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The Somnambulists

*“’Tis only fools speak evil of the clay—
The very stars are made of clay like mine.”*

The mightiest and absurdest sleep-walker on the planet! Chained in the circle of his own imaginings, man is only too keen to forget his origin and to shame that flesh of his that bleeds like all flesh and that is good to eat. Civilization (which is part of the circle of his imaginings) has spread a veneer over the surface of the soft-shelled animal known as man. It is a very thin veneer; but so wonderfully is man constituted that he squirms on his bit of achievement and believes he is garbed in armor plate.

Yet man to-day is the same man that drank from his enemy's skull in the dark German forests, that sacked cities, and stole his women from neighboring clans like any howling aborigine. The flesh-and-blood body of man has not changed in the last several thousand years. Nor has his mind changed. There is no faculty of the mind of man to-day that did not exist in the minds of the men of long ago. Man has to-day no concept that is too wide and deep and abstract for the mind of Plato or Aristotle to grasp. Give to Plato or Aristotle the same fund of knowledge that man to-day has access to, and Plato and Aristotle would reason as profoundly as the man of to-day and would achieve very similar conclusions.

It is the same old animal man, smeared over, it is true, with a veneer, thin and magical, that makes him dream drunken dreams of self-exaltation and to sneer at the flesh and the blood of him beneath the smear. The raw animal crouching within him is like the earthquake monster pent in the crust of the earth. As he persuades himself against the latter till it arouses and shakes down a city, so does he persuade himself against the former until it shakes him out of his dreaming and he stands undisguised, a brute like any other brute.

Starve him, let him miss six meals, and see gape through the veneer the hungry maw of the animal beneath. Get between him and the female of his kind upon whom his mating instinct is bent, and see his eyes blaze like an angry cat's, hear in his throat the scream of wild stallions, and watch his fists clench like an orangoutan's. Maybe he will even beat his chest. Touch his silly vanity, which he exalts into high-sounding pride — call him a liar, and behold the red animal in him that makes a hand clutching that is quick like the tensing of a tiger's claw, or an eagle's talon, incarnate with desire to rip and tear.

It is not necessary to call him a liar to touch his vanity. Tell a plains Indian that he has failed to steal horses from the neighboring tribe, or tell a man living in bourgeois society that he has failed to pay his bills at the neighboring grocer's, and the results are the same. Each, plains Indian and bourgeois, is smeared with a slightly different veneer, that is all. It requires a slightly different stick to scrape it off. The raw animals beneath are identical.

But intrude not violently upon man, leave him alone in his somnambulism, and he kicks out from under his feet the ladder of life up which he has climbed, constitutes himself the centre

of the universe, dreams sordidly about his own particular god, and maunders metaphysically about his own blessed immortality.

True, he lives in a real world, breathes real air, eats real food, and sleeps under real blankets, in order to keep real cold away. And there's the rub. He has to effect adjustments with the real world and at the same time maintain the sublimity of his dream. The result of this admixture of the real and the unreal is confusion thrice confounded. The man that walks the real world in his sleep becomes such a tangled mass of contradictions, paradoxes, and lies that he has to lie to himself in order to stay asleep.

In passing, it may be noted that some men are remarkably constituted in this matter of self-deception. They excel at deceiving themselves. They believe, and they help others to believe. It becomes their function in society, and some of them are paid large salaries for helping their fellow-men to believe, for instance, that they are not as other animals; for helping the king to believe, and his parasites and drudges as well, that he is God's own manager over so many square miles of earth-crust; for helping the merchant and banking classes to believe that society rests on their shoulders, and that civilization would go to smash if they got out from under and ceased from their exploitations and petty pilferings.

Prize-fighting is terrible. This is the dictum of the man who walks in his sleep. He prates about it, and writes to the papers about it, and worries the legislators about it. There is nothing of the brute about *him*. He is a sublimated soul that treads the heights and breathes refined ether — in self-comparison with the prize-fighter. The man who walks in his sleep ignores the flesh and all its wonderful play of muscle, joint, and nerve. He feels that there is something godlike in the mysterious deeps of his being, denies his relationship with the brute, and proceeds to go forth into the world and express by deeds that something godlike within him.

He sits at a desk and chases dollars through the weeks and months and years of his life. To him the life godlike resolves into a problem something like this: *Since the great mass of men toil at producing wealth, how best can he get between the great mass of men and the wealth they produce, and get a slice for himself?* With tremendous exercise of craft, deceit, and guile, he devotes his life godlike to this purpose. As he succeeds, his somnambulism grows profound. He bribes legislatures, buys judges, "controls" primaries, and then goes and hires other men to tell him that it is all glorious and right. And the funniest thing about it is that this arch-deceiver believes all that they tell him. He reads only the newspapers and magazines that tell him what he wants to be told, listens only to the biologists who tell him that he is the finest product of the struggle for existence, and herds only with his own kind, where, like the monkey-folk, they teeter up and down and tell one another how great they are.

In the course of his life godlike he ignores the flesh — until he gets to table. He raises his hands in horror at the thought of the brutish prize-fighter, and then sits down and gorges himself on roast beef, rare and red, running blood under every sawing thrust of the implement called a knife. He has a piece of cloth which he calls a napkin, with which he wipes from his lips, and from the hair on his lips, the greasy juices of the meat.

He is fastidiously nauseated at the thought of two prize-fighters bruising each other with their fists; and at the same time, because it will cost him some money, he will refuse to protect the machines in his factory, though he is aware that the lack of such protection every year mangles, batters, and destroys out of all humanness thousands of working-men, women, and children. He will chatter about things refined and spiritual and godlike like himself, and he and the men who herd with him will calmly adulterate the commodities they put upon the market and which annually kill tens of thousands of babies and young children.

He will recoil at the suggestion of the horrid spectacle of two men confronting each other with gloved hands in the roped arena, and at the same time he will clamor for larger armies and larger navies, for more destructive war machines, which, with a single discharge, will disrupt and rip to pieces more human beings than have died in the whole history of prize-fighting. He will bribe a city council for a franchise or a state legislature for a commercial privilege; but he has never been known, in all his sleep-walking history, to bribe any legislative body in order to achieve any moral end, such as, for instance, abolition of prize-fighting, child-labor laws, pure food bills, or old age pensions.

“Ah, but we do not stand for the commercial life,” object the refined, scholarly, and professional men. They are also sleep-walkers. They do not stand for the commercial life, but neither do they stand against it with all their strength. They submit to it, to the brutality and carnage of it. They develop classical economists who announce that the only possible way for men and women to get food and shelter is by the existing method. They produce university professors, men who claim the *role* of teachers, and who at the same time claim that the austere ideal of learning is passionless pursuit of passionless intelligence. They serve the men who lead the commercial life, give to their sons somnambulistic educations, preach that sleep-walking is the only way to walk, and that the persons who walk otherwise are atavisms or anarchists. They paint pictures for the commercial men, write books for them, sing songs for them, act plays for them, and dose them with various drugs when their bodies have grown gross or dyspeptic from overeating and lack of exercise.

Then there are the good, kind somnambulists who don't prize-fight, who don't play the commercial game, who don't teach and preach somnambulism, who don't do anything except live on the dividends that are coined out of the wan, white fluid that runs in the veins of little children, out of mothers' tears, the blood of strong men, and the groans and sighs of the old. The receiver is as bad as the thief — ay, and the thief is finer than the receiver; he at least has the courage to run the risk. But the good, kind people who don't do anything won't believe this, and the assertion will make them angry — for a moment. They possess several magic phrases, which are like the incantations of a voodoo doctor driving devils away. The phrases that the good, kind people repeat to themselves and to one another sound like “abstinence,” “temperance,” “thrift,” “virtue.” Sometimes they say them backward, when they sound like “prodigality,” “drunkenness,” “wastefulness,” and “immorality.” They do not really know the meaning of these phrases, but they think they do, and that is all that is necessary for somnambulists. The calm repetition of such phrases invariably drives away the waking devils and lulls to slumber.

Our statesmen sell themselves and their country for gold. Our municipal servants and state legislators commit countless treasons. The world of graft! The world of betrayal! The world of somnambulism, whose exalted and sensitive citizens are outraged by the knockouts of the prize-ring, and who annually not merely knock out, but kill, thousands of babies and children by means of child labor and adulterated food. Far better to have the front of one's face pushed in by the fist of an honest prize-fighter than to have the lining of one's stomach corroded by the embalmed beef of a dishonest manufacturer.

In a prize-fight men are classed. A lightweight fights with a light-weight; he never fights with a heavy-weight, and foul blows are not allowed. Yet in the world of the somnambulists, where soar the sublimated spirits, there are no classes, and foul blows are continually struck and never disallowed. Only they are not called foul blows. The world of claw and fang and fist and club has passed away — so say the somnambulists. A rebate is not an elongated claw. A Wall Street raid is not a fang slash. Dummy boards of directors and fake accountings are not foul

blows of the fist under the belt. A present of coal stock by a mine operator to a railroad official is not a claw rip to the bowels of a rival mine operator. The hundred million dollars with which a combination beats down to his knees a man with a million dollars is not a club. The man who walks in his sleep says it is not a club. So say all of his kind with which he herds. They gather together and solemnly and gloatingly make and repeat certain noises that sound like “discretion,” “acumen,” “initiative,” “enterprise.” These noises are especially gratifying when they are made backward. They mean the same things, but they sound different. And in either case, forward or backward, the spirit of the dream is not disturbed.

When a man strikes a foul blow in the prize-ring the fight is immediately stopped, he is declared the loser, and he is hissed by the audience as he leaves the ring. But when a man who walks in his sleep strikes a foul blow he is immediately declared the victor and awarded the prize; and amid acclamations he forthwith turns his prize into a seat in the United States Senate, into a grotesque palace on Fifth Avenue, and into endowed churches, universities and libraries, to say nothing of subsidized newspapers, to proclaim his greatness.

The red animal in the somnambulist will out. He decries the carnal combat of the prize-ring, and compels the red animal to spiritual combat. The poisoned lie, the nasty, gossiping tongue, the brutality of the unkind epigram, the business and social nastiness and treachery of today — these are the thrusts and scratches of the red animal when the somnambulist is in charge. They are not the upper cuts and short arm jabs and jolts and slugging blows of the spirit. They are the foul blows of the spirit that have never been disbarred, as the foul blows of the prize-ring have been disbarred. (Would it not be preferable for a man to strike one full on the mouth with his fist than for him to tell a lie about one, or malign those that are nearest and dearest?)

For these are the crimes of the spirit, and, alas! they are so much more frequent than blows on the mouth. And whosoever exalts the spirit over the flesh, by his own creed avers that a crime of the spirit is vastly more terrible than a crime of the flesh. Thus stand the somnambulists convicted by their own creed — only they are not real men, alive and awake, and they proceed to mutter magic phrases that dispel all doubt as to their undiminished and eternal gloriousness.

It is well enough to let the ape and tiger die, but it is hardly fair to kill off the natural and courageous apes and tigers and allow the spawn of cowardly apes and tigers to live. The prize-fighting apes and tigers will die all in good time in the course of natural evolution, but they will not die so long as the cowardly, somnambulist apes and tigers club and scratch and slash. This is not a brief for the prize-fighter. It is a blow of the fist between the eyes of the somnambulists, teetering up and down, muttering magic phrases, and thanking God that they are not as other animals.

*Glen Ellen, California.
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