POOR DOCUMENT

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THE FACTS

By Maarten Martens.

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In the first place I am not insane, nor am I a neuropath, or whatever the thing is called; my hand is as steady and my eye as unjaundiced as yours. The doctor has just been with me again, and he assures me I have not even any latent nervous symptoms. He has knocked my knees to see the leg go up and felt my spine and made me close my eyes and has done all their little tricks for discovering functional disturbances of the nervous centres. As for my pulse, it is that of a thoroughly healthy man, and I have never in my life had palpitations—not even in these last weeks; which is strange. My heart must be exceptionally strong.

If, therefore, you seize at the facile, glib explanation of deranged eyesight—something wrong with the liver, etcetera—the things people say so easily when they want to get away from the facts, then you may just as well not read my story at all. It can have no interest for you. The usual eyesight" theory is especially absurd in my case, as you will soon perceive if you read on. Of course my brain may be "deranged" somehow in a manner hitherto unknown to the faculty. "I can't look into your brain," says the doctor, being quite at a loss what to say. "Do you often suffer from headache?" No, I don't remember when I last had a headache. And if he had looked into my brain, what would he have found there? I might have known it would be quite useless to send for the doctor. I was anxious not to send for him. I kept my secret to myself as long as I possibly could. If I sent for him at last it was chiefly to break the abnormal tension of not sending. I was resolved to be rational in all things, and therefore I asked him to come.

It was on the 17th of June, exactly ten days ago, that the thing began. I was sitting in my garden, after luncheon. The day was hot, but not extravagantly so; the sky was blue, and the garden lay in a blaze of brilliant sunshine. It is a peaceful, old world garden, a great square of French tracery in box curves and flourishes on red gravel in the curiously fictitious style of Versailles, set in a brilliantly colored flowering border of today. The two mingle well, the prim design and the girdle of shrubs and woods, with the old brick house, gabled, at the further end. In the middle is a sundial; at the top stands a half circle of stone gods and goddesses looking away toward the house. Behind these I sat, as I often do, on one of the carved white seats, looking also away, tranquilly, across the tranquil gardens toward the tranquil house. The whole place seemed contentedly asleep. A few white doves fluttered down into the open space and strutted about among the box in the red gravel.

Suddenly I became aware that I was not alone; at what moment or in what exact circumstances I could not tell. But I was no longer alone, and I knew it.

A vague presence had taken possession of the other side of my bench. I could see nothing; the full light of day was upon us, and yet I could see nothing, but it was impossible for me to deny that I was no longer alone. I looked dreamily askance, at the empty space beside me, then a little anxiously, then I laughed aloud. I laughed shrilly at my own foolish fancy. I laughed again and again, firmly resolved to laugh. At the noise I made the startled doves soared up and flew away. They sank and strutted on the further side of the open space. I could hear them gently cooing to one another. I was glad of the sound.

In the dead, sunlit silence I lay back and looked about me. I do not know why I looked, persistently gazing and glancing away, for, as I have already said, there was nothing to see. I got up and began slowly walking round the square. "When I get around," I said to myself, "I shall sit down again and the silly impression will be gone." As I turned the furthest corner I came behind the doves and inevitably drove them up before me. They fluttered away to the statues and the benches. One of them actually alighted on my seat. I held my breath. It rested on the arm where I had sat. If it walks along the seat to the other end, I thought, that will prove to me there is nothing there. Of course I knew it would not really prove more than my own eyes were proving already. Still, I felt irrationally that it would be a great relief to me to see the dove ignore my fancy. It would at least make me realize what a fool I had been. The bird hopped down on the seat and advanced a few steps on it. I held my breath. Then, suddenly, it rose on high and with a great flapping of wings it flew away, far away, into the air, over the roofs and turrets of the house. I followed it with my eyes. The others rose also and hurried after it, and I was left quite alone.

I tried to laugh again, but the laugh stuck in my throat. It seemed so stupid to stand laughing at nothing. So I began whistling, loudly and cheerfully, and so walked round, back to the immovable statues, and resolutely sat down.

I sat down on my former side. Of course I know I ought not to have done that: I ought to have sat down in the other corner, but I didn't. I couldn't. Yet I admit that had I been confident the silly delusion would prove dispelled. Even if it came back it would certainly be gone for the moment, just as it had been away all the time I walked. I had stood still on purpose by the sun dial, by some purple peonies. It had not been there.

Naturally it had not. For it had waited for me on the bench. I felt, though I could see nothing, that it was on the bench. It was seated there. How I could realize this, not seeing anything, I am unable to explain, but I knew it as certainly as that I am now writing here. I don't want to write. I would much rather stop and tear up what I have written. I am not usually shy of tearing up my own scribbling. I have frequently torn up long letters that it has caused me great satisfaction to indite. Perhaps when this whole miserable account is written I shall have the courage to tear it up. At any rate, I shall take good care that nobody can ever read it.

When I felt the thing there again I got up at once and walked away into the woods. As soon as I left the gardens behind me I felt an immense physical relief. It was as if a numbing weight had been taken off me—no, not off my head; the doctor immediately inquired that, of course—off my whole being. I walked with an elastic step. The weather was perfect; the woods, birch and fir, looked their loveliest. I flung myself down upon the moss, among the heather and lay there, lazily tranquillized, for a couple of hours. A cuckoo was calling almost incessantly. You get very tired of his note—some people do not, I believe—but there is no less a persistent fascination in it. It is the mystery of distance, the call from nowhere, that attracts you. You feel drawn away into immensity. You want to follow—a sentiment no other voice awakens, for which all other singing birds (and I suppose a cuckoo is some sort of singing bird; at any rate it can sing false) you want to remain. You are eager to follow, though you know you could never draw any nearer. You hardly know the direction; you can form no conception of the distance; you are only aware that the object would be quite unattainable. It is that consciousness, I suppose, which makes you yearn to undertake the quest—which draws you, draws you—against your will. If man could fly tomorrow he would soar into nothing till he dropped.

After a time the cuckoo's note sounded nearer, and then, presently, nearer again. The bird had advanced comparatively close to me, and yet, of course, it was as intangible as ever. You cannot trace the cuckoo, like another bird, to a copse, to a treetop. Its call seemed quite obtrusive at last, somewhere, all around me, iterative, a mockery, a challenge to come and see. It reminded me somehow, in its vagueness, of the formless presence from which I had fled. I cannot exactly define the connection, but it was none the less perceptible. I stood ped my ears, in the end, as the cry went on and on. The whole air seemed full of a shapeless voice. I steadied myself. This was nonsense. Seen or not, the song and the singer go together; we know the cuckoo, the big, impertinent bird. It is only because he is so loud that we hear him from a distance. Beside poetic vaporing there is nothing sentimental about the cuckoo at all.

I got up and resumed my walk, wandering gradually homeward. In the peaceful glint and shadow of these pine woods you hear but a stray finch or blackbird; they nest down yonder among the strawberries. I listened to the lingering cuckoo with pleasure. How soon a rational minded man rights his senses when he has allowed them, half asleep, to drift away with him! How soon he comes to a foolish fancy when it is a foolish fancy! I came back to the house on the other side, front and went up to dress for dinner. my brother-in-law's. I drove over there; it is four miles—and thoroughly enjoyed myself. I remember my sister-in-law Jane, who was also there, saying with frankness that family connections can be quite amusing when you choose so pleasantly:—"Do you know, you

Next morning I threw open my room windows and looked out on the familiar scene. The garden already wideawake in the brilliance of midsunshine. The impassive gods and goddesses stared across at me from the tant background. The stupid sky ered white.

I went down to breakfast and worked hard all the morning. I was glad to get right into the work, and I made progress. It was a novel I was writing, a story of low life. All the people behaved with a brutal frankness, developing themselves naturally, without oversensitive, not overvirtuous, but a good deal in them of the healthy animal. It was quite bracing to smell the farmyard about them, to hear them say common place, common sense things. I read my work over and was pleased with it. Then I went to lunch and a restful sleep.

After that, at about three, I strolled out for my usual look at the garden. It would have been not to go. My dog came up at the gate and of course I took him along with me. He always accompanies me in my walks and I cannot imagine where he spends the preceding day. I admit the house is far too big a one for me to live in all by myself since my wife died and only child, Marian, married.

But I am here during nine months of the year and I have a constant succession of guests all summer; my daughter comes to me in the autumn months. At this moment I happened to my only companion a few days, excepting my faithful servant, who has been with me all and is more than half a friend. In my crowded, cheerful existence I suffer from loneliness. I was glad of the rest; some people were at the end of the week.

I must confess that I dislike my daily route along the field. I called the dog back, to heel, and started in the opposite direction. I had a long walk together in the and I talked a great deal to him. He is a lumpy, liver colored bulldog of those monstrosities with the head of a Chinese dragon and the eyes of a Mercy. He sat looking at me full of reproach. We patronized various seats in the evening I went to a rustic wedding where were recitations and costumes and some of them unintentionally comic. I laughed till I cried.

That night I slept as the night before and, feeling in high spirits, I worked all the morning and finished the first part of my story. This puts one into a healthful state of mind for getting on with one's work. At one o'clock I went out and found Bob waiting for me. The day was very hot. We strolled down the flower walk with the sundial beside me. I talked to him about the seat and I sat down.

I am absolutely certain I thought the silly delusion would come back. There was no bravado or temptation in the action. I sat down, because I had considered myself and had continued to avoid that seat, the dog had run toward it!

But there was also the slightest doubt that the figure I call it a figure; what must I call it, my God, what does it matter—I call it!—it was there.

"It's a fancy!" I thought deliberately and looked unconscious at the brilliant poppies and irises, in masses of scarlet and pink. And I looked at the dog. He had crept half a dozen yards along the path and sat there, gazing at me. He had put his ears behind his head.

I spoke to him; I tried to attract him; usually he comes stumbling up at once; he came back. "Bob!" I said. "Bob! Come here, Bob! Come!" Very slowly he drew nearer. At that moment I felt I would have given almost anything to feel the contact of this dumb, live creature. I put my hands to my face and gathered the soft, cumbersome mass to my knees and cuddled it. It lay heavy, a heavy weight, and I realized how it was alive. I felt, warm, conscious, in living contact with myself. The dog put up his head against my face, tried to lick my face, and I could feel his heart beating, much faster than my own. I do not think I was frightened; I was chiefly vexed with myself, I think, put out, disturbed.

The dog whined once or twice, and I wished he would not do that. I looked askance at the "empty" side of the bench I could not keep away from it. Suddenly, with an angry exclamation at myself, I jumped the dog off my lap into the further corner.

He leaped, screaming, on the bench and fled down the pathway, his ears down, and his tail between his legs. He rushed straight ahead, making for the house. I have never heard a dog scream like that. His shrieks sounded through the stillness dying away as he ran round to the kitchen entrance and disappeared. I had sprung to my feet; I ran after him, calling, calling.

Then I stood still at the end of the path and looked back. The stone gods and goddesses looked toward me. The whole place was empty and silent. I shuddered from the top of my head to the soles of my feet.

I went and found the dog. He was lying in his basket in the basement shivering. He eyed me from under long-drawn lids, and as I came nearer he moaned. He moaned and shivered so dreadfully I had to leave him. He grew quieter, they said, when I was not there.

I sat down in my study, which looks out on the other side, across the green slopes of a deer park, and I tried to collect my senses. It was useless now to deny to myself that I had received a terrible shock. I could no longer doubt, as I had rightly doubted in the case of the pigeon, that my impression was not a purely subjective one, but was shared by other sentient creatures. Therefore I was face to face with some horrible, quite intangible, objective fact. What had the dog experienced when he came into contact physically, or psychically?—we all know how nervous these high strung "brute" organisms are—with—with what? Not with my delusion. That, at least, I must now admit, unwillingly, against myself. Not with my delusion. Again I shuddered. I told myself I must stop shuddering. I went into the lavatory and bathed my face and hands. Not that they were hot, but I thought it would steady them.

The people who are always ready to arrange everything will probably say that I should have taken another rational human being—perhaps they will say a rational human being—into my confidence and had it out at once. Had they been in my position they would not have done so, or if they had it is they who would have forfeited that qualification which a sane man clings to—rational. My servant, as I have said, is a thoroughly trustworthy domestic, with whom I live on terms of reasonable intimacy. He knows me (from hearsay) as a writer of unreadable novels and (from experience) as a fairly clear headed man of business. He respects me more than the average of valets. Personally, he is matter of fact, unromantic to a degree. Had I spoken to him of seeing things which were invisible he would have written me down at once, inevitably, permanently, as "afflicted." No evidence would have had any effect on his preconceived limitations. With all his good practical qualities he is uneducated, ignorant, prejudiced, like his class. He "doesn't believe in ghosts," thereby considering himself superior to "them as does," without the faintest conception what is, or might be, meant by the word.

Nevertheless I rang for him. I felt that, whatever happened, I must keep my experience to myself as long as I possibly could. But I must also try, if possible, to escape from it. I bade Carston bring his books, and I spent a couple of hours with him going over the accounts of the property, which I leave largely in his hands—the daily expenditure of the place, that is to say. There is nothing so steadying to a fancy smitten mind as figures. You cannot speculate and wonder about fifteen sucking pigs at eighteen shillings apiece. They must mean thirteen pounds ten. There is a cool certitude about them which makes you feel you have, mentally, touched terra firma again. The account books being closed, I drew the man out to the garden. I had formed a resolve to bring him to the spot and see what would happen. Of course I could not make him sit down in my presence. I didn't know myself. It was a blind impulse to attempt some escape. I said, rather wildly, "There is still something I want to"—and I led him on. But as he drew near to the actual spot my courage failed me. I felt that if he also, like the dog, recognized something, admitted something, turned vague evidence as it were against myself, I should go out of my mind. I was seized with a sick fear of proof. I had had no idea how much the incident with Bob had unhinged me. Anything—anything but fresh proof.

"Stop!" I said, standing still in the path, not ten yards from the seat; "I—I—want all this changed, Carston. I don't like it at all. I have wanted it altered for a long time, and now I've made up my mind to do it at once. These two seats don't look well here at all behind the statues. I shall make a new drawing, a design for a background. Meanwhile have the seats removed at once. I shall be able to get a better impression when they're gone."

The man looked at me in veiled amazement. The seats have always been there, against a yew hedge, cut square—not, fortunately, fitting into niches, for then my suggestion would have been too Palpably absurd. I read his thought like an open book. The spot has ever been a favorite one. Many an hour have I spent there, with my wife at my side. He knows I was passionately attached to her. It is now a little more than a year since she died, and he, like all those about me, has seen me sitting there, day by day, alone. Evidently a doubt crossed his brain whether I was weary of the reminiscene—whether, perchance, thought of remarriage——

"I'll have them removed sir," he said.

"At once."

"Do you mean tonight, sir?"

"No, no, tomorrow morning will do." I turned away impatiently. I dined by myself. I did not sleep well, being restless.

Next morning the seats were carried away to the outhouse. "Would you wish them placed elsewhere, sir?" Carson had inquired. I said, "Store them." I sent a note to the curate asking him to come and dine, as I often did—no need for a reply. I sat down at a quarter-past seven without him. I had worked and walked a good deal, and the removal of the seats had entirely restored my equilibrium. The behavior of the dog was still strange; he sulked downstairs and refused to accompany me.

I had finished my soup and was dreamily gazing at the curate's chair, close besides me, debating whether I should have five minutes, when I became definately conscious that the dreaded presence was in the room with me—that it had taken possession of the vacant chair. It was no use denying the fact. If it was a madness of mine, only, well, then there it was, a madness no less terrible on account of that. The servants had gone to the adjoining store room, which contains the kitchen lift. I asked myself, in a white terror, what they would notice when they came in. I thought of the dog. The cold sweat stood out on my forehead.

The man came in with one dish, the boy with another. They went to the sideboard; they served me; they walked round the table as if nothing had happened. I breathed again. What a fool I was! I swallowed some food. "Take away the things! Mr. Blondel won't come now," I said, without looking up from my plate. The boy drew the chair back and carried it to the wall. The man was going to remove the cover—I saw distictly from under my eyelids that he had not yet touched anything—when the wine glass close to his hand fell over, rolled to the ground and snapped at the stem.

But I couldn't admit it; not even to myself. "How clumsy!" I cried angrily. The man didn't excuse himself. I looked up and saw that he had gone white, like a corpse. I should gladly have let the thing end there, but I felt that I owed him some reparation of my injustice. "Perhaps I bumped the table," I said. But I knew that he knew that wasn't so.

The servants went to the other room for the next course. Again, for a moment, I was alone. Alone? The dim presence had never left its place. From that moment I should never be alone again.

I started up and in a frenzy of rage and fear I struck blindly at the something beside me. I hit the air. But a low moan sounded close to me, so very low I barely caught it. At the same moment, however, the man servant was in the room, scared. "I beg your pardon, sir," he said.

"What's the matter?" I cried.

"We—we thought we heard you moan, sir. He stared at me as I stood there, white, doubtless, like himself, and scared.

"It's been so hot," I said. "I think the heat has upset me. I don't want anything more to eat." And I fled up to my bedroom and locked myself in.

But the heat never upsets me. The cold does. I can stand any amount of heat.

I remained in my bedroom, trying to think out what had occurred. Gradually, much against my own better knowledge, I got myself to admit that it was I who had uttered the sound; it was I who had knocked against the table. The delusions were all mine, and I was frightening my servants out of their wits. Then I remembered the dog.

The shadows of night were falling; the presence was with me in the room. Whatever it was, or whatever I thought it to be, there it was with me now as it had not been before. It was silent; it was absolutely noiseless; I could feel it all the time. I saw nothing but a vague film at times. Of course, you may say that was in my eyes, I think you are right. It is quite possible it was in my eyes only. I should be glad to think so.

"It is all foolish fancy!" I cried aloud. And as I cried these words a pressure, where I sat in an armchair by the window, a very unmistakable pressure, weighed down my left knee. It was a human hand presing heavily. I had certainly not felt this before; I have frequently felt it since. It comes when the creature is close to me, at those times when I feel what must be its breath upon my face. It comes and it stays till I sink on my knees and cover my face with my hands; that is my only temporary escape from it.

Before the night fell one thing was plain to me, the awful visitation that had come upon me would not be gainsaid. If I denied it, it asserted its presence; if I did so in the presence of others, it manifested itself. My only hope was acceptance, submission. I lay down on my bed. In my old-fashioned country house I have only lamps and candles. I kept a couple of candles lighted till I could stand them no longer. I extinguished them and lay in the dark, with the horror of that vague breath hovering around me. Presently I again lit the candles and several more on my mantelpiece, a blaze of light. I lay staring in the light, not alone. What was the use of pretending, keeping up the lie to myself? Not alone. At last, tired out, as the morning rays entered my chamber, I fell asleep, with the candles burning all around.

I rang for Carston and had tea in bed and read my letters—pleasant letters. My guests would arrive in the afternoon; the house would fill up; I should be all right. "You're looking pale, sir," said my man. "Oh, nonsense! I sat up late." I never speak to Carston of my literary work. We ignore it by mutual consent.

But it was when shaving that I thought I saw a shape behind me in the glass. I turned quickly. My hand was steady enough; I had the presence of mind to let my razor sink. There was nothing behind me.

I cannot say it was a shape I saw, and yet it was something horrible beyond words. I cannot say I saw it; I felt it in my eyes, as it were, and it was gone. It left for the moment my brain sick with the horror of it. Then my firm resolve not to give way came to my rescue.

I summoned up the powers a man has, if he be a man, and I finished shaving.

I went down to the dog, but he would have none of me. When I asked him to go out with me he whined. I told Carston to have the seats put back. "I had forgotten these people were coming," I said. "We can't make the alterations while they are here." I was greatly relieved when my visitors arrived. The house filled with laughter and bustle. Once or twice during the course of the day I had fancied there was something behind me. I had stopped listening for footsteps. There were none, but a breathing close behind me I think there was. I talked to Carston while dressing in my room. At dinner all went well. My guests—there were half a dozen of them—were charming, intellectual people. I much enjoyed their conversation. We laughed a good deal. After dinner we had music, good music, in the drawing room.

"My dear host," said a delightful, saucy young American wife to me suddenly—I had known her as a child; we are very intimate—"since when have you contracted this habit of constantly glancing into mirrors? Is it vanity?" They all laughed. Great heaven, I thought I had done it once or twice—thrice at most! I could not help it. I was dreading to see in every mirror the thing I had seen, or fancied I saw, in my glass as I shaved.

I dare not sit with my guests if I thus expose myself, I dare not shave—or be shaved. I can't let my beard grow now. If I were alone in the house I would have it done; above all things I must keep my secret. I am absolutely and certainly sane in everything. But if it be insanity to know, against all effort on my part, that this awful living thing has come into my life, then I am insane, and the dog, who loves me, is mad too. I lay half the night in the dark, hoping that would prevent my seeing the mirrors. But it did not; they shone in the summer night with a vague suggestion so infinitely horrible—no curtains could banish it—that I staggered up and lighted all the candles again. Not a moment was I alone. I saw nothing.

I caught myself constantly glancing at one mirror, then at that. The next morning I sent for the doctor. I swore him to exceptional secrecy and I told him all. I felt as I was telling that it was quite useless. He doesn't understand anything. He can only suggest that my brain, which I have by no means overworked, wants rest. He went with me to visit the dog. He could make nothing of that. But one thing I could see, to my own horror, the dog's whining at my approach impressed him terribly against his will.

I do not know how I got through the next two or three days. Once, I remember, I shrieked before my shaving glass. I had good reason to, and yet I had seen nothing. Oh, if I had only seen, could only have seen, once, I think—but I do not know. Except for that one breakdown I resolutely fought my foe. Up till now surely I have not written as man who has lost his powers or ratiocination or even his sense of humor. My guests noticed nothing unusual about me unless it were that constant unconscious glance at the glass.

They said they would break me of my recent bad habit; the thing became a recognized joke, with loud plaudits, forfeits, salvos of laughter. I clung on, thanking them for telling me, excusing myself, laughing with them. "Then why don't you leave off?" asked one of the men, a trifle impatiently. "Ah, why not? Have you no bad habits? Ah, why don't you leave off?"

I stood trembling with some sort of gratitude, when they were gone. I was alone again. I fled.

Yes, I must put it down here, after all. I have been keeping it back hitherto because it sounds so strange. But it is one of the facts; I can't hush it up. There was one corner of the house in which I was safe. I had found it out almost by chance, for I never went there. No, not by chance. Oh, not by chance! On that day—I have not even mentioned it—when I had shuddered away, shaking in every limb, from the big glass of the lavatory, some intuition, some irresistible impulse had flung me over the threshold of my dead wife's little, quiet sitting room behind the double doors. It remains unaltered. I sank down on her couch. And there, for the first time—oh, blessed feeling!—I felt I was unfollowed. I was alone.

I have gone there often since, and I am safe. It is as if I actually fling the door to against a pursuer—as if there were a resisting pressure. I have distinctly heard a sound like a snarl. But of course if I opened the door I should see nothing. I do not open the door. Once it is closed I am safe. For one thing there are no mirrors in this room; my wife had a sweet woman's vanity in refusing to be vain. But that is not sufficient explanation. There are no mirrors in the woods.

In this room, then, I am safe. I shall tell Carston; again I cannot help myself. Better he should think me crazy than that I should lose my reason. As soon as I have slept a few nights I shall leave the place altogether. Yes, I am going on a long journey.

The dog has followed me here—into the room.

* * * * * * *

This manuscript was discovered in a drawer of the above-mentioned room soon after the author's suicide. It is published, in spite of his indications to the contrary, by his daughter's express desire, because she feels that, now so much has become known that he fondly imagined would be secret and so much has been rumored which is absolutely untrue, there is left to her no better—no other means of vindicating his memory than his own unvarnished narrative of facts.

A vague presence had taken possession of my bench, yet I could see nothing.

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