

## DOUBLE-HEAD

*There are other ways to knowledge  
than the habitual ways.*  
Professor Charles Richet<sup>1</sup>

### *I. The Wooden Spoon*

The third Saturday of May 1898, in London, did not present any really special sign, even for a conscientious observer. After lunch on that day, therefore, the banal aspect of the district of Hampstead did not permit Jim Broks to foresee the series of events that the afternoon was to inaugurate, of which he was the hero and the victim, and which we shall attempt to report here.

Everything that it is permissible to say on the subject of that Saturday, so ordinary in appearance and yet so important for the person that occupies us is that the last day of the week was very different from the preceding ones, which had been dirty and damp, by virtue of a particular limpidity of the atmosphere. a crystalline blue sky, an almost summery temperature, and an abundance of light rather rare in that season.

Thus, when Jim Broks came to see his sister, his brother-in-law and their children, which he was accustomed to do regularly on the eve of every Sunday, he found the entire family installed in the open air.

The garden of Mansur Cottage was composed essentially of a large oval lawn circled by a gravel path, skirted to the right and left by flower beds, dominated by low brick walls, at the foot of which, in accordance with the season, forget-me-nots and daisies wilted, or begonias, geraniums and chrysanthemums. Near the villa, the principal path went past clumps of spindle-trees and aucubas, disposed symmetrically. Finally, at the other extremity of the rectangle formed by the terrain, it was subdivided into a minuscule labyrinth planted with trees of meager foliage.

At that place, beneath a clump of lilac, the master of the house, Cyrus Humber, was swinging in a rocking-chair with his arms folded over an abdomen that was already bulging, smoking a short wooden pipe with the happy tranquility of a tradesman in the City whose fur and leather business had demonstrated, for another week, the solidity appropriate to a well-known and prosperous firm. His wife, a dull and dreary creature, whose red hair redeemed by its rich tones all the poverty of the rest, was watching the games of two young boys and the baby.

The elder of the sons, Norman, was trailing his six and a half years on all fours for the moment, in the middle of the lawn, carrying the five years of little Robert on his back, while young Nelly, three years old, was trying to follow them, crawling on her belly—all, of course, accompanied by shrill cries and bursts of laughter.

As soon as Uncle Jim came in sight, Norman got up abruptly, without the slightest concern for Bob, who, after rolling in the grass, not without complaisance, collided with the baby and immediately hastened to hug her in his arms, kiss her with vivacity and recount a thousand marvels about Uncle Jim, in order to prevent a crisis of tears. The noise stopped Norman, who had already launched himself at a gallop toward the visitor, and caused him to run to help his younger brother pick Nelly up. Then the three children launched themselves forward, scolded by their mother, who enjoined them—without any great success—to show some restraint in the demonstration of their sympathy.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Richet (1850-1935) was a Nobel Prize-winning physiologist who devoted many years to the study of what would nowadays be called parapsychology. He worked for a time at the Salpêtrière with Jean-Marin Charcot, where he would certainly have met Paul Blocq, and probably his brother. He also wrote fiction, including a good deal of *roman scientifique*, mostly under the pseudonym Charles Epheyre.

“Sit down, Jim. How are you?” asked Cyrus Humber of the newcomer when the latter, having favored a triple attempt to scale his person and responded to multiple compliments, kisses, and trivial chatter, was abandoned by the children. “Will you have a cigar?” he added, holding out his case.

“No, thank you,” Jim replied. “I have a slight headache.”

Mrs. Humber smiled at the last words.

“Oh, Mary,” said her brother, “so you’re still as malicious as you were in the days when you called me Double-Head, affirming that the slightest headache was bound to attain insupportable proportions in me, by reason of the development of my cranium. But I responded to you that the height of my forehead only testified to the fecundity of my intelligence.”

“And you were right!” approved Cyrus, “for you’re damnably clever. Old Sam Lane, who knows what’s what, assured me this morning on the tube between Aldgate and Baker Street that there aren’t many brokers like you on the Stock Exchange, and that you’re perhaps the only one who can walk without stumbling on the accursed American paths where so many others have broken their legs.”

“In saying that, Sam Lane is unjust to my associate,” declared Jim, modestly. “I assure you that in this story, Judge led everything.”

Cyrus Humber made a gesture of negation. “You’re so adroit,” he said, “that if you wanted to, you could also make us believe that. I’m not trying to insinuate that Judge...no, Judge is a good associate for you, laborious and learned...very learned...between us, I’ve never understood why that fellow continues learning a host of things, why he’s obstinate in working on tasks foreign to his *métier* during entre evenings and nights, instead of resting after days that are fatiguing, nor why he takes pleasure in reading books on mathematics, medicine, philosophy, etc. etc...”

“He claims,” Jim replied, “that his science had often aided him to get out of difficulty, to find the solution to questions that others would have found hard to resolve, and to foresee events that he—I ought to say we—have predicted.

Cyrus Humber was unconvinced. “You believe it,” he said, “and he claims it, and I’m not as familiar with these matters as you are, nor as learned as him, but after all, in my party, I’m not considered as a fool or ignorant. I can assure you, Jim, that to appreciate the value of a good cowhide, practice is better than theory. And you won’t prevent me from thinking that in your line of work it must be the same.

Mrs. Humber intervened. “Let it go, Cyrus,” she said. “Don’t try to convince my brother. Jim Brooks and Faxton Judge aren’t two associates or two friends, it’s rather necessary to consider them as a small mutual admiration society. When Jim talks about Faxton, he attributes a whole lot of merits to him that Faxton keeps in reserve to unwrap as soon as it’s a question of Jim. If I possessed a natural jealousy I wouldn’t support without suffering the fact that Judge has acquired such a position in my brother’s affection.”

“Are you speaking seriously, Mary?” Jim asked.

“Very seriously,” Mrs. Humber replied—which determined a crisis of hilarity in her spouse.

“In that case, my dear,” he declared, puffing with laughter, “it’s me who ought to be jealous of Jim!”

In truth, Jim’s physique legitimated that kind of sentiment rather poorly. A brown suit dissimulated insufficiently, under the elegance of its fabric and the neatness of its cut, a slightly hollow chest, poorly muscled arms, long thin legs and a slight, gangling body, which sported in Cyrus’s brother-in-law the head to which he had owed since his youth the nickname he had recalled a few moments before. The excessive thinness of a narrow face with a twisted nose, framed by cheeks that stuck exactly to prominent cheekbones, then hollowed out too rapidly, emphasized the truly prodigious height of the forehead, a pale wall commencing at the bushy eyebrows and prolonged immeasurably by the retreating curve of a vast dome, above which a thin tuft of curly pink hair floated.

That face and that cranium would have attained ugly deformity if, protected by prominent brow-ridges, in the depths of which they resembled clear fresh water, augmented by ripples, in the hollow of a double grotto, the eyes had not counterbalanced them by means of all the sympathy that their blue, intense and luminous life suggested, overcoming the unfavorable impressions that their frame procured.

For the moment, their gazes took an interest in the game of the children, who were building sand-castles in the pathway. Thus, Jim did not take up his brother-in-law's comment, but said: "Would you permit me to go and help those young architects a little?"

The "young architects" saluted the arrival of Uncle Jim with a salvo of savage cries, accompanied by an explosion of foot-stamping. Then they explained at length what they were attempting to edify; they offered to his admiration the interior disposition of the roofless castle; he was shown successively the parents' bedroom, the nursery, the bathroom, and others. It remained to establish a park, for the design of which his aid was requested.

But Nelly, who had been expressing her joy for a moment spinning round like a large blonde and pink top, abruptly let herself fall, dizzily, on the fragile walls, which collapsed; and, terrified by the immensity of the disaster, she began to sob lamentably.

Then Uncle Jim picked up a wooden spade, brandished it above his head, posed it on the summit of his cranium and sketched a smile, which suddenly ended in such a frightful grimace that the desolate Nelly, while two large tears finished rolling down her red plump cheeks, started clapping her hands and shouting: "Again"

With slow, astonished gestures, and an extraordinarily grave face, which amused the baby and her brothers greatly, Uncle Jim obeyed.

When he removed his improvised headgear, to their great joy, the children saw him inspect the surroundings in the fashion of someone trying to discover the author of a disobliging joke, turn the spade over in his hands, contemplating it with a kind of curious alarm, and caress it several times, all while manifesting an extreme surprise. One could have sworn that it was the first time Uncle Jim had been authorized to look closely at and touch such an object. He considered it at length, handling it like rare porcelain, or a valuable archaeological find. He did not weary of examining, sometimes the short handle, sometimes the moderately hollowed spoon, the varnish of which, cracked in places displayed the fibers of vulgar wood, scratched by the ridges of stones, soiled by earth and detached in places.

Suddenly, the amusing man ceased his pantomime in order to commence another, in which the wooden spoon, which he threw away, no longer figured.

Slowly, he got up, turned his head and shook it in the manner used to discourage an annoying insect. Finally, he sat down on the edge of the lawn and lent an excessive attention to the disorderly bounds by means of which Norman, Bob and Nelly were testifying a gaiety that was not weakening. He folded his arms and closed his eyes, equally disdainful of the flight of swallows in the sunlit sky and the joyful expressions of the noisy trio, gesticulating nearby on the pathway.

Meanwhile, Cyrus Humber, who was stuffing a new pipe, declared to his wife: "Your brother is truly remarkable, Mary. I could never amuse the children as much as him."

That sincere admiration displeased Jim Brooks' sister, who, too artful to allow her intimate discontentment to be divined, was nevertheless unable to constrain herself to enthusiasm, and only perceived that it was tea time.

She communicated that observation to her brother, at a distance, by means of shrill modulations that brought the young man to his feet so abruptly that the children applauded and Bob asked his elder brother in a low voice: "Isn't Uncle Jim a clown?"

In that word, Bob placed a world of superstition, and he pronounced it with a slightly fearful respect, which that sort of person inspired in him. He venerated clowns as the equal of mythological and supernatural beings, and he was not far off believing that it would be easy for them to accomplish feats of which he often dreamed, such as flying through the air to pick cherries from the tree, and then eating them head down with his feet hanging on to a cloud, or some other estimable fantasy forbidden to mere mortals.

Norman knew the value attributed by Robert to the magic word and, being deprived of critical intelligence, had never thought of diminishing it. He reflected momentarily that Uncle Jim seemed to him to be sufficiently worthy to merit the glorious name. By virtue of a residual scruple, however, he admitted to Bob that he did not know.

While the caravan was heading toward the house, for the garden furniture had not yet come out of storage and it was not yet convenient to take tea in the open air, Jim Broks, following his sister and his brother-in-law, muttered between his teeth: "Dirty kids! What does all that signify? Devil take them with their damn toys! I don't understand it at all. Only Judge can get me out of this!"

That did not prevent him, however, from making kisses as resonant as slaps reverberate on the cheeks of Nelly, Bob and Norman at the foot of the staircase, where the little band separated from the parents in order to go up to the nursery, nor from responding amiably to the compliments that Cyrus Humber lavished on him regarding his practical knowledge of the art of amusing children.

Before penetrating into the dining room, Jim spotted the telephone apparatus placed in a corner of the hall and excusing himself in order to use it. He turned the handle and as soon as the bell rang he demanded: "Central 255!"

Mary, who had heard him through the door, which stood ajar, closed it and said to her husband: "He's telephoning Judge."

To which Cyrus Humber replied, very sagely: "That's quite natural, my love."

As soon as he was alone and had obtained the connection, Jim spoke in such a fashion that his words could not be heard distinctly in the next room.

"Hello! Yes, it's me! I absolutely must see you, Faxton, the sooner the better... No, it's not a matter of Stock Exchange business... No, it's not a family matter either... nor a private matter. No, it's something else... Well, the thing is... it's terribly difficult to explain, especially over the telephone... Serious? To the point that I think I'll go mad if you don't intervene... Really...! I repeat, it's impossible for me to give you the slightest useful indication... When...? This evening! Thank you! You don't know how much pleasure it gives me to hear you speak, and over the wire... You can't know...a thousand thanks! Understood, this evening...!"

Afterwards, it was at a brisk pace that Jim Broks went to rejoin his brother-in-law and his sister. He was whistling a tune from an fashionable operetta when he installed himself in his favorite armchair, near the bay window, which caused Cyrus Humber to say: "How's your headache?"

"Oh, it's passing, thanks," said Jim. "A cup of tea or two and..."

"An evening at the theater with Judge," added Mary.

"Precisely, an evening with Judge," Jim confirmed, smiling, "and this accursed headache will, I hope, have quit my double head. A little more cream, please, my little Mary."