

“Faint Illuminations of the Unknowable”¹

or,

Three Anecdotes that were Sufficiently Revealed to Me²

1

The following story is copied³ out of the book of Margery Kempe, Ancess of Lynn,⁴ the 15th century English figure⁵ who wept like a regular fountain⁶ and liked to sleep of nights⁷ with a virgin on either side of her.⁸

She tells of a man who once⁹ sat under a pear tree in an old-fashioned garden and¹⁰ fell asleep. When he awoke, the first object that presented was a¹¹ full-grown knife-tooth bear, standing as he does more than twice as tall as a man,¹² eating all the pears up.¹³

¹ James Wideman Lee, *The Making of a Man* (1892)

² Madame de Montespan, *Memoirs of Madame la Marquise de Montespan, Vol. 7* (1899)

³ Mary E. Kelton, “Inductive Method in Geography” from *New York Teachers’ Monographs, Vol. 2* (1899)

⁴ S. C., “Norfolk and Its Mystics” from *The Theosophical Quarterly, Vol. 22* (1924)

⁵ “WES-WHE” from *Handy Lists of Technical Literature* (1889)

⁶ Georgette Leblanc [Alexander Teixeira de Mattos], *The Blue Bird for Children: The Wonderful Adventures of Tyltyl and Mytyl in Search of Happiness* (1913)

⁷ Lord Hobhouse, “On the Jury System” from *The Imperial and Asiatic Quarterly Review and Oriental and Colonial Record* (1893)

⁸ “Sir Everard de Crowle: A Tale of the Thirteenth Century” from *Catholic Progress, Vol. 2* (1873)

⁹ “Probate Confiscation” from *The Albany Law Journal, Vol. 19* (1879)

¹⁰ Mary C. Roberts, “Letter to the Editor” from *G. F. S. A. Associates’ Record* (August 1912)

¹¹ Mr. Jonathan Wells, “Account of the Fall Fight which occurred near Connecticut river, May 18, 1676” from *Collections, Historical and Miscellaneous, and Monthly Literary Journal, Vol. 1* (1831)

¹² Geoff St. Reynard, “Beyond the Fearful Forest” from *Imagination Stories of Science and Fantasy* (April 1951)

¹³ E. L. S. Puffer, “A High Minded Rat” from *Youth: An Illustrated Monthly Magazine for Boys and Girls* (1905)

The man watched him, still motionless.¹⁴ You bet he was scared! And¹⁵ then the bear turned around, and looked back—and started to¹⁶ actually evacuate his bowels, so that¹⁷ an endless stream of black lava¹⁸ came gushing out upon the ground.¹⁹

The meaning of this was all plain enough:²⁰ the tree was the man,²¹ bear his sin,²² and fruit his heart.²³

Or something like that.²⁴ To tell the truth, I don't understand it myself.²⁵ I am not a very religious man.²⁶ I was baptized by a Methodist preacher²⁷ but never believed in God at all.²⁸ I just love animals. Don't you?²⁹ Something like 70 percent³⁰ of them have died since³¹ our parents were born³²—and they are dead, too.³³

Our parents, I mean. Parents in general;³⁴ parents in particular, too.³⁵

¹⁴ Charles Alden Seltzer, *The Boss of the Lazy Y* (1915)

¹⁵ Ernest Poole, *His Family* (1916)

¹⁶ Paul Radin, "Ojibwa Ethnological Chit-Chat" from *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 26 (1924)

¹⁷ Bernard Glueck, *Studies in Forensic Psychiatry* (1916)

¹⁸ A. M. Hartley, *The Academic Speaker, a System of Elocution* (1846)

¹⁹ Homer [Samuel Butler], *The Iliad, Book IV*

²⁰ Fred M. White, *The Corner House* (1906)

²¹ Jeremiah Curtin and J. N. B. Hewitt, *Seneca Fiction, Legends, and Myths* (1911)

²² Horace Bushnell, *Sermons on Christ and Salvation* (1886)

²³ Asvaghosha Bodhisattva [Dharmaraksha and Samuel Beal], *Life of Buddha* (420/1900)

²⁴ James Joyce, "The Dead" from *Dubliners* (1914)

²⁵ Anton Chekhov [Julius West], "The Cherry Orchard: A Comedy in Four Acts" from *Plays by Anton Chekhov, Second Series* (1912)

²⁶ Gustave Aimard [Lascelles Wraxall], *The Buccaneer Chief: A Romance of the Spanish Main* (1864)

²⁷ Jediah Vincent Huntington, *The Forest* (1852)

²⁸ Voltaire, "Eucharist" from *A Philosophical Dictionary*, Vol. 4 (1901)

²⁹ "The Alleged Humorists" from *The Argonaut*, Vol. 80 (1917)

³⁰ Lucius E. Fuller, "Doors, Sash and General Millwork Review" from *Lumber World Review*, Vol. 30 (1916)

³¹ Joseph Conrad, *Notes on Life & Letters* (1905)

³² J. F. and A. H. Chamberlain, *Europe: A Supplementary Geography* (1927)

³³ Friedrich Spielhagen [trans. Schele de Vere], *Problematic Characters: A Novel* (1870)

³⁴ Rev. M. Sanford, "Duty of Parents—A Dialogue" from *The Gospel Teacher*, Vol. 7 (1846)

³⁵ Alexander Marjoribanks, *Travels in New South Wales* 91847)

Very different, but also of great value, was the service rendered by Elias Howe of sewing machine fame.³⁶

Howe was not the first man to think of a sewing machine. However, he was the first man to make a sewing machine work.³⁷ He began with failure:³⁸ he first tried a double-ended needle with an eye in the center, and tried it for a whole year before becoming convinced that the device never would do.³⁹ He failed so badly that his character and his name as⁴⁰ an inventor was done.⁴¹

And then he had a dream so clear it seemed like reality.

He dreamt that⁴² he was a prisoner in the hands of⁴³ a treacherous king who, curious to see what⁴⁴ the inventor had in mind,⁴⁵ gave him just 24 hours to take himself and all his belongings⁴⁶ and make a sewing machine.⁴⁷ He worked through the night, in a stillness broken only by the crowing of a rooster in some distant farmyard and the sputtering of the lamp;⁴⁸ he had failed, and the⁴⁹ guards were coming to escort him to⁵⁰ the public execution, when⁵¹ he noticed their spears had eyes near the point.⁵²

“I must thread my needle at the end,” he said when he awoke and grasped the symbol.⁵³

³⁶ “Inventor of the Sewing Machine” from *The Mentor, Vol.1: Great American Inventors* (1910)

³⁷ “Napoleon Sought It” from *The Sentinel, Vol. 14* (1918)

³⁸ William Henry Hadow, *The Viennese Period* (1904)

³⁹ “Real Builders of America: Elias Howe, Inventor of the Sewing Machine, His Struggles and Disappointments and Success” from *The Valve World* (1909)

⁴⁰ “Reply to Horace White, 5—Baltimore” from *California Banker’s Magazine, Vol. 9* (1894)

⁴¹ F. L. Wallace, “The Music Master” from *Imagination Stories of Science and Fantasy* (December 1952)

⁴² “The Discontented Boy” from *The Churchman’s Monthly Magazine, Vol. 5* (1858)

⁴³ Lewis Collins, *Historical Sketches of Kentucky* (1847)

⁴⁴ “Places of Interest in Korea: Kang Wha” from *Korea Review, Vol. 5* (1905)

⁴⁵ Emanuel Halderman-Julius, *The Fun I Get Out of Life* (1927)

⁴⁶ “People” from *Time, Vol. 8* (1926)

⁴⁷ U. S. Congress Committee on Patents, *History of the Patent System* (1912)

⁴⁸ Rose Wilder Lane, *Henry Ford’s Own Story: How a Farmer Boy Rose to the Power That Goes With Many Millions, Yet Never Lost Touch With Humanity* (1917)

⁴⁹ “Supplementary Despatches of the Duke of Wellington” from *The Saturday Review, Vol. 14* (1862)

⁵⁰ Agnes Strickland, *Lives of the Queens of England* (1865)

⁵¹ Gerald Friedlander, *The Jewish Fairy Book* (1920)

⁵² “Napoleon Sought It” from *The Sentinel, Vol. 14* (1918)

⁵³ Katherine Taylor Craig, *The Fabric of Dreams: Dream Lore and Dream Interpretation, Ancient and Modern* (1918)

Sometimes dreams are so self-serving in character that they appear, to an outsider, to have been concocted as an excuse.⁵⁴ I myself have dreamed much foolish stuff in time.⁵⁵ When I was ten years old I⁵⁶ dreamed the solution to algebraic and geometric problems⁵⁷ in a game about⁵⁸ catching pocket⁵⁹ monsters and fighting them,⁶⁰ and when I was twenty years old⁶¹ I dreamed there was a devil prowling about the⁶² bedroom, asking for help—his scalp was bleeding, his face cut, and his clothes torn.⁶³ When I turned thirty-three years of age, the⁶⁴ age Jesus was when he was crucified,⁶⁵ I dreamed of my father, who⁶⁶ shot himself just above the right temple⁶⁷ on a hot summer day in the eventide.⁶⁸

I try not to dream. I cook and I garden—I sew and knit—I study and read.⁶⁹ Dreams are just memories of events that happen to us or to persons known to us, and they have no special hidden meaning.⁷⁰ In our ignorance of the true connection of events we are as easily misled as led.⁷¹ “I should like,” adds Dr. Alonzo Bemis, “to correct an error which has found its way into the press on many occasions—that is: the idea of the needle came to Elias Howe in a dream. Mr.

⁵⁴ William Otterbein Krohn, *In Borneo Jungles: Among the Dyak Headhunters* (1927)

⁵⁵ Johann Musaus, “The Goblin Barber” from *Short Stories, Vol. 5* (1891)

⁵⁶ Gil R. Stormont, *History of Gibson County, Indiana: Her People, Industries and Institutions, with Biographical Sketches of Representative Citizens and Genealogical Records of Many of the Old Families* (1914)

⁵⁷ E. W. Bohannon, “A Study of Peculiar and Exceptional Children” from *The Pedagogical Seminary, Vol. 4* (1896)

⁵⁸ Walter Frank Cobb, *Graded Outlines in Hygiene* (1924)

⁵⁹ Frank C. Pellett, “To Kill or Not To Kill: Mr. Taxpayer Should Look Into the Bounty Question” from *The Country Gentleman, Vol. 81* (1916)

⁶⁰ Zane Grey, *Tales of Swordfish and Tuna* (1927)

⁶¹ “The Florida Pirate” from *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine, Vol. 9* (1821)

⁶² John Moray Stuart-Young, *The Coaster at Home: Being the Autobiography of Jack O’Dazi, Palm Oil Ruffian and Trader Man of the River Niger* (1916)

⁶³ John Henry Wigmore, *A Pocket Code of the Rules of Evidence in Trials at Law* (1910)

⁶⁴ Anthony M. Rud, “A Square of Canvas” from *Weird Tales, Vol. 1* (1923)

⁶⁵ Andrew Reid, *Israel’s Shepherd* (1820)

⁶⁶ Wilhelm Stekel, *Conditions of Nervous Anxiety and Their Treatment* (1923)

⁶⁷ “He Came to Butte” from *The Michigan Miner, Vol. 3* (1900)

⁶⁸ Thomas de Witt Talmage, *Old Wells Dug Out* (1875)

⁶⁹ “Stray Leaves From my Heart-book” from *North Carolina University Magazine, Vol. 3* (1855)

⁷⁰ L. R. Geissler, “The Psychology of Dreams” from *The High School Quarterly, Vol. 1* (1912)

⁷¹ John Bascom, “A Sober Mind” from *The Bricklayer, Mason and Plasterer, Vol. 14* (1910)

Howe was too much of a Yankee to place any dependence in dreams and the needle idea was worked out by careful thought and countless experiments.”⁷²

I try not to dream anymore.⁷³

3

The other day I was riding down to the City Hall in a pretty crowded car when something happened.⁷⁴

We all felt it at once.⁷⁵ We looked at each other, and looked at the mountains, and looked at the sun, and looked at each other again, and laughed, and then looked blue.⁷⁶

“Anyone else feel that?”⁷⁷

What did we feel?⁷⁸ It felt like—like nothing much. Like the twinge of a mild electric shock.⁷⁹ Whatever had happened—and perhaps it was very little, after all—had happened not because but in spite of⁸⁰ the chance meeting of strangers⁸¹ on a city bus some mild autumnal day.⁸² Here sits an editor, hastily putting together the thoughts that will form tomorrow’s leader;⁸³ here a woman with a dog on a lead.⁸⁴ A father and his two daughters,⁸⁵ fighting each other for the

⁷² “Elias Howe, Jr., Inventor of the Sewing Machine: A Centennial Address” from *Publications of the Cambridge Historical Society* (1917)

⁷³ “Another Dog of War” from *Punch: or, The London Charivari, Vol. 148* (1915)

⁷⁴ George Niblo, *Atchoo! Sneezes from a Hilarious Vaudevillian* (1903)

⁷⁵ *The Reader’s Digest, Vol. 71* (1922)

⁷⁶ Howard Hinton, *School Days at Mount Pleasant* (1871)

⁷⁷ Ralph Henry Barbour, *The Junior Trophy* (1913)

⁷⁸ Hugh Walpole, *Katherine Christian* (1944)

⁷⁹ Cordwainer Smith, “the Game of Rat and Dragon” from *Galaxy Science Fiction* (October 1955)

⁸⁰ Beatrice Kean Seymour, *Invisible Tides* (1921)

⁸¹ Richard Burton, *Three of a Kind* (1908)

⁸² “The Queen’s New Subject” from *Judy, Vol. 41* (1887)

⁸³ Josiah Gilbert Holland, *Gold-foil: Hammered from Popular Proverbs* (1866)

⁸⁴ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (1928)

⁸⁵ J. H. Stickney, *Aesop’s Fables: A Version for Young Readers* (1915)

last⁸⁶ piece of chocolate (half a bar),⁸⁷ next to a student whose face⁸⁸ is buried in a book.⁸⁹ We were simply people who had tumbled together in a real wish to⁹⁰ live to see another sunrise⁹¹ and in doing so experienced a very actual nervous relief,⁹² an actual sense of motion, like something growing, and a sensation as inexplicable as it was⁹³ sweetly familiar—and so humanly dear that the very street⁹⁴ seemed to be winking at us.

It is a strange thing how love affects different people.⁹⁵ It's like something you'd read of in a book and say it was probably exaggerated,⁹⁶ one of those absurd fantastic novels that people write nowadays when half the characters are⁹⁷ on the verge of some great revelation that never came.⁹⁸ I've been looking everywhere for it⁹⁹ since my father's death and¹⁰⁰ have been finding it mighty hard to get.¹⁰¹ I see it as light,¹⁰² as an illumination,¹⁰³ something just past the corner of my eye, over my shoulder, and I sit very still sometimes, trying to take it off its guard,¹⁰⁴ only to lose it completely within a few seconds.¹⁰⁵

⁸⁶ "Correspondence: Chicago" from *The Electrical Engineer*, Vol. 10 (1890)

⁸⁷ Alfred Binet, *The Development of Intelligence in Children* (1916)

⁸⁸ Mrs. Bryson, *Fred C. Roberts of Tientsin: or, For Christ and China* (1895)

⁸⁹ Jules Verne [trans. N. D'Anvers], *Celebrated Travels and Travellers* (1881)

⁹⁰ Edward Everett Hale, *Memories of a Hundred Years* (1904)

⁹¹ Justin H. McCarthy, *The Proud Prince* (1903)

⁹² Amelia E. Barr, *The Paper Cap: A Story of Love and Labor* (1918)

⁹³ Absalom Martin, *Kastle Krag: A Story of Mystery* (1921)

⁹⁴ Kate Douglas Wiggin, *Penelope's Progress* (1897)

⁹⁵ S. R. Crockett, *The Men of the Moss-Hags* (1895)

⁹⁶ Augusta Huiell Seaman, *The Slipper Point Mystery* (1919)

⁹⁷ Sir Hugh Walpole, *The Duchess of Wrexe: Her Decline and Death* (1914)

⁹⁸ J. D. Beresford, *The Wonder* (1917)

⁹⁹ D. S. Maddox, *The Man from Arizona: A Farce in One Act* (1912)

¹⁰⁰ Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, "Preface" from *The Watcher and Other Weird Stories* (1894)

¹⁰¹ E. F. Ladd, "Should Food Executives Pass Upon the Legal Sufficiency of Labels for the Information of Manufacturer or Dealer?" from *The American Food Journal*, Vol. 7 (1912)

¹⁰² Grace Kinckle Adams, "An Experimental Study of Memory Color and Related Phenomena" from *The American Journal of Psychology*, Vol. 34 (1923)

¹⁰³ Mr. E. Leavenworth Elliott, "Illuminating Engineering and Its Application to the Gas Industry" from *The American Gas Light Journal*, Vol. 95 (1911)

¹⁰⁴ Oliver Onions, *Widdershins* (1911)

¹⁰⁵ Muriel Whitbeck Brown, *A Study of Reading Ability in Preschool Children* (1924)

Was that what we felt¹⁰⁶ on the bus that night?¹⁰⁷ The kind of love that only shows itself¹⁰⁸ as an afterimage of the light?¹⁰⁹ Love, noiseless and unchangeable,¹¹⁰ moving through our atmosphere with the velocity of¹¹¹ meteor flying through the air—and like a meteor leaving earth and earthly things behind,¹¹² leaving us wrecked in its wake,¹¹³ confused and disturbed and wild with a longing¹¹⁴ for each other, for all eternity?¹¹⁵

Doesn't it seem like that is what it was?¹¹⁶

And if it wasn't then¹¹⁷ I guess I'll just have to go along as always,¹¹⁸ searching for nothing in particular but everything,¹¹⁹ and finding everything in such perfect order—¹²⁰human beings going off by themselves at great distances from the¹²¹ sun, which causes them to grow by accumulating its heat in them,¹²² earth spinning and whirling around in the air¹²³—that it's all I can do to hang on¹²⁴ to the edge of the planet's face¹²⁵ without flying off into the realms of the

¹⁰⁶ Germ. Strasburgh, "Notice sur Edouard Ruppel, &c. Some Account of Edward Ruppel and of his Journey into the Interior of Africa" from *The London Literary Gazette*, Vol. (1829)

¹⁰⁷ E. Temple Thurston, *Sally Bishop: A Romance* (1909)

¹⁰⁸ Oliver Madox Hueffer, *Needles and Pins* (1924)

¹⁰⁹ Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (1897)

¹¹⁰ Margaret Deland, *The Wisdom of Fools* (1897)

¹¹¹ "Shooting Stars and Meteoric Showers" from *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, Vol. 1 (1850)

¹¹² *The Woodbury Papers* (1840)

¹¹³ Mary Heaton Vorse, "Jimmie and the Red Cross Drive" from *Woman's Home Companion*, Vol. 45 (1918)

¹¹⁴ Dan T. Moore, "The Double Spy" from *Amazing Stories* (March 1954)

¹¹⁵ Robert Andrew Arthur, "The Indulgence of Negu Mah" from *Comet* (July 1941)

¹¹⁶ Brent of Bin Bin, *Ten Creeks Run* (1930)

¹¹⁷ George O. Smith, *Hellflower* (1953)

¹¹⁸ "Letter Box" from *The Ark*, Vol. 7 (1917)

¹¹⁹ Edward P. Guild, "Christopher Gault—A Story" from *The Bay State Monthly*, Vol. 3 (1885)

¹²⁰ Mrs. Pulling, "A Mother's Duties" from *The Mother's Magazine and Family Circle*, Vol. 42 (1874)

¹²¹ "The Charms of Nativity" from *Catholic World*, Vol. 9 (1869)

¹²² Amédée Guillemin, *The Sun* (1870)

¹²³ "Geography for Beginners" from *School and Home Education*, Vol. 10 (1890)

¹²⁴ Beth B. Gilchrist, "The Disciplining of Evelyn" from *The Youth's Companion*, Vol. 95 (1921)

¹²⁵ R. J. Mann, "Occultation of Jupiter, observed at Ventnor" from *Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society* (1857)

infinite,¹²⁶ where my father is waiting for me,¹²⁷ and where love makes the silence vibrant with revelation.¹²⁸

¹²⁶ Conrad Wesselhoeft, "The Promotion of Homeopathy" from *The North American Journal of Homeopathy*, Vol. 52 (1904)

¹²⁷ Carlo Collodi [trans. Ezekiah Butterworth], *Pinocchio's Adventures in Wonderland* (1898)

¹²⁸ "Editorial: A Prayer at Communion" from *The Christian Century*, Vol. 37 (1920)