Heltered among the ramparts of the Eternal Hills lies a valley where dwell the Sons of Earth. When the yellow sunlight warms it and the skies are blue, when flowers bloom and cornfields prosper, then do the people call it the Valley of Content. But when the skies are overcast and frowning storm-clouds sweep down from the mountains, men call it the Vale of Tears.

And who shall say which of the two names it merits more? Down the sloping hillside and into the valley, there came one day a Stranger—one whom the love of wandering beckoned forever into other lands. As he walked through the streets of the village, he noticed beyond the cornfields a thin gray mist that seemed to rise, like a veil of smoke, from behind the hills; a mist so faint that at first he fancied it could only be the dimness that distance causes, where outlines grow soft and blurred against the sky. But as he looked the mist seemed to spread, growing more dense and gray, as though some giant Phantom kept watch over the valley and cast its broad-winged shadow upon the fields below. And the longer the Stranger gazed, the more somber and impenetrable grew the mysterious vapor.

"Tell me," he asked of one who stood near by, "what means you mist that rises from behind the hills? I have seen many fogs in many countries, but never one so strange as that."

The man to whom he spoke answered with a half-smile that had in it more of cynicism than of mirth. "Evidently," he said, "you are a stranger here, or you would never have asked the question. For what you see has been there longer than men can remember—since the beginning of time. Some even say that when the Hills have crumbled and the Valley has disappeared, the Mist will still remain."

"But whence comes it?" asked the Stranger. "And what can be its cause?"

The other shrugged his shoulders. "Of that I can tell you nothing," he replied. "The riddle of its existence is as unknown to me as to yourself. All through the ages men have sought to solve it. They have climbed the Heights of Thought that rise there to the northward, to look upon it face to face. They have stood upon the Cliffs of Knowledge, and scaled the highest Peaks of Intellect; and still they have not penetrated the Wall of Mist that guards the Secret of the Great Unknown. How then can I, who am only a dweller of the Valley, tell you its cause, its meaning? If your curiosity would seek more satisfaction, climb for yourself and look upon it closely. Only be careful and tread not too near the edge; for men have been overcome with dizziness before now, and lost their footing."
"Thanks for your warning, friend," the Stranger answered. "You have told me enough to rouse in me the desire to know more. I will follow the path that so many, it seems, have trod before me, and see for myself the wonder of which you speak."

Then the Stranger turned his steps to the northward, and followed the path that led up to the Heights of Thought. At first the way was fringed with grass and flowers, and shrubs and bushes grew on either side. But farther on the path led through a tangled thicket, where straggling branches barred his way, and long, sinuous brambles stretched out their thorny arms to hold him back. But he brushed them aside, and leaving the thicket behind him, mounted the bare rocks that rose beyond.

Once or twice he looked back upon the Valley, which lay like some quiet garden at his feet; and the sounds of the village reached his ears like the hum of distant bees. He almost wished he had not left it for these cold and barren heights. But the shadowy mist that lay beyond him seemed to beckon, and he turned to climb again. And ever as he climbed the atmosphere grew rarer, so that when at last he reached the summit the air was very different from that which he had breathed in the Valley.

And now before him stretched the broad Plateau of Thought, and toward the northern edge, rising in vast, impenetrable majesty, he saw the Wall of Mist.

Pervaded by an unseen element that made it almost luminous—as though behind it might be a distant light—yet denser than the densest fogs of earth or ocean; changing like smoke before the eye, and yet ever the same; rising upward until it merged into the blue, and reaching downward to a depth no eye could fathom; swaying like a curtain beneath the touch of an unseen hand, yet seemingly immovable and solid as a wall of rock—such was the Veil of Mystery that guarded the Secret of the Great Unknown. And as the Stranger gazed, there stole across his eyes and brain the dizziness of those who look down from a great height. The hills about him—the sky above—the very ground on which he stood—seemed to become unstable; to sway, to totter, then melt and vanish like things unreal; till he was left, groping and bewildered, in the mazes of an endless mist.

With sudden effort he turned his eyes away, and looking round him, saw that he was not alone. Beside the path that wound along the margin of the rock—a path worn deeper by the footsteps of each succeeding generation—a man was standing, erect and motionless, with hands clasped behind his head, gazing before him with dreaming, half-closed eyes; and there was a certain tender sadness
THE MIST: AN ALLEGORY

about his face, as of one who had tasted Melancholy and found it
sweet. As though some instinct told him of the Stranger’s presence,
he turned and held out a friendly hand.

“Still another!” he said, with a note of sympathy in his voice.
“Truly, the God of Mist has many worshipers! Or are you merely
one of those who seek to satisfy the cravings of a tormenting curiosity?
If so, believe me, you will find only disappointment. Or come you
in the name of Science, to probe the mysteries of the Great Unseen?
Alas, my friend, here all men are equal; for we stand upon the ground
of Common Ignorance. The Scientist is foiled. For the Dreamer
alone is happiness.”

“If that be so,” the Stranger said, “then will I learn to dream.
But for the present I would fain know more of this mysterious border-
land, and those who wander here along its edge.”

“Come,” said the Dreamer. “I will be your guide.” And so,
along the foot-worn pathway, the other followed.

“Strange, is it not?” the Dreamer said, “that men should leave
their homes and meadows in the Valley for such a bleak and barren
height! Yet see them yonder! How they are fascinated by the Wall
of Mist, as though some hidden magnet lay behind it! See how they
question it with wondering eyes, and stretch out helpless and imploring
arms—to a dumb Nothing. Listen—for centuries, as now, men have
been asking of the Cloud before you: “Whence? Wherefore? Whither?
And not a sign, not a whisper, has it sent them back.”

“But you—you seem to have found pleasure here?” the Stranger
said.

“That is because I never question,” the other answered. “I
only dream. The mysteries of the Great Unknown no longer perplex
me, for I do not seek to probe them. Instead, I lose my soul in
reverie, my eyes in cloud, and behold, the Mystery has grown kind!
In the gray thing before us I see a thousand beauties; dim, floating
forms, that weave a changing pattern on a curtain-cloud. Pale
phantoms of the buried ages rise out of the fog and mingle with the
hovering shadows of Events-to-Come. I see the ghosts of ancient
Myths, and hear the siren voices of forgotten Melodies. And so I
am content. Instead of clamoring at the door of the Impossible and
despairing, I sit upon the threshold and dream.”

“You are Poet, Philosopher and Dreamer in one,” said the
Stranger. “You feast upon Imagination; others starve upon Reality.”

His companion smiled; then, pointing to a gray-haired man who
was bending over the edge of the rock, he asked, “Do you know what
he is doing? Trying to sound the depths of the Great Abyss with
the plumb-line of Science!”
THE MIST: AN ALLEGORY

The Stranger shuddered. "If he should lean over too far!" he whispered. "How can he look upon it so near and yet stay calm?"

Farther on they came to a group of men who were discussing eagerly some vital question. The Stranger paused to listen, for the theme that stirred them was evidently the all-engrossing topic of the Mist. The phrases "Nebular Hypothesis" and "Theory of Evolution" fell upon his ears, and turning to the Dreamer he asked: "What do they mean? Have they discovered the secret of it all at last?"

But his companion smiled and shook his head. "Not yet," he said. "They are only just beginning to decipher the World-Alphabet. It will be a long while before they can spell anything." And so the two passed on.

BEFORE them rose the Cliffs of Knowledge, steep and rugged, towering like some huge observatory above the plains of Thought. And from the Summit, high above, there flashed a widening shaft of light. Again the Stranger questioned. "That is the Searchlight of Science," replied his guide. "For centuries it has thrown its beams upon the Mist, at first so feebly that it seemed only a candle flickering in the dark. But gradually it grew brighter, until it became a flaming beacon, fed by constant and untiring care with the accumulated fuel of the ages. And now it flashes out from the huge Revolving Lamp of Science and men marvel at its power. Yet we see what a little way it penetrates the darkness! Only a vague glimmer rests upon the Curtain of Cloud, and then the light grows faint and wavering, and melts into the dimness of the Great Unknown. And what has the Searchlight revealed? A few stray moats floating in its beam!"

"You are very scornful, my friend," said the Stranger. "Since Science has so little charm for you, we will leave the cliffs unscaled. But tell me, is there not still another mountain rising far beyond? I seem to see a distant summit towering above the Cliffs, and almost lost in cloud."

"Yes," said the Dreamer. "You are looking at the Peaks of Intellect—the heights that only the chosen few attain. Many a traveler has started out to climb them, but the sides are steep and difficult, and the air is very rare. Around the summit lies the region of Perpetual Snow, and Solitude and Silence are the only companions of him who attains the crest. From the top the Mist can still be seen. One merely looks upon it from a different point of view."

The Dreamer paused; then added, "For myself, I would rather lie and dream upon the Plateau of Thought than freeze in solitude among the Peaks of Intellect."
"The Mist has no terrors, then, for you," the Stranger said, and turned to the gray wall before them. Then, suddenly, his face grew white, and a wave of horror swept across his brain.
"Look!" he cried quickly. "Oh, will no one stop him!" And he pointed to a wild, disheveled figure standing with outstretched arms beside the chasm. But even as he spoke the man leaned forward, and with a tragic gesture of despair leaped—and was lost within the deep abyss. The Stranger turned away his eyes.
"Poor fool!" the Dreamer sighed. "Perhaps now he will find the Secret."
They walked in silence down the winding path, until they reached the spot where they had first met. Then said the Stranger: "I have seen enough. I will follow the pathway down the Hill and seek the valley again. Will you bear me company?"
But the other shook his head. "I would dream a little longer," he said. "And so—farewell."
Then slowly down the winding pathway the Stranger came, and into the sunshine that filled the Valley. The air grew warmer, and the birds sang, and the perfume of flowers was blown across his path. Down, down, into the Valley of Content, along the straggling streets and through the yellow cornfields, following always the love of wandering that beckoned him forever into other lands.
And looking back he saw the sleeping village nestling among the ramparts of the Eternal Hills; and far above it spread the gray, gray Mist, as though some Giant Phantom kept watch over the valley, and cast its broad-winged shadow upon the fields below.