

## THE ART OF BEING INTERESTING

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UGLINESS, George Eliot tells us, consists not in plainness of feature or dullness of colour, but in being uninteresting.

Whereupon a new vista seems opened before the plain, the old, the poor, the unfortunate. This good thing, the art of being interesting, may outlast beauty and youth and riches and strength: let us hasten to acquire it. Which way shall we turn? How is one to become interesting?

The engraver, Timothy Cole, tells how he arrived in Holland after months spent in the Italian galleries, with his mind imbued with the fair and heavenly images of classic art. As he walked through the great museum at Amsterdam, a strange sad-

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ness came over him, and he felt inclined to look upon the collection of small Dutch pictures as upon a dreary waste. How should he ever learn to love those *genre* subjects, with what appeared to him their gross materialism? He could have wept. He had descended from Parnassus, and was once more among the haunts of men.

"I resolved, however," he wrote to a friend, "to plod on in faith, doing my best to engrave whatever came to hand. Nine months have passed since that day, and now I marvel greatly, as I pause before my favourites in the gallery, that I could have been so blind to their charming qualities. Every day I made a new discovery until I began to count the masterpieces by the score. Now I see working in these earnest Dutchmen, the same spirit of sincerity and love and reverence which actuated the Italians. These honest workers

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tell us in their pictures that all things are miracles, and that each part and tag of anything or of any one is a miracle; and so they paint the hair of a cow's back with the same reverence that Fra Angelica painted the flowers of Paradise, and an old woman's face is as divine as that of an angel. How can there be too much fidelity and realism where nature is approached with humility and reverence?"

What is it that so charms us in Mr. Cole's narrative? Is it not his resolve to understand, to sympathize, to do his best in interpreting the "miracles" he saw; and his success therein? The prescription is of universal efficacy. Persons and things jostle us on every hand. Striving to understand them, to enter into their feelings and processes, and to interpret their best in our own acts and words—this is to be interesting.

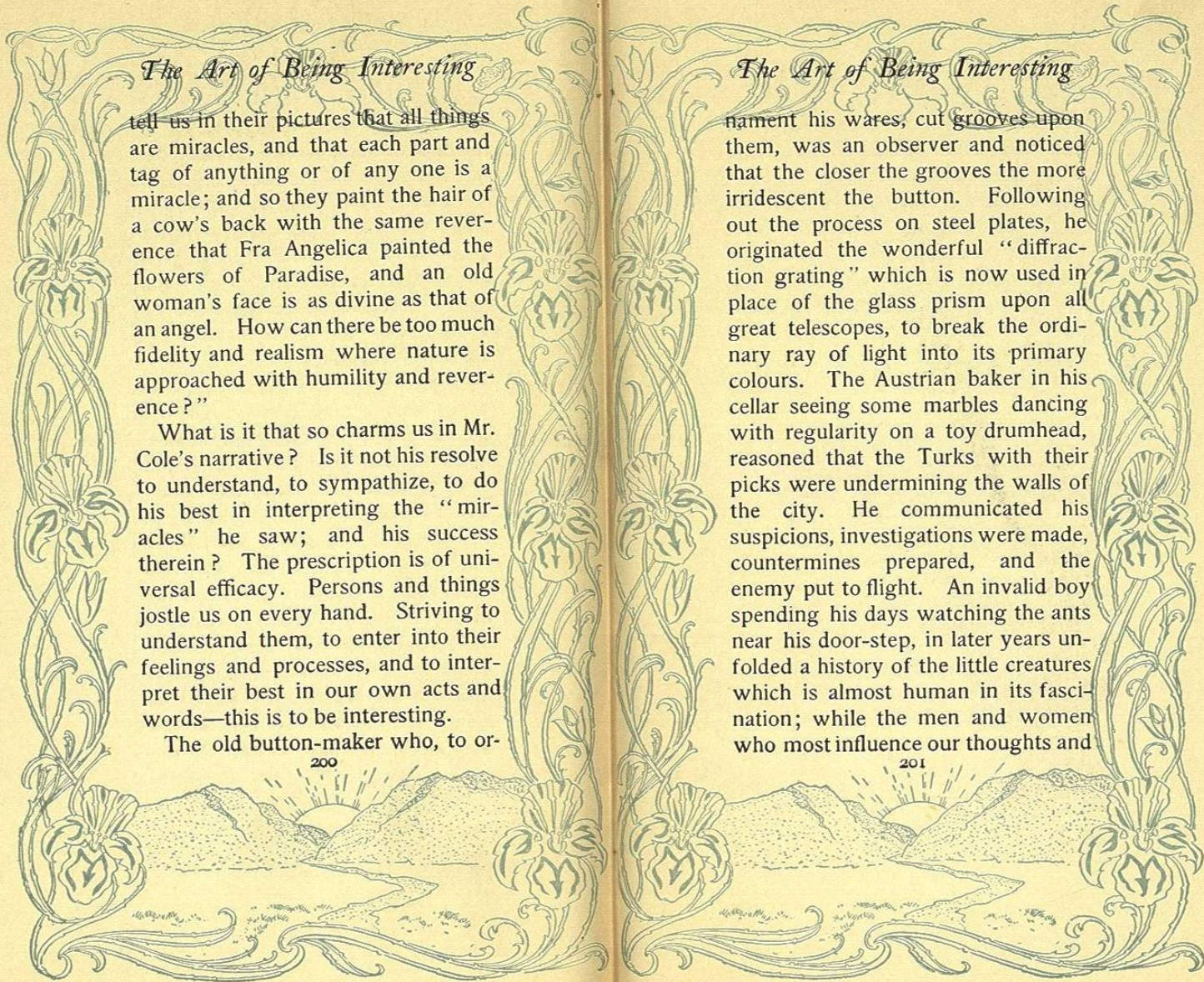
The old button-maker who, to or-

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name his wares, cut grooves upon them, was an observer and noticed that the closer the grooves the more iridescent the button. Following out the process on steel plates, he originated the wonderful "diffraction grating" which is now used in place of the glass prism upon all great telescopes, to break the ordinary ray of light into its primary colours. The Austrian baker in his cellar seeing some marbles dancing with regularity on a toy drumhead, reasoned that the Turks with their picks were undermining the walls of the city. He communicated his suspicions, investigations were made, countermines prepared, and the enemy put to flight. An invalid boy spending his days watching the ants near his door-step, in later years unfolded a history of the little creatures which is almost human in its fascination; while the men and women who most influence our thoughts and

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sway our actions are those with deep knowledge of people. "Take up every man as you take up a leaf," Cholmondelay wrote to Thoreau, "and look attentively at him: else you will moulder away." To be interesting one must be interested, and interest comes by contact. Browning's Paracelsus failed because he sought a pedestal above his fellows. Too late he learned:

To see a good in evil, and a hope in  
Ill success; to sympathize, be proud  
Of their half-reasons, faint aspirings, dim  
Struggles for truth, their poorest fallacies,  
Their prejudice and fears and cares and doubts,  
Which all touch upon nobleness, despite  
Their error, all tend upwardly, though weak,  
Like plants in mines which never saw the sun,  
But dream of him and guess where he may be,  
And do their best to climb and get to him.

It is this passion of the imperfect for the perfect which, as Matthew Arnold affirmed, is at the root of true interest; and so long as a person

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strives to see it, and to sympathize with it, and to attain unto it, that person is holding at arm's length the ugliness which we are assured consists in being uninteresting.

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Esta publicación deberá ser devuelta  
antes de la última fecha abajo indi-  
cada.

NOV 14 1958	RECIBIDO		
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TITULO

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