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THE SUN CURE

Alfred Noyes

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First Edition

THE SUN CURE

CHAPTER I

The furnished apartments—a drawing-room floor in North Street—had been for two years in the occupation of the curate at St. Margaret's and had ceased to look like furnished apartments. They had even become a passable expression of the Rev. Basil Strode's individuality. His were the colored reproductions, issued by the Arundel Society, of Old Masters. Framed in very broad frames of plain fumed oak, they replaced the gaudy but minatory texts and the Christmas-number supplements wherewith aforetime Mrs. Barrow had decked her walls. He had even provided the background on which the pictures hung—an unpatterned paper of olive green surmounted by a deep ivory-tinted frieze. He had swept from the mantelpiece Mrs. Barrow's collection of insane crockery, each item of which declared that it was "A Present from Helmstone." In their place, on a strip of green velvet that repeated the tone of the wallpaper, were three brass vases, small, severe, ecclesiastical in type, filled with flowers of the color prescribed by the church for that particular octave.

It was the Rev. Basil Strode who had provided a room's noblest embellishment—books chosen with care and lovingly used. His were the slim books of contemporary verse, through which, as his conservative weekly journal advised him, most progressively, it was his duty to keep in touch with the new age. His was the cottage piano in rosewood, and his—it must be regretfully added—was the mechanical player which could be attached to it. He had a fair range of hymn-tunes that he could play without its intervention.

On the rather sensational occasions when Miss Pettigrew had fainted at the harmonium during a week-day service, he had borne her to the vestry in his muscular arms and on his return had taken her place at the harmonium—the hymn-tune being fortunately in his repertoire. "And all," as Miss Bird said subsequently to her sister, "with the most masterly ease and coolness." He required the mechanical player for more ambitious efforts. It is to be feared that when the Misses Bird passed under the curate's open windows on a summer evening and heard what could be recognized as Chopin's Funeral March they did not realize how much of the rendition was due to the advances of modern science.

Barbara Lane, on the other hand—the daughter of Admiral Lane, and the prettiest girl in the parish—seemed to be always faintly amused at him. This was unfortunate, for he admired her, had proposed to her, and had been told that, if ever he committed a burglary, she might consider it.

In appearance the Rev. Basil Strode was far removed from the curates of comedy depicted by the late Phil May. He was a handsome man. He had the head of a thinker, though not of a creator. His eyes were beautiful and melancholy, his mouth was small and delicate, his profile inevitably suggested stained glass. He was tall and his figure might have served as an artist's model. With Swedish exercises before his bath each morning, he kept it up to concert pitch. He had been in the first rank of amateur tennis-players at Oxford, but he played no games now. He had an esthetic conviction that games were not in the picture.

The chin was just a little weak, the eyes were just a little too soft, the skin was perhaps a little too dark. At times he looked like an ordained gipsy.

He was not, his vicar admitted, a good parish priest. But he was a potent and eloquent preacher, had a pleasant voice, and got considerably less flat than the vicar himself when intoning the Litany. He enjoyed the ornate ritual of St. Margaret's, though he was far indeed from falling into Romish error. He had no wish to institute the confessional, but when middle-aged ladies felt constrained to tell him somewhat intimate and appalling stories about themselves, he listened with sympathy and gave salutary advice.

The sun streamed into his sitting-room this morning as he entered it. He was not one of those curates who in the privacy of their lodgings give way to careless dressing and college blazers. He dressed as punctiliously for breakfast as for more solemn occasions. He glanced at the low table before the fireplace, on which his breakfast and one letter awaited him. He then selected a piece of toast from the rack, applied a simple test to it, laid it down on his plate, frowned slightly, and rang the bell.

"Yes, sir," said Mrs. Barrow, who entered with decent humility.

Mr. Strode tapped the toast with one finger. "Hard again," he said in a pained voice.

"Sorry, sir. And I told the gel myself. You'd like fresh made, sir?"

"I should. And, Mrs. Barrow," he added in a low vibrant tone, "I do not wish to wait for fresh toast every morning. Not every morning. I say nothing of the waste. You will see to that? Thank you."

He poured out his tea, but he did not open his letter.

He knew the handwriting. It was that of an old friend who was rather a nuisance—a man who was capable of embracing every opinion except the orthodox—a man whose many enthusiasms were hardly distinguishable from violence—a man who habitually spoke of the most delicate matters in a way that was cheerful and even slangy—a man who had far more affection than reverence for the Rev. Basil Strode.

Not till he had finished breakfast did Mr. Strode feel able to face the sort of senseless tirade that his polemical friend wrote to him, couched as it always was in nervous but ill-chosen language.

He shook his head sadly, as he drew the sheet from the envelope. The first three words seemed to come at him like a kick in the face.

The three words were: "Hallo, Old Fruit!"

Strode smiled a little wearily. Old days at Oxford were recalled to him. But when would Harry Dalston be able to see that those days no longer existed and adapt himself to changed circumstances? It was not the familiarity that Basil minded. From an old friend who had been at school and college with him familiarity was justifiable. A bishop might write a familiar letter to another bishop. But a bishop would not say, "Hallo, Old Fruit!" And Basil Strode was gradually crystallizing into a mental condition where the bishop was conclusive and did not admit of argument.

It was all so lamentable, too, for Dalston was such a good fellow really. He was a musician. He was a scholar, with some contempt for the academic lines of scholarship. He was a man of boundless energy. At an early stage of his career —when he was but a boy—he had been in the first half-million to discover Omar *via* Fitz-Gerald. He was a magnificent apostle, but with an uncomfortable leaning towards false gods. Not always. He had been sound, as Basil admitted, in his advocacy of the Swedish exercises.

But Harry Dalston was a predestined rebel, and rebels are habitually defective in taste and judgment—qualities that Basil valued. Then again, Harry Dalston thought at least as much about his body as he did about his mind, and considerably more than he did about his soul. Basil Strode could not, of course, be in sympathy. It is true he took care that his personal appearance should be in accord with the dignity of his office, and that he took such physical exercise as his health required. But even this latter now seemed to him something of a humiliation. He inhabited a machine that could keep in order only if it were allowed to propel itself by its own power for an average distance of six miles *per diem*. That was the way he put it, and was annoyed at being rebuked by Dalston for irreverent criticism of the designs of his Creator. Whatever he might have done at Oxford in his youth—of which Dalston took a malicious joy in reminding him —Basil Strode's view was now that brother ass should be beaten and starved into quiescence. Dalston, on the other hand, denounced the fast as "a spiritual toot with offensive next-morning effects." And yet the friendship continued, and Basil Strode went on with his reading of Harry's letter.

"I want to tell you," wrote Harry, "some months ago I went into the 'Return-to-Nature' literature. Did a chunk of Thoreau, dipped into old Walt again, likewise George Borrow—bless him! The passion for truth and nature revived in me. This grand hot weather helped. I said to myself, 'Dammy, I'll do it, and chance who calls me a crank!' Do what? Why, pull off this dirty civilization and pitch it into the waste-basket, go back to the first garden of all, soak up the sunlight by day and sleep under the stars by night. But you can keep your hair on. The police have not got me yet. On my departure from all conventions I sacrificed on the altar of conventionality. That is to say, I got up old Giffen from the village—him what builds and carpents—and made him erect an eight-foot-high palisade, impenetrable to the vision, round thirty square yards of turf at the bottom of my paddock here. You remember the stream there? It runs right through the middle of my enclosure. It's a desert island with a door to it within ten minutes' walk of my house. When the job was finished old Giffen said to me: 'Going to keep some sort of a wild beast there, sir, if I may ask?' I told him he'd guessed it.

"So he had. But in this case, all that the creature required was to take sun-baths in peace.

"There are times when the grasshopper is a burden, and the observation of slight necessary civilities towards people I dislike leaves me frantic and murderous. When the world seems stacked with fools and one can no longer suffer them, when one's life is rotten music played by a rotten mechanical contrivance. At one time such moods led me to drink

enough whisky to wash a tramcar—anything to get unconscious sleep. Now I go back to my desert island and to nature. I lie naked in the sun or in the water of the stream. I hear no cackle. I see nothing but the blue above me. And solitude, silence and the sun cast out the devil.

"At first I came here for just an hour or two at a time. But at this moment I have been here for four days and three nights consecutively. My servants believe I am in London, partly perhaps because I told them I was going there. During that time I have worn no clothes, eaten nothing but uncooked fruit, drunk nothing but water, owed nothing to civilization but one blanket, which I have not used, a pipe and its concomitants, a volume of Tolstoi and writing materials. (Tolstoi, by the way, is an artist and an apostle, but he is also a blighter.) I have lost (only temporarily, I trust) any desire for alcohol. I am at peace with all mankind including those composers whom I most hate. I am rested. I am in accord with nature.

"Now I can go back for a while, and I am going back tonight. My servants believe that I return by the late train, after they are all in bed. But before I go back I write this to offer you my example as your one chance of salvation.

"The nearer the pulpit, the further from God! Do as I have done. Wake naked at night with the stars above you, and you may come to that sense of proportion which is the base of humor and of religion. Read your 'Sartor Resartus' again. Set the breadth and depth of the sun against the formulas of your creed. Study a small bug in the grass and wonder whether he may not matter more than you in the scheme of things. Above all, forget the little bug-house poets who flatter you into thinking that your armchair interest in bosh on hand-made paper indicates an original and unconventional mind. Get rid of the bats in your belfry. Get rid of your chains, and the bandage on your eyes, and the opiate in your brain. Be religious as I am.

"P.S. 'Ware ants. They bite like sin. I cleared them all out of here before I started."

In the heat of the moment Basil considered the letter insolent, even from an old friend. That reference to the mechanical piano-player, for instance, was quite unnecessary. How could a man of irregular life and unorthodox opinions venture to tackle an ordained priest on the subject of religion? How could a great (though in some respects erroneous) thinker like Tolstoi be described as a blighter? Dalston's discovery was no discovery at all. It was as old as the hills. What did it all amount to? A rather bad-tempered man who let himself be tremendously upset by the merest trifles, and then drank whisky to excess, and found benefit from a few days of vegetarian diet, sun-baths and a rest-cure. That was all there was to it, and it was quite commonplace. It was precisely what anybody with any medical knowledge would have expected.

This verdict would be dispatched to Dalston in due course. Meanwhile there were various parish matters. He called upon the vicar to express a conscientious opinion, and he was snubbed—delicately and gently snubbed but still snubbed. He was no sooner back at his rooms than a parishioner—an old lady with the brains of a hen and with much the same vociferousness—called to say that she had been unable to distinguish between his sermon of the previous evening and flat atheism. She had felt it her duty to utter one word of warning. She was only a poor old woman, but the Scripture said that out of the mouths of babes and sucklings, as Mr. Strode would remember.

All was not well with Chalkdene. There had been a burglary of Miss Pettigrew's house last night. She had lost some very valuable articles, and the thief had not been caught, so that it might happen at the old lady's house also, at any moment now. Basil gathered that she attributed these things to his own subversive influence. Then came an anonymous post-card, referring to genuflections as "antics," and asking Mr. Strode why he did not go over to Rome at once. Mr. Strode's shoe-lace came untied publicly, and in retying it he broke it. Mrs. Barrow sent up toast at luncheon that was as hard as her own unregenerate heart.

By the parcel-post, at two o'clock, there came another missive from Dalston, a book this time, a book in light orange covers, by a German, on sun-bathing. It was crowded with pictures that aptly symbolized (as Basil thought) the final dilemma which our paradoxical civilization was so rapidly approaching. There were pictures of what, at first, appeared to be savages in the South Sea Islands, but, on closer inspection, were highly civilized young persons disporting themselves naked among pine-forests. There were pictures of permanently waved young women, with carefully arranged flowers in their hair, performing ecstatic physical exercises on the seashore. There were pictures of equally well-barbered and equally ecstatic young gentlemen leaping naked over sunlit snow-fields on skis. But those were rather chilly, he thought.

There was one picture where the rebels against civilization seemed to be crawling in and out of a vast mud pie, like hilarious lizards. This almost primeval picture was called "The Mud-Wallow." There was another picture in which the

exponents of the new return to Nature looked as if they had quietly taken the place of the Greek figures in a public park, and were holding their breath lest you should discover the change. There were others in which they looked like frogs, posing for the camera, of course, but considerably more at ease in that less exacting rôle. The very German rhapsody of the letter press—"how proudly is the sunlight from the manly chest reflected"—was hardly supported by the art of the photographs. All too often the illustrations brought to Basil's mind the poor "forked radishes" of "Sartor Resartus." He knew nothing of this new continental craze; and, at first, he was a little appalled. He wondered if the modern world was really going mad. He read the remarks of the author on "The Mud-Wallow" twice, the second time with a marked German accent, which made it more effective:

"*Out of pure unbounded joy of body, and love of Nature, I used to hurl myself in wet weather prone on the earth, naked, in soft, muddy ground. Thus was born my idea of 'The Sporting Mud Bath.' And, strange to say, this opened the way back to Nature, even to those whose hearts had been all too closely shut through an unhappy upbringing. There was always a noise of ungovernable merriment at this spot. The warm tenacious mass stuck to our skin. We tumbled ourselves into the mud, kneading it with our whole bodies*"—Basil didn't like the phrase—"*and it made us strong and shapely. All our ideas were turned right round. Ask yourselves, my happy sunshine friends, and even today you will not be able to say which was finer: to go slowly into the mud, dirtying your clean skin, or to push each other in bodily.*"

But what really made Basil sit up was the English editor's introduction to the book, in which a famous dignitary of his own church was quoted. "The author of this book," said Dean Finch, "is a bit of a fanatic, *but it will do good*. I am in favor of publishing."

Now Basil had great faith in this particular luminary of his church, and, moreover, Dalston had scrawled sardonically at the side of the dean's remark, "I wish the photographer had got *him*!" Basil resented this. Dean Finch was a thoughtful person; and Dalston didn't seem to see that the dean was really supporting what was best in Dalston's own gospel. The mud-wallow, of course, was extravagant, but not the sunlight treatment, of which science had been telling us so much lately. There was a good deal in all that; and he began to turn the pages of "Man and Sunlight" with a new sympathy, since it had received the dean's blessing. It is true that, when Mrs. Barrow brought the coffee in, Basil hastily dropped his napkin over the picture of those light young ladies and gentlemen, dancing an innocent ring of roses in one of the glades of Eden. "Happy was their laughter," as the author said, "and there were harmony and sunshine in their hearts." But such things, Basil felt, were for a more exalted stage of civilization than Mrs. Barrow had yet reached. The sunlight treatment in itself, of course, was excellent.

There was a new kind of glass that might be put in his bedroom window. But the book firmly repudiated such feeble makeshifts. The sun-bather was not to skulk behind screens if he desired to regain his natural glory. He must be free to "catch the wild-goat by the hair"; yes, even the great Victorian poet supported that "back to Nature" impulse, on occasion; and Basil was insidiously drawn into a train of thought that surprised himself. It was to have more than surprising consequences. He still condemned Dalston's letter; but he condemned it now for a different reason.

Dalston was a prosperous lawyer, with a practice which he delegated chiefly to subordinates. He was also a landowner, in a small way, and he could satisfy a whim by erecting a palisade round what he called his private desert-island. But it was unreasonable to tell a poor curate in lodgings to do the same thing, although—well—well—he would go out for a walk instead. He paused a moment before his book-shelves to select a companion—one of the slim books of recent verse which Dalston had described in his crude way as "bug-house poetry." "Bug-house," he understood, was American slang for "lunatic."

An American professor who once stayed at Helmstone for the summer had given him some really interesting information of that sort. It might be compared with our own "bee in the bonnet." Any insect, to an American, was a "bug"; but they usually "geared things higher" in America, owing to the size of their country; and so they magnified the English metaphor and spoke of "bats in the belfry." But it was just like Dalston to condemn these books as—what had he called them in his last letter?—"the little passports of pseudo-modernity."

Basil, himself, had often been baffled by the elderly critics who, in their frantic anxiety not to fall behind the age, had advised him to take these odd productions seriously. But, in a sense, it was his duty to keep up with the times, in their artistic developments, and it involved no mental fatigue. Half an hour a week, at tea-time, was all that he usually spent on it, and it enabled him to keep abreast of what the bright young people were doing and thinking. It was most unreasonable of Dalston to criticize this. Dalston was always crying out against conventions; and yet, as soon as one or

two of the bright young people (by no means so dazzingly young either) really did attack the duller conventions of our literature, and go to the expense of producing an entirely new kind of work on hand-made paper, Dalston began to talk of the convention of unconventionality and "bosh."

Almost at random, and very much as (according to Darwin) butterflies choose their mates, he selected a slim book—his latest acquisition—in a cover startlingly patterned with lozenges of red and yellow. It was entitled "Leap-Frog." One had to admit that there was a piquancy, even in their titles, which was lacking in Browning's "Paracelsus" and Arnold's "Thyrsis." It had a natural attraction for the young. He slipped it into his pocket and set out, unconscious of what awaited him, for the great adventure of his life.

CHAPTER II

Away on the downs, in a remote spot where the cultivated land spread its last fields, Double Dick sat on a bank and turned over the collection of rags that Thorn, the shepherd, had brought up with him.

Thorn drove the central stake into the ground, and lashed on to it the crosspiece which was to extend the arms of a scarecrow.

"Them arms look to you too long?" said Thorn to that other scarecrow—the ragged man on the bank.

"A bit of jut-out at the end of the sleeves won't do no harm," said Double Dick. "If you has no objections, Muster Thorn, this here's a better hat nor mine, and a better coat nor mine."

"So I'd reckoned," said Thorn, "but felt a delicacy in putting it forward. It's not the hat that it was before it got into the chaff-cutter three years back, but they used good stuff in the days when that were made." He picked up the coat and surveyed it critically. "There you are again," he said, "Muster Bloxham had that coat twenty year, for so he told me when he give it me for this job. Ah, it took things easy at first, did that coat—same as we humans when we're young."

"Sundays?" suggested Double Dick.

"Aye, and market days. And then it got past it, and he worked it cruel hard every day and all weathers for eight years. Lately it's been sort of resting. That setter-bitch of his had it to lay on and her pups worried it a deal, but that were good stuff too. Well, there it is. Pitch me over your own coat and hat and put them on instead; and you'll look a better man and I'll build a better scarecrow."

Double Dick made the exchange with alacrity.

"Mind you," said Thorn, as he placed the scarecrow's trousers *in situ* and stuffed them out with bracken, "mind you, Double Dick, it's Farmer Bloxham's interests as I'm acting in. Wouldn't be honest otherwise. But worst clothes make best scarecrows. There's a smell of beer on this coat of yours as would ... Well, well, find us a niceish bit of chalk. I shall want that by'n'by."

Double Dick heard all disquisitions on morality without interest and undertook all work with reluctance. But a lump of chalk was lying against his foot and this is a give-and-take world. He picked it up wearily, threw it across to the old shepherd and reclined on the bank again.

As Thorn went on with his work he glanced from time to time at Double Dick, as an artist glances at his model. He trimmed a big swede with his knife and fixed it securely on the central pole. He whitened the front half with chalk except for two circles for the eyes, a triangle for the nose, and a crescent for the mouth. Fronds of withered fern represented the hair, and were held in place by the hat. He turned up the coat collar to make the neck more realistic. He fastened to the back of the figure the windmill arrangement that gave a continuous clack and croak in a light breeze. And then Thorn stood back a few yards to survey the finished work. Double Dick sat up and also looked at it with interest.

There was a moment's silence and then Double Dick said with simple conviction:

"Gord! It's me."

"It ain't unlike," the artist admitted. "Only that's got to work, that has. Ain't often we sees you three miles away from The Deliverance."

"When there ain't no job for me in Chalkdene, I've got to come and look for one." He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Picnic party up there—ten or a dozen of 'em. One of 'em came into Reed's for sugar what they'd forgot, and so I heard. Likely they'll be sick of carrying them tea-baskets, and if I gives a hand with them back to Helmstone that ought to be worth a shilling."

"I see," said the shepherd, which in this case did not necessarily mean, "I believe." Double Dick may have been so called because his real name was Richard Richardson. There may have been an allusion to the shuffling trot with which he would sometimes perform an accelerated errand. There was most certainly a reference to the fact that Richard Richardson was not a man of single purpose.

He was not a tramp. If he walked, and still more, if he trotted, it was with a view to remuneration. He preferred to remain in Chalkdene where he was well known and universally disrespected. Permanent residents employed him occasionally for work that did not demand intelligence, honesty or personal cleanliness. Visitors gave him coppers because he was, they alleged, "a character." In the winter by arrangement he slept in the corner of a barn or stable, and in return chopped as little wood as he thought the farmer would stand. In the present glorious weather, he slept frequently and slept anywhere.

We all have our special gift and Double Dick's gift was that he could drink a certain small quantity of paraffin with mustard in it without being ill. The exhibition of this gift—of which he probably had the monopoly—had earned him many a pot of beer at The Deliverance. He had one relative, a crippled brother who held an ecclesiastical appointment with a regular salary—he was organ-blower at St. Margaret's, made and mended nets for the fishermen, and lived decently at Helmstone. At one time this brother had responded not ungenerously to Double Dick's assertion—he would walk over from Chalkdene to make it—that brothers should help one another, by which he meant that John Richardson should finance Richard Richardson's insobriety.

"And then," Double Dick would recount, "that damn curate came interfering between blood-relations." In other words, Basil Strode had advised the organ-blower not to waste any more money on a worthless reprobate, and the advice had been strictly followed. "Setting brother again' brother," said Double Dick. "That's nice work for a man o' Gord, I don't think. Ah, and he'll answer for it at the last day too! And he won't have to wait till then if I get a half a quarter of a chance."

And Destiny had freakishly decided that the required eighth of a chance was to be forthcoming.

It was perfectly true that it was the picnic party that had brought Double Dick up onto the downs, but since his interest in it was not precisely as he had described, he waited until the shepherd had gone off to his work.

Double Dick then made his way upward to that little hollow where he had seen the picnic baskets deposited under the charge of Major Bongline, while the rest of the party went shoreward. And here Double Dick found what he had expected to find. Major Bongline had grown weary of inaction, had decided that there was not a soul in sight and that the picnic baskets were as safe as a church without him, and had strolled off to meet the others on their return. But there was no time to lose.

Double Dick was desperately hungry. For the last two days he had had nothing but beer, and not much beer. He opened the first basket, and started on the first edible that presented itself. It caused him to appeal loudly to the Deity. Paraffin and mustard he might tolerate, but he was sorry he had tried a caviar sandwich. Bath buns now—Helmstone has a shop which is famous for them—Bath buns were safer. He devoured a Bath bun with frantic haste, and at the same time dropped the silver cigarette box into one of the pockets of Farmer Bloxham's old coat and a few teaspoons into another. He kept his eye fixed on the ridge over which the picnic party would shortly be returning.

But, while he watched for danger in one direction, it came upon him from another. He heard its approach, but too late. He found his skinny arm held in a muscular grip, and the rest of the Bath bun dropped from his hand. And the more vibrant tones of Basil Strode's voice—the tones used for complaints about toast or dissenters—were heard:

"What is this, Richardson? You are a thief? I've always suspected it."

Thought (even in Double Dick) is more rapid than light. In less than a second, Double Dick thought of telling a tale, and of what the tale should be, and decided that the simple faith requisite in the audience was wanting in this case. It seemed equally useless to be very penitential and respectful, for this was a hard man who set brother against brother; and on the whole it would be better to say something on a different subject, gain time for consideration, and then see which way the cat jumped.

"You're 'urting my arm," said Double Dick.

"If you try to bolt, you'll be hurt more," said Basil, as he released him. "Come on, now. Turn out your pockets."

When Double Dick had turned them out, Basil Strode went over them and found in them one teaspoon, which he was asked to believe had been over-looked. The curate did not believe it and said so. And then Double Dick lost his temper.

"Think yourself ruddy clever, don't you? What would you do if you was me? You'd do the ruddy same as I've done. Yes,

you ruddy well would. You've got your clothes and your money and your full belly and you don't want nothing. If you was nigh starved as I am, you'd snatch a bit of food where you could. There's no ruddy credit in not taking what you don't want."

"Under no circumstances should I steal," said Basil, firmly. "And cigarette boxes and teaspoons are not food."

"Ho!" said Double Dick, bitterly. "Tell us some more ruddy novelties."

Basil Strode caught him by the arm again, and this time he really did hurt him. He asked Double Dick to keep a civil tongue in his head. And there were tears in the squealing sufferer's eyes as the owners of the stolen property came over the ridge. Salutations and explanations followed.

"Case for the police," said Major Bongline at once, with military precision.

"If you had remained here, as you promised to do," said Mrs. Camp, the founder of the picnic, with severity, "this would never have happened, Major Bongline. As it is, we are very much indebted to you, Mr. Strode. I think it should be for you to decide. We can safely be guided by you."

"That is quite what I think," said Miss Bird.

"And I," said Miss Todmarsh.

"We all do," said a chorus of young ladies, led by Miss Adela Bird.

"Hear, hear!" said Mr. Pepper, a high-spirited young gentleman with symphonic shirt and necktie.

Major Bongline subsided and polished a silver cigarette box on which there were finger-marks.

"Well," said Basil, "I've already given him a bit of punishment for using bad language. You've lost nothing except a bun or so. If he goes to prison, his brother, our organ-blower, and a most respectable man, will feel it far more than he will. He's a worthless brute but—well, shall we give him a warning and one more chance?"

"As a matter of fact—" Major Bongline began, looking up from the cigarette box. But nobody took any notice of him, and he never finished the sentence. Unanimous agreement was given to Mr. Strode's suggestion.

Basil Strode addressed the sinner with manly severity. The ladies looked on approvingly. The Major deliberately—and somewhat rudely—turned his back and went on with his polishing. Mr. Pepper and another young man exchanged the glance of humor.

Double Dick's manner was now subdued. However much he resented the lecture, he was physically afraid of the lecturer. He was quite silent. His head was downcast. His unclean hands held the hat that had been in the chaff-cutter. But his furtive eyes were busy.

When Strode had finished, Double Dick thanked him and thanked the ladies. It would be a lesson to him for the future—and—well, he was sorry that there had been any misunderstanding. They were poor, confused and inadequate words, and as he was speaking them he dropped his hat and picked it up again. And then he slunk away.

But the dropping of the hat was neither confused nor inadequate. He had dropped it exactly where he meant it to go. The way in which he had picked it up did more credit to his dexterity than to the sincerity of his penitence. But nobody noticed it.

He knew of a safe retired spot not far away, where he could sleep and eat in peace. Thither he bent his steps. On reaching it he would remove his hat once more, and take out from it the large Bath bun which he had so skilfully picked up. It was something, as it were, saved from the wreck. But that "half of a quarter of a chance" of getting even with the Rev. Basil Strode seemed to have receded further into the distance. Yet it had never been nearer. It was very near indeed now.

CHAPTER III

Basil Strode swept aside the proffered compliments and thanks. He said with truth that it did not take much of a man to deal with a half-starved weakling like Double Dick.

"But," he said, "I am really glad you thought I did the right thing in letting him go. You see, he's never been in prison yet, though I've no doubt he's deserved it scores of times, and John Richardson would have felt it terribly."

"And now," said Mrs. Camp, "you really must have a cup of tea with us. Without you, we should probably have had none at all."

Basil Strode thanked her, but feared he must be getting on. He had made up his mind to a ten-mile walk that afternoon, and barely four of the ten had been accomplished.

"You're fond of walking?" asked Miss Adela Bird, shyly.

"Oh, very. I always want to go on and on, seeing new country all the time. One of these days I shall be suddenly tempted to do it—right on until Sunday comes round again. Why not?"

Major Bongline, who was annoyed, resisted a temptation to say, "Do!" It had been the merest facetiousness on the curate's part, but the Misses Bird found it interesting.

"I notice that you take one of your new poets with you," said Miss Pansy Bird, who was the Honorary Secretary of the Helmstone Literary Society, and still read Christina Rossetti.

Basil Strode glanced at his side-pocket, and was slightly embarrassed to see that "Leap-Frog" was obtruding its flamboyant title. He wished somehow that he had chosen "Apples of the Moon" by the same author.

"Yes," he said, "one must keep abreast of what is being done."

"I am afraid I am rather old-fashioned," said Miss Bird, with eyes that looked like the dark innocent pansies of her name. "I like youth, and I like the real newness, which always seems to me to be a development out of the old—not a bombshell. But I'm not sure that some of the writers who are claiming those qualities today are as new and young as the elderly critics tell us. I feel surest of my young writers when I don't hear their joints creaking with the strain to be new."

"Isn't that rather the Victorian view, Miss Bird? *Rather* the Victorian view, I think," said Basil, showing his white teeth in the invulnerably superior smile to which his modernity entitled him. He was not an unintelligent man; but he had not really listened.

"Perhaps it is," said Miss Bird, "but—"

Basil interrupted her, as from above, gently and firmly. "We must remember how badly Keats and Shelley were treated in their day, mustn't we?"

"But the Della Cruscans, who were really bad, were sat upon, too, weren't they?" said Miss Bird. "And, after all, your argument would apply to bosh as well as to beautiful things."

"Victorian, Miss Bird, Victorian," said Basil, wagging a playful finger at her. He had never heard of the Della Cruscan poets, but it was one of his principles never to give himself away in such things. "The conventional mind is the enemy, you know, in this country. I always admire that fellow—what's his name—who dedicated his book in those six words: '*To the British Public, these pearls!*' We must think for ourselves. We mustn't be *too* conventional, you know."

"But—that's exactly—I don't want to think what the fashion of the moment and the newspapers tell me I ought to think. At least, I don't want to do it mechanically. And I don't mean what you think I mean," stammered poor Miss Bird, blushing and puzzled at her inability to penetrate that superior armor with a perfectly sound and pointed weapon. The Helmstone debates had not yet taught her that you cannot argue with an alleged "modern" who is so pleased with himself (and so ancient a type) that he waives your own remarks and hears nothing but his own blood purring in his ears.

"Not too conventional," the curate murmured. Then, with the smile of the merciful victor, he changed the subject, and began to talk about tennis.

The change was partly due to the appearance of a small runabout car, lolloping and jerking like a rabbit over the turf on the more or less level ridge of the downs. It was driven by Barbara Lane.

She turned skilfully round a clump of gorse, and pulled up close to the picnic party.

"Sorry I'm late," she called, with a wave of her hand which somehow seemed to include everyone but Basil Strode. "It took me longer than I expected to get the strawberries and cream. Major Bongline, come and help me to unload."

Grinning his delight and looking remarkably like a white-faced cat with a red mustache, that had been dipped in an ash-pit, Major Bongline scrambled to relieve her of rugs, thermos-bottles, baskets of strawberries, and a large pair of marine glasses. These last belonged to the Admiral; and Barbara had been adjured by Miss Pettigrew to bring them for the detailed inspection of ships at sea. Miss Pettigrew had greatly enjoyed looking through those glasses on a former occasion, though it might have been noticed that, while her voice was rapturously describing the details she observed on distant ships, the glasses frequently dipped towards the more personal aspect of things—the little specks of humanity wandering along the coast, or over the gardens behind the coast-guard cottages.

Barbara looked enchanting today, Basil thought, though he seemed only to get glimpses of her profile. It had the distracting effect upon him of being as oblivious of his presence as a wild flower, while it tugged his whole nervous system to attention, as the moon tugs the tides of the sea. He tried to look away from it by talking with forced animation to others; but, although he turned his back upon her, he found himself gradually drifting round and through the party until he stood at her side.

"Barbara," he said, in a low voice, "I hope we are at least friends again."

She looked up, and saw Miss Pettigrew watching them maliciously.

"My dear Basil," she answered, in a voice that could be heard by everyone, "if you won't stay for tea, you really must have one of these delicious strawberries."

She held out a basket to him, and he took one.

"I regard it as a token, a little symbol," he murmured again.

"So would Sir Willoughby Patterne," she replied. "A single berry doesn't make a dish of strawberries and cream. And you will observe that I have withheld the sugar. I hope you are going for a good long walk. All my best thoughts occur to me when I am walking alone on the downs."

"If I were to find you at the other end, I would walk round the world, Barbara."

"You needn't go as far as the waters of Israel, Basil; ten miles or so would be quite enough, if you really thought hard all the way."

"First, Sir Willoughby; then, Naaman, the Syrian," he exclaimed, a little heatedly.

"Not at all, Basil," she laughed. "As usual, you miss the point of my feeble remarks. You are not in the least like a leper. You are already almost as a little child; that's why I gave you the strawberry."

Major Bongline joined them at this unsatisfactory moment, and Barbara continued, a little mockingly, to Basil—as though it were a merely literary discussion:

"Do you remember that delicious poem about a child on the downs?—

> "*Still, still I seem to see her, still*
> *Look up with soft replies,*
> *And take the berries with her hand*
> *And the love with her lovely eyes.*"

"Took both?" chuckled Major Bongline, with military amusement at all such poetical matters. "Took both, eh? Greedy little beggar, eh, what?"

Basil turned away with his nose in the air.

"And how are *you*, Miss Pettigrew?" he said. "I was distressed to hear of your burglary last night. One has come to look upon Chalkdene as a little world apart, where such things don't happen. But, of course, your house on the outskirts of the village must be distinctly lonely at night. I hope it was not a great shock to you."

An acid smile suppressed Miss Pettigrew's sharp features.

"How thoughtful of you to remember my little troubles, Mr. Strode! But I am quite recovered, thank you. Fortunately the burglary took place while I was asleep, so that I was not aware of the burglar's presence. I was as unconscious as I was when I fainted at the harmonium."

"He—but surely the ruffian did not enter your room, Miss Pettigrew?"

"That is exactly what the ruffian did, Mr. Strode. He entered my room and took a number of things from a table at my bedside. He entered by the window. We found the gardener's ladder under the window in the morning, and we found the footmarks. He must have been in a great hurry, for he took everything indiscriminately from just the one table, and then absconded. The police think it can hardly have been a professional burglar. In fact, only spite can account for his having taken some of the things. Two were valuable; the others were of value only to myself."

"It really is too bad," said Pansy Bird, "after the rather jolly prescription the London specialist gave you—pineapple juice before breakfast, and no worries."

Basil Strode was not a humorist; but he suffered, often, from seeing a joke at the wrong moment. The conjunction of a burglary at the bedside with that doctor's prescription of "no worries" tickled him, and he began to laugh. "What *are* you laughing at?" said Miss Pettigrew, with asperity.

"I don't know. I really don't know," said Basil, laughing even more. Then the Misses Bird began to laugh, and Mrs. Camp, then Mr. Pepper swelled the chorus with a sudden high-nosed neighing, and Miss Pettigrew turned and rent him.

"Really, Mr. Pepper, you have a perfectly idiotic laugh. Burglary is not a laughing matter, even if the state of my nerves —"

"Oh, but it wasn't the burglary, Miss Pettigrew," said Mr. Pepper, who was a young man of resource, and, while he was endeavoring to save the situation, Basil Strode, still laughing, swept off his hat in farewell, and made his escape. He was on the ridge of the next down before Miss Camp had a chance to make her usual observation. She wondered when the engagement of Miss Lane to Basil Strode would be announced.

So she made it now, though a little late. Mr. Pepper conceded that Miss Lane was pretty enough, but—unfortunately—was not in his style.

The Major glared at the retreating figure of Basil Strode.

"I suppose," he said, "that's the type of what they call muscular Christianity."

Mrs. Camp wagged a playful finger at him, and asked what they called sentries who deserted their posts. But she helped the Major in his struggles with the spirit-lamp.

The elder Miss Bird, as she unpacked tea-things vigorously, said that it was splendid to see the way Mr. Strode dealt with that brute. "And all," she said, "with the most masterly ease and coolness." She had said it before, but her enjoyment in it was unabated.

"I wished he'd stayed," said her sister simply.

"He would have done if Barbara Lane had urged it," said Miss Pettigrew, maliciously but truly.

Meanwhile Mr. Strode, propelling himself by his own power at the rate of four miles an hour, was trying to recall where he had seen the scientific statement that the sunlight was the dire enemy of all evil microbes. He knew many scientific facts, and they were all derived from unscientific sources. His evening paper often used three or four to fill a column. Thus, and not otherwise, did Mr. Strode learn the difference between volts and amperes, and how much horsepower ran

to waste annually at a waterfall, the name of which he had forgotten.

Certain it was that the glorious sunlight this afternoon was doing him good. He supposed that he was really taking a modified sun-bath, with his clothes on. The parish pin-pricks no longer lacerated him. His behavior towards Double Dick completely satisfied him. And there seemed to be some ladies in his parish at any rate who did not think so badly of him.

And then he looked over the wide sea, and the wide wheat-fields mellowing to harvest, and up at the limitless uncaring blue. And he saw that not only were the parish pin-pricks small, but his satisfaction with his own act and the feminine applause were, if anything, smaller. And he was not really a small-minded man. After all, should he look over Dalston's mad letter again? He had it in his pocket.

He had covered almost half a mile of up and down country when, in the heart of a quite deserted and untilled valley, he came upon a little ruined cottage. The southern wall—on the side of the sea—was down, and there was no roof. Tall grass waved around it, and thick bushes had sprung up in what had once been the living-rooms. Ruins always appealed to him, and he had confided this fact to Dalston a year before. Dalston had replied that his friend's choice of a profession had already indicated such preference. He entered pensively, and sat on a fallen fragment of the wall, gazing southward over some three miles of grass, thyme, poppies, and white chalk, to the end of the valley and the heat-shimmer of the sea. On the north, east and west, the downs rose abruptly from the boundaries of the cottage-garden, and gave fine shelter. The garden had gone back to the wild now; only in a far corner the rosemary remembered the children who had played there.

Yes, here indeed might one be as secure as Dalston in his special enclosure. Here, in far more beautiful surroundings one might go back to nature and drink the sunlight at every pore.

Double Dick removed his eye for a moment from the crack in the wall, behind which he had reposed after his bun, and straightened his back. Unseen, he had watched the parson for the last fifteen minutes, and so far the results had been quite unsatisfactory. The enemy had sat down, had stared at the scene before him in a way that to Double Dick seemed affected, had taken a long letter from his pocket and read it all through, had put the letter back again, and still sat there. There seemed to be nothing to be done. Double Dick shook his head sadly.

And then he heard Mr. Strode exclaim aloud and with determination: "I will! Here goes!"

In a flash Double Dick's eye was back at the crack of observation, and very extreme was his surprise. Mr. Strode was undressing himself rapidly and completely. Stripped, he was a fine figure of a man, as Double Dick admitted. "Gord! He's got shoulders on him," thought Dick to himself.

Basil Strode extended his arms once or twice, felt the warm glow all over him, and then picked his way gingerly over the stones of the ruined cottage until he passed out of sight. The requisite eighth of a chance had come, and Double Dick recognized it. The parson had apparently gone stark staring mad, but this hardly interested Dick. He was interested in revenge, and in clothes and methods of procuring them—good clothes with good things in their pockets, such as a watch and chain, a cigarette-case, a match-box, a sovereign-case, all of precious metal. And the sound as the garments had been flung down had shown Dick that there was plenty of loose silver in the right-hand pocket of the trousers. With extreme care and skill Dick began to reconnoiter.

He located his enemy lying at full length on a couch of moss and wild thyme, his eyes fixed on the little clouds that voyaged slowly across the blue. And presently the eyelids flickered and then closed.

Double Dick moved now with a speed and activity that would have astonished any of his previous employers.

Basil Strode had not actually slept, but he recognized that he was becoming very drowsy. He had had at least half an hour of his sun-bath, and had enjoyed it more than he had thought possible. He seemed possessed of new vigor. His skin

felt fresh and clean. But the heaviness and stickiness of clothes were to be endured again. Only he promised himself that this should not be the last time. He would return here again, and bathe in the sun again. And—yes—he would admit to Dalston that there were gleams of reason in his madness.

He made his way back to the cottage. And there he stood erect, and stared. There was no mistake about it. His clothes had gone; not so much as a shoe-lace was left. All had been stolen. He was as one newly come into the world, for—the phrase came back to him—one brought nothing into the world. The thief might be a mile away, in any direction, and pursuit was hopeless.

Rage passed and dismay followed. If it ever became public knowledge that he had been in this predicament, his career was ended. He saw in imagination a congregation with lips twitching in suppressed mirth as he passed up the aisle, and he wilted under it. He must think, and quickly.

The first thought that occurred to him was not hopeful. If it had happened on the seashore, there would have been less risk of his appearing utterly ridiculous, though a parson without even a bathing-suit would have to be discreet, even then, in his search for help. But, on the seashore, if he could have concealed himself until it was possible to accost some lonely male and explain his predicament, it would have appeared as a more or less normal disaster of the bathing season. The seashore almost seemed to clothe you. It was a very different thing—a dreadful predicament—to be running about naked, in the open country, miles from the sea. It was especially dreadful on the downs, where there were no hedges, and he could be seen for miles if he emerged from his hiding-place. He might have crawled along a hedge, if it had existed, and popped his head up, at the right moment, to ask a suitable passer-by for help. But there was no chance of any such discreet approach here. If he wanted help on the downs he must be blatant and unashamed. The coast seemed to be his only hope, if he could reach it and find that lonely male. They were usually paired off, appallingly so, at Helmstone, in the summer. Still, he might attract the attention of the coast-guard.

Unfortunately, the nearest point of coast was at least two miles away, and the main road, with a constant stream of motorcars, conveying silk-stockinged maidens to and fro, ran parallel with the coast and was an insuperable barrier by daylight. Moreover, there were footpaths over the downs, along which lovers wandered at dusk. He might even run into the picnic party—Mrs. Camp, Miss Bird, and the rest. What an anticlimax to the heroic affair of this afternoon! He could imagine the chuckle of Major Bongline. Still, the coast seemed the best, although he would have to wait till after dark.

And on the heels of dismay came determination. There was no situation so desperate that the will of man might not deal with it. The friendly night would come and bring counsel. He would think out a way. In a few hours, at worst, workers and wanderers would have gone home, and he might venture forth to explore. Quite near, some favoring chance might wait him. If only nobody knew—if only the secret was kept and his dignity with it—then the loss of his clothes and valuables was as nothing.

He was about to settle down for the necessary period of waiting, when, a few yards away from his crumbling wall, he observed a bright patch under a gorse-bush. A wild momentary hope flashed upon him. Could any of his clothes have been dropped there by the thief in the hurry of his flight? He must take the risk of leaving his hiding-place and find out, at once.

He scanned the line of the downs against the sky. There was nobody in sight, but one had to be careful, in these days, of field-glasses, and someone might crest the ridge at any moment. He hastily scurried out on all fours to the gorse-bush, and was petrified with disappointment. The bright patch was no more than the book of new verse in the flamboyant boards. The title, "Leap-Frog," in large red letters seemed to leer at him mockingly as he crouched on his hands and knees staring at it. The thief was no critic, perhaps, but he had undoubtedly dropped it there, and it was all that he had dropped. Basil Strode crawled twice round the gorse-bush to make quite sure. He peered anxiously into its withered heart. There was nothing else—nothing. So he scurried into the shelter of his ruined walls, taking the forlorn relic of his modernity with him. He had a hiding-place, at least, and sunlight, and the book would perhaps distract his thoughts till the dusk came, and he could really do something. It was not till he settled down in a well-screened corner and began to turn the pages that the irony of his discovery seemed to annoy him.

But he was saved from considerable anxiety for the moment by giving his attention to it; for he had no sooner begun to examine the verses than three young women of Helmstone surmounted the distant ridge called Little Barn Down, and advanced gaily towards the ruined cottage, which lay directly between them and the village. All three of them sang in the choir like nightingales, and chattered in the village like magpies. Even if he had known of their approach, he could have

done nothing, unless he bolted across the open country in full view. He had already chosen the best-concealed corner of his ruin, unless he preferred to crawl into the tall grass, of which several great clumps whispered near him. It was just as well, therefore, that he should be spared five minutes of mental torture; and that, as the village girls came down the slope with their baskets of blue cornflowers and poppies, the unfortunate curate should be reposing his snowy limbs on a sunlit bed of bracken, and devoting his attention to the solemn pages of "Leap-Frog."

One section of the book was entitled "Locked Bedrooms." It contained a "Pink Room," a "Yellow Room" and a "Blue Room"—one poem to each. Basil tried the Pink Room first. It went thus:

Pink sandals and pink feet
Pink columbines that fleet
    With fluffy muslin cries
    Like twittering butterflies
Through flowers that croon and bleat,
    Because the cricket said,
    Harlequin is dead.

My stockings once were pink.
    Let all the ladders rip!
    Let tears, like candles, drip!
My heart's a skating rink
    Where gnats go round and round,
Like spelling-bees in hell,
    Making a grass-green sound,
Since the gray cricket said
    (What *is* that pale blue smell?)
    Harlequin is dead.

"It eludes—it certainly eludes one," Basil thought, "but in circumstances that make concentration so difficult"—he delivered a blow with his book at a wasp that seemed to be obsessed with a desire to settle on his unprotected body—"it would be unfair to say that there is nothing to seize in these poems, eccentric as they appear at first sight. Hasn't a famous critic said that even Shakespeare was probably thought to be mad by the conventional persons of his day, when he used phrases like 'the whips and scorns of time'? We must remember how Debussy was misunderstood. One *does* catch glimpses, in spite of Dalston—"

The young women were considerably nearer now. If a skylark had not been singing madly overhead, Basil would probably have caught some of their chatter.

He turned a page and read "The Yellow Room."

The Princess lolls at ease,
    Among forgotten sins,
A dragon clasps her knees,
    A Queen with forty chins,
Looks down at her. *Chinese.*

The bed is like a bun,
    (So full of little crumbs
That she can never sleep).
    The kettle hums and hums.
And hums. *Uriah Heep.*

O humming-bird of brass,
    Where have we met before?
The sunset, like an ass,
    Neighs through the open door.

What of her eyeballs? *Glass.*

Nebuchadnezzar knew
    Those chins in other days.
The Fourth Dimension, too,
    Is bulging through her stays.
Where *did* we meet? *The Zoo.*

Basil felt vaguely irritated.

"This really does not seem very helpful," he thought; but, as there was nothing else to do for the moment, he turned to the "Blue Room."

Arabesque is the theme
of the Blue Room.

One white star in the water jug
Kisses the nose of the lapping pug.

He curls through the scheme
of the Blue Room.

His rose-leaf tongue in a fat black dream,
Licks that mirrored star like cream.

The hair-brushes gleam
in the Blue Room.

Meek silver brushes for big, bald brows,
The Colonel snores and dreams of cows.

Arabesque is the dream
of the Blue Room.

But wide awake, at the Colonel's side,
Croons mad Jemima, his rice-faced bride.

And blinks at the moon
in the Blue Room.

She lies and blinks with her skinny feet
Twittering over the Polar sheet.

Jews flow like a stream
through the Blue Room.

They brush their beards with her silver brushes.
They fade like ghosts through the gooseberry bushes.

Their dark eyes gleam
in the Blue Room.

Over the housetops flitters the bat
Kee-kweeking, "Babylon town lies flat."

There's a big black beam
in the Blue Room.

Babylon's gone, and Helen of Troy!
But Jemima waits for the gardener's boy.

Things aren't what they seem
in the Blue Room.

Her father, the Duke, though his health is poor,
Watches all night for her paramour.

He gapes like a bream
at the Blue Room.

All night long in his water-proof,
He clings with his nails to the slippery roof.

Like a Demon
over the Blue Room.

But his exquisite Chinese nails, alack,
Are a manicured decalogue, bending back,

As he slips, slips
over the Blue Room.

Like a Gaga Gargoyle, crack! He is gone!
Slap over the edge—to Babylon!

Right over the eaves
of the Blue Room.

Bang on the head of the gardener's boy
And sends *him* home—to Helen of Troy!

There's a long white scream
from the Blue Room.

And the Colonel snores, but Jemima lies
With fifteen Helens in her eyes,

And her twittering feet
in the Blue Room.

And each of her toes, like the key of a spinet
Chirrups as wild as a love-sick linnet.

For the gardener's boy
in the Blue Room.

Till the moon grows blue, and the sheet grows blue,
And her feet grow blue in the blueness, too.

Blue, blue as the theme
of the Blue Room.

"Really," the Reverend Basil Strode muttered to himself aloud, "this book may be unconventional, but for a man bereft of all his clothes, it *is* rather a White Elephant."

He closed the book, and thought for a moment. Locked Bedrooms, indeed! He had a vision of his own comfortable bedroom—the can of hot water waiting for him, the towel neatly folded over the top. In the sitting-room below, the table was laid for tea. The silver urn was hissing. There was honey in the comb and brown bread—

What on earth was he to do? With an exclamation that sounded far from clerical (sounded, in fact, almost like Dalston) he suddenly flung "Leap-Frog" right over the farther wall of his hiding-place. He would not have confessed it to Dalston; but, aided by the sudden shock of this predicament, the ruffian had already conquered on the question of "bug-house poetry."

What was the next? he asked himself a little acidly. He was to study a small bug in the grass, was he? and get what Dalston called religion. For a moment he had an eery sense of having been taken by the scruff of the neck (almost as he had taken Double Dick) and being compelled, for his own good, to do all kinds of things that he did not like; an eery sense, too, of being watched, through the great blue lens of the sky, by a Gargantuan humorist. He felt like (what did *Sartor* call the naked biped?) a little forked radish, running about under an immense microscope. Rubbish! There was nothing for it! He would get up like a man, and stride across the downs, and explain his plight to the first person he met —

He actually rose to his feet with that intention when, to his horror, he heard silvery feminine voices—three of them—all talking at once, passing behind the biggest wall of his ruin. Instantly he flung himself down, and crawled like a snake into the thickest and tallest clump of grass.

He recognized the voices. One of them belonged to Laura Smith, the daughter of a churchwarden, a peppery little upholder of the proprieties, who had recently been agitating the local council with purple-faced protests against the visitors who walked through the village street in their bathing-suits. The three voices were obviously discussing the matter.

"Of course," said Laura Smith, "we mustn't be *too* conventional." (Basil winced in his hiding-place.) "I don't believe in being very Victorian, and all that. But if you give them an inch, as father says, you've got to give them an ell, and you don't know what they'll be doing next."

"I think he's quite right. It's time somebody stood up for decency," replied the vicar's nursery governess. "I say, Laura, let's explore the ruined cottage. Somebody told me the old man who lived here used to hide his money away in all sorts of odd corners. We might find something. Come on. Let's have a treasure-hunt."

The curate's veins curdled. He didn't feel at all like buried treasure; though, if he were discovered, the story would all too certainly be what these creatures would call "priceless."

"No, come along. We shall be late for tea. We're late already," called the daughter of the leading local dissenter, and to Basil's infinite relief the advice was taken. The footsteps thudded into silence over the turf, and in half a minute the chatter had died away in the distance also. But five minutes had passed before Basil's heart resumed its normal beat. The narrow escape had brought his predicament home to him. It was madness to think of emerging in daylight if he was to remain at Helmstone. He must think, think, think of what exactly he was to do when the friendly dark arrived with what he hoped would be his opportunity. This was a matter in which he could not waive the difficulties in his usual manner. There might be very great difficulties—even after dark. He could foresee that. He was not debating the conventions with Miss Bird now. He must concentrate. He must think.

CHAPTER IV

The beauty of the rules of art is, of course, that they are dictated by Nature, and that Nature herself secretly observes them. Basil Strode had returned to Nature with a vengeance; and Nature having plunged him into the thick of his adventures, according to the best Horatian maxim, was now giving him plenty of time to pick up the threads of his past. After an hour of alternate panic and resignation, it was clear enough that nothing could be done until the arrival of the friendly dark. As soon as his thoughts could break away from his immediate predicament, they took wing for Barbara Lane; leaving the bodily part of him to make itself as comfortable as it might under the shelter of his ruined wall. The Sussex downs were dry to the point of drought, and the stones radiated the heat all round him. He had nothing to complain of on that score. But Barbara—was her "no" really final?

Everything had seemed so hopeful. He was a poor curate, it was true; but he had excellent prospects. Uncle William was in a very weak state of health. He lived upon curries, and he always got bronchitis in November. Each bout was worse than the last, and he had always refused to leave his club, and spend his winters abroad. Besides, there was his rich Aunt Sarah. Her health was comparatively robust; but she was so anxious to get him married that she was ready to settle a considerable part of her property on him at the first bob-major of the church-bells. There was no rival in the field, he felt sure; but, though, in any gathering, Barbara and he always drifted into a conversation of their own, that faint amused smile—No, it was not hopeful. Was it his voice? Was it his clerical collar? A girl didn't marry a man that she secretly laughed at.... If she ever heard of his present predicament, he supposed that she would be even more amused. He writhed at the thought of appearing ridiculous in her eyes.

How sphinxlike even the simplest of these modern young women were! The nineties had decided that they were "sphinxes without secrets"; but his modernism had ruddy become pre-ninety. You never really knew what Barbara was thinking about. What she actually said was no real clue to it, though once or twice, in her silences, he felt that they understood one another. He remembered one such silence on the afternoon of his proposal. But it had led to exactly the opposite of what he had hoped. He wondered if, all the time, she had been suppressing her amusement; if, after his departure, she had broken into peals of laughter, with the Admiral, over their dinner-table. The thought stung him, and he flushed. He was vain enough; but, where Barbara Lane was concerned, he was horribly sensitive, and his opinion of himself was not exalted.

He had conveyed, perhaps, a rather different impression on the day of his rejection; for, in many ways, his apparent conceit was as merely self-protective as the clothes of which he had now been robbed. He had walked home with Barbara from a tennis-party at Mrs. Camp's; and she had taken him through her own garden to see how excellently the village carpenter had converted a beer-barrel into a nine-doored dove-cote. Under Barbara's directions it had been thatched with straw, and set upon a pole of silver birch, to the left of the summer-house. They sat on garden-chairs, outside the summer-house for half an hour, watching the snowy fantailed pigeons, as they fluttered around their new home.

"I like them better than doves," she said. "Doves always look slightly soiled."

He laughed; and they talked of the best way of turning pink hydrangeas blue. Then, without any warning, he seized her hand, and said:

"Barbara, I want you to marry me."

She looked him straight in the eyes, and remarked, with cool detachment, and that faintly amused smile again—

"But *I'm* not a pink hydrangea."

He was hurt. Even if he were ultimately to be smiled out of existence, he thought that a little emotion was indicated now.

"Barbara," he said, "I am very serious. I may not be romantic, but..."

"On the other hand," she replied, "I am seldom or never serious; but I am intensely romantic. I am also bleakly realistic; and you will never understand romance or realism, or poetry of life, or even eggs and bacon, till you give up ..."

"Give up what?"

"Oh, I don't know. Give up reading that absurd literary weekly of yours to begin with."

"What on earth has that to do with ..."

"Oh, nothing. But it has something to do with poor little Miss Bird."

"My dear Barbara, am I, or are you, crazy? What has Miss Bird, and the distinguished pages of the literary ..."

"You remember the 'distinguished' poem that was quoted in the copy you lent to me?

> "They ordered bacon
> And eggs at seven.
> At eight o'clock,
> There was nobody down.
> Only the coffeepot
> Stood on the table."

"Yes, but what possible ..."

"Do you also remember what your 'distinguished' weekly said about it? '*The old-fashioned reader who would dismiss as insignificant this new and vital work (a striking example of the sharp-edged imagisme with which the more adventurous of our younger writers are experimenting today)*'—you see, Basil, I have it by heart, words, tone, cadence and all—'*forgets that every object, even the coffeepot on the table, has a perimeter which not only encloses that object, but also subtends a physical and metaphysical otherness that includes the whole of the rest of the universe. Such work, therefore, is more truly significant of ultimate reality than all the pantings after God of the Victorians.*'

"Do you know why that has haunted me ever since I read it?"

"I do not see what on earth—" Basil began, but he looked a little guilty.

"Because," said Barbara, and now she really did seem serious, "you used those absurd words yourself, exactly as if they were your own, to squash poor Miss Bird at the last meeting of the Poetry Circle; and you know perfectly well that you were squashing a perfectly genuine love of simple and true things in a perfectly genuine little woman, and that the words you borrowed for the purpose were muddle-headed and insincere drivel. I'm not a superior person, Basil, and I went straight home and read Longfellow's 'Hymn to the Night.' I also lent her one of Andrew Lang's books, in which he praises it up to the skies, to take your bad taste out of her mouth. Andrew Lang, as I reminded her, wasn't a fool; and, if it's a question of sophistication, I'd back my brindled Andrew against all the conceited scribblers of that jolly weekly of yours, and against all the curates they mislead into pseudo-intellectual snobbery, too, for that matter."

"But, my dear Barbara, you surely wouldn't refuse to marry me on literary grounds!"

"They are not literary grounds. They are human grounds. Miss Bird, as I told you, is unlike your 'distinguished' anonymities in having a few quite genuine beliefs; and you used the cheap phrases of a pseudo-metaphysical charlatan, in a precious literary weekly, to snub her. I saw the hurt look on her face long after you had wiped your boots on her perfectly sincere love of certain perfectly true and simple things. I walked home with her; and it was in her eyes when we said good night."

"My dear Barbara, I must really introduce you to one of Strindberg's plays which I am quoting next Sunday in my sermon."

"My dear Basil"—she leaped to her feet—"I prefer the society of my intellectual equals. I'm late for lunch already; and next Sunday I shall stay at home, or go for a walk with Miss Bird and discuss Christina Rossetti—whom, incidentally, she is quite right in thinking a great writer. You have chosen to label her aspirations after beauty and goodness 'pantings after God.' Very well. I don't go to church to hear a high-brow Anglican curate quoting a Scandinavian lunatic, any more than I go to my hair-dresser's to hear a Christy minstrel reciting the Apostles' Creed. I know that it's all very noble and distinguished and broad-minded and generally newspaperish. You might have been brought up in a seminary for young ladies of fashion. Good-by"—and she darted off, ejaculating as she ran, unless his startled ears deceived him, "Gosh! These curates!"

So it all seemed rather bewildering. At one moment he seemed to have been attracted by her feminine conservatism; at the next he felt curiously out of date; for Barbara belonged to the very latest generation. He didn't know whether he was modern or antique. In either case, it appeared he was a fraud. An unsuspected side of Barbara Lane's character had been revealed. Usually, she was reserved. He had never heard her swear before, though he had once seen her almost as indignant about the ill treatment of a horse in the village street. But, strangely enough, he felt that her devastating outburst at the end of the interview was more comforting than the faint smile with which she usually met his attentions.

The sun was going down now. The sea-gulls were circling like rose-petals over the opalescent Channel. He could hear the chatter of the jackdaws as they wheeled about the chalk cliffs in the distance. He could hear, with his mind's ear, too, another kind of chatter, vaguely menacing him. A shiver ran over his body, with the first cool breath of evening. Perhaps it had been rather mean of him to make Miss Bird look ridiculous. She had a very good chance of being avenged now. The sunset was beautiful, like Barbara. But his literary journal had told him that sunsets (and even beauty) were out of date; and his "utter nakedness" was of a kind that could trail no clouds of glory about it. His terrestrial home seemed almost as far away as the celestial, and he was sundered from it by more formidable obstacles. Perhaps he really had been mean.—Perhaps he had been stripped in more ways than one, and of more than one kind of clothing. Elvish, if not impish, hands had been at work. The downs grew vast in the dusk. The few traces of civilization died out. There was not even the tinkling of a sheep-bell. The bare solitudes of the flint-men swept around him. Over his crumbling wall, as the time for action drew near, he surveyed carefully the long slopes, and the swelling crests, the dark circle of a dew-pond in the trough of the valley; and on the ridge of the Tye, the dusky barrow of the forgotten warriors who had left their bones there fifteen centuries ago. From a smooth stretch of pale green sky in the still smoldering west the evening star delicately and distinctly winked at him. The sunset had been angry; but now, like Barbara, it seemed to be faintly, distantly, amused again.

CHAPTER V

A magic opal light still shimmered and twinkled for innumerable miles over the dark green wrinkles of the sea as Basil Strode stole out of his hiding-place. He stared at it like a man awakening from a confused dream, and then an odd thing happened. Despite his predicament, he felt a swift thrill of joy in the beauty of the night, a joy such as only escaped prisoners and uncaged animals feel. He did not think or reason about it; but he felt strangely urged to wander farther from his shelter and drink in his new-found freedom more recklessly. At this hour, indeed, he ran little more risk of being seen than would give a spice of novelty to the adventure. His hunger, too, was sharpening; and he soon found himself on the way to the scene of the picnic, which diverted him only a little from his path to the sea.

The fragrant dew-drenched grass wet him to the knees as he walked up the lower slope of the valley. He was pleasurably alive to it; he was alive indeed to a thousand things which would usually have presented themselves in vain. That was what it must have been like in Eden—a quickness, an exquisite alertness.... He pulled hard on the rein of his thoughts. Really, this was very ridiculous. Really, he must be a little mad, he said to himself. How would all this appear in the cold clerical light of the world he had left behind him? His mind was working in a way that led—he had always believed—either to police-courts or to private asylums. He had read of such cases, and thought them almost too absurd to be true. For a moment, beads of perspiration broke out on his forehead, and quite genuine alarm seized him. Was he behaving sanely?

His question seemed to come from a great distance, like another question that he remembered asking himself at a bump-supper—"Am I sober?" But it was powerless, now as then, to affect the situation. It only frightened him for a moment. Then—a still more extraordinary thing happened. He suddenly reached the crest of the slope. It was one of the highest points of the downs. Forty miles of moonlit country swept around him. He gasped for joy and stretched up his arms to the sky as if to pull it down to him. It was only a blind gesture, but—as he stood, white against the dark blue starry spaces, on the thyme-clad summit of the hills—he looked like the statue of a Greek athlete praying before some Olympic contest; or Endymion, perhaps, on Mount Latmos. But the words that came to his lips were fragments of a sentence that he had once described as blasphemous—when Dalston had quoted it. "I believe in Wagner and Beethoven! And in the author of 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'!"

The gorse-grown hollow lay almost immediately below him. But it was a miraculous glen tonight, crowned with a mass of dull gold, and lighted by the moon for the revels of Titania. Puffs of warm almondlike scent reached him from its great spikes of blossom. He moved towards it, alive to every head of clover, every little thicket of thyme, under his unused feet—a young Lysander, wandering away from the white walls of Athens into the enchanted country of the "Midsummer Night's Dream." Between the perilous thorns he kept carefully to a stair of heather-clumps that wound through bronze bracken and dark green ferns, down to the scene of the picnic. But his point of view had changed. He was approaching the little world of picnics from the outside, stealing back across the fringes of fairyland from a kingdom of beauty and wonder. He would not have been overwhelmingly surprised to see elfin armies valiantly storming the citadels of those tall foxgloves, or riding away with their booty along the white road of a star-beam. But, though he had come to look for it, he would have been very greatly surprised to see a substantial basket, forgotten by his late fellow mortals.

He was surprised to the verge of delight even by what he did find—a large crust of brown bread and an apple, enough to blunt the edge of his hunger, keen as it was. He feasted royally, reclining on his purple couch of thyme, and gazing across a softly waving mile of dark red clover to the broad lane of liquid silver that the moon had now drawn across the sea. He decided that, early in the morning, before tackling the coast-guard, he must go down and bathe.

In the meantime, he might as well sleep, and he had already settled in his mind where he would pass the night. It was an unusually warm summer, but the air had been washing round him with increasing coolness after sundown, and a slight shiver warned him that he was not yet inured to the habits of Tahiti. On the crest of the next down there stood a dark mound which he knew to be a haystack, and he made his way towards it with pleasant anticipations, dipping down into a fragrant whispering valley of dusky golden mustard-flower, and up again with long strides towards that elfin hostelry with the peaked roof of straw-thatch. Two lines of verse about a tramp who had also lodged at the Sign of the Beautiful Star, and pitied those who had not, came into his mind as he neared it:

> "Never slept in haystacks when the dawn came oversea, sir,
> Hollowed out a nest, and closed the doorway with a clump."

He had quoted those lines to Barbara, and she had replied, "The sooner you do it, the better, Basil." He thought it rather cutting at the time. But it was an admirable suggestion now, and he blessed the poet for making it. In a few minutes he had followed the first part of the instructions, hollowed out a cavity about three feet from the ground, lined it with bracken, and ensconced himself in it deliciously. The warmth and the sensation of absolute freedom that came to him in making this choice of lodging, with no more care than that of a wild creature settling down for the night, thrilled him like a strain of music. It was, perhaps, as crazy an adventure as had ever befallen a member of his dignified profession. But, in spite of all his fears (and for the moment these had vanished), he was—yes, he must confess—he was really enjoying it.

He felt extremely youthful. He looked up at the stars with a momentary return of a feeling that he had not known since childhood—a feeling of familiar faces bending over him, of ignorance, innocence, complete trust, and helpless happiness. He was at home for the first time in his manhood, and he lay quietly wondering at the huge friendliness of the universe. The sea, gentle, as only giants can be, breathed a vast lullaby, in rhythm with his own breathing, against the distant shore. Nature was said to be cruel, sometimes; but he wondered whether she ever did more than save the individual from himself, whether it were not an illusion to look upon her as the careless originator of suffering, this all-merciful Mother with her inflexible laws, inflexible to save her worlds from chaos, inflexible in her covenants of cause and consequence, kind as life and freedom would allow her to be, and compassionately drawing her children to her heart in death.

He grasped vaguely at some tremendous truth—some perfect system to which the world was only half awake—in which to follow the laws of Nature was to master the universe, and the way of service indeed the way of perfect freedom. He saw dimly what the ancients meant by their divinities of the woods and water-springs, and by saying that mortals had met with immortal lovers in the valleys of Arcadia or by the Sicilian sea. He saw still more dimly how mortal lovers had stolen like stars to their high places above the night, and how the moon had leaned down, like a village girl through her casement, to kiss her sun-colored shepherd.

Some fragments of verse that he had written in a punt on the upper river at Oxford floated through his mind and blew away like thistledown. They were not very good verses, but he had never quite been able to understand how he had produced them. They were undoubtedly pagan, though several phrases were quite proper to his own ritual. In fact, he thought that perhaps that originated in an attempt to find a rhyme for "litany":

"Hear, ah, hear me, Mother Earth, where the solemn litany
  Rolls like a purple cloud around thy sunny feet,
Take and heal this wounded heart with thine all-healing dittany
  Loved of every wounded thing upon the hills of Crete,
Herb of grace that, long ago, the Queen of Laughter brought,
Healed the Prince and lulled the pain and guarded while he fought."

He murmured the lines over to himself drowsily, turned over on his side and fell asleep; but it was a sleep full of "dreams that wave before the half-shut eye." He was possessed with a fever of joy in that sense of escape from a dreary and colorless prison. In a lesser degree tramps have known it, when they have left the casual ward for the open road. But this was something that it would have taken a Keats or a Shelley to describe worthily—the ecstasy of escape from the huge machine of modern civilization into the world of the shepherds of Theocritus. Memories of the honeyed songs of Syracuse pushed through the loosening fibers of his mind like flowers that had been sown there in his college days and forgotten; exquisite cadences lulled his dreams—dryads leaned down to him, singing:

"*Here are built for him shadowy bowers of green, all laden with tender anise, and children flit overhead—the little Loves—as the young nightingales perched upon the trees fly forth and try their wings from bough to bough.*

"*Oh, the purple coverlet strewn above, more soft than sleep! So Miletus will say, and whoso feeds sheep in Samos.*

"*... And now, good night to Cypris in the arms of her lover! But lo, in the morning, we will all of us gather with the dew, and carry him forth among the waves that break upon the beach, and with locks unloosed, and ungirt raiment falling to the ankles, and bosoms bare, will we begin our shrill sweet song.*"

The echoes of the Hymn to Adonis died away as, in a half-dream, he raised himself on one elbow, thrust out his head, and looked at the flush of dawn that was overspreading the east. The moon melted into the pale blue skies as the

snowflake vanishes into clear water. Was it a dream? He could have vowed that he heard a light step brushing through the ferns between the gorse and the clover-field. He slipped out of his haystack, and crept to the edge of the hollow, where a screen of tall foxgloves and feathery grasses concealed him. There—again—he could have vowed he heard a rustling footstep in the ferns! He stared out through his curtain of lucid green stems. But there was nothing in his field of vision except the almost overwhelmingly beautiful sea of dark red clover, across which two white butterflies chased one another, right away into the distance, tiny points of brilliance, down to the pale blue sky of the bay.

He looked back towards the haystack, and saw a white scrap of paper, rather larger than a butterfly, fluttering on the turf quite near. He had missed it when he first tumbled out of his drowsy nest. He picked it up casually. What an extraordinary coincidence! It looked as if it had been torn out of a small note-book, and it bore, in a characterless hand, these penciled lines:

> Be kind and courteous to this gentleman;
> Hop in his walks and gambol in his eyes;
> Feed him on apricocks and dewberries,
> Nod to him, elves, and do him courtesies.

CHAPTER VI

It was some little time before he felt quite sure that his own strange predicament was not a dream. One of the strangest aspects of the whole affair was that Nature seemed to accept it as quite usual. Indeed, she seemed more friendly than ever. Confiding bees began their morning's work in the gorse-bloom; grasshoppers chirred—little crickets on the clean-swept hearth of the sun—a blackbird cocked a shining eye at him, and whistled to his mate with an impudent domesticity; small blue butterflies fanned themselves under his nose, so near that he could see the tiny lozenges of pearl that inlaid their under-wings; a ladybird perched upon his hand and sunned herself with complete unconcern. Great warm waves of exquisite perfume came rolling up across the clover-meadows from the radiant sea.

It was impossible for him to be discontented, impossible for any human being to be dissatisfied with such a flood-tide of joy and beauty. He accepted the situation full-heartedly, and stood up to drink in the full glory of the day. This was enough for the moment. He would go down to the sea and swim. After that, of course, he would have to lie in wait for the coast-guard, or even approach his house.... There would be time enough for that, before the coast-guard's wife and daughters were about. He had never known so wonderful a sunrise. He had no wish to abandon his Eden too soon.

He felt a little uneasy at first, as he went through the clover meadows. White, against that dark red, would show for miles.—That glimpse he had caught on waking, by the bye, could it have been only a dream? It was vivid in his memory still, so vivid that he felt as if it had been permanently photographed on his brain.—But the risk he ran at that early hour, and in that lonely valley, was nothing to the reckless delight of wading through that waving world of dawn and dew. He flung his arms about for sheer happiness in their freedom. Once he ran and leapt, like a savage, scattering dewdrops and elfin rainbows around him, and sending up one, two, three, four skylarks into the blue, like fountains of joy sprung by his racing feet. Once, close to the white chalk cliffs, he stood in a cloud of crimson, and for one exalted moment felt himself transfigured to the sun god in his gorgeous chariot, bringing the dawn over the broad sea that creamed on the sands a hundred feet below.

Then he clambered hastily down the narrow gully, the dry bed of a stream, that was the only way down to the shore between Chalkdene and Whitebarrow. He raced across the sands and, meeting the clear green waves with his knees, dashed into deep water and struck out to sea, farther and still farther, till he caught sight of cottages on the coast-line, and still farther, till they shone like tiny white specks of salt against the purple downs, out into the deep cold Channel. Then back again he swam, floating now and again in one of those strange zones of warmth that greet the swimmer without any apparent cause and are as distinct from the rest of the sea as oil from water.

He lay on the sands for some time, basking in the sun, then he remembered that his retreat might be cut off if he waited much longer; for it might not be easy to cross the cliffs in the full glare of day. He mounted the gully quickly; but he had no sooner raised his head above the level of the cliff than he dropped it again as if he had been shot. There, on the close-bitten turf, not six yards away, but happily with their backs to him, stood two figures. One was the coast-guard, striking a terribly official note with his neat blue uniform, peaked and golden-braided cap, trim black beard, and brass-rimmed telescope. The other, still more terrible in her unofficial capacity, was a girl, who seemed to be inquiring about a ship at sea. She was carrying a basket heaped with mushrooms. Unless his eyes had absolutely deceived him, it was Barbara Lane! He remembered. The Admiral liked mushrooms, and Barbara often got up early to hunt for them.

He ensconced himself behind a big round boulder of chalk, congratulating himself that there were no contrasts of color here to catch a random eye. His body had already lost the pallor of civilization, but it still blended with the chalk very well. There were white smears of it all about his limbs, and he looked like a roughly cast figure by Rodin as he crushed himself back into the white hollow of the cliff, and crouched there, listening, seventy feet above the beach. A little sail passed, a petal blown along the blue, three hundred yards out. But he was quite indistinguishable from his surroundings on that side. Nevertheless, Rodin would have been well pleased with the tense outline of his muscles, as of a hunted savage in hiding. If he were discovered, he would never be able to face the suppressed mirth of a gossiping parish. His dignity meant more to him than to most men. He would emigrate, at once! If he escaped—as please heaven he would—he must be more careful! He must get into hiding at once, and think out some sensible plan of procuring clothes. Unless he exercised the greatest care, there might be paragraphs in the papers. Bribes, prayers, threats were alike powerless in such cases with a free and independent press. He remembered with horror the Sunday newspapers of his pre-clerical days.

He heard Barbara Lane—her voice undoubtedly—thanking the coast-guard for his information, which would doubtless

be given to the Admiral at breakfast. He heard the soft thud, thud of the coast-guard's footsteps approaching the gully. He nerved himself for the supreme moment and tried to frame an opening sentence which would not appear too ridiculous, and would be at the same time plausible. But Miss Lane must still be within a few yards. He couldn't risk it yet, unless he was discovered by the coast-guard himself. Then, to his combined relief and dismay, he heard the click of a shutting telescope and the thud of the footsteps going towards Whitebarrow. He waited a minute or two, then looked again. The coast-guard was disappearing round a bend of the cliff-road. Miss Lane was already on the crest of the first down, a frail figure, struggling with the light sea wind and the stream of a forward-blowing skirt.

But, what an escape! And what a misfortune! She was no sooner at a safe distance than he saw two more young women, with bathing towels round their necks, running gaily down from the coast-guard's house to the very gap where he lay. He had just two seconds while they passed behind a clump of dwarf firs, and in those two seconds he stole across the turf like an Indian, and flung himself down, panting, in the long grass at the side of the clover-field. It concealed him completely. Under this cover he was able to creep into the thick of a field of tall wheat, in which he could sit upright and see without being seen.

The field sloped a little to the south, so that, across the innumerable spear-heads of golden grain that formed his bodyguard, he commanded a wide view of the clover valley and some miles of the white chalk coast. Barbara was a tiny white speck of muslin in the distance now. There was no one else in sight. He must wait. He watched with interest till the speck disappeared. The sun poured down upon him, but he felt as safe as the skylark in its "privacy of glorious light." There are no casual wayfarers in the midst of a ripe wheat-field. He lay back, in the relief of his escape, plucking with careless hands at the great red poppies and the exquisite cornflowers which—as he was now able to notice—dappled the whole field as with little scraps of blue sky.

That rustling sound came back to him—that footstep in his morning dream. It must certainly have been a dream. But dreams soon vanished, for he was beginning to feel the effect of his long fast—"spare Fast," as Milton said, "that oft with gods doth diet." St. Athanasius, too, had called fasting "the food of angels." He remembered how a Catholic poet had described the gestation in fasting and solitude of his exquisite and gorgeous visions, more lucid than those of the opium-eater, more delicate than those of the hashish-smoker, and how he had walked in a garden after some such period of seclusion and privation, and "suddenly was aware of a minute white-stoled child sitting on a lily." But to enjoy a fast properly, one ought to be able to break it.

The lonely male who was to help him had not arrived, and he was growing very hungry. He must try to secure a more mundane food. He rubbed ears of wheat between his hands, blew away the husks and munched greedily. It was delicious, but unsatisfactory in small quantities. He restrained his appetite until he had worked at the process for ten minutes and obtained quite a little heap of winnowed grain. Then he breakfasted; and never, he thought, had breakfast tasted so good. Strictly speaking, he supposed he was robbing the farmer, but he gave himself Scriptural authority for it, and today he claimed the privilege of the birds. He was outside civilization.

When he had taken the edge off his hunger—delicious as the food was, and it was indeed manna, he could not quite satisfy himself with it—he desired to quench his thirst. His lips were still salt from the sea, and the sun had made this new need serious. There was only one place he could think of for that purpose—the dew-pond on the crest of the downs, just above the hollow where he had spent the night. The wheat-field would give him cover nearly all the way, and the gorse began where the wheat ended. He set out at once, as ready for new adventure as he had been glad to find his present sanctuary. His fear of discovery had been so greatly lessened by the security of the last hour.

It was even easier than he expected to reach the desired height without emerging from cover. There was a short open space between the edges of the gorse and the dew-pond, but from this point of vantage he could survey the country for miles on every side. He did so very carefully, and there was only one human being in sight, about a quarter of a mile away. It was old Thorn, the shepherd, sitting by his flock, on the slope beyond the ruined cottage, with his dog stretched at his feet. He heard the melodious tinkling of the sheep-bells and saw the sunlight flash on the "silver crook," the design of which had once greatly taken his fancy. He had tried to buy it; but he had only succeeded in making the old man dislike him intensely.

"You can't get a crook made like that nowadays. I've had it for forty years, and the man that made it is dead. You can see it shining a mile away. It's been in the 'Cademy. An artist painted it. A lady she was, a real lady, I reckon. She made eight pound a week in Lunnon or more by her painting. No, I won't sell it! I aren't going to have they Papists carrying my silver crook about." And that was the end of it.

But it would not be well, he thought, to be discovered by old Thorn, who was by far the most garrulous resident of the parish. However, the shepherd and his flock were so far away that they looked as if they had dropped out of a toy Noah's Ark. The sun was high enough to make little patches of shadow under each sheep, so that they seemed to be fixed on tiny stands of dark green, in the strictest fashion of the nursery. He thought he might safely venture to the dew-pond.

The particular dew-pond, a circular hollow, twenty feet in diameter, and shaped like a shallow wine-glass, was lined with cement. The clear water was three feet deep in the center and the hottest summer was powerless upon it. Never had he enjoyed a drink so much. He caught up the clear water in the hollow cup of his hands again and again; and finally leaned down his flushed face to the pond and reveled in it, like a jungle creature in the dry season, till he was satiated.

He rose, with head, shoulders, arms and chest dripping and sparkling, and made quickly for the cover of the gorse. It would be best, he thought, to return to his wheat-field. It seemed absolutely safe there, and it was certainly the most delightful sanctuary he had yet found. He would bask in the sun, and think out his plan, guarded by myriads of golden spears. He returned by way of the hollow, down the winding-stair of heather-clumps that he had descended last night, skirted the dark red waves of the clover on hands and knees, and crept into the tall wheat through which he could have been traced—had there been any onlooker—only by the mysterious waving line like the wake of an invisible ship, that went on and on to the heart of his sanctuary, and then gradually obliterated itself.

He lay supine to the sun now, among his black-hearted poppies and soft blue cornflowers. He would have ample leisure now to think out a plan. Unfortunately, there are limitations to the truth uttered by the great man who said that there is nothing good or bad, but thinking makes it so. Mazy plans Basil thought, or wished to think, quite good, seemed to burst like iridescent bubbles at the first impulse to test them by leaving his hiding-place. It really looked as though the coast and the coast-guard were the only chance of escape, unless he was to appear ridiculous. One could do nothing about that till the next morning. Even from where he lay, if he raised his head, he could see an incessant stream of bright patches on the distant main-road between him and the sea. Busses, charabancs and motorcars were buzzing along that road like a line of many-colored beetles and ladybirds, harmless enough at that distance; but he pictured with horror the thronged occupants, rising to their feet in a charabanc, and hooting with glee if he dared to approach and emerge. The high bus-tops, too, were rather like crowded conning-towers on that cliff road.

On the other hand, if he waited another whole day and night, there would be complications at home. Even now, he wondered what they were making of his disappearance. Mrs. Barrow would be nervous. Probably she had hurried round to the vicar with the news that he had not returned last night from his walk. He had taken no luggage. He would lie and pretend that he had taken a knapsack or a tooth-brush and gone for a brief walking tour, and that the housemaid had forgotten his message to Mrs. Barrow. The picnic party would hardly have noticed or remembered what he was carrying. Or would they? He was growing a little panicky with all the things that he seemed to have to think of simultaneously, and it didn't make for clearness of aim in his "plans." He wished he could send Mrs. Barrow a post-card to keep her quiet. It was an excellent idea, if he could have done it. So were they all, all excellent ideas; but what was to be the next practical step, the duty that lay nearest? He must think. He must think.

CHAPTER VII

Readers of the newspapers are well acquainted with the fact that an English village is rather like a slumbering heap of gunpowder. It slumbers for ages, with fantailed pigeons carooning and racooing on its russet roofs, or wheeling round its ancient spire. Then, without any warning, a spark falls. The newspapers flare with head-lines; and for a week or two the inhabitants of one more old-world village walk in the fierce light of publicity, with new smiles upon their faces, and sly glances of conscious pride at obscure visitors from anywhere else on the planet.

You can never foretell the occasion of that heavenly spark. A suicide, or even a murder, may fall quite disappointingly flat. A burglary may be as ineffective as a damp match on a windy night. There is only one thing certain—that, when the flare does come, it will come from a conjunction of minute events, which no human mind could contrive. The time, the place, and the loved one must be all together, or the spark from heaven will fall in vain.

The spark in this case was Mr. Silas P. Murdoch, a newspaper man with an American training, who had been staying for a week-end in Helmstone. He had taken a bus over to Chalkdene and called at The Deliverance for refreshment. At The Deliverance, he heard of the burglary at Miss Pettigrew's house, and was mildly amused by the landlord's comments on that lady. At The Deliverance he also heard that the curate had mysteriously disappeared last night; that the curate's landlady had been to see the vicar about it; and that a search of the downs was contemplated. At this, Mr. Murdoch naturally pricked up his ears, and visualized "Missing Curate" head-lines. In a very short time he had acquired a good deal of the village gossip—and in Chalkdene there was very little of any resident's private affairs that was not known and circulated by the wireless telegraphy peculiar to country villages. He learned that the Reverend Basil Strode had wished to marry Miss Barbara Lane, and that Miss Barbara Lane had treated that natural weakness coldly, if not scornfully. Fragments of private conversation, punctuated with "she says to him, and he says to her"—fragments that would certainly have surprised the speakers to whom the remarks were attributed—were repeated not only with confidence in their verbal accuracy, but with attempts at a reproduction of the original emotion.

"Mr. Strode," she says, "I could never marry a Papist."

"Papist," 'e says. "'Oo's a Papist? Papists live in monasteries," 'e says. "And that's just what I want to avoid. Take care you don't drive me there, Barbara Lane," 'e says. "There's many a man been driven into a monastery by a woman's cold 'eart," 'e says.

Silas P. Murdoch was not impressed by the reports of the actual conversations; but he had an eye to the romantic possibilities of the disappearance; and there was quite enough in what he had heard to make him anxious to interview Miss Lane. A few words from her would add appreciably to the value of the telegram he was going to send to his newspaper, and he secured them. Harmless words—"Yes, Mr. Strode is a friend of mine, and I really don't understand his disappearance"—were the basis of a paragraph, more ingenious than the village gossip, and full of subtle suggestion of the skilled journalist. A column and a half, with head-lines, and this paragraph in the center, as the throbbing heart of the whole, in his morning paper, was quite enough to focus the attention of the newspaper world on Chalkdene and the mystery of the Missing Curate.

Mr. Murdoch himself organized the search along the coast, with the enthusiastic aid of the boy scouts. The afternoon papers were full of its failure. Three more reporters arrived on the same day, with instructions to secure a good "story" at all costs, and the ball of Basil Strode's fame was set jubilantly rolling through the great world while he was still "thinking" in the golden isolation of his wheat-field, and unaware of any whispers but its own.

Towards evening, since no message had come from him, Miss Lane had rashly confessed in answer to a leading question by a newspaper man that (like all the rest of his friends) she was anxious, and would like to hear of his safety. The vicar, too, was in favor of a search of the downs. Basil Strode might have fallen into a chalk-pit, after dusk, and perhaps be lying there with a broken leg.

Mr. Silas P. Murdoch, in fact, had very successfully roused the whole neighborhood from its apathy, and the very silence of the downs began to have something sinister about it. Eyes had begun to search the incoming tide, and glance at gorse-bushes, in half expectation of a dreadful discovery. It might all fizzle out in a minor accident, of course, but there was always the hope of suicide, or even murder; and, if the man on whose disappearance the attention of some millions of eager readers was now focused would only remain "missing" a little longer, the "news value" of the discovery, when it

did come, could be enhanced a thousandfold by the veil of mystery which had been drawn around it.

Each of the four reporters had become a kind of private detective, and was poking and prying into all the holes and corners of the village life. The burglary at Miss Pettigrew's was already a feature in the afternoon papers. One crime in the neighborhood might be the herald of another, and it was just possible, of course, that the same criminal might have committed both. Basil Strode had a valuable gold watch in his pocket when he disappeared into the fastnesses of the Sussex downs. There would be portraits of both Miss Lane and Miss Pettigrew the next morning, and the press had rushed to the help of the police with pictures of the missing man. So that, naturally, the police began to be interested.

In the meantime, Mr. Murdoch, walking over the downs, had found old Thorn, the shepherd, making himself a new wattled sheep fold at the topmost edge of Basil's wheat-field. Mr. Murdoch endeavored to impress upon Thorn the importance of informing Mr. Murdoch of anything discovered by man, dog, or sheep in their ramblings over the downs. This information, if it related to the body of the missing man, would be worth a guinea more than anyone else would pay for it, even if it were a merely accidental fatality. If, as everyone hoped, the case was more sensational, it would be worth an additional five guineas. Thorn was a callous old bird, and for a moment he considered the possibility of lending to an accident at least the colors of a crime.

"I might give 'un a crack over the head with my crook," he remarked. "It wouldn't make no difference to him, and it 'ud be worth more to you and me."

But this was firmly discouraged by the newspaper man. In any case, if Thorn discovered anything, crime or accident, he was to drop his crook, leave his sheep and come direct to Mr. Murdoch at The Deliverance before telling even his wife.

It was this point that Mr. Murdoch found most difficult to drive home. Thorn was obviously doubtful of his own power to hold his tongue for even the short time necessary to secure the scoop; and it was only by flourishing pound notes before him that Mr. Murdoch had any hope of making him realize the importance of it. At every hint of a check upon his garrulousness, the shepherd became evasive, and his eye wandered. It took Mr. Murdoch nearly half an hour to impress his simple proposition on the shepherd's mind; for old Thorn had all the egotism of the solitary, and he became exasperatingly irrelevant.

"Now, if you have any information whatsoever," Mr. Murdoch said, "I can rely on you to—"

"Oh, you could write a book about my life," the old man replied, lifting his moleskin cap and scratching his head. "There was a man I knowed was gored by a bull, over at Fensham's Tye, and a whole flock of sheep killed by lightning once, down yonder in the valley. In the fold they were. Yerse, oh, yerse. That were a tarrble thunder-storm. My wife sits up in bed about two o'clock in the marning, just as the biggest crack came. 'Wake up! Wake up!' she says to me, 'It's the Judgment Day.' And I says to her, 'Lay still, woman,' I says. 'What *is* to be, *will* be. Lay still.' That were right, weren't it? Yerse, oh, yerse."

"And so," replied Mr. Murdoch, "if you discover anything (and you must keep your eyes open) or if your dog discovers anythin', you must ..."

"I been painted twice by an artist," the old man answered. "I was in the 'Cademy last year, with my silver crook an' all."

"Is that so?" said Mr. Murdoch. "Now your complete silence until—"

"Be you married, sir?" said Thorn, drawing back a pace or two from the wattled fold which he had been constructing.

"I am," said Mr. Murdoch, "but—"

He was cut short by deeds not words this time; and, indeed, Mr. Murdoch's jaw dropped with astonishment at what he saw; for the ancient shepherd planted his crook firmly on the ground and then, with a sly side-glance of his brown birdlike eyes, and a chirrup as of a rider encouraging his horse, soared lightly into the air and vaulted clean over the four-foot wattles into the fold.

"Seventy-six I be next birthday," he said to the amazed newspaper man. "When you go home, you tell your wife you saw me go over them wattles as clean as a whistle."

"I most certainly will," said Silas P. Murdoch. "Let me see you do it again."

With a chuckle the old man flew through the air a second time.

"Gee!" said Mr. Murdoch. "I wish I had a camera here."

"There's a man in Chalkdene would lend you one," said the uncivil and unspoiled child of nature, with a Wordsworthian simplicity that was rather a shock to Mr. Murdoch on his most sensitive side. It was his business to reveal what would otherwise be hidden. It was not his business to give free "publicity" to aged genius lusting for fame. A note of austere refinement, a little cold, a little imperious, came into his voice.

"I'll do that later," he said, "if you're able to give me any exclusive information about the Reverend Basil Strode's disappearance on the downs. I'll have your picture in all the London papers."

"You'll sell a lot of 'em if you do," said the old man. "Thousands of 'em. All right, sir, don't you forget. And *I'll* not forget neither. I'll keep my eyes open; and whatever I see and whatever I hear, I'll come and tell you at The Deliverance."

Mr. Murdoch gave him a small sum on account, and bade him good-by.

"Don't you forget," the old man called after him, "don't you forget to tell your wife you saw me go over them wattles as clean as a whistle."

And so, without realizing it, Mr. Murdoch had effectively closed one of Basil's two possible ways of escape. He had passed another night in the haystack, the coast-guard had not appeared in the morning; and the young women with their bathing towels had cut him off from the gully to the beach, even earlier than usual. He was ravenously hungry. During the morning, he had made one vain attempt to stalk a solitary male, by creeping along the outskirts of his wheat-fields; but the solitary male had been three-quarters of a mile away, and the intervening space of close-cropped turf was all too open to be attempted in broad daylight, with the possibility of new spectators of the other sex, at any moment, over the crest of the next down.

But Basil had observed Thorn at work on his new sheepfold at the upper edge of the wheat-field; and, in spite of the old man's garrulousness and enmity, he had resolved to creep up to him and attempt to bribe him handsomely, in return for clothes and silence. Thorn was the very last man he would have chosen in his whole parish for the virtue of silence; but perhaps a system of doles, which would stop if the silence were broken, would be effective. In any case, the situation was growing desperate, and a third night of absence would add indefinitely to the excitement at home and to the consequent complications on his return. He resolved, therefore, to creep up to old Thorn, and broach the matter without delay.

As he approached the upper end of the field, he wondered whether Thorn's dog would hear the rustling, or notice the waving line of his progress through the wheat. He felt peculiarly open to bites in his present predicament. But he reached the edge of the field without mishap, only to be frozen stiff and still again by the sound of voices. At four o'clock every afternoon it was the custom of Mrs. Thorn to contribute to the vigor of her elderly husband by bringing him a large bowl of hot bread and milk. He was a teetotaler, a non-smoker, and an abstainer from both tea and coffee, and it was to these disagreeable virtues that he attributed his prowess over the wattles.

Basil lay flat in the wheat-field, only a few feet away, and heard dreadful things. He heard the old man boasting to his wife about the promise that had been made to him by "a Lunnon newspaper."

"'Find the Reverend Basil Strode, dead or alive, and we'll put your picture in all the Lunnon papers,' 'e says; 'and any bits of information you can secure for us,' 'e says, 'we'll pay you anything you like to ask,' 'e says."

Every detail that Thorn added—and there were many, more vivid than accurate—made it only too clear that if secrecy were desired, it would be madness for a naked Anglican parson to tackle this dissenting shepherd. Basil had hardly realized how the old man disliked him, and he was more than a little appalled to hear Thorn suggesting, once again, to his wife that, if he found the body, he might add to the sensation of the discovery, and his own profit, by giving 'un a crack over the head with his crook. All this, mixed in with the old shepherd's itch for notoriety—which had developed into something like a fever since a wandering artist had sent him and his flock to the Academy—ended Basil's last gleam

of hope in this direction. He lay flat and still in the wheat, hardly daring to breathe, till the voices receded a little. It sounded as though old Thorn were accompanying his wife for a few yards on the way home.

Basil peered stealthily through the wheat-stems. Thorn had halted about twenty yards away, and Mrs. Thorn was evidently saying good-by. And then, almost under his nose, at the edge of the wheat, Basil saw something much more interesting—the large bowl of bread and milk with a cloth wrapped round it to keep it warm, which Mrs. Thorn had deposited there. In ten seconds the shepherd would be turning his head towards it; but Basil grabbed it in less than one second, and, tucking it firmly in the crook of one arm, he made his felonious way rather like an underwater swimmer, on two knees and one hand, back into the warm golden heart of his wheat-field.

It was delicious—that bread and milk, with the black crusts in it—the most delicious food, he thought, that he had ever tasted; and it was made all the more delicious by a distant shout that he heard echoing over the wide valley from the leather lungs of old Thorn—"Wummon, wummon, come back! You've forgot my bowl!"

The bees buzzed among his blue cornflowers, and, all around him, the poppies, like blood-red flames tethered to the ground by their green threads, but always floating in a golden air of dreams, encouraged him to lie back at ease in the blazing sunlight and wait for the friendly dark once more. He had slept very little on the previous night. He had done all the thinking of which he was capable, explored all the possibilities, and come back to his original conclusion. There was only one way out.

He heard the huge friendly sea in the distance; and, in the recesses of his memory, he had the music of a hundred poets to fleet the time away and croon his cradle-song. Moreover, there was magic around him. He had never before been near enough to the earth to see it, magic in leaf and stem and butterfly's painted wing; magic, humming and creeping all round him, magic natural and more potent than the strange flower-juice which Puck dropped into the eyes of sleeping lovers, making them ridiculous and happy forever.

He felt rather as if he were seeing things for the first time; and, if to be ridiculously stripped were the price he had to pay for it, he didn't care, provided that he could keep it to himself. Puck had been good to him so far. There was something a little uncanny about Dalston. But he could think no more. His eyes closed on a verse of a favorite poet, invoking the music that brings the slumber of the sea-tides into the heart and brain:

> Some legend long and low
> Whose equal ebb and flow
> To and fro creep
> On the dim marge of gray
> 'Tween the soul's night and day
> Washing "awake" away
> Into "asleep."

CHAPTER VIII

When he awoke, the west already shone with that most beautiful of all colors, the soft and lucid green of the sunset sky. The moon was dawning, dusky-gold behind the faint masses of poppied wheat that stood up and murmured against the opalescent east. Gradually the stars were lit by an invisible taper, as he had seen the candle-flames, tiny points of unwavering light, steal out on the high altar of some great cathedral. They thronged the whole sky at last, from horizon to horizon; and then, as the sea was lost in the darkness, the unseen fishing-boats continued the vast ceremony, with lights indistinguishable from the stars, till he could have sworn that the earth ended abruptly a few yards away, and that the starry spaces were rolling under his feet. "Get religion," Dalston had said, and the saying occurred to him with a glimmer of meaning.

It was dark enough now for him to venture out, as he had determined, in search of food. His rule must be that of the jungle-tiger—the sun-flooded day for sleep, the night of dews and cooler breezes for hunting. He rose to his feet eagerly, and felt that his large kingdom had returned to him as, without need of cover, he passed out of the wheat-field, climbed the height of the downs again, descended into the valley beyond and, passing the little ruined cottage, ran with a long swinging stride up the close-cropped thyme and turf of the farther slope, which had been deserted, an hour before sunset, by old Thorn and his flock.

From the crest of this new ridge he could see the lights of Chalkdene, an elfin constellation, in a shoreward slanting gap below him; and, far away, along the coast, the still more fairylike lines of clustered lights where by day one saw the piers of Helmstone. Immediately below him, a hundred yards away, was a dark square patch that, as he drew nearer, seemed to be closely packed with small gray curling clouds. A faint tinkle told him it was a sheepfold. Between this and Chalkdene there was a series of still darker patches, which he knew to be the village allotments.

He moved towards them. There could be little doubt about it—the curate of St. Margaret's was meditating a felony. He was vague as to what he was likely to find; but visions of many succulent vegetables and fruits floated before him. The solid base of his expectations was perhaps no more than parsnips or carrots; but on this he had built an airy fabric of tomatoes, ridge cucumbers, even strawberries; and there was one wall—he remembered admiring the blossom—that might afford him a succulent pear! Approach from this side was easy, and he was ravenous. It might be safer after midnight, but he must at least make the attempt now.

Probably some of his hopes would have been realized; but as he passed the sheepfold, his attention was attracted by an extremely foolish ewe that, in trying to reach a pile of turnips outside, had got her head fixed between two horizontal bars of the wattles, and was now, apparently, struggling to pull it off in her alarm at this ghostly visitant.

For five minutes he tried to pull the bars apart and release her; but he succeeded only in making her struggle until, to his horror, stains of blood began to show through her wool. At last he found the solution and, pushing her head along the bars to the other side of the fold, arrived at an opening wide enough for her to withdraw. She scurried back among her staring companions without thanking him; and, at the same instant, he saw a cluster of lanterns mounting the slope from Chalkdene and coming straight towards him. Someone was ringing a clamorous hand-bell in another direction. Perhaps a child had been lost on the downs. Evidently some kind of search was in progress.

Suddenly a stentorian voice, about a hundred yards distant, bellowed—"Muster Strode! Muster Strode!"—and the ghastly truth dawned upon him. He seized a turnip from the pile at his feet and returned up the dark hill like a winged Mercury, but with less fear than resentment. In a few minutes he had gained the second height above his wheat-field, and he stood there, disdainfully watching the lights of the searchers, clustering and dispersing in all directions. Civilization was sending out her spies, stretching out her tentacles, to capture her rebel and snatch him back from the liberal earth and the open sky! He did not formulate the thought; but the resentful emotion possessed him as quickly, almost, as if he were an Indian, watching the invasion of his hunting-grounds by the despised palefaces.

He saw several lights flitting in and out of the ruined cottage. They clustered together for a consultation; and then he saw them extend in a long line and move towards him, up the slope of the range on which he was now standing. He retreated sullenly to his wheat-field. Even if they searched it—and that was not likely—he could easily evade them there. He flung himself down on his bed of bracken and poppies like an indignant god.

It was not so much the search as a sudden realization of the tyranny of the social machine that made him angry. "This

rabbit-race of ours," as Dalston had called the city-dwellers—with their narrow conventions, their stiff collars, their senseless boots, their insane hats, their stuffy houses, their beastly buttons, their vestry-meetings, their diseased bodies, their morbid minds—was hunting him down. These pallid creatures, whose teeth decayed, whose hair dropped off, whose eyes grew dim before they were twenty, because of their unnatural lives, were creeping out of their pestilential warrens to bring him back from the heart of Nature. There they were—damn them!—with their penny lanterns under the everlasting stars. There was one shrill cockney voice that skirted his wheat-field and, every six yards, insisted on calling, "Mister Strowd! Mister Strowd!"

Little circles of red hovered here and there as the lanterns passed through the clover, and then they dwindled away inland like an irregular line of glow-worms. He would have to submit in the end, he knew. But they were trying to shorten even his brief respite. They would submerge him by sheer weight of numbers, as they had swamped the native races with Bibles and whisky. He would have to cramp his body and fetter his soul with worn devices. He would have to drug his brain with the opiates of custom, and bandage his eyes with petty hypocrisies. He would have to take his place on the social treadmill, and never remove his feet again until he died. Unless ...

He attacked his turnip ravenously, and after some preliminary trouble, managed to make quite a hearty meal. For dessert he winnowed some more wheat. And then he made his way to the haystack, and made himself comfortable for the night.

He wondered what Mrs. Barrow was thinking of his absence. She would have prepared his dinner for him last night; and before she retired, she would have left his bowl of warm milk as usual, on his table, covered with a plate. He wondered what she thought when she found it there in the morning. All the parish was talking by this time. What were they saying? He lay back and looked up at the stars, the far-sprinkled systems and sun-clusters. Let them say whatever they liked—what in the world did it matter? He lay there, passively gazing at bigger things, and his mind seemed to be acting as a receiver of messages from the unknown. Dead poets talked to him. He recited their poetry for them, softly, and he felt as if it were not himself, but the night wind speaking:

> "Tiger, tiger, burning bright
> In the forests of the night ..."

His lips were moving, but they were the lips of a mask. He was only a mouthpiece of the universal soul....

Perhaps tonight Mrs. Barrow had not left his bowl of milk, as usual, covered with a plate; but soon he would have to go back to it, and then everything would be "as usual"; and, so far as he could see, there was no escape. Unless ...

His mind wandered vaguely to the South Seas, to coral islands and calm lagoons. But—would Barbara be there?

Then he covered himself with bracken and fell asleep again only to dream of moonlit palm-trees in an earthly Paradise, through which he was roaming hand in hand with a slender Psyche who went beside him silverly in the blue gloom, with a crimson hibiscus in her dusky hair. They were lovers in an unspoiled Eden, where life was a perfect music that had long since resolved all discords into harmony. There was no death there and no decay, no strife and yet no monotony; for there was no limit to its range of beauty or to the height and depth of their wonder and adoration. They wandered through long golden aisles of dew-drenched ferns that threw patterns of delicate shadow on her satin skin; and they passed under mighty cedars, whose level black layers and flakes, floating against the crimson dawn, gave the whiteness of a dove's wing to every curve of her supple body. They waded together through violets that looked like deep blue pools in the heart of the woods; and, as they went, the long waves of her dusky hair blew round them both. Once, they found the only sorrowful thing in Eden—the dismantled bower that Eve had made and abandoned. They trained the roses over it again, and when she stood in the ruined doorway with arms raised to the great clusters of blossom and the dewy flakes and fallen petals clinging to her long, wet, uplifted side, he suddenly fell on his knees and kissed her feet with that wonderful cry of St. Augustine—"*Sero te amavi, Pulchritudo, tam antiqua et tam nova, sero te amavi!*"

Adequate interpretation of the Fathers of the Church is perhaps hardly to be expected from a lost curate, dreaming in a haystack.

CHAPTER IX

After sleeping for little more than two hours, Basil awoke, feeling rather chilly. It was about one o'clock in the morning, but he had no idea of the time, and he was quite unable to read it by the glittering clock of the stars. The turnip and the winnowed wheat had not compensated him for his usual little dinner—three courses, ending with a "savory" or *pâté de foie gras*—and he was ravenous.

He emerged from his haystack, irritated at his own inaction, and an idea struck him. Why had he not thought of it before? About a mile away, in a hollow of the downs, there was a lonely little farm-cottage belonging to a man called Jaggers.

Basil had already dismissed the idea of knocking at the door and asking for clothes; for Jaggers was now in a hospital at Helmstone (Basil had visited him there) and the only occupant of the cottage at present was the highly nervous and loquacious Mrs. Jaggers. She was doubly nervous now that there were rumors of burglars in the district. Indeed, as Jaggers had told Basil, Mrs. Jaggers was quite safe, for she not only barricaded the door at night, but slept with a double-barreled gun at her bedside, which Jaggers himself had loaded for her and shown her how to use. The gun was the least of the dangers that Basil foresaw in a direct approach to Mrs. Jaggers. This new hope was comparatively modest. He remembered that, in a field adjoining the cottage, there was a chicken-run, and it was obviously probable that there would be eggs.

He was now quite ready to steal a chicken, if he could have made use of it; but his aspirations went no farther than eggs, which he could eat raw. There was not the slightest fear of his being observed at this hour of the night, and he set off at once with a long loping run that set his blood circulating and raised his spirits once more to the level of real enjoyment. He even recalled the saying of Whitman that no one who had not lived naked in the open air had ever been fully alive.

The loneliness of the hour and the stillness so impressed him that he thought it might almost be possible to enter the village itself, and steal up the long street to his own door. On ordinary occasions it might; but he remembered that, after the burglary at Miss Pettigrew's, two additional policemen had been drafted in from Helmstone to soothe the nervousness of his parishioners. There was the additional difficulty that he would have to knock at his own door and rouse Mrs. Barrow, with probably half the neighbors, before he got in; and even then ...

He might try to break into his own abode, of course; but the police were very much on the alert now. He had seen them, padding quietly on rubber soles, up and down that moonlit street, on the last night he spent at home.

He really couldn't stalk up that long aisle of conventional houses in the condition of Adam before the Fall; and, if he sneaked up, it might be worse. A sudden hand on his shoulder—explanations—No, he couldn't face that, or the subsequent pounding to wake a heavy sleeper, and the request to Mrs. Barrow, through the keyhole, to unlock the door and retire before he entered. There were so many little difficulties. He must secure not only food, but clothing of some sort before he returned. And, in the meantime, he was bent on food.

The little farmhouse stood up before him now, gray and ghostly, with a strange resemblance to a goblin face—two tiny windows for eyes, and the door for a mouth. On a hedge to one side of it, he saw something white.

He drew near. It was a sheet that Mrs. Jaggers had forgotten to take in with the rest of her washing when evening fell. Shakespeare told him so, even before he touched it, and the lines sang through his brain with a sudden joy:

> The white sheet bleaching on the hedge—
> With, hey! the sweet birds, O, how they sing!—
> Doth set my pugging tooth on edge ...

He drew it towards him, and wrapped it around him with bliss. He could get to the shore in this garment and bide his time in safety, though all the young women in Sussex should go down to the sea to bathe at six o'clock in the morning! And now—in the happy meantime—eggs!

He made his way towards the shadowy chicken-run in a corner of the field. Everything was working out gloriously. He withdrew the wooden peg from the staple, and cautiously opened the door of the pen. There was a drowsy clucking. He thrust a long cautious arm into the darkness and felt warm feathers—cluck, cluck, cluck—and then one, two, three smooth, warm eggs. He withdrew them softly—cluck, cluck, cluck—chipped off an end and sucked, ravenously, where

he sat. Whites and yolks, deliciously fresh, disappeared as quickly and gratefully as oysters down his throat. Never had eggs tasted so good. And then he made his mistake.

He thought it would be advisable to take one or two eggs back to his haystack with a view to an early breakfast. He thrust in his hand again, a little less cautiously, and felt more feathers. But this time it was a less drowsy or a less complaisant bird. There was a tumultuous whirring, as though he had started the engine of an airplane in the chicken-pen, and a wild screech from an enraged fowl that would have done credit to a brave of the Mohawks, whooping for the blood of a Mohican. It was followed by a savage barking from a large kennel under the house, where a shaggy object that looked to Basil's startled eyes as formidable as a grizzly bear leaped furiously at its rattling chain. Basil wrapped his sheet round him, and was gliding swiftly across the field in full flight, when one of the tiny windows of the farmhouse opened with a jerk. He caught sight over his shoulder of a woman's frightened face at the window as he vaulted over the low fence. He heard her shrill cry of alarm. The ferocity of the barking was redoubled. The dog seemed to be going mad with fury. Then the uproar ceased for three seconds; and, in those seconds Basil heard distinctly the sharp snapping of the chain; and saw, over his shoulder, the huge dog rushing across the field.

Basil had been quite a good performer on the cinder-track in his college days; but he ran now as if there were red-hot cinders under his feet. The white sheet streamed out behind him from his shoulders, as he ran. Two ends of that precious thing he clasped round his neck; but, for the rest, he was unimpeded and wholly Greek. He would have been a serious competitor with Atalanta; for certainly neither apples nor eggs could have halted him now. He remembered having heard of the peculiar ferocity of this particular dog and the necessity of chaining it.

With normal bodily protection, and in normal circumstances, he was not nervous with animals, but he had not the slightest desire to emulate the statue in the Zoological Gardens of primitive man grappling with a tiger. The brute gained on him rapidly. He could hear the whimpering snarl drawing nearer at every stride. He looked round him for flints, as he ran, and saw nothing but soft chalk. He could hear the savage panting close behind him now, and he made a last spurt, aiming at the dew-pond, into which he thought he might plunge. A man standing waist-deep in water would have the advantage over a swimming dog, and would probably be able to stun or drown his assailant. It was an ingenious plan; but the dog also spurted. There was a louder and more furious snarl, a leap, and a heaving tug at the sheet behind that almost brought the fugitive onto his back. He turned, heroically at bay; and, before the dog could get the lacerated sheet out of his mouth, Basil swooped down upon him like an indignant albatross, avenging an assault upon its tail-feathers.

There was an amazed glare of the dog's red eyes. Then, in a flash, the bristling head of the brute was skilfully enveloped in the sheet; and the ends that had been round Basil's own neck were knotted around the jerking and snarling throat. The furious bundle rolled over and over, emitting blood-curdling sounds; but Basil was not content with half-measures in an emergency like this. The sheet was large, coarse, and strong. With a deftness to which he could never have attained in cold blood, and an instinctive ingenuity, amounting almost to inspiration, he took advantage of the dog's rollings and flounderings to wrap the calico more and more completely round the bristling and squirming body. He made swift sailor's knots at every possible stage, now between the hind legs, and now round the straining ribs. To make doubly sure he tore a strip from the corner that had been lacerated by the dog's teeth, knotted it grimly round one of the kicking hind legs and tied it, with a double hitch, to the loose ends of another great knot that he had made behind the dog's neck. Basil was once quite a good hand in a sailing-boat. It was marvelous how it all came back to him. He tied all kinds of knots that he thought he had entirely forgotten; and he had still a yard or two of the stuff in reserve. With a last triumphant fold, and a knot that would have done credit to any bo'sun in the King's Navy, he enveloped and entangled the whole writhing and snarling mass of muscle and bone so inextricably that even a canine Houdini would have taken a week to wriggle himself out again.

At the same time, he had reason to believe that this ferocious beast was capable of anything; and he took the additional precaution of wading through a fragrant clover field on his way back to his couch in the haystack. There were no running brooks in the neighborhood. He thought that clover might be equally effective as a scent-destroyer.

But the adventures of the night were not yet over. As he neared his haystack, he saw on the ridge of the down, dark against a sky of scudding moonlit cloud, the very thing that he least expected to see at that hour of the night—a solitary male figure lurching heavily along towards Felscombe, a tiny village about four miles away. Basil immediately began to stalk him.

In a few minutes he had seen enough to fill him with hope. The stranger looked like a cockney summer visitor, who had missed the last bus home after the closing of the public-houses in Helmstone. He was evidently a little tipsy—all the

better, perhaps—and Basil decided to accost him at once.

"Hullo, there," he called. "Stop! I want to speak to you!"

"Hullo, old f'la," said the reveler, cocking a crumpled straw hat over his left eye as he turned. He surveyed Basil from head to foot with a chuckle, but without the least surprise.

"Tha'sh a good idea," he said, carefully balancing himself, "tha'sh a very good idea. It would shave a lot of unnecessary trouble if we all did it."

A diabolically selfish notion flashed into Basil's mind at these words. The drunken man was reasonably near his own size.

"It *is* a most excellent idea," Basil replied, nonchalantly; "it's most refreshing. Why don't you try it yourself? Come along. Take your clothes off, now, and we'll have a race, up to High Barn and back. I'll give you a good long start, and ten shillings if you beat me."

"Tha'sh a good idea, too," said the stranger, beginning to take his flannel blazer off. "Always glad to meet an ingenuish f'la, with 'riginal ideas. My name's Horace Pincher. Wash yours?"

"My name's Inge," said Basil, not altogether unscrupulously, but simply because that name had been lurking in his subconscious mind ever since he had read the introduction to the book on sun-bathing.

"You doan say so," replied Mr. Pincher, unbuttoning his braces, "any relashun Gloomy Dean?"

"Brother," said Basil.

"You doan say so. I regard itch great privilege to run rayshes with brother of Gloomy Dean in state nashur. But"—he hesitated, and stopped the disrobing process—"regardsh payment of that ten shillings, how's to be done?"

"That's all right," said Basil. "Don't worry about that. Take your trousers off."

"Tha'sh all very well," said Mr. Pincher, with an air of profound cunning, "but f'la without pockets can't prodoosh ten shillings."

"I'll send you a check," said Basil.

"Now, look here, Inge," said Mr. Pincher. "I'm man of the world. You can shee that, can't you? I'm man of the world, staying at Felscombe for little shummer holiday with poor old mother. Natchrally man of the world requires more amusements than Felscombe can shupply. Itch very expenshive always going into Helmshtone. Financhully, itch unsound. Ten shillings would be shtrornary useful, financhully. But I'm man of the world, and when a perfick stranger, in complete state nashur, offers write checks on downs, 'smy opinion tha'sh very sushpishus. Very sushpishus. 'Smy opinion you want my clo'es."

"Not at all, not at all," said Basil, desperately trying another tack. "I tell you what I'll do. I'll walk over to Felscombe with you, and you shall lend me another suit. Then we'll go back to my own house, and I'll write you a check for five pounds."

"Tha'sh a splendid idea," said Mr. Pincher. "Financhully, five pounds would be shtrornerly useful at the preshunt moment. Itch getting late, but maysh well make a night of it. All shame, my mother's very reshpectable person. She'll be waiting for me. I couldn't introdoosh even brother of Gloomy Dean like this."

"I'll wait on the downs, outside the village, till you get the clothes," said Basil.

"You're most shtrornery 'genuish f'la, you know," said Mr. Pincher. "Shtrornery intelleck. I shpose that short of thing runsh in family. The Gloomy Dean'sh remarkable f'la, too. Shtrorney things he thinksh of in Evening Shtandard. Birth-control for yellow rayshes what he wants. Soon be a thousand million Chinese. Far too many, he says. What'sh his remedy? Birth-control. Dam good idea. But 'smy opinion his brother'sh even more ingenuish f'la."

And Mr. Pincher jubilantly seized Basil's arm and proceeded to dance hilariously in the direction of Felscombe, singing at the top of his voice,

"There's a tavern in the town,
In the town ...
I'll hang my harp on a weeping willow tree ..."

The next quarter of an hour was a difficult one. Mr. Pincher was suddenly seized by a new suspicion, and he insisted on stopping, in the middle of a fairy ring, to eliminate it.

"Look here, old f'la, I'm man of the world. You can shee that at a glansh. How'm I to know you're really brother Gloomy Dean? Prove it. F'rinstance. Can you repeat names booksh Old Testament? Can't shay 'em myshelf, of course, but quite capable reckonizing 'em, when repeated. Brother Gloomy Dean ought to be able to do that."

"Certainly," said Basil. "Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy—"

"That doesn't sound ri' to me," said Mr. Pincher, "you've left out Shalms."

"They come later," said Basil. "Deuteronomy, Joshua—"

"Yes. Tha'sh all ri'. Joshua's all ri'. Strornary genuish f'la, Joshua. Held up his hand and stopped shun going round earth, spite of fact afterwards dishcovered 'sother way about. You know what I mean, old f'la? Earth goes round shun, not shun round earth. Joshua jus' held up s'and. Stopped it. Mose impressive. But doan let me interrup' you. Mose interesting."

"Judges, Samuel one, Samuel two, Kings one, Kings two, Chronicles one, Chronicles two, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Job, Psalms—"

"Thash all ri'. I was jush waiting till you came to Shalms. You needn't go on. Too many of 'em. Shee at once you know 'em all. I doan profesh know 'em all myself; but, man of world, always glad to reckonize capashty others. Proud to reckonize strornary intelleck. If I m' say so, haven't slightest doubt now strornary gifted brother Gloomy Dean in complete state nayshur. Shake hands."

They shook hands fervently; and, once more, gripping the arm of the naked curate, Mr. Pincher resumed his discordant songs and his cake-walk towards Felscombe.

On the brow of the hill above the tiny slumbering village they parted.

"You won't be too long," said Basil, anxiously; "and you'll remember that the five pounds is awaiting you."

"Leave it to me, old f'la. I'm sperienced finanshur. In fi' minutes, in fi' minutes, I'll bring you finest pair of troushers ever see in your life."

With this promise, Mr. Pincher tottered carefully down the little winding path between dwarf firs and the elfin street below. Basil saw him safely passing the first row of whitewashed cottages; the lych-gate of the church; and the duck-pond. Then to his horror, he heard Mr. Pincher's voice loudly uplifted again in. "I'll hang my harp on a weeping willow-tree," and, a moment later, a loud hammering on a door.

There was a thrusting open of windows all along that elfin street, and Basil saw goblinlike heads popping out, and peering at the returned prodigal. A heated altercation between Mr. Pincher and some of his immediate neighbors ensued.

"Disgraceful, I call it, coming home in such a condition, and waking everyone up," a woman's voice rang out on the still air. "You ought to give 'im a piece of your mind, Mrs. Pincher!"

"Ay, and a bit of the rough side of your tongue, too, Mrs. Pincher," a man's voice echoed.

"It's 'is bad companions in 'Elmstone does it," answered another voice, evidently Mrs. Pincher's. "Stop that knocking, 'Orace. I'm coming down to let you in."

"Tha'sh all ri', old girl," Mr. Pincher replied, cheerily, "I been in jolly good company. I'm going back to Helmstone with the gifted brother of Gloomy Dean. He'sh waiting for me, up there, on the downsh, in complete state nayshur. You needn't come down. I wancher throw me down my besh coat and troushers."

A door was unlocked.

"Come into the 'ouse at once, 'Orace, and go to bed."

"Can't be done. All I want's my besh coat and troushers."

"Now, now, Mr. Pincher," a more soothing feminine voice pleaded, "go along into the 'ouse with your pore mother. You can't go out again tonight."

"Simportant finanshul matter, I tell you—"

"Well, you can attend to all that tomorrow. What you want is a good sleep," said the soothing voice.

"All ri'. You go and tell brother Gloomy Dean meet me in lounge of Grand Hotel, Helmstone, eleven o'clock, and I'll lend him finesh pair of troushers ever seen in's life."

"All right, Mr. Pincher. I'll go and tell 'im myself. Only you just go along into the 'ouse now."

A door slammed. Windows shut, and there was complete silence. Basil made his way back across the lonely, starlit downs to his haystack, with a new sense of being astray in a strange nocturnal world, outside his own. He would hardly have been surprised now if he had met the Pied Piper dancing home from a fair, and fluting to himself on High Barn Down.

But he decided to return to his original plan. He must go down to the seashore in the early morning. In the meantime, he might as well snatch an hour or two of rest in the comparative warmth of his hiding-place. He was tired when he crept into that drowsy cavity, lined with bracken, in the haystack. He closed the opening with a clump of loose hay, and fell sound asleep.

CHAPTER X

Miss Pettigrew writes an anonymous letter, in a disguised hand, to the vicar.

Sir:

I think it my duty to give you a *hint* as to the whereabouts of the Reverend Basil Strode. As you perhaps know, there was a *very* attractive American woman, a Mrs. Trotter, staying in Chalkdene, last spring, with her husband. Professor Trotter returned to America alone, and his wife was to follow by a later boat. *She is still in London*, and I think you will find that the Reverend Basil Strode is *not very far away*.

A Well Wisher

Miss Pettigrew writes, by the same post, over her own signature to Mrs. Trotter, at Judson's Hotel, Little Savile Street.

Dear Mrs. Trotter:

Your many friends in Chalkdene have been hoping that we should see you down here again before you ended your much too short visit to England. It was very kind of you to send me that delightful little book of your husband's on the Spanish Missions of California. How beautiful those pepper-trees must be with their long streamers of red berries. I shall always value it greatly as a memento of our friendship, and the pleasant times we spent together in this secluded village.

I suppose you have heard the dreadful news about poor Mr. Strode. There seems to be no doubt that it is suicide. He had his failings, of course, but we shall miss him greatly; and, as you didn't know, perhaps (for he was a reserved man), he had the very greatest esteem for yourself, and was never tired of saying that nobody would have taken you for an American. *Bon voyage!*

Yours sincerely,

Jane Pettigrew

Mrs. Trotter writes to Miss Pettigrew, from the S.S. Leviathan.

My dear Miss Pettigrew:

I am writing to you on board ship, on the eve of sailing for the United States. Your letter, which I brought with me on the boat train, has confirmed my worst fears. The newspapers, of course, had told me of Mr. Strode's disappearance; and I remembered those dangerous chalk cliffs, over which anyone might have fallen at night; but it was only for a dreadful moment that I thought of suicide. He was indeed a high-minded and a remarkable man; but he seemed to me to be suffering from an ascetic complex. I wished very much that he could have met my friend Mrs. Walters, who has studied psychoanalysis and theosophy. If he had, this awful tragedy might never have taken place. It only proves once more that it is not good for man to be alone.

I understand that, in England, suicides are not buried with religious rites. In fact, I have been assured by a fellow passenger that it is the barbarous custom to bury the victims of self-slaughter, not in a churchyard, but at the crossroads, with a wooden stake driven through them, and the earth leveled over them. As an American citizen, I should like to register my silent protest; and to be counted among the friends who will surely pay a last tribute to his memory; for some of his sermons were among the most uplifting and inspirational I have ever heard.

I am writing, therefore, to Messrs. Black & Ripley, my English bankers, to ask them to procure the best wreath obtainable for twenty-five dollars, and have it mailed direct to his poor old landlady, Mrs. Barrow, with a request that it be placed on his bier. On the card that will be attached to it, I have inscribed some of the wonderful words of Mrs. Eddy on reincarnation, followed by a line or two from Shakespeare, in which the brother of Ophelia makes his

sublime protest against the narrow-minded abbreviation of her funeral ceremony.

If Mr. Strode is not even to be allowed a formal grave, I have requested that the wreath and the card shall be laid upon that leveled earth at the crossroads, as the protest of a one-hundred-per-cent American woman, who was born at Springfield, Illinois, the home-town of our greatest President.

Yours faithfully,

JACQUELINE B. TROTTER

From the Reverend Herbert Partridge, B.A., of St. Jude's, Walsall, to the Vicar of Chalkdene.

Dear Sir:

I understand that there is every likelihood of your requiring a new curate in the near future; and, lamentable though the occasion must be, I am writing in the hope that you will bear me in mind if that occasion should arise. My uncle, Joshua Partridge, was at Oxford with you, he tells me; and it is on his suggestion that I am writing; for I have been told by my doctor that my health necessitates a removal from the Midlands to the South Coast. I am enclosing further particulars about myself; and, though no one more ardently desires than I that poor Mr. Strode should be restored, safe and sound, to his parishioners, the newspapers suggest that in these cases the memory or the mind is usually affected to a degree which may incapacitate the sufferer for his parish work.

My own trouble is merely a mild form of bronchitis, which I am told will probably disappear in the sunshine of the south.

Believe me, dear Sir,

Yours most truly,

HERBERT PARTRIDGE

From Horace Pincher, hair-dresser's assistant and man of the world, on holiday at Helmstone, to the Vicar of Chalkdene, a letter originally addressed to the Daily Mail, but not published.

Dear Sir:

Re the Reverend Basil Strode.
Cherchez la femme.
Verb sap.
Yours faithfully,
HORACE PINCHER

From Mrs. Goodenough to the Vicar of Chalkdene.

Dear Vicar:

I am confined to the house by an attack of lumbago, otherwise I should have called, instead of writing this note. I know that you have always pooh-poohed my conviction that Mr. Strode was on the highway to Rome. But I am positive that I am right; and that this is accountable for his disappearance. Consider the alternatives. He cannot have met with an accident. He would have been found, dead or alive, long before this. He cannot merely have gone off

on that walking-tour, of which we have heard so much. He would certainly have let you know before doing that; or if he had been casual enough to do it, intending to let you know by letter, and the letter had gone astray, he would have seen a newspaper long before this, and revealed his whereabouts at once.

It is my firm conviction that he has gone into a monastery. *Storrington should be searched.* The unhappy man may already be repenting of his rashness; but, once the monastery doors have closed upon him, it is unlikely that he would ever emerge from his cell again. We all know what dreadful things are done in those places. I beg of you to write to the Home Secretary and *have all the monasteries searched*.

I am,

Yours most anxiously,

EMMELINE GOODENOUGH

P.S. It might be worth trying to find out whether the dreadful little convent in the village knows anything about it. *Stella Maris*, I believe it is called. He once attempted to persuade me that our own dear little Norman church was built by *monks*.

From Mrs. Barrow's housemaid to her young man in Helmstone.

Dear Jack:

I can come with you to the pickshurs every evening this week oweing to the disapeerance of Mr. Strode it's awful but wen you think how he use to go on about his meels it looks like a judgment to me an it shose wot a lot of useless work he give wen you think I've only had to do his room once since he disapeered his tabul is cuvvered with letters so you couldn't dust it even if you wanted to wich I dont an this morning me and Mrs. Barrow was struck all of a heep by a luvvly big Reeth white lilies and roses and sparrowguss fern it come from a floris in London with deepis simpafy from that Mrs. Trotter the Amerrican wot give you a shilling four taking a parsil into Helmstone one day an theres a roomer in Chalkdene as Mr. Strode has elope with Mrs. Trotter because her husbin is a professor and they say professors dont know how to luv but I dont think Mr. Strode has elope with Mrs. Trotter because wot would be the sence of her sending him a Reeth wich Mrs. Barrow says cost five pounds an thats half what I urn in a year in this dam hole though Miss Pettigrew's cook says she mite have sent it to put us off the sent an its put me off all rite because the sent is so strong in his room along of Mrs. Barrow putting the Reeth with his other letters on the tabul there you cant think of nothing but funerals and whenever you open the door the sent comes out at you like the Dead March in Sawl its awful though it seems a funny thing too having a Reeth there and no corpse only the letters for him to open when he comes back and if Mr. Strode should come back and open that door he wont arf get a shock but it reminds you weve all got to die some day so we may as well go to the pickshures while we can its Olga Savage in Sented Sin tomorrow night you know shes the star you said had eyes like me so Ill meet you at the entrance at arf past six bring sum of them striped peppermints with you the sort the man said was good for the hiccups Ive had indijestiun orl this weel orl along of these newspaper reporters worrying about Mr. Strode and giving me tips and chocklits to answer orl kinds of questions you wouldnt arf laugh if you knew Mrs. Barrow says you never know a good thing till youve lost it but orl I can say is I never knew what a lot of unnessary work he give till he'd gone.

Cheerio, Jack. Arf past six tomorrow at the Palace. Tootle-oo.

GLADYS

Miss Pettigrew writes to her Psychoanalyst.

Dear Dr. Baxter:

You will be pleased to hear that there has been a distinct improvement in my health since you drew those suppressions out of my subconscious self which you so rightly compared with conger-eels.

You asked me if I remembered having any optical illusions in the daytime, which might have a bearing on that horrid complex. At the time I said no; but a few days ago I had a most extraordinary experience.

You will remember that I told you a clergyman had for a long time been pestering me to marry him, and that I had consistently refused him; but, although you said that this was probably the cause of all my troubles and urged me to reconsider the matter, I thought that you were mistaken. My recent experience, however, has rather startled me, and as I promised you, I am writing to tell you of it, though it is the kind of thing that I could never mention to anyone but yourself. But, after all, this is the whole *raison d'être* of psychoanalysis, isn't it?—that one should be able to rid oneself of what would otherwise be unmentionable.

On the day in question, I was at a picnic party on the downs. We had some very powerful marine glasses belonging to Admiral Lane, through which we had all been looking in turn at ships on the sea. I happened to turn the glasses inland, on a little speck in the landscape, about four miles away. It turned out to be the ruins of an old cottage. I saw the crumbling walls quite distinctly. They appeared to be only a yard or two away. I was surveying these with interest when, to my utter amazement, I saw the clergyman in question, crawling out of the cottage towards me on all fours, with a violently agitated expression of countenance, and—how shall I say it?—*without a stitch of clothing*. I was so startled that I dropped the glasses, and sank on to my knees before the dreadful apparition, with a cry of alarm which brought the whole picnic party round me. Fortunately, I did not give myself away, and was able to pass it off as a heart-attack.

But I cannot help thinking that with your usual insight you were expecting something of the sort; and I shall be glad to know what you think of this *dreadful* experience. When I am next in London, I shall call for further treatment. Your advice has been *so* valuable to me.

Yours most sincerely and gratefully,

JANE PETTIGREW

Dr. Baxter to Miss Pettigrew.

Dear Miss Pettigrew:

I was intensely interested by your letter. It confirms my diagnosis in every detail. My advice to you is that you should marry him at once, for reasons that I expressed in our last interview.

Yours sincerely,

WILLIAM BAXTER. P.A.S. (V.P.) etc. etc.

Pansy Bird writes from London to Barbara Lane.

Dear Barbara:

I am returning your book by registered post, as I am staying on here in London for a few weeks. It is a first edition, I see, and it has your mother's name in it, so I know it must be a treasure. It was sweet of you to lend it to me.

And now I have some news which will probably surprise you. I am engaged to be married. It has all happened very quickly, though I've known him for some time. He is a great friend of my cousin's here, and I think you've met him at Mrs. Camp's. He is a writer, not known at all yet; but, of course, he will be. His name is Gilbert Pepper. Please make a note of it, because it's going to be famous some day.

I'm telling you all about it, because in a way you are responsible for the whole affair. One thing has led to another so curiously, that I feel rather like a character out of "Pippa Passes." I said this to Gilbert, and he asked me if I didn't mean Pepper Passes. But I hope to cure him of that sort of thing, before long.

You remember how indignant you were with Mr. Strode about that quotation at the Poetry Circle. I happened to speak of it at lunch the other day. Gilbert was there, and he burst out laughing, and said, "*Perimeter of the Coffeepot!* Great Scott! *I* wrote that article. I also invented the poem and its author." There was no such poem, and no such book; and the "review" was written to see how much the editor and readers of our distinguished literary weekly would swallow. Apparently they all swallowed it completely. But my point is this—I am very distressed at what the papers are saying about Mr. Strode. Are you quite sure, Barbara dear, that you didn't go too far? He was obviously devoted to you; and it would be dreadful to think that you had been responsible for his disappearance. I am so happy myself that I can't bear the thought of being indirectly the cause of unhappiness to others. And, after all, though I was hurt at the time, it turns out that the whole thing was really a joke, and I am going to marry the real author of it.

Do you think it would be any use putting a little notice, carefully worded, so that only Mr. Strode would understand it, in the personal column of the Morning Post? I know that he always reads that column.

Yours affectionately,

PANSY BIRD

Barbara Lane replies to Miss Bird.

My dear Pansy:

I am delighted at your news. Mr. Pepper is indeed a lucky man. Of course, I remember him well.

My sympathies now, of course, are all with Basil. Your revenge is so exquisitely complete; but I shall not be able to resist letting Basil know the whole truth about the article when he returns, as of course he will. He is not of the suicidal kind, and I'm really very fond of him.

But I don't think I shall advertise in the Morning Post. Mrs. Goodenough is convinced that he has retreated into a monastery; and the Morning Post would be the last thing that he would be allowed to see in those circumstances. I don't think it's a monastery myself; but I am quite sure it is a "retreat" of some kind to which newspapers do not penetrate.

Thank you for returning my book. My mother was very fond of Andrew Lang, whose ink still "sings of Helicon," though very few of our contemporaries knew it. His "Theocritus" is the loveliest translation ever made, though perhaps, if Walter Pater had given us a complete "Aucassin and Nicolette," it would have been even lovelier. Do you remember that heavenly passage, all dew and crumpled petals, where Nicolette slips out of her bedroom window early on a May morning and goes barefoot through the garden to look for her lover? *The daisies which she crushed in passing looked dark against her feet; the girl was so white.* And she goes to the place where Aucassin was imprisoned, and hears him sorrowing within, and calling on her name; and after she had listened awhile ...

You see how romantic you've made me. But alas, we live in the twentieth century. I am quite sure that I am not responsible for the disappearance of Basil. On the whole, however, I think our tangled web is more like "A Midsummer Night's Dream" than "Pippa Passes." The newspaper reporters are certainly under the stage direction of Bottom the Weaver; and, from what you tell me, I think that if your Mr. Pepper isn't Puck, he must be a first cousin of Mustardseed.

Every possible happiness, my dear Pansy, and thousands of good wishes. I shall have a copy of "Aucassin and Nicolette" specially bound for you, as a wedding present.

Yours affectionately,

CHAPTER XI

When Dalston saw the head-lines in his morning paper—Mystery of a Sussex Village and Strange Disappearance of a Curate—he was really startled and distressed. His conscience accused him of barbed phrases aimed at what he had supposed to be the overcomfortable security of his friend's mode of life; and he now began to imagine all kinds of secret troubles to which he had been blind. It would be too horrible if he had been shooting his epigrammatic arrows at a man on the verge of suicide; and he decided to take the eleven-thirty train down to Helmstone. At Victoria Station he saw the placards of the "lunch" editions of the newspapers.

"I wish they wouldn't call them that, damn them," he muttered. He had been thinking of having lunch on the train; but they discouraged him like a sardonic jest. With that curious unanimity which sometimes focuses the attention of the whole world on one comparatively insignificant person, MISSING CURATE glared at him in huge red and black letters from every direction. There was an array of placards outside the station which, by grim concentration on the one subject, irresistibly suggested an appalling tragedy. Inside the station it was even worse. Round both bookstalls the placards blared all the variations, with the brazen vigor of a military band. MISSING CURATE. MIDNIGHT MAN-HUNT, cried the clarionets. MISSING CURATE. CLIFF SEARCH, boomed the trombones. MISSING CURATE. SENSATIONAL DEVELOPMENT, rattled the kettle-drums. To Dalston's mind, knowing Basil Strode as he thought he did, one of two sinister conclusions seemed inevitable. It seemed impossible that Basil Strode should be alive and unaware of this hubbub. His silence, therefore, implied one of two things. If it was deliberate, something must be seriously wrong with his affairs. If it was not deliberate, he must be dead.

On the short run down to the South Coast, Dalston decided against lunch, but he puffed at the short pipe, which was his inseparable companion, and consumed several large whiskies instead. When he got out of the train at Helmstone the placards again bombarded him from all sides. MISSING CURATE. POLICE ACTION. A taxicab whirled him along the cliff road to Chalkdene, in considerably less than the time allowed by law; and, after depositing his handbag at The Deliverance, he went at once to see Mrs. Barrow at Basil's lodgings.

This interview was not enlightening. It took place in Basil's deserted sitting-room; and Dalston, still puffing grimly at his short black pipe, glanced round it with the eye of a man who fears the worst. Mrs. Barrow's pale face and frightened eyes; the ticking of the clock; the pile of unopened letters on the table, the unopened newspapers, and—most sinister of all—the large wreath, with its funereal fragrance, brought the situation more vividly home to him.

"What's the meaning of this?" he said, pointing to the wreath.

"It come yesterday, sir."

"A little premature, isn't it?"

"I 'ope so, sir, indeed I 'ope so," said Mrs. Barrow, "an' it don't seem right to keep it 'ere in one way, but you can't 'ardly send it back, can you sir, till you know if 'twill be needed? I been wondering if I ought to put it in water, sir, till we know one way or other. It seems a shame to let them lovely lilies shrivel up in this 'eat."

Dalston growled an inarticulate reply, and puffed contemplatively at his pipe.

"He had no worries, you think, Mrs. Barrow?" he said, at last.

"I never heard him complain of anything, I'm sure, sir, except—"

"Except what?"

"Only the toast being 'ard at breakfast, sir, and one or two little things like that."

"You've no reason to suppose that he had any affair with a woman."

"Oh, no, sir, Mr. Strode wasn't that kind of gentleman at all, sir."

"Well—one never knows. What is that photograph?"

"That, sir? Oh, that's Miss Barbara Lane, sir."

"Ah, yes. I remember. A very attractive young woman."

"Miss Barbara Lane," replied Mrs. Barrow with dignity, "would hardly be called a 'young woman,' sir. She's the Admiral's daughter; and the only reason she wouldn't marry Mr. Strode—so they say in the village, for he never said anything about it himself—was because he was too 'Igh Church for the Admiral."

"And a very good reason, too," said Dalston, a little gruffly. The ecclesiastical vases, and the Arundel reprints that decorated his old friend's room had something pathetic about them now, and he felt constrained to hide his own feelings. He remembered with a pang how he had once surreptitiously decorated that severe mantelpiece with pictures of a musical-comedy chorus.

"All the same," he said, "I think I'll go and see Miss Lane. I remember meeting her once when I was staying here with Mr. Strode."

Dalston wasted no time. In five minutes he was on the track of Miss Lane. She was not at her house; but had gone down to the sea-front for her usual morning swim, and had not yet returned.

"Her usual morning swim"! Dalston thought this rather heartless in the circumstances, and his jaw set grimly as he went down the gap to the small and select sea-front of Chalkdene, with its forty deck-chairs and bathing-tents. There was a refined hush here, very different from the raucous vulgarity of Helmstone; the occupants of the deck-chairs kept up a subdued murmur of polite conversation, and the warm rustling of the Morning Post and Times blended gently with the rustling of the sea.

He found Barbara Lane without difficulty in that small circle. She was sitting on a deck-chair, engrossed in a novel. There was a chair beside her on which she had deposited her bathing-kit. Without ceremony, Dalston picked up the damp bundle and sat down, nursing it on his knee. Barbara looked up, gave a slight gasp of recognition and then—to his disgust—began to laugh in the heartless fashion of her generation. At the sardonic expression of his face—in which the short black pipe was still grimly clenched—she checked herself.

"Yes," he said cryptically, "I always thought that the merriment of Chopin's funeral march was a little exaggerated."

"Oh, but that's much too difficult for me," she said, laying down her novel. "Can't you give me an easier opening? Or shall I play first? Have you been to the Academy, or do you like Shakespeare, Mr. Dalston? I think that 'Love's Labour's Lost' is a very bad title, don't you? Too many sibilants. It's quite impossible for anyone with the slightest tendency to lisp."

"Shakespeare's women didn't lisp, thank God. But I think I have begun to understand Basil Strode's disappearance already," he replied, slowly and firmly, with the air of one whose experience of human wickedness, now thoroughly confirmed, was as impervious to provocation as the hide of a rhinoceros.

"But this is even better than what's-his-name's French conversations," she retorted. "I cannot say what has become of the clergyman; but I have read three novels and a half of Walter Scott, skipping all the prefaces. Do go on."

"I am a very old friend of Basil's, Miss Lane, and I don't feel at all flippant about it. I wish you would tell me if you know anything that would throw a light on this disappearance. You hardly seem to realize what has been happening, and all that it implies."

"But, surely, the absence of a man from his abode, for forty-eight hours or so, is not necessarily—"

"I said 'all that it implies.' A man of his type, and in his circumstances, doesn't vanish, without warning and without luggage. Nor does he keep silence when half the newspapers of the world are shouting his name, unless something very serious has happened, or something that he thinks very serious. All that I want to know is whether you can throw any light on this. I think you know what I mean."

Barbara Lane looked at him for a moment, and her eyes softened.

"Mr. Dalston," she said, laying a hand lightly on his coat-sleeve. "I think you are really fond of Basil, and so I will tell you in confidence what I would tell no one else. He did ask me to marry him, though how anyone else ever heard of it I haven't the slightest idea."

"Village wireless," muttered Dalston. "I had rooms here once; and, whenever I dined with Basil, my own landlady used

to give me a detailed account, on the preceding day, of every course we were going to have. Basil never spoke of you to me; but everyone else seems to know everything. They all say you wouldn't marry him because he was too High Church for your father."

"Nonsense! Dear old Dad hasn't any prejudices of that sort. He even says that he likes incense, and wishes that Basil could have his own way about it. He told the vicar that, now he's getting on in life, he doesn't see very well, and he doesn't hear very well, so he rather thought he would enjoy a church where he could smell his religion."

Dalston gave a deep chuckle at this; and Barbara, in turn, looked at him reproachfully.

"The hilarity of the Dead March in Saul—" she began.

"I know," he said contritely, "but I suppose you know him better, in some ways, than I do—and you seem to be quite happy about it. I'm anxious all the same, really anxious."

"Isn't it rather the business of the cheaper newspapers to make people anxious, if they can?"

"Oh, I know. They don't care a hoot. War, death, grief, it's all one to them. Why, last week, one of them discovered that the rather pathetic widow of a murderer had changed her name and was trying to bring up her children decently in an obscure country village. Out came the head-lines at once. They actually had the double-barreled hypocrisy to blaze across the whole of their front page—*For God's sake, let her forget!* No; I don't take that sort of thing seriously as a rule; but the fact remains that Basil has disappeared; and, if I may say so, I think you are just the kind of person that he may have taken very seriously indeed."

"I don't suppose for a moment that I have anything to do with his disappearance. In fact, I told him that, if he would only do something really outrageous, I might possibly marry him."

"But that's exactly—"

"No. He quite understood what I meant. I meant that if he could only break away from this pseudo-modernity, and pseudo-intellectualism; if he could just once defy his own age, instead of defying the dead Victorians; if he could only shock the vicar (who reads Proust) by quoting Longfellow (one doesn't put him on the mountaintops, of course, but there's better stuff than Proust ever dreamed of in the sonnets on Dante); I should feel that he was really his own self, instead of a variation on a current theme. It seems to me that if you really like a person, you want him above everything to be his own self. From what I have heard of you, Mr. Dalston, I should think you would understand exactly what I mean."

"The odd thing is that I've been going for Basil on the same ground, in a slightly different way. One does get so sick of the notion of the present moment—that, because its conventions aren't those of the last century, it has no conventions of its own. The conventionalists of today all seem to forget that the conventions of yesterday were equally different from those of the day before yesterday. And it's all so unsuited to the real Basil. The clothes don't fit him, and they don't fit his religion either."

"A lot of the curates are like that now, and most of the girls' schools. That's what is so irritating about it. I have a very personal reason for being irritated by it; but I don't think I should have bothered if I hadn't thought that Basil's real self was quite different. Do you know it's nearly two o'clock! I shall be horribly late for lunch. Don't worry too much, Mr. Dalston. I'm not so heartless as I seem; but I don't believe it's as serious as you think. Logic has its limitations, you know; and there are always more than two alternatives, though we can't always see them. You're rather a dear to be so fond of him. Good-by for the present."

And, seizing her bathing-kit, she departed, with a glance of her long-lashed eyes that made his head swim. He supposed that he owed it to her gratitude for his interest in Basil's fate. He did not know in the least how he was to distinguish between what was serious and what was merely badinage in her conversation; but he felt more than ever sure that, if any young woman was capable of driving Basil Strode mad and also of restoring him to sanity again, Barbara Lane was that young woman.

He returned to The Deliverance with his head in a whirl, but feeling vaguely reassured by Barbara's complacency. A boy on a bicycle had just arrived with the latest editions of the London papers. At Dalston's first glimpse of the contents, his new-found optimism vanished. The head-lines offered a new sensation that brought him back from his airy excursion

with Miss Lane to the grim realities of the situation. Missing Curate. Scotland Yard Activity.

CHAPTER XII

The haystack afforded a warm and drowsy lodging; and Basil had slept so little on this adventure that he now succeeded in oversleeping himself. The sun was high when he woke. Every thyme-clad hill was flinging up its skylark, a handful of elfin joy, to the cloudless blue; and the whole world was happy. But the busses and motorcars were driving merrily over the main road. He had missed the coast-guard again.

Oddly enough he was almost glad of the fact. At least there was a streak of queer joy in his annoyance. He seemed to be learning things, too, that were going to help him later on, and if Puck had arranged it all, he was not altogether ungrateful for this elfin schooling. It seemed to him quite clear now that if his love-affair had gone awry, it was due to his own self-conceit, and this had been ruthlessly stripped away in the last forty-eight hours. He had learned something about hunger and its relation to theft; and he would understand hungry people better in future. He was not sure that he didn't even catch a glimpse of the place of crime itself in the scheme of things. It was certainly playing a part in his own development. There was one wild moment, for instance, after he had overheard Thorn's conversation yesterday, when it occurred to him that he might leap out on the old ruffian from behind, stun him with a lump of chalk, and take his coat and trousers.

It was just as impossible, of course, as any of his other schemes; but it was very good for Basil's education that this bloodthirsty impulse should have seized him even for the fleeting second. He had lost more stiff collars than one; and, when he returned to civilization, he felt that everything would be slightly different. He would not be so prone in future to the sin by which the angels fell. The change in himself was perhaps so minute that others would hardly observe it; but he had the queerest instinctive feeling that its apparent triviality would make all the difference to Barbara Lane. His poets whispered to him quite seriously:

> O, the little more and how much it is!
> And the little less, and what worlds away!

He suddenly realized exactly what Barbara had meant by saying that she would marry him if he would only commit a burglary; and his heart leaped. He would return to her now almost like a schoolboy who has been punished and forgiven. He could almost see the new understanding, humorous, but so human, in her eyes. It did not lessen the beauty of it that he was eating a comic fragment of turnip for breakfast. Nor did he feel in the least ridiculous, while the outside world kept its distance. And here again he was learning something.

When he was at school he had learned how to make the shy newcomer uncomfortable by gazing with an entranced eye at his shoes. Later on, he had often accomplished the same feat by a quick glance at a gawky undergraduate's socks or evening tie; and, even in the outside world, he had been an adept at fixing a cold and fishlike stare on such misfortunes as a broken stud in an evening shirt; a slightly frayed edge on a collar; a sock that had slipped its suspender; an old shoe-lace that had been broken and craftily reknotted, or a new shoe-lace that didn't quite match its companion. Like many another young Englishman of his generation he had been unconsciously trained to observe such things first and foremost, and sometimes they were all that he did observe.

His schoolmasters had introduced him to the masterpieces of literature in the same spirit, the spirit of the immature parodist in a school magazine. The ripe parodist is often a valuable critic; but, for English youth, parody is not the best approach to the masterpieces, and consciously or unconsciously, English education has too often adopted it, perhaps as the schoolmaster's only way of getting even with the masters. But it lacks insight and a sense of proportion.

The amusement of quoting for the millionth time the weak lines in Wordsworth had led Basil to the intellectual snobbery of "Locked Bedrooms," which nobody could parody, because like the snake that represents eternity, it had its own tail in its mouth, and was quite effectively swallowing its own nonsensical body. The queer fact was that, in his own ridiculous predicament, he was learning something about this also. It was impossible for him to be snobbish, in any sense, while he was lying naked in a haystack, or stealing a bowl of bread and milk from an aged shepherd.

He had acquired a new insight into his own conventions, and those of our civilization. Some of its garments, he had begun to realize, were merely a necessary disguise, without which humanity might not borrow Sunday tickets for the Zoological Gardens and inspect such inferior animals as the lion and the tiger, the gazelle and the fawn. But he was acquiring a new insight into the conventional rebellions, the convention of unconventionality also.

At Dalston's instigation he had entered the temple of some of Dalston's gods. He had read Thoreau's "Walden"; and he couldn't help wishing that Thoreau had gone through his own absurd adventure. It would have given a new turn to some of his colloquies with Nature. Throughout his book, this was true, and that was true, but the whole was false. No clear logic ran through it, no spirit of gentle reason pervaded it, and the writer's sense of self-importance disgusted him. In Walt Whitman reaction had run wild; and, through the desire to make things better, there was an obvious desire to startle and offend.

The "distinguished" art of "Locked Bedrooms" he had already thrown into the crucible of Nature herself. Sun and rain and dew should deal with his own copy of that great work. Those schoolboy bletherings had amused his idleness, partly out of *snobisme*, and partly because newspapers, without a purpose, devoted space nowadays to illiterate imbecilities that nobody would have glanced at twice, a generation ago. Criticism had sunk to a level where it could only be regarded with a tongue in the cheek, in the idlest of after-dinner moods. One knew beforehand exactly what certain writers were going to say about each other in certain journals. Odd—that the loss of one's clothes should have stripped his mind also of its affectations. But it had; and he had become a human being, almost a boy, again; and suddenly, a brilliant idea struck him, an idea that, if he had not become a boy again, would probably never have entered his mind at all. It was about time that some idea should strike him; for, as he lay at watch for the opportunity that never came, at the edge of his wheat-field, he caught a sentence from a passing conversation of two spinsters of his parish.

"*The vicar seems to think that it may be murder. They are talking of using bloodhounds to discover the body.*"

CHAPTER XIII

Five hours later, Basil was pacing feverishly up and down the ruined cottage, or pausing to watch, with eyes of glittering welcome, the storm that was now creeping up across the Channel. Quick scribbles of lightning ran all about the sea-horizon. He watched them and the set of the ragged thunder-clouds with eagerness, as if he were physically hungering for the storm to break.

The sun, a ball of red fire, went down slowly, behind the leaden seas. He set out, some minutes before it had vanished, with a definite purpose now, and with hardly a thought of any other cover than the dusk. The threatening of the storm had swept the downs clear, and the darkness came thick and fast. He had not been this way before. Big, heavy drops began to fall like warm tears around him, and coursed along his shining body as he leaned against the wind. At last the rustle of the rain cloaked all other sounds. It was all to the good; Helmstone streets would be empty. There might be a policeman or two to dodge, but that would be no great matter. Anyhow, he had to get back if the heavens fell.

And then the storm broke. In the unseen spaces overhead a battle raged. The tramp of legions merged in the roar of artillery. In a moment, all the sodden sky was one blind flash, as the crouched swift earth leaped abruptly out of the dark and sank back into blacker darkness.

And in that moment Double Dick stood before him, like a rigid specter, outstretched to bar his way, a sound of clacking laughter in his throat. Basil had dragged him to earth before he recognized what his hands had gripped—a scarecrow, a wooden skeleton robed in rags and tatters. But what precious rags and tatters! There was no time for squeamishness. A few minutes later Basil sped down the gully to the beach with the cast-offs of Double Dick and Farmer Bloxham clinging to his soaked body—such sackcloth was the sinner to wear on his expulsion from Eden. Back to civilization again in the rags that civilization itself had rejected. He stumbled, fell, swore, and was up and on again. Not a man or woman in his parish but would have howled with laughter, and Basil would have cared no more than he did for the howling storm.

The rocks were slippery, even for a barefoot man, and he chafed madly at his slowness. At Melscombe he took his chance. A dash up the Gap and through a few yards of village street, under blind windows that laughed derisively at him, and then he was on the cliff path. The turf was beneath his feet and he could run. As he ran, he saw at every flash the Chalkdene road leap white from the downs.

Three miles of running and walking, and then as the first houses of Chalkdene sprang at him out of the dark, he slid back to the beach again. One more mile and he knew that, at the top of the cliff, he would find the street where he lodged. So far, he had met no human being. He climbed the steps to the top of the cliff.

At a little distance, the policeman under the lee of the shelter saw no more than some poor devil of a tramp on his way to shelter in the town. "Rough night," he called out. Basil shouted some monosyllabic answer, inarticulate as the croak of the scarecrow on the downs. His own voice surprised him—for two days he had not heard it. Near The Deliverance, in the arch of a door, the original owner of the clothes—Double Dick—saw, with a shock the scarecrow, or his own double, shuffling hurriedly past him.

Mrs. Barrow had locked her front door securely. But Mrs. Barrow's handmaids had neglected to fasten the dining-room window. In a moment, Basil was in the house.

Upstairs, Mrs. Barrow awoke. The sound could not be mistaken. Somebody was in the bathroom on the floor below and was having a bath. Mrs. Barrow was afraid and prayed to God. She then stumbled on the comforting reflection that burglars do not like baths and went to sleep again.

At a quarter to seven on the following morning, a little later than usual, Mrs. Barrow's sleepy servant draggled downstairs to the basement and began her duties. Her night had been undisturbed. She did not think of Mr. Strode at all. If she had thought of him it would have been as a superior gentleman who made less work in the house when he was not there. At seven o'clock Mrs. Barrow also descended and was astounded to see, framed in the doorway of her sitting-room, her missing lodger. He was dressed in his usual clothes, clean-shaven, orderly; but there was—so Mrs. Barrow said afterwards—a look in his face, and he was carrying the large wreath over his arm. Mrs. Barrow said, "My God!"

and sat down on the stairs.

"Morning, Mrs. Barrow," said Strode. "I see you can't have got my post-card, saying that I was going on a walking trip for a few days." His voice reassured her.

"Post-card, sir? No, sir! Nothing of that kind. Why, we all thought you must be dead. That's why it comes as such a shock."

"I see. Well, you can take this wreath away. I want breakfast at once."

"The room ain't properly done yet, sir."

"Never mind. I had no dinner last night, and I'm hungry. You can do the room later. Be as quick as you can, please. I must be at the vicarage at eight."

Considerably impressed by the tone in which Basil had uttered the word "hungry," Mrs. Barrow sent up an imposing fleet of breakfast dishes in several relays. He had disposed of all the porridge, the pickled herrings, and half a loaf of brown bread before Gladys arrived, panting, with the hot kidneys and bacon. At the sight of the devastation he had already wrought, her eyes bulged like pale blue marbles, and she gave subdued vent to an awestruck "Goo!" It looked as if there was going to be more "unnecessary work" than ever; and she could not resist a polite question, tremulous with suppressed ironies:

"Would you like anything to follow, sir?"

In view of what she had already laid before him, her freezing little query should have reminded him that, in the first hour of his return, she had done enough work for a week. She had little hope of really seeing him blush, but she was not prepared for the Reverend Basil Strode's almost lyrical reply.

"Certainly. Bring up anything you've got. Some cold ham and poached eggs, perhaps; and another rack of toast; and, if Mrs. Barrow has any cold beef, she might send that up, too. If not, she might fry some of those large sausages you use in the kitchen. I rather like them. And, if there is no more fruit in the house"—he had already disposed of the two apples and the forlorn banana he found on the side-board—"you might run down to the village and get some of those excellent pears which Mrs. Barrow procured for me last week. But, before you go, bring up some more butter and a pot of that honey. And—er—by the bye—if there is any shortage in the larder, there is that little thank-offering, as Mrs. Trotter called it—"

"The wreath, sir?" exclaimed Gladys, thinking, as she told her young man at the pictures afterwards, that Mr. Strode had gone mad, and was about to order it up as a Gargantuan salad.

"No-no-no. Even Mrs. Trotter would hardly describe the wreath as a thank-offering," he replied, with a confidence quite unshaken by the dubious expression on the maid's face. "About a fortnight ago, Mrs. Trotter sent a large tin of some things which Americans eat. You might tell Mrs. Barrow to let me have some of those, too."

Stunned by his overwhelming unconsciousness of the real point of her original little question, Gladys tottered dumbly from the room.

As soon as his physical hunger began to be appeased, Basil seized one of the newspapers that had been accumulating during his absence. He turned the pages with the eagerness of a print-starved mind. His right hand, in the act of conveying a piece of buttered toast to his mouth, suddenly paused. His jaw dropped. He stared at the head-lines in amazement, and his thoughts reeled at his own notoriety. Here was a pretty fuss. Fortunately, nobody seemed to have the faintest idea of the ridiculous truth. In fact, he seemed to have cut rather a dash. There was a romantic touch in some of the suggestions (though he wished that Barbara's name had not been involved) a dark breath as of the cliffs of Elsinore. There would have to be explanations, of course; but, on the whole, the explanation which he had already thought of—the hastily extemporized walking-tour, and the post-card that had not been delivered—seemed to be the best, and the most dignified. It should extricate him from all the legitimate questionings of the inquisitive.

He turned to the pile of letters. Few of them were personal. One does not write to a friend who has disappeared into thin air. But there was a flood of bills; and—oddly enough—a circular from a London tailor, full of most unconscious irony, of things which wake the uneasy mind to vague suspicions of a deliberate intention.

Sir:

It is not generally understood how many individual peculiarities there are in the human figure. Most of the tailors in these days are working on mass production lines; and it is obviously impossible for them to ameliorate artistically any defects that there may be, or to make allowance for any peculiarities in the individual client. As I am an exception to this rule, I should like you to try my work, where I am sure you will notice a difference that will be a source of gratification to yourself and a constant pleasure to your friends.

Yours truly,

J. B. WILKINSON

The letter itself was typewritten, on the white note-paper of the firm, and obviously genuine; but it had been refolded to fit a square gray envelop which looked suspiciously unbusinesslike. The postmark showed that it had been posted in Helmstone on the previous evening. It had been addressed with a pen, in what looked like a disguised handwriting. What did this mean? Everything or nothing? He felt strangely perturbed. Yet he couldn't see how—no, he gave it up.

The next letter that he opened was from an international press-cutting agency, enclosing a column and a half from an Irish newspaper about his disappearance. It informed him that, if he wished for a complete collection of the press reports, the agency would be pleased to supply them at three guineas a thousand; and would arrange them, tastefully, in an album with gilt edges for one guinea more.

There were three flattering letters from photographers telling him that they would like to take his photograph, free of charge, for their press gallery; and that they would each present him with one finished portrait, beautifully mounted, for his own use.

Then came a letter marked "Private and Confidential," from a mistaken gentleman who described himself as a "publicity agent," and seemed to think that Basil desired to attract even more attention. The writer hinted that many "distinguished" persons owed their fame to his machinations; and that, if he were granted an interview, he would suggest methods that would enable Basil Strode to "capitalize" his new-found publicity, and provoke more of it, for their mutual profit. "Publicity" had progressed far since the timid days when the satirist said of one of its practitioners:

"The puff of a dunce, he mistook it for fame."

It was the whole hog nowadays, and you wrote your own puff.

It was suggested that if the missing curate, on his return, would write an account of himself (or allow the agent to write it for him), it might be sold to a certain Sunday newspaper for considerably more than Milton received for Paradise Lost. This enterprising Journal (as Basil remembered hearing) had recently paid a vast sum to a woman accused of murdering her husband. All she had to do was to write a page of sisterly advice to young ladies contemplating matrimony, and the same agent had arranged it. There was a fine impersonal touch about this letter. It was addressed to Reverend Basil Strode "or nearest relative." It pointed out, in a postscript, discreetly but clearly, that in certain sad contingencies even dependents might find a sympathetic ear and a fount of consolatory profit; and that, in these days, when so many persons neglected to insure their lives, or to make wills, it was almost a religious duty to communicate any essential particulars to the publicity agent himself at the earliest possible moment; for fame was fleeting, and if the golden harvest was to be secured, it was necessary to put in the sickles and reap.

Then came a more mysterious communication. It had been posted in Chalkdene, and it contained only the following words, written in a deliberately round and characterless hand:

Welcome home I can now give you the full quotation:

Be kind and courteous to this gentleman;
Hop in his walks and gambol in his eyes;
Feed him with apricocks and dewberries,
With purple grapes, green figs and mulberries;
The honey-bags steal from the humblebees,
And for night tapers crop their waxen thighs

To have my love to bed and to arise;
And pluck the wings from painted butterflies
To fan the moonbeams from his sleeping eyes;
Nod to him, elves, and do him courtesies.

Basil was forced to connect it with the scrap of paper which he had found near the haystack. Was it pure coincidence? And what on earth did it mean? Did it refer to some literary conversation at the Poetry Club? Could it be—Quite impossible! But again he was profoundly perturbed.

Lastly, he opened a publisher's circular which invited him to buy specimens of another and very different kind of literature, mostly of young women who (as the publisher enticingly hinted) undoubtedly deserved the suppression for which they hoped, and all the publicity that could be wrung out of it. In his pseudo-modern capacity, Basil had occasionally purchased an "advanced" work, and he had been deluged with these appalling catalogues in consequence. But the world had evidently "advanced" even during the last week; for the publisher particularly called his attention to one book which "might be suppressed at any moment, and therefore should be secured at once." It was by the "distinguished" author of "Leap-Frog," and was entitled "The Baboon Companion." Under the title there was a closely printed collection of laudatory criticisms from "distinguished" critics in "distinguished" literary weeklies. One of these remarked:

The heroine of this book is an habitué of Montmartre, sodden with drink, who becomes a victim of atavism, goes out to the Congo and falls in love with a baboon in the steaming tropic jungle. The broken and savage obscenities that drop from her lips on every page somehow wring the heart with a tragic beauty. The wise reader will recognize the high importance of this young author's furious insight into primitive passions; his discovery of a new field in which to exploit them; and his frank acceptance of the grave artistic necessity of occupying it. The subject is treated in all its aspects, and the book is a somber, dignified and passionate plea for the recognition of the so-called lower animals; and for the removal of all man-made taboos. As Velisetta, the heroine, cries, in passionate rebellion, when she is separated from her baboon companion at the close, "My God, are we not one clay?" The thought is, of course, an advanced development from Rousseau; but however much the conventional will shrink from abandoning old ideas, it is a courageous and distinguished work. If—as appears likely—it is suppressed by the mere legal authorities, its author may invoke not only the name of Milton, but that of Darwin, against those who would lay a sacrilegious hand on the august Ark of our national literature. He is an author to watch.—Mr. Beestley Porchester, the distinguished critic, in the Weekly Review.

Basil Strode felt, at once, that he had returned to modern English civilization; but "we are what suns and winds and waters make us," and there was still a tang of wild thyme in his nostrils. He dropped the circular into his waste-paper basket, went over to his book-shelves, picked out half a dozen slim books, tore them into small sections, and rammed them down on the top of the circular.

Then, early as it was, he put on his hat, and set out for the vicarage. Eyes stared and mouths gaped from many doorways as he passed up the street; and, before he reached the duck-pond, he was aware of a small crowd of villagers hurrying after him at some little distance. He turned, and addressed an apparently petrified man who stood quite near. It happened to be Double Dick's brother—the organ-blower.

"Richardson, I have just returned from a little walking tour, and discovered that my message to that effect has gone astray. Hence this ridiculous fuss. I shall be glad if you will tell everyone that there is nothing to be excited about."

The rest of the crowd was approaching at the double now, anxious to hear what he was saying; but he sent them back with a peremptory wave of his hand, and strode on to the vicarage. At the gate he paused and saw the organ-blower, surrounded by an eager circle, on the brink of the duck-pond. His own words were wafted back to him, in less clerical tones, on the low sea wind, mingled with a forceful quacking of ducks.

"'Ence," 'e says, "'ence this ree-dickulous fuss."

It seemed to be taking quite well, as the disciples of Jenner say. He clicked the latch and walked into the vicar's garden, looking at the herbaceous borders as though his chief interest in life at the moment was to discover exactly what had happened to the delphiniums during his absence.

The vicar had not yet breakfasted. He was energetically rolling his tennis lawn, and welcomed his curate there, with astonishment, but satisfaction. Again, the post-card story—slightly elaborated—was quite well received. Basil was extremely apologetic and hoped that the vicar had not been inconvenienced or made nervous.

"My dear fellow," said the vicar cheerfully. "We haven't had so much excitement for a long time. The newspapers have—well—you have made Helmstone famous. But all's well that ends well. I have done much the same kind of thing myself in my younger days—started off with no plans, bought a tooth-brush and slept in my day-shirt, and sent a post-card to tell people where I was. Only in your case the post-card didn't turn up!"

"You can't trust those wretched boys to do a single thing."

"Thoughtless little beggars. We were no better ourselves at one time. But the newspapers will be after you, I'm afraid. They'll be dreadfully disappointed you weren't murdered. Have you seen them?"

"Mrs. Barrow told me," said Strode in an uneasy voice, "they've been very troublesome. I shall dodge them."

"You'll find it difficult," said the vicar cheerfully. "Very difficult. They'll want to interview you, and make some further romance out of it, unless you are careful. There's one very aggressive person, a Mr. Silas P. Murdoch, who wanted to set bloodhounds on your track, or said he wanted to, probably for head-line purposes. He will certainly come to see you."

"I shall snub him," said Basil, but he felt uneasy. Something in his bones shrank from the inquisitorial light which he felt, instinctively, would be shed upon his inner consciousness by Mr. Silas P. Murdoch. He was not out of the wood yet.

CHAPTER XIV

When Basil got back to his lodgings, he was surprised and annoyed to find no less than four large fat strangers ensconced in the most comfortable chairs of his sitting-room. Their bulk and their detached air gave it the general effect of a railway compartment on a foggy morning; and he had an unpleasant feeling that, unless he was very careful, he would be carried along with them, like Eugene Aram, to an unknown and extremely unpleasant destination. The largest of these sinister visitors rising solemnly to his feet, remarked massively, "The Reverend Basil P. Strode, I presume."

"I have no second initial; but otherwise that is my name," replied Basil coldly.

Ignoring the criticism, the stranger handed him a card, from which Basil gathered that he was being addressed by no less a personage than Mr. Silas P. Murdoch of the Daily Telegram, and ought to be duly impressed.

"These gentlemen are my colleagues," said Mr. Murdoch with a wave of his plump hand to each in turn. "Mr. James R. Milligan of the Sunday Budget, Mr. Harold A. Spink of the Leader, and Mr. John D. Smithers of the Affiliated News Association Ltd. Gentlemen, meet the Reverend Basil P. Strode."

Every nerve in Basil's body was wildly irritated by this man, and he replied, with something of his old vibrant tone: "As I ventured to remark before, I have no second initial, but I shall be glad to know the purpose of your"—he was about to say "intrusion" but he thought better of it and said—"er—visit."

Mr. Murdoch paid no attention, for he was now wetting his finger and turning over a sheaf of papers which he had extracted from an inner pocket. But Mr. Smithers sidled up to Basil and murmured, tactfully:

"He means no harm. He's a British journalist with an enormous admiration for American methods. He picked it up on the other side; but he's got it all wrong, you know. As a matter of fact, none of us here ever possessed a second initial; but Murdoch always sticks it in as a sort of compliment. If he has nothing else to go on, he usually borrows one from a millionaire. He gives me a 'D,' when he's in a good temper. That's from John D. Rockefeller. He took a 'P' for himself; and he's given you a 'P.' That's from J. P. Morgan; and it means that he has a great respect for the publicity you've been piling up. However, you needn't worry. He always sticks 'em in; but his editors always cross 'em out."

Basil grunted incoherently at this interesting information. Mr. Smithers was diplomatic, but who can fathom the sources of these temperamental antagonisms? Another man might have given Basil a hundred initials, and not irritated him as Mr. Murdoch's silence was irritating him now. Perhaps it was the way in which the back of Mr. Murdoch's fat neck was shaved, half-way up to the crown of his head, irresistibly suggesting to Basil "singed swine"; perhaps it was the way in which Mr. Murdoch went on wetting his finger to turn his quite unnecessary papers; perhaps it was an instinctive feeling that Mr. Murdoch was the incarnation of all the forces that had whirled him into a loathsome notoriety.

In any case, Basil stared at him with detestation, subtly and steadily increased by his own consciousness of the ridiculous secret which he desired above all things to conceal. With the other men he felt that he could deal; but there was something formidable about Mr. Murdoch. Basil was fascinated by his movements, the set of his mouth, the licking of his lips, as a critical rabbit might be fascinated by a python's preparations to swallow him.

"And—er—what do you want to see me about?" Basil said, at last, with an effort to break the spell that bound him.

Mr. Murdoch riveted his attention again at once, with a low sardonic chuckle.

"There has been a good deal of public interest in your doin's lately, Mr. Strode, and now that everythi' seems to have ended happily, we would like to have a word or two from you to our readers. Would you care to tell us sumpin' about your walkin' tour, for instance."

"There is very little to say—except that, as I had nothing very much to do in the parish for a few days, I conceived the idea of turning a long country walk into a short walking tour during this glorious weather. Unfortunately, my post-card to the vicar was never delivered."

"You took no baggage with you, Mr. Strode?" said Mr. Murdoch.

"No pajamas or tooth-brush for instance?" murmured the explanatory Mr. Smithers.

"I obtained all that I required at my first stopping place."

"Uh-huh," said Mr. Murdoch, "and the name of that place was—"

"Faircombe," said Basil.

"Uh-huh! And I suppose you just stayed at the lovely little old-world Sussex inns in the most out-of-the-way villages, ha'nts of ancient peace. You found the Green Man at Faircombe a fairly good house, I guess. It was the only inn in the place, when I came through Faircombe a few weeks ago, so I s'pose that's where you stayed."

"Yes," said Basil, for want of a reasonable alternative; but, the moment he said it, he could have bitten his tongue off. The python seemed to be swelling visibly.

"You see, Mr. Strode, as a newspaper man I'm interested to discover that, in Sussex, not sixty miles from London as the crow flies, there are villages in which it is possible for placards and newspaper head-lines to make no impression at all. There were placards about yourself outside every little newspaper shop in the country; and, if you didn't walk past any of them, you must have found a reel unspoiled bit of the primeval desert, it seems to me. It would interest our readers, I think, if you would be so kind as to mark the line of your walkin' tour roughly, on this map of Sussex."

He unfolded the map which he had extracted from his bundle of papers and spread it before Basil.

"Really, you know," said Basil, "I don't think I can do that. I walked very much as the spirit moved me, and I have a very bad memory. Also—there has been so much ridiculous fuss in the newspapers that I shall be very much obliged if you will say no more about it. I shall be glad, too, if you will not mention the fact that I stayed at the Green Man, in Faircombe."

Mr. Murdoch shot a swift glance at Basil.

"It would be a very valuable piece of publicity for the Green Man," he said meditatively.

"I am not thinking of the Green Man, I am thinking of myself, at the moment, and I loathe publicity. Besides"—a brilliant idea struck him—"there are some friends of mine at Faircombe, who would be rather hurt that I didn't go and stay with them, if they read of it in the papers."

"Uh-huh," said Mr. Murdoch, who was now thinking deeply, "and there are no other places that you would care to mention, unspoiled beauty-spots that—"

"I should certainly not advertise any beauty-spots or they would instantly be devastated," Basil interjected, "and now, Mr. Murdoch, as I have a good deal of urgent correspondence to get through this morning, I am afraid that I must bring this pleasant conversation to a close."

In the case of another man, Mr. Murdoch might have been merely disappointed, and ready to accept defeat. But he, too, was moved by a temperamental antagonism to this superior person in a clerical collar.

"I am afraid I can't promise to withhold all information from the thousands of readers who have been followin' your case with so much sympathy, Mr. Strode; but I will do my best to fall in with your wishes, so far as that can be done, *without misleadin' the public*."

It was a shot in the dark, but Mr. Murdoch was gratified to see that it went home. Basil visibly winced and looked frightened; but he recovered himself quickly, and his fear changed to anger.

"You fellows have done nothing else all your lives," he cried.

As he grew hotter, Mr. Murdoch grew cooler. His grim jaws moved quietly, as though he were chewing the cud.

"That's a very good reason," he replied, "for seein' that we don't tell the public a pack of lies now; and, by cripes—"

He stopped short, looked at Basil from head to foot, gave a low whistle, nodded his head as if an entirely new idea had come to him, then strode out of the house, followed in a rather shamefaced silence by Mr. James R. Milligan of the Sunday Budget, Mr. Harold A. Spink of the Leader, and Mr. John D. Smithers of the Affiliated News Association Ltd.

"What's the game now, Silas?" said Mr. Milligan.

Mr. Murdoch crushed his soft hat firmly on his head, rammed a cigar into the corner of his mouth, bit off the end, and spat it out before replying.

"That big stiff has got my goat. It looks to me as if he wasn't quite as lonely as Mr. Wordsworth's little wanderin' cloud when he went on this—what did he call it?—brief walkin' tour! D'joo notice how the name of that inn slipped out, and how he tried to take it back? I tell you what I'm gonna do. Come down to the post office. I'm gonna telephone the Green Man at Faircombe."

CHAPTER XV

The four newspaper reporters, a little soured by the way in which their rocketing sensation had apparently sizzled out, left Chalkdene by the Helmstone bus which catches the nine o'clock train to town. But Mr. Silas P. Murdoch, with his Scottish blood, and his American training, was not satisfied. There were mysteries, unexplained factors, in this affair, which piqued his curiosity, and irritated his professional pride. The Reverend Basil Strode had certainly told him three separate lies, of a kind that an elderly statesman had once called "frigid and calculated." The telephone message and the Green Man had merely underlined one of those lies, without explaining it; but parsons surely do not tell lies of that sort without cause, and grave cause.

Moreover, the Reverend Basil Strode, feeling perhaps that he was being drawn into a corner by this persistent questioning, had snubbed Silas P. Murdoch in the presence of his colleagues; and Silas P. Murdoch was a man who had usually got his own back. It annoyed him to think that Basil Strode was not prominent enough to be stung, from time to time, in the press, later on. You could dodge or shoot an elephant, but the most Napoleonic of press men would find it difficult either to dodge or shoot a flea. If he did not get his own back now, he would never get it back. He did not like to be snubbed or bluffed by an amateur; and he did not like his expeditions to be fruitless. He wore what his colleagues called his "poker-face," and sat silently chewing the butt of his cigar till the bus pulled up with a jerk in the square outside the railway-station.

"Ten minutes ahead of time," said Mr. Milligan of the Sunday Budget, briskly. "What's the matter with you, Silas? There'll be plenty more stories tomorrow. P'raps they'll arrange a nice little murder for you down at Eastbourne. No use looking like Napoleon at St. Helena. Come and have a drink!"

"Has it ever struck you," inquired Mr. Murdoch sardonically, "that, whenever you sit down to think, in this land of old and just renown, everyone asks if you've got a headache? See you later, on the train. I'm gonna buy a mouse-trap."

With this enigmatic remark, Mr. Murdoch watched his companion pass through the revolving doors of the refreshment room, hailed a taxicab, and ordered the driver to convey him and his "grip" as quickly as possible back to Chalkdene.

"He's hiding sumpin'; and it'll be a scoop for the Daily Telegram, whatever it is," he muttered. "Unless the Reverend Basil Strode tells lies for fun, it must be sumpin' pretty big. Never saw a man's face look more like Dr. Jekyll's, on the films, when he's just recovered from bein' Mr. Hyde. I've got to find his back door, that's all."

Certainly, if Basil Strode could have seen the Napoleonic expression on the square white face of Silas P. Murdoch at that moment, as the taxicab hummed along the dark cliff road, he would have felt intensely uneasy. Murdoch's unlighted cigar-butt looked as if it had been hammered into his face with a mallet; and the shell-rimmed glasses, as they met the headlights of the last bus from Chalkdene, gleamed like two lighted portholes in the bows of a torpedo-boat.

Basil Strode had been informed by his landlady that the reporters had gone back to London, or he might even have postponed the delicate task on which he was now engaged. The horrible garments he had borrowed, at one remove, from Double Dick had now been locked up in a cupboard for two days and a night; and his sensitive nose had been made aware of their presence every time he entered his bedroom. He had burned a little cone of Japanese incense, and only succeeded in making his room smell like the Zoo on a bank holiday. The undertones dominated the whole tune; and he even imagined that he detected new suspicions in the sniff of Mrs. Barrow, as she stood in the door and told him that she couldn't find the shoes he'd been wearing on his—er—holiday, anywhere. Nor could she find the suit he'd taken or collect the underwear as usual for the laundry. She had always valeted him with the punctiliousness he himself had inspired; and his vague remarks about putting them out later did not solve in her mind the riddle which was agitating her as to their place of concealment. He had never locked anything up before; and he had never, never put his dirty boots in that cupboard.

On all these points, of course, Basil was equally perplexed. But there was another part of the problem, of which Mrs. Barrow was unaware and this he intended to settle without delay. He went up to his bedroom after dusk, sheathed his hands in chamois-leather golfing gloves, unlocked the cupboard, and rolled those other dreadful garments up in several back numbers of an ecclesiastical journal, through the thick dull pages of which he hoped that the savage aroma would not penetrate, if by any mishap he met a friend while he was carrying it. He packed the hideous bundle in a white cardboard box that had once contained a top-hat; and, since this box might appear a little conspicuous, he wrapped the

whole contraption in brown paper and tied it up, quite neatly, with string.

He was not yet an experienced criminal; but, as he murmured to himself, it was quite necessary that this parcel should be "sub-fusc." He intended to take it for a short brisk walk up Long Down, under cover of darkness, and drop it into the obliterating heart of a gorse-bush.

About nine o'clock, when Mrs. Barrow was safely ensconced in her kitchen, he stole out, closing the door behind him very quietly, and walked quickly up the darker side of the deserted village street. There was only one danger-point—The Deliverance, which was the last house in the village, on the edge of the downs. It stood there like a sentry. There was no way of avoiding it, if the downs were his aim, and he had decided that they would be better than the busier road to Helmstone.

He passed the lighted windows of the inn with all the hurried stealth of the innocent man who has something to conceal; and—unfortunately for Basil Strode—at that very moment, a taxicab drew up at the inn door. Mr. Silas P. Murdoch saw the shadowy figure slipping furtively past the window of his cab, observed the large parcel, and wondered why on earth a curate should be carrying it out into the lonely wilderness of the Sussex downs at this late hour. Before the cabman had stopped his meter, Silas P. Murdoch had crumpled a pound note into his hand.

"Take my grip into The Deliverance. The name's on it. Tell 'em I want to keep my room for another night," he said bruskly, and disappeared into the darkness, beyond the last lamp-post, on the trail of Basil Strode.

Silas P. Murdoch had smoked too many cigars, and spent too many late nights at the Press Club, looking Napoleonic over whiskies and sodas, to be altogether in training for an adventure like this. The night was cloudy. The turf of the downs was slippery, and the long ascent exhausting, at the speed set by the athletic lope of the curate. Silas P. Murdoch, in fact, had begun to pride himself, in recent years, on a certain rotundity, which had once been flatteringly described by a colleague, in print, as "a presence." But he was very short of breath in less than five minutes, and his steaming face misted the shell-rimmed glasses so thickly that he had frequently to take them off and wipe them. Once, in doing so, he put his foot into a rabbit-hole and rolled heavily into some thistles.

It was only the Napoleonic strain of the Fleet Street tradition that enabled him to keep that shadowy figure in sight. At last, to Silas P. Murdoch's gasping gratification, Basil Strode arrived at a thicket of gorse which prevented rapid progress. He paused, and glanced round him. The newspaper man dropped on hands and knees behind a gorse-bush, and watched like a deer-stalker.

The ground here was honeycombed with rabbit-holes; and Mr. Strode seemed to be examining these with interest. He, too, dropped on his hands and knees; and now, to Silas P. Murdoch's astonishment, he was thrusting the large parcel into one of the rabbit-holes, thrusting it with vigor and determination, as far as his arm could reach, and then as much farther as one of his long legs could drive it. Not content with this, Mr. Strode collected as many lumps of the loose chalk as he could find and pushed these down after the parcel. Then, glancing round him again, and drawing a deep breath, like a man who has rid himself of a dreadful secret, he went lightly down the hill towards Chalkdene.

The watcher crawled carefully round the gorse-bush, keeping it between him and the curate till the latter had disappeared into the lower darkness of the valley. Then, with something like awe at the thought of what he might find, Silas P. Murdoch rose upright, and walked with Napoleonic dignity up to the rabbit-hole. He was convinced now that he was on the verge of the biggest "scoop" of his life. His thoughts ranged from child-murder to—Well, it might be anything after what he had seen, and heard. The lying, the stealth, a parson, too!

He began to visualize the head-lines. CLERGYMAN'S LIFE OF CRIME. NEW SCARLET LETTER, revealed by Silas P. Murdoch, of the International Press. All the same he had to work for it. Mr. Murdoch's arm had the Napoleonic defects of brevity and fatness, and it took him some time to get at the buried parcel by breaking away the turf and chalk over the top of the rabbit-hole. At last, however, it was in his arms. He could not attempt to examine it in the dark. Valuable clues might be lost. One never knew. He trotted and slithered down the slippery hillside, clasping his precious burden to his breast, with the eagerness of a boy who, after many vague dreams, has at last actually unearthed a pirate's hoard.

In less than ten minutes, he had laid his burden on his own clean white bed at The Deliverance, and began to open it.

"Beer, to begin with," he muttered. Then he tore off the outer wrappers, and dropped back into a chair with the quite inappropriate ejaculation, "Holy Smoke!"

After a moment he rose again, and approached the garments gingerly, as a cat approaches a fire, or an apparently dead rat. He prodded the pockets and, being less squeamish than Basil Strode, eventually thrust a hand into one of them. From this malodorous orifice he drew a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles, and something hard and crescent-shaped, rolled up in a lady's handkerchief.

"Joolery," he gasped. He unrolled a corner of the handkerchief, caught one glimpse of the glittering contents, and sat down again, with eyes so protruding, and brow so bulging with thought, that it seemed doubtful whether his massive shell-rimmed spectacles would stand the strain. But it was no longer Napoleon at St. Helena. It was Napoleon with his eagles up, and the world-scoop at his feet. The mystery was there, mystery enough for a hundred head-lines, if it was properly handled. All that was necessary was to put two and two together, and discover what the devil it all meant. But, the more he thought, the more completely it baffled him; and the more firmly determined he became to get to the bottom of it, and deliver the full value of whatever was to be discovered to the Daily Telegram.

The spectacles, he felt certain, were a link between the Reverend Basil Strode and the burglary at Miss Pettigrew's house. As for the other object, it had not been mentioned, though it must undoubtedly have been missed, if ...

Obviously, his first step was to go and see Miss Pettigrew, at once. After that, it might be a matter for the police. He hoped so.

CHAPTER XVI

While Basil Strode and Silas P. Murdoch had been dodging in and out of each other's lives on the downs, each of them thinking that he was working things out for himself quite successfully, the weavers of the pattern that no man ever sees till the end of his life had been busy elsewhere, preparing great surprises for both of them.

Double Dick, in return for odd jobs at The Deliverance was allowed sometimes to sleep in the stable-loft. It was his nearest approach to a permanent address; and, though he was not troubled by inquisitive retainers to account for unexpected changes in his wardrobe, he had now almost as many perplexities as the Reverend Basil Strode. He lay back on his bed of hay, sucking at his clay pipe, in the dim light thrown through the unglazed window by the gas-lamp in the stable-yard, and contorting his unclean brows over recollections of the talk in the bar that afternoon.

The burglary at Miss Pettigrew's had been his first attempt at crime on the larger scale. He was essentially a minor artist. Perhaps it was for this reason that he had not been suspected so far; but he was growing nervous about it. He had not known the value of some of the things he had stolen. He had not even dared to attempt to dispose of them, and this gave him a feeling of something like injured innocence when he thought of the sensational accounts of the affair which (owing to the recent focusing of newspaper attention on Chalkdene) had been appearing in the newspapers—London newspapers, too. There had been large head-lines. Chalkdene seemed to be unnaturally proud of it. Everybody talking and smiling in the village street, and buying the newspapers as if he'd got a new interest in life, instead of feeling sorry for Miss Pettigrew.

Nobody knew what that sort of thing might lead to. They had been dropping dark hints, at The Deliverance, that afternoon, about Scotland Yard. Men in plain clothes. You could tell them, sometimes, by their boots. Handcuffs. Click. He shivered. Six years, perhaps. He didn't like it at all. He didn't like the things the landlord had been saying, at The Deliverance. Criminals always gave themselves away, sooner or later. Even the craftiest of 'em always forgot some little thing. They leave footmarks or finger-prints. Or they drop some little thing somewhere, careless-like. "You've only got to give Scotland Yard a button, and they'll find the whole suit." That was the remark that made him jump.

Fine sort of talk to be buzzing round the head of a nervous and innocent man on a happy summer afternoon, especially when the loot of the burglary and the Reverend Basil Strode's clothes were at that very moment reposing in a corner of the stable-loft, behind a pile of old boxes, which had not been disturbed for years, but—with Scotland Yard on the track—might be disturbed at any moment. It was a fine country where a man might be sent to jail because of his finger-prints. Worse than Russia.

The footmarks would be all right, because—as it happened—Double Dick seldom bought his own shoes; and, at the time of the burglary (the thought went through him like a warm drink) he had been wearing a pair of old brogues that had been given to a jumble-sale by the Reverend Basil Strode. They had drifted into the possession of Double Dick by devious ways which nobody could now trace; and, if the matter was to be decided by footprints in Miss Pettigrew's garden, Scotland Yard would have to arrest—There again a gush of brilliantly illuminating thought, which he compared with rum and milk, went through his brain. Those other little things that in the landlord's agitating phrase, he had "left behind him, careless-like," in the pockets of the scarecrow. Those, too, must now be in the possession of the Reverend Basil Strode.

They were the only articles on which Double Dick had seen any prospect of raising a few shillings at once. He was not in touch with receivers of stolen property; and the other things were too valuable to palm off as his own. But he had seen an advertisement in a Helmstone window, indicating that the gold spectacle-rims and even the false teeth of deceased relatives were distinctly sought after; and he thought he might rise to at least one respectable old maiden aunt. It was perhaps fortunate, after all, that Basil Strode had taken those clothes from the scarecrow. Double Dick was not a psychologist; but he had an instinctive feeling that the silence of Basil Strode was about the safest thing he knew on that little episode. Then, suddenly, taking the clay pipe from his mouth, and, sitting bolt upright in the hay as though an angel had appeared to him there, he exclaimed jubilantly, "Gawd! I see it all!"

In a few moments he had dragged his loot out of its hiding-place—the diamond star that had belonged to Miss Pettigrew's mother; the gold cigarette-case that had been presented to Miss Pettigrew's father; and the missing suit, shoes and underwear of the Reverend Basil Strode.

"'E done it, just as much as *I* done it," Double Dick muttered to himself. "'E stole them things from the scarecrow, not

knowing their value, same as I done from Miss Pettigrew; and 'e can 'ave the responsibility for it."

He thrust the diamond star into one of Basil Strode's pockets and the cigarette-case into another; rolled the clothes up into a compact bundle round the shoes; surveyed the village street from his aerie and decided to carry out his new plan at once. It took him exactly two minutes and a half to shuffle down the dark side of the street as far as the small front garden of the curate's house.

He had intended to hide his bundle in the laurels under the bay-window, if necessary. But fortune was favoring him. There was no light in the sitting-room. The curate was obviously out, and the window was wide open to the summer air. Further observations made it clear that Mrs. Barrow was in the kitchen. There was not a soul in the street. Double Dick decided to make a good job of it while he was about it, nipped in through the window like a boy of fourteen, and ran quickly up the short flight of stairs to the curate's bedroom.

"Take the blinking lot," he murmured, as he stuffed the bundle into the narrow cupboard from which his own garments had been so lately removed. "Take the blinking lot, and I 'ope you'll get six years for it, same as I should have done, if there wasn't one law for the rich and another for the pore."

The door of the cupboard had been standing open; and the key was in the lock. A brilliant finishing touch occurred to him. He locked the cupboard and dropped the key into the pocket of Basil Strode's dressing-gown, which hung behind the bedroom door. Then, like an elderly but remarkably agile chimpanzee, Double Dick nipped down and out again into the darkness of the street and disappeared towards his hay-loft.

Ten minutes later, Mrs. Barrow went upstairs to lay out the Reverend Basil Strode's pajamas, bedroom slippers, and dressing-gown—according to the prescribed ritual. She felt the key in the pocket, drew it out, and—though she believed that he had not intended her to find it, and had left it there by accident—she could not resist the impulse to peep into the Bluebeard secrets of a cupboard which had been mysteriously locked against her. It contained, of course, just what she expected—the missing clothes; but why had the Reverend Basil Strode locked them away? She sniffed. The aroma of beer had not yet vanished from the cupboard. The clothes looked as if they could unfold a sordid tale.

She remembered reading a letter—it was one of her few weaknesses—from one of Mr. Strode's college friends: Dalston, that was the name. It was a very strange letter for anyone to write to a clergyman. He had been down to Helmstone, since the fuss in the papers, and had asked her some very curious questions. She really didn't know what to think of it all, she was sure. She picked up the stained and dusty suit; and, while she was shaking her head over it, there was a step and a suppressed exclamation at the door. She turned quickly and met the startled gaze of Basil Strode.

"I found your clothes in the cupboard, sir," she said, with a curious mixture of defiance and guilt in her voice and demeanor. "I thought perhaps I had better take them downstairs, to be brushed and pressed. Your shoes were there, too, sir. And the other things. I found the key in the pocket of your dressing-gown, sir."

Basil Strode stared at the clothes in complete bewilderment; and Mrs. Barrow remembered his confusion afterwards, with dreadful misgivings. He made no reply at first, but came up to her, and looked down at the clothes with his face growing crimson.

"Yes," he said at last. "Perhaps you'd better. They got rather hard wear on my little walking tour, and—er—I really thought of giving them away."

"The *shoes* are almost *new*, sir."

"Yes, I meant the clothes. I locked them up because I knew your indefatigable zeal would make you take unnecessary trouble over them."

"I *see*, sir," said Mrs. Barrow, with an emphasis that made Basil profoundly uneasy.

She noted this, at once, and seized the opportunity to retire, in the odor of righteousness, with the clothes over her plump arm, and the shoes in her hand.

CHAPTER XVII

Silas P. Murdoch, in the meantime, had not been idle. Miss Pettigrew had just finished her simple evening repast of soft roes on toast, followed by junket and apple-sauce, with cream, and was about to settle down in her armchair to read her newspaper, when Florence brought in the card of that enterprising journal's representative.

"The gentleman says he has important informationum."

"Ask him to step in, Florence."

"Yessum."

And so Fleet Street entered a world as remote as Cranford, and the big Persian cat rose slowly and rubbed itself against Fleet Street's legs, and Fleet Street beheld, under the delicate miniature of a great-great-grandfather in the naval uniform of the days of Queen Anne, a little shelf of books, bearing such old unhappy far-off titles, as "Misunderstood," "The History of the Fairchild Family," and "The Wide, Wide World."

Mr. Murdoch came straight to the point.

"These are your spectacles, I believe, Miss Pettigrew."

She seized them, stared at them, exchanged them for those she was wearing and stared *through* them.

"Undoubtedly," she said. "But where did you—They haven't caught the thief."

"I think," said Mr. Murdoch, sardonically, "I know where to find him. There is just one little matter which would help to corroborate. You had soft roes for supper, I believe, Miss Pettigrew. Now it's rather a delicate question, I'm afraid, but would you mind tellin' me whether you—er—recognize these—er—dental fittin's?"

He unrolled the handkerchief which he had discovered in the buried garments, and displayed gold and ivory.

Miss Pettigrew emitted and suppressed a thin sound, like the squeaking of a bat.

"Why, really, I—what an extraordinary thing!" she said, after a moment's embarrassment. "I will ask my cook. I believe she *does*. I mean, I believe she *did*. I will ask her, at once."

Miss Pettigrew picked up the handkerchief and its precious contents, and moved swiftly to the door.

"Pardon me, Miss Pettigrew," said Mr. Murdoch, "I would advise the owner to give them a dip in some solution of carbolic before tryin' them on."

"I will suggest it," said Miss Pettigrew with dignity, and closed the door firmly behind her.

In five minutes she returned, looking a little plumper in the face, and ten years younger.

"I have found the owner," she said sternly. "Now, will you please tell me how these things came into your possession?"

"Two hours ago, Miss Pettigrew," said Silas P. Murdoch, impressively, "two hours ago, these articles were in the possession of the Reverend Basil Strode."

"What?" she cried, flushing crimson, with her voice rising to something like a scream. "Basil Strode? And what was *he* doing with them, may I ask?"

"Buryin' them, Miss Pettigrew," said Silas P. Murdoch, with that grim restraint which makes the successful head-line. "Buryin' them."

"But it's an outrage. The man must be mad! Where was he burying them?"

Silas P. Murdoch had never been more impressive. He always enjoyed the sense of power, and his replies fell like sledge-hammer blows on the delicate fabric of Miss Pettigrew's dignity.

"He was buryin' them on the downs, Miss Pettigrew, in a rabbit-hole."

"In a rabbit-hole," she whispered, huskily, with her eyes narrowing to glittering needle-points, as though she were staring into an abyss of insanity. "In a rabbit-hole! But how—who—why? Mr. Murdoch, what do you mean? You don't suggest that Mr. Strode—"

"At present, Miss Pettigrew, I suggest nothing. I am merely telling you certain remarkable facts. Now, those footprints which were discovered in your garden by the police are still visible, I suppose?"

"They are exactly as when they were first discovered."

"Fine. Now, I have here a pair of shoes which I borrowed from the Reverend Basil Strode's kitchen-maid at the cost of one half-crown, on condition that they should be returned within an hour. Have you any objection to makin' a little experiment with me? I have a kind of hankerin' to see if these shoes fit those footprints."

Mr. Murdoch opened his dispatch case and produced a pair of partially cleaned shoes.

"We shall require a light," he said.

Miss Pettigrew looked at him with protruding eyes; then, as if under a hypnotic spell, she walked up to her writing-desk, fumbled in a drawer, and produced the little electric torch which, on dark Sunday nights, sometimes guided her feet down the crooked lane from the back of her house to the church. Mr. Murdoch opened the door for her, and they went out in silence together through the hall and into the garden. In silence the torch was flashed upon the footprints in the flower-bed. In silence Mr. Murdoch placed the shoes in the footprints. They fitted as the cast fits the mold.

Then Mr. Murdoch, pointing to the air above them, remarked grimly, "Allow me to introduce you to the Reverend Basil Strode, Miss Pettigrew."

She started, as though in her mind's eye she actually saw a shadowy occupant of those shoes. Without replying, she led the way back into the house.

"There were several articles of considerable value," she said at last, "and these are still missing. What am I to do about them? It is an outrage! An outrage!" Her thin lips worked with the effort to suppress her fury. "The man must be mad!"

"Not mad, Miss Pettigrew. I've talked to him. He's too clever a liar to be mad. The worst part of this case is that he was buryin' sumpin' that he had taken, perhaps as a blind, perhaps out of malice, and keepin' the other things which were valuable, and—well, he may have had a lot of old Oxford bills. I knew a gentleman-burglar that did worse things than the Reverend Basil Strode when he was being threatened by his college creditors. You can't tell what the motive may be. There's only one thing certain. If you want your diamonds, and the gold cigarette-case, there's just one person to search for them."

"It's an outrage! An outrage!" Miss Pettigrew quavered again. "I cannot imagine; I cannot conceive! Nothing is too bad for such a person! And a clergyman, too!"

"Exactly, Miss Pettigrew. But you must remember that, in a sense, Alexander Borgia was a clergyman. Now—up to the present you will admit that I have been comparatively successful in tracin' this outrage to the right quarter; and I think that, if you follow my advice, we shall be able to secure your property for you in a very short time."

"What do you propose?"

"I propose that you should come with me, right away, to the police-station, give them this new information, and ask an officer to accompany us to the Reverend Basil Strode's house, where I hope we shall be able either to identify your property, or to discover what he has done with it."

Miss Pettigrew's eyes flashed. She compressed her thin lips. The vengeance of which she had so often dreamed—and which she now desired more fiercely than ever—was within her grasp more completely than she could have hoped. The Reverend Basil Strode had contrived his own downfall.

"Let us go at once," she said. "Oh, most certainly! Let us go at once!"

CHAPTER XVIII

Mrs. Barrow—according to her usual custom—before brushing Basil Strode's clothes, turned out the pockets and—as she said afterwards—gave herself "quite a turn" also. The diamond star and the gold cigarette-case lay winking and glittering on the kitchen table for fully a minute before she recovered her breath.

"Goo! Di'monds," ejaculated Gladys, the pop-eyed kitchen-maid, as she entered on this unexpected scene.

"'Old your tongue," said Mrs. Barrow. "They're what was taken in the burglary. I've seen 'em when I used to oblige Miss Pettigrew. Gawd knows what 'e's been doing. P'raps 'e's been hunting the burglar and got them back. But why did 'e lock them up in that cupboard. Why didn't he—"

"Goo! P'raps 'e's like Raffles," said Gladys.

"'Old your tongue," said Mrs. Barrow. "I don't know *what* to think. Gawd moves in a mysterious way; but this is too much for me."

At this moment there was a heavy step outside, and a low knocking at the back door. Mrs. Barrow gave a slight scream. "'Oo's that?" she said. "Go and see!"

"Goo!" said Gladys, peering through the scullery window. "It's the perlice!"

"Open the door! Don't let them in! Don't open the door! Let them in!" said Mrs. Barrow. Excitement and anticipation of further excitement, forbade that Gladys should unravel the intricacies of this command. She flew to the door, opened it, and with a real sense of drama, pop-eyed and open-mouthed, pointed an eager finger at the kitchen table, as the police-sergeant, followed by Miss Pettigrew, and Silas P. Murdoch, strode into the kitchen. Mrs. Barrow sank gasping into a basket-chair and flung her apron over her head.

The sergeant picked up the diamonds and the cigarette-case.

"Your property, I take it, ma'am," he said to Miss Pettigrew, with the air of a man who had solved a great problem by the light of his own intelligence.

"Undoubtedly," said that lady, through lips that emotion had pinched into something like a little blue blob of cracked ice. "Undoubtedly."

"*We* just found it," said Gladys, in a husky whisper of awestruck pride. "Me and Mrs. Barrow. *We* just found it."

"I was going to ask you a few questions before interviewing Mr. Strode," said the sergeant. "Some of these will now be inconsequent, as the saying is. We 'ave discovered the stolen property. All that we now want is to identify the thief. 'Ow did these articles find their way into this 'ouse?"

"We found 'em—me and Mrs. Barrow—in 'is pawkets," volunteered Gladys, "when we was brushing 'is clothes."

"Ah," said the sergeant, "and these clothes belong to—"

"Mr. Strode," said Gladys. "They were locked up in his cupboard for three days. After we saw the di'monds, we thought 'e must have been 'unting the burglars when he disappeared from 'ome last week. But Mrs. Barrow says, in that case, she says, why did he lock the joolery up in his cupboard without saying nothing to *nobody*?"

"Pree-cisely," said the sergeant. "Pree-cisely"—and wrote something in his note-book.

"Now—did 'e give these clothes out to be brushed?"

"No," said Gladys. "Mrs. Barrow 'appened to find the key of the cupboard in his dressing-gown. And that's a funny thing, too, when you come to think of it."

"It—is—in-deed," said the sergeant, making a further note in his book. "And now, Mrs. Barrow, if you will kindly remove your apron, from your 'ead—Thank you. I take it you confirm the statement of this young woman?"

"This 'as always been a respectable 'ouse," Mrs. Barrow began.

"I'm afraid, Mrs. Barrow, that is irreverent to the matter in 'and. You confirm what this young woman 'as told us."

Mrs. Barrow inclined her head with hauteur.

"Very well. I must ask you now to take me up to Mr. Strode. You must say nothing of what 'as passed between us 'ere, until I have finished questioning 'im."

He handed the "jewelry" to Miss Pettigrew, and threw the soiled clothes over his arm. Mrs. Barrow rose with dignity. The sergeant followed her out of the kitchen, and—at a discreet distance—Gladys tip-toed after the sergeant. Mr. Murdoch and Miss Pettigrew remained in the kitchen, to await contingencies.

Then a strange thing happened. Mrs. Barrow had been pondering many things under the shelter of her apron, and she had been forced (though she was a loyal old soul) to a dreadful conclusion about the man whom she had valeted all too well, and probably for the last time. Half-way down the passage to the study, she suddenly broke into a fat trot, and bounced into the quiet room, lit by a green-shaded reading-lamp, where Basil was now lazily turning the pages of his evening paper.

"Quick!" she gasped. "They're after you! You've just got time to get out of the window and run."

And that was all she had time to say, for the sergeant had come pounding after her into the room. Basil Strode rose with a whitening face.

"What's all this?" he said.

"Mrs. Barrow is p'raps a little 'ysterical, sir," said the sergeant. He made a gesture, and she left the room with a gurgling sob of "This 'as always been a respectable 'ouse, I'm shaw." Basil glanced at the clothes on the sergeant's arm. Instantly it flashed through his mind that some busybody had got wind of his adventure on the downs, and was trying to make mischief. A vague vision of a prosecution for something improper floated before him. He had no time to think. But he was convinced that nobody could know anything for certain, and he was determined that the ridiculous truth should not be given away.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, sir, but I've a certain case in 'and, and I want to ask you a few questions that may 'elp me to carry out my duty. I understand that you spent last Friday night, when you was on your walking tour, at the Green Man 'otel in Faircombe."

"Yes," said Basil, a little defiantly, and even a little uneasily, but not for a moment suspecting the truth—that the sergeant, half an hour ago, had been talking to that inn on the telephone, with the enthusiastic encouragement of Mr. Silas P. Murdoch.

"Did you 'appen to see a man in the bar, wearing a very dirty and ragged suit of clothes, and smelling strongly of beer?" continued the sergeant, craftily watching his victim's face.

Basil started at what seemed to point to his rabbit-hole, and was instantly relieved. They were evidently on the wrong track.

"I can't very well say. One sees a good deal of that sort of thing, doesn't one? I really don't remember seeing such a person, however, on that particular evening. But what are you doing with *my* clothes there?"

The sergeant laughed.

"Why, Mrs. Barrow was brushing 'em, sir, in the kitchen; and, when she got 'ysterical-like, she flung them into my arms and ran along this passage into your room. I came after her, and till you spoke, I 'ardly realized I'd got them. She was saying they'd been locked up in a cupboard ever since you'd got back. I 'ope that isn't because you're afraid of another—burglary, sir?"

The sergeant laughed again; very cleverly this time. Basil laughed, too, but uneasily.

"No," he said. "They were locked up to save her the trouble of brushing them. But this hasn't anything to do with your case, has it?"

"Only this, sir. Two of the most valuable articles taken from Miss Pettigrew's 'ouse last week were found in the pockets of this suit, which was locked up in your bedroom. Also you were seen burying some rags on the downs this evening, in which other proceeds of the same burglary were concealed. Also, the footprints under the window which the burglar entered correspond exactly to your own. Also, I telephoned to Faircombe where you say you stayed, and I have ascertained that you did not stay there. Can you give me any more accurate account of your whereabouts and movements recently, sir?"

"No, I cannot," said Basil, "and I regard this intrusion and all this questioning as an infernal piece of impertinence."

"Excuse me, sir," said the sergeant, softly, but dangerously, "that won't do. If there is no explanation of how this property came into your possession—"

"Get out of this," said Basil savagely, "get out of it! I've had enough of this confounded questioning. First the newspapers, and then the police. If you don't go, I shall—"

"There is no explanation, then, sir?"

"Absolutely none."

"Then, I'm afraid, sir, I have no alternative but to take you into custody."

"Custody! Confound your impudence," cried Basil, in a fury that would have robbed him of the last shred of diplomacy, even if he had had an answer to give. But he could give no explanation, even to himself, of the extraordinary tangle in which he had become involved. In any case, it did not seem a satisfactory answer to the burglary charge to say that he had been running about naked on the Sussex downs for two days and nights. He had successfully deprived himself of all corroborative evidence of that episode, even if he had wished to reveal it, which he certainly did not. And the facts that had been brought up against him were bewilderingly like arrows shot from a hundred different directions by unseen enemies. He could not tackle them all at once, or bring them into a single coherent answer; and now he was angry, and therefore cooperating with the enemy.

"You will leave this house, at once," he said, "and I shall see that your impertinence is brought to the attention of your superiors."

He pointed to the door, and tapped impatiently with his foot.

"At once, please."

"Certainly, sir. And I must ask you to come with me," said the sergeant grimly, laying a hand on his arm.

Basil shook it off furiously, took the sergeant by the shoulders, and endeavored to push him through the door. The sergeant at once pulled out his whistle, and blew a prolonged call. Almost immediately the constable whom he had ordered to wait outside in the street lurched heavily into the room through the open window. To Basil's bewildered eyes the room was chock-full of blue uniform and helmet.

"You will only make it worse by resistance, sir," said the sergeant. "I've got my duty to perform."

He made a sign to the constable, and each taking an arm of the speechless prisoner, they hustled him out into the darkness.

CHAPTER XIX

The court was crowded, when the sensational case of the alleged Burglar-Curate, as the newspapers called him, came up for trial at the county town. The papers were full of it for three days, and Basil Strode's steadfast refusal to give any explanation of the evidence against him gave the general public ample room for the development of a thousand mysteries, and a thousand guesses at their solution. Obviously, he had been leading a double life. Probably there was a woman in the case. He had entrusted his defense to Dalston; but he had not confided in him, and Dalston could make no logical story out of the evidence before him.

The questions of the prosecuting lawyer elicited nothing.

"How do you account for the articles which were found in your pockets?" he asked.

"I did not know they were there," Basil replied, quite naively.

"And the articles in the pockets of the clothes which you were burying under cover of darkness on the downs?"

"I did not know they were there, either."

"Where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise," remarked the presiding deity, and everyone in court, except Basil Strode, tittered. Whereupon the presiding deity remarked that if this unseemly merriment continued he would have the court cleared, and added sternly:

"Perhaps you will tell us *why* you were burying these things."

"Because they smelled of beer!" said Basil petulantly.

"Were these unpleasant garments your own?"

"Certainly not," said Basil.

"Then who was the owner?"

"I haven't the slightest idea."

"How did they come into your possession?"

"I found them."

"Found them? Where?"

"On the downs."

"And you took them home, packed them in this hat-box, and then took them out again and buried them in a rabbit-hole at night, for amusement, I suppose?"

"You can put it that way, if you like."

"You have no other explanation of this remarkable behavior?"

"No."

"Had you ever worn these—unpleasant garments yourself, Mr. Strode?"

The prisoner hesitated for a moment, then a real sensation swept through the court.

"Yes," he said.

"Recently?"

"Yes."

"On what occasion?"

"Not a dinner-party, I suppose?" said the presiding deity. The court exploded and was again sternly called to order.

"Was it during your—disappearance?" said the lawyer.

"Part of the time," said Basil.

"You wished to disguise yourself, perhaps?"

"You may put it that way, if you like."

"And for what purpose, pray, did you wish to disguise yourself?"

"A purely personal reason."

"Come, come, Mr. Strode. In justice to yourself, you have surely a better explanation than that."

"I have no explanation whatever. I am just as much puzzled as the court about all these later developments. I cannot unravel the web which seems to be drawn about me."

And at this point the inquiry closed for the day, leaving the reporters with a fine crop of head-lines for the next morning —*The Curate and the Rabbit-Hole*; *Curate Disguised in Tramp's Rags*; and *Curate's Amazing Admission*.

Late that afternoon, the prisoner had a serious talk with his lawyer.

"Basil, you blighter," said Dalston, "unless you give me more information, we're going to be smashed. If you could only prove an alibi! But claiming you were in bed from ten o'clock the night of the burglary till the following morning, when no one can testify that you did not leave your room by the window during that time, proves nothing. And the consequences will be more serious than you seem to realize. Unless you have a positive craving for a long term of imprisonment you must give me something to work on. It's all very well to rely on your character and position, but you've admittedly been doing some very odd things. I've never tried to unravel such a tangle in my life. You remember the nice little poem, don't you, Basil?—

> "Oh, what a tangled web we weave
> When first we practice to deceive!

"I can't make head or tail of it, and I've had a good deal of experience of crime. It isn't fair to yourself, and it isn't fair to your lawyer. The first is your own lookout; but my reputation's at stake. Everyone's talking about this affair. The press is full of it. I don't believe you're a criminal; but I shall lose this case unless you trust me with a little more of the truth. Can't you tell me, for instance, exactly why you were burying those things in the rabbit-hole? It's making me a laughing-stock. I go into court like Alice in Wonderland, and all I can say is 'curiouser and curiouser.' Why can't you give me some sort of an explanation?"

"But the explanation is purely personal. It had nothing to do with anyone but myself. It is entirely irrelevant to the burglary."

"My dear fellow, we've got beyond relevance nowadays. After the question in court about your burying the old clothes in a rabbit-hole, an old lady came up to me, one of your old parishioners, and said she thought she could account for it. I asked her how, and she said, in a husky whisper, with her eyes bulging out of her head, like an insane lobster's, 'I am convinced that Mr. Strode is secretly a Roman.' So you see what you are in for, unless you help your lawyer. I only want the truth for my own guidance, and surely you can trust me not to give it away to anyone else. You know enough about *me* to tell me anything that *you're* likely to have done; and, with a very little aid from yourself, I ought to be able to get you out of this absurd mess in a very short time. Look here, Basil." Dalston suddenly leaned forward, fixed a psychoanalytical eye on the expressionless face of his friend, and said very slowly and deliberately, "*Are—you—fond—of—dogs?*"

Basil started, as at a pistol shot, at the sound of the word "dogs," and Dalston swiftly seized his advantage. "Run your eye over this," he said. "It's a letter from a woman named Jaggers, to her husband, who is in hospital at Helmstone. He gave it to the vicar, and the vicar thought I might find it useful. Mrs. Jaggers seems to be in a state of some perturbation."

Basil took the two scrawled pages of soiled paper, and with Dalston watching him like a lynx, read the following

remarkable communication:

> Jaggers:
>
> I don't keer if it is gawl stoans or if it ent gawl stoans stop worritting about sech doctors trash and cum home at oncet or I'll be just about leavin for good they was a stark nakid burgleer cum spannelling round our house las night and our dog Dempsey have lost his nurves that's wot cum of namin your dog after prise fiters an tellin your wife heed gard her like he was the wite man's hoap you always said Dempsey were a man eater but it's give him a shock he broak his chain an went after the burgleer but he never cum back all night Job Thorn found Dempsey in the mornin all trussed up like a chicking inside of a sheet wot the burgleer stoal from our washing an Dempsey were all tied up inside of it like he were in a pudden bagg when Job Thorn brung him back his tale were spassumed up between his leggs so tight you couldn't see it hees sittin by the kitching stove now rolling the wites of his eyes up like one of they Methodies it seems like your man eating dog orta have sum chanst against a stark nakid burgleer but he sits there with his ears all draggly like a sick crow an he look like one of they watercress men his face is that scared it scares me two an I woant stay here no more a good manny thinks Mr. Strode have been murdered by they burgleers it give Job Thorn a bad turn he was offered dunnamany pounds to find the boddy an wan he first seed Dempsey all wrop up in our sheet like a corpus he thawt heed cum into his reward he knew by the shape Mr. Strode must have been mortually chopped about so when he give the bundle a poke with his crook an Dempsey begun kicking agen an yammering it give Job Thorn an orful turn two the burgleers had tied Dempsey up with thatamany notts Job Thorn had to cut him out with his sheep shears so our best calico sheet has gone an I'm going two if its two mutch for a man eating dog like Dempsey wot you said could pull down a bullock wot must it bee fer your wife hopping this fines you as it leaves me at pressunt.
>
> ANNE

A curious look of confused guilt had crept over Basil's features. Then, one corner of his mouth was twitched by a faint smile.

"Well," said Dalston, still watching him grimly, and holding his short black pipe in his hand expectantly, "any comments?"

Basil drew a deep breath, like a man preparing to take a plunge into a cold sea.

"Can I trust what you call your sense of humor, Dalston?"

"Certainly—so far as anyone outside this room is concerned. I may be a blackguard, but I respect my profession. Of course, it may be so bad that I shall have to throw up the case; but then it wouldn't be exactly humorous, would it? Spit it out, old man."

And, suddenly, Basil Strode, fixing Dalston's eyes with a glance that held him spellbound, remarked snappily: "Very well, then. I will tell you. As a matter of fact, Dalston, you are largely responsible." And he plunged forthwith into a full account of his adventures. For the first moment or two Dalston gallantly held his breath at critical moments. Then, like the bursting of a soda-water syphon, he gave way; and the next instant Basil suddenly began to laugh, and kept on laughing, till his sides ached.

"But how on earth are we to get you out of this tangle without giving the show away?" said Dalston.

"You must," said Basil. "I have a personal reason for that, too, quite apart from the fact that nobody likes to be made utterly ridiculous."

"Of course. Even a parson would rather be regarded as a criminal-hero than a blithering idiot. Well, we'll try; but, at present, I see no way out. If ever a fly walked into a spider's web and solemnly wrapped each separate thread around its dear little legs and wings, you've done it, Basil; and unfortunately the spider, in this case, is the law. By the bye, there were two articles in your scarecrow's pockets, the spectacles and something else. The other side has been very vague about the nature of the second article. They almost seem to want to keep it dark. What was it?"

"I really don't know. As I've told you, I hadn't the remotest notion the beastly things were there."

"Well, I have a kind of hankering to find out. In the meantime, I think I'll have a talk with your friend, Double Dick. But, I

say, Basil, do you remember the amorous penance of poor old Don Quixote—when he stripped himself naked in the Sierra Morena and gave two or three frisks in the air, so that even Sancho made haste to turn his horse's head that he might no longer see, and rode away full satisfied that he might swear his master was mad? There was a time when I regarded myself as your exemplar in these refined extravagances, Basil, but tonight I feel uncommonly like Sancho."

Dalston obtained his interview with Double Dick, and was more successful than he had anticipated in discovering what he wished to discover. Under the influence of crafty suggestions and veiled menaces, he got all the information he wanted about the second mysterious article in the pockets of the scarecrow; and, through contact with the inspiring nature of the occupant of the hay-loft, suddenly conceived a Macchiavelian scheme of his own, brilliant, though simple, and profoundly illegal, though perfectly just.

Accordingly, at nine o'clock that night, Miss Pettigrew received another unexpected visitor, in dinner-jacket and black tie this time.

Dalston was even more delicate than Mr. Silas P. Murdoch.

"I am very anxious," he said, "that this case should be conducted with the least possible distress to yourself; for, though of course my first duty is to my client, everyone must sympathize with a lady who has been subjected to such annoyance and, if I may say so, one whose personal charm is all too likely to influence a jury to the point of vindictiveness towards anyone who—er—"

"Pray continue," said Miss Pettigrew, with vinegar and honey contending oddly for the mastery in her voice.

"Well. You know what the newspapers are, Miss Pettigrew. They are on the track of that second mysterious article in the pockets of the—er—scarecrow."

"The scarecrow, Mr. Dalston? I don't understand you." Miss Pettigrew looked distinctly alarmed.

"A figurative expression, Miss Pettigrew. I mean the dreadful garments which Basil Strode tried to bury in the rabbit-hole. Now, the newspapers—as you know—merely desire startling head-lines, and they want something really fresh, really sensational, and what they think—in their ignorance—to be amusing, or even ridiculous. You know how the press has been concentrating on what they call the 'Mystery of an Old-World Village.' Very well. In the course of a few days—as this case develops—I am dreadfully afraid that all the newspapers in England will have head-lines about yourself—and the nature of that second portion of your property which, hitherto, I may say largely by my own efforts has not been touched upon.

"It's a dreadful world—this world of vulgar publicity, and I hesitate to suggest the sort of thing they'll say. They are so dreadfully unrefined in these newspaper offices. But—may I borrow this pen, and a sheet of paper, for a moment? Thank you. This is the sort of thing I want to save you from."

Dalston scrawled some large letters on a sheet of foolscap and handed it to Miss Pettigrew. She stared at it in speechless horror.

AMAZING NEW CHALKDENE COMEDY

"Head-lines like that, and worse, far worse," Dalston continued, "will stamp themselves, bite themselves, I might almost say, into the mind and—unfortunately—the memory of the whole reading public. The victims of this kind of publicity are never forgotten. They go to a hotel in Switzerland, and in two days, everyone is glancing at their table, and sniggering about rabbit-holes. Oh, the newspapers! The newspapers! I wish I could tell you what I think of them. But there we are. We have to face the facts."

"I could never have conceived it possible—such vulgarity. Besides, they are so—er—general nowadays."

"Exactly, Miss Pettigrew; and, of course, a civilized person is not like a person in a state of nature. We wear shoes because our feet are more sensitive. We wear glasses to adapt our eyes to tasks which the savage is not called upon to perform. And so with this other merely mechanical aid, without which, in former days, I suppose, people were simply

finished when they lost their teeth. Probably that is why they all grew old so soon. A civilized person might just as well try to walk barefooted along a road of sharp flints as dispense with these little aids which civilization has invented—aids to locomotion, aids to sight, aids to digestion.

"You, Miss Pettigrew, if I may say so, are an exceedingly civilized person, and therefore particularly likely to suffer at the hands of the unrefined. Now the question is—what are we to do to stop this outrage before it is too late? You wish to avoid this newspaper discussion, I suppose?"

"At all costs," said Miss Pettigrew.

"Very well. Has it occurred to you that this case is getting extraordinarily complicated? You have discovered, in this one incident, how circumstances may entangle a person in a dreadful predicament. Now what do you suppose Basil Strode's motives really were, in burying those garments and those objects, in the rabbit-hole? Suppose that, by some chance, he had discovered the thief, secured your property, and then been confronted with the very delicate task of letting *you* know that *he* knew, so to speak, about this more intimate portion of it.

"Suppose also that the circumstances of his discovery were such that he also feared the exploitation of it by the press for your own sake. Suppose that the criminal held this over his head. Like yourself, Miss Pettigrew, he is really a very refined person, who I really believe would rather be accused of a crime than bring such embarrassment upon a lady in public. Now, I do know for a fact that he did not commit this burglary; and, as you know, the court is extremely puzzled by his reticence, and by certain odd features of the evidence against him.

"He was arrested chiefly because he lost his temper at the persistent questioning. Had he chosen, Miss Pettigrew, had he chosen—and I want you to mark my words very solemnly—had he chosen, he might have had a very different story to tell. It is a long and complicated story; but, if necessary, we can lay our hands on the real thief. But this will necessitate exactly what I—and Basil Strode—desire to avoid."

"Do you mean that Basil Strode has—"

"Basil Strode could have ended the case at once if he had not desired to keep an embarrassing little subject out of the newspapers. He lost his head, I think, a little. He ought to have let you know that *he* knew. But there it is. You have been shielded from grievous public annoyance, and the man who shielded you is facing a criminal charge."

Dalston's eyes flashed. His countenance, through the flush of the port wine with which he had primed himself after dinner, was illuminated with the nobility of his own oratory, and Miss Pettigrew was overwhelmed.

"Miss Pettigrew," Dalston resumed solemnly, after a pause, "may I ask what led you to take the extreme step of going to the police before giving him a chance of explaining privately?"

"It was a newspaper man, Mr. Dalston, a newspaper man."

"Exactly. A newspaper man whom Basil Strode had snubbed for asking impertinent questions. Oh, Miss Pettigrew, Miss Pettigrew, I fear you have been led up to the very verge of a trap."

"But the newspaper man promised ..."

"Exactly. But that was only to get the case going. As soon as the time is ripe, out will come the whole story. And even your friend will print it on the ground that it is now public property. Our only chance is to make the whole case collapse, at once. I've had enough of it, if you have."

"Most certainly, Mr. Dalston. Oh, most certainly! I fear that I have done Mr. Strode a great wrong."

"I observe on your book-shelf, Miss Pettigrew, a novel entitled 'Misunderstood,' a dear old book, of a more refined generation than the present; and, by its side, there is another—'The Wide, Wide World' (by an American authoress, I believe). I hardly know why I refer to them, but I think that, in their pages, you will find a just appreciation of exactly what I know you must be feeling now. But let us put our heads together, and see if we cannot go into court tomorrow with something that will make the whole case collapse at once."

It was half past eleven when Dalston left Miss Pettigrew's house; and, as he returned to The Deliverance, his face was wreathed with a smile that would have done credit to the Cheshire Cat.

CHAPTER XX

Three days later, Basil Strode, walking along the white chalk cliffs to Helmstone, overtook Barbara Lane. She was carrying a book. A skylark caroled madly over their heads, and a herring gull mewed and swooped upon the sea below them as they exchanged greetings.

Barbara felt, at once, that his manner had subtly changed. The touch of affectation had gone. But she found it difficult, at first, to alter the slightly mocking tone which his affectation had engendered in herself.

"Basil! You are too wonderful," she exclaimed, "and I was quite wrong! So it was not Sir Willoughby Patterne after all, but Don Quixote."

"I think it was simply asinine Basil Strode, Barbara. You needn't look any further than that. But I've been waiting for days to tell you how really sorry I am about that—er—little incident of—er—Miss Bird. That lecture you gave me; you were quite right, you know. I behaved badly."

"My defense of her wasn't entirely unselfish, Basil. It may have been indirectly a defense of my own skin."

"But, surely, my wretched little poisoned arrows didn't hit you—"

"No; and it wouldn't have mattered if they had. I should have taken them differently; and I'm able to protect myself with the patter of the moment. At the same time, in the simplest and truest part of me, where I don't hide my real self behind the patter of the moment, my views aren't so very different from Miss Bird's."

"Nor are mine," he said. "I was only trying to be up to date and clever, I suppose. I've discovered that I don't fit the part."

"Half of our differences at the present day are just differences of patter—the patter of one convention clashes with the patter of another—and we miss everything that's worth having. I long to get away, sometimes, from my own generation. I don't care whether it's into the past, or into the future, so long as it's away from the patter into simple realities again. I hate being a slave to my own age."

They were silent for a minute or two, awkwardly silent.

"You never knew my younger sister Joan," Barbara said at last. "She died when she was hardly more than a child. But we used to discuss the books we read; and she was rather a hero-worshiper. If ever I was guilty of belittling her heroes—and I was, sometimes—I have always been very sorry for it. She loved her Dickens; and I know now that she had the root and heart of the matter, and it was only our contemporary girl-school patter that prevented me from seeing it then. We are so afraid of sentimentality that we're losing the power of human feeling. Our writers today understand all the brutalities and cynicisms; but how many of them understand the simple human affections that hold decent human beings together and make the world worth living in? Perhaps it was—oh, well, I'll fall back on the patter—perhaps it was this 'complex' about Joan that made me lecture you so severely."

"Why are you telling me this?" said Basil, and his heart sank at what seemed to be the only possible explanation. "Why are you telling me this? Unless—"

"I don't quite know. I'm taking this book back to the library," she answered, changing the subject abruptly. "But I'm going to order a copy for myself. It's von Hügel's letters to his niece. A good deal of it is advice about what she should read, from the Greek dramatists, and Plato, to Dante, and the moderns. But there's one passage—let's sit down here on this bank for a moment. I'll show it to you. It ought to console both of us. I suppose he went about as deep as anyone nowadays; but—see."

Basil took the book, and read the passage indicated, following the rosy tip of her forefinger along the lines.

"*He never gave me any purely clever books. He could not bear them. We never really get anything that way, he would say; Clever people never think. They are incapable of thinking.—I have always found this so. Cleverness never goes with depth and real thinking.*"

"It's a difficult thing to explain, Basil; but as you're not clever any more, I think you'll understand my saying that when I read those sentences, I nearly cried. He was such a wise old man, you know, and he was giving her such wonderful

books, taking her so gently up the mountain-peaks of poetry and imagination."

Basil could not explain it either, but there was a queer lump in his own throat.

"I can't pretend to any depth at all," he muttered, "except that I've begun to suspect the abysmal depths of my own ignorance."

"You've escaped from your own age, then, Basil."

"Barbara, would you like me to tell Miss Bird that I realize the feebleness of my wit on that disastrous occasion?" He spoke almost like a contrite schoolboy, and she was touched.

"I shouldn't think any more about it, Basil. Miss Bird is extremely happy at the present moment. She has been completely consoled by Mr. Pepper, who, strangely enough, reads nothing but Jorrocks. I feel that my responsibility is over in that direction, and yours, too."

They rose, and resumed their walk towards Helmstone. She noticed that Basil did not even laugh at the remark about Jorrocks. He was strangely subdued, and she tried to cheer him up.

"It was frightfully dramatic, you know, when Miss Pettigrew got up and told the court that the real thief had confessed, and that you were a kind of Bayard and Roland and Amadis of Gaul and Lord Chesterfield all rolled into one. You can't give other things away, I know, but I do wish you'd tell me what that mysterious thing was you were burying in the rabbit-hole. When that question was asked about it in court, on the last day, Miss Pettigrew nearly collapsed. Mr. Dalston was frightfully mysterious about it. He said it was a small *objet d'art*, of great sentimental value to the owner; and when I asked him what kind of art, he simply replied, 'Chryselephantine art,' and left it at that.

"I looked up 'chryselephantine' in the dictionary, and all the dictionary said was 'composed of gold and ivory,' from the Greek *chrysos*, gold, and *elephas*, ivory or elephant. I thought I knew all Miss Pettigrew's preciosities. Perhaps this was something her grandfather brought home from India, something with a curse on it, from one of the temples."

"There is certainly good evidence for there having been a curse on it," said Basil, and changed the subject to poetry—Milton's marvelous phrases about the East, "Dusk faces with white silken turbans," and that other thumb-nail picture, as he called it, of the "Chineses with their cany waggons."

But Barbara dragged him back to it, and, though he succeeded in squashing further inquiry about "chryselephantine art," by professing complete ignorance of its history, significance, and value, he found it more difficult to evade Barbara's blithe questions with regard to his disappearance from home on what, she took for granted, was a three days' burglar-hunt.

The fame of this had spread far and wide. As they passed a little throng of people by the wayside, at one of the stopping-places of the Helmstone bus, a woman in the crowd nudged her neighbor, with an expressive glance towards Basil.

"Sherlock 'Olmes," she said, in a hushed, but quite audible undertone. "That's 'im. There 'e goes. You know, 'im that caught the Chalkdene burglars." It had risen to the plural now. Basil and Barbara walked on with lofty indifference. He pointed carelessly to a patch of poppies in a distant field. All the same, Basil was thoroughly enjoying the new reputation, for heroism and intellectual alertness, which he had acquired in Chalkdene through the sensational collapse of the trial, and the splendidly mysterious suggestions which had been made about him by both sides to the complete bewilderment of the court.

The presiding deity, in fact, had been so astonished at the tributes paid to each side by the other that he was unable to make more than one very minute jest at the expense of both before dismissing the case.

"Is this a court of justice, or a mutual admiration society?" he asked, almost jealously, and the sensation of the new turn in the affair had been so great that only the usher, as in duty bound, had tittered, and the court had risen in sardonic gloom, while the frantic applause of a crowd of parishioners welcomed the hero back to freedom.

Again and again Barbara returned to that scene. "It was too wonderful, Basil. But supposing that the new information (whatever it was) that convinced the prosecution had not been obtainable, what would you have done?"

"Gone to prison, I suppose," said Basil, with the nonchalance of a Sydney Carton, and a little intoxicated with the glance

that Barbara gave him round a piquant corner of her hat. "Gone to prison, I suppose."

There was silence again for a moment, then he added:

"Of course, when I came out, I should have claimed the fulfilment of your promise that you would marry me, if only I would do something outrageous. I suppose I should hardly have got off with less than six years; but you would have been bound in honor to wait, don't you think?"

"I suppose I should," she said, and his heart leaped.

"And now, as the burglary seems to have fallen through, or rather as I seem to have caught the burglars instead, what is to be done about it? Look here, Barbara, I've solemnly vowed that the whole story, the true story, of what happened during my disappearance from home shall never be told to a living soul, unless perhaps I tell it to my wife, after we are married."

"But that sounds more mysterious than ever."

"Will you fulfil the conditions, and let me tell it to you?"

"I will think about it," she said.

"Barbara!" he cried, seizing both her hands.

"But you must keep nothing back," she added.

"Nothing! Nothing in the world!"

"Very well, then. But, first of all, I must tell you that I'm a bit of a detective, too. I wasn't very anxious about you, when everyone was discussing your murder and suicide and the rest."

"What do you mean, Barbara?"

"Do you remember that poet you used to quote about the Sussex downs? I've altered a line or two:

> "Never gathered mushrooms on the downs the same as me, sir,
> Early in the morning when the sky was growing red;
> Passed a quiet haystack while the dawn came oversea, sir,
> Saw a head stick out of it, and thought you knew that head!"

"Good heavens, Barbara! What do you mean! But this is beyond everything! You're not going to turn it into comedy again. I know I'm a comedian, a low comedian, if you like, but—" He looked panic-stricken.

"Don't be alarmed," she said. "It may have begun in comedy, wild comedy, but it's turning into a lyrical poem. Here we are at Helmstone. I'm going to tea with the Brooks; but I've held my tongue for ages, and I think I can go on holding it. So I think I'll give you the rest of my answer tomorrow, together with the rest of your adventures, if you like. Double Dick was doing some odd jobs in our garden the other day. I talked to him. He had been very badly scared; and, under the influence of his brother, he had apparently 'got religion.' But I persuaded him that further confession was unnecessary and retribution unlikely. You must admire my tact, though, Basil. Don't worry. I think I shall have to share all your secrets in future, or you'll never be able to keep them."

Saying this, she hailed a taxicab, leaped into it and held his hand through the window, murmuring:

> "'Be kind and courteous to this gentleman;
> Hop in his walks and gambol in his eyes.'"

Then she drove away.

He stood, looking after the dwindling vehicle in a bewildered and ecstatic trance, like one who henceforth, wherever he goes, and whatever he does, will not presume to suppose that he is really more than an infant led by the hand of—Puck, shall we say, or Mab—through the eternal Midsummer Night's Dream into which the material world dissolves for all

true lovers, a dream that bestows a donkey's head upon the weaver, but rewards him with the kiss of Titania.

THE END

[The end of *The Sun Cure* by Alfred Noyes]