

# Up and Down

By Algernon Blackwood

His vagueness, apparently, is only on the surface of his mind; down at the centre the pulses of life throb with unusual vigour and decision. And I think the explanation of his puzzled expression and dazed manner—to say nothing of his idiotic replies—when addressed upon ordinary topics is due to the fact that he prefers to live in that hot and very active centre. He dislikes being called out of it.

Down there his creative imagination is for ever at work: he sees clearly, thinks hard, acts even splendidly. But the moment you speak to him about trivial things the mists gather about his eyes, his voice hesitates, his hands make futile gestures, and he screws up his face into an expression of puzzled alarm. Up he comes to the best of his ability, but it is clear he is vexed at being disturbed.

“Oh yes, I think so—very,” he replied the other day as we met on our way to the Club and I asked if he had enjoyed his holiday.

“Awful amount of rain, though, wasn’t there?”

“Was there, now? Yes, there must have been, of course. It *was* a wet summer.”

He looked at me as though I were a comparative stranger, although our intimacy is of years’ standing, and our talks on life, literature, and all the rest are a chief pleasure to each of us. We had not met for some months. I wanted to pierce through to that hot centre where the real man lived, and to find out what the real man had been doing during the interval. He came up but slowly, however.

“You went to the mountains as usual, I suppose?” he asked, with his mind obviously elsewhere. He hopped along the pavement with his quick, birdlike motion.

“Mountains, yes. And you?”

He made no reply. From his face I could tell he had come about half-way up, but was already on the way down again. Once he got back to that centre of his I should get nothing out of him at all.

“And you?” I repeated louder. “Abroad, I suppose, somewhere?”

“Well—er—not exactly,” he mumbled. “That is to say—I—er—went to Switzerland somewhere—Austria, I mean—down there on the way towards Italy *beyond Bozen, you know.*” He ended the sentence very loud indeed, with quite absurd emphasis, as his way is when he knows he hasn’t been listening. “I found a quiet inn out of the tourist track and did a rare lot of work there too.” His face cleared and the brown eyes began to glow a little. It was like seeing the sun through opening mists. “Come in, and I’ll tell you about it,” he added, in an eager whisper, as we reached the Club doors.

At the same moment, however, the porter came down the steps and touched his hat, and my vague friend, recognising a face he felt he ought to know, stopped to ask him how he was, and whether So-and-so was back yet; and while the porter replied briefly and respectfully I saw to my dismay the mists settle down again upon the other’s face. A moment later the porter touched his hat again and moved off down the street. My friend looked round at me as though I had just arrived upon the scene.

“Here we are,” he observed gently, “at the Club. I think I shall go in. What are you going to do?”

"I'm coming in too," I said.

"Good," he murmured; "let's go in together, then," his thoughts working away busily at something deep within him.

On our way to the hat-racks, and all up the winding stairs, he mumbled away about the wet summer, and tourists, and his little mountain inn, but never a word of the work I was so anxious to hear about, and he so anxious really to tell. In the reading-room I manoeuvred to get two arm-chairs side by side before he could seize the heap of papers he smothered his lap with, but never read.

"And where have you been all the summer?" he asked, crossing his little legs and speaking in a voice loud enough to have been heard in the street. "Somewhere in the mountains, I suppose, as usual?"

"You were going to tell me about the work you got through up in your lonely inn," I insisted sharply. "Was it a play, or a novel, or criticism, or what?" He looked so small and lost in the big arm-chair that I felt quite ashamed of myself for speaking so violently. He turned round on the slippery leather and offered me a cigarette. The glow came back to his face.

"Well," he said, "as a matter of fact it was both. That is, I was preparing a stage version of my new novel." All the mist had gone now; he was alive at the centre, and thoroughly awake. He snapped his case to and put it away before I had taken my cigarette. But, of course, he did not notice that, and held out a lighted match to my lips as though there was something there to light.

"No, thanks," I said quickly, fearful that if I asked again for the cigarette the mists would instantly gather once more and the real man disappear.

"Won't you *really*, though?" he said, blowing the match out and forgetting to light his own cigarette at the same time. "I did the whole scenario, and most of the first act. There was nothing else to do. It rained all the time, and the place was quiet as the grave—"

A waiter brought him several letters on a tray. He took them automatically. The face clouded a bit.

"What'll you have?" he asked absentmindedly, acting automatically upon the presence of the waiter.

"Nothing, thanks."

"Nor will I, then. Oh yes, I will, though—I'll have some dry ginger ale. Here, waiter! Bring me a small dry ginger ale."

The waiter, with the force of habit, bent his head questioningly for my order too.

"*You* said—?" asked my exasperating friend. He was right down in the mists now, and I knew I should never get him up again this side of lunch.

"I said nothing, thanks."

Nothing, then, for this gentleman," he continued, gazing up at the waiter as though he were some monster seen for the first time, "and for me—a dry ginger ale, please."

"Yes, sir," said the man, moving off.

"Small," the other called after him.

"Yessir—small."

"And a slice of lemon in it."

The waiter inclined his head respectfully from the door. The other turned to me, searching in his perturbed mind—I could tell it by the way his eyes worked—for the trail of his vanished conversation. Before he got it, however, he slithered round again on the leather seat towards the door.

"A bit of ice too, don't forget!"

The waiter's head peeped round the corner, and from the movement of his lips I gathered he repeated the remark about the bit of ice.

"I *did* say 'dry'?" my friend asked, looking anxiously at me; "didn't I?"

"You did."

"And a bit of lemon?"

"And a slice of lemon."

"And what are you going to have, then? Upon my word, old man, I forgot to ask you." He looked so distressed that it was impossible to show impatience.

"Nothing, thanks. You asked me, you know."

A pause fell between us. I gave it up. He would talk when he wanted to, but there was no forcing him. It struck me suddenly that he had a rather fagged and weary look for a man who had been spending several weeks at a mountain inn with work he loved. The pity and affection his presence always wakes in me ran a neck-and-neck race. At that "centre" of his, I knew full well, he was ever devising plans for the helping of others, quite as much as creating those remarkable things that issued periodically, ill-understood by a sensation-loving public, from the press. A sharp telepathic suspicion flashed through my mind, but before there was time to give it expression in words, up came the waiter with a long glass of ginger ale fizzing on a tray.

He handed it to my vague friend, and my vague friend took it and handed it to me.

"But it's yours, my dear chap," I suggested.

He looked puzzled for a second, and then his face cleared. "I forget what *you* ordered," he observed softly, looking interrogatively at the waiter and at me. We informed him simultaneously, "Nothing," and the waiter respectfully mentioned the price of the drink. My friend's left hand plunged into his trousers pocket, while his right carried the glass to his lips. Perhaps his left hand did not know what his right was about, or perhaps his mind was too far away to direct the motions of either with safety. Anyhow, the result was deplorable. He swallowed an uncomfortable gulp of air-bubbles and ginger—and choked—over me, over the waiter and tray, over his beard and clothes. The floating lump of ice bobbed up and hit his nose. I never saw a man look so surprised and distressed in my life. I took the glass from him, and when his left hand finally emerged with money he handed it first vaguely to me as though I were the waiter—for which there was no real excuse, since we were not in evening dress.

When, at length, order was restored and he was sipping quietly at the remains of the fizzing liquid, he looked up at me over the brim of his glass and remarked, with more concentration on the actual present than he had yet shown:

"By the way, you know, I'm going away tomorrow—going abroad for my holiday. Taking a lot of work with me, too—"

"But you've only just come back!" I expostulated, with a feeling very like anger in my heart.

He shook his head with decision. Evidently that choking had choked him into the living present. He was really "up" this time, and not likely to go down again.

"No, no," he replied; "I've been here all the summer in town looking after old Podger—"

Old Podger!" I remembered a dirty, down-at-heel old man I once met at my friend's rooms—a poet who had "smothered his splendid talent" in drink, and who was always at starvation's door. "What in the world was the matter with Podger?"

"D.T. I've been nursing him through it. The poor devil nearly went under this time. I've got him into a home down in the country at last, but all August he was—well, we thought he was gone."

*All August!* So that was how my friend's summer had been spent. With never a word of thanks probably at that!

"But your mountain inn beyond Bozen! You said—"

"Did I? I must be wool-gathering," he laughed, with that beautifully tender smile that comes sometimes to his delicate, dreamy face. "That was *last* year. I spent my holidays last year up there. How stupid of me to get so absurdly muddled!" He plunged his nose into the empty glass, waiting for the last drop to trickle out, with his neck at an angle that betrayed the collar to be undone and the tie sadly frayed at the edges.

"But—all the work you said you did up there—the scenario and the first act and—and—"

He turned upon me with such sudden energy that I fairly jumped. Then, in a voice that mumbled the first half of his sentence, but shouted the end like a German officer giving instructions involving life or death, I heard:

"But, my dear good fellow, you don't half listen to what I say! All that work, as I told you just now, is what I expect and mean to do when I get up there. Now—have you got it clear at last?"

He looked me up and down with great energy. By biting the inner side of my lip I kept my face grave. Later we went down to lunch together, and I heard details of the weeks of unselfish devotion he had lavished upon "old Podger." I would give a great deal to possess some of the driving power for good that throbs and thrills at the real centre of my old friend with the vague manner and the absent-minded surface. But he is a singular contradiction, and almost always misunderstood. I should like to know, too, what Podger thinks.