, you wouldn’t really, dear,” argued a friend; “you *think* you would.”

“Yes, I would,” persisted the first lady; “I am tired of myself. I’d even be you, for a change.”

In my youth, the question chiefly important to me was—What sort of man shall I decide to be? At nineteen one asks oneself this question; at thirty-nine we say, “I wish Fate hadn’t made me this sort of man.”

In those days I was a reader of much well-meant advice to young men, and I gathered that, whether I should become a Sir Lancelot, a Herr Teufelsdröckh, or an Iago was

a matter for my own individual choice. Whether I should go through life gaily or gravely was a question the pros and cons of which I carefully considered. For patterns I turned to books. Byron was then still popular, and many of us made up our minds to be gloomy, saturnine young men, weary with the world, and prone to soliloquy. I determined to join them.

For a month I rarely smiled, or, when I did, it was with a weary, bitter smile, concealing a broken heart—at least that was the intention. Shallow-minded observers misunderstood.

“I know exactly how it feels,” they would say, looking at me sympathetically, “I often have it myself. It’s the sudden change in the weather, I think;” and they would press neat brandy upon me, and suggest ginger.

Again, it is distressing to the young man, busy burying his secret sorrow under a mound of silence, to be slapped on the back by commonplace people and asked—“Well, how’s ‘the hump’ this morning?” and to hear his mood of dignified melancholy referred to, by those who should know better, as “the sulks.”

There are practical difficulties also in the way of him who would play the Byronic young gentleman. He must be supernaturally wicked—or rather must *have been*; only, alas! in the unliterary grammar of life, where the future tense stands first, and the past is formed, not from the indefinite, but from the present indicative, “to have been” is “to be”; and to be wicked on a small income is impossible. The ruin of even the simplest of maidens costs money. In

the Courts of Love one cannot sue in *formâ pauperis*; nor would it be the Byronic method.

“To drown remembrance in the cup” sounds well, but then the “cup,” to be fitting, should be of some expensive brand. To drink deep of old Tokay or Asti is poetical; but when one’s purse necessitates that the draught, if it is to be deep enough to drown anything, should be of thin beer at five-and-nine the four and a half gallon cask, or something similar in price, sin is robbed of its flavour.

Possibly also—let me think it—the conviction may have been within me that Vice, even at its daintiest, is but an ugly, sordid thing, repulsive in the sunlight; that though—as rags and dirt to art—it may afford picturesque material to Literature, it is an evil-smelling garment to the wearer; one that a good man, by reason of poverty of will, may come down to, but one to be avoided with all one’s effort, discarded with returning mental prosperity.

Be this as it may, I grew weary of training for a saturnine young man; and, in the midst of my doubt, I chanced upon a book the hero of which was a debonnaire young buck, own cousin to Tom and Jerry. He attended fights, both of cocks and men, flirted with actresses, wrenched off door-knockers, extinguished street lamps, played many a merry jest upon many an unappreciative night watch-man. For all the which he was much beloved by the women of the book. Why should not I flirt with actresses, put out street lamps, play pranks on policemen, and be beloved? London life was changed since the days of my hero, but much remained, and the heart of woman is eternal. If no longer prizefighting was to be had, at least there were boxing competitions, so

called, in dingy back parlours out Whitechapel way. Though cockfighting was a lost sport, were there not damp cellars near the river where for twopence a gentleman might back mongrel terriers to kill rats against time, and feel himself indeed a sportsman? True, the atmosphere of reckless gaiety, always surrounding my hero, I missed myself from these scenes, finding in its place an atmosphere more suggestive of gin, stale tobacco, and nervous apprehension of the police; but the essentials must have been the same, and the next morning I could exclaim in the very words of my prototype—"Odds crickets, but I feel as though the devil himself were in my head. Peste take me for a fool."

But in this direction likewise my fatal lack of means opposed me. (It affords much food to the philosophic mind, this influence of income upon character.) Even fifth-rate "boxing competitions," organized by "friendly leads," and ratting contests in Rotherhithe slums, become expensive, when you happen to be the only gentleman present possessed of a collar, and are expected to do the honours of your class in dog's-nose. True, climbing lamp-posts and putting out the gas is fairly cheap, providing always you are not caught in the act, but as a recreation it lacks variety. Nor is the modern London lamp-post adapted to sport. Anything more difficult to grip—anything with less "give" in it—I have rarely clasped. The disgraceful amount of dirt allowed to accumulate upon it is another drawback from the climber's point of view. By the time you have swarmed up your third post a positive distaste for "gaiety" steals over you. Your desire is towards arnica and a bath.

Nor in jokes at the expense of policemen is the fun entirely on your side. Maybe I did not proceed with judgment. It occurs to me now, looking back, that the neighbourhoods of Covent Garden and Great Marlborough Street were ill-chosen for sport of this nature. To bonnet a fat policeman is excellent fooling. While he is struggling with his helmet you can ask him comic questions, and by the time he has got his head free you are out of sight. But the game should be played in a district where there is not an average of three constables to every dozen square yards. When two other policemen, who have had their eye on you for the past ten minutes, are watching the proceedings from just round the next corner, you have little or no leisure for due enjoyment of the situation. By the time you have run the whole length of Great Titchfield Street and twice round Oxford Market, you are of opinion that a joke should never be prolonged beyond the point at which there is danger of its becoming wearisome; and that the time has now arrived for home and friends. The "Law," on the other hand, now raised by reinforcements to a strength of six or seven men, is just beginning to enjoy the chase. You picture to yourself, while doing Hanover Square, the scene in Court the next morning. You will be accused of being drunk and disorderly. It will be idle for you to explain to the magistrate (or to your relations afterwards) that you were only trying to live up to a man who did this sort of thing in a book and was admired for it. You will be fined the usual forty shillings; and on the next occasion of your calling at the Mayfields' the girls will be out, and Mrs. Mayfield, an excellent lady, who has always

taken a motherly interest in you, will talk seriously to you and urge you to sign the pledge.

Thanks to your youth and constitution you shake off the pursuit at Notting Hill; and, to avoid any chance of unpleasant *contretemps* on the return journey, walk home to Bloomsbury by way of Camden Town and Islington.

I abandoned sportive tendencies as the result of a vow made by myself to Providence, during the early hours of a certain Sunday morning, while clinging to the waterspout of an unpretentious house situate in a side street off Soho. I put it to Providence as man to man. "Let me only get out of this," I think were the muttered words I used, "and no more 'sport' for me." Providence closed on the offer, and did let me get out of it. True, it was a complicated "get out," involving a broken skylight and three gas globes, two hours in a coal cellar, and a sovereign to a potman for the loan of an ulster; and when at last, secure in my chamber, I took stock of myself—what was left of me,—I could not but reflect that Providence might have done the job neater. Yet I experienced no desire to escape the terms of the covenant; my inclining for the future was towards a life of simplicity.

Accordingly, I cast about for a new character, and found one to suit me. The German professor was becoming popular as a hero about this period. He wore his hair long and was otherwise untidy, but he had "a heart of steel," occasionally of gold. The majority of folks in the book, judging him from his exterior together with his conversation—in broken English, dealing chiefly with his dead mother and his little sister Lisa,—dubbed him uninteresting, but then they did not know about the heart. His chief possession

was a lame dog which he had rescued from a brutal mob; and when he was not talking broken English he was nursing this dog.

But his speciality was stopping runaway horses, thereby saving the heroine's life. This, combined with the broken English and the dog, rendered him irresistible.

He seemed a peaceful, amiable sort of creature, and I decided to try him. I could not of course be a German professor, but I could, and did, wear my hair long in spite of much public advice to the contrary, voiced chiefly by small boys. I endeavoured to obtain possession of a lame dog, but failed. A one-eyed dealer in Seven Dials, to whom, as a last resource, I applied, offered to lame one for me for an extra five shillings, but this suggestion I declined. I came across an uncanny-looking mongrel late one night. He was not lame, but he seemed pretty sick; and, feeling I was not robbing anybody of anything very valuable, I lured him home and nursed him. I fancy I must have over-nursed him. He got so healthy in the end, there was no doing anything with him. He was an ill-conditioned cur, and he was too old to be taught. He became the curse of the neighbourhood. His idea of sport was killing chickens and sneaking rabbits from outside poulterers' shops. For recreation he killed cats and frightened small children by yelping round their legs. There were times when I could have lamed him myself, if only I could have got hold of him. I made nothing by running that dog—nothing whatever. People, instead of admiring me for nursing him back to life, called me a fool, and said that if I didn't drown the brute they would. He spoilt my character utterly—I mean my character at this period. It is difficult to

pose as a young man with a heart of gold, when discovered in the middle of the road throwing stones at your own dog. And stones were the only things that would reach and influence him.

I was also hampered by a scarcity in runaway horses. The horse of our suburb was not that type of horse. Once and only once did an opportunity offer itself for practice. It was a good opportunity, inasmuch as he was not running away very greatly. Indeed, I doubt if he knew himself that he was running away. It transpired afterwards that it was a habit of his, after waiting for his driver outside the Rose and Crown for what he considered to be a reasonable period, to trot home on his own account. He passed me going about seven miles an hour, with the reins dragging conveniently beside him. He was the very thing for a beginner, and I prepared myself. At the critical moment, however, a couple of officious policemen pushed me aside and did it themselves.

There was nothing for me to regret, as the matter turned out. I should only have rescued a bald-headed commercial traveller, very drunk, who swore horribly, and pelted the crowd with empty collar-boxes.

From the window of a very high flat I once watched three men, resolved to stop a runaway horse. Each man marched deliberately into the middle of the road and took up his stand. My window was too far away for me to see their faces, but their attitude suggested heroism unto death. The first man, as the horse came charging towards him, faced it with his arms spread out. He never flinched until the horse was within about twenty yards of him. Then, as the animal was evidently determined to continue its wild career, there



was nothing left for him to do but to retire again to the kerb, where he stood looking after it with evident sorrow, as though saying to himself—“Oh, well, if you are going to be headstrong I have done with you.”

The second man, on the catastrophe being thus left clear for him, without a moment’s hesitation, walked up a bye street and disappeared. The third man stood his ground, and, as the horse passed him, yelled at it. I could not hear what he said. I have not the slightest doubt it was excellent advice, but the animal was apparently too excited even to listen. The first and the third man met afterwards, and discussed the matter sympathetically. I judged they were regretting the pig-headedness of runaway horses in general, and hoping that nobody had been hurt.

I forget the other characters I assumed about this period. One, I know, that got me into a good deal of trouble was that of a downright, honest, hearty, outspoken young man who always said what he meant.

I never knew but one man who made a real success of speaking his mind. I have heard him slap the table with his open hand and exclaim—

“You want me to flatter you—to stuff you up with a pack of lies. That’s not me, that’s not Jim Compton. But if you care for my honest opinion, all I can say is, that child is the most marvellous performer on the piano I’ve ever heard. I don’t say she is a genius, but I have heard Liszt and Metzler and all the crack players, and I prefer *her*. That’s my opinion. I speak my mind, and I can’t help it if you’re offended.”

“How refreshing,” the parents would say, “to come across a man who is not afraid to say what he really thinks. Why are we not all outspoken?”

The last character I attempted I thought would be easy to assume. It was that of a much admired and beloved young man, whose great charm lay in the fact that he was always just—himself. Other people posed and acted. He never made any effort to be anything but his own natural, simple self.

I thought I also would be my own natural, simple self. But then the question arose—What was my own natural, simple self?

That was the preliminary problem I had to solve; I have not solved it to this day. What am I? I am a great gentleman, walking through the world with dauntless heart and head erect, scornful of all meanness, impatient of all littleness. I am a mean-thinking, little-daring man—the type of man that I of the dauntless heart and the erect head despise greatly—crawling to a poor end by devious ways, cringing to the strong, timid of all pain. I—but, dear reader, I will not sadden your sensitive ears with details I could give you, showing how contemptible a creature this wretched I happens to be. Nor would you understand me. You would only be astonished, discovering that such disreputable specimens of humanity contrive to exist in this age. It is best, my dear sir, or madam, you should remain ignorant of these evil persons. Let me not trouble you with knowledge.

I am a philosopher, greeting alike the thunder and the sunshine with frolic welcome. Only now and then, when all things do not fall exactly as I wish them, when foolish,

wicked people will persist in doing foolish, wicked acts, affecting my comfort and happiness, I rage and fret a goodish deal.

As Heine said of himself, I am knight, too, of the Holy Grail, valiant for the Truth, reverent of all women, honouring all men, eager to yield life to the service of my great Captain.

And next moment, I find myself in the enemy's lines, fighting under the black banner. (It must be confusing to these opposing Generals, all their soldiers being deserters from both armies.) What are women but men's playthings! Shall there be no more cakes and ale for me because thou art virtuous! What are men but hungry dogs, contending each against each for a limited supply of bones! Do others lest thou be done. What is the Truth but an unexploded lie!

I am a lover of all living things. You, my poor sister, struggling with your heavy burden on your lonely way, I would kiss the tears from your worn cheeks, lighten with my love the darkness around your feet. You, my patient brother, breathing hard as round and round you tramp the trodden path, like some poor half-blind gin-horse, stripes your only encouragement, scanty store of dry chaff in your manger! I would jog beside you, taking the strain a little from your aching shoulders; and we would walk nodding, our heads side by side, and you, remembering, should tell me of the fields where long ago you played, of the gallant races that you ran and won. And you, little pinched brats, with wondering eyes, looking from dirt-encrusted faces, I would take you in my arms and tell you fairy stories. Into the sweet land of make-believe we would wander, leaving the sad old

world behind us for a time, and you should be Princes and Princesses, and know Love.

But again, a selfish, greedy man comes often, and sits in my clothes. A man who frets away his life, planning how to get more money—more food, more clothes, more pleasures for himself; a man so busy thinking of the many things he needs he has no time to dwell upon the needs of others. He deems himself the centre of the universe. You would imagine, hearing him grumbling, that the world had been created and got ready against the time when he should come to take his pleasure in it. He would push and trample, heedless, reaching towards these many desires of his; and when, grabbing, he misses, he curses Heaven for its injustice, and men and women for getting in his path. He is not a nice man, in any way. I wish, as I say, he would not come so often and sit in my clothes. He persists that he is I, and that I am only a sentimental fool, spoiling his chances. Sometimes, for a while, I get rid of him, but he always comes back; and then he gets rid of me and I become him. It is very confusing. Sometimes I wonder if I really am myself.

## **ON THE DISADVANTAGE OF NOT GETTING WHAT ONE WANTS**

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LONG, long ago, when you and I, dear Reader, were young, when the fairies dwelt in the hearts of the roses, when the moonbeams bent each night beneath the weight of angels' feet, there lived a good, wise man. Or rather, I should say, there had lived, for at the time of which I speak the poor old

gentleman lay dying. Waiting each moment the dread summons, he fell a-musing on the life that stretched far back behind him. How full it seemed to him at that moment of follies and mistakes, bringing bitter tears not to himself alone but to others also. How much brighter a road might it have been, had he been wiser, had he known!

“Ah, me!” said the good old gentleman, “if only I could live my life again in the light of experience.”

Now as he spoke these words he felt the drawing near to him of a Presence, and thinking it was the One whom he expected, raising himself a little from his bed, he feebly cried,

“I am ready.”

But a hand forced him gently back, a voice saying, “Not yet; I bring life, not death. Your wish shall be granted. You shall live your life again, and the knowledge of the past shall be with you to guide you. See you use it. I will come again.”

Then a sleep fell upon the good man, and when he awoke, he was again a little child, lying in his mother’s arms; but, locked within his brain was the knowledge of the life that he had lived already.

So once more he lived and loved and laboured. So a second time he lay an old, worn man with life behind him. And the angel stood again beside his bed; and the voice said,

“Well, are you content now?”

“I am well content,” said the old gentleman. “Let Death come.”

“And have you understood?” asked the angel.

“I think so,” was the answer; “that experience is but as of the memory of the pathways he has trod to a traveller journeying ever onward into an unknown land. I have been wise only to reap the reward of folly. Knowledge has ofttimes kept me from my good. I have avoided my old mistakes only to fall into others that I knew not of. I have reached the old errors by new roads. Where I have escaped sorrow I have lost joy. Where I have grasped happiness I have plucked pain also. Now let me go with Death that I may learn..”

Which was so like the angel of that period, the giving of a gift, bringing to a man only more trouble. Maybe I am overrating my coolness of judgment under somewhat startling circumstances, but I am inclined to think that, had I lived in those days, and had a fairy or an angel come to me, wanting to give me something—my soul’s desire, or the sum of my ambition, or any trifle of that kind I should have been short with him.

“You pack up that precious bag of tricks of yours,” I should have said to him (it would have been rude, but that is how I should have felt), “and get outside with it. I’m not taking anything in your line to-day. I don’t require any supernatural aid to get me into trouble. All the worry I want I can get down here, so it’s no good your calling. You take that little joke of yours,—I don’t know what it is, but I know enough not to want to know,—and run it off on some other idiot. I’m not priggish. I have no objection to an innocent game of ‘catch-questions’ in the ordinary way, and when I get a turn myself. But if I’ve got to pay every time, and the stakes are to be my earthly happiness plus my future existence—why, I don’t play. There was the case of Midas; a