
B1 · INTERMEDIATE

The Crystal Egg

Full version reader.

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Read each chapter once without stopping, and don't worry about every word. Then read it again slowly and underline the language you want to keep. Use the **Ask the teacher** page at the end for your notes, doubts and favourite lines, and bring them to your next Apex class.

Chapter 1

There was, until a year ago, a little and very dirty looking shop near Seven Dials, over which the name of "C. Cave, Naturalist and Dealer in Antiquities" was inscribed. The contents of its window were curiously varied. There was also, at the moment the story begins, a mass of crystal, worked into the shape of an egg and brilliantly polished. And at that two men, who stood outside the window, were looking, one of them a tall, thin clergyman, the other a black-bearded young man of dark complexion and simple costume. The dark young man spoke with energetic gesticulation, and seemed to ask his companion to buy the article.

While they were there, Mr Cave came into his shop. When he saw these men and the object of their attention, he became nervous. He looked over his shoulder, and softly shut the door. He was a little old man, with pale face and peculiar blue eyes; his hair was grey, and he wore an old blue coat and slippers. He remained watching the two men as they talked. Mr Cave seemed still more depressed when they came into the shop.

The clergyman, without any ceremony, asked the price of the crystal egg. Mr Cave looked nervously towards the door leading into the parlour, and said five pounds. The clergyman protested that the price was high. It was, indeed, very much more than Mr Cave had intended to ask, when he had bought the thing. But Mr Cave stepped to the shop door, and opened it. "Five pounds is my price," he

said, as if he wished to end a useless discussion. As he did so, the upper portion of a woman's face appeared in the glass panel of the door leading into the parlour, and looked curiously at the two customers. "Five pounds is my price," said Mr Cave nervously.

Now the young man, who had so far watched Cave attentively, spoke. "Give him five pounds," he said.

"It's a very high price," said the clergyman, and began to count his resources. Then Mr Cave began to explain in an agitated manner that the crystal was not entirely free for sale. His two customers were naturally surprised at this, and asked why he had not thought of that before he told them its price. Mr Cave became confused, but he went on with his story, that the crystal was not free for sale that afternoon, that another customer had already appeared. The two customers turned to leave the shop, but at this moment the parlour door opened, and a fat woman appeared.

She was younger and very much larger than Mr Cave; she walked heavily and her face was red.

"That crystal is for sale," she said. "And five pounds is a good enough price for it. I can't think, Cave, why you don't take the gentleman's offer!"

Mr Cave, greatly confused by her sudden appearance, looked angrily at her, and said that he had the right to manage his business in his own way. A discussion began. The two customers watched the scene with interest and some amusement. Mr Cave insisted on a confused and

impossible story of a customer who had come to buy the crystal that morning, and his agitation increased. It was the young man who ended this curious discussion. He proposed to come again in the course of two days. "And then, if the crystal is not sold, we must insist," said the clergyman. Mrs Cave apologised for her husband, explaining that he was sometimes "a little strange," and as the two customers left, the couple prepared for a free discussion of the incident.

Mrs Cave talked to her husband with directness. The poor little man repeated his story about another customer he had in view, and then said that the crystal egg was worth ten guineas. "Why did you ask five pounds?" said his wife. "Let me manage my business in my own way!" said Mr Cave.

Mr Cave had a step-daughter and a step-son living with him, and at supper that night the discussion about the crystal was continued.

"I think he has refused to sell that crystal before," said the step-son, a boy of eighteen.

"But five pounds!" said the step-daughter, a young woman, of twenty-six who liked to argue.

Mr Cave could only answer that he knew his own business best.

After supper his step-daughter and step-son went out and his wife retired upstairs to think over the business aspects of the crystal. Mr Cave went into the shop to close it for the night, and stayed there until late. The next day Mrs

Cave found that the crystal had been removed from the window, and was lying behind some old books. She put it back in the window. But she did not say anything about it, as she had a nervous headache. Mr Cave was always silent. The day passed disagreeably. Mr Cave was more irritable than usual. In the afternoon, when his wife was sleeping, he removed the crystal from the window again.

The next day Mr Cave went on business. In his absence Mrs Cave, who all the morning was thinking about the sale of the crystal, and the methods of spending five pounds, went into the shop. Her eye naturally turned to the window. What was her surprise when she saw no crystal there!

She went to the place behind the counter, where she had discovered it the day before. It was not there; and she immediately began a search about the shop.

When Mr Cave returned from his business, about a quarter to two in the afternoon, he found the shop in some confusion, and his wife, very nervous, and on her knees behind the counter. Her face appeared hot and angry over the counter, as the bell announced his return, and she immediately accused him of "hiding it."

"Hid what?" asked Mr Cave.

At that Mr Cave, apparently very surprised, rushed to the window. "Isn't it here?" he said. "Oh! what has become of it?"

Just then, Mr Cave's step-son came into the shop from the inner room - he had come home a minute or so before Mr

Cave - and asked angrily about his dinner. He was working in a furniture shop down the road, but he had his meals at home, and he was naturally angry to find no dinner ready.

But, when he heard of the disappearance of the crystal, he forgot his dinner, and his anger passed from his mother to his step-father. His first idea, of course, was that his step-father had hidden it. But Mr Cave denied it absolutely, and accused, first, his wife and then his step-son of having taken the crystal for a secret sale. So began a long and very emotional discussion, which ended for Mrs Cave in hysterics. Mr Cave hid himself from his wife's emotions in the shop.

In the evening the discussion was resumed under the presidency of the step-daughter. The supper passed sadly and ended in a disagreeable scene. Mr Cave, extremely excited went out banging the front door violently. The rest of the family searched all the house hoping to find the crystal.

The next day the two customers came again. They were received by Mrs Cave almost in tears. She told them of the disappearance of the crystal egg. They laughed silently at one another and said it was very extraordinary. As Mrs Cave began to tell them of all the difficulties of her married life, they turned and left the shop.

Now we must say that Mr Cave was a liar. He knew very well where the crystal was. It was in the rooms of Mr Jacoby Wace, Assistant Demonstrator of St. Catherine Hospital. It stood on the sideboard covered by a black

velvet cloth. It is from Mr Wace that the details of this story were received. Cave had brought the thing to the hospital, and there had asked the young scientist to keep it for him. Mr Wace was in doubt at first. He liked the old man, and he had often invited him to smoke and drink in his rooms, and to talk about life in general, and about his wife in particular. So Mr Wace knew the difficulties of Mr Cave's married life, and he decided at last to keep the crystal for him. Mr Cave promised to explain later the reasons for his interest in the crystal more fully, but he spoke of seeing visions in it. He called on Mr Wace the same evening.

He told an interesting story. He had bought the crystal with other things at another curiosity shop, and had decided to sell it at the price of ten shillings. It had remained in his shop for some months, and he was thinking of reducing the price, when he made a strange discovery.

At that time his health was very bad, and the ill-treatment he received from his wife and step-children made it even worse. He had begun life in a comfortable position, he was a man of education, and he suffered for weeks from melancholia and insomnia. At night, when his thoughts became intolerable, he usually got up and went about the house. And about three o'clock one morning, in August, he came by chance into the shop.

The dirty little shop was quite black except in one place, where he saw an unusual glow of light. Approaching this, he discovered that it was the crystal egg, which was standing on the corner of the counter towards the window.

A thin ray passed through the shutters, fell upon the egg, and seemed to fill its interior.

It seemed to Mr Cave that this was against the laws of optics as he had known them in his younger days. This diffusion was not in accordance with his physical conceptions. He approached the crystal nearly, looking into it and round it. He was surprised to find that the light was not steady. It seemed that the egg was a hollow sphere of some luminous vapour. Moving about the egg, he suddenly found that he had come between it and the ray, and that the crystal remained luminous. He was very astonished, and carried it to the darkest part of the shop. It remained bright for four or five minutes, when it slowly went out. He placed it again in the light ray, and it became luminous almost immediately.

Mr Wace was able to verify the curious story of Mr Cave. He has himself held this crystal in a ray of light many times. And in a perfect darkness the crystal was very faintly phosphorescent. But it was not equally visible to all eyes. Mr Wace's own capacity was inferior to that of Mr Cave. And Mr Cave's vision was better when he was weak and tired.

Now from the beginning this light in the crystal produced a great impression upon Mr Cave. But he told nobody of his curious observations. He found that as the dawn advanced the crystal became less luminous. And for some time he was not able to see anything in it, except at night-time, in dark corners of the shop.

But by putting an old velvet cloth over his head and hands, he was able to see the luminous movement within the crystal even in the day-time. He practised it only in the afternoon, while his wife was sleeping upstairs. And one day, turning the crystal about in his hands, he saw something. It came and went instantly but it gave him the impression that the crystal had for a moment opened to him the view of a wide and strange country.

Now, it is not necessary to describe all the phases of Mr Cave's discovery. It is enough to say that the effect was this: the crystal, observed at an angle of about 137 degrees from the direction of the illuminating ray, gave a clear picture of a wide and strange countryside. It produced an impression of reality, and it seemed more real and solid when the light was better. It was a moving picture, certain objects moved in it, but slowly and calmly like real things, and when the direction of the lighting and vision changed, the picture changed also.

Mr Cave's impressions, Mr Wace says, were free from any emotional quality of hallucinations. But the difference in intensity of the impressions received by the two men was very great.

The view, as Mr Cave described it, was always of a wide plain, and it seemed to him that he was looking at it from a height, like a tower or a mast. To the east and to the west the plain was bounded by high red cliffs. These cliffs passed north and south. He was nearer the eastern cliffs, on the occasion of his first vision the sun was rising over them. And he saw many flying forms that he took for birds.

Below Mr Cave saw a long row of buildings; it seemed that he was looking down upon them. There were also trees curious in shape, and in colouring, beside a wide and shining canal. And something great and brilliantly coloured flew across the picture. But at first it was very difficult for Mr Cave to keep the picture, his hands shook, his head moved, the vision came and went.

His next clear vision, which came about a week after the first, showed him the view down the length of the valley. The view was different, but he was sure that he was looking at this strange world from the same place, although he was looking in a different direction. The long facade of the great building, the roof of which he had seen below him before, was now seen in perspective. He recognized the roof. In the front of the facade was a terrace of massive proportions and extraordinary length, and down the middle of the terrace, at certain intervals, stood huge but very graceful masts, bearing small shiny objects which reflected the setting sun. Beyond the terrace was a wide lawn on which some large creatures rested. Beyond this again, and parallel with the distant cliffs, was a broad river. The air seemed full of great birds; and across the river were many splendid buildings among a forest of trees.

And suddenly something flew across the vision, and a face, or rather the upper part of a face with very large eyes, came close to his own on the other side of the crystal. Mr Cave was so frightened by the absolute reality of these eyes, that he stepped back from the crystal to look behind

it. He was quite surprised to find himself in the cool darkness of his little shop. And, as he looked about him, the glowing crystal slowly went out.

Such were the first impressions of Mr Cave. From the beginning, when he first saw the valley, his imagination was strangely affected, and later the vision became a real passion. He went about his shop indifferent, thinking only of the time when he would be able to return to his watching. And then a few weeks after his first sight of the valley the two customers came, and he had to ask Mr Wace to hide the crystal.

Now while the thing was Mr Cave's secret, it remained a wonder. But Mr Wace was a young scientific investigator. When the crystal and its story came to him, and he had seen the phosphorescence with his own eyes, he began to develop the problem systematically. Mr Cave came every night from half-past eight until half-past ten, and sometimes, in Mr Wace's absence, during the day. On Sunday afternoons, also, he came. From the beginning, Mr Wace made detailed notes, and with the help of his scientific method the relation between the direction from which the light ray entered the crystal and the orientation of the picture was proved. He, also, greatly improved the conditions of the observations, so that they were able to observe the valley in any direction they wished.

The method of working was always the same: Mr Cave watched the crystal and reported what he saw, while Mr Wace wrote a short note of his report. When the crystal went out, it was put into its box and the electric light

turned on. Mr Wace asked questions, and advised further observations.

The attention of Mr Cave had been quickly directed to the bird-like creatures he had seen in each of his earlier visions. Their heads were round, and curiously human, and it was the eyes of one of them that had so frightened him on his second observation. They had broad, silvery wings, and these wings were not built on the plan of bird-wing, but supported by curved ribs radiating from the body. The body was small, but fitted with long tentacles, immediately under the mouth. At first it seemed incredible, but Mr Cave persuaded Mr Wace that these creatures owned the great buildings and the beautiful garden that made the broad valley so splendid. And Mr Cave noticed that the buildings had no doors, but that the creatures entered them through the great circular windows, which opened freely. Besides these creatures there were many other flying beings with smaller wings. And on the terraces large-headed wingless creatures were visible, hopping busily upon their tentacles.

One day looking very fixedly at the shiny objects upon masts that stood on the terrace of the nearer building, Mr Cave came to the conclusion that the shiny object there was a crystal like that into which he looked.

Occasionally one of the large flying creatures approached a mast and looked into the crystal fixedly for a time. And a series of observations, made at the advice of Mr Wace, persuaded both observers that the crystal into which they looked actually stood at the summit of the last mast on the terrace. And it was one of these inhabitants of this other

world that had looked into Mr Cave's face while he was making these observations.

Such are the essential facts of this very strange story. We have to believe one of two things: either that Mr Cave's crystal was in two worlds at once, which seems absurd; or that it had some relation of sympathy with another similar crystal in this other world, so that what was seen in the interior of the crystal in this world, was visible to an observer in the corresponding crystal in the other world. At present, indeed, we cannot explain this relation of two crystals, but we know enough to understand that the thing is not quite impossible. This view of the crystals was the idea of Mr Wace, and to me it seems quite probable...

And where was this other world? This question, also, was answered by Mr Wace. After sunset, the sky in the crystal darkened quickly and the stars shone out. They were the same as those we see. Mr Cave recognized them: so that the other world was probably somewhere in the solar system. Then Mr Wace learned that the midnight sky was darker than our winter sky, and that the sun seemed a little smaller. And there were two small moons! They were like our moon but smaller, and one of them moved so quickly that its motion was clearly visible. These moons were never high in the sky, but disappeared as they rose. And all this corresponds fully, although Mr Cave did not know it, to the probable condition of things on Mars.

Indeed, it seems a very possible thing that looking into this crystal Mr Cave actually saw the planet Mars and its inhabitants. And then the evening star that shone so

brilliantly in the sky of that distant vision was our own familiar earth.

For a time the Martians - if they were Martians -probably did not know of Mr Cave's inspection. During this time Mr Cave was able to watch the actions of these winged people, and his report was vague and short, but very interesting. Mr Cave was not able to say if the winged Martians were the same as the Martians who hopped about the terraces, and if the latter could put on wings at will. He several times saw certain white bipeds, like apes, feeding among the trees. And once a hopping round-headed Martian caught one of them in its tentacles, and then the picture went out suddenly. Another time a big thing, that Mr Cave thought at first was some gigantic insect, advanced very quickly along the road beside the canal. As this came nearer Mr Cave saw that it was a very complicated mechanism of shining metals. And then, when he looked again, it had disappeared.

After a time Mr Wace tried to attract the attention of the Martians, and the next time that the strange eyes of one of them appeared close to the crystal Mr Cave cried out and jumped away, and they immediately turned on the light and began to gesticulate in a manner like that of signalling. But when at last Mr Cave looked into the crystal again the Martian had disappeared.

These observations had continued till November, and then Mr Cave began to take the crystal with him when he went home, and to bring it back when he returned. So that he could look into it in the daytime, when he was alone, or at

night.

In December Mr Wace's work in connection with an examination became hard. The observations were stopped for a week, and for ten or eleven days he did not see Mr Cave. He then wished to resume their observations, and went to see Mr Cave. But Mr Cave's shop was closed.

He knocked and the door was opened by the step-son in black. He at once called Mrs Cave, and from her Mr Wace learnt that Cave was dead and already buried. He had been found dead in his shop in the early morning, the day after his last visit to Mr Wace, and the crystal had been clasped in his cold hands. His face was smiling, said Mrs Cave, in tears. He probably had been dead five or six hours when he was found.

This was a great shock to Mr Wace, and he began to reproach himself for his neglect of the symptoms of the old man's ill health. But his chief thought was of the crystal. He asked Mrs Cave about it, and learnt that it had been sold to a friendly dealer in Great Portland Street. Mr Wace hurried at once to this dealer. But there he learnt that the crystal egg had already been sold to a tall, dark man in grey. And there the material facts in this curious story come suddenly to an end. The dealer did not know who the tall, dark man in grey was, and he had not observed him with sufficient attention to describe him. He did not even know which way this person had gone after leaving the shop. For a time Mr Wace remained in the shop, asking the dealer hopeless questions. And at last, realising that the whole thing had passed out of his hands, he returned to his

rooms, a little astonished to find the notes he had made still visible upon his table.

My own ideas of the crystal egg are practically identical with those of Mr Wace. I believe that the crystal on the mast in Mars and the crystal egg of Mr Cave are in some physical relation, that cannot be explained at present, and we both believe that Mr Cave's crystal has probably been sent here from that planet, in order to give the Martians a near view of our affairs. Possibly crystals corresponding to the crystals on the other masts are also on our globe. No theory of hallucination can explain the facts.

Ask the teacher

Notes, doubts and favourite lines to take to your next class:

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