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A SOCIAL DIFFICULTY.

THE Bishop laid down the telegram on the table with the air of a man who has made his mind up, and will hear no further nonsense from anybody about it.

“No, my dear,” he said to his wife decisively. “He’s been acquitted, and that is so far satisfactory—to a certain extent, I grant you, satisfactory: humanly speaking, it was almost impossible that he could be acquitted. The evidence didn’t suffice to convince the court-martial. I’m glad of it, very glad of it, of course, for poor Iris’s sake; but upon my word, Charlotte, I can’t imagine how on earth they can ever have found it in their consciences to acquit him. In my opinion—humanly speaking once more—it’s morally certain that Captain Burbury himself embezzled every penny of all that money.”

Mrs. Brandreth turned the telegram over nervously, with two big tears standing ready to fall in the corners of her dear motherly old eyes, and then asked in a timid voice, “So you’ve quite decided, have you, Arthur, that it must be all broken off between him and poor Iris?”

The Bishop played with his paper-knife, half stuck through the *Guardian* in his testy fashion. “My dear,” he answered, with the natural impatience of a just man unduly provoked by female persistence, “how is it possible, I put it to you, that we could ever dream of letting her marry him? I don’t wish to judge him harshly—far be it from me to judge any man: I hope I understand my duty as a Christian better: but still, Charlotte, it’s one of our duties, you know,—an unpleasant duty, but none the less a duty on that account—not to shut our eyes against plain facts. We are entrusted with the safe-keeping of our daughter’s happiness, and I say we oughtn’t to allow her to imperil it by throwing herself away upon a man whom we strongly suspect—upon just grounds—to be quite unworthy of her. I’m sorry that we must give Iris so much pain; but our duty, Charlotte, our duty, I say, lies clear before us. The young man himself sees it. What more would you wish, I wonder?”

Mrs. Brandreth sighed quietly, and let the two tears roll unperceived down her placid, gentle, fair old face. “The court-martial has taken a more lenient view of the case, Arthur,” she suggested tentatively, after a pause of a few minutes.

The Bishop looked up from the table of contents of the *Guardian* with a forcedly benign glance of Christian forbearance. Women *will* be women, of course, and *will* sympathize with daughters and so forth in all their foolish matrimonial entanglements. “My dear,” he explained, with his practised episcopal smile of gentle condescension to the lower intelligence of women and of the inferior clergy, “you must recollect that the court-martial had to judge of legal proof and legal certainty. Moral proof and moral certainty are, of course, quite another matter. I might hesitate, on the evidence given, to imprison this young man or even to deprive him of his commission in the army; and yet I might hesitate on the very same grounds to let him take my daughter in marriage. He has been acquitted, it is true, on the charge; but a suspicion, Charlotte, a certain vague shadow of formal suspicion must always, in future, hang over him like a cloud. Cæsar’s wife—you remember the Roman dictator said, Cæsar’s wife must be above suspicion. Surely, if even a heathen thought that, we, Charlotte, with all our privileges, ought to be very careful on what sort of man we bestow Iris.”

And having thus summarily dismissed the matter, the Bishop turned with profound interest to the discussion on the evil consequences of the Burials Bill and the spread of dissent in the West of England.

To a mind deeply engrossed with these abstruse and important subjects, the question about poor Iris’s relations with Captain Burbury, of the Hundred and Fiftieth, was, of course, a relatively small one. Iris, indeed, had never been engaged to him; that was a great comfort in all this ugly, unpleasant business. The young man had only buzzed a little around the episcopal palace at Whitchester, danced with her, talked to her, and arrived at a slight private understanding which didn’t exactly amount to a regular engagement, and which had never been officially communicated to the parental ear. That, at least, was a great comfort; the Bishop considered it almost providential. Since this awkward question about the deficiency in the adjutant’s accounts had first arisen, to be sure, the Bishop had learned from Mrs. Brandreth that this young man (he always spoke of Harry Burbury in that oblique fashion) had succeeded in making a passing impression upon poor Iris’s unbestowed affections. But then girls, you see, are always fancying themselves in love with some young

man or other, and are always profoundly convinced for the time being that they can never conceivably be happy without him. We, my dear Mr. Dean or my dear Sir William, who are men of the world—I mean, who are persons of maturer years and more solid understanding—we know very well that in six months or so girls forget all about that nice Mr. Blank or that dear Captain Somebody in their last passing fancy for young So-and-so, who will in due time be equally forgotten, in favour of some more really desirable and eligible person. And as in this case there would be no public withdrawal, no open breach of an announced engagement, Dr. Brandreth turned complacently to the discussion on the Burials Bill, and in ten minutes had completely dismissed from his profound episcopal mind the whole subject of Captain Burbury's unfortunate court-martial.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Brandreth, who was not philosophical, like the Bishop, but who felt herself most imprudently sympathetic with all dear Iris's little girlish feelings—quite wickedly so, she was almost afraid—Mrs. Brandreth, I say, had stolen away quietly to her daughter's room, and was sitting on the little couch at the foot of the bed, with Iris's hand held fast in hers, and Iris's soft crimson cheek laid tenderly on her motherly shoulder. "There, there, darling," she was saying with tears in her eyes, as she soothed her daughter's hand gently with her own; "don't cry, Iris, don't cry, my pet. Yes, do cry; it'll do you good, darling. Perhaps by-and-by, when things blow over a little, your papa will think rather differently about it."

Iris took up the telegram for the fiftieth time with a fresh flood of tears: "From Captain Burbury, Aldershot, to Miss Brandreth, Eaton Place, London. The court-martial has acquitted me on all the charges. But I can never, never see you again."

"Oh, mamma," she cried through her sobs and tears, "how cruel of him to say such a thing as that, and at such a moment!"

"No, no, dearest," her mother said. "He was quite right to say it. He feels the horrible suspicion rests upon him still, and he can't bear to face you while it's hanging over him. No good and true man could do otherwise.... But," she added after a moment's pause, "I think, Iris, ... I think, darling, in spite of what he says, you'll probably see him here this very evening."

Iris gave a sudden start of surprise and pleasure. "This evening, mamma! This very evening?" she cried excitedly. "Oh no, not after sending me such a telegram as that, dear, surely!"

Mrs. Brandreth had not the slightest idea in the world that she was a practical psychologist—probably she could not have pronounced the word even if you had asked her—yet she answered quite readily, "Why, you know, Iris, he must have come straight out from the court-martial and sent off that telegram in the heat of the moment, just to let you know at once he had been at any rate acquitted. Of course he couldn't help adding the despairing tag about his never, never seeing you. But when he goes back to his own quarters and thinks it over a little, he'll make up his mind—I know young men, my dear—he'll make up his mind that he must just run up to town and speak with you once more before he breaks it all off for ever. And if he sees you, Iris—but, after all, why *should* he break it off? He has nothing to be ashamed of. For, indeed, I'm quite sure, darling, he never, never, never, never could have taken that dreadful money."

"Of course not, mamma," Iris answered simply, with profound confidence. What a blessed thing it is to be a trustful woman! The Bishop's moral certainty was really nothing at all compared to his pretty, weeping daughter's unshaken conviction.

"Charlotte," the Bishop said, putting his head in at the door for a second, with his episcopal hat suspended loosely in his right hand, "I've ordered the carriage, and I'm going down now to the Athenæum; from the Athenæum I shall drive on to the House of Lords; from the House of Lords, after dinner, I shall go into the Commons and hear what those dissenting Glamorgan people have got to say about this distressing Welsh disestablishment business. Very probably the debate may be late. I shall send the carriage home, in case you want it, and I shall cab it back or take the Metropolitan. Don't sit up for me. Have you got a latch-key?"

Mrs. Brandreth gave an involuntary start. The notion of the Bishop demanding a latch-key was really and truly too ridiculous. The fact was, the Brandreths had only just taken their furnished house in Eaton Place for the season that very week, and the Bishop himself had arrived alone from the Palace, Winchester, that identical morning. A man oppressed by the spiritual burdens of an entire diocese cannot, of course, be reasonably expected to go house-hunting. It was

irrational and unscriptural, Dr. Brandreth held, to suppose that he should leave the work of his see to serve tables. So Mrs. Brandreth and Iris had come to town and secured the episcopal lodgings beforehand; and as soon as everything was put fully straight, the Bishop himself came up for the session to "his own hired house" (like St. Paul) and entered into the enjoyment of a neatly ordered and well-arranged study. This, he explained, left his mind perfectly free for the wearing and harassing duties of the episcopate, combined, as they were under our existing circumstances, with the arduous work of a Lord Spiritual in the Upper House.

Yes, Mrs. Brandreth *had* a latch-key; and the Bishop, still absorbed in soul by the effects of the Burials Bill and the aggressive conduct of the Glamorganshire Dissenters, kissed his wife and daughter mechanically, and went off ruminating to the Athenæum. "Iris has been crying," he said to himself with a pensive smile, as John turned the handle of the carriage-door respectfully behind him. "Girls will make a fuss about these foolish love affairs. But in a little while she's sure to get over it. Indeed, for my part, what she can possibly see to admire in this young man in the Hundred and Fiftieth rather than in poor dear good Canon Robinson, who would make such an admirable husband for her—though, to be sure, there *is* a certain disparity in age—fairly passes my comprehension."

And yet, when young Mr. Brandreth of Christ Church had wooed and won Charlotte Vandeleur, he was himself a handsome young curate.

The afternoon wore away slowly in Eaton Place, but dinner-time came at last, and just as Mrs. Brandreth and Iris were rising up disconsolately from a pitiable pretence of dinner, "for the sake of the servants," there came a very military knock at the front door, which made poor Iris jump and start with a sudden flush of vivid colour on her pale cheek.

"I told you so, darling," Mrs. Brandreth half whispered in a pleased undertone. "It's Captain Burbury."

And so it was. The mother's psychology (or instinct if you will) had told her correctly. Mrs. Brandreth rose to go into the drawing-room as soon as the card was duly laid before her. "I oughtn't to leave them alone by themselves," she thought to herself silently. "If I did, under the circumstances, Arthur would be justifiably angry." And, so thinking, she drew her daughter's arm in hers, murmured softly, "Iris dear, I really feel I oughtn't to leave you," and—walked off quietly without another word into her own boudoir.

Iris, her heart beating fast and high, opened the door and stepped alone into the front drawing-room.

As she entered, Harry Burbury, that penitent and shamefaced man, walked up to her with hands outstretched, ... seemed for a moment as if he would bow merely, ... then made as though he would shake hands with her ... and finally, carried away for a moment from his set purpose, caught her up ardently in both his arms, kissed her face half a dozen times over, and pressed her tight against his heaving bosom.

He had never kissed her so before, but Iris somehow felt to herself that the action just then really required no apology.

Next minute, Harry Burbury stepped back again a few paces and surveyed her sadly, with his face burning a fiery crimson. "Oh, Iris," he cried, "I mean Miss Brandreth—no, Iris. I made up my mind as I came along in the train from Aldershot that I should never, never again call you Iris."

"But, Harry, you made up your mind, too, you would never see me!"

"I did, Iris, but I thought—I thought, when I came to think it over, that perhaps I had better come and tell you, before I left England, why I felt it must be all closed for ever between us."

"Left England, Harry! All closed between us!"

"Yes, Iris; yes, darling!" And here Harry so far forgot his resolution once more that he again kissed her. "I shall resign my commission and go away somewhere to the Colonies."

"Harry!"

It was a cry of distress, and it rang terribly in the young man's ears; but with an effort he steeled himself. He didn't even

kiss her. "Iris," he began once more, "it isn't any use my trying to call you Miss Brandreth, and I won't do it. Iris, I feel that, after this, I have no right to come near you in future. I have no right to blight your life with that horrid, terrible, undeserved suspicion."

"But, Harry, you are innocent! You didn't take it! And the court-martial acquitted you."

"Yes, darling, they acquitted me of the charge, but not of the suspicion. If I *had* taken it, Iris—if a man had taken it, I mean, he might perhaps have kept his place, on the strength of the acquittal, and tried to live it down and brazen it out in spite of everything. But, as I didn't take it, and as I can't bear the shadow of that horrible suspicion, I won't live on any longer in England, and I certainly won't burden you, dearest, with such a terrible, unspeakable shame."

"Harry," Iris cried, looking up at him suddenly, "I know you didn't do it. I love you. I trust you. Why should we ever mind the other people?"

Harry faltered. "But the Bishop?" he asked. "How about your father, Iris? No, no, darling, I can never marry you while the shadow of this hideous, unworthy doubt rests over me still."

Iris took his hand in hers with a gesture of tenderness which robbed the act of all suspicion of unwomanly forwardness. Then she began to speak to him in a low, soft voice, to comfort him, to soothe him, to tell him that nobody would ever believe it about him, till Harry Burbury himself began half to fancy that his sensitive nature had exaggerated the evil. How long they sat there whispering together it would be hard to say: when lovers once take to whispering, the conversation may readily prolong itself for an indefinite period. So at least Mrs. Brandreth appeared to think, for at the end of a quiet hour or so her sense of propriety overcame her sympathy with Iris, and she went down to join the young couple in the front drawing-room. It gives me great pain to add, however, that she stood for a moment and rustled about a few magazines and papers on the landing-table, very prudently, before actually turning the handle of the drawing-room door. This is a precaution too frequently neglected in such cases by the matter-of-fact and the unwary, but one whose breach I have often known to produce considerable inconvenience to the persons concerned.

When Mrs. Brandreth at last entered, she found Iris, as girls are usually found on similar occasions, seated by herself bolt upright on a very stiff-backed chair at the far end of the room, while Harry Burbury was playing nervously with the end of his moustache on the opposite side of the centre ottoman. Such phenomenal distance spoke more eloquently to Mrs. Brandreth's psychological acumen than any degree of propinquity could possibly have done. "They must have been very confidential with one another," Mrs. Brandreth thought to herself wisely. "I've no doubt they've settled the matter by themselves offhand, without even thinking the least in the world about dear Arthur."

"Mamma," Iris said timidly, but quite simply, as her mother stood half hesitating beside her, "Harry and I have been talking this matter over, and at first Harry wanted to leave England; but I've been saying to him that somebody must have taken the money, and the best thing he can do is to stop here and try to find out who really took it. And he's going to do so. And, for the present," Iris emphasized the words very markedly, "we're not to be engaged at all to one another; but, by-and-by, when Harry has cleared his reputation——" and here Iris broke off suddenly, a becoming blush doing duty admirably for the principal verb in the unfinished sentence. (This figure of speech is known to grammarians as an aposiopesis. The name is for the most part unknown to young ladies, but the figure itself is largely employed by them with great effect in ordinary conversation.)

Mrs. Brandreth smiled a faint and placid smile. "My dear Iris," she said, "what would your papa say if he only heard you talk like that?" And feeling now quite compromised as one of the wicked conspirators, the good lady sat down and heard it all out, the house thereupon immediately resolving itself into a committee of ways and means.

It was very late, indeed, when Mrs. Brandreth, looking at her watch, exclaimed in some surprise that she really wondered dear Arthur hadn't come home ages ago.

At this unexpected mention of the Bishop, Harry Burbury, who had run up to town honestly intending to see him and renounce his daughter, but had allowed himself to be diverted by circumstances into another channel, rose abruptly to take his departure. It occurred to him at once that two o'clock in the morning is not perhaps the best possible time at which to face a very irate and right reverend father. Besides, how on earth could he satisfactorily explain his presence in

the Bishop's own hired house at that peculiarly unseasonable hour?

As for Mrs. Brandreth, now fairly embarked on that terrible downward path of the committed conspirator, she whispered to Iris, as William fastened the big front door behind Captain Burbury, "Perhaps, dear, it might be quite as well not to mention just at present to your papa that Harry"—yes, she actually called him Harry!—"has been to see you here this evening. And if we were to go to bed at once, you know, and got our lights out quickly, before your papa comes home from the House, it might, perhaps, be all the better!"

To such depths of frightful duplicity does the downward path, once embarked in, rapidly conduct even an originally right-minded clerical lady!

Meanwhile the Bishop, sitting with several of his episcopal brethren in the Peers' gallery at the House of Commons, forgot all about the lapse of time in his burning indignation at the nefarious proposals of the honourable gentlemen from that revolutionary Glamorganshire. It was a field-night for the disestablishers and disendowers, and there seemed no chance, humanly speaking, that the debate would be terminated within any reasonable or moderate period. At last, about a quarter to two, the Bishop took his watch casually from his pocket. "Bless my soul!" he cried in surprise to his right reverend companion, "I must really be going. I hadn't the least idea the time had gone so fast. Mrs. Brandreth will positively be wondering what has become of me."

There were several cabs outside the House, but it was a fair, clear, star-lit night, and the Bishop on the whole, being chilly with horror, preferred walking. It would stretch his episcopal legs a little, after such a long spell of sitting, to walk from Whitehall down to Eaton Place. So he walked on along the silent streets till he came to the corner of St. Peter's Church.

Then an awful thought suddenly flashed across his bewildered mind. Which house did he actually live in?

Yes, yes. It was too true. He had forgotten to notice or to ask the number!

If the Bishop had been a little more a man of the world, he would, no doubt, have walked off to the nearest hotel, or returned to the House and thrown himself upon the hospitality of the first met among his spiritual compeers. But he doubted whether it would be quite professional to knock up the night-porter of the Grosvenor at two in the morning, and demand a bed without luggage or introduction; while, as to his episcopal brethren, he would hardly like to ask them for shelter under such unpleasant and humiliating circumstances. The Bishop hesitated; and the bishop who hesitates is lost. Nothing but an unfaltering confidence in all his own opinions and actions can ever carry a bishop through the snares and pitfalls of modern life. He felt in his pocket for the unused latch-key. Yes, there it was, safe enough; but what door was it meant to open? The Bishop remembered nothing on earth about it. Mrs. Brandreth had met him at Paddington that morning with his own carriage, and he recollected distinctly that she had given John merely the usual laconic direction, "Home!" When he came out that afternoon, absorbed as he was by the proceedings of the Glamorganshire Dissenters, and distracted somewhat by side reflections about Iris's love affairs, he hadn't even had time to notice at which end of the street his own hired house happened to be situated. There was clearly only one way out of the difficulty: he must try all the doors, one after another, and see which one that particular latch-key was intended to open.

Walking up cautiously to the corner house, the Bishop tried to stick that unfortunate key boldly into the keyhole. It was too large. "*Non possumus*," the Bishop murmured, with a placid smile—it is professional to smile under trying circumstances—and with his slow and stately tread descended the steps to try the next one.

The next one succeeded a trifle better, it is true, but not completely. The keyhole was quite big enough, to be sure, but the wards stubbornly refused to yield to the gentle and dexterous episcopal pressure. In vain did the Bishop deftly return to the charge (just as if it were a visitation); in vain did he coax and twist and turn and wheedle; those stiff-necked wards obstructed his passage as rudely and stoutly as though they had been uncompromising Glamorganshire Dissenters. Baffled, but not disheartened, the Bishop turned tentatively to the third door. Oh, joy! The key fits! it moves! it withdraws the bolt readily from the clencher! The Bishop pushed the door gently. Disappointment once more! The door was evidently locked and fastened. "This situation begins to grow ridiculous," thought the Bishop. "One can almost enter faintly, by proxy, into the personal feelings of our misguided brother, the enterprising burglar!"

On the Bishop went, trying door after door down the whole south side of Eaton Place, till he had almost reached the very end. It was certainly absurd, and, what was more, it was painfully monotonous. It made a man feel like a thief in the night. The Bishop couldn't help glancing furtively around him, and wondering what any of his diocesans would say if only they could see their right reverend superior in this humiliating and undignified position. His hand positively trembled as he tried the last door but five; and when it proved but one more failure to add to the long list of his misfortunes, he took a sidelong look to right and left, and seeing a light still burning feebly within the hall, he applied for a second his own keen episcopal eye with great reluctance to the big keyhole.

Next moment he felt a heavy hand clapped forcibly upon his right shoulder, and turning round he saw the burly figure of an elderly policeman, with inquisitive bull's-eye turned full upon him in the most orthodox fashion.

"Now then, my man," the policeman said, glancing with scant regard at his hat and gaiters, "you've got to come along with me, I take it. I've been watchin' you all the way down the street, and I know what you're up to. You're loiterin' about with intent to commit a felony, that's just about the size of what you're doin'."

Dr. Brandreth drew himself up to his full height, and answered in his severest tone, "My good fellow, you are quite mistaken. I am the Bishop of Whitchester. I don't remember the exact number of my own door, and I've been trying the latch-key, on my return from the House of Lords, to see which keyhole it happened to open."

The policeman smiled a professional smile of waggish incredulity. "Bishop, indeed!" he echoed contemptuously. "House of Lords! Exact number! Gammon and spinach! Very well got up, indeed, 'specially the leggin's. But it won't go down. It's been tried on afore. Bishops is played out, my man, I tell you. I 'spose, now, you've just been dinin' with the Prince of Wales, and havin' a little private conversation at Lambeth Palace with the Archbishop of Canterbury!" And the policeman winked the wink of a knowing one at his own pleasantries with immense satisfaction.

"Constable," the Bishop said sternly, "this levity is out of place. If you do not believe me to be what my dress proclaims me, then you should at least take me into custody as a suspicious person without insulting my character and dignity. Go down with me to the Houses of Parliament in a cab, and I will soon prove to you that you are quite mistaken."

The policeman put his finger rudely to the side of his nose. "Character and dignity," he replied with unbecoming amusement—"character and dignity, indeed! Why, my good man, I know you well enough, don't you trouble yourself. My mates and me, we've been lookin' for you here this three months. Think I don't remember you? Oh, but I do, though. Why, you're the party as got into a private house in Pimlico last year, a-representing yourself to be a doctor, an' cribbed a gold watch and a 'ole lot of real silver from the unsuspectin' family. Come along with me, Bishop, I'm a-goin' to take your reverence right off down to the station."

The poor Bishop temporized and expostulated, but all to no purpose. He even ventured, sorely against his conscience, to try the effect of a silver key in unlocking the hard heart of the mistaken constable; but that virtuous officer with much spirit indignantly repudiated any such insidious assaults upon his professional incorruptibility. The Bishop inwardly groaned and followed him. "How easily," he thought to himself with a sigh, "even the most innocent and respectable of men may fall unawares under a disgraceful suspicion." For it is only in a limited and technical sense that Bishops regard themselves as miserable sinners.

Even as the thought flashed across his mind, he saw standing under a neighbouring doorway a person who was evidently endeavouring to escape notice, and in whom his quick eye immediately detected the bodily presence of Captain Burbury.

The Bishop drew a sigh of relief. This was clearly quite providential. Under any other circumstance he would, perhaps, have been curious to know how Captain Burbury came to be lingering so close beside his own hired house at that unseemly hour. He would have suspected an audacious attempt to communicate with Iris, contrary to the presumed wishes and desires of her affectionate parents. But, just as things then stood, the Bishop was inclined to hail with delight the presence of anybody whatsoever who could personally identify him. He was in a lenient mood as to unproved suspicions. To his horror, however, Captain Burbury, casting a rapid glance sideways at his episcopal costume, silhouetted out strikingly against the light from the policeman's bull's-eye, turned his back upon the pair with evident disinclination then and there to meet him, and began to walk rapidly away in the opposite direction.

There was no time to be lost. It was a moment for action. Captain Burbury must be made to recognize him. Half-breaking away from the burly policeman, who still, however, kept his solid hand firmly gripped around the episcopal forearm, the Bishop positively ran at the top of his speed towards the somewhat slinking and retreating captain, closely followed by the angry constable, who dragged him back with all his force, at the same time springing his rattle violently.

“Captain Burbury, Captain Burbury?” gasped the breathless Bishop, as he managed at last to come within earshot of the retiring figure. “Stop a minute, I beg of you. Please come here and explain to the constable.”

Captain Burbury turned slowly round and faced his two pursuers with obvious reluctance. For a second he seemed hardly to recognize the Bishop: then he bowed a little stiffly, and observed in a somewhat constrained voice, “The Bishop. How singular! Good evening. I suppose ... this officer ... is showing you the way home to your new quarters.”

The policeman’s sharp eye lost none of these small touches. “Doesn’t want to get lagged hisself,” he thought silently. “Didn’t half like the other follow letting me see he was a pal of his after I’d copped him!”

“Captain Burbury,” the Bishop said, panting, “I have most unfortunately forgotten the number of my new house. I was rather imprudently trying to open the doors all along the street with the latch-key which Mrs. Brandreth gave me on my leaving home for the House of Lords this morning, in order to see which lock it fitted, when this constable quite properly observed, and, I am sorry to say, misinterpreted my action. He believes I am loitering about to commit a felony. Have the goodness, please, to tell him who I am.”

“This is the Bishop of Whitchester,” Harry Burbury answered, very red, and with a growing sense of painful discomfort, expecting every moment that the Bishop would turn round upon him and ask him how he came to be there.

“Ho, ho, ho!” the constable thought to himself merrily. “Bishop and Captain! Captain and Bishop! That’s a good one, that is! They’re a gang, they are. Very well got up, too, the blooming pair of ’em. But they’re a couple of strong ’uns, that’s what I call ’em. I won’t let on that I twig ’em for the present. Two able-bodied burglars at once on one’s hands is no joke, even for the youngest and activest members of the force. I’ll just wait till Q 94 answers my rattle. Meanwhile, as they says at the theayter, I will dissemble.”

And he dissembled for the moment with such admirable effect that the Bishop fairly thought the incident settled, and began to congratulate himself in his own mind on this truly providential nocturnal meeting with Captain Burbury.

“An’ what’s his Lordship’s exact number?” the constable asked, with a scarcely suppressed ironical emphasis on the title of honour.

“Two hundred and seventy,” Harry Burbury answered, trembling.

“Two hundred and seventy!” the guardian of the peace repeated slowly. “Two hundred and seventy! So that’s it, is it? Why, bless my soul, that’s the very door that the military gent was a-lurkin’ and a-skulkin’ on! Perhaps you’ve got a latch-key about you somewhere for that one too, eh, Captain?”

Before the Bishop could indignantly repel this last shameful insinuation, Q 94, summoned hastily by his neighbour’s rattle from the next beat, came running up in eager expectation.

“All right, Simson,” the Bishop’s original captor exclaimed joyfully, now throwing off the mask and ceasing to dissemble. “This is a good job, this lot. This here reverend gentleman’s the Bishop of Whitchester, an’ his Lordship’s been a-loiterin’ round in Eaton Place with intent to commit a felony. I ketched him at it a-tryin’ the latch-keys. This other military gent’s his friend the Captain, as can answer confidential for his perfect respectability. Ho, ho, ho! Security ain’t good enough. The Captain was a-skulkin’ and a-loungin’ round the aireys hisself, an’ didn’t want at first to recognize his Lordship. But the Bishop, he very properly insisted on it. It’s a gang this is; that’s what it is; the Bishop’s been wanted this three months to my certain knowledge as the medical gent what cribbed the silver. I’ll take along his Lordship, Simson; you just ketch a hold of the Captain, will you?”

Harry Burbury saw at once that remonstrance and explanation would be quite ineffectual. He gave himself up quietly to go to the station; and the Bishop, fretting and fuming with speechless indignation, followed behind as fast as his gaitered

legs would carry him.

Arrived at the station, the Bishop, to his great surprise, found his protestations of innocence and references to character disregarded with a lordly indifference which quite astounded him. He was treated with more obvious disrespect, in fact, than the merest curate in a country parish. He turned to Harry Burbury for sympathy. But Harry only smiled a soured smile, and observed bitterly, "It is so easy to condemn anybody, you know, upon mere suspicion."

The Bishop felt a twinge of conscience. It was somewhat increased when the inspector in charge quietly remarked, "I feel a moral certainty that my officers are right; but still, in consideration of the dress you wear—a very clever disguise, certainly—I'll send one of them to make inquiries at the address you mention. Meanwhile, Thompson, lock 'em up separately in the general lock-up. We're very full to-night, Bishop. I'm sorry we can't accommodate you with a private cell. It's irregular, I know, but we're terribly overcrowded. You'll have to go in along with a couple of other prisoners."

Moral certainty! The Bishop started visibly at the phrase. It's hard to condemn a man unheard upon a moral certainty!

There was no help for it, so the Bishop allowed himself to be quietly thrust into a large cell already occupied by two other amiable-looking prisoners. One of them, to judge by the fashion in which he wore his hair, had very lately completed his term of residence in one of her Majesty's houses of detention; the other looked rather as though he were at present merely a candidate for the same distinction in the near future.

Both the men looked at the new-comer with deep interest; but as he withdrew at once into the far corner, and seated himself suspiciously upon the bed, without displaying any desire to engage in conversation, common politeness prevented them from remarking upon the singularity of his costume in such a position. So they went on with their own confabulation quite unconcernedly after a moment, taking no further notice in any way of their distinguished clerical companion.

"Then that's not the business you're lagged upon?" one of them said coolly to the other. "It isn't the adjutant's accounts, you think? It's the other matter, is it?"

"Oh yes," the second man answered quietly. "If it had been the adjutant's accounts, you see, I'd have rounded, of course, on Billy the Growler. I never did like that fellow, the Growler, you know; an' I don't see why I should have my five years for it, when he's had the best part of the swag, look 'ee. I had no hand in it, confound it. It was all the Growler. I didn't even get nothink out of it. That ain't fair now, is it, I put it to you?"

"No, it ain't," the first man answered, the close-cropped one. "But there'll be some sort of inquiry about it now, in course, for—worse luck for the Growler—I heard this evenin' the court-martial's acquitted that there Captain Somebody. They'll look about soon for some one else, I take it, to put the blame upon."

The other man laughed. "Not that," he put in carelessly. "The court-martial's acquitted him, but nobody don't believe he didn't take it. Nobody ain't going to suspect the Growler. Every one says it's a moral certainty that that Captain Thingummy there he took the money."

The Bishop drew a long breath. After all, this whole incident had been truly providential. No names were mentioned, to be sure; but from the circumstances of the case the Bishop felt convinced the person referred to was Harry Burbury. Could he have been placed in this truly ludicrous position for a wise reason—on purpose to help in extricating an innocent person from an undeserved calumny? The Bishop, with all his little failings, was at bottom a right-minded and tender-hearted man. He would not have grudged even that awkward hour of disagreeable detention in a common lock-up if he could be of any service, through his unjust incarceration, to one of his dear but wrongfully suspected brethren.

The men soon relapsed into silence, and threw themselves upon the bed and the bunk, which they assumed as by right, being the first comers. The Bishop, never speaking a word to either, but ruminating strangely in his own mind, took his own seat in silence on the solitary chair over in the corner.

The minutes wore away slowly, and the Bishop nodded now and then in a quiet doze, till the clock of the nearest church had struck four. Then, the door of the big cell was opened suddenly, and the inspector, with consternation and horror depicted legibly upon every fibre of his speaking countenance, entered the cell with a deferential bow.

“My Lord,” he cried in his politest tone to the delighted Bishop, “your carriage is waiting at the door, and your coachman and footman have come here to identify you—a formality which I am sure will hardly be needful. I must apologize most sincerely for the very unfortunate——”

The Bishop held up his finger warningly. Both the other occupants of the cell were fast asleep. “Don’t wake them,” the Bishop whispered in an anxious tone. “I naturally don’t wish this story to get about.”

The inspector bowed again. Nothing could better have suited his wishes. His constables had made a foolish mistake, and the laugh would have been against them in the force itself, far more than against the right reverend gentleman. “Who arrested the Bishop?” would soon have become the joke of the day among the street Arabs. Besides, had he not, under stress of circumstances, been committing the irregularity of putting as many as three prisoners in a single cell?

“As you wish, my Lord,” he answered submissively, and bowed the Bishop with profound respect into the outer room.

There John and the footman were waiting formally to recognize him, and the carriage stood ostentatiously at the door to carry him home again.

“Inspector,” the Bishop said quietly, “you need not apologize further. But I don’t want this most unfortunate affair to get publicly spoken about. You will easily perceive that it might be regarded by—ahem!—some irreverent persons in a ludicrous light. I shall be glad if you will request your constables to say nothing about it to one another or to anybody else.”

“My Lord,” the inspector said, with a feeling of the most profound relief, “you may rely upon it that not a single soul except the parties concerned shall ever hear a word of the matter.”

“And my companion in misfortune?” the Bishop asked, smiling.

The inspector, in his fluster of anxiety about the great prelate, had clean forgotten poor Harry Burbury. He went off at once to release the young man and make him a further nicely graduated apology.

“Captain Burbury,” the Bishop said, “can I drive you anywhere? Where are you stopping?”

Harry’s face reddened a little. “Nowhere, in fact,” he answered awkwardly. “The truth is, I have only just run up from Aldershot, and had meant to put up at the Charing Cross Hotel.”

Companionship in misfortune *emollit mores*. The Bishop relaxed his features and smiled graciously. “It’s too late to go there now,” he said with unwonted kindness. “You had better come round to Eaton Place with me, and Mrs. Brandreth will try to find a comfortable bed for you.”

Harry, hardly knowing what he did, followed the Bishop timidly out to the carriage.

As soon as they had seated themselves on the well-padded cushions of the comfortable episcopal brougham, the Bishop suddenly turned round and asked his companion, “Captain Burbury, do you happen to know anybody anywhere who is called—excuse the nickname—the Growler?”

Captain Burbury started in surprise. “The Growler!” he cried. “Why, yes, certainly. He’s the adjutant’s orderly in my own regiment.”

The Bishop laid his hand kindly on the young man’s arm. “My dear Captain Burbury,” he said softly, “I believe I can do you a slight service. I have found a clue to the man who really embezzled the regimental money.”

The carriage swam around before Harry Burbury’s eyes, and he clutched the arm-rest by the window tightly with his hand. After all, then, the Bishop at any rate did not wholly suspect and mistrust him! Perhaps in the end he might marry Iris!

“My dear,” the Bishop said to his wife, on the morning when the adjutant’s orderly was first examined at Aldershot on the charge of embezzlement, “this strongly enforces the casual remark I happened to make to you the other day about the difference between moral and legal certainty.”

“And as soon as this wretched man is really convicted,” Mrs. Brandreth observed timidly, “there can be no reason why we shouldn’t announce that Iris is engaged to Captain Burbury.”

When you have once rendered a man a signal service, you always retain a friendly feeling for him. The Bishop looked up benevolently from his paper. “Well, Charlotte,” he said, “he seems a very proper, well-conducted young man, and though I should certainly myself have preferred Canon Robinson, I don’t see any good reason why he and Iris, if they like one another, shouldn’t be married as soon as convenient to you.”



Transcriber's Note

This text has been preserved as in the original, including archaic and inconsistent spelling, punctuation and grammar, except that obvious printer's errors have been silently corrected.

[The end of *A Social Difficulty* by Grant Allen]