The Infernal Riddle of Thomas Peach

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Jas Treadwell

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THE INFERNAL RIDDLE OF THOMAS PEACH,

Gentleman, of C____ton B____, Somerset-shire;

With an *authentic account* of certain

NOTORIOUS EVENTS

occurring in that county

anno Domini 1785

Containing also some *metaphysical* discoveries,
of a very remarkable nature

JAS TREADWELL

CHAPTER ONE

READER! — Good-day to you!

And good-morrow, too! for our acquaintance is destined to be long. We are sure of it. We see it in your eye — There is something about it, which bespeaks a mind out of the common sort. The gleam of curiosity — A philosophic cast —

We flatter ourselves, we are never mistaken in these matters.

It is curious – significant, we think — That you join us in contemplating that most interesting of objects, to all whose habits of thought run in deep secret courses, unfathomed by the busy majority of our fellow-mortals — a TOMB.

Will you step but a little further into the church-yard? — We have a stone to shew you, which will repay your attention. —

You do not hesitate. We have not erred in our estimate of you. — You are one of those who understand, by rare instinct, that no quarter-hour is better spent, than in such a place. — Among the tranquil society of the dead.

For what truly meditative soul can fail to wonder at the multitude of histories here closed and laid to rest? — and reflect, like Shakespear's melancholy jesting prince, that all our wit and ambition — all the griefs which afflict, and the joys which delight us — the fretting circumstance and earnest design, between which we steer the tempestuous course of our being — All this, is at last to be sealed in a plot of earth a stride across. — Left with not a word to say for itself, beyond *Here lies* — a name — and perhaps a pious encomium, scarce different from the lines scratched out on our neighbour stones, which time and slow ruin have already begun to cancel?

We begin, you see, as we mean to continue, in *fine stile*. — Be assured, this is no common tale.

We are heartily glad our paths have coincided here, at the gate of St. _____ in the town of ____-upon-Thames, where that famous river escapes the mud and mire of the city, and turns its silver back on all that lies below. What business has hurried you out of London, or what reluctance detains you in this charming spot, we do not presume to speculate. Only permit us — A step or two this way, if you please —

Here — Observe this memorial, modest, yet dignified — Erected to the memory of one THO.S PEACH.

Consider it well! for we will venture, that your boots have never pressed the earth of a soil more pregnant with remarkable secrets, nor your eye passed as lightly over a name more deserving of its attention.

Perchance, in your years of adventure, you once conveyed yourself to the remotest island of the world, there to contemplate those handfuls of earth where *Buonaparte* lies at rest, though he once made toys of kingdoms. Or, perhaps, you have stood at the grave of Alexander — we know not, we confess, precisely where it lies — Or of any great potentate, whose word once brought down the walls of cities. What is there to detain you in the name of *Tho.s Peach*? A man, you may think, who lived, and died; merely one among his fellows in the churchyard, come to dust.

Yet if that dust could speak! —

Why, that is our endeavour, in a nut-shell.

In the antient days of these islands, the druidic priests would gather in circles of stone, to commune with the souls of their ancestors, and receive from them prophetic wisdom. We are no oracle; nor do we pretend ourselves apprentice to any magic, save that common to all who dip their pen into the well from which a *Milton* or a *Landon* conjured marvels the whole world must wonder at, until the day it ends in fire and darkness — We mean, *the English tongue*. — Yet we intend nevertheless, to RAISE THE DEAD.

Come forth from this your place of rest, *Thomas Peach*! — Walk and breathe again! — for one has come, who has in their eye that particular mark, by which we know them worthy to hear your tale!

Our summons is heard. —

Courteous reader — You shall not regret our encounter. This we declare, in the most sober truth; that no druidical prophecy ever struck its half-savage hearers with greater amazement, than this history of ours must impress upon all who attend to it; even in these modern days, when marvels arrive at our imperial shore on every rising tide, and miracles are monthly reported in the proceeding of the learned societies.

Without further preamble, then! we transport you to the year seventeen eighty-five, when *Buonaparte* terrified only his playmates, and the comet of *Landon*'s poetic genius had not yet entered the earthly sphere. — And, to the county of Somersetshire — whose steep-sided hills were then but newly cut by the canals, and whose burgeoning port* thrived on the whip-scarred back and manacled limb of a licensed traffic in human flesh!

In that time and place we shall find our hero. — Tho.s Peach, Esq.

To all eyes but ours, he appears an unremarkable man. He is no longer in the prime of his strength, nor yet quite entered upon his middle years; he is perhaps five-and-thirty. He could not tell you the precise day of his birth, being of somewhat uncertain parentage. In the matter of the location he is more determinate, yet his answer leaves so much unsaid, as to be almost no answer at all.

— I was born, madam, at London.

— London! A great many are born there, I suppose.

— I suppose so.

* We see by your look that you are perhaps unacquainted with the county. Let us speak without epithet: we allude to *Bristol*, in those days among the first cities of the kingdom, after the monstrous and all-consuming capital.

If you yourself, reader, were the lady interrogatrix in this exchange, and possessed of sufficient curiosity to press your enquiry, despite the evident diffidence of the gentleman, you would doubtless proceed to ask, *which parish* of the city had the honour of his baptism. But we must inform you, that Mr Peach resides in an unfashionable old house, with but a single parlour, which stands alone on the side of one of the low steep valleys in which the present corner of Somerset-shire abounds, a morning's ride from the nearest town worthy of the name. From this you may gather, that his neighbours are what we may call good honest country folk. — To whom the name of *London*, signifies a single chimaerical monster, one part king and lords and commons, another part — dressed in silks and calicoes — incomprehensible fashions, and a third — the hind-quarters, we suppose — rotten with every kind of vice, and wallowing in the skirts of Mother Gin; and the whole no more to be imagined as an assemblage of distinct boroughs and parishes, than Pandemonium itself.

— You have preferred the country for the air, I suppose?

— The air is indeed very pleasant hereabouts.

— They say there is nothing like it for the constitution. We have the waters at Bath, too, you know. All the quality are to be found there.

— Those waters have been famed since the time of Julius Caesar.

— La, sir! — you are an educated man, I see.

Mr Peach only inclines a little, and shakes his head even less, as though at once to acknowledge, and throw off, the compliment — Leaving poor madam little the wiser.

— A London man, and educated! I wonder you haven't mistaken your way, sir. For you know, we have already a parson. Aha, ha, ha.

— If I have strayed, madam, then it was a fortunate error, to have led me to so charming a spot.

From which you may further deduce, that Mr Peach is adept in evading the curiosity of those, among whom he has, for no reason they are able to extract from him, come to live.

Indeed, there is much about Mr Peach that baffles enquiry.

It is plain enough that he is *a gentleman*. But to which species of gentleman he belongs, is as mysterious as the headwaters of the Nile. Is he a *sporting* gentleman? — He has sat several hands at loo together, and swung a willow among the less drunken sort of cricketers, though Farmer Bowler, who is the first *bat* among the neighbouring villages, finds him excessively watchful, and less lusty in his application than befits a man of spirit. The younger Miss Furzedown swears, she once saw three partridges hanging by their necks outside his door. — But — which settles the matter — He does not ride at hounds.

Well, then! — is he an *enthusiastic* gentleman?

Such was the general opinion on his first arrival in the country, prompted by his plain neat habits, and the curious air of solemnity which attends him, as though he has been transplanted to the woods and fields, from some antique temple of dust and hieroglyphs. He is often to be encountered walking in the roads, unaccompanied, with the exact gait and pace of one who walks for the sake of it, and not — as good stout fellows ought — for the purpose of conveying themselves from one spot to another. In those days, a man of sober dress and serious mien, found strolling at all hours in the open air, might very well be suspected of Methodistical leanings. Within a month of Mr Peach's appearance it was universally agreed, that his perambulations had no design beyond searching for a field to set up a-preaching in, and he would soon be tormenting the farmers and yeomen with sermons.

— I'll *sermon* him, says Farmer Townsman, turning a cudgel in his one hand, while the other holds fast to a pot of cider. It is Farmer Townsman's immovable faith that the agents of corruption are ever ready to steal the pot of cider from his rightful grasp, should his vigilance waver for an instant; the excise men, or the scientific improvers, or, in his darkest dreams, the French.

— If he sermonize a word in my hearing, I'll *sermon* him, sir, and I'll sermon him back where he came from, be he never *sir* or *man*, and d___n me if I don't.

But the general opinion proves itself mistaken. — At the discovery of which error, it forgets itself, and pretends never to have thought any thing of the kind. For in all his ramblings, Mr Peach is not heard to trouble his neighbours, nor his neighbours' neighbours, with more than a polite *Good-morrow*, and perhaps an unexceptionable remark on the pleasing spectacle of their kitchen-garden, or the prospects of wet weather.

Is he, then, a *gentleman of trade*?

If so, it must be such a business as can be conducted invisibly. Papers come and go, it is true. Dick the inn-keeper's lad brings parcels wrapped in foolscap, and inked on the outsides, which smell to him of learning. Mr Peach sends him back on his mule with a penny for his trouble, and as often as not with letters for the stage-coach, though for the stile or smell of these he cares not a whit, having new coin of the realm to engage his interest in their place. Such exchanges of letters, perhaps hint at a species of commerce — But, even in this nook of Somersetshire, bounded to the west by the sea, and to the north by the estuary, devoted time out of mind to the breeding of sheep and the gathering of wool — Even here, the means and manners of trade are not altogether unknown. For the increase and general circulation of trade — we need hardly remind you — has been the most remarkable, the most universal, the most irreversible change in the constitution of the nation, these past three score years and ten. Thus our good honest country folk, though they toil at the scythe and the spinning-wheel, know so much at least, that trade is sharp-eyed and nosy — keen, and interfering — Ever talking itself up, and worming its way about. Mr Carter the button-maker must always be prating of the price of shell, and the iniquity of cheese-paring tailors. Mr Smith the wainwright goes knocking at every door, offering his repairs, and never waits to be asked. — Yet here is Mr Peach, busy with nothing of the sort. He is never known to *button-hole* a man; he keeps himself to himself; and is, by every outward mark, a quiet solitary fellow.

Is he a gentleman of *fashion*? To this enquiry a word will suffice — He is not.

Is he a gentleman scholar? But what is a gentleman scholar, if not another name for a man of the cloth? — and Mr Peach is never seen at church.

Is he, then, a gentleman *free-thinker*? Such men, as all the world knows, are troublemakers, seducers of dairy-maids, and engines of every sort of wickedness. Yet though there are many, who wish Mr Peach were a more convivial fellow — And a few, who cannot be persuaded otherwise, than that a man of whom so little can be determined, must be *up to no good* — Nevertheless, at the time our history begins, when Mr Peach has been in the country for nigh two years, it is conceded everywhere that he is a harmless sort of gentleman — Whatever other sort he may be.

It is sometimes murmured, that a man so mysterious, must be endowed with secrets. — That his obscure habits, indicate one who does not wish to be discovered. — In short, that he is a man, *with a past*. — But what that past may hide, is a matter of mere conjecture. Mr Peach appears to have no connexions — no prior acquaintance — no history, of any sort.

Who are his people? No one can say. — You, reader, will presently find yourself at an advantage in this matter. Be so good as to endure your share of the general ignorance a page or two longer, for, you understand, we prepare our portrait as might a *Reynolds* or a *Romilly*, drawing our hero in mere outline, without distinct face or form — So that you may wonder, as the country people do, WHO IS THOMAS PEACH? — Are the Peaches some body, or no body? Do they — as the rustic wits have it — grow on every tree? Or are they only to be found in well-tended soil, in the warm confines of a garden? None can recall hearing the name abroad, except two or three who have taken their wives and daughters to town to see the play. — They themselves can tell you nothing of it, for they fell asleep at the raising of the curtain, and were woken only by the concluding marks of approbation or displeasure. — But they recall

the womenfolk, all their way home, sighing at the adventures of poor pretty Polly PEACHUM.*

Is he a Church and King man? The parson has sat at cards with him, but cannot vouch for it, though he won't say a word against the fellow neither. — Parson Taverner is not known to be much exercised over matters of religion.

Is he for the ministers, or against them? Is he 'in' or 'out'? He will drink the king's health beside the next man, when loyal cups are raised — But, as he says, who would not? — for he wishes ill-health to no creature alive.

— Why, d___n me, sir, not even a Frenchman?

— I am sure the people of that country suffer the pains of tooth-ache and ague as miserably as we.

— A Frenchman? A d___d, popish, foppish, poxy Frenchman?

— Poor fellow, says Mr Peach, mildly. — If the pox have him, you and I need hardly drink to his distemper.

By which answers, a proud and proper Englishman — and in this vicinity, there dwells no other kind, by their own careful estimation — Such a man, we say, might wonder, whether this Mr Peach be truly their fellow or not. — Yet he drinks his majesty's health, as you see, and adds his not unpleasant barytone to the chorus of Rule, Britannia.

Is he a man of feeling, or of reason? Is he in jest or earnest?

Is he an *addition to society*?

No one is certain — or if one is, another is equally certain on the other side.

Is he *rich*, or *poor*? — those two fixed and absolute states of being, ordained by God for the benefit of all, according to those whom wise Providence has seen fit to place among the ranks of

* The Beggar's Opera is half a century and more old, at the time of our history, yet its fair heroine Polly may still be admired on every provincial stage, five nights in seven. — We should suspect her of having drunk from the fabled spring of eternal youth, had she not fallen at last into age and obscurity, in the decades subsequent.

the former? *This* question, surely, admits of easy answer, for any vacillation on the matter seems to speak of some doubt in God's own mind, which is untenable in any theology.

Let us be certain, then. — He is not poor. The poor labour and suffer, and are drunk. Tho.s Peach walks, and sends and receives letters, and raises neither voice nor hand to any man. He has the tenancy of a solid house of good old timbers and thatch, though low, and in an obscure situation, and on the damper side of the valley. There are three servants; Jem, the boy, and Anny, the maid, who *live in*, as the saying is, the one above the stable, and the other next-door the larder; and also Mrs Shin, who thanks God she has never been in service since she entered the married state, and goes to her own home and husband every night, but is nevertheless in receipt of wages from Mr Peach for the express purpose of managing his household and supplying his table, and is therefore *a fortiori** his house-keeper, will she or no.

These are not the visitations of poverty. — But, neither are they the appurtenances of riches.

A quibble! — you say. A false paradox! Our hero — we suppose you to continue — Is evidently — a man of THE MIDDLING SORT.

We admit the justice of your riposte. But, consider — Why, if this is so, is Tho.s Peach to be found in rustic retirement? and not in town, where the people of the middling sort go, to swell their ever-increasing numbers? Where is his shop? — Where his practice? — his means, of *getting on*? Why seeks he not to raise his station, nor seems to fear a descent?

Reader — We know you to be a person of attentive and discriminating observation. We have said it already — We see it in your

* Our reader may perhaps be a student of logic or the law, and object, that we misuse the Latin term. We make no apology. — The art of the *necromantic historian* — for such we stile ourselves, raising as we do our hero from the obscurity of his tomb — is neither logical, nor, in strict consideration, lawful.

look. Else we would have let you pass the church-gate, with no more than a nod, and never begun to expound these great mysteries, among whose small beginnings we now occupy you. We guess, therefore, that you have already divined the sure way to resolve this question. You do not need us to remind you, that no store of knowledge about a man is more richly and readily mined, than the gossip of his domestic servants.

— His board is plain enough, says Mrs Shin.

— That's well.

— Plain mutton, and a piece of cheese with his bread.

— Aye?

— And good beer. Nor he never stints on the house-keeping neither. Not like some of the gentlemen. Nor counts every penny in and out. A mean thing, I call that. A shabby practice. I could never abide an household as pinches every penny.

By which it appears that Mr Peach is at once frugal and liberal; and so, we are none the wiser.

Let us enquire of the younger folk instead.

— Why, 'tis all books! — says Anny, the maid, to whomever will listen — You never saw such a quantity of books. There can't be so many words in all the world. He cares for *them* like any thing, though he drink from the same dull old pot every day, and only three pairs of breeches, and them all the same one as the other, and three kerchiefs without a bit of stitching on them! I says to him, Lor, sir, don't you want to send to Mr Farmer, the tailor? For surely he could, if he had a mind to. But he won't think of that, or of new china, or any thing new or nice, but only his books. And so dark everything is! There's a chest at the bottom of the stair, which I'm sure it must be full of bones, it's so black and old. Though what do you think he says it is instead? — Anny does not wait for your answer — More books! Lor, sir, I says to him, won't you take them out, for what use is it them all shut away and they can't even be read? For so I was thinking to catch him out, and have him open the chest, and so we'll see what there may be inside it, really! But he won't, and he

says, Let them lie in peace Anny. — Like he was talking of a dead thing! I'm sure there's a key. It must be in his pocket always, for I've never found it, unless he keeps it upstairs, where I'm not to think of going —

Well, you say, with pardonable impatience. — And what says the stable-boy, Jem?

— He's a good master.

No more than that?

— He gave us a shilling at Christmas-tide.

Jem looks at the ground, and blushes. He is sixteen, a thin lad, with a catch or stammer upon his tongue. From Anny you may learn more than you asked. — From Jem, you will discover barely any thing. — Though he will offer you this:

— The master bears up under his sorrow.

And thus poor tongue-tied Jem brings us, by an indirect road, to the last and greatest question, touching the mystery of Tho.s Peach — The question of infinite portent. — IS HE A BACHELOR?

Now, reader, you may be minded to protest, that notwithstanding every subtlety of philosophy, it cannot in the least degree be a matter of doubt, whether a man have a wife or no. There may be, you will allow, certain circumstances, which might accommodate some uncertainty. To take the example nearest at hand — We cannot say whether you, reader, are sworn *to have and to hold*, &c. — Nor can *you* determine the same of *us*.* Nevertheless, it must be agreed, that in cases of personal acquaintance, such uncertainty is utterly forbidden. To speak without ornament, all who know Tho.s Peach, must be perfectly apprised of the matter. It cannot be otherwise.

Let us be plain, then. — He is NOT a bachelor.

For it is widely known, that Mr Peach *has* a wife. — This, despite the curious circumstance, that no body has ever seen her.

* Though we rejoice to inform you that we are not; and, moreover, we earnestly recommend the single state, to all who have yet a choice in the matter, be they man, woman, child, widow or widower.

Poor lady! — she is very ill — And must keep to the low room above-stairs, under the roof of the house, in her bed — All the day, and all the night as well — And only Mr Peach himself, is permitted to attend to her.

— Poor Mrs Peach! — is it for her health you are come to the country?

— Alas, madam. I fear even the famed waters at Bath cannot improve her.

— Her condition is so very bad?

— It is.

— Good lady! Yet I hope, it may not be — I hardly know if I ought to ask.

Mr Peach allows madam several moments uninterrupted, for the purpose of resolving her doubts.

— I hope, there is not much danger?

— You are good to enquire, madam. We do not fear overmuch, provided only that Mrs Peach be not disturbed in the smallest degree.

— Oh, you need never trouble yourself on that score! The situation here is peace itself! I am vastly relieved. We have none of your London noise and pother hereabouts.

Mr Peach and his visitor together survey the prospect from his door-step.

— You know, I'm sure, there is Doctor Law in town.

— I have heard of the gentleman.

— They do say he does marvels. He was brought in to see the daughter of the Duke of _____.

— That lady, I regret to say, I am not familiar with.

— Familiar! Ha, ha. Oh! — Madam covers her mouth. — Do excuse me. I ought to mind the poor lady up-stairs.

— Your solicitude does you credit, madam.

We here omit some pleasantries, conducted, in truth, more in accord with the visitor's inclination than the host's.

— I am sure Doctor Law would ride this way, if sent for. He was not too proud to visit my old uncle. In Weston.

— There is nothing to be done with the doctors.

— Nothing at all? Can it be so certain?

— Quite certain.

— Mercy! Poor lady.

— You have a good heart, madam. Be assured, Mrs Peach will not worsen for lack of bleeding and patent powders.

— Well! I hope so. But must she be confined always?

— It is the only safe way.

— Alas, what troubles visit us, in this vale of tears.

Mr Peach sighs. — It is possible he has found in madam's sentiment, a significance she did not intend to put there.

— Well, sir, we are good people hereabouts, though we have no London airs, and we shall bring you and your lady such comfort as we can, I dare say.

Some further pleasantries are again omitted.

— The want of company must be very trying for her.

— It is a burden Mrs Peach bears with patience.

— Does she so, does she so! good lady. Yet it must be a trial. For I always say, in good company every thing becomes tolerable. The pleasure of society is free to all, is it not?

— I have always found it a coinage circulated every where, and estimated its value accordingly.

— Precisely so! We are of a mind, I see.

Mr Peach bows.

— Perhaps —

Mr Peach waits.

— I might bring a bowl of my broth? Depend upon it, there is nothing like it, in any ailment. It is simply the bones of the beef, boiled, with the peelings, and a drop of sugar. A dish of broth will do Mrs Peach all the good in the world, I'm sure.

— You are very kind.

— Then it is settled! Might I present it to Mrs Peach to-morrow? We shall have beef for supper.

— Alas, madam, I fear you have misunderstood. Mrs Peach's state does not allow the least disturbance.

— Well, you may rest easy! and easy as any thing, for I shan't disturb her a bit. Only a moment to take the broth up and present my compliments, and set down the jug where ever the lady pleases.

— The thing is quite impossible, madam.

— Do you say so?

— Quite impossible.

— Is Mrs Peach then so very weak, that a mere friendly word puts her in danger?

— In the most extreme danger.

— Good heavens! Oh! I must not exclaim so. I must speak low.

At which madam leans somewhat in at the door, and raises her voice.

— Do — forgive — me — Mrs Peach! I meant not — to trouble — you!

Madam retreats again, adopting a loud whisper.

— Poor, poor lady! You will present my excuses, I hope?

Mr Peach will do so.

— It quite grieves me, to think of the loneliness of her confinement. There must be some thing to be done to relieve it.

— Nothing at all.

— She need not receive company like a fine lady. We have none of those airs hereabouts, you know, sir.

— Nevertheless, madam. Nevertheless.

— Well! it is a very grievous thing.

— It is our lot to take the world as we find it, and not otherwise.

Madam is saved from the difficulty of appreciating this *Stoical* opinion, by the diverting of her attention to the upper windows of the house, which protrude in rustic fashion from the angle of the thatch.

— Is it not a rather low room?

— I have seen higher.

— A low room, they say, is not good for the animal spirits.

— I am pleased to say Mrs Peach's animal spirits suffer no ill effects from it.

— I wonder that she will have the shutters kept close!

— It is to prevent the obtrusion of light and sound.

— Yet she must have air, surely?

— Air, madam, like the pleasure of society, is both free and ubiquitous.

— Indeed, sir. All must agree with you, I hope! I do myself, that's certain. — Might Mrs Peach venture to sit in the window, I wonder? For taking the sun and the good fresh air. I might wave, like so — Madam greets the casement with a refined flutter — And present my compliments. There could be no harm in it.

— I regret to say you are mistaken. Nothing is so expressly forbidden to Mrs Peach in her condition than sitting at the window. A window is indeed of all things most to be feared. It has been my constant care these two years of my dear wife's indisposition to guard her from such dreadful apertures. You would tremble, madam, to hear of the narrow escapes we have had, when a moment's inattention has brought the lady too much in the proximity of that fiendish device of the architect's science, a WINDOW!

That evening, over her supper of beef, madam gives it as her determined opinion that Thomas Peach is a monstrous tyrant, whose design is to bring his poor wife to her grave, by denying her air, light, Doctor Law, and female visitors; most likely, in order to get his grasping hands on an inheritance.

The hypothesis is taken up in certain households, and, like the old physician's doctrine of the yellow bile and the black, has its day. It accords with that taste for the *Gothick*, which our older readers may remember, was fashionable among novelists and other tittle-tattlers, in the years to which we have translated you. But, as the bubble of fashion swells, only to burst — And, as the advancement of science casts what was once fixed and acknowledged doctrine, into the fire, along with the rest of the outworn rubbish of the past — we are generous with simile, and like the overstocked merchant offer you two, when one might have served your purpose — The theory is overtaken by its more modish cousin, introduced in that part of Somerset-shire by none other than loquacious Anny, of whom we have already had the pleasure.

One day, in conversation with Mrs Cooke, she pronounces the fateful words: —

— I don't believe there's any body up there at all.

Mrs Cooke, who takes in the more genteel sort of washing, is so astounded at this Copernican revolution in the universe of her thought — which consists exclusively in the orbits, the zeniths and nadirs, and the retrograde motions, of those of her neighbours she deems worthy of attention — That she places her hands on her hips, to maintain balance.

— I do swear it, says Anny. — I never heard a single sound. Not so much as the creak of a board or the scratch of a mouse. Not for all my months in service. Only last week I lost a button, and climbed the stair to see if it fell off on the landing, him being out a-walking, for he says we mustn't go up the stair, you know, but I couldn't see the harm in it, and I went ever so quiet. And then I had to go on my knees crawling to look all about, for it's dark as pitch on the landing, for he won't have the window open, except at night. And my ear comes to the door, as it must, you know, from me looking in all the corners, and just at that very moment I fancied there's the button, all stuck down in a little hole between the boards, so what was I to do but stay as quiet as ever I could, while my finger and thumb tried to pull it up? I'm sure I was kneeling there three minute together, and not so much as drawing a breath, and my ear as close by the door as this — Miss holds up the said finger and thumb — So what can I do but listen, though I never meant to? And what do you think I heard all that time?

Mrs Cooke will not hazard a guess.

— Not one thing.

Mrs Cooke waggles her head, and says, Don't mistress Peach sleep a-days?

— Sleep, without tossing and turning! without breathing! I hardly call that sleeping. It was all quiet as the tomb. — I'd swear it in any court in the land, my hand on the Bible. I'd swear it before the king himself. There's no such body as Mrs Peach, and I'll never say a word different, and you may bring me up before the

justice and I'll still maintain it. Who can say there is, tell me that? Who's seen Mrs Peach, or heard a word of her? I'll tell you who. Not a soul, that's who.

— The gentleman do.

— He may very well say he do! And I may say, I go to my little room behind the parlour and see the Pope of Rome, and who's to deny it then, for it's only my word that says so.

— That were very pert. And like as not thee'd be d____d for it.

— Don't teaze, and be stupid! I don't say I *do* any such thing — Only I *might* say it, and who's to say I don't?

— Why, Anny, the parson would tell thee not to. — The Pope of Rome!

Anny begins to tire of this exchange — And fears, she has cast her seed on stony ground. But Mrs Cooke, though slow, runs deep, after a fashion; and having once effaced from her brain the picture of little Anny Pertwee playing the harlot with the bishop of idolaters and Frenchmen, she begins to see the justice — And, which is more significant — The *interest* — in this new hypothesis.

Before the week is out she is relaying it, to all who will listen — Which is to say, every body.

— Little Anny do say, there be no Mrs Peach at all.

Nothing can be more gratifying than the sensation produced by this intelligence. Society is transformed. Conversation, which hitherto ambled circuitously around the same antient parish paths — ever turning at the old familiar cross-roads and stiles — Now discovers a broad new turnpike, driven straight across the land — And disdains to go by any other way. Anny Pertwee, until that moment in the general estimation a gad-about girl, her tongue forever running on this or that, becomes a person of celebrity among her own sex. Thus it is, that by the turn of the year in which our story begins, when barren fields and bitter winds mean there is little work or pleasure to be had out-of-doors, you may hear by every fire-side and in every tavern the thousand-tongued rumour, whispering — Thomas Peach *is*, after all, a bachelor!

Reader, you are — as we are ourselves — a person of discernment. You smile at our little canvas of country gossips, and take no notice of opinions thus promulgated. — Much as a judge disdains evidence merely circumstantial, or given as hearsay. But be pleased to consider the case, under the more austere and searching light of EXPERIMENT.

Experiment! — That touchstone, of a truly scientific understanding — Nursemaid of reason!

Anny Pertwee, we admit, says much. — It may please you to know, that we intend to abridge her contributions to our history, wherever possible, in future pages; and have indeed made our best endeavours in that direction, during those scenes, where strict historical necessity has already compelled us to introduce her. — Yet in among all she says, we confess we find a seam of true metal. For, though she be entirely ignorant of the science of old *Bacon*, or the Frenchman *Descartes*, or even the good British commonsense of *Locke* and *Hume*, she has by mere accident fallen upon a test of — the *experimental method*.

She says to herself — we may suppose — Very well; here is a man, master of the house in which I serve, who declares, *My wife is confined to the bed-room up-stairs, and is never to be disturbed, and the door never to be opened nor so much as knocked at*. — Now — When I subject his assertion to the trial of EXPERIMENT, what do I find? — Why, by your leave, sir, I find not a single confirmation of it. And therefore, I have leave to doubt it — And — which is, we confess, less the index of a temperament truly *scientific* — I shall tell every body so.

Thus, reader, having assured you of the mere impossibility of any doubt upon the question — having, indeed, determined it ourselves, with an unwisely* categorical answer — We have perhaps brought you to a state of some perplexity.

* It is our practice on occasion, to take up our pen after dinner, and thereby permit the attendants of *Bacchus* a degree of admittance, into the company of *Clio*. We have reached that stage in life where habits are, alas, not to be remedied.

Let us, then, lay out the facts, as we have them.

Here is Mr Tho.s Peach, outwardly a man of education and good sense, who has taken a moderately comfortable, though very far from fashionable house, in a retired situation; and in the upper floor of that house he has installed his ailing wife, behind a door he keeps always locked, and windows he will only open a little at night-time; because her health is of such extreme delicacy, that he will admit no one but himself into her presence, nor risk any contagion from beyond the room where she is confined. — And here is Anny, engaged in the household in the capacity of maid, unable by any means to discover for herself, who or what occupies the up-stairs portion of the house; nor ever seeing or hearing the least sign of the supposed Mrs Peach.

On this presentation, we think it safe to say, that the facts are conformable to our prior declaration.* For the case of Anny, strictly considered, does not contradict the case of Mr Peach, because, to have *no evidence* of a thing's existence, is not to have *evidence of its non-existence*; and if, as Mr Peach maintains, the condition of Mrs Peach is such that she must pass all her days in perfect stillness and silence, then it is no wonder to find poor Anny unable to satisfy her tormenting curiosity — No matter how frequently she will take advantage of Mr Peach's fondness for walking in the country, by ascending the stairs, and listening at the door — Or how often she will go in the room at the end of the house, where she is not required to go, and cast an eye over Mr Peach's papers. — The which breaches of the trust Mr Peach implicitly places in her, we are compelled to admit, she indulges in, more regularly than she would wish it known.

— Begging your pardon, sir.

Mr Peach lowers an octavo volume of sermons to his lap, and looks to the door of the end-room.

— Granted, Anny, with pleasure.

— Sir?

* That 'Mr Peach is NOT a bachelor' — *vide supra*.

— No matter, no matter. What is it you wish to say?

— Only, sir, and I know it's not my place to ask, but I wonder about the mistress. Mrs Peach, sir. Her name.

— Her name, Mr Peach answers with a sigh, is Eliza.

— Only it's a hard thing, sir, to be in service to my mistress, and not even rightly know her name.

— Is that so very hard a thing?

— It is, sir.

— Then I am pleased to have lightened the burden.

— Begging your pardon, sir, nor her face neither. People do say, What sort of lady is your mistress? But I can't say whether she's dark or fair, or great or small, or her nature, though I am sure she's very good, nor I wouldn't have you think I'd breathe a word different. I wonder sometimes whether she even knows there's such a creature in the world as I, and me her own maid, for if I'm the maid in this house, then amn't I her maid too?

— She knows you quite well, Anny, and is grateful for all you do, and says you're a good girl.

— Does she so? I'm glad to hear it.

— Then I have soothed your troubles twice over. We must count this a lucky day.

— You do talk with her of me, then?

— A man and his wife may talk, I suppose?

— Beg pardon, sir, humbly. I remember my place.

— I trust you do.

— Only, I never see — But, I ought not to speak of it, sir, I know.

— You know you ought not, says Mr Peach, mildly, And yet you do.

— Oh, sir! don't be hard. — Will you turn me out?

— Heavens, child! — Come, approach.

— Ah! I couldn't.

— Well, stay at the door if you like, but I would speak gently, and it might suit your hearing better if you would consent to stand there, by the fire-iron. That way, you see, we shall neither of us need to raise our voices.

— It's only I'm not used to the room, sir, for I never like to go among your books and letters.

— That is very praiseworthy. Rest assured, I shall not request that you open a book, or pick up a letter. See, I put my own aside. — The octavo sermons are moved to a trestle of oak. — Now, come.

— Very well, sir.

— So, Anny, tell me. Are you content with your station?

— Sir?

— Your situation in this house. Do you find your duties tolerably agreeable, and your wages not insufficient? You may speak with candour, for, look, here we are by the fire together.

— I hardly know how to say, sir. You don't chaff me, nor mean to turn me out?

— Because you ask with what name my wife was baptized, and wonder how she looks? I would be a cruel master indeed.

— I know you aren't any such, sir. You are very fair.

— I think I am, Anny. There are those, you know, who will say my dear Eliza has neither name nor face at all.

— I don't take your meaning, sir.

— It is rumoured there is no such lady as Mrs Peach.

— God forgive us! What a thing to say! I can scarce believe it. Will folks say such wicked things?

— Whether it be wicked, we must leave a greater judge to decide, should He chuse to concern Himself with it. But, you see, your questions must appear altogether innocent in the comparison.

Anny is not altogether certain of Mr Peach's meaning — Though her interest in the conversation has fastened on another point.

— I hate to think people will say such things. I'm sure I never heard it myself.

— Well, never mind that, Anny, but tell me, are you content in your situation?

— Most surely, sir, and I don't complain of any thing, nor speak out of turn on any matter. There are many who will gossip,

though I don't name names, for that wouldn't be right, but I know how to behave, I dare say.

— I am heartily glad of it, child. — Look, then; you say you are content with us, and we say we are content with you. And so we shall have no more talk of turning away nor chaffing. And here's tuppence for you.

Were this tale of ours a *moral fable*, set down for the instruction of mankind, we might tell you that the receipt of this small token hung as heavy on miss's conscience, as did the thirty pieces of silver, in the pocket of him to whom they were paid. — We must inform you instead, that no sooner has the coin vanished into Anny's fair hand, than she begins to picture, not a noose around her neck, but a new bit of ribbon in her apron.

— But, says she, her natural pertness restored by the evidence of her master's good-humour, Does my mistress speak of me indeed?

— I make a good report of you.

— You converse at night, then, sir? For the lady is not to be disturbed during the day. I never hear so much as a word.

— Alas, Anny, I fear I may not discuss with you the *nocturnal conversations* between man and wife. You are but fourteen, are you not?

— Fifteen come Michaelmas.

— Go along now. I do think you're a good girl, Anny. But go quietly! — this is a well-made house, and a slight thing like you won't make it rattle, but we must always have Mrs Peach's rest in mind.

You may well imagine, how Anny exercises her hearing that night, and every night after, as she lies in her little room beside the larder. — How she creeps from her bed, and holds her breath, and lets her door fall open, though not so much as might make the hinges cry out — And listens — As hard as ever she can. The house is indeed of stout construction — Thick-boned and thick-walled as those Somerset yeomen, who once made it their home, before its plot of wooded land flattered the greedy eye of a greater

man. We suspect, now we have cause to consider the matter, that Mr Peach had these virtues in mind, when he chose to take it. — Anny's ears have the keenness — and , we dare say, the shapeliness — of youth; yet no whisper of *nocturnal conversation* penetrates through the lath and the great old beams to where she stands.

Only, one night in twenty — And that so faint, it could almost be a dream — She fancies, she can discern the murmur of Mr Thomas Peach, scarcely more distinct than the sound of air in the woods above the house. — But of an answering voice, there comes no hint at all.