J. D. BERESFORD

THE HAMPDENSHIRE WONDER

With an introduction by
WALTER DE LA MARE

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INTRODUCTION

IT is thirty-five years since the child in this story made his way into my mind—in that event all but a one-way street! We met for that first time, not in a book, but by way of his maker's MS., and he was an early link in what has proved to be a long and unbroken friendship. I say "mind," but how so much as attempt to describe that chaotic and unmappable region; frequented as it is by a multitude of phantoms—absent friends, the elusive shapes that haunt one's sleep, one's own imaginations, and (not least active, vivid, and self-willed) the wraiths we encounter in fiction?

At first glimpse of this "Wonder," though he himself made no sign, there followed a peculiarly intense absorption on my part, shot through with compassion and horror. Quiet little lodger he may be; but, once in, he haunts the house, upstairs and down: one's head, one's heart, the cellar of the sub-conscious. And for this old acquaintance of his, he is of the company of such unforgettable characters as, say, the daughter of the Russian princess in Turgénev's *First Love*, of Emma Bovary, of Heathcliff, of the heroic, self-immolated little priest in *The Power and the Glory*, of the procuress in *The Basilisk of St. James's*, of the devotee in Julian Green's *A Garden Enclosed*.

Their tragic reality is astonishing. They have been given life in a manner and degree seldom conferred on the living; they seem to wear a saliency and significance very unusual indeed in one's daily existence. Theirs too is a kind of changeless beauty—whatever their failings, as though they were of another order of being. Nor is it within their power to perish. Symbols of what?

This book, indeed, is one of a special little cluster of Mr. Beresford's novels: fantasies. In *What Dreams May Come*, for example, David, seeking his land of heart's desire in dreams, finds himself in the metropolis of *Oion* —a community glazed in and secluded from the visitations of Nature and the wild. It is beatifically, frictionlessly mechanized and "run." Its docile and charming people in their varitinted tunics are scarcely distinguishable in sex. Their intercourse one with another is all but voiceless; the individual is *en rapport* with the host. There, earthly passion is all but spent—*Mare Serenitatis*. Our familiar cares, hardships, violence, luxury, misery, sins, follies have more or less gone with the wind—with the too-fleshly and the self-centred. Our histories and philosophies have been reduced to pemmican. Fiction, poetry, art are obsolete. There is no need for them; mind communes with mind. I delighted in their company, their marvels, customs, culture, music, habits. And yet . . . Well, I must leave the rest of David's dream-devisings to other eager adventurers.

Then there is perplexed but aspiring little Mr. Begbie, a publisher, in *The Riddle of the Tower*. He is exiled by a bomb into the wilderness of "space-time," doomed to be the sport of the ever-spinning Wheel of Life, and is finally enmeshed in the midst of an appalling human Termitary. Man—already in these unhappy days seemingly thither bound—has turned Ant. But Mr. Begbie comes back; to share the counsel and spiritual convictions of one of his authors, Paul Detmold. And he, surely, is no less after the pattern and desire of the mind of his maker than is the serene love-inspired faith-healer in *The Camberwell Miracle*.

Then, again, there is that fresh and lively fable called *The Goslings*—Everyman's little family of next-door

neighbours—on a compulsory trek. It is still as irresistible an enticement to my fancy—with its blazing, bediamonded, lunatic "Queen of the Earth" in a pestilence-stricken London, with its raid of the two girls on the abandoned emporium in Knightsbridge, a swallow flitting in and out of its broken windows—as were the extravaganzas-come-true of that idol of my boyhood, Jules Verne. *Peckover*, too; which still awaits me; and short stories in the same genre. Particularly "The Trap Without a Bait," wherein a belated traveller enters a town no less nebulous, no less actualized, and even more memorable and haunting than *Oion*—the illusory abode of "the Middle-class." To defeat the magic of this "unholy place" our traveller fortifies himself with an exorcism:—

"Truth is that which we will to believe; and there are as many aspects of truth as there are diversities in the mind of man. Let everyone, therefore, seek his own belief, since none but a fool will accept truth at second-hand."

Fidelity to his own truth to life, and beyond it, has been indeed the guiding star of all Mr. Beresford's fantasies, whatever their theme and ingredients. Romance, Horror, the Grotesque, with Invention for postilion, are a breed of horses that can step along merrily enough in front of Fiction's coach. Here an intellectual realist keeps a steady hand on the reins—steering clear meanwhile of the contents of the actualist's kennel. Admirable storyteller though he is, he may on occasion let his story "go hang"; but he is a vigilant craftsman. Even his tales aimed at the millions of readers of the American magazines involved him, he tells us, in "endless patience . . . immense labour." That indeed is the fate of every devoted mariner on the Sea of Ink—and we are both of us somewhat ancient ones now.

As a fantasist, moreover, he is always in the service of an idea—a simple idea too, easily detachable. What he does with it is another matter. He is *too* invariably present in his work, a shadowy but perceptible figure in the wings, prompt-copy in hand—our guide, philosopher and (often quizzical) friend. His characters vivaciously occupy his coach, as did Guy de Maupassant's, but may at need be invited to alight and push behind. "Idea" for his view-halloo, he is also an addict of the sciences—physics, mathematics, astronomy, psychology, "Freudery", sociology. He is an ethicist rather than a moralist, and tolerant both by habit and nature. Good-humoured but intently serious, he has an implacable aspiration to improve mankind, and is therefore no friend of mental indolence, stiff-necked orthodoxy, humbug, pomposity, bigotry and mere sophistication. A measure of sentiment; charity; good sense; irony; and a sprinkle of that delicate French vinegar, the satirical—these are his condiments. An effluence of mysticism also haunts the bowl; and that half-secret magical herb—conferring an aroma rather than a positive savour—that is called poetry.

As for the idea of *The Hampdenshire Wonder*, the reader will soon discover that. It is the Wonder himself that continues to grip me at every re-encounter in a vice of engrossment. "How begot, how nourished!" His was *not* an "angel infancy"; he is no little Lord Fauntleroy! Physically repulsive, devoid of affection, gratitude, fancy, humour, childlikeness; appealing in his self-schooled desolation to no other sentiment than a grudging pity—which he would disdain—he comes and goes. He is devastatingly actual, and is of a reality, a realization, seldom accorded even to Satan. Yet there is no shadow of conceit in him, no aggressiveness, no

malice, only a sublime indifference to those whom he is by nature and gifts incapable of accepting as his "betters," let alone his masters and pastors. There is, surely, no child in English fiction of his uniqueness; or adult, either, so self-sufficing yet forlorn. To watch him at the fall of night scramble out of that library window!

And with him is his mother, no *less* tragic a creature, since she is consumed with love for him—this prodigy of pure acquisitive intellect—and yet is witless of conceiving what she has conceived; and is therefore torn with wordless grief and foreboding: a mute, grotesque, infinitely pitiable, latterday Madonna. No wonder their brief history is well on its way to becoming a classic.

WALTER DE LA MARE.

JOHN DAVYS BERESFORD, b. 1873. Son of the Rector of Castor, near Peterborough. Was articled to a country architect at Stamford at seventeen, and afterwards for three years in London to the Diocesan Surveyor for Sussex in Gray's Inn. After working for eight years as an architect's assistant, and making various other essays to earn a livelihood, he started writing for publication in 1908, and was a regular contributor to the *Westminster Gazette* until the end of 1914.

Jacob Stahl: The Hampdenshire Wonder, 1911; *A Candidate for Truth,* 1912; *Goslings,* 1913; *The House in Demetrius Road,* 1914; *The Invisible Event: The Mountains of the Moon,* 1915; *These Lynnekers: House-Mates,* 1916; *Nineteen Impressions: God's Counterpoint,* 1918; *The Jervase Comedy,* 1919; *An Imperfect Mother,* 1920; *Revolution: Signs and Wonders,* 1921; *The Prisoners of Hartling: Taken from Life,* 1922; *Love's Pilgrim: The Imperturbable Duchess and Other Stories,* 1923; *Unity,* 1924; *The Monkey Puzzle,* 1925; *That Kind of Man,* 1926; *The Tapestry: The Decoy,* 1927; *All or Nothing, The Instrument of Destiny: Writing Aloud,* 1928; *Real People: The Meeting Place,* 1929; *Love's Illusion: Seven Bobsworth,* 1930; *An Innocent Criminal: The Old People,* 1931; *The Next Generation: The Middle Generation,* 1932; *The Young People: The Inheritor: The Camberwell Miracle,* 1933; *Peckover,* 1934; *On A Huge Hill,* 1935; *Blackthorn Winter: The Faithful Lovers,* 1936; *Cleo,* 1937; *The Unfinished Road,* 1938; *Snell's Folly,* 1939; *Strange Rival* (with Esmé Wynne-Tyson): *Quiet Corner,* 1940; *What Dreams May Come: A Common Enemy,* 1941; *The Long View,* 1942; *The Benefactor: Men In the Same Boat* (with Esmé Wynne-Tyson), 1943; *If This Were True: The Riddle of the Tower* (with Esmé Wynne-Tyson), 1944; *The Prisoner,* 1946.

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PART THREE

MY ASSOCIATION WITH THE WONDER

PART ONE

MY EARLY ASSOCIATIONS WITH GINGER STOTT

CHAPTER I

THE MOTIVE

I

I COULD not say at which station the woman and her baby entered the train.

Since we had left London, I had been struggling with Baillie's translation of Hegel's *Phenomenology*. It was not a book to read among such distracting circumstances as those of a railway journey, but I was eagerly planning a little dissertation of my own at that time, and my work as a journalist gave me little leisure for quiet study.

I looked up when the woman entered my compartment, though I did not notice the name of the station. I caught sight of the baby she was carrying, and turned back to my book. I thought the child was a freak, an abnormality; and such things disgust me.

I returned to the study of my Hegel and read: "For knowledge is not the divergence of the ray, but the ray itself by which the truth comes to us; and if this ray be removed, the bare direction or the empty place would alone be indicated."

I kept my eyes on the book—the train had started again—but the next passage conveyed no meaning to my mind, and as I attempted to re-read it an impression was interposed between me and the work I was studying.

I saw projected on the page before me an image which I mistook at first for the likeness of Richard Owen. It was the conformation of the head that gave rise to the mistake, a head domed and massive, white and smooth—it was a head that had always interested me. But as I looked, my mind already searching for the reason of this hallucination, I saw that the lower part of the face was that of an infant. My eyes wandered from the book, and my gaze fluttered along the four persons seated opposite to me, till it rested on the reality of my vision. And even as my attention was thus irresistibly dragged from my book, my mind clung with a feeble desperation to its task, and I murmured under my breath like a child repeating a mechanically learned lesson: "Knowledge is not the divergence of the ray but the ray itself. . . ."

For several seconds the eyes of the infant held mine. Its gaze was steady and clear as that of a normal child, but what differentiated it was the impression one received of calm intelligence. The head was completely bald, and there was no trace of eyebrows, but the eyes themselves were protected by thick, short lashes.

The child turned its head, and I felt my muscles relax. Until then I had not been conscious that they had been stiffened. My gaze was released, pushed aside as it were, and I found myself watching the object of the child's next scrutiny.

This object was a man of forty or so, inclined to corpulence, and untidy. He bore the evidences of failure in the process of becoming. He wore a beard that was scanty and ragged, there were bald patches of skin on the jaw; one inferred that he wore that beard only to save the trouble of shaving. He was sitting next to me, the middle passenger of the three on my side of the carriage, and he was absorbed in the pages of a half-penny paper—I

think he was reading the police reports—which was interposed between him and the child in the corner diagonally opposite to mine.

The man was hunched up, slouching, his legs crossed, his elbows seeking support against his body; he held his clumsily folded paper close to his eyes. He had the appearance of being very myopic, but he did not wear glasses.

As I watched him, he began to fidget. He uncrossed his legs and hunched his body deeper into the back of his seat. Presently his eyes began to creep up the paper in front of him. When they reached the top, he hesitated a moment, making a survey under cover, then he dropped his hands and stared stupidly at the infant in the corner, his mouth slightly open, his feet pulled in under the seat of the carriage.

As the child let him go, his head drooped, and then he turned and looked at me with a silly, vacuous smile. I looked away hurriedly; this was not a man with whom I cared to share experience.

The process was repeated. The next victim was a big, rubicund, healthy-looking man, clean shaved, with light-blue eyes that were slightly magnified by the glasses of his gold-mounted spectacles. He, too, had been reading a newspaper—the *Evening Standard*—until the child's gaze claimed his attention, and he, too, was held motionless by that strange, appraising stare. But when he was released, his surprise found vent in words. "This," I thought, "is the man accustomed to act."

"A very remarkable child, ma'am," he said, addressing the thin, ascetic-looking mother.

II

The mother's appearance did not convey the impression of poverty. She was, indeed, warmly, decently, and becomingly clad. She wore a long black coat, braided and frogged; it had the air of belonging to an older fashion, but the material of it was new. And her bonnet, trimmed with jet ornaments growing on stalks that waved tremulously—that, also, was a modern replica of an older mode. On her hands were black thread gloves, somewhat ill-fitting.

Her face was not that of a country woman. The thin, high-bridged nose, the fallen cheeks, the shadows under eyes gloomy and introspective—these were marks of the town; above all, perhaps, that sallow greyness of the skin which speaks of confinement. . . .

The child looked healthy enough. Its great bald head shone resplendently like a globe of alabaster.

"A very remarkable child, ma'am," said the rubicund man who sat facing the woman.

The woman twitched her untidy-looking black eyebrows, her head trembled slightly and set the jet fruit of her bonnet dancing and nodding.

"Yes, sir," she replied.

"Very remarkable," said the man, adjusting his spectacles and leaning forward. His action had an air of deliberate courage; he was justifying his fortitude after that temporary aberration.

I watched him a little nervously. I remembered my feelings when, as a child, I had seen some magnificent enter the lion's den in a travelling circus. The failure on my right was, also, absorbed in the spectacle; he stared, open-mouthed, his eyes blinking and shifting.