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Goethe Hawthorne Smith Kafka
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Darwin Thoreau Thoreau Twain Plato Scott
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The Crack of Doom

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THE CRACK OF DOOM

BY
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PREFACE

The rough notes from which this narrative has been constructed were given to me by the man who tells the story. For obvious reasons I have altered the names of the principals, and I hereby pass on the assurance which I have received, that the originals of such as are left alive can be found if their discovery be thought desirable. This alteration of names, the piecing together of somewhat disconnected and sometimes nearly indecipherable memoranda, and the reduction of the mass to consecutive form, are all that has been required of me or would have been permitted to me. The expedition to Labrador mentioned by the narrator has not returned, nor has it ever been definitely traced. He does not undertake to prove that it ever set out. But he avers that all which is hereafter set down is truly told, and he leaves it to mankind to accept the warning which it has fallen to him to convey, or await the proof of its sincerity which he believes the end of the century will produce.

ROBERT CROMIE.

Belfast, *May*, 1895.

THE CRACK OF DOOM

CHAPTER I.

THE UNIVERSE A MISTAKE!

"The Universe is a mistake!"

Thus spake Herbert Brande, a passenger on the *Majestic*, making for Queenstown Harbour, one evening early in the past year. Foolish as the words may seem, they were partly influential in leading to my terrible association with him, and all that is described in this book.

Brande was standing beside me on the starboard side of the vessel. We had been discussing a current astronomical essay, as we watched the hazy blue line of the Irish coast rise on the horizon. This conversation was interrupted by Brande, who said, impatiently:

"Why tell us of stars distant so far from this [2] insignificant little world of ours—so insignificant that even its own inhabitants speak disrespectfully of it—that it would take hundreds of years to telegraph to some of them, thousands to others, and millions to the rest? Why limit oneself to a mere million of years for a dramatic illustration, when there is a star in space distant so far from us that if a telegram left the earth for it this very night, and maintained for ever its initial velocity, it would never reach that star?"

He said this without any apparent effort after rhetorical effect; but the suddenness with which he had presented a very obvious truism in a fresh light to me made the conception of the vastness of space absolutely oppressive. In the hope of changing the subject I replied:

"Nothing is gained by dwelling on these scientific speculations. The mind is only bewildered. The Universe is inexplicable."

"The Universe!" he exclaimed. "That is easily explained. The Universe is a mistake!"

"The greatest mistake of the century, I suppose," I added, somewhat annoyed, for I thought Brande was laughing at me.

"Say, of Time, and I agree with you," he replied, careless of my astonishment. [3]

I did not answer him for some moments.

This man Brande was young in years, but middle-aged in the expression of his pale, intellectual face, and old—if age be synonymous with knowledge—in his ideas. His knowledge, indeed, was so exhaustive that the scientific pleasantries to which he was prone could always be justified, dialectically at least, by him when he was contradicted. Those who knew him well did not argue with him. I was always stumbling into intellectual pitfalls, for I had only known him since the steamer left New York.

As to myself, there is little to be told. My history prior to my acquaintance with Brande was commonplace. I was merely an active, athletic Englishman, Arthur Marcel by name. I had studied medicine, and was a doctor in all but the degree. This certificate had been dispensed with owing to an unexpected legacy, on receipt of which I determined to devote it to the furtherance of my own amusement. In the pursuit of this object, I had visited many lands and had become familiar with most of the beaten tracks of travel. I was returning to England after an absence of three years spent in aimless roaming. My age was thirty-one years, and my salient [4] characteristic at the time was to hold fast by anything that interested me, until my humour changed. Brande's conversational vagaries had amused me on the voyage. His extraordinary comment on the Universe decided me to cement our shipboard acquaintance before reaching port.

"That explanation of yours," I said, lighting a fresh cigar, and returning to a subject which I had so recently tried to shelve, "isn't it rather vague?"

"For the present it must serve," he answered absently.

To force him into admitting that his phrase was only a thoughtless exclamation, or induce him to defend it, I said:

"It does not serve any reasonable purpose. It adds nothing to knowledge. As it stands, it is neither academic nor practical."

Brande looked at me earnestly for a moment, and then said gravely:

"The academic value of the explanation will be shown to you if you will join a society I have founded; and its practicalness will soon be made plain whether you join or not."

"What do you call this club of yours?" I asked. [5]

"We do not call it a club. We call it a Society — the *Cui Bono* Society," he answered coldly.

"I like the name," I returned. "It is suggestive. It may mean anything — or nothing."

"You will learn later that the Society means something; a good deal, in fact."

This was said in the dry, unemotional tone which I afterwards found was the only sign of displeasure Brande ever permitted himself to show. His arrangements for going on shore at Queenstown had been made early in the day, but he left me to look for his sister, of whom I had seen very little on the voyage. The weather had been rough, and as she was not a good sailor, I had only had a rare glimpse of a very dark and handsome girl, whose society possessed for me a strange attraction, although we were then almost strangers. Indeed, I regretted keenly, as the time of our separation approached, having registered my luggage (consisting largely of curios and mementoes of my travels, of which I was very careful) for Liverpool. My own time was valueless, and it would have been more agreeable to me to continue the journey with the Brandes, no matter where they went.

There was a choppy sea on when we reached [6] the entrance to the harbour, so the *Majestic* steamed in between the Carlisle and Camden forts, and on to the man-of-war roads, where the tender met us. By this time, Brande and his sister were ready to go on shore; but as there was a heavy mail to be transhipped, we had still an hour at our disposal. For some time we paced the deck, exchanging commonplaces on the voyage and confidences as to our future plans. It was almost dark, but not dark enough to prevent us from seeing those wonderfully green hills which landlock the harbour. To me the verdant woods and hills were delightful after the brown

plains and interminable prairies on which I had spent many months. As the lights of Queenstown began to speck the slowly gathering gloom, Miss Brande asked me to point out Rostellan Castle. It could not be seen from the vessel, but the familiar legend was easily recalled, and this led us to talk about Irish tradition with its weird romance and never failing pathos. This interested her. Freed now from the lassitude of sea-sickness, the girl became more fascinating to me every moment. Everything she said was worth listening to, apart from the charming manner in which it was said.

To declare that she was an extremely pretty [7] girl would not convey the strange, almost unearthly, beauty of her face—as intellectual as her brother's—and of the charm of her slight but exquisitely moulded figure. In her dark eyes there was a sympathy, a compassion, that was new to me. It thrilled me with an emotion different from anything that my frankly happy, but hitherto wholly selfish life had known. There was only one note in her conversation which jarred upon me. She was apt to drift into the extraordinary views of life and death which were interesting when formulated by her eccentric brother, but pained me coming from her lips. In spite of this, the purpose I had contemplated of joining Brande's Society—evoked as it had been by his own whimsical observation—now took definite form. I would join that Society. It would be the best way of keeping near to Natalie Brande.

Her brother returned to us to say that the tender was about to leave the ship. He had left us for half an hour. I did not notice his absence until he himself announced it. As we shook hands, I said to him:

"I have been thinking about that Society of yours. I mean to join it." [8]

"I am very glad," he replied. "You will find it a new sensation, quite outside the beaten track, which you know so well."

There was a shade of half-kindly contempt in his voice, which missed me at the moment. I answered gaily, knowing that he would not be offended by what was said in jest:

"I am sure I shall. If all the members are as mad as yourself, it will be the most interesting experience outside Bedlam that any man could wish for."

I had a foretaste of that interest soon.

As Miss Brande was walking to the gangway, a lamp shone full upon her gypsy face. The blue-black hair, the dark eyes, and a deep red rose she wore in her bonnet, seemed to me an exquisite arrangement of harmonious colour. And the thought flashed into my mind very vividly, however trivial it may seem here, when written down in cold words: "The queen of women, and the queen of flowers." That is not precisely how my thought ran, but I cannot describe it better. The finer subtleties of the brain do not bear well the daylight of language.

Brande drew her back and whispered to her. [9] Then the sweet face, now slightly flushed, was turned to me again.

"Oh, thank you for that pretty thought," she said with a pleasant smile. "You are too flattering. The 'queen of flowers' is very true, but the 'queen of women!' Oh, no!" She made a graceful gesture of dissent, and passed down the gangway.

As the tender disappeared into the darkness, a tiny scrap of lace waved, and I knew vaguely that she was thinking of me. But how she read my thought so exactly I could not tell.

That knowledge it has been my fate to gain.

[10]

CHAPTER II.

A STRANGE EXPERIMENT.

Soon after my arrival in London, I called on Brande, at the address he had given me in Brook Street. He received me with the pleasant affability which a man of the world easily assumes, and his apology for being unable to pass the evening with me in his own house was a model of social style. The difficulty in the way was practically an impossibility. His Society had a meeting on that evening, and it was imperative that he should be present.

"Why not come yourself?" he said. "It is what we might call a guest night. That is, visitors, if friends of members, are admitted, and as this privilege may not be again accorded to outsiders, you ought to come before you decide finally to join us. I must go now, but Natalie" (he did not say "Miss Brande") "will entertain you and bring you to the hall. It is very near—in Hanover Square." [11]

"I shall be very glad indeed to bring Miss Brande to the hall," I answered, changing the sentence in order to correct Brande's too patronising phrase.

"The same thing in different words, is it not? If you prefer it that way, please have it so." His imperturbability was unaffected.

Miss Brande here entered the room. Her brother, with a word of renewed apology, left us, and presently I saw him cross the street and hail a passing hansom.

"You must not blame him for running off," Miss Brande said. "He has much to think of, and the Society depends almost wholly on himself."

I stammered out that I did not blame him at all, and indeed my disclaimer was absolutely true. Brande could not have pleased me better than he had done by relieving us of his company.

Miss Brande made tea, which I pretended to enjoy in the hope of pleasing her. Over this we talked more like old and well proven friends than mere acquaintances of ten days' standing. Just once or twice the mysterious chord which marred the girl's charming conversation was touched. She immediately changed the subject [12] on

observing my distress. I say distress, for a weaker word would not fittingly describe the emotion I felt whenever she blundered into the pseudo-scientific nonsense which was her brother's favourite affectation. At least, it seemed nonsense to me. I could not well foresee then that the theses which appeared to be mere theoretical absurdities, would ever be proven—as they have been—very terrible realities. On subjects of ordinary educational interest my hostess displayed such full knowledge of the question and ease in dealing with it, that I listened, fascinated, as long as she chose to continue speaking. It was a novel and delightful experience to hear a girl as handsome as a pictorial masterpiece, and dressed like a court beauty, discourse with the knowledge, and in the language, of the oldest philosopher. But this was only one of the many surprising combinations in her complex personality. My novice was still in its first stage.

The time to set out for the meeting arrived all too soon for my inclination. We decided to walk, the evening being fine and not too warm, and the distance only a ten minutes' stroll. At a street crossing, we met a crowd unusually [13] large for that neighbourhood. Miss Brande again surprised me. She was watching the crowd seething and swarming past. Her dark eyes followed the people with a strange wondering, pitying look which I did not understand. Her face, exquisite in its expression at all times, was now absolutely transformed, beatified. Brande had often spoken to me of mesmerism, clairvoyance, and similar subjects, and it occurred to me that he had used his sister as a medium, a clairvoyante. Her brain was not, therefore, under normal control. I determined instantly to tell him on the first opportunity that if he did not wish to see the girl permanently injured, he would have to curtail his hypnotic influence.

"It is rather a stirring sight," I said so sharply to Miss Brande that she started. I meant to startle her, but did not succeed as far as I wished.

"It is a very terrible sight," she answered.

"Oh, there is no danger," I said hastily, and drew her hand over my arm.

"Danger! I was not thinking of danger."

As she did not remove her hand, I did not infringe the silence which followed this, until [14] a break in the traffic allowed us to cross the street. Then I said:

"May I ask what you were thinking of just now, Miss Brande?"

"Of the people – their lives – their work – their misery!"

"I assure you many are very happy," I replied. "You take a morbid view. Misery is not the rule. I am sure the majority are happy."

"What difference does that make?" the girl said with a sigh. "What is the end of it all – the meaning of it all? Their happiness! *Cui Bono?*"

We walked on in silence, while I turned over in my mind what she had said. I could come to no conclusion upon it save that my dislike for her enigmatic aberrations was becoming more intense as my liking for the girl herself increased. To change the current of her thoughts and my own, I asked her abruptly:

"Are you a member of the *Cui Bono* Society?"

"I! Oh, no. Women are not allowed to join – for the present."

"I am delighted to hear it," I said heartily, "and I hope the rule will continue in force." [15]

She looked at me in surprise. "Why should you mind? You are joining yourself."

"That is different. I don't approve of ladies mixing themselves up in these curious and perhaps questionable societies."

My remark amused her. Her eyes sparkled with simple fun. The change in her manner was very agreeable to me.

"I might have expected that." To my extreme satisfaction she now looked almost mischievous. "Herbert told me you were a little –"

"A little what?"

"Well, a little – you won't be vexed? That is right. He said a little – mediæval."

This abated my appreciation of her sense of humour, and I maintained a dignified reticence, which unhappily she regarded as mere sullenness, until we reached the Society's room.

The place was well filled, and the company, in spite of the extravagantly modern costumes of the younger women, which I cannot describe better than by saying that there was little difference in it from that of ordinary male attire, was quite conventional in so far as the interchange of ordinary courtesies went. When, however, any member of the Society mingled with [16] a group of visitors, the conversation was soon turned into a new channel. Secrets of science, which I had been accustomed to look upon as undiscoverable, were bandied about like the merest commonplaces of education. The absurdity of individuality and the subjectivity of the emotions were alike insisted on without notice of the paradox, which to me appeared extreme. The Associates were altruistic for the sake of altruism, not for the sake of its beneficiaries. They were not pantheists, for they saw neither universal good nor God, but rather evil in all things—themselves included. Their talk, however, was brilliant, and, with allowance for its jarring sentiments, it possessed something of the indefinable charm which followed Brande. My reflections on this identity of interest were interrupted by the man himself. After a word of welcome he said:

"Let me show you our great experiment; that which touches the high-water mark of scientific achievement in the history of humanity. It is not much in itself, but it is the pioneer of many marvels."

He brought me to a metal stand, on which a small instrument constructed of some white metal [17] was placed. A large number of wires were connected with various portions of it, and these wires passed into the side-wall of the building.

In appearance, this marvel of micrology, so far as the eye-piece and upper portions went, was like an ordinary microscope, but its magnifying power was to me unbelievable. It magnified the object under examination many thousand times more than the most powerful microscope in the world.

I looked through the upper lens, and saw a small globe suspended in the middle of a tiny chamber filled with soft blue light, or transparent material. Circling round this globe four other spheres revolved in orbits, some almost circular, some elliptical, some parabolic. As I looked, Brande touched a key, and the little globules began to fly more rapidly round their primary, and make wider

sweeps in their revolutions. Another key was pressed, and the revolving spheres slowed down and drew closer until I could scarcely distinguish any movement. The globules seemed to form a solid ball.

"Attend now!" Brande exclaimed.

He tapped the first key sharply. A little grey [18] cloud obscured the blue light. When it cleared away, the revolving globes had disappeared.

"What do you think of it?" he asked carelessly.

"What is it? What does it mean? Is it the solar system or some other system illustrated in miniature? I am sorry for the misadventure."

"You are partly correct," Brande replied. "It is an illustration of a planetary system, though a small one. But there was no misadventure. I caused the somewhat dangerous result you witnessed, the wreckage not merely of the molecule of marsh gas you were examining—which any educated chemist might do as easily as I—but the wreckage of its constituent atoms. This is a scientific victory which dwarfs the work of Helmholtz, Avogadro, or Mendelejeff. The immortal Dalton himself" (the word "immortal" was spoken with a sneer) "might rise from his grave to witness it."

"Atoms—molecules! What are you talking about?" I asked, bewildered.

"You were looking on at the death of a molecule—a molecule of marsh gas, as I have already said. It was caused by a process which I would [19] describe to you if I could reduce my own life work—and that of every scientific amateur who has preceded me since the world began—into half a dozen sentences. As that would be difficult, I must ask you to accept my personal assurance that you witnessed a fact, not a fiction of my imagination."

"And your instrument is so perfect that it not only renders molecules and atoms but their diffusion visible? It is a microscopic impossibility. At least it is amazing."

"Pshaw!" Brande exclaimed impatiently. "My instrument does certainly magnify to a marvellous extent, but not by the old device

of the simple microscope, which merely focussed a large area of light rays into a small one. So crude a process could never show an atom to the human eye. I add much to that. I restore to the rays themselves the luminosity which they lost in their passage through our atmosphere. I give them back all their visual properties, and turn them with their full etheric blaze on the object under examination. Great as that achievement is, I deny that it is amazing. It may amaze a Papuan to see his eyelash magnified to the size of a wire, or an uneducated Englishman to see a cheese-mite [20] magnified to the size of a midge. It should not amaze you to see a simple process a little further developed."

"Where does the danger you spoke of come in?" I asked with a pretence of interest. Candidly, I did not believe a single word that Brande had said.

"If you will consult a common text-book on the physics of the ether," he replied, "you will find that one grain of matter contains sufficient energy, if etherised, to raise a hundred thousand tons nearly two miles. In face of such potentiality it is not wise to wreck incautiously even the atoms of a molecule."

"And the limits to this description of scientific experiment? Where are they?"

"There are no limits," Brande said decisively. "No man can say to science 'thus far and no farther.' No man ever has been able to do so. No man ever shall!"

[21]

CHAPTER III.

"IT IS GOOD TO BE ALIVE."

Amongst the letters lying on my breakfast-table a few days after the meeting was one addressed in an unfamiliar hand. The writing was bold, and formed like a man's. There was a faint trace of a perfume about the envelope which I remembered. I opened it first.

It was, as I expected, from Miss Brande. Her brother had gone to their country place on the southern coast. She and her friend, Edith Metford, were going that day. Their luggage was already at the station. Would I send on what I required for a short visit, and meet them at eleven o'clock on the bridge over the Serpentine? It was enough for me. I packed a large portmanteau hastily, sent it to Charing Cross, and spent the time at my disposal in the park, which was close to my hotel.

Although the invitation I had received gave [22] me pleasure, I could not altogether remove from my mind a vague sense of disquietude concerning Herbert Brande and his Society. The advanced opinions I had heard, if extreme, were not altogether alarming. But the mysterious way in which Brande himself had spoken about the Society, and the still more mysterious air which some of the members assumed when directly questioned as to its object, suggested much. Might it not be a revolutionary party engaged in a grave intrigue—a branch of some foreign body whose purpose was so dangerous that ordinary disguises were not considered sufficiently secure? Might they not have adopted the jargon and pretended to the opinions of scientific faddists as a cloak for designs more sinister and sincere? The experiment I witnessed might be almost a miracle or merely a trick. Thinking it over thus, I could come to no final opinion, and when I asked myself aloud, "What are you afraid of?" I could not answer my own question. But I thought I would defer joining the Society pending further information.

A few minutes before eleven, I walked towards the bridge over the Serpentine. No ladies appeared [23] to be on it. There were only a couple of smartly dressed youths there, one smoking a cigarette. I sauntered about until one of the lads, the one who was not smoking, looked up and beckoned to me. I approached leisurely, for it struck

me that the boy would have shown better breeding if he had come toward me, considering my seniority.

"I am sorry I did not notice you sooner. Why did you not come on when you saw us?" the smallest and slimmest youth called to me.

"In the name of—Miss—Miss—" I stammered.

"Brande; you haven't forgotten my name, I hope," Natalie Brande said coolly. "This is my friend, Edith Metford. Metford, this is Arthur Marcel."

"How do you do, Marcel? I am glad to meet you; I have heard 'favourable mention' of you from the Brandes," the second figure in knickerbockers said pleasantly.

"How do you do, sir—madam—I mean—Miss—" I blundered, and then in despair I asked Miss Brande, "Is this a tableau vivant? What is the meaning of these disguises?" My embarrassment was so great that my discourteous question may be pardoned. [24]

"Our dress! Surely you have seen women rationally dressed before!" Miss Brande answered complacently, while the other girl watched my astonishment with evident amusement.

This second girl, Edith Metford, was a frank, handsome young woman, but unlike the spirituelle beauty of Natalie Brande. She was perceptibly taller than her friend, and of fuller figure. In consequence, she looked, in my opinion, to even less advantage in her eccentric costume, or rational dress, than did Miss Brande.

"Rationally dressed! Oh, yes. I know the divided skirt, but—"

Miss Metford interrupted me. "Do you call the divided skirt atrociously rational dress?" she asked pointedly.

"Upon my honour I do not," I answered.

These girls were too advanced in their ideas of dress for me. Nor did I feel at all at my ease during this conversation, which did not, however, appear to embarrass them. I proposed hastily to get a cab, but they demurred. It was such a lovely day, they preferred to walk, part of the way at least. I pointed out that there might be drawbacks to this amendment of my proposal. [25]

"What drawbacks?" Miss Metford asked.