

AGAINST INANIMATE OBJECTS.

THE title of this paper is not one of those enigmatical ones which I perceive to be so fashionable now-a-days, wherein a riddle, as it were, is propounded to the Reader at the very commencement, which may or may not be resolved by the time he has perused the entire essay. When I say Inanimate Objects, I do not refer, for instance, to plain and phlegmatic females, although a good deal might with reason be written against *them* beside Mr. Bailey's pardonable though scarcely chivalrous aspiration: 'I wish I was behind you with a brad-awl!' I simply mean Things without Life—artificial ones only, for I know better than to find fault with Nature's handiwork—which arouse the passion of anger in the human breast with greater frequency than even the conduct of Boys themselves.

For example, I am about to seal a letter, for I am one of those old-fashioned persons who still use wax, and object to sear my tongue with patent gum and the backs of postage-stamps until it becomes as glutinous as an ant eater's: well, I have just placed the seal at the left-hand corner of my desk, and have dropped the wax in a fine oval upon the envelope; all is prepared for the impression of my family arms, a Tortoise passant over a Hare couchant, and the motto *Patientia vincit omnia*; when—hey presto—the seal is gone! I put it there—*there*, in that left corner, not a moment ago (I will take my Bible oath of it), and now it's gone! I am not a passionate man, goodness knows; I don't think anybody ever heard a profane expression escape my lips; but when I am quite alone, and these sort of things occur, I use a Formula. Surely my readers must have suffered again and again from this extraordinary and magical disappearance of Inanimate Objects, and will admit the necessity of some safety-valve for the feelings in such a case. I know a most respectable old lady, the widow of a Doctor of Divinity, who, when 'put out,' always invokes the northern counties of England—Northumberland, Cumberland, Westmoreland, and Durham—magnificent names, with a slightly blasphemous ring about them, and I recommend ladies of hasty temper to take a leaf out of her book. For myself, however, I confess that shibboleth is not sufficiently powerful, and I use another mixture, equally innocent, but of a more satisfying kind.

But this seal, and how it has got away? *Mis-laid itself*, you know; for that's what it comes to, and no less—how can we explain it? 'Here to-day, and gone to-morrow,' is a startling statement with respect to human mortality; but how can it compare with 'Here this instant, and gone the next,' as has happened to my seal? The seal is said to be rather like a human creature, but no analogy can be founded on that circumstance; for if had been a pencil-case, or a bit of blotting-paper, or an inch of Indian ink, the same thing is just as likely to have occurred. The sudden and mysterious disappearance of Inanimate Objects is a matter that has never yet been properly handled. We are all aware that they do disappear, instantaneously, unaccountably, and oftentimes as irrecoverably as though they had been magnetically attracted to the centre of the earth; but the explanation of the phenomenon has never been attempted. Perhaps the philosophers secretly shrink from grappling with a circumstance so weird and supernatural; and I must acknowledge that the belief in the influence of demons in small domestic mischances (still common among the Irish peasantry) is hereby afforded no little excuse. Don't tell me that we ourselves mislay the articles in question, and have forgotten where we placed them, for such an explanation is simply an insult to your fellow creatures. As for that seal, you might just as well endeavour to persuade me that I could mislay my hand or my foot. Yes, I am aware that I am near-sighted; and a nice, gentlemanly, agreeable person you are to remind folks of their physical imperfections—but I can see a yard all round me (except of course behind), and much more ten inches and a half, which is the exact visual distance to the left-hand corner of my desk, where I placed that

seal. Pooh, pooh. Of course I know the particular disadvantage under which I labour. Often and often, have I gone about with my spectacles pushed up on my forehead, in the utmost fume and fury, because they were not in their case, nor anywhere else where I looked for them; my Formula itself was scarcely adequate to those terrible occasions; I have sat down—I confess it—and stamped with irritation to think that some of those Boys (my nephews) had carried off my spectacles, and would probably bring them back, if they brought them back at all, with only one glass. But it is not to such exceptional misadventures that I here allude. I am speaking of the sufferings that all of us, whether blind or not, endure from Inanimate Objects.

Still confining myself to the subject of their disappearance, what words can paint the desolation that seizes the human soul upon finding, in a strange house where one is a guest for the first time, and when the second dinner-bell is just on the point of ringing, that there is no button to the collar of one's embroidered shirt. This deficiency can scarcely be called unexpected, for washerwomen are the natural enemies of mankind, and are always doing them injuries, either of this sort, or through unpunctuality and iron-mould; but the dreadful consequences of the thing make up, and more for the absence of that one element of horror—Surprise. We have dressed, with the exception of coat and waistcoat, in entire ignorance of our loss, and only discover it as we prepare to affix our shirt-collar to the treacherous band. If it had been any other button of the shirt that was missing, an erect position, and the hand artistically placed over the spot, would have carried us through the evening without discovery; but the collar-button is the very seat and principle of existence as respects costume, without which there is no such thing as being dressed at all. No; there is nothing for it but the taking everything off again (including those exquisite studs, which took five minutes apiece to put in one's shirt-front without creasing), and the Formula for those who have one. If one, who has no such innocent safety-valve, is led to use 'a few cursory observations,' as struggling to disembarass himself of his garments, like Hercules with the shirt of Nessus, he pictures to himself the assembled guests below, and his punctual host standing, watch in hand, with his back to the drawing-room-fire, let us hope that the Recording Angel will take the excessive provocation into account, and, as in the case of Uncle Toby, obliterate the accusing words with a pitying tear.

Another rather trying position in which one is apt to be placed when away from home, and without one's wife, is the not being able to part one's hair. Love, they say, is like a Wig, because *the worst of it is the Parting*; but the same may be also said of one's own hair, and especially of that portion of it at the back of one's head. Some men don't part their hair at all, and others have none to part; but those, perhaps over neat and precise folks, who like myself, make a practice of doing so, will bear me out in the statement that there are few Inanimate Objects with which a man is more apt to get in a passion than with his Comb. It does its mission, with respect to that straight white furrow, well enough, so long as its progress can be watched in the glass, and when coming home (if I may say so) under one's own eye; but at the top of the head, and still worse, behind it, you feel that its course has been erratic in the extreme. In vain, you turn your head round swiftly in hopes to catch the reflection of the back of it in the mirror before it has time to fade away. The comb is taken in hand, and blindly guided, hither and thither, until, with a hideous ejaculation, you dash it to the ground, and knock three or four of its teeth out. To ask the lady of the house, or even the chambermaid, to be so good as to part one's hair for one, is a thing we seldom venture to do.

An umbrella that won't open, is another trial to the temper; a sharp shower sets in, and you find this whalebone apparatus not a *bit* more useful than a walking-stick, until, just as the

sun comes out, you burst open the refractory contrivance with violence, and half the ribs fly through the silk. If you think you will ever shut it again after *that*, you are very much mistaken.

When you hire an open carriage, your modesty will probably induce you to take the back-seat: now, that back-seat, which sticks up very well of itself, will, now that you have begun to lean against it, obstinately endeavour to fall forward; it keeps tapping against your shoulders with the persistency of that famous drop of water that formed so cheap and popular a torture with the Holy Inquisition, and will drive you almost as frantic. Now, why does this happen, I should like to know?

When you are "driving yourself," as the phrase goes, and you benevolently endeavour to flick a fly off your horse's ear, what a sad affair it is to find your whip-lash fast in the harness. You might have tried to hitch it there ten thousand times, and would have failed; but now, if you had got out, and tied it, it could not be more securely fastened. You can't leave the vehicle, because the horse won't let you get in again; but although a notorious runaway, he now begins to crawl as though he were in the shafts of a one-horse hearse, for he knows that you can't give him the whip because you have given it to him already.

A fishing-line hitched in a tree is also a situation likely to evoke the Formula.

A cab-window that you cannot quite close, even though it rains, for fear of being suffocated, and from the reflection that several patients bound for the hospital may have recently ridden in it, is a very objectionable Inanimate Object when there is no button (and there never is) to hold the window-strap. You have to keep it in your hand as though you were deep-sea fishing, and do so until you are nearing your destination, when, looking round for your traps, you forget all about it, and suddenly leave go of your slippery charge; then the window falls to the bottom of its receptacle, and is smashed to atoms.

There are some Inanimate Objects which awaken other sensations than those of irritation or anger, such as Roasted Apples, which instantly suggest powders, and give one an attack of the shivers; and Cold Water, which reminds one, by a twitter in the small of the back, of taking pills; but these are rather foreign to the subject of this paper. To come suddenly with a tender tooth, as one is eating game, upon a large round shot (such as are used in fowling-pieces of course; not canon), is to anticipate, if I may say so, the Destruction of the Universe. For a moment, besides the complete disintegration of one's own private physical economy, the End of the World seems really to have arrived! It is far worse than ice-pudding, which, as we all know, caused poor Sir Alured Denne to use such sad language, after having promised St. Romwald never to swear again:

Astonishment, horror, distraction of mind,
Rage, misery, fear, and iced pudding—combined!
Lip, forehead, and cheek—how these mingle and meet,
All colours, all hues, now advance, now retreat.
Now pale as a turnip, now crimson as beet!
How he grasps his arm-chair in attempting to rise,
See his veins how they swell! mark the roll of his eyes!
Now east, and now west, now north, and now south,
Till at last he contrives to eject from his mouth
That vile spoonful—what
He has got he knows not;
He isn't quite sure if it's cold or it's hot;
At last he exclaims, 'as he starts from his seat:
A snow-ball, by — what I decline to repeat.

For Sir Alured, poor fellow, was unacquainted with the Formula.

Nothing else save the few little things which I have mentioned ever ruffles the naturally smooth cur—cur—cur—current of my tem—tem —. If there is one Inanimate Object in this world which excites my indignation and fury beyond endurance, it is a steel pen that won't write, and *I have got hold of one now*. I have tried him forwards, and I have tried him backwards; I have coaxed him, and given him ink enough for ten pens; and now, I have dashed his points against the desk, and broken them both, and I feel a little better. Excuse, Mr. Printer, my setting down these few words in pencil.