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<SPHINXES.>

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There are people to whom mystery is the very breath of life and the

main element of their existence. Without it they are insignificant

nobodies; by its aid they are magnified into vague and perhaps awful

potentialities. They are the people who take the Sphinx for their

model, and like her, speak darkly and in parables; making secrets of

every-day matters which would be patent to the whole world in their

simplicity, but which, by the magic of enigmatic handling, become

riddles that the curious would give their lives to unravel.

Nothing with these people is confessed and above board, and nothing is

shown openly so that you may look at it all round and judge for

yourself what it is like and what it is worth. The utmost they do is

to uncover just a corner of something they keep back in the bulk,

tantalizing you with glimpses that bewilder and mislead; or they will

dangle before you the end of a clue which they want you to take up and

follow, making you believe that you will be guided thereby into the

very heart of a mystery, and that you will find a treasure hidden in

the centre of the maze which will abundantly repay you for the

trouble of hunting it out. Nine times out of ten you will find nothing

but a scarecrow of no more value than the rags of which it is

composed--if even you find that. They are the people who repeat to you

the most trivial things you may have said, and who remind you of the

most unimportant things you may have done, years ago, all of which you

have totally forgotten; but they will speak of them in a mysterious

manner, as if they had been matters of vital meaning at the

time--things which would open, if followed up, a page in your private

history that it were better should be forgotten. As it is a question

of memory, you cannot deny point-blank what they affirm; and as we all

have pages of private history which we would rather not hear read

aloud at the market-cross, you are obliged to accept their highly

suggestive recollections with a queer feeling of helplessness and

being somehow in their power--not knowing how much they are really

acquainted with your secret affairs, nor whether the signal they have

flashed before your eyes is a feint or a revelation.

Of the same sort, with a difference, are those who are always going to

tell you something some day--people burdened with a perennial mystery

which never sees the light. You are for ever tormented with these folks'

possibilities of knowledge. You turn over in your own mind every

circumstance that you think they could have got hold of; you cunningly

subject all your common friends to crafty cross-examination; you go,

link by link, through the whole chain connecting you with them; but

you can find nothing that leads to the mere outskirts of the mystery.

You can make nothing of it; and your sphinx goes on to the end promising

some day to tell you something which dies with him untold. Your only

consolation is the inner conviction that there was nothing to tell

after all.

Then there are sphinxes of a more personal kind--people who keep their

affairs a profound secret from every one, who wash all their dirty

linen scrupulously at home and double-lock the door of the cupboard

where the family skeleton lives. They are dungeons of silence,

unfathomable abysses of reserve. You never know more of them, mind nor

estate, than what you can learn from the merest outside of things.

Look back, and you cannot recollect that you have ever heard them

speak of their family or of their early days; and you are not

acquainted with a living soul with whom they are connected. You may

visit them for years without knowing that such and such a friend is

their cousin, or maybe their sister. If they are unmarried men, they

have no address save at their club; and neither you nor their most

intimate friends have an idea where they sleep. For all you know to

the contrary they may be married, with a fine flourishing family

snugly stowed away in some suburban villa, where perhaps they live

under another name, or with the omission or addition of a title that

effectually masks their real individuality. If this is their

special manifestation of sphinxhood, they take as many precautions

against being identified as a savage when out on a scouting

expedition. They obliterate all traces of themselves so soon as they

leave their office in the City, and take it as a terrible misfortune

if the truth is ever discovered; though there is nothing disgraceful

in their circumstances, and their wives and children are healthy and

presentable.

Most of us have been startled by the sudden discovery, in our own

circle of friends, of the wife and children of some member of our

society hitherto supposed to be a bachelor and unshackled. All the

time that we have been joking him on his celibacy and introducing him

to various young ladies likely to make good wives if properly taught,

he has been living in the holy estate a little way out of town, where

he is at last stumbled on by some OEdipus who tells the secret to all

the world and blows the mystery to the winds. We may be very sure that

the officious OEdipus in question gets no thanks for his pains, and

that the sphinx he has unmasked would rather have gone on living in

congenial secrecy with his unacknowledged family in that remote

suburban villa, than be forced into publicity and recognition. Leading

two lives and personating two men--the one as imagined by his friends,

the other as known to his belongings--was a kind of existence he liked

infinitely better than the commonplace respectability of being \_en

évidence\_ throughout.

With certain sphinxes, no one but the officials concerned ever

knows what they have done, where they have served, what laurels they

have gained. It comes out quite by accident that they were in the

Crimea, where, like Jack Poyntz in \_School\_, they were heroes in their

own way, though they don't talk about it; or that they performed

prodigies of valour in the Indian Mutiny and obtained the Victoria

Cross, which they never wear. This kind has at least the merit of

being unboastful; keeping their virtues hidden like the temple which

the real sphinx held between her paws, and to which only those had

access who knew the secret of the way. But though it is hateful to

hear a man blowing his own trumpet in season and out of season, yet it

is pleasant to know the good deeds of one's neighbours, and to have

the power of admiring what is worthy of admiration. Besides, modesty

and mystery are not the same things; and there is a mean to be found

between the secrecy of a sphinx making riddles of commonplace matters,

and the cackle of a hen when she has laid an egg for the family

breakfast.

The monetary or financial sphinx is one of the oddest of the whole

tribe and one of the most mysterious. There are people who live on

notoriously small incomes--such as the widows, say, of naval or

military men, whose pensions are printed in blue-books and of whose

yearly receipts the world can take exact cognizance--yet who dress in

velvet and satin, perpetually go about in cabs and hired carriages,

and are never without money to spend, though always complaining

of poverty. How these financial sphinxes manage surpasses the

understanding of every one; and by what royal road they arrive at the

power of making two do the work of four is hidden from the ordinary

believers in Cocker. You know their ostensible income; indeed, they

themselves put it at so much; but they keep up a magnificent

appearance on a less sum than that on which you would go shabby and

dilapidated. When you ask them how it is done, they answer, 'by

management.' Anything can be done by management, they say, by those

who have the gift; which you feel to be an utterance of the sphinx--a

dark saying the key to which has not yet been forged.

You calculate to the best of your ability, and you know that you are

sound in your arithmetic; but, do what you will, you can never come to

the rule by which five hundred a year can be made to compass the

expenditure of a thousand. If you whisper secret supplies, concealed

resources, your sphinx will not so much as wink her eyelid. How she

contrives to make her ostensible five hundred do the work of a

thousand--how she gets velvet and satin for the value of cotton and

stuff, and how, though always complaining of poverty, she keeps

unfailingly flush of cash--how all this is done is her secret, and she

holds it sacred. And you may be quite sure of one thing--it is a

secret she will never share with you nor any one else.

The rapidly-working \_littérateur\_ is another sphinx worth

studying as a curiosity--we might say, indeed, a living miracle. There

he stands, a jovial, self-indulgent, enjoying man, out in society

every night in the week; by no means abstinent from champagne, and as

little given to early rising as he is to consumption of the midnight

oil. But he gets through a mass of work which would be respectable in

a mere copyist, and which is little less than miraculous in an

original producer. How he thinks, when he finds time to make up his

plots, to work out his characters, even to correct his proofs, are

riddles unanswerable by all his friends. Taking the mere mechanical

act alone, he must write faster than any living man has ever been

known to write, to get through all that goes under his name. And when

is it done? Literary sphinxes of this kind go about unchallenged;

indeed, they are very much about, and to be beheld everywhere; and one

looks at them with respect, not knowing of what material they are

made, nor of what mysterious gifts they are the possessors. Novels,

plays, essays, poems, come pouring forth in never slackening supply.

The railway stations and all hoardings are made gorgeous by the

announcement of their feats set out in red and blue and yellow. No

sooner has one blaze of triumph burnt itself out than another blaze of

triumph flares up; and nothing but death or a rich inheritance seems

likely to stop their mysterious fecundity. How is it done? That is the

secret of the literary sphinx, to which the admiring and amazed

brotherhood is anxiously seeking some clue; but up to the present hour

it has been kept jealously guarded and no solution has been arrived

at.

There is another form of the literary sphinx in the Nobodies and Anons

who speak from out the darkness and let no man see whence the voice

proceeds. They are generally tracked to their lair sooner or later,

and the sphinx's head turns out to be only a pasteboard mask behind

which some well-known Apuleian hid himself for a while, working much

amazement among the wondering crowd while the clasps held good, but

losing something of that fervid worship when the reality became known.

Others, again, of these Anons have, like Junius, kept their true abode

hidden and their name a mystery still, though there be some who swear

they have traced the footsteps and know exactly where the sphinx

lives, and what is the name upon his frontlet, and of what race and

complexion he is without his mask. It may be so. But as every

discoverer has a track of his own, and as each swears that his sphinx

is the real one and no other, the choice among so many becomes a

service of difficulty; and perhaps the wisest thing to do is to

suspend judgment until the literary sphinx of the day chooses to

reveal himself by the prosaic means of a title-page, with his name as

author printed thereon and his place of abode jotted down at the foot

of the preface.