

SLEEPYMAN

We met at Jeremy's club, at his request. It was Christmas Eve, although you would have scarcely known it. Save for a tall fir in the lobby, decorated in a rather spartan manner, there was nothing in the place to indicate that this was the season to be jolly. I was not surprised: this was, after all, one of the oldest clubs in London, walls lined with thickly-painted portraits of long dead members, endless volumes of Punch and acres of wallpaper whose very hue depressed the eye. The birth of the infant Christ was merely one of the many things that had happened outside the club's walls, and could be of little interest to the elderly gentlemen in their armchairs, snoring under tented copies of *The Times*, some of whom looked as though they had been here since the Nativity.

Or so it seemed to me. I had always been the restless sort, travelling from frontier to frontier in search of I knew not what. Whereas Jeremy, ever since our shared boyhood, had always been content to sit, to watch and to listen. I think it was this that had drawn him to the club. Here he could read his books, see interesting specimens of humanity, and generally be an observer of life rather than a participant. Indeed, many times I had come here and found him seated in this theatre of boredom with a twinkle in his eye that seemed to say, "Is it not all amusing, this parade of life?"

But today I did not find him thus. Today he was tired, red of eye, and nervous in his demeanour. Every casual movement around us – the approach of a servant, the rustle of a newspaper – was apt to cause him to jerk around in his seat and look for its cause. I confess I found it most unsettling, especially in its contrast with Jeremy's normally much more sedentary demeanour.

I summoned a servant to us by the simple expedient of standing up and clicking my fingers. Sullenly, the brute came over and took my order of two large brandies and water and then shambled off to some distant kitchen. I beamed at Jeremy:

"That's the way to get their attention," I said.

Normally, Jeremy would have smiled or at least have admonished me for my brusqueness. But today he said nothing at all, and just stared at me until I had sat down. It seemed to me – I knew not how I discerned this – that he was waiting for me to stop moving, as though the very act of motion was in some wise distressing to him. I made myself as still as possible, even folding my hands into my lap, and this did seem to calm him.

After the servant had returned and, casting me a baleful look like a donkey caught nibbling a gardener's carrots, slunk once more into the shadows, Jeremy sat up suddenly in his seat and leaned forward.

"How are you, Alfred?" he asked.

"I am well, thank you," I replied. "Although I must confess, I am keen to return to Afghanistan. There are stories of –"

But what there were stories of, I never got to tell Jeremy. Instead, with a curious flickering glance, from one side of the room to another, he said, "I am glad to hear it. But in truth, I am not well at all."

Irritated by this – I had not been aware that I had come to compare our differing states of health, I said, "Is that the cause of the sudden abruptness that has come upon you?"

Jeremy looked startled at that. "Abruptness?" he said, then, "Oh, my dear Alfred, I see what you mean. Please excuse my manners. It was not my intention to be rude."

He spoke in the measured tones I knew so well, and for a moment the old Jeremy was sitting there before me, calm and thoughtful, taking in both the world and the other fellow's point of view. I was mollified and begged him to continue.

"I have of late," he began, "been plagued."

We were interrupted by a loud crash. Someone – possibly the donkeyish servant who had brought us our drinks – had dropped a tray and all its contents. By the sound of the outlandish cursing this had provoked, some of it in Urdu, he had dropped it into the lap of one of the sleeping generals. Jeremy twitched in agitation until silence descended once more.

"Plagued?" I prompted.

"Yes," said Jeremy. "The word is not ill-chosen. I - "

Then suddenly, to my great alarm, he clapped his hand in a fist over his right eye.

"Damn you!" he shouted. "Get away from me!"

Just as I wondered if he was addressing me, Jeremy began violently to jam his fist into his eye.

"Is there something in your eye?" I asked him.

Jeremy let his hand drop and I saw that his eye was red and inflamed. He looked into my eyes and began to laugh.

When Jeremy had calmed down (if that is the right word for his resumption of his former jittery state), he said, "I beg of you, Alfred, to make allowance for the way that I am."

"You are my oldest friend," I said with feeling, for my travels had given me nothing but disdain for the 'stiff upper lip' coldness of my peers. "That can never change."

For a moment, Jeremy seemed to relax. "Thank you," he said. "I too value your friendship more than anything else. Which is why," he added, no longer relaxed, "I feel able to share with you, and you only, the events which have led to my being in this condition."

He downed his brandy in one gulp, and began to tell me the story that I now set down before you. It was a tale of which I, who had sat by campfires from the Caspian Sea to the Great Wall, had never heard the like.

"A few months ago," Jeremy said, "I had begun to be vexed by an old complaint. You may recall, Alfred, my frustration as someone who enjoys reading and the pleasures of study to find that my eyesight has never been as good as other people's."

I nodded, remembering – but being careful not to mention – the glasses Jeremy had worn at school, one lens smoked to correct his vision. The source of much bullying, he had loathed them.

"Since our schooldays, I have made many fruitless visits to eye doctors and the like, seeking to correct the faults in my vision," said Jeremy. "Some called my cloudy vision the result of nerve damage, others claimed that it was hereditary, but while many offered a cause, none offered a solution. None that

is," he added, looking away perhaps at the memory of some quack treatment, "which worked."

"And is that what troubles you now?" I asked, but Jeremy was not listening.

"Then one day I was browsing at the old book market in Pindar Street. You know the one, Alfred?"

I did not, such things being of little interest to a man with my robust temperament. But I did not wish to interrupt, so I merely nodded.

"On one crowded table, there was a small... *heap* is the only word that suits... of old medical textbooks," Jeremy said, "At first I thought nothing of it, for I am not especially interested in medicine. Then – "

Jeremy laughed. His laugh had never been particularly infectious, as there was always something dry and distant about it, but now it was a lifeless, hollow caw.

"I was about to say, then something caught my eye," he continued. "Anyway, I noticed that the book on the top of the pile was called *Ocular Ailments And Their Cures*. You can imagine my reaction."

"An old dusty book?" I said, real amusement in my voice. "I can imagine that nothing could be more pleasing to you, Jeremy."

"Indeed," he said, absently. "I was however referring not to the fact of the book being a book per se, but the fact rather than this was a volume concerned with my own particular *bête noire*."

"Of course," I said, again anxious to let the story unfold.

"I picked the book up and found that, despite its battered appearance, *Ocular Ailments* was in excellent condition. Not only that, but instead of being a dull and meaningless collection of old wives' tales and futile remedies, it was of all things a practical guide."

"Practical?" I said. "How so?"

"It was a book about not *treating* the eye," Jeremy replied, "But rather *exercising* it."

"Very sensible," I said.

"Sensible?" Jeremy said. He grasped the arms of his chair. "That book has ruined me."

Jeremy paid for the book and returned home with it. He began to read it, he told me, in the back of the hansom cab taking him through the darkening streets, and as soon as he was ensconced in his own armchair, he continued to read it until his servant announced that dinner was ready. He read with the book at his side during the meal, and he took the book to bed with him.

It was not a long book, nor a complex one, and by the end of his third day with the book, Jeremy was entirely familiar with its contents, and even found himself chanting some of the simpler exercises as he shaved in the morning. For the fact was, this book was no dull medical text, but a manual, if you will, a handbook for improving every aspect of one's ocular health. The book's anonymous author, in a brief introduction, claimed that the eye was a muscle, or set of muscles, like any other, and as such could be improved; and the contents of the book were merely exercises to make the eye stronger and fitter.

The book dealt with many aspects of eye-training – better focus, reduction of eye strain and so forth – but the part which interested Jeremy the

most, understandably, was the part which dealt with what the author called "clouded sight." Clouded sight was, Jeremy told me, a good description of his own vision – confined to the right eye only, but a problem nevertheless.

"It is as the Bible says," he told me, "My left eye is as good as any other man's, but my right – I see as if through a glass, darkly. A constant fog, or cloud. Mostly I just grin and bear it, but from time to time – especially if I have been reading all night – it is intolerable, and I feel as though I am walking through dense smoke."

The book offered very specific relief for my friend's problem. A series of exercises for the eye – Jeremy did not bore me with the details – which, through a combination of techniques, would as it were train it to focus more powerfully and in doing so reduce the cloudiness to a point where it was no longer a problem.

I must have looked skeptical, because Jeremy said, "I can assure you, Alfred, there was no sleight of hand or mumbo-jumbo involved. This was a simple set of exercises. And it worked."

According to Jeremy, the exercises began to have an effect on his sight almost immediately. It was as if the eye had previously been indulged, he said, as if it had become accustomed to a state of laziness and inertia, and the exercises had given the eye (he actually used this robust phrase) something of a kick up the backside. The cloudiness began to disperse, first to a minuscule degree, and then in large patches.

"After a while," said Jeremy, "The difficulty for me was not the usual one of discerning objects through the cloud in my eyes, but rather becoming used to what I believe is called the stereoscopic nature of vision in two eyes at once."

He found it hard at first to cope with a three-dimensional world. Those of us who are blessed with properly balanced sight are used from childhood to seeing the world as it is, but for men like Jeremy, it is curiously hard to escape the flatness they have been used to. He was, he told me, constantly either bumping into things or, conversely, shying away from objects that were nowhere near him. Something as simple as a walk in the park became, for a while, a terrifying exercise in negotiating a world of crazy angles and sudden swoops of movement.

"But I persevered," Jeremy said. "I became used to my new ability, and why not? I had after all surmounted an affliction that had blighted my life since birth, and I felt that I had now been granted passage into a new, and better world."

He signalled a passing servant for more brandies.

"It was then," he said, "that *it* first appeared."

"It?" I asked.

"At first it was nothing," Jeremy said. "A dot in the corner of my eye. Something so small that I only noticed it when it moved. Like a tiny piece of grit, floating in a corner."

"I know it," I said, glad for the first time to have something to contribute to a conversation that was by no means easy to follow. "I used to get them when I woke up. My old nanny would say, 'It's a sleepyman, rub your eyes and it will go away.'"

"The wisdom of old women," said Jeremy, and a sigh escaped him. "How I wish it were true."

As time went on, Jeremy's right eye became the equal of his left. His vision balanced itself and he no longer feared trees or other looming objects. And, to his great delight, he was able to work for greater periods of time and to read long into the night. But from time to time, the irritating dot would reappear. No amount of eye-rubbing – "*pace* your old nanny," Jeremy said, not quite smiling – or drops or rest could shift it. The dot would appear, then disappear, of its own accord, coming or going as it pleased.

The book was no help in this matter. It offered no cure or solution for this minor irritation, and when Jeremy consulted an oculist, he too had nothing useful to say, prescribing lotions and unguents of which Jeremy had already made unsuccessful use.

"And then," said Jeremy, "the dot began to get bigger."

Not only did it get bigger, but it took on a new shape, no longer a tiny circle, but something longer. It had, Jeremy fancied, the shape of a man. He knew this was absurd – it was just a flaw created by his optic nerve, or a shadow on the cornea, or some such – but he could not help, as men do, giving the shape human attributes. Days would go by and his sight would be perfect. Then, out walking, he would see someone out of the corner of his eye. He would turn, and there would be no man, and he would realise, it was the shape again.

The figure – perhaps under the pressure of Jeremy's mind, perhaps not – had developed fully from dot to man. When Jeremy saw him now, he saw him as a fully human figure, a man with saturnine features and a curiously drowsy aspect.

"Never full on, you understand," said Jeremy. "Never in the centre of my vision, but always slightly to one side. Almost out of vision."

"A man, you say?" I answered, trying to make sense of his words. "A dot – a shape – that became a man?"

Jeremy fixed me with a sardonic stare.

"I can see you do not believe me," he said.

I chose my words carefully.

"In my travels," I began, "I have heard stories – "

"Stories!" cried Jeremy. "This is no story! It is not one of your traveller's tales, Alfred! It happened – to me!"

Each day Jeremy would wake and go about his business. Then, at a point in the day when he had almost forgotten about it, the figure would appear. He might be stood as if waiting further along the road, or as if idling in the corner of the library. He might be standing on the other side of the room, or a little down the hall. But he would never quite be in the centre of Jeremy's vision, never entirely in sharp focus; always a little to one side.

"You used the words 'it happened?'" I said to Jeremy. "Do you mean that it – for I do believe you, old friend – has ceased?"

"So I believed," he replied. "So I believed."

One night, after he had been – to use Jeremy's words – *hounded* by the figure all day long, Jeremy scoured his book one more time for anything that could help him and finding nothing, in an access of emotion threw the book into the fire. As it burned up before his eyes, Jeremy found himself overcome with a fierce lassitude, and fell asleep almost at once in his chair.

"When I woke up," he told me, "the room was cold, and lighted by the rays of the early morning sun. *And he was gone*. I must admit, I wept."

"I take it," I began cautiously, "that he was not gone forever."

Jeremy shook his head.

"Oh no," he answered. "As I said, when I opened my eyes he was gone. But when I closed them again, there he was again. Nearer this time."

He looked me in the eye, a smile on his lips. It was not, I have to say, a pleasant smile.

"Looming, you might say," he added.

It was evening now, in the club. Small clouds of cigar smoke wafted through the air as servants moved about, lighting the gas lamps.

"And now, whenever I close my eyes, there he is," Jeremy said. He took from his waistcoat pocket a tiny silver box. Opening it, he took out two small pills.

"So now," he said, putting the pills into his mouth, "I don't close my eyes."

"And when you sleep?" I asked.

"Sleep?" said Jeremy, in a hollow voice. "I haven't slept for two weeks. Or three. I've lost count."

"But that is impossible!" I almost cried. A couple of generals woke up, then returned to their slumbers. "A man must sleep, or else he will -"

There was a movement behind us. I turned, but nobody was there. Jeremy must have felt it to, because without saying a word he rose to his feet.

"Jeremy," I said. "Come with me tomorrow. I know a man in Harley Street."

If Jeremy heard me, I shall never know. He simply turned and walked away from. I got up to follow him, and felt a hand on my arm.

No, said the sleepyman, his voice thick as porridge, *he's mine*.