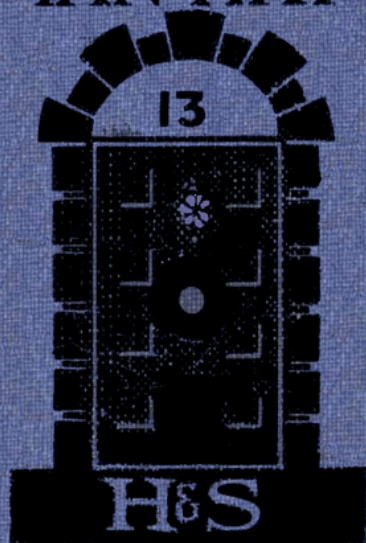


The LUCKY
NUMBER
IAN HAY



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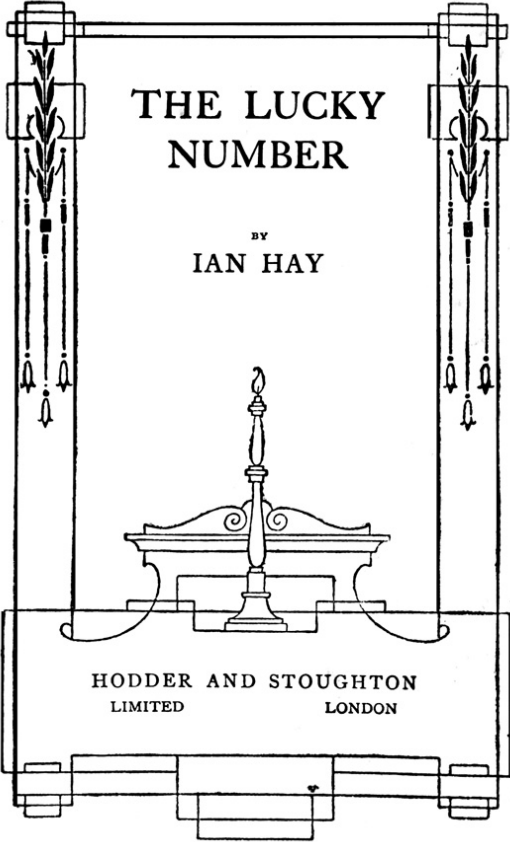
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THE WRITINGS OF IAN HAY

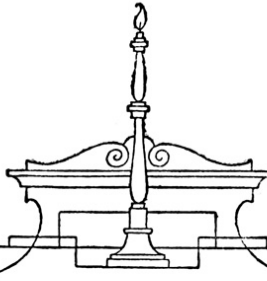
Year.

- 1907 "PIP," A ROMANCE OF YOUTH
Two Hundredth Thousand.
- 1908 THE RIGHT STUFF
One Hundred and Ninety-second Thousand.
- 1909 A MAN'S MAN
Two Hundred and Ninth Thousand.
- 1911 A SAFETY MATCH
Two Hundred and Ninth Thousand.
- 1913 HAPPY GO LUCKY
One Hundred and Ninety-sixth Thousand.
- 1914 A KNIGHT ON WHEELS
Three Hundred and Fifty-third Thousand.
- 1914 THE LIGHTER SIDE OF SCHOOL LIFE
Thirty-eighth Thousand.
- 1915 THE FIRST HUNDRED THOUSAND
Three Hundred and Ninetieth Thousand.
- 1916 ALL IN IT
One Hundred and Fifty-fourth Thousand.
- 1917 GETTING TOGETHER
Sixty-first Thousand.
- 1919 THE LAST MILLION
Thirty-eighth Thousand.
- 1921 THE WILLING HORSE
Ninety-fifth Thousand.
- 1923 THE LUCKY NUMBER
Twenty-sixth Thousand.



THE LUCKY
NUMBER

BY
IAN HAY



HODDER AND STOUGHTON
LIMITED LONDON

TO
TIM

Made and Printed in Great Britain.
Hazell, Watson & Viney, Ld., London and Aylesbury

To the Reader

HERE are thirteen stories. I understand that there exists a certain prejudice against this number: it is supposed to bring ill-luck. Something must therefore be done about it.

My first idea was to take a hint from a house just round the corner from here, which endeavours, rather ingeniously, to mask its true identity from Fortune under the numeral "12A." But *12A Stories* is not an imposing title. It suggests a Sales Catalogue, or an exercise in elementary algebra. I have therefore decided to follow a plan much employed by the ancients, who were accustomed to propitiate their gods by judicious flattery. For instance, that particularly stormy sheet of water now known as the Black Sea was originally called *Pontus Euxinus*, which means *The Sea that is Kind to Strangers*. Following this admirable example, I have decided to call this little collection of stories "The Lucky Number." Of course, like you, I harbour no childish prejudices about the luck of this numeral or that: in fact, I have always found thirteen one of my luckiest numbers. But other people are so cowardly and superstitious that perhaps we ought to make certain allowances for them.

Here is a list of the stories, and the author's excuse for writing them:

1. "SCALLY."—Everybody has to write a dog story sooner or later. This is mine. I wrote it in 1911, and, having written it, promptly left the manuscript in a railway carriage on the London, Brighton, and South Coast Railway. Whoever found it never published it—a circumstance of which two explanations present themselves. The first is obvious and humiliating. The second is the fact that no one can read my handwriting but myself—and then not always. Ultimately I had to rewrite the whole story from memory. Retracing one's steps is the most uncongenial of exercises, and I have disliked "Scally" cordially ever since. However, to show my fairness and impartiality, I put him first.

2. NATURAL CAUSES.—I suppose every flat-footed, blundering wooer, exasperated by the unsportsmanlike manner in which the modern maiden employs against him the entirely artificial weapons with which modern convention furnishes her, dreams dreams of the manner in which he would handle the creature if ever he found himself alone with her on a comfortably appointed

desert island. "Natural Causes" is my idea of the way in which the situation would work out. Written in 1912.

3. "THE LIBERRY."—Written in 1921. This story is based on actual fact, and the reader may care to amuse himself by trying to separate the fact from the fiction.

4. OCEAN AIR.—My complaint against most love stories is that they make the hero altogether too dashing and irresistible. This story gives the underdog his day out. It also illustrates the undoubted effect of ocean air upon character. Further, it affords to the author a pretext for resuscitating an old character—rather a favourite of his—from a former novel. Written in 1922.

5. PETIT-JEAN.—We are credibly informed that the recent War is no longer mentioned by the best people. However, I have taken upon myself to insert one War story in this collection. Like Jean himself it is only a little one. Written in 1917.

6. THE CURE.—If "Petit-Jean" is a War story, "The Cure" is essentially post-War, and deals with the habits, customs, and mental attitude of that new and characteristic type, the Profiteer—particularly his anxiety to assume the feudal responsibilities and privileges of the class whom he has largely supplanted. Written in 1921.

7. SET TO PARTNERS.—This, too, is a post-War story, in the sense that in the course of the narrative it is frankly admitted that there has been a War, and that that War has had consequences, such as War widows, who insist upon intruding into the narratives of the most exclusive novelists. Written in 1922.

8. OUR PIRATE.—A children's story, pure and simple. Should be skipped by all readers between the ages of fourteen and twenty-one. Written in 1914.

9. LOCUM TENENS.—I think we all like to speculate as to what we would do if invited by fate to perform someone else's job for an hour or two. Personally, I have always coveted the post of the Traffic Policeman; but perhaps, considering the present high death-rate in the great cities of this country, Providence knows best. It would be a fine thing, too, to occupy a pulpit for a little while. It is given to few men to say exactly what they like, for as long as thirty minutes at a time, to an audience precluded from

offering a single protest or contradiction. So I started out to write a story about a young man who impersonated a Vicar. Needless to say, the story took an unexpected turn at an early stage, and I never got the sermon in at all. But perhaps the reader will overlook that. Written in 1922.

10. BILL BAILEY.—Nowadays the motorist of limited means can send a modest cheque to Mr. Ford and receive almost by return of post a new, resplendent, and resonant “Tin Lizzie.” In 1910, when “Bill Bailey” was written, cheap cars were unknown, and the humbler kind of motorist had to wait until some elaborate and expensive machine crawled on to the market in a condition sufficiently second-hand to suit his purse. Those were the really romantic days of motoring—when men went forth to the garage in the morning knowing neither whether the car would be induced to start at all or, if it did, whether it would ever get home again. Those days are dead, but it is well that their memory should be preserved.

11. A WIRE ENTANGLEMENT.—This is not a War story, as you might think, unless an artless study of ordinary domestic and connubial strategy can be regarded as such. Written in 1922.

12. A SPORTING COLLEGE.—This is the oldest of the stories, written away back in 1905. It is a memory of those happy, happy days when every tree was green and nothing mattered very much except manipulating a ball, or an oar, with just a little more dexterity or endurance than your bosom friend.

13. FOWL PLAY.—A very little story indeed. In fact, it is the “A” in the “12A” mentioned above.

The author has to thank the proprietors of *Blackwood's Magazine* for permission to reproduce “‘Scally,’ ” “Natural Causes,” and “Bill Bailey”; of *Hutchinson's Magazine* for similar courtesy with regard to “The Cure,” “Ocean Air,” “Set to Partners,” and “A Wire Entanglement”; of *The Strand* for “‘The Liberry’ ” and “Petit-Jean”; and Messrs. Blackie for “Our Pirate.”

IAN HAY.

Contents

	PAGE
“SCALLY”: THE STORY OF A PERFECT GENTLEMAN..	<u>11</u>
NATURAL CAUSES: AN ISLAND COMEDY	<u>49</u>
“THE LIBERRY”	<u>84</u>
OCEAN AIR.....	<u>122</u>
PETIT-JEAN.....	<u>151</u>
THE CURE.....	<u>175</u>
SET TO PARTNERS.....	<u>200</u>
OUR PIRATE.....	<u>222</u>
LOCUM TENENS.....	<u>235</u>
“BILL BAILEY”.....	<u>260</u>
A WIRE ENTANGLEMENT.....	<u>282</u>
A SPORTING COLLEGE.....	<u>306</u>
FOWL PLAY: THE LATEST RURAL INDUSTRY.....	<u>317</u>

I

“BETTERSEA trem? Right, miss!”

My wife, who has been married long enough to feel deeply gratified at being mistaken for a maiden lady, smiled seraphically at the conductor, and allowed herself to be hoisted up the steps of the majestic vehicle provided by a paternal County Council to convey passengers—at a loss to the rate-payers, I understand—from the Victoria Embankment to Battersea.

Presently we ground our way round a curve, and began to cross Westminster Bridge. The conductor, whose innate Cockney *bonhomie* his high official position had failed to eradicate, presented himself before us and collected our fares.

“What part of Bettersea did you require, sir?” he asked of me.

I coughed, and answered evasively:

“Oh, about the middle.”

“We haven’t been there before,” added my wife, quite gratuitously.

The conductor smiled indulgently, and punched our tickets.

“I’ll tell you when to get down,” he said, and left us.

For some months we had been considering the question of buying a dog; and a good deal of our spare time—or perhaps I should say of my spare time, for a woman’s time is naturally all her own—had been pleasantly occupied in discussing the matter. Having at length committed ourselves to the purchase of the animal, we proceeded to consider such details as breed, sex, and age. My wife vacillated between a bloodhound, because bloodhounds are so aristocratic in appearance, and a Pekinese, because they are *dernier cri*. (We like to be *dernier cri* even in Much Moreham.) Her younger sister Eileen, who spends a good deal of time with us, suggested an Old English sheep-dog, explaining that it would be company for my wife when I was away from home. I coldly recommended a mastiff. Our son John, aged three, upon being consulted, expressed a preference for twelve tigers in a box, and was not again invited to participate in the debate.

Finally we decided upon an Aberdeen terrier, of an age and sex to be settled by circumstances, and I was instructed to communicate with a

gentleman in the North, who advertised in our morning paper that Aberdeen terriers were his speciality. In due course we received a reply. The advertiser recommended two animals—namely, “Celtic Chief,” aged four months, and “Scotia’s Pride,” aged one year. Pedigrees were enclosed, each about as complicated as the family tree of the House of Hapsburg; and the favour of an early reply was requested, as both dogs were being hotly bid for by an anonymous client in New York. The price of “Celtic Chief” was twenty guineas; that of “Scotia’s Pride,” for reasons heavily underlined in the pedigree, was twenty-seven. The advertiser (who was an Aberdonian) added that these prices did not cover cost of carriage. We decided not to stand in the way of the gentleman in New York, and having sent back the pedigrees by return of post, resumed the debate.

Finally Stella (my wife) said:

“We don’t really want a dog with a pedigree. We only want something that will bark at beggars and be gentle with baby. Why not go to the Home for Lost Dogs at Battersea? I believe you can get any dog you like there for five shillings. We will run up to town next Wednesday and see about it—and I might get some clothes as well.”

Hence our presence on the tram.

Presently the conductor, who had kindly pointed out to us such objects of local interest as the River Thames and the Houses of Parliament, stopped the tram in a crowded thoroughfare and announced that we were in Battersea.

“Alight here,” he announced facetiously, “for the ’Ome for Lost Dawgs!”

Guiltily realising that there is many a true word spoken in jest, we obeyed him, and the tram went rocking and whizzing out of sight.

We had eschewed a cab.

“When you are only going to pay five shillings for a dog,” my wife had pointed out with convincing logic, “it is silly to go and pay perhaps another five shillings for a cab. It doubles the price of the dog at once. If we had been buying an expensive dog we might have taken a cab; but not for a five-shilling one.”

“Now,” I inquired briskly, “how are we going to find this place?”

“Haven’t you any idea where it is?”

“No. I have a sort of vague notion that it is on an island in the middle of the river—called the Isle of Dogs, or Barking Reach, or something like that. However, I have no doubt——”

“Hadn’t we better ask someone?” suggested Stella.

I demurred.

“If there is one thing I dislike,” I said, “it is accosting total strangers and badgering them for information which they don’t possess. Not that that will prevent them from giving it. If we start asking the way we shall find ourselves in Putney or Woolwich in no time.”

“Yes, dear,” said Stella soothingly.

“Now I suggest——” My hand went to my pocket.

“No, darling,” interposed my wife hastily; “*not* a map, please!” (It is a curious psychological fact that women have a constitutional aversion to maps and railway time-tables. They would sooner consult an unprincipled errand-boy or a half-witted railway porter.) “Do not let us make a spectacle of ourselves in the public streets again! I have not yet forgotten the day when you tried to find the Crystal Palace. Besides, it will only blow away. Ask that dear little boy there. He is looking at us so wistfully. . . .”

Yes, I admit it was criminal folly. A man who asks a London street-boy to be so kind as to direct him to a Home for Lost Dogs has only himself to thank for the consequences.

The wistful little boy smiled up at us. He had a pinched face and large eyes.

“Lost Dogs’ ’Ome, sir?” he said courteously. “It’s a good long way. Did you want to get there quick?”

“Yes.”

“Then if I was you, sir,” replied the infant, edging to the mouth of an alleyway, “I should bite a policeman!”

And with an ear-splitting yell, he vanished.

We walked on, hot-faced.

“Little wretch!” said Stella.

“We simply asked for it,” I rejoined. “What are we going to do next?”

My question was answered in a most incredible fashion, for at this moment a man emerged from a shop on our right, and set off down the street before us. He wore a species of uniform, and emblazoned upon the front of his hat was the information that he was an official of the Battersea Home for Lost and Starving Dogs.

“Wait a minute, and I will ask him,” I said, starting forward.

But my wife would not hear of it.

“Certainly not,” she replied. “If we ask him he will simply offer to show us the way. Then we shall have to talk to him—about hydrophobia, and lethal chambers, and distemper—and it may be for miles. I simply couldn’t *bear* it. We shall have to tip him, too. Let us follow him, quietly.”

To those who have never attempted to track a fellow-creature surreptitiously through the streets of London on a hot day the feat may appear simple. It is in reality a most exhausting, dilatory, and humiliating exercise. Our difficulty lay not so much in keeping our friend in sight as in avoiding frequent and unexpected collisions with him. The general idea, as they say on field-days, was to keep about twenty yards behind him; but under certain circumstances distance has an uncanny habit of annihilating itself. The man himself was no hustler. Once or twice he stopped to light his pipe, or converse with a friend. During these interludes Stella and I loafed guiltily upon the pavement, pointing out to one another objects of local interest with the fatuous officiousness of people in the foreground of railway posters advertising health-resorts. Occasionally he paused to contemplate the contents of a shop window. We gazed industriously into the window next door. Our first window, I recollect, was an undertaker’s, with ready-printed expressions of grief for sale upon white porcelain discs. We had time to read them all—from “In Lasting Memory of Our Dear Mother” to “A Token of Respect from the Choir.” The next was a butcher’s. Here we stayed, perforce, so long that the proprietor, who was of the tribe which disposes of its wares almost entirely by personal canvass, came out into the street and endeavoured to sell us a bullock’s heart.

Our quarry’s next proceeding was to dive into a public-house.

We turned and surveyed one another.

“What are we to do now?” inquired my wife.

“Go inside too,” I replied, with more enthusiasm than I had hitherto displayed. “At least I think I ought to. You can please yourself.”

“I will not be left in the street,” said Stella firmly. “We must just wait here together until he comes out.”

“There may be another exit,” I objected. “We had better go in. I shall take something, just to keep up appearances, and you must sit down in the Ladies’ Bar, or the Snug, or whatever they call it.”

“Certainly not!” said Stella.

We had arrived at this *impasse* when the man suddenly reappeared, wiping his mouth. Instantly and silently we fell in behind him.

For the first time the man appeared to notice our presence. He regarded us curiously, with a faint gleam of recognition in his eyes, and then set off down the street at a good round pace. We followed, panting. Once or twice he looked back over his shoulder—a little apprehensively, I thought. But we ploughed on.

“We ought to get there soon at this pace,” I gasped. “Hallo, he’s gone again!”

“He turned down to the right,” said Stella excitedly.

The lust of the chase was fairly on us now. We swung eagerly round the corner into a quiet by-street. Our man was nowhere to be seen, and the street was almost empty.

“Come on!” said Stella. “He may have turned in somewhere.”

We hurried down the street. Suddenly, warned by a newly awakened and primæval instinct, I looked back. We had overrun our quarry. He had just emerged from some hiding-place of his own, and was heading back towards the main street, looking fearfully over his shoulder.

Once more we were in full cry. . . .

For the next five minutes we practically ran—all three of us. The man was obviously frightened out of his wits, and kept making frenzied and spasmodic spurts, from which we surmised that he was getting to the end of his powers of endurance.

“If only we could overtake him,” I said, hauling my exhausted spouse along by the arm, “we could explain that——”

“He’s gone again!” exclaimed Stella.

She was right. The man had turned another corner. We followed him round, hot-foot, and found ourselves in a prim little *cul-de-sac*, with villas

on either side. Across the end of the street ran a high wall, obviously screening a railway-track.

“We’ve got him!” I exclaimed, feeling as Moltke must have felt when he closed the circle at Sedan.

“But where is the Dogs’ Home, dear?” inquired Stella.

The question was never answered, for at this moment the man ran up the steps of the fourth villa on the left and slipped a latchkey into the lock. The door closed behind him with a venomous snap, and we were left alone in the street, guideless and dogless.

A minute later the man appeared at the ground-floor window, accompanied by a female of commanding appearance. He pointed us out to her. Behind them, dimly, we could descry a white tablecloth, a tea-cosy, and covered dishes.

The commanding female, after a prolonged and withering glare, plucked a hairpin from her head and ostentatiously proceeded to skewer together the starchy white curtains which framed the window. Privacy secured, and the sanctity of the English home thus pointedly vindicated, she and her husband disappeared into the murky background, where they doubtless sat down to an excellent high tea.

Exhausted and discomfited, we drifted away.

“I am going home,” said Stella in a hollow voice. “And I think,” she added bitterly, “that it might have occurred to you to suggest that the man might possibly be going *from* the Dogs’ Home, and not to it.”

I apologised. It is the simplest plan, really.

II

It was almost dark when the train arrived at our little country station. We set out to walk home by the short cut across the golf-course.

“Anyhow, we have saved five shillings,” remarked Stella.

“We paid half a crown for the taxi which took us back to Victoria Station,” I reminded her.

“Do not argue to-night, darling,” responded my wife. “I simply cannot endure anything more.”

Plainly she was a little unstrung. Very considerately I selected another topic.

“I think our best plan,” I said cheerfully, “would be to advertise for a dog.”

“I never wish to see a dog again,” replied Stella.

I surveyed her with some concern, and said gently:

“I am afraid you are tired, dear.”

“No, I’m not.”

“A little shaken, perhaps?”

“Nothing of the kind. *Joe, what is that?*”

Stella’s fingers bit deep into my biceps muscle, causing me considerable pain. We were passing a small sheet of water, which guards the thirteenth green on the golf-course. It is a stagnant and unclean pool, but we make rather a fuss of it. We call it the Lake, and if you play a ball into it you send a blasphemous caddie in after it and count one stroke.

A young moon was struggling up over the trees, dismally illuminating the scene. Upon the slimy shores of the pool we beheld a small moving object. A yard behind it was another object, a little smaller, moving at exactly the same pace. One of the objects was emitting sounds of distress.

Abandoning my quaking consort, I advanced to the edge of the pond and leaned down to investigate the mystery.

The leading object proved to be a small, wet, shivering, whimpering puppy. The satellite was a brick. The two were connected by a string. The puppy had just emerged from the depths of the pool, towing the brick behind it.

“What is it, dear?” repeated Stella fearfully.

“Your dog!” I replied, and cut the string.

III

We spent three days deciding upon a name for him. Stella suggested Tiny, on account of his size. I pointed out that time might stultify this selection of a title.

“I don’t think so,” said Eileen, supporting her sister. (She usually does.)
“That kind of dog does not grow very big.”

“What kind of dog is he?” I inquired swiftly.

Eileen said no more. There are problems which even young women of twenty cannot solve.

A warm bath had revealed to us the fact that the puppy was of a dingy yellow hue. I suggested that we should call him “Mustard.” Our son John, on being consulted (against my advice) by his mother, addressed the animal as “Pussy.” Stella continued to favour “Tiny.” Finally Eileen, who was at the romantic age, produced a copy of Tennyson and suggested “Excalibur,” alleging in support of her preposterous proposition that

“It rose from out the bosom of the lake.”

“The darling rose from out the bosom of the lake, too, just like the sword of Excalibur,” she said, “so I think it would make a lovely name for him.”

“The little brute waded out of a muddy pond towing a brick,” I replied. “I see no parallel. He was not the product of the pond. Some one must have thrown him in, and he came out.”

“That is just,” retorted Eileen, “what some one must have done with the sword. So we’ll call you Excalibur, won’t we, darling little Scally?”

She embraced the puppy warmly, and the unsuspecting animal replied by frantically licking her face.

However, the name stuck—with variations. When the puppy was big enough he was presented with a collar engraved with the name “Excalibur,” together with my name and address. Among ourselves we usually addressed him as “Scally.” The children in the village called him “The Scallywag.”

His time during his first year in our household was fully occupied in growing up. Stella declared that if one could have persuaded him to stand still for five minutes it would have been actually possible to see him grow. He grew at the rate of about an inch per week for the best part of a year. When he had finished he looked like nothing on earth. At one time we cherished a brief but illusory hope that he was going to turn into some sort of an imitation of a St. Bernard; but the symptoms rapidly passed off, and his final and permanent aspect was that of a rather badly stuffed lion.

Like most overgrown creatures, he was top-heavy and lethargic, and very humble-minded. Still, there was a kind of respectful pertinacity about

him. It requires some strength of character, for instance, to wade along the bottom of a pond to dry land accompanied by a brick as big as yourself. It was quite impossible, too, short of locking him up, to prevent him from accompanying us when we took our walks abroad, if he had made up his mind to do so. The first time this happened I was going to shoot with some neighbours. It was only a mile to the first covert, and I set off after breakfast to walk. I was hardly out upon the road when Excalibur was beside me, ambling uncertainly upon his weedy legs and smiling up into my face with an air of imbecile affection.

“You have many qualities, old friend,” I said, “but I don’t think you are a sporting dog. Go home!”

Excalibur sat down upon the road with a dejected air. Then, having given me fifty yards’ start, he rose and crawled sheepishly after me. I stopped, called him up, pointed him with some difficulty in the required direction, gave him a resounding spank, and bade him begone. He responded by collapsing like a camp bedstead, and I left him.

Two minutes later I looked round. Excalibur was ten yards behind me, propelling himself along upon his stomach. This time I thrashed him severely. After he had begun to howl I let him go, and he lumbered away homeward the picture of misery.

In due course I reached the cross-roads where I had arranged to meet the rest of the party. They had not arrived, but Excalibur had. He had made a detour and headed me off. Not certain which route I would take after the cross-roads, he was sitting, very sensibly, under the signpost, awaiting my arrival. On seeing me he immediately came forward, wagging his tail, and placed himself at my feet in the position most convenient to me for inflicting chastisement.

I wonder how many of our human friends would be willing to pay such a price for the pleasure of our company.

As time went on Excalibur filled out into one of the most terrifying spectacles I have ever beheld. In one respect, though, he lived up to his knightly name. His manners were of the most courtly description, and he had an affectionate greeting for all—beggars included. He was particularly fond of children. If he saw children in the distance he would canter up and offer to play with them. If the children had not met him before they would run shrieking to their nurses. If they had, they would fall upon Excalibur in a body and roll him over and pull him about. On wet afternoons in the nursery my own family used to play at “dentist” with him, assigning to Excalibur the

rôle of patient. Gas was administered with a bicycle pump, and a shoehorn and buttonhook were employed in place of the ordinary instruments of torture. But Excalibur did not mind. He lay on his back upon the hearthrug, with the principal dentist sitting astride his stomach, as happy as a king. He was particularly attracted by babies; and being able by reason of his stature to look right down into perambulators, was accustomed whenever he met one of these vehicles to amble alongside and peer inquiringly into the face of its occupant. Most of the babies in the district got to know him in time, but until they did we had to attend to a good deal of correspondence upon the subject.

Excalibur's intellect may have been lofty, but his memory was treacherous. Our household will never forget the day upon which he was given the shoulder of mutton.

One morning after breakfast Eileen, accompanied by Excalibur, intercepted the kitchen-maid hastening in the direction of the potting-shed carrying the joint in question at arm's length. The damsel explained that its premature maturity was due to the recent warm weather, and that she was even now in search of the gardener's boy, who would be commissioned to perform the duties of sexton.

"It seems a waste, miss," observed the kitchen-maid, "but cook says it can't be ate nohow, now."

Loud but respectful snufflings from Excalibur moved a direct negative to this statement. Eileen and the kitchen-maid, who were both criminally weak where Excalibur was concerned, saw a way to gratify their economical instincts and their natural affection simultaneously. Next moment Excalibur was lurching contentedly down the gravel path, with a presentation shoulder of mutton in his mouth.

Then Joy Day began. Excalibur took his prize into the middle of the tennis-lawn. It was a very large shoulder of mutton, but Excalibur finished it in ten minutes. After that, distended to his utmost limits, he went to sleep in the sun, with the bone between his paws. Occasionally he woke up, and raising his head stared solemnly into space, in the attitude of a Trafalgar Square lion. The bone now lay white and gleaming upon the grass beside him. Then he fell asleep again. About four o'clock he roused himself, and began to look for a suitable place of interment for the bone. By four-thirty the deed was done, and he went to sleep once more. At five he woke up—and pandemonium began. He could not remember where he had buried that bone.

He started systematically with the rose-beds, but met with no success. After that he tried two or three shrubberies, without avail; and then embarked upon a frantic but thorough excavation of the tennis-lawn. We were taking tea upon the lawn at the time, and our attention was first drawn to Excalibur's bereavement by a temporary but unshakable conviction on his part that the bone was buried immediately underneath the tea-table.

As the tennis-lawn was fast beginning to resemble a golf-links, we locked Excalibur up in the wash-house, where his hyena-like howls rent the air for the rest of the evening, penetrating even to the dining-room. This was particularly unfortunate, because we were having a dinner party in honour of a neighbour who had recently come to the district—no less a personage, in fact, than the new Lord-Lieutenant of the county and his lady. Stella was naturally anxious that there should be no embarrassments upon such an occasion, and it distressed her to think that these people should imagine that we kept a private torture-chamber on the premises.

However, dinner passed off quite successfully, and we adjourned to the drawing-room. It was a chilly September evening, and Lady Wickham was accommodated with a seat by the fire in a large arm-chair with a cushion at her back. When the gentlemen came in Eileen sang to us. Fortunately the drawing-room is out of range of the wash-house.

During Eileen's first song I sat by Lady Wickham. Her expression was one of patrician calm and well-bred repose, but it seemed to me that she was not looking quite comfortable. I was not feeling quite comfortable myself. The atmosphere seemed a trifle oppressive; perhaps we had done wrong in having a fire after all. Lady Wickham appeared to notice it too. She sat very upright, fanning herself mechanically, and seemed disinclined to lean back in her chair.

After the song was finished I said:

"I am afraid you are not quite comfortable, Lady Wickham. Let me get you a larger cushion."

"Thank you," said Lady Wickham; "the cushion I have is delightfully comfortable; but I think there is something hard behind it."

Apologetically I plucked away the cushion. Lady Wickham was right; there was something behind it.

It was Excalibur's bone.

IV

A walk along the village street was always a great event for Excalibur. Still, it must have contained many humiliating moments for one of his sensitive disposition; for he was always pathetically anxious to make friends with other dogs and was rarely successful. Little dogs merely bit his legs, while big dogs cut him dead.

I think this was why he usually commenced his morning round by calling on a rabbit. The rabbit lived in a hutch in a yard at the end of a passage between two cottages—the first turning on the right after you entered the village—and Excalibur always dived down this at the earliest opportunity. It was no use for Eileen (who usually took him out on these occasions) to endeavour to hold him back. Either Excalibur called on the rabbit by himself or Eileen went with him: there was no other alternative.

Arrived at the hutch, Excalibur wagged his tail and contemplated the rabbit with his usual air of vacuous benevolence. The rabbit made not the faintest response, but continued to munch green food, twitching its nose in a superior manner. Finally, when it could endure Excalibur's admiring inspection and hard breathing no longer, it turned its back and retired into its bedroom.

Excalibur's next call was usually at the butcher's, where he was presented with a specially selected and quite unsaleable fragment of meat. He then crossed the road to the baker's, where he purchased a halfpenny bun, for which his escort was expected to pay. After that he walked from shop to shop, wherever he was taken, with great docility and enjoyment; for he was a gregarious animal and had a friend behind or underneath almost every counter in the village. Men, women, babies, kittens, even ducks—they were all one to him.

At one time Eileen had endeavoured to teach him a few simple accomplishments, such as begging for food, dying for his country, and carrying parcels. She was unsuccessful in all three instances. Excalibur upon his hind legs stood about five feet six, and when he fell from that eminence, as he invariably did when he tried to beg, he usually broke something. He was hampered, too, by inability to distinguish one order from another. More than once he narrowly escaped with his life through mistaking an urgent appeal to come to heel out of the way of an approaching motor for a command to die for his country in the middle of the road. As for educating him to carry parcels, a single attempt was sufficient. The parcel in question contained a miscellaneous assortment of articles from the grocer's, including

lard, soap, and safety matches. It was securely tied up, and the grocer kindly attached it by a short length of string to a wooden clothes-peg, in order to make it easier for Excalibur to carry. They set off home. . . .

Excalibur was most apologetic about it afterwards, besides being extremely unwell. But he had no idea, he explained to Eileen, that anything put into his mouth was not meant to be eaten. He then tendered the clothes-peg and some mangled brown paper with an air of profound abasement. After that no further attempts at compulsory education were undertaken.

But it was his daily walk with Eileen which introduced Excalibur to Life—Life in its broadest and most romantic sense. As I was not privileged to be present at the opening incident of this episode, or most of its subsequent developments, the direct conduct of this narrative here passes out of my hands.

One sunny morning in July a young man in clerical attire sat breakfasting in his rooms at Mrs. Tice's. Mrs. Tice's establishment was situated in the village street, and Mrs. Tice was in the habit of letting her ground-floor to lodgers of impeccable respectability.

It was half-past eleven, which is a late hour for the clergy to breakfast, but this young man appeared to be suffering from no qualms of conscience upon the subject. He was making an excellent breakfast, and reading the Henley results from *The Sportsman* with a mixture of rapture and longing.

He had just removed *The Sportsman* from the convenient buttress of the teapot and substituted *Punch*, when he became aware that day had turned to night. Looking up, he perceived that his open window, which was rather small and of the casement variety, was completely blocked by a huge, shapeless, and opaque mass. Next moment the mass resolved itself into an animal of enormous size and surprising appearance, which fell heavily into the room, and—

*“Like a stream that, spouting from a cliff,
Fails in mid-air; but gathering at the base,
Remakes itself,”*

—rose to its feet, and, advancing to the table, laid a heavy head upon the white cloth and lovingly passed its tongue (which resembled that of the great anteater) round a cold chicken conveniently adjacent.

Five minutes later the window framed another picture—this time a girl of twenty, white-clad, and wearing a powder-blue felt hat caught up on one side by a silver buckle, which twinkled in the hot morning sun. The Curate started to his feet. Excalibur, who was now lying upon the hearthrug dismembering the chicken, thumped his tail guiltily upon the floor, but made no attempt to rise.

“I am very sorry,” said Eileen, “but I am afraid my dog is trespassing. May I call him out?”

“Certainly,” said the Curate. “But”—he racked his brains to devise some means of delaying the departure of this radiant, fragrant vision—“he is not the least in the way. I am very glad of his company: I think it was most neighbourly of him to call. After all, I suppose he is one of my parishioners? And—and”—he blushed painfully—“I hope you are, too.”

Eileen gave him her most entrancing smile, and from that hour the Curate ceased to be his own master.

“I suppose you are Mr. Gilmore,” said Eileen.

“Yes. I have only been here three weeks, and I have not met everyone yet.”

“I have been away for two months,” Eileen mentioned.

“I thought you must have been,” said the Curate,—rather subtly for him.

“I think my brother-in-law called upon you a few days ago,” continued Eileen, upon whom the Curate’s last remark had made a most favourable impression. She mentioned my name.

“I was going to return the call this very afternoon,” said the Curate. And he firmly believed that he was speaking the truth. “Won’t you come in? We have an excellent chaperon”—indicating Excalibur. “I will come and open the door.”

“Well, he certainly won’t come out unless I come and fetch him,” admitted Eileen thoughtfully.

A moment later the Curate was at the front door, and led his visitor across the little hall into the sitting-room. He had not been absent more than thirty seconds, but during that time a plateful of sausages had mysteriously disappeared; and as they entered, Excalibur was apologetically settling down upon the hearthrug with a cottage loaf.

Eileen uttered cries of dismay and apology, but the Curate would have none of them.

“My fault entirely!” he insisted. “I have no right to be breakfasting at this hour. But this is my day off. I take early service every morning at seven; but on Wednesdays we cut it out—omit it, and have full Matins at ten. So I get up at half-past nine, take service at ten, and come back at eleven and have breakfast. It is my weekly treat.”

“You deserve it,” said Eileen feelingly. Her religious exercises were limited to going to church on Sunday morning and coming out, if possible, after the litany. “And how do you like Much Moreham?”

“I did not like it at all when I came,” said the Curate; “but recently I have begun to enjoy myself immensely.” He did not say how recently.

“Were you in London before?”

“Yes—in the East End. It was pretty hard work, but a useful experience. I feel rather lost here during my spare time. I get so little exercise. In London I used to slip away for an occasional outing in a Leander scratch eight, and that kept me fit. I am inclined,” he added ruefully, “to put on flesh.”

“Leander? Are you a Blue?”

The Curate nodded.

“You know about rowing, I see,” he said appreciatively. “The worst of rowing,” he continued, “is that it takes up so much of a man’s time that he has no opportunity of practising anything else. Cricket, for instance. All curates ought to be able to play cricket. I do my best, but there isn’t a single boy in the Sunday-school who can’t bowl me. It’s humiliating!”

“Do you play tennis at all?” asked Eileen.

“Yes, in a way.”

“I am sure my sister will be pleased if you will come and have a game with us one afternoon.”

The enraptured Curate had already opened his mouth to accept this demure invitation, when Excalibur, rising from the hearthrug, stretched himself luxuriously and wagged his tail, thereby removing three pipes, an inkstand, a tobacco-jar, and a half-completed sermon from the writing-table.

V

Excalibur was heavily overworked in his new rôle of chaperon during the next three or four weeks, and any dog less ready to oblige than himself might have felt a little aggrieved at the treatment to which he was subjected.

There was the case of the tennis-lawn, for instance. He had always regarded this as his own particular sanctuary, dedicated to reflection and repose. But now the net was stretched across it, and Eileen and the Curate performed antics all over the court with rackets and small white balls which, though they did not hurt Excalibur, kept him awake. It did not occur to him to convey himself elsewhere, for his mind moved slowly; and the united blandishments of the players failed to bring the desirability of such a course home to him. He continued to lie on his favourite spot upon the sunny side of the court, looking injured but forgiving, or slumbering perseveringly amid the storm that raged around him. It was quite impossible to move Excalibur once he had decided to remain where he was, so Eileen and the Curate agreed to regard him as a sort of artificial excrescence—like the buttress in a fives court. If the ball hit him—as it frequently did—the player waiting for it was at liberty either to play it or claim a let. This arrangement added a piquant and pleasing variety to what is too often—especially when indulged in by mediocre players—a very dull game.

But worse was to follow. One day Eileen and the Curate conducted Excalibur to a neighbouring mountain-range—at least, so it appeared to Excalibur—and played another ball game. This time they employed long sticks with iron heads, and two balls, which, though they were much smaller than the tennis balls, were incredibly hard and painful. Excalibur, though willing to help and anxious to please, could not supervise both these balls at once. As sure as he ran to retrieve one the other came after him and took him unfairly in the rear. Excalibur was the gentlest of creatures, but the most perfect gentleman has his dignity to consider. After having been struck for the third time by one of these balls, he whipped round, picked it up in his mouth, and gave it a tiny pinch—just for a warning. At least, he thought it was a tiny pinch. The ball retaliated, with unexpected ferocity. It twisted and turned. It emitted long snaky spirals of some elastic substance, which clogged his teeth and tickled his throat and wound themselves round his tongue and nearly choked him. Panic-stricken, he ran to his mistress, who, with weeping and with laughter, removed the writhing horror from his jaws and comforted him with fair words.

After that Excalibur realised that it is wiser to walk behind golfers than in front of them. But it was boring business, and very exhausting, for he loathed exercise of any kind; and his only periods of repose were the occasions upon which the expedition came to a halt on certain small flat lawns, each of which contained a hole with a flag in it. Here Excalibur would lie down with the contented sigh of a tired child, and go to sleep. As he almost invariably lay down between the hole and the ball, the players agreed to regard him as a bunker. Eileen putted round him; but the Curate, who had little regard for the humbler works of creation, Excalibur thought, used to take his mashie and attempt a lofting shot—an enterprise in which he almost invariably failed, to Excalibur's great inconvenience.

Country walks were more tolerable, for Eileen's supervision of his movements, which was usually marked by an officious severity, was sensibly relaxed in these days; and Excalibur found himself at liberty to range abroad amid the heath and through the coppices, engaged in a pastime which he imagined was hunting.

One hot afternoon, wandering into a clearing, he encountered a hare. The hare, which was suffering from extreme panic owing to a terrifying noise behind—the blast of something quite exceptional in the way of profiteers' motor-horns, to be precise—was bolting right across the clearing. After the manner of hares where objects directly in front of them are concerned, the fugitive entirely failed to perceive Excalibur, and indeed ran right underneath him on its way to cover. Excalibur was so unstrung by this adventure that he ran back to where he had left Eileen and the Curate.

They were sitting side by side upon the grass, and the Curate was holding Eileen's hand.

Excalibur advanced upon them thankfully, and indicated by an ingratiating smile that a friendly remark or other recognition of his presence would be gratefully received. But neither took the slightest notice of him. They continued to gaze straight before them, in a mournful and abstracted fashion. They looked not so much *at* Excalibur as *through* him. First the hare, then Eileen and the Curate! Excalibur began to fear that he had become invisible—or at least transparent. Greatly agitated, he drifted away into a neighbouring plantation, full of young pheasants. Here he encountered a keeper, who was able to dissipate his gloomy suspicions for him without any difficulty whatsoever.

But Eileen and the Curate sat on.

“A hundred pounds a year!” repeated the Curate. “A pass degree, and no influence! I can’t preach, and I have no money of my own. Dearest, I ought never to have told you.”

“Told me what?” inquired Eileen softly. She knew quite well, but she was a woman; and a woman can never let well alone.

The Curate, turning to Eileen, delivered himself of a statement of three words. Eileen’s reply was whispered *tu quoque*.

“It had to happen, dear,” she added cheerfully, for she did not share the Curate’s burden of responsibility in the matter. “If you had not told me, we should have been miserable separately. Now that you have told me, we can be miserable together. And when two people who—who——” She hesitated.

The Curate completed the relative sentence. Eileen nodded her head in acknowledgment.

“Yes; who are—like you and me, are miserable together, they are happy! See?”

“I see,” said the Curate gravely. “Yes, you are right there. But we can’t go on living on a diet of joint misery. We shall have to face the future. What are we going to do about it?”

Then Eileen spoke up boldly for the first time.

“Gerald,” she said, “we shall simply have to manage on a hundred a year.”

But the Curate shook his head.

“Dearest, I should be an utter cad if I allowed you to do such a thing,” he said. “A hundred a year is less than two pounds a week.”

“A lot of people live on less than two pounds a week,” Eileen pointed out longingly.

“Yes, I know. If we could rent a three-shilling cottage, and I could go about with a spotted handkerchief round my neck, and you could scrub the doorstep, *coram populo*, we might be very comfortable. But the clergy belong to the black-coated class, and people in the lower ranks of the black-coated class are the poorest people in the whole wide world. They have to spend money on luxuries—collars, and charwomen, and so on—which a working-man can spend entirely on necessities. It wouldn’t merely mean no pretty dresses and a lot of hard work for you, Eileen. It would mean

Starvation. Believe me, I know! Some of my friends have tried it, and I know!”

“What happened to them?” asked Eileen fearfully.

“They all had to come down in the end—some soon, some late, but all in time—to taking parish relief.”

“Parish relief?”

“Yes. Not official, regulation, rate-aided charity, but the infinitely more humiliating charity of their well-to-do neighbours. Quiet cheques, second-hand dresses, and things like that. No, little girl, you and I are too proud—too proud of the Cloth—for that. We will never give a handle to the people who are always waiting to have a fling at the improvident clergy—not if it breaks our hearts we won’t!”

“You are quite right, dear,” said Eileen quietly. “We must wait.”

Then the Curate said the most difficult thing he had said yet.

“I shall have to go away from here.”

Eileen’s hand turned cold in his.

“Why?” she whispered; but she knew.

“Because if we wait here, we shall wait for ever. The last curate in Much Moreham—what happened to him?”

“He died.”

“Yes—at fifty-five; and he had been here for thirty years. Preferment does not come in sleepy villages. I must go back to London.”

“The East End?”

“East or South or North—it doesn’t signify. Anywhere but West. In the East and South and North there is always work to be done—hard work. And if a parson has no money and no brains and no influence and can only work—run clothing-clubs and soup-kitchens, and reclaim drunkards—London is the place for him. So off I go to London, my beloved, to lay the foundations of Paradise for you and me—for you and me!”

There was a long silence. Then the pair rose to their feet, and smiled upon one another extremely cheerfully, because each suspected the other (rightly) of low spirits.

“Shall we tell people?” asked the Curate.

Eileen thought, and shook her head.

“No,” she said. “Nicer not. It will make a splendid secret.”

“Just between us two—eh?” said the Curate, kindling at the thought.

“Just between us two,” agreed Eileen. And the Curate kissed her, very solemnly. A secret is a comfortable thing to lovers, especially when they are young and about to be lonely.

At this moment a leonine head, supported upon a lumbering and ill-balanced body, was thrust in between them. It was Excalibur, taking sanctuary with the Church from the vengeance of the Law.

“We might tell Scally, I think,” said Eileen.

“Rather!” assented the Curate. “He introduced us.”

So Eileen communicated the great news to Excalibur.

“You do approve, dear, don’t you?” she said.

Excalibur, instinctively realising that this was an occasion upon which liberties might be taken, stood upon his hind legs and placed his fore-paws on his mistress’s shoulders. The Curate supported them both.

“And you will use your influence to get us a living wage from somewhere, won’t you, old man?” added the Curate.

Excalibur tried to lick both their faces at once—and succeeded.

VI

So the Curate went away, but not to London. He was sent instead to a great manufacturing town in the North, where the work was equally hard, and where Anglican and Roman and Salvationist fought grimly side by side against the powers of drink and disease and crime. During these days, which ultimately rolled into years, the Curate lost his boyish freshness and his unfortunate tendency to put on flesh. He grew thin and lathy; and although his smile was as ready and as magnetic as ever, he seldom laughed.

But he never failed to write a cheerful letter to Eileen every Monday morning. He was getting two hundred pounds a year now, so his chances of becoming a millionaire had been doubled, he said.

Meanwhile his two confederates, Excalibur and Eileen, continued to reside at Much Moreham. Eileen was still the recognised beauty of the

district, but she spread her net less promiscuously than of yore. Girl friends she always had in plenty, but it was noticed that she avoided intimacy with all eligible males of over twenty and under forty-five years of age. No one knew the reason of this, except Excalibur. Eileen used to read Gerald's letters aloud to him every Tuesday morning: sometimes the letter contained a friendly message to Excalibur himself. In acknowledgment of this courtesy Excalibur always sent his love to the Curate—Eileen wrote every Friday—and he and Eileen walked together, rain or shine, on Friday afternoons to post the letter in the next village. Much Moreham post office was too small to remain oblivious to such a regular correspondence.

But the Curate was seen no more in his old parish. Railway journeys are costly things, and curates' holidays rare. Besides, he had no overt excuse for coming. And so life went on for five years. The Curate and Eileen may have met during that period, for Eileen sometimes went away visiting; and as Excalibur was not privileged to accompany her upon these occasions he had no means of checking her movements. But the chances are that she never saw the Curate, or I think she would have told Excalibur about it. We simply have to tell some one.

Then, quite suddenly, came a tremendous change in Excalibur's life. Eileen's brother-in-law—he was Excalibur's master no longer, for Excalibur had been transferred to Eileen by deed of gift, at her own request, on her first birthday after the Curate's departure—fell ill. There was an operation, and a crisis, and a deal of unhappiness at Much Moreham: then came convalescence, followed by directions for a sea voyage for six months. It was arranged that the house should be shut up, and the children sent to their grandmother at Bath.

“That settles everything and everybody,” said the gaunt man on the sofa, “except you, Eileen. What about you?”

“What about Scally?” inquired Eileen.

Her brother-in-law apologetically admitted that he had forgotten Scally.

“Not quite myself at present,” he mentioned in extenuation.

“I am going to Aunt Phœbe,” announced Eileen.

“You are never going to introduce Scally into Aunt Phœbe's establishment!” cried Eileen's sister.

“No,” said Eileen, “I am not.” She rubbed Excalibur's matted head affectionately. “But I have arranged for the dear man's future. He is going to visit friends in the North. Aren't you, darling?”

Excalibur, to whom this arrangement had been privately communicated some days before, wagged his tail and endeavoured to look as intelligent and knowing as possible. He was not going to put his beloved mistress to shame by admitting to her relatives that he had not the faintest idea what she was talking about.

However, he was soon to understand. Next day Eileen took him up to London by train. This in itself was a tremendous adventure, though alarming at first. He travelled in the guard's van, it having been found quite impossible to get him into an ordinary compartment—or rather, to get anyone else into the compartment after he had lain down upon the floor. So he travelled with the guard, chained to the vacuum brake, and shared that kindly official's dinner.

When they reached the terminus there was much bustle and confusion. The door of the van was thrown open, and porters dragged out the luggage and submitted samples thereof to overheated passengers, who invariably failed to recognise their own property and claimed someone else's. Finally, when the luggage was all cleared out, the guard took off Excalibur's chain and facetiously invited him to alight here for London town. Excalibur, lumbering delicately across the ribbed floor of the van, arrived at the open doorway. Outside upon the platform he espied Eileen. Beside her stood a tall figure in black.

With one tremendous roar of rapturous recognition, Excalibur leaped straight out of the van and launched himself fairly and squarely at the Curate's chest. Luckily the Curate saw him coming.

"He knows you all right," said Eileen with satisfaction.

"He appears to," replied the Curate. "Afraid I don't dance the tango, Scally, old man. But thanks for the invitation, all the same!"

Excalibur spent the rest of the day in London, where it must be admitted that he caused a genuine sensation—no mean feat in such a *blasé* place. In Bond Street the traffic had to be held up both ways by benevolent policemen, because Excalibur, feeling pleasantly tired, lay down to rest across the narrowest part.

When evening came they all dined together in a cheap little restaurant in Soho, and were very gay—with the gaiety of people who are whistling to keep their courage up. After dinner Eileen said good-bye, first to Excalibur and then to the Curate. She was much more demonstrative towards the former than the latter, which is the way of women. Then the Curate put

Eileen into a taxi, and having, with the aid of the commissionaire, extracted Excalibur from underneath—he had gone there under some confused impression that it was the guard's van again—said good-bye for the last time; and Eileen, smiling bravely, was whirled away out of sight.

As the taxi turned a distant corner and disappeared from view, it suddenly occurred to Excalibur that he had been left behind. Accordingly he set off in pursuit. . . .

The Curate finally ran him to earth in Buckingham Palace Road, which is a long chase from Soho, sitting upon the pavement, to the grave inconvenience of the inhabitants of Pimlico, and refusing to be comforted. It took his new master the best part of an hour to get him to the Euston Road, where it was discovered that they had missed the night mail to the North. Accordingly they walked to a rival station and took another train.

In all this Excalibur was the instrument of Destiny, as you shall hear.

VII

The coroner's jury were inclined at the time to blame the signalman, but the Board of Trade Inquiry established the fact that the accident was due to the driver's neglect to keep a proper look-out. However, as the driver was dead, and his fireman with him, the Law very leniently took no further action in the matter.

About three o'clock in the morning, as the train was crossing a bleak Yorkshire moor seven miles from Tetley Junction, the Curate suddenly left the seat upon which he lay stretched, dreaming of Eileen, and flew across the compartment on to the recumbent form of a stout commercial traveller. Then he rebounded on to the floor, and woke up—unhurt.

“'Tis a accident, lad!” gasped the commercial traveller, as he got his wind back.

“So it seems,” said the Curate. “Hold tight! She's rocking!”

The commercial traveller, who was mechanically groping under the seat for his boots—commercial travellers always remove their boots in third-class railway compartments upon night journeys—followed the Curate's advice, and braced himself with feet against the opposite seat.

After the first shock the train had gathered way again—the light engine into which it had charged had been thrown clean off the track—but only for a moment. Suddenly the reeling engine of the express left the metals and

staggered drunkenly along the ballast. A moment later it turned right over, taking the guard's van and the first four coaches with it, and the whole train came to a standstill.

It was a corridor train; and unfortunately for Gerald Gilmore and the commercial traveller, their coach fell over corridor side downwards. There was no door upon the other side of the compartment—only three windows, crossed by a stout brass bar. These windows had suddenly become skylights.

They fought their way out at last. Once he had got the window open the Curate experienced little difficulty in getting through; but the commercial traveller was corpulent and tenacious of his boots, which he held persistently in one hand while Gerald tugged at the other. Still he was hauled up at last, and the two slid down the perpendicular roof of the coach on to the permanent way.

“That's done, anyway,” panted the bagman, and sitting down he began to put on his boots.

“There's plenty more to do,” said the Curate grimly, pulling off his coat. “The front of the train is on fire. Come!”

He turned and ran. Almost at his first step he cannoned into a heavy body in rapid motion. It was Excalibur.

“That you, old friend?” observed the Curate. “I was on my way to see about you. Now that you are out, you may as well come and bear a hand.”

And the pair sprinted along the line towards the blazing coaches.

It was dawn—grey, weeping, and cheerless—on Tetley Moor. Another engine had come up behind to take what was left of the train back to the Junction. Seven coaches, including the lordly sleeping-saloon, stood intact; the other four, with the engine and tender, lay where they had fallen—a mass of charred wood and twisted metal. A motor-car belonging to a doctor stood in the roadway a hundred yards off, and its owner, together with a brother of the craft who had been a passenger in the train, were attending to the injured. There were fourteen of these altogether, mostly suffering from burns. These were made as comfortable as possible in the sleeping-berths, which their owners had vacated. Under a tarpaulin by the side of the permanent way lay three figures which would never feel pain again.

“Take your seats, please!” said the surviving guard in a subdued voice. He spoke at the direction of a big man in a heavy overcoat, who appeared to

have taken charge of the salvage operations. The passengers clambered up into the train.

Only one delayed. He was a long, lean young man, black from head to foot with soot and oil. His left arm was badly burned, and seeing a doctor disengaged at last he came forward to have it dressed.

The big man in the heavy overcoat approached him.

“My name is Caversham,” he said. “I happen to be a director of the Company. If you will give me your name and address, I will see to it that your services to-night are suitably recognised. The way you got those two children out of the first coach was splendid, if I may be allowed to say so. We did not even know they were there.”

The young man’s teeth suddenly flashed out into a white smile against the blackness of his face.

“Neither did I, sir,” he said. “Let me introduce you to the responsible party.”

He whistled. Out of the grey dawn loomed an eerie monster, heavily singed, wagging its tail.

“Scally, old man,” said the Curate, “this gentleman wants to present you with an illuminated address. Thank him prettily!” Then to the doctor. “I’m ever so much obliged to you; it’s quite comfortable now.”

He began stiffly to pull on his coat and waistcoat. Lord Caversham, lending a hand, noted the waistcoat, and said quickly:

“Will you travel in my compartment? I should like to have a word with you, if I may?”

“I think I had better go and have a look at these poor folk in the sleeper first,” replied the Curate. “They may require my services—professionally.”

“At the Junction, then, perhaps?” suggested Lord Caversham.

But at the Junction the Curate found a special waiting to proceed north by a loop line; and being in no mind to receive compliments or waste his substance on a hotel bill, departed forthwith, taking his charred confederate, Excalibur, with him.

But Fortune, once she takes a fancy to you, is not readily shaken off, as most successful men are always trying to forget.

A fortnight later Lord Caversham, leaving his hotel in a great northern town—he combined the misfortunes of being both a director of the railway company and a Cabinet Minister, and had spent a harassing fortnight attending inquests and explaining to fervent young counsel why he had not been present upon the footplate of the engine supervising the driver and fireman at the time of the accident—encountered an acquaintance whom he had no difficulty whatever in recognising.

It was Excalibur, jammed fast between two stationary tram-cars—he had not yet shaken down to town life—submitting to a painful but effective process of extrication at the hands of a *posse* of policemen and tram-conductors, shrilly directed by a small but commanding girl of the lodging-house drudge variety.

When this enterprise had been brought to a successful conclusion, and the congested traffic moved on by the overheated policemen, Lord Caversham crossed the street and tapped the damsel upon the shoulder.

“Can you kindly inform me where the owner of that dog may be found?” he inquired politely.

“Yass. Se’nty-one Pilgrim Street. But ’e won’t sell ’im.”

“Should I be likely to find him at home if I called now?”

“Yass. Bin in bed since the eccident. Got a nasty arm.”

“Perhaps you would not mind accompanying me back to Pilgrim Street in my car.”

After that Mary Ellen’s mind became an incoherent blur. A stately limousine glided up: Mary Ellen was handed in by a footman, and Excalibur was stuffed in after her, in instalments. The grand gentleman entered by the opposite door and sat down beside her; but Mary Ellen was much too dazed to converse with him.

The arrival of the equipage in Pilgrim Street was the greatest moment of Mary Ellen’s life. After the grand gentleman had disappeared within the dingy portals of Number Seventy-one in quest of Mr. Gilmore, Mary Ellen and Excalibur remained in the street, chaperoning the chauffeur and footman, and keeping the crowd at a proper distance.

Meanwhile, upstairs in the first floor front, the Curate, lying in his uncomfortable flock bed, was saying:

“If you really mean it, sir——”

“I do mean it. If those two children had been burned to death unnoticed I should never have forgiven myself, and the public would never have forgiven the Company.”

“Well, sir, as you say that, you—well, you *could* do me a service. Could you possibly use your influence to get me a billet—I’m not asking for an incumbency: any old curacy would do—a billet I could marry on?” He flushed scarlet. “I—we have been waiting for a long time now.”

There was a long silence, and the Curate wondered if he had been too mercenary in his request. Then Lord Caversham asked:

“What are you getting at present?”

“Two hundred a year.”

This was about two-thirds of the salary which Lord Caversham paid his chauffeur. He asked another question, in his curious, abrupt, staccato manner:

“How much do you want?”

“We could make both ends meet on three hundred. But another fifty would enable me to make her a lot more comfortable,” said the Curate wistfully.

The great man surveyed him silently—wonderingly, too, if the Curate had known. Presently he said:

“Afraid of hard work?”

“No work is hard to a man with a wife and a home of his own,” replied the Curate with simple fervour.

Lord Caversham smiled grimly. He had more homes of his own than he could conveniently live in, and he had been married three times. But even he found work hard now and then.

“I wonder!” he said. “Well, good afternoon. I should like to be introduced to your *fiancée* one day.”

He walked briskly down the stairs and into the street. Mary Ellen, frustrating the footman, darted forward and flung open the door of the car with a magnificent flourish.

Excalibur, mistaking her intention, and anxious to oblige, promptly crawled in.

IX

A tramp opened the Rectory gate and shambled up the neat gravel walk towards the house. Taking a short cut through the shrubbery he emerged suddenly upon a little lawn.

Upon the lawn a lady was sitting in a basket-chair, beside a perambulator, whose occupant was slumbering peacefully. A small but intensely capable nursemaid, prone upon the grass in a curvilinear attitude, was acting as a tunnel to a young gentleman of three who was impersonating a railway-train.

The tramp approached the group and asked huskily for alms. He was a burly and unpleasant specimen of his class—a class all too numerous on the outskirts of the great industrial parish of Smeltingborough.

The lady in the basket-chair looked up.

“The Rector is out,” she said. “If you will go into the town you will find him at the Church Hall, and he will investigate your case.”

“Oh, the Rector is out, is he?” repeated the tramp, in tones of distinct satisfaction.

“Yes,” said Eileen.

The tramp advanced another pace.

“Give us half a crown,” he said. “I haven’t had a bite of food since yesterday, lady. Nor a drink neither,” he added humorously.

“Please go away,” said the lady. “You know where to find the Rector.”

The tramp smiled unpleasantly, but made no attempt to move.

The railway-tunnel rose abruptly to its feet, and remarked with asperity:

“Now then, pop off!”

Even this had no effect. The lady looked up again.

“You refuse to go away?” she said.

“I’ll go for half a crown,” replied the tramp, with the gracious air of one anxious to oblige a lady.

“Watch baby for a moment, Mary Ellen,” said Eileen.

She rose, and disappeared into the house, followed by the gratified smile of the tramp. He was a reasonable man, and knew that ladies do not wear

pockets.

“Thirsty weather,” he remarked affably.

Mary Ellen, keeping one hand upon the shoulder of Master Gerald Caversham Gilmore and the other upon the edge of the baby’s perambulator, merely chuckled sardonically.

Next moment there came the sound of footsteps round the corner of the house, and Eileen reappeared. She was clinging with both hands to the collar of an enormous dog. Its tongue lolled from its great jaws, its tail waved menacingly from side to side; its mighty limbs were bent, as if for a spring. Its eyes were half closed, as if to focus the exact distance.

“Run!” cried Eileen to the tramp. “I can’t hold him in much longer!”

This was true enough, except that when Eileen said “in” she meant “up.”

But the tramp did not linger to discuss prepositions. There was a scurry of feet; the gate banged; and he was gone.

With a sigh of relief Eileen let go of Excalibur’s collar. Excalibur promptly collapsed upon the grass and went to sleep again.

I

MISS PHYLLIS ETHERINGTON, conscious of a sudden chilliness in her toes, crossly drew those extremities into a less adventurous position and endeavoured to recompose herself to slumber. But she was aware, even in the semi-stupor in which she lay, of a certain element of disturbance in her surroundings. Her pillow felt extremely hard, and the sun appeared to be streaming through her cabin skylight with unusual ferocity. Had she overslept herself, she wondered? How about breakfast? She must have lain long. Had she been called? Certainly she was beginning to feel thoroughly restless. Something rigid and unyielding was pressing against her ribs. A book, perhaps: she was in the habit of reading late in bed and dropping off to sleep, the volume under perusal usually being retrieved somewhere in the neighbourhood of the hot-water bottle in the morning. Should she make an effort now, or—the sluggard's inevitable alternative—give herself just five minutes longer?

The question was settled for her. Her toes were once again sending up signals for help, and their appeal was backed ten seconds later by a sudden splash of water, which broke over the sleeper's feet and deluged her to the knees.

Miss Etherington sat up suddenly, to realise that she had mistaken her whereabouts. It was a dream reversed. Instead of tumbling out of fairyland to wake up in bed, she had tumbled out of bed to wake up in fairyland.

She was sitting upon a sunny shore—a concave arc of shelving yellow sand, with blue and white wavelets lazily rolling up and down the declivity. One of these broke gently over her bare feet for the third time.

Woman-like, she took a lightning inventory of her costume—and gave a little gasp of dismay. Her toilet presented the appearance of having been begun in haste and not finished at all. Her long hair, dank but luxurious, flowed down to her waist. A saxe-blue serge skirt fluttered round her bare ankles. Her most adequate article of attire was a cork life-belt, fastened round her quilted dressing-gown. She was stiff and aching in every limb.

She remembered all now. The yacht—the tropical hurricane—the grinding crash in the dead of night—the trampling of feet overhead and the

hoarse shouting of men—the heeling decks and flapping ropes—a pair of hands which had hurried her along the sloping alleyways and passed her down into a heaving cockle-shell—finally, the great green wave which had swung up out of the darkness and fallen upon them all and carried her down, down, down, until she lost consciousness. And here she was, cast up and alive upon a warm sandy beach. The life-belt was responsible for that, she supposed. She had no recollection of having put it on, though. Probably the hands which hurried her on deck had attended to that. There was a number on it: *S. Y. Island Queen, R. Y. S.—State-Room No. 3*. The number of her state-room was seven, so this could not be the belt which she had noticed rolled up in a rack above her berth, lazily wondering if she would ever need it.

Then, as her senses adjusted themselves, came the inevitable inquiry: “Where were the others? Her host, that cheerful, kindly old nobleman, was he gone? What a death for a man reputed to know the Pacific as most amateurs know the Solent! And the Arthur Denholms? And Colonel Shiell? And Margaret Alderson? And”—Miss Etherington’s exquisite features hardened for a moment—“Leslie Gale?”

Then her face softened again. Death closes all accounts. Leslie Gale, lying peacefully in twenty fathoms of blue water, could never again do anything to increase or diminish the sum-total of his account with her—an account opened, run up, audited, and found incorrect in every possible way within a brief but extremely stormy period of three weeks. That vendetta was at an end, anyway.

Why had she come to dislike him so intensely? she wondered. Was it because he had asked her to marry him? Apparently not; for in that case she should at this moment be cherishing the bitterest feelings towards some seventeen other gentlemen, mostly of blameless character and antecedents, who had at various periods mooted the same proposition. Was it because he had proposed to her after an acquaintance of three days? No; one man had done so after one ball, and she had felt rather flattered. She had disliked Leslie Gale from the moment of their first meeting. He had not treated her with the respect—that is, the servility—to which she was accustomed. She objected also to the manner in which he had treated his dismissal. True, he had not behaved violently or idiotically, like most of the others. On the contrary, he had exhibited most exasperating detachment of mind about it, and had talked—no, *chatted* to her about herself in a manner which she resented very much. He had appeared almost sorry for her.

“You are in a difficult position,” he said musingly, at that point in their interview at which a right-minded lover would have departed, with drawn

features, into the night. “You are a girl with brains and character—and a bit of a spoiled child into the bargain. You cannot love a man who is your mental and moral inferior, and you are too opinionated and conceited to give in to your superior. So you fall between two stools.”

At this she had been unable to resist the temptation of a crushing retort.

“Are you my superior?” she rapped out.

“Yes.”

Joy! He had fallen into the trap.

“Then”—maliciously—“why don’t you subdue me?”

On paper, there was no answer to this question; but this bumptious young man had replied without hesitation:

“Because you won’t stand your ground. You will run away.”

“Why should I run away—from you?” inquired Miss Etherington icily.

“Because,” replied Mr. Gale, “you are afraid of me.”

“Indeed?”

“Yes.”

“Then you think you will subdue me?”

“No,” he said frankly—“I don’t. You won’t give me the chance. Modern civilisation deprives man of many of his weapons. If we were shut up together on a desert island, or if we had lived in the cave-dwelling period _____”

“You would have subdued me with a flint axe, I suppose,” said Miss Etherington scornfully.

“No, not at all. There would have been no need. If I had wanted you I should have used the flint axe to settle the pretensions of your other suitors, and then picked you up and carried you off.”

“It is possible,” said Miss Etherington gently, “that I might not have come.”

“Yes, you would. You would have come gladly, knowing that the best man had got you; and that is all a woman really cares about.”

“If you honestly believe that,” replied Miss Etherington almost compassionately, “all I can say is that your intelligence is even more unformed than I suspected. When you have seen a little more of the world

you will realise that mankind has progressed beyond the schoolboy attitude towards life. Women are now free agents.”

“Yes. And I’m not sure,” remarked the experienced Mr. Gale, “that there are as many happy marriages under the new system as the old. Women are notoriously bad judges of a man. I shall watch your future career with interest, Miss Etherington—interest and apprehension. In matters of the heart I mistrust your judgment.”

He rose.

“Now,” he said, “if you would like to have the last word you had better say it at once; because it is getting late, and the rest of the party may be wondering what you and I are discussing under the lee of the chart-house.”

At this Miss Etherington had risen from her seat and sailed silently and majestically aft.

That was a fortnight ago. Since then, in the constricted space of a yacht, friction had been inevitable. Miss Etherington at first made an attempt to avoid Mr. Gale’s society, but relinquished this on being taunted with “running away.” So she changed her tactics, and treated Mr. Gale with excessive sprightliness in public and cold disdain in private. Here she was more successful. Gale’s flippant and philosophical detachment did not wear well. He maintained a careless and semi-humorous pose for about a week, and then one evening, under the baneful influence of a full round moon, suddenly crumpled up and descended to sentimental entreaty. Miss Etherington, perceiving that he had delivered himself into her hands, let him run on for nearly ten minutes, and then gave free rein to a rather exceptional talent for biting sarcasm. Gale’s amorous expansiveness collapsed like a punctured balloon at the first stab; and feeling hot and foolish and being a man, he lost his temper, and said things which should not be said to a lady, however provoking.

Then followed seven days of open hostility. Finally one night, when the indefatigable Mrs. Arthur Denholm organised a dance on the deck under the awning, Leslie Gale, who hated feuds, summoned his entire stock of common-sense and courage, and asked Miss Etherington for a waltz.

He met with a flat refusal, for which he was fully prepared. He persisted.

“Nonsense!” he said. “Come on! Just a little turn! It will do us both good,” he added meaningly.

Without further entreaty he placed an arm round Miss Etherington’s slim waist, and trundled her unresisting but unresponsive form twice round the

deck. Then, a little blown by the considerable exertion involved, he paused, and remarked cheerfully:

“That was splendid!”

Miss Etherington swiftly released her waist from his arm, and crossed the deck to where one Ommaney, a callow and cub-like member of the company, was lolling against a stanchion.

“Billy dear,” she said, with an entrancing smile, “will you dance with me?”

Billy, much flattered, complied.

An hour later Miss Etherington, on her way to bed, found her path barred by Mr. Leslie Gale, who was standing at the foot of the companion. His face was white, and his teeth chattered gently—but not with cold or fear.

“Let me pass, please,” said Miss Etherington, rather nervously.

“I only wanted to say,” answered Mr. Gale in a voice which Miss Etherington had never heard before, “that I think you are the most ill-bred and detestable girl I have ever met. You may pass now.”

That was last night—say twelve hours ago. And now Leslie Gale was dead, lying with the wreck of the yacht deep down beside the coral reef that had wrecked them. Dead! And so were the others, to all seeming. She gazed round—at the horse-shoe curve of the little bay; at the palm-covered slopes behind her; at the boiling surge outside the bar. Was she utterly alone? She was a plucky young woman, and declined to be frightened until she was sure.

She sprang resolutely to her feet and set out inland. Not far off uprose a little hill. From the summit of this she could survey her kingdom and take an inventory of its possibilities. She was not beaten yet. Her pulse beat high. Her small bare toes resolutely crimped the sand.

Meanwhile, behind an adjacent sandhill, following the movements of his beloved with breathless interest, lay Mr. Leslie Gale. He chuckled gently. His chief asset in life—some people considered it a liability—was a strong if somewhat untimely sense of humour. Not even a recent escape from a watery grave could damp his enjoyment of the situation. He sat up in his rapidly drying pyjamas, and slapped himself feebly.

“My sainted aunt!” he murmured brokenly. “I shall have to get a flint axe!”

II

Miss Etherington, white-lipped and struggling gamely with the terrors of utter loneliness, lay face downward upon a patch of coral sand. She had completed her survey of the island, which was not much larger than a couple of full-sized golf-courses; and lo! it was her exclusive property. There were no habitations, and no inhabitants. She lay very still, holding herself in. Once or twice her shoulders heaved.

Suddenly, like music from heaven, the sound of a discreet and thoroughly British cough fell upon her ears, and in a moment the cobweb of terror which was beginning to enshroud her senses was swept away. Hardly believing her good fortune, she sprang up, tossed back her hair from her eyes—and found herself face to face with Mr. Leslie Gale.

“Oh!” she gasped. “You?”

“Yes—just me!” he replied. “There is nobody else.”

“And are all the others——?” She pointed to the tumbling seas outside the bar.

“I don’t know,” replied Gale, interpreting the question. “Very likely most of them got away in the lifeboat. You were in the cutter, you know.”

“If they escaped, wouldn’t they have landed here?” said the girl doubtfully.

“I’m not so sure. That squall which struck us was the tail-end of a cyclone. They may have been swept out to sea. In fact,” he added, covertly regarding Miss Etherington’s white face and troubled eyes, “I am *sure* they were. I saw them get clear away myself. Anyhow, they are not here. I have been all over the island to see.”

“Are there any traces?”

“Yes, but not of human beings. Chiefly spars and gratings. I collected all I could: they may be useful for—domestic purposes.”

It was not, perhaps, a very happy way of putting it. Miss Etherington flushed, and demanded:

“What do you mean?”

“I mean what I say. We may have to stay here for months. Are you an expert in household management? Can you tend the fireside, while I labour to keep the home together?”

“I *can't* live here alone with you for months,” cried the girl desperately.

“I am afraid it can't be helped,” said Mr. Gale. “We may get taken off by some passing vessel, but for the present you must be content to live the life of a cave-woman.”

Miss Etherington caught the allusion, and her spirit responded instantaneously to the implied challenge.

“First find your cave!” she replied disdainfully.

“By the greatest luck in the world,” announced Mr. Gale calmly, “I have already done so. Come and see.”

He led the way along the sea-shore, eager to exhibit his discovery, Miss Etherington rebelliously following. Already, she reflected, primitive man was asserting himself: in a procession of two she walked in the rear.

“Presently he will expect me to fetch and carry,” she said to herself. “Let him dare!”

The cave lay close to the water's edge, in a tiny cove facing south. It ran back some fifteen feet into the heart of a lofty rock, and was floored with white coral sand, warm and dry beneath the rays of the noonday sun which streamed in through the doorway.

“Somewhere to sleep, at any rate,” commented Mr. Gale cheerfully. “But what chiefly concerns me at present is the discovery of something to eat. Come and find coconuts.”

Once more the procession moved off, its order unaltered. A coconut palm was speedily found, and Mr. Gale embarked upon a brief gymnastic display, which presently furnished them with a supply of solid and liquid refreshment of which both our islanders stood in considerable need.

“This landscape,” said Gale, as he sat contentedly sunning himself after the fashion of man when fed, “reminds me of North Berwick Links, with a few palms dotted about and no tourists. There is Point Garry.” He indicated the little promontory in which their cave was situated.

“Have you climbed to the top yet, partner?” he continued.

“No,” said Miss Etherington shortly; “I have not.”

“Well, you shall,” said Mr. Gale kindly. “We may see things from there which have hitherto escaped our notice. No good sitting here moping!”

With great energy he led the way to Point Garry and scaled the heights, assisting his companion from time to time.

“We will now scan the horizon,” he announced, when they reached the top. “I think that is what Robinson Crusoe would have done under the circumstances. No—nothing! Nothing to be seen but those big rocks jutting up out of the water over there. I noticed them this morning. They look like a row of teeth, don’t they?” he inquired chattily.

“I fail to observe any resemblance,” replied Miss Etherington.

“No? Well, I was always quick at noticing things from a child,” said Mr. Gale, with unimpaired *bonhomie*. “We are not all blessed with good imagin——. Hallo! what’s that?” He seized the girl’s arm in unaffected excitement, and pointed.

“You are holding my arm,” said Miss Etherington coldly. “Let go, please!”

Mr. Gale had already done so, in order to make a pair of binoculars of his hands.

“Do you see something projecting up between the two middle teeth?” he asked. “I think—I *think*—yes, it is—the bow of a ship! It must be the yacht. It *is* the yacht! I can see the top of her funnel. She must have grounded there. I was right. It was a cyclone. The wind has been playing a perfect game of rounders with itself.”

“Do you think there is anyone on board?” asked Miss Etherington, suddenly hopeful. After all, a steward or a coal-trimmer would be something with which to dilute Mr. Gale. Another woman seemed too much to expect.

“I doubt it, but I will see,” said Mr. Gale.

“How?”

“I am going to swim out.”

“All that way?”

“Yes; not more than half a mile, I fancy.”

“Supposing there are——”

Miss Etherington paused, suddenly remembering that the man beside her was unworthy of solicitude.

“Sharks—eh? Perhaps, but I must risk it. If I meet one I will make a noise like a company promoter, and he’ll merely bow respectfully. Do you know what that old hull means to us? Blankets, tools, food! Perhaps they have left a boat on board.”

“Can you swim half a mile?” inquired Miss Etherington.

“It is just about my limit,” confessed Mr. Gale frankly, “but I can try.”

“Would you”—Miss Etherington wavered between common humanity and a feminine desire not to offer anything which could be construed into encouragement—“care to have my cork-jacket?”

“If you are *quite* sure you won’t catch a chill without it,” replied Mr. Gale tenderly.

He proceeded to buckle on the jacket, apparently oblivious of a look which to a thinner-skinned man would have made drowning seem an easy death, and scrambled over the rocks to the water’s edge. He poised himself upon a convenient taking-off place.

“Back to tea!” he cried, and disappeared with a splash. It is not easy to dive cleanly in a cork jacket.

Presently he reappeared, and struck out boldly in the direction of Double-Tooth Islet. Miss Etherington, seated upon the summit of Point Garry, her round chin resting on her hands, followed the course of his black head as it slowly forged its way across the limpid channel. Many thoughts passed through her mind. On the one hand, she hated Mr. Leslie Gale to the fullest extent of a nature more than usually well endowed for the purpose. On the other, she knew that there were sharks in these seas—she had seen them. Even now she could descry in the wake of Mr. Gale a tiny black dot which might or might not be the dreaded triangular fin. She closed her eyes, and kept them tightly shut for more than half an hour.

When she opened them, a figure, silhouetted against the skyline upon the summit of Double-Tooth Islet, was triumphantly semaphoring safe arrival. Miss Etherington did not reply. Instead, she rolled gently over on to her side in a dead faint.

After all, as she argued to herself when she came to, she had had a most exhausting twenty-four hours, and her sole diet had been a portion of cocoanut.

Mr. Gale returned more expeditiously than he had set out, adequately clothed and propelling the yacht's dinghy, which was loaded to the water's edge with miscellaneous stores.

"Help me to unload these things, quickly," he called to Miss Etherington, "and carry them up to the cave. I must go out to the yacht again before she slips off."

"Will you take me with you this time?" asked Miss Etherington.

"Why?"

"I want some things out of my cabin," was the prim reply.

"I'm afraid you haven't got a cabin any more," said Gale. "The stern half of the ship is under water, and I'm salving all I can from the forward part. However, I will select a wardrobe for you from what is available. I always had great natural taste."

He paddled away so quickly that Miss Etherington had no time effectively to ignore this last pleasantry. When Mr. Gale returned an hour later he found her still sitting beside the heap of stores on the shore.

"The yacht is lifting with the swell," he announced. "She is just hanging on by her eyebrows now. Rolled over fifteen degrees a minute ago. Gave me a nasty turn, I can tell you, down in the lazarette grubbing for tinned sardines—for you. They are rather a favourite delicacy of yours, aren't they? Hallo! Why haven't you carried up some of these stores? Tired?"

Miss Etherington, who had been rehearsing her part for this scene for the past hour, replied icily:

"I am not accustomed to be ordered about."

Gale, who was lifting a heavy box out of the boat—the carpenter's tool-chest—laid down his burden and sat on it.

"Insubordination? H'm—a serious matter!" he observed. "We must hold a court-martial this evening." He rose, and continued: "As you don't appear inclined to assist me to furnish the Home, perhaps you will kindly repair to the Home itself. I will carry this case up for you, and you shall unpack it. Then you can make the place snug with a few deft feminine touches. When I have finished my day's work I shall expect to find my slippers toasting at the fender. That is always done, I believe. Do not butter them, though, or Darby will have a few words to address to Joan. You will find me a fearful domestic tyrant."

Miss Etherington, dimly wondering whether this excursion into the realms of humour masked a threat or merely indicated mental vacuity of the hollownest type, rose from her seat and departed in the direction of the cave. But she did not halt there. Instead, she climbed to the summit of Point Garry, and there sat for a full hour surveying the sunset with an expression upon her features for which a competent under-nurse would have prescribed just one remedy.

The red-hot coppery ball of the sun dropped into the sea so suddenly that one almost expected to hear it sizzle, and the warm darkness of a tropical night rushed down from the heavens. Stars sprang out upon the velvety sky.

“Partner!” called a voice from below.

“I won’t—I *won’t!*” muttered the girl to herself between her clenched teeth.

There was a pause, and then she heard the feet of Mr. Gale climbing the rocky path which led to her eyrie. Presently his head appeared above the edge.

“Shall I bring your supper up to you, or will you come down to it?” he inquired. “I may mention that there is an extra charge for serving meals above stairs. Your food will cost you more, so to speak.”

Miss Etherington was in no mood for badinage of this kind.

“I will come,” she said stonily.

A bright fire was burning at the mouth of the cave, and a stew of a primitive but inviting character was bubbling in an iron pot hung over the blaze. Crates and cases had been piled into a neat rampart round their demesne. Over the cave mouth itself Mr. Gale had hung a stout curtain of sailcloth.

“Be seated, Miss Etherington,” said Mr. Gale. “That is your place.”

He pointed to a seat upon the sand, fashioned out of boat cushions propped against the base of the rock.

Miss Etherington obeyed.

“This is a one-course dinner,” continued Mr. Gale in deprecating tones, “but I have no doubt that when you take matters in hand you will be able to turn out something more pretentious. What will you drink? I have a bottle of brandy, which had better be reserved for medicinal purposes, and a dozen stone ginger, which I have retrieved from the wreck at great personal risk,

knowing it to be a weakness of yours. We must not be reckless about it. An occasional bottle on special occasions—birthdays and Christmases. I think to-night comes under the head of special occasions. Say when!”

Babbling in this light-hearted strain, Mr. Gale proceeded to do the honours of the feast, incidentally making a hearty meal himself. Miss Etherington ate nothing to speak of.

When he had finished, Leslie Gale punctiliously asked for permission to smoke, and lit his pipe.

“I wonder how long half a pound of tobacco will last me?” he mused, puffing comfortably. “A month, perhaps, with care. How ripping the moon looks on the water!”

Miss Etherington did not reply. Her eyes were set. Gale stood up.

“Bed-time,” he announced. “You are tired. Come and see your room.”

He lit a candle and screwed it into the neck of a bottle. The flame hardly flickered in the soft air.

“Please walk in,” he said, holding back the sailcloth flap.

Miss Etherington obeyed, mechanically.

In one corner of the cave Gale had constructed a sleeping-place of blankets and boat-cushions. On a convenient ledge lay a tin basin; beside it stood a bucket of fair water. Even soap was there. A deal chest served for chair and wardrobe.

Leslie Gale held the candle aloft.

“What do you think of me as an upholsterer?” he asked with pride. “I will see about electric bells and a hot-water tap in the morning.”

Miss Etherington made no reply.

Gale set down the candle on the ledge.

“Is there anything else I can do for you in here?” he asked.

“No, thank you.”

“Quite sure? It is the last time of asking.”

Struck by a curious note in his voice, the girl looked up suddenly.

“Why?” she said.

Their eyes met. Mr. Gale's, which were usually remarkable only for a self-satisfied twinkle, were grey and steely.

"Because," he said slowly, "I do not intend to invade your privacy again. Hereafter this cave is *yours*—utterly and absolutely—to withdraw to whenever again you feel inclined, as you did to-day, to doubt my ability to behave like a gentleman. Good-night!"

He turned towards the curtained doorway.

"Where—where are you going to shelter?" inquired a low voice behind him.

"On the beach—between a couple of oyster-shells!" he replied. "Good-night!"

A childish and flippant rejoinder, the reader will admit, utterly spoiling what might have been a dignified—nay, heroic—exit from the cave. But Leslie Gale was never one to let the sun go down upon his wrath, or mistake the theatrical for the dramatic.

IV

Miss Etherington awoke next morning to find the sun beating upon the sailcloth curtain. Half-dazed, and failing for a moment to realise her surroundings, she uttered a stifled cry.

A shadow fell upon the curtain.

"Shriek once for the Boots, twice for the chambermaid, three times for the waiter," advised a cheerful voice. "Breakfast is served."

Ten minutes later Miss Etherington found herself, subdued but hungry, partaking of fresh fish fried in oatmeal.

"Any amount of nourishment to be had for the asking over there by those rocks," said the *chef*. "It's lucky. We have enough tinned stuff to last us for months; but tinned turkey and tinned plum-pudding both taste very much alike after a few weeks; so these little fellows"—he helped himself to another fish—"will serve to drive away monotony. Have some cocoa?"

"I hate cocoa," replied Miss Etherington, with a return of her old petulance. Gale's assumption that they were settled upon the island for life angered her, as usual.

“Members,” gabbled the incorrigible Mr. Gale, “are requested not to chastise the club servants personally, but to enter all complaints upon the backs of their bills, which will be considered by the Committee at its next session. But I am sorry you don’t like cocoa. I will try and find some coffee for you. I am going to make a final trip to the yacht after breakfast.”

“Is she still there, then?”

“Yes, I have been out already this morning. I don’t think the old thing will hang on much longer, though. There is a heavy swell outside. By the way, do you know why Robinson Crusoe was not alone when he landed on his island? Give it up? Because he found a heavy swell on the beach and a little cove running up the sand. . . . No?”—as Miss Etherington remained quite impervious to this outrage. “Well, perhaps not! It might go better with a larger audience. It used to be received with rapture in the schoolroom at home. I thought perhaps—however, to resume. Is there anything else you require before the yacht goes under?”

“Yes—hairpins,” said Miss Etherington unexpectedly.

“I’m *afraid* not,” said Gale. “The only cabins not under water by this time are the engineers’, and engineers always wear their hair bobbed, as you know. But really”—he respectfully scrutinised his companion’s tumbled mane—“it looks very nice as it is.”

Miss Etherington, upon whom last night’s lesson had not been wasted, smiled, for the first time since their landing; and Mr. Gale was conscious deep down in his heart, which possibly was not so light as his tongue, of a tiny thrill of satisfaction and relief. Was this peace—or merely an armistice?

“I must go now,” he said. “After that we will formally annex our kingdom and draw up a constitution.”

“You are sure it is quite safe on the yacht?” asked Miss Etherington rather anxiously, staring under her hand at the lazy swell beyond the rocks.

“I will take great care of myself,” said Mr. Gale in soothing tones. “Don’t be anxious.”

“But I *am*,” said Miss Etherington warmly.

“This is most gratifying,” murmured Mr. Gale.

“If you were drowned,” explained Miss Etherington, “I should probably starve; and in any case I should have to do all the cooking and washing-up myself.”

Apparently it was only an armistice.

Still, when Mr. Gale returned half an hour later with a boat-load of what he described as “comforts,” he found that his companion had cleared away the breakfast and made their encampment tidy.

He made no comment, but summoned a council of two to discuss the situation. He pointed out their probable position upon the chart.

“We seem to be a long way from anywhere,” said the girl dismally.

“We are,” said the Job’s Comforter beside her; “and what is more, we are a long way from any steamer route. Still, you never know. Luckily we have a spring of water and plenty of tinned food, not to mention fish and products of the soil. We might catch a turtle, with luck, and perhaps I shall find something to shoot. Now, supposing I do the hunting and fishing and general hew-wood-and-draw-water business, will you undertake the cooking and general housekeeping?”

Miss Etherington nodded.

“We must build a little wooden hut,” continued Gale, with all the enthusiasm of a small boy playing at Red Indians. “I can sleep in one half and keep the stores in the other. A sort of lean-to. We will regularly *organise* this island before we have done with it! I wonder, now, about clothes. What we have on won’t last for ever. It’s a pity your cabin was under water, or I might have salvaged a regular wardrobe for you. Number Seven, wasn’t it?”

Miss Etherington nodded.

“By the way,” she asked, “what was yours?”

“Number Three. Why?”

“Oh, nothing.”

“Well, as for clothes,” continued the indefatigable Mr. Gale, “if we haven’t got them we must make them. Can you cut out?” he inquired sternly, regarding his companion with the austere air of a Dorcas Society secretary.

“Don’t you think,” interposed Miss Etherington dryly, “that you are taking rather too much thought for the morrow—not to speak of the day after to-morrow? May I make a suggestion?”

“By all means,” said Mr. Gale indulgently.

“Let us go and look round for passing ships,” said Miss Etherington.

The organiser, a trifle dashed, rose and meekly followed practical Eve to the summit of the rock. But there were no ships.

Mr. Leslie Gale turned severely upon his companion.

“You see?” he said. “Twenty minutes wasted! And life is so short. Let us return and make plans.”

Miss Etherington calmly followed him down again.

Still, her suggestion was not without effect. A clause was inserted in the constitution of their kingdom to the effect that Gale should climb Point Garry (as they agreed to call the headland) twice daily, at dawn and sundown, and search the horizon for passing vessels, Miss Etherington performing the same duty at other times throughout the day, during her companion’s absence at the chase.

The rest of that morning was occupied with what is usually known as “settling in,” a process which appears to be as inevitable to castaways in the South Pacific as to semi-detached suburbanites much nearer home. At midday Miss Etherington dished up her first meal, at which, pleasantly tired, they lay side by side upon the warm sand and conversed quite amicably. Both realised simultaneously that there is something very uniting in working to retrieve a joint disaster. With a single impulse Mr. Gale edged a little nearer to Miss Etherington, and Miss Etherington edged a little farther away from Mr. Gale.

Thus Nature, who sets the dockleaf beside the nettle, adjusts the fine balance of sex-department.

When they had eaten, Leslie Gale hauled the dinghy into a shady patch of sand and proceeded to invert it over a blanket.

“What are you doing?” inquired Miss Etherington, wiping a plate.

“I propose to take a siesta,” said Mr. Gale. “I have been working like a coolie since four o’clock this morning. I made two trips before you were up, and I am done to the world. I advise you to retire to your cave of harmony and do likewise. We must keep ourselves fit, you know, and—and—be merry and bright. I only wish,” he added awkwardly, “that you could have found yourself in more congenial company.”

Then he crawled hurriedly under the dinghy’s protecting shade, and rolled himself up in the blanket.

Left to her own devices, Miss Etherington, in obedience to an idea which had been obtruding itself upon her for some hours, entered the cave and

inspected her cork-jacket, which lay neatly rolled up upon a ledge. Upon its outer surface, as already related, was neatly stencilled the legend, *S. Y. Island Queen, R. Y. S.—State-Room No. 3.*

Very slowly and reflectively Miss Etherington rolled up the jacket and put it back upon its ledge. Then, quitting the cave, she climbed up upon Point Garry and listlessly scanned the horizon.

She returned an hour later. The expression upon her features would have been ascribed by an expert in physiognomy to the workings of a guilty but unrepentant spirit.

Presently she awoke Mr. Leslie Gale, and set before him an evening meal whose excellence she did her best to discount by a display of cold aloofness which would have blighted the appetite of a less determined optimist.

V

“My hole, I think,” said Mr. Gale.

“Well,” remarked Miss Etherington with asperity, “if lizards are going to lie across the line of my putt on *every* green, I don’t see how you can help winning a hole occasionally.”

“These things will happen on sporting courses,” said Mr. Gale sympathetically. “Still, you could have taken advantage of the by-law which says that lizards may be lifted or swept aside (but not pressed down) without penalty. Now for Point Garry! You get a stroke here. All square and one to play.”

They stood upon the seventeenth green of the island golf-course. Their clubs were two home-made instruments of the hockey-stick variety, their equipment being completed by a couple of solid but well-gnawed indiarubber balls, which had been employed upon the yacht to afford recreation and exercise to their hostess’s terriers. It was five o’clock in the afternoon. Supply, as represented by Mr. Gale, the purveyor, having temporarily satisfied Demand, as represented by Miss Etherington, the housekeeper, with sufficient comestibles and combustibles for the next twenty-four hours, the pair were indulging in a little exercise before proceeding from labour to refreshment.

The golf-course was an abiding joy. It had been opened with much ceremony a fortnight ago, Miss Etherington driving off the first ball from the

first tee, and Mr. Gale gallantly retrieving the same from the Pacific Ocean. There were eighteen holes, ranging from five to seventy yards in length, and the course abounded in natural hazards of the most diverse description. There were no caddies, but, as Mr. Gale remarked, a caddy when you possess only one club looks ostentatious.

The golf-course is a characteristic product of British occupation of alien territory. John Bull, we all know, has a weakness for descending casually upon the unappropriated spaces of the earth, the fact that they do not strictly belong to him being, in his view, fully balanced by the fact that he causes them to prosper as they have never prospered before. If you make a desert, he argues, blossom like the rose, what does it matter whose desert it was previously? His methods of procedure seldom vary, whether he be an official man-in-possession or a younger son in search of a career. Having adjusted the local constitution to his satisfaction, he sets to work to assist the slightly flustered inhabitants to make the place pay. After that he lays out a golf-course.

There being no inhabitants upon the island, and consequently no laws to adjust, our friends had been able to get to work on the golf-course at once. Their new life had altered them surprisingly little. After three months of a semi-savage existence, so far from reverting to the service of primitive Nature, they had adapted Nature to the requirements of modern society and turned the island into a very fair imitation of a fashionable health-resort. Had they been of another caste—say, the mechanical—they would have impressed their mark in another fashion none the less indelible. There would have been waterwheels, mills, and sluices. Being of the class called leisured, accustomed to extract as much enjoyment from life as possible and on no account ever to worry about anything, they had settled down, in one of Nature's most typical strongholds, to the nearest approach they could compass to the careless artificial life that they were accustomed to live. And so powerful are use and wont, that these two unruffled Britons bade fair to expel Nature from her own stronghold. Cave man and cave woman they certainly were not yet. They were members of a class which has always been carelessly indifferent to outside influences, and does not easily change its habits or mode of speech. Consequently the island had not barbarised them. They were gently denaturalising the island.

Mr. Gale took the eighteenth hole in a perfect nine, Miss Etherington's ball overrunning the green and taking refuge in a lie with which only a corkscrew could have coped. The victor having offered to the vanquished

the insincere condolences usual upon such occasions, the pair sat down to enjoy the afternoon breeze.

“What is for dinner to-night?” inquired Mr. Gale.

“Turtles’ eggs, fried sardines, biscuits, and bananas,” replied Miss Etherington. “It’s the last tin of sardines but one.”

“Oh! How are the stores in general lasting out?”

“There seems to be plenty of most things. We were rather extravagant at first, but since you developed into such a mighty hunter——”

“And you into such a nailing housekeeper——”

“We have become almost self-supporting.”

At this fulsome interchange of compliments the pair turned and smiled upon one another.

“And we seem to thrive on it,” said Mr. Gale complacently. “I must have gone up a stone in weight, and I feel as skittish as a young unicorn. You look pretty fit, too.”

He turned and surveyed his companion. She was wearing the smart blue skirt in which she had landed on the island, sadly frayed and bleached, but still bearing the *imprimatur* of Hanover Square, together with a flannel cricket-shirt. Round her neck was knotted a coloured handkerchief. Her feet were bare. The hairpin difficulty had never been overcome, and Miss Etherington usually kept her rippling mane plaited into a convenient pigtail. That appendage having developed a habit at the end of a full swing of dealing its owner a severe buffet in the face, it was Miss Etherington’s custom when playing golf to gather her locks into a heap upon the top of her head, and confine the same within a coloured headband, after the fashion of the stage brigand. Just now she was unfastening the knot of this contrivance.

Mr. Gale, discoursing at ease upon diet and hygiene, suddenly tripped in his speech, for without warning a soft wavy cascade fell about the girl’s shoulders. Through the glistening veil he could descry the droop of her lashes and the curve of her cheek. His tongue began to frame silent phrases about the tangles of Neæra’s hair, and his heart beat foolishly. Of late he had become increasingly conscious of this weakness—nay, vice. Common decency seemed to forbid such sentiments towards an unprotected female. But——

“Thank you,” said Miss Etherington frigidly, “I am glad you think I am putting on flesh; but you need not look at me like that. This is not Smithfield

Market.”

Mr. Gale’s attack of sentimentality passed hastily.

“Do you know,” he said, “that we have been in this island for three months?”

“Have we?” replied Miss Etherington. “It seems longer,” she added untruthfully.

“And I don’t think,” pursued Mr. Gale, “that we have made the most of our opportunities.”

Miss Etherington scented danger, but could not forbear to inquire:

“In what way?”

“Well,” replied Mr. Gale, “look at the things Robinson Crusoe did. He built a boat——”

“We have a boat already,” remarked matter-of-fact Miss Etherington.

“Yes, that *is* a bit of a hardship,” agreed Mr. Gale. “Then, didn’t he teach a parrot to talk? Couldn’t we——”

“There are no parrots on this island,” replied Miss Etherington gently.

“Quite true, but you haven’t grasped the principle of what I am driving at. Here we are, living on a desert island, and so far we haven’t done anything that two people couldn’t have accomplished by going for a picnic up the Thames. I even shave. We eat food out of tins; we do a little bathing and fishing in the morning, and play golf in the afternoon, and sit about in the evening and say how jolly it must be in Town just now. It seems to me that we are out of the picture somehow. We ought to be a little more primitive—barbaric. Do you follow me?”

“No,” said Miss Etherington. “In my opinion really nice people continue to behave just as nicely on a desert island as on a yacht.”

“But don’t you think,” continued Mr. Gale perseveringly, “that we might train two goats to play bridge with us, or teach a turtle to sing, or something? Then we should feel that we were getting back to Nature—quite biblical, in fact. ‘The voice of the turtle is heard in the land,’ and so forth.”

“If you are going to talk nonsense,” said Miss Etherington, “I will go and get dinner ready.”

“When we got away from here,” continued the imaginative Mr. Gale, “we could take the little troupe with us, and earn an honest living on the

music-hall stage. I once saw some performing seals at the Palace. I should think performing turtles would get quite as big a salary; and then when the public got tired of them we could sell them to the Lord Mayor for soup. That is what is known in commercial circles as a by-product.”

He ran on, and Miss Etherington watched him stealthily through her lashes. A man and woman, however antipathetic, cannot consort together upon an uninhabited island for three months without gaining some insight into one another’s characters and motives. Miss Etherington knew the meaning of this performance. Mr. Gale suspected her of low spirits, and was endeavouring to cheer her up. He was not doing it very well; but after all, good intentions count for something, and Miss Etherington felt grateful, despite herself. She continued to watch him furtively. He was a presentable youth. He sat beside her, healthy, clean-cut, and bronzed, wearing a ragged flannel shirt and an old pair of duck trousers. His hands were clasped about his knees; his eyes were fixed on vacancy; and his tongue wagged unceasingly. A hare-brained and occasionally bumptious young man, but a man for all that.

Suddenly Gale inquired:

“I say, what do you think of me now? Has your opinion of me altered at all, after three months of me neat?”

The next moment he repented of his inquiry. He had firmly resolved never to embarrass the girl in this fashion so long as they remained on the island together. Now he had broken his word to himself. Miss Etherington’s rippling mane had been a little too much for his fortitude.

But the girl did not appear offended. She replied quite simply:

“Yes, I have. I think you have behaved very courageously in the face of all our difficulties——”

“Self-preservation is the first——” began Gale awkwardly.

“—And I have to thank you for a good deal as well,” continued Miss Etherington, with slightly heightened colour. “Besides saving my life—you *did*, you know: that was your life-jacket I was wearing that morning—you have behaved very courteously and honourably to me ever since we found ourselves here; and I am grateful.”

This was well spoken. Mr. Gale was silent for a moment. Then he inquired:

“You did not expect such behaviour from me?”

“I—I never doubted you after the first few hours,” said Miss Etherington in a low voice. “I was not quite myself then. Do you forgive me? You will, won’t you?”

Their eyes met. Mr. Gale’s suddenly blazed.

“When you look at me and talk to me like that,” he almost shouted, “I could—— Ahem! Ha! H’m! Quite so! *My error!*”

Miss Etherington’s cheeks were crimson.

“I think I will go and see if there are any ships going past,” he concluded lamely.

“Perhaps it would be as well,” agreed Miss Etherington. “Don’t be late for dinner.”

Mr. Gale turned to go, and then paused.

“You don’t ask me,” he remarked in a slightly injured voice, “whether my opinion of *you* has changed at all.”

“No,” replied Miss Etherington. “There is no need.”

“I wonder what in thunder she meant by that,” mused the harassed Mr. Gale, as he scrambled up Point Garry. “Heaven help a man left alone on a desert island with a girl! And I actually thought it would make things easier! Flint axe, and all that. Why don’t I—— Hallo, hallo, hallo! Steady, my boy! Is wisions about?”

He had reached the summit of the bluff. There, two miles to the northward, slipping gently over the rollers under easy sail, he beheld a ship—a three-masted schooner.

VI

For a castaway, hungering for a re-entry into civilisation, Mr. Gale’s subsequent behaviour was peculiar.

He began by staring stockishly at the passing vehicle of deliverance, evidently the prey of conflicting impulses. Beside him lay a neatly piled heap of firewood, collected for such a contingency as this. His eye fell thereon. He regarded it absently, and then raised his eyes to the schooner, which went about and began to slant towards the island.

Mr. Gale, instead of shouting or semaphoring, dropped suddenly to his knees and crept furtively back whence he came, until he arrived at the edge

of the little plateau, to a position which commanded their cave and encampment. Miss Etherington, from whose eyes the schooner was screened by the intervening bulk of Point Garry, was diligently preparing dinner. Mr. Gale gazed down upon her long and intently. Her sleeves were rolled up for culinary duties, and her arms looked very round and white. Snatches of a song she was singing floated upwards to his ears. Mr. Gale's pulse quickened; his purpose hardened; his conscience died within him.

"I *can't* do it," he muttered—"I *can't!*" A box of matches dropped from his nerveless fingers. . . .

Presently he crawled upon his hands and knees—he would not even risk the exposure of his figure against the skyline now—to a position from which he could see the schooner. The breeze had freshened; she had gone about again, and was bowling away from the island.

VII

An hour later they met for their evening meal. With characteristic fidelity to the customs of their order they invariably dressed for dinner—that is to say, Miss Etherington put on shoes and stockings and changed from her cricket-shirt to a silk jumper, while Mr. Gale attired himself in a suit of comparatively white drill which had once been the property of the chief steward of the yacht.

They were very silent that night. Mr. Gale's conscience was coming to life again. It was true that he loved Miss Etherington—far more, indeed, than that usually astute maiden could have gathered from the somewhat flippant and informal manner in which he had declared his passion—but this fact, urged his conscience, did not give him the sole right to her society. He had robbed her of her birthright that afternoon: he had deliberately cut her off from a return to the great world and all it held for her. He had behaved like a cad, he felt, and being an honourable young man, he was filled with a desire to make confession.

"You are not very amusing to-night," remarked Miss Etherington suddenly.

For purposes of playful badinage, there was a tacit understanding between them that everything which went wrong on the island—from cyclones to a fit of the dumps—was Leslie Gale's fault; and that long-suffering young man was growing accustomed to being treated as something between a sinful little schoolboy and a rather incompetent court jester.

“Am I to sparkle?” he inquired meekly.

“Yes.”

“I don’t feel quite up to it.”

“Well, flicker, anyhow!” urged Miss Etherington.

Mr. Gale reflected, and replied:

“I can’t do it to-night. That moon makes me humpy. Look at it! What a whopper!”

Both sat silently surveying the great silvery disc which hung above them, turning their little cove, with its yellow sand and green-clad rocks, into an etching in black and white. There was a long silence, broken by a tremulous sigh from Miss Etherington. Evidently the moon was beginning to exercise its usual pernicious influence.

“To-night’s Great Thought—what is it?” inquired Mr. Gale encouragingly.

“I was thinking,” said Miss Etherington dreamily, “what a good thing it would be if all the people who disliked one another for no reason at all could be dropped down together upon an island like this for a month or two.”

Mr. Gale, knowing full well that a woman never embarks upon a general statement without intending it to have a personal application, carefully turned this sentiment over in his mind.

Then suddenly he glowed duskiely.

“You mean,” he said unsteadily, “that most people improve on acquaintance?”

“Yes,” said Miss Etherington deliberately—“I do.”

There was a pause. Then Gale continued:

“Even—people like me?”

Miss Etherington nodded.

“Even people like you,” she said. “And,” she added unexpectedly, “even people like me.”

Mr. Gale glanced at her, then stirred in his seat and took a mighty breath of resolution.

“You could *never* be improved upon by an acquaintance, however long.”

Then he heaved a great sigh of relief. An Englishman does not say these things easily—that is, when he means them.

Miss Etherington subjected her companion to a fleeting but adequate scrutiny, and saw that he was once more at her mercy. But she felt no desire to wither him up—to annihilate the flank thus rashly exposed. Three months of life in the open had entirely cured her of conceit and petty meanness. Still they had not eradicated in her the natural predilection of a woman for dallying with the fish upon the hook.

“I wonder if you mean that,” she remarked in a voice which, though in form severe, in substance invited further folly on the part of Mr. Gale.

“Yes, I do mean it,” he replied, without heat or passion. “But I am not going to pursue the subject, because I have no right. I have just done you a serious wrong. I want to make confession.”

He turned to her, like a penitent to a shrine.

“This evening,” he said, “when I climbed to Point Garry on my usual excursion, I saw a ship.”

Miss Etherington started, but made no further sign.

“She was quite close,” continued Gale, “and I could have caught her attention by signalling. But—I didn’t! I let her go! There!”

He stood motionless at her feet, awaiting sentence.

Miss Etherington raised her clear grey eyes to his.

“Why did you let the ship go?” she asked.

“Because I love you so,” said Gale simply. “I could not bear to be parted from you, as I knew I should be. It seemed too cruel to bring this life to an end, just as——”

“Just as what?” asked the girl quickly.

“Just as you were beginning to get used to—it,” concluded Leslie Gale, coward.

Miss Etherington was silent for a little time. Then she said:

“You made no attempt to signal?”

“None.”

“Concealed yourself, perhaps?”

Gale nodded miserably, and waited.

Miss Etherington dropped her eyes again, and began to scrutinise the tips of her shoes.

“I wouldn’t worry about it too much if I were you,” she said.

“Why?”

“I saw the ship too,” said the girl demurely.

VIII

They sat on in the moonlight—and on, and on, and on. About half-past ten Mr. Gale had respectfully but firmly taken Miss Etherington’s hand. Miss Etherington had made a half-hearted attempt to withdraw it. Mr. Gale had apologetically but pertinaciously held on. After that they began to talk, and although they had not been out of one another’s company for the best part of three months, not one of the many topics with which they had whiled away that lengthy period intruded itself into the conversation. They seemed to have turned over a new page in the book of life together. Under their eyes it lay, fair, blank, and gleaming with blessed possibilities beneath the rays of a tropical moon. And for the moment they were well content to leave it so. Let to-morrow, with its prosaic meticulous pen and inkhorn, stand far off and wait! There would never be another hour like this.

At last Miss Etherington rose.

“I am sleepy,” she said. “Let me go now.”

Gale held her to him for a moment longer, caressing her loosely-knotted shimmering hair.

“Phyllis!” he murmured reverently, and raised his face skyward, as if to give thanks. From the neighbourhood of his right shoulder there arose a muffled observation. For a moment he failed to take note of it, for he was gaping dumbly over Miss Etherington’s head at the moonlit waters of their bay. Miss Etherington accordingly spoke again.

“I wish,” she murmured—“I wish there were a lot of people to tell.”

“To tell what? That we are”—he coughed nervously—“engaged?”

“Yes. Engaged sounds queer on a desert island, doesn’t it? But when a girl gets engaged she wants to tell *everybody*.”

“That’s strange. When *I* get engaged I feel that the secret is too precious to pass on to anybody. It’s mine! mine! Ours! ours! ‘Ours’—how wonderful

that sounds after years of just ‘mine.’ But”—he brought his gaze back seaward again—“do you really want a crowd of people to tell your news to?”

“Yes, please,” said Miss Etherington meekly.

“Well, shut your eyes, and don’t open them until I tell you.”

Miss Etherington obeyed. Mr. Gale rotated her carefully until she faced the calm, glittering ocean.

“Abracadabra! Likewise what ho! Open your eyes!” he commanded.

Miss Etherington obeyed. There before her in the moonlight, half a mile from the shore, like a misty sea-wraith, floated a great white yacht, drifting to an anchorage. Even as they gazed there was a luminous splash, and the cable rattled out.

IX

They were taken home next day on board the *Morning Star*, brought out to search for them by their host and the other survivors of the wreck.

For many years Mr. Leslie Gale never ceased to bless the three-masted schooner whose passing had been fraught with such uniting consequences. In fact, he exalted that nameless vessel into a fetish, ascribing to it match-making properties bordering upon the supernatural. It was Mrs. Gale who pricked the bubble.

“I wonder, dearest,” observed her husband one day, “if you would have ever found out that you really cared for me if you hadn’t seen that old hooker go sailing by—what?”

“I wonder,” said Mrs. Gale patiently.

“It was lucky,” continued the fatuous Leslie, “that no ship turned up earlier on, before you had acquired a taste for me, so to speak. That would have put me in the cart, wouldn’t it?”

“Would it?”

“Yes. Supposing that it had happened sooner? Supposing, for instance, that after we had been together for a matter of a few hours, instead of a few months, you had climbed Point Garry and seen a ship go sailing by? What then?”

Mrs. Gale arose, and began to put away her work.

“I did,” she said briefly.

I

I FIRST met Mr. Baxter at the fourpenny box outside Mr. Timpenny’s second-hand bookshop in High Street, and was attracted at once by the loving care with which he handled its contents. Dirty and dog-eared as most of them were, he never snatched one up or threw it down, after the common fashion of patrons of inexpensive literature, but would gently extract a more than usually disreputable volume from its heap, blow the dust off, straighten the warped cover, and smooth out the wrinkled pages before dipping into the subject-matter. In fact, the last operation struck me as interesting him least of all.

Becoming aware of my presence, he moved aside with a courtly little bow. He was a dusty old gentleman in a very shabby frock-coat. He looked as if he lived in the fourpenny box himself.

“Am I preventing you from selecting a volume, sir?” he inquired.

I hastened to reassure him. I had no special designs on the fourpenny box, or indeed on any. I was merely idling.

“I am waiting for the chemist to make up a prescription,” I said.

“Then you don’t do your own dispensing, sir?”

“As a rule, yes. I have run out of this particular drug, though. But you know me?”

“Yes, sir; by sight. We do not take long in Broxborough to get to know everyone by sight. You succeeded to Doctor Wiseman’s practice, I think?”

“Yes.”

“A good old man, sir, and a lover of books, like myself.”

“You’re right about yourself,” I said. “You handle a book as I would a delicate patient.”

“A very apt comparison, sir. To me, in a manner of speaking, a book is a human thing. A dilapidated book is a patient; I like to repair its broken back and gum in its loose pages. In fact, the late Archdeacon used to rally me

upon the subject, sir. He insisted that I cared more for a book, as a book, than for what was inside it.”

I ventured, with immediate success, to draw him out upon the subject of the late Archdeacon.

“Archdeacon Belford, sir. He died many years ago, and few remember him now. A great scholar and gentleman. I was associated with him almost continuously in my younger days. It was he who assisted me to found my library.”

“Your library?”

“Yes, sir.” The old gentleman’s mild blue eyes suddenly glowed with pride. “Nothing very pretentious, of course; but I take my little pleasure in it. And it grows—it grows.” He picked a small tattered volume out of the box—it looked like an ancient school prize—and turned down a few dogs’-ears with a distressed expression.

“A sweet little edition,” he said, examining the text, “but small print. I have left my glasses at home. Would you very kindly indicate to me the nature of its contents, sir?”

I read a few lines aloud to him—poetry.

“I don’t know it,” I confessed. “Poetry is not much in my line. Let me look at the title-page. Ah—Robert Southey.”

“I rather thought it was Southey,” said Mr. Baxter immediately.

“I fancy you are more widely read than I am,” I remarked.

“I make a point of reading aloud a passage out of one of my books every day, sir. I acquired the habit under the late Archdeacon. We read together constantly. He had very definite views on the value of reading. ‘A man with books about him,’ he used to say, ‘is a man surrounded by friends far more interesting and distinguished than any he is likely to meet when he dines with the Bishop. A man with a library of his own, however small, is at once a capitalist who can never go bankrupt and an aristocrat who moves in circles to which the common herd cannot penetrate. In other words, a man with a library is a man respected!’ That was why I founded my own, sir. The Archdeacon himself contributed the first few volumes.”

“Is it a large library?” I asked, glancing furtively at my wrist-watch.

“No, sir; of very modest dimensions. But it is sufficiently large to be utilised by nearly all my friends.”

“You lend them books, then?”

“Oh no, sir. I would not do that. My books are everything to me—and you know what book-borrowers are! My friends are welcome to tap my literary resources, but it must be through me as medium.”

“I don’t quite understand,” I said, noting out of the corner of my eye that Mr. Pettigrew, the chemist next door, had emerged from behind the carved wooden screen which masks the mysteries of his dispensing department from the layman’s eye, and was now visible through the shop window, busy with white paper and sealing wax.

“When a seeker after knowledge calls upon me,” explained the indefatigable Mr. Baxter, “I select from my library the appropriate volume and read, or recite, to him such passages as appear to me most applicable to his case. In this way I ensure the safety and cleanliness of my literary property——”

“So here you are! I thought so. Have you been buying another of those dirty things?”

A small, alert, slightly shrewish girl of about fifteen had suddenly appeared from nowhere, and was now transfixing my flinching companion with the eye of the Ancient Mariner.

“Only fourpence, my dear,” replied Mr. Baxter deferentially.

“That’s right. Throw money about!” said the young lady. “Have you *got* fourpence?” she added, with a slight softening of manner.

“Well, to be exact, I rather think all I have at the moment is threepence.”

The Ancient Mariner produced a penny.

“Here you are,” she said, handing him the coin with a not altogether successful attempt at an indulgent smile. “You haven’t bought anything for a fortnight. Go in and pay for it, and then come home to dinner, do!”

“Good morning, Mr. Baxter! How’s the library this morning?”

The chemist was standing in his doorway, with a facetious twinkle in his eye. Evidently Mr. Baxter’s library was an accepted target for local humour.

Mr. Baxter took no notice, but disappeared into the bookshop. Mr. Pettigrew handed me my bottle.

“One of our characters, that old fellow,” he said, with that little air of civic pride which marks the country-townsman booming local stock. “Quite

a poor man; but possesses an extensive library—*quite* extensive. His learning is at the service of his fellow-citizens. He likes to be called The Oracle. Supposing you want to know something about Shakespeare, or Julius Cæsar, or Wireless Telegraphy, or Patagonia, you go to Baxter. You press the button and he does the rest! Lives a bit in the clouds, of course; and I wouldn't go so far as to say that his information is always infallible. In fact"—Mr. Pettigrew tapped his forehead significantly—"his upper storey _____"

"Who made up a wrong prescription, and poisoned a baby?" demanded an acid voice immediately under the humorist's left elbow. He swung round. The small girl, crimson with wrath but with her emotions well under control, stood gazing dispassionately before her, apparently talking to herself.

"Whose wife gave a party," she continued—"and nobody came? Whose daughter wants to marry the curate—and he won't? Who——"

"That'll do," announced Mr. Pettigrew shortly, and retired in disorder into his shop. Simultaneously The Oracle emerged from the bookshop with Robert Southey under his arm, and with a stately inclination in my direction departed down the street, under the grim and defiant escort of his infant guardian.

II

One morning about three months later, my butler, footman, valet-de-chambre, chauffeur, and general supervisor, McAndrew, thrust his head round the dining-room door as I sat at breakfast and announced:

"There a wee boady in the hall."

I have known McAndrew for seven years now, and I understand his vernacular. We met in that great rendezvous of all time, the Western Front, on a day when I took command of a Field Ambulance in which McAndrew was functioning as a stretcher-bearer. When our unit was demobilised in nineteen nineteen, McAndrew came before me and announced that he had relinquished all intention of resuming his former profession of "jiner" in his native Dumbarton and desired henceforth to serve me in the capacity mentioned above for the joint term of our natural lives. I took him on, and he does very well. He has his own ideas about how to wait at table, and his methods with unauthenticated callers are apt to be arbitrary; but he is clean and honest, and—well, he wears a vertical gold stripe on his left sleeve and three ribbons just above his watch-pocket. That is enough for me.

As I say, his vernacular now contains no mysteries for me. So when he made the alarming announcement just mentioned I realised at once that no case of infant mortality had occurred on my premises, but that a person of small stature desired an interview.

“Man or woman?” I asked.

“A lassie.”

“A patient?”

“I couldna say: she wouldna tell me,” replied McAndrew, not without bitterness.

“Bring her in,” I said. Forthwith the Ancient Mariner was ushered into my presence.

“Grampa’s in bed with one of his legs again,” she announced.

I forbore to ask an obvious and fatuous question, and nodded.

“Doctor Wiseman used to attend him,” continued my visitor; “but he didn’t charge him very much—next to nothink, almost,” she added, with a shade of anxiety.

“Is your grandfather insured, or on any club?” I asked. “If so, the panel doctor——”

“No, he isn’t insured, or anything. He’s a gentleman. He has a liberry.”

Toujours the Liberry! “Where does he live?” I inquired.

“Twenty-one, The Common. When can you come?”

“Eleven o’clock.”

“All right. Don’t be earlier than that: I have the room to straighten.”

The home of The Oracle proved to be one of a row—something between a villa and a cottage. The door was opened by my sharp-featured little friend.

“Walk in,” she said—“and wipe your boots.”

Mr. Baxter was in bed in the front parlour. As I had suspected, he had both legs with him—but one of these was inflamed and swollen.

“I always bring him in here when he’s poorly,” explained the granddaughter (whose name I discovered later to be Ada Weeks), “because he likes to be with his old books.” She favoured her patient with an affectionate glare. “He’s half silly about them.”

I attended to the invalid's immediate wants, and then overhauled him generally. He was not what an insurance agent would have termed "a good life." After that, I was introduced to the library, which occupied the wall opposite to the bed. It consisted of a couple of mahogany bookcases, of solid Victorian workmanship, with locked glass doors lined with faded green silk. Ada Weeks produced a key from under her grandfather's pillow and unlocked one of the doors, revealing the books. They were all neatly covered in brown paper. There were no titles on the backs, but each book bore a number, in sprawling, irregular figures.

"There, sir!" announced my patient, with simple pride. "There you behold the accumulated wealth of a man who is just as wealthy as he wishes to be!"

"Rats!" remarked a sharp voice from the recesses of the library; but the old gentleman appeared not to hear.

"It dates from the lamented death of the late Archdeacon. There are a hundred and seventy-nine volumes in all. The little Southey is the last arrival. Show it to us, Ada."

Miss Weeks extracted Volume One Hundred and Seventy-Nine from the lowest shelf, and handed it to the old man. He turned over the pages lovingly.

"Here is the passage which made us acquainted, sir," he said. "A delightful thing." He produced spectacles from somewhere in the bed, adjusted them, and read:

*"My days among the Dead are passed:
Around me I behold
(Where'er these casual eyes are cast)
The mighty minds of old:
My never-failing friends are they,
With whom—With whom——"*

He faltered.

"*'With whom I converse day by day,'*" said Ada Weeks in a matter-of-fact voice. "Don't strain your eyes."

"You are right, my dear," admitted Mr. Baxter, laying down the book. "The type is somewhat small. But this little poem is strangely suggestive of my own condition. It is called *The Scholar*—just about an old man living in the past among his books. I have read it to myself many a time since last I

saw you, sir. Put it back, Ada; and show the Doctor an older friend. Something out of the late Archdeacon's library—say Number Fourteen."

Miss Ada pulled down the volume indicated, blew viciously upon the top edges, and handed it to me. It proved to be part of an almost obsolete Encyclopædia.

"A useful little compendium of knowledge," was Mr. Baxter's comment. "Unfortunately, I have not the set complete—only eight volumes. They go as far as *Pocohontas*. There are four more, really."

"*Prairie Oyster* to *Zymotic*," confirmed the ever-ready Miss Weeks.

"Precisely. You would be surprised at the number of my callers who desire information on matters that come between *Prairie Oyster* and *Zymotic*!" The old gentleman sighed. "But where their requirements are limited to the earlier letters of the alphabet, I can usually find a passage which both interests and enlightens them." He glanced at the number on the back of the book. "This is the first volume of the set: *A—Byzantium*. Many a hungry soul have I fed from it." He turned over the pages. "Addison—Algebra—Archæology—Adenoids. That reminds me, a neighbour is coming in to consult me about Adenoids this afternoon. A mother—a woman in quite humble circumstances. I must look up Adenoids."

"Isn't that rather trespassing on my department?" I asked.

"Oh dear no, sir. All I shall do will be to find the passage relating to adenoids, and read it aloud to Mrs. Caddick."

"Mrs. Caddick? I am treating a child of hers for adenoids at present."

"Quite so, sir. And Mrs. Caddick naturally wishes to know what they are. I shall read to her the scientific definition of the ailment. It is surprising what a comfort that will be to her. Poor soul, she's almost illiterate; and the printed word is a sacred mystery to such!"

"You are an authority on human nature, Mr. Baxter, I perceive."

"You are kind to say so, sir. But I was a mere disciple of the late Archdeacon. It's a strange thing, human nature," he continued pensively. "I have studied it all my life. My recreation is to help it—and it needs all the help it can get. I am at home every evening, and folk look in quite regularly to ask for my guidance on some literary, historical, or scientific point of interest. 'Consulting The Oracle,' they are kind enough to call it. Such visits enable me to gratify at once my hobby and my vanity!" He smiled.

“You have one or two bulky-looking volumes up there,” I said, approaching the bookcase and inspecting the top shelf. “Who is this big fellow—Number Eighty-Seven?”

I half raised my hand; but in a flash Ada Weeks was before me.

“It’s Shakespeare,” she announced, snatching the volume down and holding it to her flat little bosom. “Presentation!”

“Ada is always a little jealous about letting the presentation volumes out of her hands,” explained Mr. Baxter, from the bed. “That book was conferred upon me as a small token of esteem by a certain literary circle in London in which I was interested before I came here, many years ago. Bring it to me, my dear.”

Ada Weeks, with a sidelong and defiant glance in my direction, handed the great book to the old man. He opened it at random, and began to read aloud:

*“This fortress built by Nature by herself
Against infection and the hand of war;
This happy breed of men, this little world;
This precious stone set in a silver sea;
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England.”*

He broke off, and smiled.

“You see I do not need glasses,” he said, “for such a passage as that! I almost know it by heart, although I never possessed the Archdeacon’s astonishing facility in that direction. He was accustomed to commit a passage to memory every day. Put it back, Ada dear.”

Miss Weeks restored the volume to the case, closed the door, turned the key, and faced me with the air of a small but determined hen which has safely shut her chickens into the coop in the very face of an ill-disposed but inexperienced young fox. I took up my hat.

“Good-bye, Mr. Baxter,” I said. “I shall come and see you to-morrow. Don’t let your disciples overture you.”

The old man flushed.

“I thank you for that flattering word, sir,” he said.

Half-way down the street I realised that I had forgotten my stethoscope. Accordingly, I retraced my steps.

I found the front door open. I might have walked in without ceremony; but inspired by a very proper fear of Miss Ada Weeks, I tapped respectfully and waited. There was no response. Presently I became aware of voices proceeding from the front parlour—the door of which stood wide open—just inside the passage. This is what I heard:

“*Adenitis*, and *Adenoid Growths*—that’s the nearest I can find. Which do you want?”

“I think *Adenoid Growths*, my dear. Read it through once, as usual; then again line by line.”

“All right. Pay attention, mind!” said Miss Weeks sharply, and began:

“*Adenoid Growths of the lym—lymphatic tissues of the upper throat occur chiefly in children from four to fourteen. Yes, that’s right: Johnny Caddick is eight. The child breathes through the mouth.—Where do they expect him to breathe through? His ear?—suffers from Nasal Cat—cat something; we’ll call it cater—from Nasal Cater. I wonder how people can write such words, let alone read them!*”

“To me,” said the gentle voice of the old man, “it seems wonderful that they should be able to do either.”

“Listen again,” commanded Miss Weeks, oblivious of a resounding knock from me.

“—*Nasal Cater, and slight deafness; and is stupid and sluggish—this book takes off Johnny Caddick to the life, and no mistake! I wonder what his mother will say—with a cha-rac-ter-is-tic—oh crumbs!—facial expression. Cure is effected by a simple operation of removal. Does that mean his face? A good job if it does! That’s all. Now I’ll learn you it. Adenoid Growths—*”

“*Adenoid Growths; Adenoid Growths; Adenoid Growths—*”

“*Of the lymphatic tissues—*”

I recollected that I had a spare stethoscope at home, and tip-toed down the steps.

III

I learned a good deal about the Baxter *ménage* during the next few weeks, from various sources.

First the Rector, whom I encountered one day paying a parochial call at Twenty-one, The Common. We walked home together.

“He’s a strange old fellow,” said my companion, “and most of his characteristics are derived from imitation, conscious or unconscious, of a stranger old fellow still.”

“The late lamented?”

“Exactly. Old Belford was a bachelor, and lived alone among his books in his house in the Close for nearly forty years. His only companions were an aged cook-housekeeper and Adam Baxter. He died fifteen or twenty years ago, before I came here. He was nearly ninety, I fancy.”

“What was Baxter’s exact status in the household?”

“By his own account, he was the old man’s confidential secretary, amanuensis, and librarian. My own belief is that he cleaned the Archidiaconal boots. Of course he may have been allowed to dust the books in the library too. Anyhow, during his period of service in that household he contrived to amass an enormous quantity of more or less useless book-learning. He is regarded hereabouts as quite a savant. His erudition makes him respected by those who have none, and his library of miscellaneous rubbish gives him the status of a man of property.”

“It’s not all rubbish. He has a Shakespeare and a Southey, at least. He has Jowett’s Thucydides too, he tells me.”

“You’re right: I retract that part. But his library is rubbish, in the sense that it’s an unclassified rag-bag of odds and ends. Still, he’s an enlightened old chap in his way. When he settled down in that little house after old Belford’s death and began to set up as a sort of provincial Socrates, his conversation and library were mainly classical, as you might expect, considering their origin. He would pull down a Homer, or a Herodotus, or a Virgil, and spout to his audience some favourite passage of his late employer.”

“You mean to say he translated from the original Latin and Greek?”

“Ah! That’s what nobody knows. The peculiar thing about Baxter is that though he will read or quote from any book in his library for your delectation, he practically never permits anyone to take the book out of his hands. No human eye, for instance, has ever fallen upon the printed pages of Baxter’s Homer. If it did, I suspect it would find that page printed in good plain English. Pope’s translation, probably.”

“You think he is a fraud, then?”

“Oh bless you, no! I think he is a genuine booklover, and values—in fact lives on—the respect which his literary eminence earns for him in this extremely unliterary township. But candidly I think most of his classical works are common cribs. I have known less pardonable forms of hypocrisy. But I was saying just now he was enlightened. Of late years he has supplemented his Latin and Greek and his poets and historians by scientific and technical literature. People go and consult him about all sorts of modern developments and tendencies now.”

“Adenoids, for instance?”

“Precisely. Well, I turn off here. I am going to pay a call upon a gentleman who made a large fortune out of Civilian War Work of National Importance. *He* has acquired a library, too—quite recently and all at once—beautifully bound in morocco and tree calf. But I doubt if he could quote a single line from a single volume therein. Baxter for me, every time! Good afternoon.”

Secondly, from McAndrew.

“Yon auld felly, Baxter,” he suddenly remarked to me one day while driving me home from a professional round, and passing the door of Number Twenty-one; “he’s real respeckit in the toon. In Scotland, of course, he would be naebody, for every one’s educatit there. But here there’s men making as much as seeven pound a week at the Phoenix Linoleum Works, on the south side, that has read naething since they passed through school but the Sabbath newspapers. They look on Baxter as a kin’ o’ Cyclopedy. *But*—I was in there the other nicht for a bit crack, and I asked him what he thought of Rabbie Burns. *He’d never heard tell of him!* There’s your Oracle!”

“Mr. Baxter is a self-made man of letters,” I said. “He got most of his learning second-hand from the Archdeacon. Perhaps the Archdeacon was not a student of Burns, either.”

The enormity of this suggestion quite paralysed McAndrew for a while. Presently he recovered sufficiently to resume:

“Yon Archdeacon was a doited sort of body. He lived all alone in yon dreich-lookin’ house in the Cathedral Close nigh fufty year. He had naething aboot him but books, and naebody aboot him but an auld wife, Mistress Corby, and Baxter. She’s deid now, but her dochter married on the ironmonger in High Street. It was her was telling me. Mistress Corby did the

beds and the cooking, and Baxter did everything else. He redd up the library, and dusted the books. He carried the coals and sorted the garden as weel. And where do you think the Archdeacon got him?”

“Baxter?”

“Aye. Singin’ in the street! There’s few fowk in this toon ken that, or mind it. But Baxter just drufted into the place one wet day, with the toes stickin’ oot of his boots, and the Archdeacon found him standin’ in the rain and took him intil the hoose and kept him. Twenty-five shillin’ a week he got, with two suits of clothes a year and a bit present at Christmas. He bided there thirty years, and the Archdeacon never repented of his bargain. Good servants is scarce.”

McAndrew paused impressively, to allow this last truth to sink in, and continued:

“I jalouse the way Baxter got on so weel with the Archdeacon was the interest he took in the library. He was never oot of it, unless he was pitten oot. It wasna so much that he would read the books as worship them. He would take them oot and hold them in his hands by the hour, or sit back on a chair and glower at their backs on the shelves. So Mistress Corby’s dochter that married on the ironmonger tellt me.”

“By the way, when did Mr. Baxter’s granddaughter appear on the scene?” I inquired.

“That was long after the old man died. He left Baxter an annuity, with two bookcases and a wheen books to start a library of his ain. Mistress Corby’s dochter says he left him fufty, and Baxter pinched other twenty-five. That was the nucleus, you’ll understand. The rest he has been collecting for himself for many a year.”

“And the granddaughter?” I inquired gently.

“Oh, aye; I was coming to her. She came along about five years ago, not long after the old man had settled into yon wee hoose where he stays now. She just appeared. Naebody could ever find oot where from, although Mistress Corby’s dochter asked Baxter to tea in her own hoose twice and called on him herself three times. Baxter is as close as an oyster, and as for the lassie”—McAndrew shuddered slightly—“she has an ill tongue tae provoke.”

Thirdly, *chez* Baxter.

As already indicated, it was the old gentleman's custom of an evening to receive visitors in the front room and discourse to them on literature, poetry, history, and science. Light refreshments—very light refreshments—were handed round by Miss Weeks; but these were a mere appendage to the literary provender supplied. I formed the habit of joining this symposium upon one evening every week—at first out of idle curiosity (and perhaps with the pardonable desire of indulging in one of the few forms of advertisement open to a struggling physician), but subsequently through sheer interest in the Academy itself and the amazingly sure touch with which the master handled his disciples.

They were a motley crew. There were socially ambitious young shop-assistants, anxious to acquire a literary polish likely to impress the opposite sex. There were artisans who wished to advance themselves in the technique of their profession. There were heavy-handed, heavy-shouldered, rather wistful men, with muscles made lusty by hard physical labour, conscious of minds grown puny and attenuated for lack of intellectual nourishment. There were humble folk with genuine literary leanings, who came to consult Mr. Baxter's poems and essays, and sometimes shyly proffered compositions of their own for perusal and comment. There were men—uneducated men—dimly conscious of the fact that they possessed immortal souls, who had waded into the deep waters of theological speculation, and got out of their depth. For each and all Mr. Baxter had a word of welcome and counsel.

"I am very happy to see you, Mr. Wright. And your friend, Mr. ———? Mr. Dennis. Thank you. We are going to read and discuss a passage from *The Tempest* presently. Shakespeare, you know. Be seated, and my granddaughter will offer you a little refreshment. . . . I have been consulting various authorities on statical electricity for you, Mr. Armitage. I have marked a few passages in my Encyclopædia, Volume Twenty in my library, which seem to me to treat the subject most lucidly. You might also derive some information from the life of Mr. Faraday—Volume Eighteen. My granddaughter will look up the passage for you presently. . . . Ah, Mr. Jobson! How are they down at the factory to-day? You are just in time. We are about to read and discuss a passage from *The Tempest*. Shakespeare, of course. Be seated, pray. . . . For me to read, Mr. Penton? Thank you: that indeed will be an intellectual treat. I will peruse your manuscript at leisure, and comment upon it at our next meeting. . . . The Agnostics still bothering you, Mr. Clamworthy? Well, I am no theologian; but for sheer old-fashioned common sense I don't think you can beat Paley's *Evidences of Christianity*. The late Archdeacon used to say that he always came back to Paley in the

end. Ada, my dear, that passage I marked in Volume Forty-Seven! Now, friends, *The Tempest!*”

After that the Presentation Shakespeare would be opened, and Mr. Baxter would declaim selected passages. His voice was mellow, and his manner ecclesiastical: plainly his whole deportment was moulded, to the last gesture and inflexion, on one unvarying model. A discussion would follow—a quite naïve and rather pathetic discussion, sometimes. Ultimately Mr. Baxter would sum up, generally with extracts from other Shakespearean passages, which he turned up with great readiness and dexterity, rolling them from off his tongue with obvious relish. Occasionally he would ask Ada for some other volume, and read from that. There were great moments when he would actually call for Homer or Horace and, with apologies for rusty scholarship, offer to our respectful ears a quite coherent rendering of some famous passage.

Finally, at a moment selected by herself, the vigilant Ada Weeks would terminate the proceedings with the curt announcement that her grandfather was tired. The precious volumes were locked in the library again, and we were bidden, without ceremony, to say good night to our host and not to bang the street door. Both of which commands we obeyed promptly and reverently, and departed homeward.

IV

Possibly it may have occurred to the reader to wonder whether in a community at once so erudite and progressive as Broxborough—it possesses both a Cathedral Close and a Linoleum Factory, you will remember—there can have been no official alternative to Twenty-one, The Common—no Public Library, no Public Lecture Courses, no Municipal Oracle, as it were.

In truth Broxborough once had all these things. Before the war there existed an institution known as Broxborough Pantheon. Here was an excellent library of reference; lectures and classes, too, were constantly in operation throughout the winter months. In its lighter moments the Pantheon lent itself to whist drives. But the entire building had been destroyed by fire in nineteen fifteen, and had never been rebuilt, for the good and sufficient reason that during those days there were other things to do. After the Armistice money was scarce and rates were high. Moreover, that shrinking sensitive-plant, the British bricklayer, had been instructed by his Union to limit his professional activities to a tale of bricks so tenuous that his labours for the day were completed, without undue strain, by the time that he

knocked off for breakfast. The months passed; such constructive energy as the district could compass was devoted to Government housing schemes, and still the Pantheon lay in ruins.

But one day a man from Pittsburg, who had been born in Broxborough nearly forty years previously and had relinquished his domicile and civil status therein by becoming an American citizen at the age of three, returned, rugged, prosperous, and beneficently sentimental, to revisit the haunts of his youth and refresh his somewhat imperfect memories of his birthplace.

Naturally he found the place profoundly changed. The Cathedral organ-bellows were now inflated by a gas-engine, and the nine-seventeen up train did not start until nine-forty-two. And—where the Broxborough Pantheon had once reared its stucco pseudo-Doric *façade* upon the market-square, there was nothing but an untidy hoarding masking a heap of charred debris and labelled, “*Site of proposed new premises of the Broxborough Pantheon.*” The label appeared to have been there for some years.

John Crake of Pittsburg made inquiries, and the truth was revealed. The old Pantheon had ceased to exist for nearly five years, and the new Pantheon, in the present condition of the rate-payer’s pockets, seemed unlikely ever to exist at all. So John Crake, having pondered the matter in his large and filial heart, put his hand into his own capacious pocket, and lo! the new Pantheon arose. The plasterers had wreaked their will upon the donor’s bank account, and were making sullen way for the plumbers and electricians, about the time when I first encountered Mr. Baxter outside the second-hand bookshop.

And now the building was ready for occupation, and the exact procedure at the opening ceremony was becoming a matter of acute recrimination at the Council meetings. So that genial gossip the Rector informed me, as we encountered one another one afternoon on our professional rounds.

“Things are more or less arranged,” he said—“so far as our city fathers are capable of arranging anything. The place is to be called Crake Hall, which I think is right, and Crake himself is coming over from America for the opening, which I call sporting of him. Old Broxey” (the Most Noble the Marquis of Broxborough, the Lord-Lieutenant of our County) “will perform the opening ceremony. That is to say, he will advance up the steps in the presence of the multitude and knock three times upon the closed doors of the Hall. A solemn pause will follow, to work up the excitement. Then the donor, who will be standing inside, wearing a top-hat for the first time in his life——”

“Rector, I have frequently warned you that your ribald tongue will some day lose you your job.”

“Never mind that. It’s a poor heart that never rejoices, and I am too fat to be serious all the time, anyhow. Well, after the appointed interval of silence, Crake will open a kind of peep-hole in the oaken door, and say: ‘Who goes there?’ or something of that kind. Broxey, if he is still awake, will reply: ‘The Citizens of this Ancient Borough,’ or words to that effect. Then the doors will be thrown open—assuming that they *will* open; but you know what our local contractors are—and Crake will be revealed in his top-hat, and will say ‘Welcome, stranger!’ or ‘Walk right in, boys!’ or ‘Watch your step!’ or something like that, and will hand the key of the Institute to Broxey, who will probably lose it.”

“I see. And then to lunch at the Town Hall, I suppose?”

“Not so fast. Remember this is a Cathedral city: the Dean and Chapter must be given an opportunity to put their oar in. The Dean will now speak his piece, after which I understand that the Choir, who are to be concealed somewhere behind one of the doors, will create a brief disturbance. After that the town will assert itself against the County and the Close.”

“What is their stunt going to be?”

“An Address of Welcome and Grateful Thanks to Crake.”

“That seems reasonable. But who is going to compose it?”

“I have already done so, by request. It is not half bad,” said the Rector modestly.

“Who is going to read it? The Mayor?”

“The Mayor is an imperfect creature, but he possesses one superlative quality: he harbours no illusions about his own ability to grapple with the letter H. He declines to read the Address. Most of the Corporation are in the same boat—though they don’t all admit it.”

“Why don’t you read it yourself?”

“Trades Union rules forbid. If I read it it would be regarded as the propaganda of the Established Church. The forces of Town and Chapel would combine to fall upon me and crush me. No, we must have a citizen—a citizen of credit and renown, locally known and esteemed.” The Rector eyed me furtively. “I suppose *you*, now——”

“Not on your life!” I replied hastily.

“Why not?”

“Well, for one thing I am a comparative stranger: I haven’t been here two years yet. Besides, in opening a literary and intellectual emporium of this kind you want—I have it! The very man!”

“Who?” asked the Rector eagerly.

I told him.

The Rector halted in the middle of the street and shook me by the hand.

“Ideal!” he said. “I’ll fix it with the Council. You go and ask *him*.”

V

I repaired to the home of The Oracle that same evening. It was destined to be a memorable visit.

Something unusual in the atmosphere impressed itself on my senses the moment Ada Weeks opened the door to me. Miss Weeks’s manner could never at any time be described as genial: at its very best it was suggestive of an indulgent sergeant-major. But this evening Ada resembled a small, lean cat, engaged in a rear-guard action with dogs. Her green eyes blazed: one felt that she would like to arch her back and spit.

“Pettigrew and Mould is here,” she said. “Hang up your own hat: I can’t leave them.” And she vanished into the front room.

Messrs. Pettigrew and Mould were a sore trial to Mr. Baxter. They did not consult The Oracle regularly, but when they did they made trouble. Their efforts appeared mainly to be directed towards embarrassing their host by asking frivolous questions, and then humiliating him in the presence of his disciples by the manner in which they received his answers.

The attitude of Mr. Pettigrew, the chemist, was understandable; for he was a mean little man, and jealous. He possessed diplomas and certificates of his own: he was steeped in all the essences of the Pharmacopœia: yet none did him reverence. The townspeople purchased cough mixtures and patent pills from him with no more respect than if they had been sausages or yards of tape. Even when he assumed an air of portentous solemnity and retired behind his carved oak screen with a prescription, most of his customers took it for granted that he filled up the bottle from a water-tap and added colouring matter and a dash of something unpleasant to the taste. Probably they were not far wrong. But wrong or right, it never occurred to

any of them to treat Mr. Pettigrew as an Oracle, or Savant, or Philosopher; and Mr. Pettigrew undoubtedly felt very badly about it.

Mr. Mould was our local undertaker—which was unfortunate, for nature had intended him for a low comedian. Under a professionally chastened exterior he concealed the sense of humour and powers of repartee of a small boy of ten. To him Mr. Baxter, with his studied little mannerisms and his pedantic little courtesies, was fair game.

When I entered the parlour these two worthies were heavily engaged in their favourite sport of philosopher-baiting. The philosopher himself, I noticed, was looking very old and very tired. I had not seen him for a week, and I was secretly shocked at his appearance.

“You’re not looking well,” I said, as I shook hands. “You ought not to be entertaining your friends to-night.”

“Indeed,” replied my host, with the ghost of a smile, “my friends have been entertaining me. Mr. Mould has been amusing us all. Has he not, Ada?”

“If I was his wife,” replied Miss Weeks, with a glare which would have permanently disheartened any comedian less sure of himself than Mr. Mould, “I should die of laughing—at myself!”

This dark saying was accepted by the undertaker as a compliment.

“I certainly venture to claim,” he observed complacently, “that we pulled our respected friend’s leg pretty neatly to-night.” Pettigrew sniggered.

“What was the joke?” I asked, without enthusiasm.

“Well, me and Mr. Pettigrew here,” began the undertaker, “knowing Mr. Baxter’s fondness for giving information and advice, brought him a little poser last time we came here. We asked him if he could find anything in his library about an ancient Greek party called Cinchona. He said he would look Mr. Cinchona up. This evening he had his little lecture all ready for us. Highly enjoyable, it was. Cinchona, it seems, was one of the less-known figures in Ancient Greek Mythology—wasn’t that it, Pettigrew?”

Pettigrew grinned, and clicked. He was an unpleasant-looking creature, with false teeth which did not fit.

“In fact,” continued Mould, with immense relish, “poor old Cinchona was such a little-known figure that most people—common uneducated druggists, like Mr. Pettigrew—thought Cinchona was the name of the bark they make quinine from. Haw, haw, haw!”

The two humorists roared outright this time. Mr. Baxter, with the unruffled courtesy of perfect breeding, smiled again, though I could see he was much put out. Jobson, the heavy-shouldered artisan from the factory, sat gazing at him in a puzzled and rather reproachful manner. One could see that he felt his master *ought* to have known all about cinchona.

“An interesting coincidence,” commented the old man gently. “The drug cinchona is of course well known scientifically; but classically, Cinchona the demi-god is hardly known at all. In fact, he is only mentioned once or twice in the whole of ancient literature. I have been dipping into my Homer”—he indicated the familiar volume in his hand—“and I find——”

“May I look for myself?” asked Pettigrew suddenly; and before even Ada could spring to the old man’s side he had snatched the book and opened it. Baxter put out his hand anxiously.

“Let me find the passage for you, Mr. Pettigrew,” he said. “I do not know whether you are familiar with ancient Greek——”

“No,” said Mr. Pettigrew grimly, looking up from the book, “I am not. But I *am* familiar with modern German. This book is printed in German!”

“The marginal comments are in German, of course,” said the old man quickly. “The thoroughness of German research is proverbial. Give me back the book, pray!” I noticed he was breathing very shortly.

Ada Weeks settled the question by wrenching the volume out of Pettigrew’s hand and locking it into The Library.

“You can go!” she announced. “We only entertain gentlemen here.”

Pettigrew took up his hat: Mould rose and did likewise. The rest of the company fidgeted uncomfortably in their seats. It was a particularly unpleasant moment.

“Good night, Mr. Baxter,” said Pettigrew, moving towards the door, which Miss Weeks was obligingly holding wide open for him. “Sometimes I wonder,” he sniggered, turning again, “whether you are quite as ripe a scholar as you would have some of the less educated people in this town believe.”

“Ripe? He’s over-ripe—rotten!” announced Mould confidently.

Mr. Baxter rose suddenly from his arm-chair.

“Gentlemen,” he said, “you insult me in my own house. It is your privilege to do so. You are my guests——”

I thought it time to interfere. I crossed the room, gently lowered my old friend into his seat again, and turned to the company. They were all on their feet by this time.

“Now look here,” I announced, in what I have always hoped is a breezy voice, “you people really must keep your debates academic. Here you are, all flying straight up in the air over some twopenny-ha’penny point of scholarship, and exciting one of my most valued patients”—I patted Baxter solemnly on the shoulder—“to an attack of insomnia! You mustn’t do it, you know—especially just now!”

“What do you mean, just now?” asked Ada quickly. She shot an apprehensive glance at her grandfather’s drawn features.

“I mean this. You know the opening of Crake Hall takes place on Saturday?”

Everyone looked up, surprised at the diversion.

“Yes: what of it?” said Pettigrew.

“You know that an Address of Welcome and Grateful Thanks is to be read to Mr. Crake by a representative citizen of the town?”

“Yes,” said Pettigrew again; and he said it with an intensity which gave him away badly.

“Well, Mr. Baxter here—our very dear and esteemed friend Mr. Baxter”—I spoke the words deliberately, and felt the old shoulder suddenly stiffen under my hand—“has been unanimously selected by the Council”—I breathed a prayer that the Rector might not have failed me—“to read that Address! That is why I am thoroughly angry with you all for tiring him out with your conundrums. He is not a young man, or a strong man; and I want to have him in first-class trim for his appearance on Saturday. Home to bed, all of you!”

“Outside!” commanded Miss Weeks; and shepherded the entire company into the passage, closing the door behind her.

Baxter and I were left alone. I took my stand on the worn hearthrug, with my back to the fire, lingering over the lighting of my pipe with the uneasy self-consciousness of the Englishman who has just participated in a scene. My old friend’s thin hands were extended upon the arms of his chair; his head was sunk upon his breast. I decided to say something cheerful.

“Well,” I remarked, “I think the Council’s invitation came to you at a very appropriate moment.”

Baxter raised his head, and I noticed that he seemed to have grown many years older.

“I fear you have done me an ill service, sir,” he said. “Unintentionally, of course!” he hastened to add.

“In what way?”

“I cannot accept the Council’s invitation.”

“Why not? I’ll have you fit and well by Saturday.”

“It’s not that, sir. I cannot do it.”

“Why not?”

“Because—because I happen to be an impostor!”

“Oh, come! You must not take things too much to heart. A man can be a sound scholar without knowing very much about Greek or German.”

“It’s not that, sir.”

“What then?”

“I can neither read nor write.”

VI

I mixed a glass of weak whisky and water, and made him drink it. Presently he began to talk—in a low voice, with pauses for breath; but after a while with a flicker of his old graciousness and dignity:

“The late Archdeacon, sir, used to observe that a man should have no secrets from his banker, his lawyer, or his doctor. (He had a great many from all three, but no matter!) I have no banker, and no lawyer; but I have a doctor—a very kind doctor—and I am going to tell him something which it is only fair he should know.

“I was born before the days of Free Education: I was earning my living in the streets of London when Mr. Forster brought in the Bill of Eighteen Seventy. My circumstances were extremely humble. I passed the first years of my life on a canal barge. (My uncle steered the barge. I think he was my uncle.) It is difficult to educate children so reared. They have no permanent place of abode; no particular school-district is responsible for such little vagrants. So I grew up illiterate. My uncle died. I earned my living as best I could. I was strong and active; I engaged in tasks which demanded no

knowledge of letters. I learned to cipher a little in my head and to read the ordinary numerals; but the alphabet remained a mystery to me.”

“Why did you not learn to read and write?”

“I did try. At the age of twenty I determined to master my ignorance. I purchased a primer, and endeavoured to teach myself. But that task was hopeless. I entered a night-school—and they asked me what I wished to study. Languages—Mathematics—Science—Engineering? How could I, a great grown man, tell them that I wanted to learn to read and write? I hurried out of the building.

“Then I married. I married a woman as unlettered as myself. Whom else could I ask? We were happy together, in our humble way. But we had few associates, and such as we had possessed all our ignorance and none of our aspirations.”

“Had you children?”

“One daughter—Ada’s mother. You may depend upon it we sent *her* to school! And she learnt quickly—far too quickly for me. I had cherished a hope that my child and I might commence our education together. But how could the muscle-bound intellect of an illiterate of thirty keep pace with the nimble wits of a sharp little girl?”

The nimble wits of a sharp little girl! Somehow I seemed to recognise that portrait.

“My daughter had passed the goal almost before her father had started. Once more, discouraged and baffled, I relinquished my ambitions: I was a foolish fellow to have entertained them at all. But my child was good to me—very good. Although she possessed neither the art nor the patience to teach me my letters, she discovered in me my one talent—quite a phenomenal aptitude for memorisation. Compensation, probably. If I heard an ordinary newspaper article read over once or twice I could repeat it, word for word, without prompting. And so to satisfy my hungry soul I would beg my little daughter to read aloud to me her school tasks, or her evening lessons—elementary history, geography, and the like. I never forgot them: they were the first real learning I ever possessed. I can repeat them still—and I think they kept me sane.

“My daughter grew up; married; had a daughter of her own; died; and I was alone again. Suddenly I realised that I had passed middle age. I was no longer able-bodied; and I began to realise that when the body begins to fail it is the brain that must carry on. And I had no brain—nothing but a few

instincts and rules of life. They were wholesome instincts and healthy rules of life; but as a means of livelihood they were valueless. I began to slip down. I supported myself by odd and menial tasks: I cleaned knives and boots: I sold newspapers which I could not read: I spent long hours as a night watchman, occupying my mind by repeating to myself passages from my little girl's school-books.

“Then came a hard winter: work was scarce enough for skilled labourers, let alone unskilled. As for the illiterate, there was no market for them at all. I tramped from London to try my fortune elsewhere; and came to Broxborough. I was destitute: I sang in the streets for bread—songs I had learnt by listening in public-houses or at popular entertainments in my younger days. And there the late Archdeacon found me. I was a stranger, and he took me in.” He was silent again.

“He was very good to you?” I said presently.

“He was an angel from heaven, sir!”

“But didn't he teach you to read?”

The old man looked up at me piteously.

“Sir, I never confessed to him that I could not! And he never found me out! Why should he? I was his servant, engaged on purely domestic duties. Such clerical work as dealing with tradesmen involved was attended to by the housekeeper. One day my master asked me if I had read the Prime Minister's speech, and I replied that I never read the newspapers. I intended the statement to be a confession, leading up to a fuller confession; but instead, the good old man took me to mean that I despised politics and journalism and was interested only in philosophy and literature. From that day he admitted me to all the privileges of his literary companionship. His favourite hobby was reading aloud—preferably passages from the Classics—and he had few to read to. None, in fact. I was appointed his audience. Every evening we sat together and he read aloud to me, with every kind of illuminating comment. My peculiar faculty for memorisation, intensified by the absence of any other medium of self-cultivation, enabled me to commit to memory the greater part of what he read and said. At the end of ten years I could quote long passages from most of the standard works of literature. When the dear old man died I was a human fountain of quotations—poetical, historical, philosophical. Just that, and nothing more. Once more I had to make a niche for myself in the world. My accumulated lore was my sole asset. So I took this little house, and set up my useless—because mainly ornamental—little library, and endeavoured to win the respect of my new

neighbours by dispensing an erudition which was in reality second-hand. Second-hand, sir!" He looked up wistfully. "Am I an impostor?"

"All learning is second-hand," I said. "You are not an impostor."

He rose to his feet, and took my hand.

"You have lifted a load from my mind," he said. "Confession is good for the soul. But you will understand now why I cannot deliver that Address."

"Why not?" I repeated. "I will get a copy of it for you, and you can learn it by heart."

"You can do that?"

"Certainly."

The colour came back to his face.

"The time is short," he said eagerly—"very short; and my memory is not what it was; but I will try. Ada shall read it to me, and read it to me, and read it to me, until I am word-perfect! I *will* succeed! It will be wonderful!"

"It will score off Mould and Pettigrew, too," I added spitefully.

But obviously Mr. Baxter was not thinking of Mould or Pettigrew. He was up again in his rightful place, in the clouds.

"It will be my Apotheosis!" he declared; and brought down his feeble hand with a gentle thump upon the table beside him.

"That's right!" said Miss Weeks, entering. "Break all the cups!"

VII

At the Municipal luncheon which followed the inauguration of Crake Hall one chair was vacant; the Mayor, in his opening remarks, referring sympathetically to the fact. Mr. Baxter, to whom had fallen the honour of reading the Address of Welcome to their distinguished guest that morning, had found the strain of the proceedings rather too great for his advanced years, and had reluctantly begged to be excused from participating further in the ceremonies of the day. In short, Mr. Baxter had gone home to bed. Later in the proceedings, the Lord-Lieutenant also alluded to the matter. His Lordship was a statesman of somewhat limited ideas, and it is just possible that he was grateful to have had a topic suggested to him. So he spoke quite feelingly of the chair—the chair which was to have been occupied by "our eminent fellow-citizen Mr. Buxton." It was a cheering and reassuring sign,

he continued, of our national and civic solidity of character and sense of proportion that Broxborough, where to the unseeing eye of the outside world nothing seemed to matter save linoleum, should yet be able amid its manifold industrial activities to produce a man—a man in quite humble circumstances—to whom Linoleum was nothing and Letters everything. Napoleon had called us a nation of shopkeepers; but so long as a commercial community like Broxborough could go on breeding homespun scholars like Mr. Dexter, we as a nation could continue to give the lie to Napoleon. (Loud and prolonged applause.)

Meanwhile the recipient of these testimonials lay a-dying in his own front parlour. Ada Weeks had put him straight to bed there on his return, utterly exhausted, from the Inauguration. All his frail physical powers had been concentrated for three days on making himself word-perfect in the Address—which he had delivered, by the way, flawlessly. Now reaction had come. An hour later, more nearly frightened than I had ever seen her, Ada fetched me.

My patient had just asked me, faintly but fearlessly, one of the last questions that mortal man can ask; and I had given him his answer.

“I am quite ready,” he replied calmly. “I am only seventy-four; but it is well that a man should go at the zenith of his career.”

“Are there any arrangements you would like to make?” I asked. “Any thing you would like to say?”

“Yes. Is Ada there?”

“Of course I am there!” The small, stricken figure crouching on the other side of the bed put out a skinny paw and took the old man’s hand. She held it steadfastly for the rest of the time he lived.

“Would you like to see the Rector?” I asked.

“No, no. I am at peace with God. It is of my little granddaughter that I would speak.” His voice was stronger now. “My annuity dies with me. I have some small savings, which she will receive. But they will not keep her. I shall be grateful if you will exert your influence, sir, in enabling her to go into service.”

“There is a vacancy in my house, if Ada will come,” I said.

“Thank you. Will you go to the Doctor, Ada?”

Ada, with tears running freely at last, nodded in answer; and the dying man proceeded to the business which was ever uppermost in his thoughts.

“Then, sir, my Library.”

“Yes. What are you going to do with it? Leave it to the town?”

“No, no, no, no!” He was strangely emphatic.

“What then?” I asked. I had an uneasy feeling that the Library was going to be bequeathed to me, and I did not want it in the least. But my fears were relieved at once.

“I intend to leave it to Ada—temporarily.”

“Temporarily?”

“Yes. But as she will be an inmate of your household, she will probably desire to take you into her confidence, and possibly avail herself of your assistance.” His voice failed again: his grip on life was relaxing rapidly. Then he recovered himself, and almost sat up. “Will you promise me, sir, to assist Ada to carry out my wishes with regard to the disposal——”

“I promise,” I said. “Don’t exhaust yourself.”

The old man sank back, with a long and gentle sigh.

“Then I die contented, and reassured. Re——” His voice died away again. Then he rallied, for a final effort:

“I have lived respected, I think!”

That was all.

I looked across to Ada, and nodded. Characteristically, she rose from her knees, crossed to the window, and drew down the blind.

VIII

Next morning Ada Weeks and I sat facing one another in my study, across a newly opened packing-case. It contained Mr. Baxter’s Library.

“But why must we?” I asked.

“We needn’t worry why. He said every blessed book was to be destroyed, and that’s all there is about it. Mr. McAndrew is burning rubbish outside; I’ve told him we’ve got some more for him. Let’s get it over, and go back to Grampa—sir,” concluded Ada suddenly, remembering somewhat tardily that she was addressing her employer.

We unpacked the books. First came some musty theological tomes.

“He knew a lot out of them,” remarked Ada. “Used to fire it off at the Rector, and people who didn’t believe in religion, or couldn’t. He picked it all up from his old Archdeacon, though, long before I came to him.”

“When did you come, by the way?”

“Nearly six years ago now. I was living with an aunt. She went and died when I was nine, and Grampa sent for me here. It was me that learned him all his new stuff—science, and machinery, and aeroplanes, and things like that. He didn’t know nothink but Latin and Greek and history and algebra up till then. Here’s the Cyclopædia coming out now. He never used it till I come. He never even knew it was four volumes short until I told him. . . . This next lot is mostly little books he picked up cheap at second-hand places—mouldy little things, most of ’em. Some of them were useful, though. Here’s one—*The Amateur Architect*. It’s queer how fussy people can be about house-planning, and ventilation, and drainage, and things like that, especially when they know they’ve got to live all their lives in a house where they have no more say in the ventilation and drainage than my aunt’s cat! Grampa had to learn nearly the whole of this book, they wanted so many different bits of it. Well, I think we have fuel enough now for a start.”

We staggered into the garden, with arms full, to where McAndrew’s bonfire was burning fiercely. McAndrew himself, having regard to his chronic interest in other people’s business, I had dispatched upon an errand. Soon the Encyclopædia and the theological works were engulfed in flame. Some odd volumes followed. I cremated my old friend Robert Southey with my own hands. This done, we returned to the packing-case and delved again.

“Did Mr. Baxter wish everything to be burned?” I asked. “What about the presentation volumes—the Shakespeare, for instance?”

“They was *all* to be burned,” announced Ada doggedly, lowering her head into the case and avoiding my glance.

“Very well,” I said.

Suddenly Ada looked up again, fiercely.

“Cross your heart and wish you may die if you look inside one of them!” she commanded.

I meekly took the grisly oath. But chance was too strong for us. Ada, eager to keep me entirely aloof from the mystery, attempted to lift four large volumes out of the case at once. The top volume—the Presentation Shakespeare itself—slipped off the others, fell upon the floor, and lay upon

its back wide open. I could not help observing that it was a London Telephone Directory.

For a moment Ada and I regarded one another steadily. She did not wink an eyelash. Indeed, it was I who felt guilty.

“I may as well see them all now,” I said.

“Please yourself,” said Ada coldly.

It was a strange collection. There were three Telephone Directories in all—all old friends of mine, and peculiarly adapted, from their size and dignity, for presentation purposes. (I think they were Shakespeare, Milton, and Dante. The presentation Tennyson, however, proved to be a Bulb Catalogue.) There was a Hall and Knight’s Algebra, from which, in my presence, the old man had frequently and most movingly quoted Keats. Homer, as Pettigrew had correctly indicated, was an elementary German grammar. *Plato’s Apology* was Mr. Chardenal’s First French Course.

“He used to get them cheaper than the real ones,” explained Ada. “Besides, what did it matter to him, anyhow?” What, indeed? Poor old boy!

I worked through the whole collection—the miscellaneous flotsam of second-hand bookshops and jumble sales—old novels sold in bundles; old directories sold as waste paper. Every book was neatly covered, and decorated with a sprawling number—the sight of which, although it advertised nothing to the outside world but the position of a book on a shelf, had never failed, for more than twenty years, to switch on the right record in that amazing repertoire.

Idly, I picked out the last book in the box. It was a stumpy little volume, bearing the number Twenty-Five.

“That’s ’Orace,” said Ada promptly. “It’s a real one—in Latin; only it has the English on the opposite page. We used that a lot.”

I turned over the time-soiled leaves, and my eye encountered a familiar passage. I looked up.

“I think he would have liked to have a small inscription on the coffin,” I said. “We can arrange it when we go back to the house. There’s a line here that seems to me to describe him very accurately.”

“Read it,” said Ada. I did so:

“Of upright life, and stainless purity.”

“Yes; he was all that,” said Ada thoughtfully. “Never done nothink on nobody; and always the gentleman. It will look nice on the plate. How does it go in Latin?”

I read aloud the ancient tag:

“Integer vitæ, scelerisque purus.”

Ada nodded her head vigorously.

“Put it in Latin,” she said. “He’d have liked it that way. Besides, it’ll learn Mould and Pettigrew, and that lot!”

I

AN ocean voyage affects you in one of two ways: either you are gloriously stimulated or profoundly depressed. Moreover, salt air plays tricks with character itself. It gets into a man's blood for the time being, and sometimes makes him do things which surprise him.

Jacob Finch was bitterly disappointed in his first experience of the deep. He had pictured himself revelling in the luxury of a great ocean-going hotel, making pleasant acquaintances, and taking a prominent part in the social activities of the ship. In short, he had dreamed the dreams that a thoroughly shy and thoroughly undistinguished individual generally does dream at the prospect of escaping from the society of people who have known him and disregarded him all his life, into a world where nobody knows him at all and where he fondly imagines he will have his handicap revised.

Having recently come into money—a comfortable income from a comfortable aunt lately departed this life at Chislehurst—Jacob had decided to see the world. Being a young man of secret yearnings and little initiative, he had begun with Monte Carlo, where for three days he persevered in a dismal exercise which he described to himself as “entering into the life of the place.” That is to say, he loafed forlornly round the Casino, looking over the shoulders of people gambling at the tables, or sat equally forlornly in a restaurant watching the backs of people eating and drinking. Of course when he returned home he would be able to tell his relatives in Little Tushington how he had run over to Monte and had a flutter at the tables. But—*il faut souffrir pour être viveur*.

One day he noticed in the hotel lounge a bulletin which announced that a White Star liner from New York, bound on a spring cruise to various attractive Mediterranean ports, would call at Monaco on the morrow to take up intending passengers. Jacob realised at once that in Monte Carlo he was in his wrong setting. His rugged island nature was plainly unsuited to the pursuit of enervating and effeminate pleasures ashore: his home was obviously upon the rolling deep. So straightway he paid his hotel bill and transferred his person, effects, and lonely soul to an excellent cabin in the great ship *Empiric*, where he was excessively unwell for twenty-four hours. On the whole these were the happiest hours that he was destined to enjoy for

some days to come; for when he recovered and endeavoured to “enter into the life of the ship,” he did so with as little appreciable effect upon the other participants therein as before. He strolled about the smoking-room, watching Semitic gentlemen playing poker. He tramped round the promenade deck, timidly eyeing the rows of passengers tucked into deck chairs, and vainly trying to summon sufficient courage to wake one of them up and start a conversation. He lingered wistfully in the vicinity of the athletes who played shuffleboard and deck-quoits. He sat in the corner of the lounge after dinner and watched the dancing couples, whistling defiantly through his teeth to show himself that he was enjoying the music. At meal-times he shared a table with four other passengers. Unfortunately they were all English, and strangers to one another as well; so conversation was limited to requests for the mustard.

Jacob had applied for and received a numbered and reserved chair in the long line that ran from end to end of the starboard side of the promenade deck. He had built high hopes on this. To sit wedged between two fellow-creatures for hours at a time and for days on end without occasionally exchanging some sort of greeting or observation is a human impossibility, even under the Union Jack. As a matter of fact Jacob had secretly hoped to find himself between two Americans, because experience had taught him that Americans are an intrepid and adventurous race, and will frequently risk addressing a remark to a stranger where an Englishman would insist upon waiting either for a formal introduction or a shipwreck.

Here again he was unfortunate. On the left of his chair came a gap in the line, caused by the intervention of the smoking-room doorway. Still, there was a chair upon his right. It was empty, and it remained empty for two whole days. But after that an event occurred which changed the whole face of the world.

Jacob had completed his usual solitary morning constitutional, and was making for his moorings carrying a rug and two magazines, when he observed that the chair next to his was occupied. In fact, at that very moment the deck-steward, with the solicitous tenderness of his race, was tucking a passenger into it—a girl. Somewhat fluttered, Jacob halted at a convenient distance, and examined her covertly. She repaid examination. She possessed large, dewy, grey eyes, a rather pert little nose, and a clear, delicate skin. But what Jacob chiefly noticed at first glance was her smile, which struck him as the most beautiful thing that God had ever created. The smile in question was directed at the deck-steward, in recognition of his ministrations; but some of it flowed past him and was intercepted by Jacob Finch.

Simultaneously an invisible torpedo struck Jacob fairly and squarely in the chest, and exploded. Jacob's head reeled: the blood sang in his ears. Dazed and trembling, he groped his way mechanically into his chair, and arranged the rug clumsily over his knees. Apparently unconscious of his presence, the vision beside him opened a book, found the place, and began composedly to read.

But pretty girls are seldom as unconscious as they look. Jacob's neighbour was fully aware that a healthy young male of presentable but slightly melancholic appearance had sat down beside her. Had she been stone blind she must have known, for she could hardly have failed to hear the beating of his heart. It was a still, sunny morning, and the great ship, heading south, slipped peacefully through the blue waters of the Mediterranean. The scene was set for comfortable chatting and pleasant confidences. The deck was almost deserted, and their nearest neighbour was an elderly gentleman fast asleep.

Presently Jacob's little companion laid down her book for a moment, in order to adjust her steamer-rug. Straightway the volume slid from her lap on to the deck. Jacob dived for it, and returned it, dumbly. The girl thanked him with a smile, resumed her reading—at least, she continued to keep her eyes upon its pages—and silence reigned again.

Here was an opportunity: but seize it Jacob could not. Shyness is a potent and paralysing thing. He sat rigid. The girl presented her left shoulder to him, and turned over another page.

Twenty minutes passed, and Jacob's tongue was still fast bound in misery and iron. Turning hither and thither in his extreme discomfort he cast a sidelong glance upon the volume on his neighbour's lap. It was a new novel which half the ship was reading, called *Faint Heart*. The cruel appropriateness of the title cut his dumb soul like a whip-lash.

“Go on!” he exhorted himself. “You're fellow-passengers, aren't you? Say something! You miserable brute! Say *anything*! Tell her it's a fine day! Ask her if she's a good sailor! Oh, you wretched, cowardly funk! Make her smile again! Say something funny! Do something! Do *anything*! Pah!”

It was no use. Speak he could not, without some friendly lead.

Presently his companion finished a chapter, laid down her book, opened a little bag, and produced a cigarette. Then she made further search in the bag, presumably for matches; but without success. She gave a little sigh of annoyance, and restored the cigarette to its case.

It was now or never. Jacob, his fingers in his waistcoat-pocket and his heart in his mouth, nerved himself for the supreme effort of his life.

He swallowed his heart, cleared his throat in a distressing manner, and said huskily:

“May I offer you a light?”

“Oh, please!” replied the girl. “It was stupid of me to leave my matches in the cabin.” Her voice was fresh and clear. A student of intonation might have hazarded a guess that she was a native of London; but to Jacob Finch she sounded like the soloist of the Heavenly Choir. He handed her his match-case without a word. It did not occur to him to take out a match and light it for her. He knew nothing of such niceties of overture.

The girl lit her cigarette, and returned the match-case.

“Thank you so much,” she said. “I hope my smoking doesn’t upset you. You are a good sailor, I suppose?”

“Yes, very good,” replied Jacob. “At least,” he added more cautiously, “I hope I shall be. This is my first long sea trip, and I only came on board at Monaco.”

“Monaco? Oh! Did you come from Monte?”

“Yes. I—I—had a run over from Town for a week, to have a flutter.”

“Had you any luck?”

“I was just all square.” This was literal truth, for Jacob had not adventured a penny piece at the tables, being quite ignorant of the necessary procedure and much too shy to seek advice on the matter.

“We came on board at Marseilles,” said the girl. “I didn’t enjoy the first few days much, even on this nice big boat. This is the first time I have been on deck.”

“I was wondering where you were,” said Jacob, with a temerity that surprised himself.

“Why? Did you——?”

“I mean, I was wondering who was going to sit in that chair,” explained Jacob. “Are you a large party?”

“I am with an aunt of mine. She is down below—and likely to stay there, poor thing!”

“Is she still si——unwell?”

“Dreadfully. It was sweet of her to come at all, considering what a bad sailor she is. But I was dying to take the trip, and she always spoils me. I love being spoiled.” Again the smile flashed out. “Don’t you?”

“That’s right,” said Jacob—and felt thoroughly exasperated with himself. It was his habit, being a man of unambitious vocabulary, to say “That’s right” whenever he could think of nothing more original to say. It was plain that his companion had just given him the chance to say something very gallant indeed. But the fence was too formidable for him.

At this moment the ship’s bell somewhere forward chimed twice, and a well-nourished youth in tight blue uniform and brass buttons, emerging from the doorway beside him, proceeded to shatter the gossamer of romance by means of an ear-splitting rendering of *The Roast Beef of Old England* upon the key-bugle.

II

During the next few days Jacob Finch, having tumbled headlong in love, sank down, down into the lower depths, until he touched bottom. There he stayed. He had never been in love before. That is to say, he had never lost his heart to any girl, though he had been timidly in love with love itself ever since his sixteenth birthday. Consequently he suffered with all the severity incident upon a first experience. A lover is popularly supposed to pass his time alternately in the heights and in the depths, in correspondence with the mood of his lady. But this is not true. It is all a matter of disposition. Your sensitive lover—the unfortunate person who cannot get along without systematic encouragement—resides almost permanently in the abyss. He is morbidly sensitive about intruding where he is not wanted: and once a humble-minded individual gets that idea into his head he is in for a fairly agonising time of it. The only man who ever ought to become a lover is your thick-skinned fellow with a good conceit of himself. He is in his element all the time: he is convinced that he is being a glorious and continuous success, and as often as not wearies his beloved into capitulation from sheer despair of making him understand the cold truth.

But Jacob Finch was not of that mettle. As already stated, having dived into the ocean of love, he went straight to the bottom and stayed there. His knowledge of women was of the slightest, and his faith in his own powers of attraction slighter still. He cherished a theory that in order to inspire a

woman's affection a man must be gallant, handsome, and above all notable in some way—a success, in short. The fact that there is more than one feminine instinct to which a man can appeal was unrevealed to him. He did not know that some women like mothering failures. So his longing soul clung to the dust—or rather, to the well-scrubbed deck-planking which supported the pretty feet of Miss Myra Greig. (That was her name, he discovered, by consulting the table-plan on the saloon staircase.)

Attractive girls on board ship are not easily monopolised, especially by diffident suitors. The greater part of Jacob's time now was spent in dumbly enduring the spectacle of Miss Greig being taken for walks, Miss Greig being instructed in deck games, Miss Greig dancing the fox-trot with a variety of more or less expert and eligible gentlemen. True, she was his companion and neighbour for a quite appreciable period every day, for she was an insatiable reader and spent long hours in her deck chair. But Jacob reflected despondently, even as they reclined with elbows touching, that she was there by accident and not from choice.

Still, he persevered, in his own painstaking way. He studied Miss Greig's character, endeavouring to define her taste in men, in order that he might instantly model himself upon her ideal. He thought of interesting topics and entertaining anecdotes, and noted the same down upon his shirt-cuff, that he might never cease to be entertaining. He lay awake half the night envisioning his lady under various circumstances, and rehearsing exactly what he would do in the somewhat unlikely event of her falling overboard. In fine, by brooding and dreaming where he ought to have been pursuing a more active policy, Jacob worked himself into a state which may account for his subsequent surprising behaviour.

On the third afternoon after their first meeting Miss Greig, who had been immersed for half an hour in the closing chapters of *Faint Heart*, closed the book with a little sigh of rapture, and sat up. The faithful shadow beside her quivered responsively.

“Well, that's over!” she remarked regretfully. “I wish I could write!” She turned to Jacob. “I'm afraid I've been very unsociable: but I've been in a trance for the last half-hour.” She shivered delicately. “It's quite cold, isn't it?”

“Would you like to walk round the deck?” inquired Jacob eagerly.

“I should love it. Hold my book for me, will you?”

Jacob extracted his divinity from her chair, much as a connoisseur might extract a porcelain shepherdess from a packing-case, and they set out for their walk. Not that Jacob had any particular realisation that he was walking: he had a vague feeling that he was swimming. He was immediately in conversational difficulties, as usual, and began furtively to work his left shirt-cuff out of his sleeve.

They reached the rail which marked the sternmost limit of the promenade deck, and surveyed the receding vista of the Bay of Naples, which they had left an hour before. Above the city towered a mountain, from the summit of which now and then emerged a puff of smoke, suggestive of a comfortable gentleman smoking a cigar in his club.

“I suppose that is Mount Etna?” said the girl.

“Yes,” replied Jacob, tactfully. “Vesuvius, rather.” He referred stealthily to his shirt-cuff. “It is four thousand and twenty feet——”

“How wonderful it must be,” said Miss Greig, a trifle hastily, “to know things like history and geography! Do you remember how clever you were about Corsica when we touched there—Napoleon and all that? I suppose you have travelled a great deal?”

“Well, of course one covers a certain amount of ground,” replied Jacob, trembling with pleasure. “One knocks about, and so on.” Then he added tentatively:

“Have you seen much of the world?”

“No, I am quite a little stay-at-home. I have spent most of my life in Devonshire. We have a place there. Of course it isn’t in the least grand, but it has been in the family a good long time now.”

“I take it,” said Jacob with a gulp, “yours is what is called a county family.”

“I suppose so,” said the girl carelessly. “At least, if a tumbledown old Jacobean house with a stone terrace, and a flock of deer on the lawn below, and a few acres of land, and some funny old tenants are the qualification, we are.”

Jacob’s heart sank. Already the adamantine bars of the English caste system were lowering themselves between him and his crazy dream. Suddenly the girl looked up at him with an adorably confidential little air.

“Do you know,” she remarked, “I have been wondering lately what you are.”

“What I am?” Jacob’s heart quickened again. She had actually been thinking about him.

“Yes—your profession. Now don’t tell me: it’s such fun guessing!”

“What do I look like?” asked Jacob, endeavouring to get his shoulders back without attracting notice.

“Well—are you in business of any kind?”

“No.”

“I am glad: I think commerce is so dull. Let me see, now—what else could you be? A lawyer—an engineer—an architect—an artist? No? Well _____”

“What would you like me to be?” asked Jacob. It was an audacious night for him, but Miss Greig did not seem to mind.

“I know what I should like to be myself, above all things in the world,” she replied.

“What?”

“An author.” She laid a caressing hand upon the cover of *Faint Heart*, which Jacob was carrying.

“I would give anything in this world,” she said simply, “to be the man who wrote that book!”

Jacob Finch gazed down into her small, eager, flushed face. Her lips were parted; her eyes shone. Something seemed to snap inside his head, and an unknown and omnipotent force from outside took possession of him.

“I’m afraid you can’t be him,” he said gravely. “But——”

“But what?” asked the girl, her attention caught by the tone of his voice.

“You can meet him, if you like.”

“What do you mean?”

Without a tremor Jacob Finch turned back the cover of *Faint Heart*, and pointed to the author’s name upon the title page.

“*My nom de plume!*” he announced.

Miss Greig clasped her hands, and gazed up at him breathlessly.

“*You?* You are really Julius Mablethorpe?” She almost whispered the question.

Jacob Finch nodded, defiantly.

III

News travels fast on board ship. Within twelve hours it was known to every saloon passenger that the rather chinless young man, who wore a made-up tie at dinner and spent his time mooning about after that rather saucy little piece with the big eyes, was no less a personage than the famous Julius Mablethorpe, the author of nineteen Best Sellers and a household word (or byword, according to your standard of literary taste) throughout the English-speaking world.

The consequences were immediate and numerous, and entirely beyond anything that Jacob Finch—or indeed most people—could have anticipated. We can divide these into the consequences affecting his relations with the world in general, and those affecting his relations with Myra Greig.

The first naturally was that Jacob became a ship's topic of the first rank.

“Curious how hard some of these celebrities are to spot,” said the passengers to one another. “One would never have singled out this chap. But when you come to look at him, you can see—you can *see*! There's something there—something that we haven't got. Look at his forehead, the way it bulges! Look at his ears, the way they stick out! Look at his chin, the way it goes in! Watch his eyes! They seem to see nothing, but I bet you they're taking in everything! You and I will be in his next book, as likely as not. We must be careful how we behave—eh?”

Next, lifelong admirers closed round Jacob Finch and discussed with him at length the works of Julius Mablethorpe—to the extreme discomfort of the former, whose acquaintance with the writings of the latter was of the slightest. But even when detected in palpable unfamiliarity with his own handiwork his disciples counted the fact to him for righteousness.

“Most interesting, these geniuses!” they said. “This one really seems quite fed up at being asked about his own stuff. Can't even remember which book of his a character belongs to. Queer, reserved, dreamy, unpractical creatures—what? Barrie's another of 'em.”

Then they would ask Jacob Finch for the favour of Julius Mablethorpe's autograph—which was granted, they noted, with characteristic diffidence—and retire below to record the whole episode in their diaries.

Secondly, the effect upon Jacob's relations with Miss Greig. For perhaps six days he lived his dream—oblivious of everything save the consciousness that this matchless creature found him above all men desirable. He did not think; he did not reflect; he simply accepted the inconceivable bliss which had descended upon him.

Then, suddenly, he came to himself. The sun was blotted out; a pall of black despair spread over heaven; and he realised exactly what he had done. Previous to this he had had a chance—how good or bad he did not know; but a chance—to win Myra Greig for his own. Now that chance was gone for ever. Plainly he could not marry Miss Greig without telling her that he was an impostor; and equally plainly if he told her he was an impostor she would not marry him. He worshipped her with all his body and soul—and by one single act of madness he had cut himself apart from her for ever. No wonder the autograph seekers found their lion a little *distract*.

It was evening, and he sat upon the edge of his bed smoking a cigarette. He had an appointment with Miss Greig on the boat deck—such appointments could be had for the mere asking now—at ten minutes to nine, to look at the moon, which was at the full. He closed his burning eyes and reflected for the hundredth time.

“If I carry on till the end of the trip, and then slip off the ship quietly, and disappear for ever—that will be the end of the whole business, in a manner of speaking. Of course it will mean that I can never see her again. She will think that I have let her down. She will think me a cad——”

He choked, and genuine tears forced their way beneath his eyelids.

“—And if I go upstairs and make a clean breast of it now, that only means that she will give me the chuck on her own account straight off, and never speak to me again! Oh dear!” He dropped his face into his hands, and writhed in the tangled web which he had so artlessly woven for himself.

Still, taking him all in all, Jacob was a man, and a gentleman. He sat up, and looked at his watch. The hour of the rendezvous had come. He dipped his face into cold water and scrubbed it with a rough towel—and there are less practical ways of achieving moral regeneration—after which, having brushed his hair and rearranged his tie, he surveyed himself resolutely in the mirror.

“I will!” he said aloud; “I will! It's the only decent thing to do. I'll do it now!”

IV

Miss Greig was reclining in a lounge chair in the moonlight, on the boat deck, and welcomed him with a little air of demure proprietorship which at once thrilled and tortured him.

“I have a message for you,” she announced importantly.

“A message?” Jacob started. “Who sent it?”

“The Passengers’ Entertainment Committee. There is to be a Concert in the saloon to-morrow night, and they want you to take the chair.”

“*Me?*” exclaimed Jacob in a voice of horror.

Miss Greig smiled indulgently.

“Yes—you! Celebrities mustn’t be too modest, you know. If you *will* be Julius Mablethorpe you must expect to have to do things like that. You have brought it on yourself,” she concluded, with perfect truth.

“But isn’t there anybody else?”

“No. You are easily the greatest celebrity on this ship. You will do it, won’t you?” Miss Greig raised her eyes appealingly.

Jacob resolutely avoided them.

“I can’t,” he said miserably.

“Not even to please me?”

Jacob writhed. “Tell her now!” commanded a stern voice within him. “Go on! The longer you look at it the less you will like it.” He drew a deep, shuddering breath.

“I would do anything in the world to please you,” he began, leaning closer to the girl and speaking in a low choking voice; “but—but—well, there is something I must tell you first. There is a reason——”

“A woman doesn’t want to listen to reason,” retorted Miss Greig petulantly.

“But this reason——”

“Never mind reasons.” She gave him a quick glance. “I’m not really thinking about the Concert, or the silly old other passengers. I’m asking you to do this just to please me, and for nothing else. There! Won’t you? I shall

be so proud of you. Please?" Miss Greig laid an impulsive hand upon Jacob's sleeve.

Without doubt, argument between the sexes under the moon on a semi-tropical sea should be prohibited, or at least supervised, by the State. The consequences were automatic. Next moment Jacob had taken possession of the hand, and was kissing it passionately.

"I love you!" he said: "I love you! I would do anything for you. I don't care what happens now. I've said it—there! And I'm glad, anyway!"

This was not what Jacob had intended to say, nor anything like it; but Miss Greig showed no disposition to be critical. Neither did she withdraw her hand. Indeed Jacob was conscious, to the very marrow of his soul, of a soft responsive pressure. He gazed down upon her: her long lashes were drooping.

"Look up!" he said, in a voice entirely unfamiliar to him.

The girl obeyed; and Jacob, inexperienced though he was, realised at a glance that fate had put something into his keeping that night which would never entirely pass out of it again or ever be given to another.

"Do you know," said Myra ten minutes later, "you rather frighten me!"

"Do I?" replied Jacob in genuine astonishment. "Why?"

"Well, all my life I have dreamed that when I came to be loved by somebody it wouldn't be anybody famous, or clever, or strong; but just somebody who was nobody in particular, if you know what I mean—some man who was rather lonely and helpless, and wanted taking care of." She gave a shy laugh. "That was what first made me feel"—she leaned her head comfortably against his arm—"feel this way about you. I really thought you were lonely and helpless. Wasn't it cheek of me? Do you mind, dear?"

"No," said Jacob unsteadily, "I don't mind. I'm glad. At least—I would have been."

"If you hadn't been what you are?"

"That's right," said Jacob, with a heart of lead.

The girl rose to her feet.

"Let me go now," she said. "No, don't kiss me—yet. To-morrow I shall have to speak to you about something. May I tell them that you will take the

chair at the Concert?"

"Whatever you say," assented Jacob mechanically. "Good night, my dear!"

"Bless you!" said the girl. She threw him a last smile over her shoulder, and disappeared down the stairway.

Left alone, Jacob stood gazing over the moonlit sea—silent, motionless, not without a certain dignity. Finally he clasped his hands over his heart, and closed his eyes.

"O God," he murmured, "please let her go on smiling at me like that for a little while longer. Then I will tell her. I promise! But not just yet—please!"

V

The Purser, a stout gentlemen of paternal appearance and enormous acquaintance, tapped discreetly upon the sitting-room door of Suite Number Seventeen on B Deck, and entered.

Sprawling in an arm-chair, with his feet on the table and a litter of proof-sheets upon the floor all round him, sat a large man with greying hair, in his shirt-sleeves, angrily puffing an unclean pipe and stabbing at a proof-sheet with a fountain-pen.

He looked up.

"Go away!" he said. "Remove yourself! Go and purse somewhere else!"

But the Purser merely grinned, helped himself to a cigar unbidden, and sat down upon the sofa.

"So they've punctured your blessed old incognito after all," he remarked.

The large man looked up from his proof-sheet and glared.

"What do you mean? I don't understand your filthy vernacular. I only speak English."

"Then why don't you write it, old son?" asked the Purser gently. But Julius Mablethorpe was not to be drawn. He wanted this alarming allusion to his incognito explained.

"Don't play the pantaloon," he urged, "but tell me."

“I have told you. Your disguise appears to have been penetrated.”

“What makes you think so?”

“Well, there is a notice up on the board outside my office to say that you are to take the chair at the Concert to-night. I presume the announcement has been made with your knowledge and consent. Between ourselves, I shouldn’t wonder if you had offered to do it. I have always suspected this incognito business of yours of being an advertising stunt.”

But these gross insults, which in most cases would by this time have precipitated a most enjoyable wrestling-match between two short-winded but light-hearted sexagenarians, failed of their usual effect. Julius Mablethorpe (entered on the passenger list as Lemuel K. Baggs) rose from his seat, scattered his impedimenta upon the floor of the cabin, and gazed earnestly down upon his old friend.

“You’re speaking the truth, I suppose?”

“‘I always tries to utter lies, and every time I fails,’ ” quoted the Purser.

“Either someone has found out that I am on board,” said Mablethorpe slowly, “and has put my name up as a sort of challenge to me to come forth and make a holy show of myself; or else—well, it has happened before, and may happen again.”

“What?”

“I wonder! What a rum coincidence if it *has*, with me actually on the same ship. *The Long Arm*, eh? Not a bad title for a short story! Now——”

“Abandon these senile and mercenary maunderings,” urged the Purser, “and say what you’re driving at.”

Mablethorpe told him.

“Go and find out who he is, like a good chap,” he said when he had finished.

“I will,” replied the Purser grimly, and left the cabin.

In twenty minutes he returned.

“You’re right, old fellow,” he announced. “You are being impersonated.”

Mablethorpe nodded.

“Somebody with mutton-chop whiskers and a cummerbund, I suppose?” he said gloomily.

“More or less.”

“I knew it! Well?”

“Apparently he revealed his identity—that is to say, your identity—two or three days ago, and has been the big noise on this old packet ever since. I suppose I ought to have heard about it sooner, but I have been busy in the office with manifests and things ever since we left Algiers. Anyhow, your understudy has been having a wonderful time—surrounded by adoring females, telling them where he gets his inspirations from, and writing autographs. What are you going to do about it? Shall I ask the Old Man to put him in clink?”

“Not at all. Why should I deprive a fellow-creature of his innocent pleasures? But I should like to meet the gentleman. When is this perishing concert of his to take place?”

“To-night, at nine.”

“Bring him in here before dinner, will you?”

VI

Two hours later Jacob Finch, gloriously arrayed for his evening’s official labours, was ushered, not altogether at his ease, by the Purser into Suite Number Seventeen. There he beheld a large man with twinkling blue eyes and a preternaturally solemn expression, sitting behind a table.

“Purser,” announced the large man in a voice of thunder, “you can get out!”

“Yes, sir,” replied the Purser respectfully, and departed.

“Sit down, please,” said the man to Jacob, indicating the sofa. “Drink this.”

He rose and placed a glass of whisky-and-soda within reach of his guest, and resumed his magisterial pose behind the table.

“Now,” he said, “you will naturally desire to know who I am, and why I have invited you to this *tête-à-tête*. I will tell you. I write novels, of a distressing but popular character. I have been for the last four months in the United States, collecting material for another. I am now rounding off my trip by circumnavigating the Mediterranean. I have been occupied during the past fortnight in revising the proofs of a new book which has to be delivered to my publishers next week. In order to secure complete privacy and

freedom from interruption I have remained almost entirely in my cabin, and I am entered on the passenger list under an assumed name. You will find it given there as Lemuel K. Baggs. I made it up myself: I think it is rather good. My real name, in point of fact, is Julius Mablethorpe. . . . Here's another drink for you. Now, old man, tell me why you did it?"

Mr. Mablethorpe resumed his seat, leaned back, lit a cigar, smiled benevolently, and waited. He had to wait some time, for his visitor found himself for the moment incapable of speech. He sat huddled upon the sofa, gaping like a stranded fish.

"Take your time," advised Mablethorpe. "In fact, you may as well listen to me for a bit longer."

He exhaled a long cloud of cigar smoke, and proceeded:

"A man impersonates another man for one of three reasons. Firstly, to gain some fraudulent advantage—make money out of the game, in fact. I may say at once that I acquit you of any such intention."

"That's right, sir," murmured Jacob faintly.

"Secondly, in obedience to a curious but not altogether unnatural craving—the craving for fame, distinction, notoriety—anything, in fact, which will lift a man out of the ruck of his fellow-creatures and make him conspicuous for a moment. Men have been found willing to die for such a moment. I suppose you have never written to the police pleading guilty to a murder, have you?"

"No, sir."

"Ah! Well, I assure you lots of people do. It is a fact that after a murder of any importance has been committed, the difficulty of the authorities is not so much to find the guilty man, and hang him, as to avoid hanging some perfectly respectable citizen who insists that he did the deed and none other. It may seem strange that people should come and make bogus confessions; but they do, by the dozen. Why? Well, if there is one thing that galls a certain type of utterly undistinguished individual it is the consciousness that the world at large has never heard of him—and never will. So he makes up his little mind to achieve immortality somehow—even if he has to invoke the assistance of Madame Tussaud. Of course that is an extreme way of putting it. Probably most of these self-confessed desperadoes do not expect to be convicted: after all, there is no evidence against them. What they really hope for is a couple of days in the public eye and a few really gratifying pressnotices. After they are acquitted—that is, kicked out—they return home

branded as celebrities, and live happily ever after. But you say you have never been taken that way?"

"No, sir."

"Good! Forgive me for talking so much, but I don't often encounter such an indulgent audience. Of course there is a milder variation of the disease. Did you, for instance, ever write to a Patent Medicine Company, informing them that you were once a nervous wreck, but that since consuming three bottles of their specific you are now fit to hang from the chandelier by your heels?"

"No, sir."

"Well, I assure you thousands of people do it. There is an impression that patent medicine testimonials are paid for by the proprietors. Stuff and nonsense! They simply pour in unsolicited, from people who probably never touched the stuff but hope that their ungrammatical letter, accompanied by an unrecognisable portrait, will be published in the advertisement columns of the press. You see, Madame Tussaud's again—from a less ambitious angle! It's a queer world. But you say you have never done any of these things?"

"No, sir."

"Then that brings us to the third alternative. There is only one other reason why a man should endeavour to assume a personality which for some reason he regards as more desirable than his own, and that is to enable him to create an impression in some particular quarter. Of course it must be a temporary impression, because naturally he's bound to be found out if he goes on too long. Still he does it—and I rather think *you* have done it, my friend!"

Julius Mablethorpe abandoned his judgment-seat, crossed to the sofa, sat heavily down upon it, and laid a gentle hand on Jacob Finch's shoulder.

"Now tell me all about her," he said.

And to this eccentric but tender father-confessor, Jacob recounted the whole pitiful story of Faint Heart and his Fair Lady.

VII

"I don't know what you must think of me, sir," he remarked miserably when he had finished.

“There are two kinds of sin,” announced Mablethorpe—“human and inhuman. The first kind can always be forgiven—and that’s where you come in. If you had robbed an orphanage, or written a psycho-analytical novel, it would have been different.”

“But I deliberately took your name, sir, and——”

“Don’t you worry about that. It’s not the first time it’s happened. Why, a couple of years ago a friend of mine telegraphed to me from a Swiss hotel to say that there was a fellow staying there who said he was me! Was he to have him arrested? I wired back and asked what the gentleman looked like, and how he was behaving. My friend replied: ‘A most presentable person. He has a large stock of your novels with him, and is giving them away.’ I sent a final wire: ‘Encourage him to continue.’”

“It was very generous of you,” said Jacob.

“Not at all: it was good business.”

“But it was generous to let him off.”

“Oh, one has to make allowances, you know. There is something about the air of foreign hotels, and indeed ocean liners, which gives a curious twist to the moral fibre for the time being. It makes people extraordinarily elastic in their conception of who and what they really are. They are separated for the moment from those who are in a position to contradict them, so they hurriedly avail themselves of the opportunity—the opportunity of a lifetime to many of them—to allow the ineradicable human craving for telling lies about oneself full play. That’s all, I think. Go along and have dinner.”

Jacob rose unsteadily to his feet.

“You—you forgive me, sir?” he asked humbly.

“Lord bless you, yes! I forgive you. But I’m going to impose two conditions.”

“Anything, sir! Anything!”

“In the first place, you must make a clean breast of it to the young lady. You need not tell her I am on board; in fact, I would rather you didn’t tell anybody that. But tell her that you are not me.”

“I will, sir; I will indeed! I was going to, in any case. I have been so miserable about it. I will tell her to-night, and leave the ship at Alexandria. What was the other condition, sir?”

Mablethorpe’s eyes twinkled.

“I am a retiring individual,” he said. “You must take the chair for me at the Concert.”

Jacob Finch’s knees turned to water.

“But, sir——” he stammered.

“They are fair terms, I think,” said Mablethorpe: “I have forgiven you, and granted you full permission to continue your impersonation of me until you leave the ship. You owe me something for that. Take the chair you shall!”

“I—I—have to make a speech. What shall I say?”

“I will write something out for you. Look in here after dinner for it. And see you deliver it nicely, because I am coming to listen to you. Now run off. By the way, will you forgive a most personal suggestion?”

“Certainly, sir—anything!”

“As you are going to give an imitation of me, would you mind dressing the part a bit? Reproduce my sartorial eccentricities as it were? For instance, I usually tie my evening ties myself, instead of wearing the extremely neat and symmetrical arrangement favoured by you. I can give you one when you come in for the speech—and tie it for you if necessary. *Au revoir!* I’m glad to feel that we understand one another.”

“That’s right—I mean, God bless you, sir!”

VIII

“I was so proud of you to-night,” said Myra softly. “You speak as well as you write.”

Once more they were sharing the boat-deck with the moon. The Concert had been a great success: thanks to a moving appeal from the Chair a more than usually satisfactory sum had been collected for the Seamen’s Orphanage. They reclined in their deck chairs side by side, sharing a rug, with fingers intertwined.

Myra’s testimonial evoked no direct response, but it gave Jacob what he had been groping for—a cue. He disengaged his cold fingers from those of his beloved, and rose to his feet.

“I am leaving the ship to-morrow,” he said abruptly.

Myra caught her breath, and gazed up at him with suddenly dilated eyes.

“You are going to—*what?*” she asked.

“I am going to leave this ship to-morrow,” repeated Jacob.

“But why? I—I—I hope you haven’t had bad news, or anything.”

“No. But I must leave.”

“Tired of me already?” The girl laughed, a little unsteadily, and avoided his gaze.

“For God’s sake, don’t joke about it!”

Myra heard the agony in his voice, and looked up again quickly. Then she saw his face in the moonlight. Swiftly she extended a slim arm and drew him gently down.

“Will you tell me about it?” she asked.

He dropped into his seat again.

“Yes—I will. That is why we are here now. Don’t look at me, please: just turn your head away and listen. I have something to say to you. I am not Julius Mablethorpe at all. My name is Jacob Finch, and nothing else. Until six months ago I was a bank clerk in a little country town in Norfolk. Then an aunt died and left me some money. I’d never been anywhere or seen anything in all my life, so I thought I would take a trip abroad. I went to Monte Carlo. I hated it. I came on this boat. I hated that too. And then—then I saw you. I thought you were the most beautiful thing God ever made—especially your smile. When I got to know you, and you told me about yourself—your country place in Devonshire—the old family you belonged to—and—and the flocks of deer—and the terrace, and everything—I felt so miserable I didn’t know what to do, you were so far above me. You see what I mean? I had no appearance, no accomplishments; nothing to impress a girl at all. I simply had to do *something*, to—to—get you to like me, even if it was only for a week. Then suddenly the chance—the temptation—came, when you said you admired people who could write, especially Julius Mablethorpe. It was all over in a flash. I was mad, I think. But it was my one chance to win your respect, and I seized it! . . .

“I never meant to tell you I loved you, though. I was trying that night to make a clean breast of everything. Instead, I—well, it just happened: Fate was too strong for me. And when you said that you—*you*—cared for me—well, I simply couldn’t give you up right away. I had to have my happiness, if only for a few days of my life. So I have been acting a lie to you for more than a week. . . .

“Well, it’s all over now: I have confessed. It’s a relief, really, though it ends everything for me. Now you know why I leave the ship to-morrow. We shall not meet again, of course; our stations in life are so different: so I hope that, not having to see me, you will manage to forget this slight I have put upon you. I hope, too, you won’t reproach me more than you can help. My punishment is about all I can bear already. You see, I am losing you. That’s enough: don’t add any words to it, if you don’t mind. . . . That’s all, I think. No, there’s this. I am going to have a pretty bad time when I go away from you, but there’s just one thing will keep me up. Do you know what that is? Remembrance! I have had my hour! I have been a liar, and an impostor, and a cad, and I have borrowed—stolen—something I had no right to; and I’m going to be punished for it. But I have had my hour! Nothing can ever take that away from me. Please say to me, if you will, that you won’t grudge me that. Then I will take my leave and go below. I will be off the ship to-morrow before you come on deck.” His voice grew husky. “Will you please say—what I asked?”

Their two heads were very close together now. The girl, with face still averted, lay motionless in her chair.

“Please say it,” he whispered—“that you don’t grudge me—that! Will you?”

Slowly she turned her face to him; and he saw her eyes were full of tears.

“My dear,” she said, with a laugh that was mainly a sob, “I can’t tell you how happy you’ve made me!”

“Happy! Why? How?”

Myra took his hand.

“Why? How? Don’t you see, ever since you said you were the Mablethorpe man I have felt that things were all wrong? I was so proud about it—but I was wretched underneath. You were too high up in the world for me, my dear. The fact is, I”—Jacob opened his mouth to offer an obvious protest—“I know! You are going to remind me about my county family, and my house in Devonshire, and the flock of deer (or was it a covey?), and the terrace, and the tenants! Well, forget them, will you? They’re a castle in the air of mine. In fact, I got them out of one of Mablethorpe’s books! I live with my aunt in Highgate, and I work in an office in the city. I had influenza badly, and the boss was very good about it, and sent me on this trip to pick up again. That’s what I am, really. That’s why I told you the other day that I

was frightened of you. I was speaking the truth that time, all right. Besides, there was another thing that made me wretched. There was nothing I felt I could really *do* for you. You mustn't think a woman always wants to be a wife to a man: sometimes she wants to be his mother. That's what I wanted to be to you—you poor, sensitive, solitary thing! And for more than a week you have been cheating me out of that hope, you bad boy! But it's all right now. We are ourselves again, thank goodness!—just our two plain, ordinary little selves—and we love one another, and to-morrow auntie and I are going straight back home with you when you land. You're my own Jacob: by the way, I'm going to call you Jack; and I'm your own—oh, there's one thing more! My name isn't Myra Greig at all: it's Molly Grigg. Call me Molly, will you?"

Jacob complied at once, with immense solemnity.

"You're quite sure you don't like Molly less than Myra, do you?" inquired Miss Grigg, with a slight inflexion of anxiety.

"I prefer her," replied Jacob. "She is more in my own class—on my level."

But Molly shook her head.

"You're worlds above me still," she said. "Look at the little speech you made at the Concert to-night! It was beautiful. So long as you can make up things like that there's no need for you to pretend to be Julius Mablethorpe, or anybody else."

"Oh, that was just a flash-in-the-pan," replied Jacob modestly.

But Molly shook her head again.

"I don't agree with you. I agree with that big man with the grey hair who got up and seconded the vote of thanks to the Chair. He said that your speech would always linger in his memory as the most perfectly conceived and most happily phrased thing of its kind he'd ever listened to. What was his name, by the way?"

"Baggs, I think."

"Well, Baggs is a good judge. Anyhow, he knows how to read character. I like Baggs."

"So do I," said Jacob, with feeling.

"I like Mablethorpe too. Of course he's only a name to us; but well, I feel somehow that I have Mablethorpe to thank for you!"

“That’s right,” said Jacob.

But I am not so sure. Julius Mablethorpe and *Faint Heart* between them may have given Jacob his preposterous impulse, but I doubt if he would have obeyed it on land. The responsibility, in my opinion, rests with ocean air.

I

UPON the Belgian large-scale map the place is described as *Fme. du Gde Étang*, which being expanded and interpreted means, “The Farm by the Big Pond.” But after the War had been in progress for some few months the British Army Ordnance Department took the map in hand and issued a revised version, in which the original imposing title was converted into “Cow Corpse Farm.” The cow in question had expired suddenly and rather inconsiderately right outside the door of the outhouse which did duty as Company Headquarters and Officers’ Mess. Unfortunately the current occupants of the billet, being on the eve of departure into other regions, contented themselves with holding an inquest—the verdict was Death by Misadventure, an injudicious repast of jettisoned quartermaster-sergeant’s stores, including a nose-bag and a machine-gun belt, being ascribed as the contributing cause—and left the funeral arrangements to their successors. When these arrived the cow had already lain in state for more than a week, and it became immediately obvious that the obsequies had been all too long delayed. The interment took place the same afternoon, a warm afternoon in May, and was attended by a half-platoon of B Company and about half a million bluebottles. The returning mourners unanimously decided to follow up the funeral with a christening. The baptismal ceremony took place in the *estaminet* at the cross-roads close by, and the name stuck.

Within the precincts of Cow Corpse Farm resided, at the moment of our story, first, Mme. la Fermière, variously referred to as “Madame” by the company commander, “the old gel” by the officers’ mess cook, and “the lady of the ’ouse” by the courteous rank-and-file.

Secondly, Mlles. Hélène and Marguérite, Madame’s daughters. The two girls worked unceasingly about the farm or fields. They were a cheerful and friendly pair, and Hélène was pretty, especially upon a Sunday morning, when she donned her best dress and discarded sabots in favour of quite smart boots.

Thirdly, the officer commanding B Company, with four subalterns. Their united ages amounted to about a hundred years.

Fourthly, B Company, two hundred strong.

Fifthly, Henri, of whom more anon.

And, as they say on theatrical posters, sixthly, Petit-Jean.

Truly, Madame's hands were full. Her husband was almost certainly dead. He and Liége had fallen together, and no news of him had since been obtainable. Her eldest son, Jacques, was somewhere near Dixmude, serving with what was left of the Belgian Artillery. Madame's sole male prop in the upkeep of the farm, always excepting Petit-Jean, was a shambling, shifty-eyed hobbledohoy of twenty-five or so—one "'Nrri," as Madame called him. 'Nrri was saved from military service by a mysterious disorder connected with "*ma poitrine, M'sieur le Capitaine*" (a hollow cough). 'Nrri, one learned, was not a member of the family. He was a *réfugié*. He had arrived one day in the early autumn of nineteen fourteen, hastening with other breathless persons before a tide of Prussian bayonets. Almost immediately afterwards the tide turned, owing to the intervention of French and British bayonets, and Madame and Cow Corpse Farm were left safely above high-water mark, some three miles back from the trench-line.

'Nrri remained on the farm, like a piece of particularly unattractive flotsam. Labour was scarce in Belgium in those days, and Madame was glad to keep him. He ploughed, delved, and splashed about from dawn till dusk, and slept in the loft over the cow-house with Petit-Jean.

As for Petit-Jean himself, he was a sturdy youth of uncertain age. In his workaday clothes, as he ordered the cows about or enjoyed himself in the unspeakable morass of manure which filled the yard, he looked a grimy fifteen. On Sundays, when, as a preliminary to attending Mass, he was washed and attired in a tight blue knickerbocker suit with brass buttons, black stockings, buttoned boots, and a species of yachting cap, he looked an angelic twelve.

B Company, who have only been introduced to you, so far, *en bloc*, were commanded by a veteran of twenty-three, one Crombie. Promotion came quickly upon the Western Front. A year previously Crombie had been leading a platoon round a barrack square at Aldershot. Since then he had seen as much active service as would have sufficed a soldier of the previous generation for a lifetime. This year's service had enabled him, in the elegant phraseology of the moment "to put up two more pips"—in other words, to achieve the three stars of a captain. He was assisted in the task of ruling, feeding, housing, and leading some two hundred men by his four youthful subalterns and one seasoned warrior of enormous antiquity, Company Sergeant-Major Goffin.

B Company were “back at rest.” They had handed over their trenches to D Company last Wednesday, and did not propose to return thither for seven days. For the moment they were at peace. It is true that a pair of six-inch guns (named respectfully Ferdinand and Isabella), artfully concealed in a meadow a hundred yards distant, roared forth their message of destruction at uncertain periods both by day and night, shaking Cow Corpse Farm to its foundations; but they hardly disturbed the well-earned slumber of B Company.

About three o’clock each afternoon the methodical Boche gunners would begin their daily exercise of “searching” for Ferdinand and Isabella. Sometimes their shells came sufficiently near to make it necessary for B Company to congregate for half an hour or so in a sandbag retiring-room, specially constructed for the purpose in rear of the barn.

On this particular Saturday morning Captain Crombie, having concluded his orderly room, and having dealt out admonition, reproof, and in one case Field Punishment Number One, with an even hand, continued to sit in the seat of judgment at the head of the kitchen table, frowning gloomily at a heap of parcels from home, which lay upon the stone floor in the corner by the grandfather’s clock.

He turned to his second-in-command—one Rumbelow.

“Any more gone this morning, Rum?” he asked.

“Two.”

“Curse the fellow, whoever he is!” exclaimed Crombie.

The parcels in question contained such comforts as go to mitigate the discomforts of the soldier on active service, and were addressed to members of the company to which “B” acted as relief. On Tuesday this company would come out of trenches and take over Cow Corpse Farm and all that appertained to it, including the heap of parcels which had been accumulating for them in their absence. But the heap would not be a complete heap.

“We shall have to do something,” said Rumbelow.

“Did you speak to the sergeant-major about it?” asked Crombie.

“Yes. He wants to see you.”

Presently Sergeant-Major Goffin arrived, and saluted with the stately thoroughness of a generation which learned its drill in days when time was no object.

“Sergeant-Major,” began Crombie, “I want to consult you about this parcel business. Do you suspect anybody?”

“In a manner of speaking, sir—yes.”

“Well, let’s get down to it. Who?”

The sergeant-major pointed an accusing finger—about the size and shape of a banana—towards the door which led from the kitchen to the inner room, an apartment which served as kitchen and dining-room for the whole of Madame’s *ménage*, and as a bedroom for all the ladies of the establishment.

“Not Madame?” exclaimed Crombie.

“No, sir,” conceded the sergeant-major; “nor one of the young women.”

“Well—who?” repeated Crombie, impatiently.

“I *think*, sir,” said the sergeant-major, “that we ought to look for the accused in that loft above the cow-house.”

“Who lives there?”

“The odd man, sir—Henry, I think his name is—and the young boy.”

“Jean?”

“The boy John, sir.” (The sergeant-major declined to recognise Gallic affectations.)

“Why?”

The sergeant-major cleared his throat and swung into his main theme.

“In my opinion, sir, these thefts are committed during the night. This room is fully occupied by day. There’s the officers and the officers’ servants, and the cooking and so forth. It would be difficult for anybody to come in here and pin—extract anything, sir, by day.”

Here Rumbelow, who seldom spoke except to the point, intervened.

“What about the night?” he said. “I sleep here myself.”

“That, sir,” resumed the sergeant-major, a little reproachfully, “is what I was coming to. That is the reason why I suspect the boy. A full-grown man couldn’t come groping about in here without making a noise. But a boy might creep in; and you, sir, if you will pardon the liberty, being perhaps a heavy sleeper, he might be able to help himself without disturbing you.”

Sergeant-Major Goffin ran down and stood at ease. Crombie pondered.

“There is only one thing to do,” he said at last—“search the loft. I don’t like the idea. Neither will Madame. But——”

“I have a plan, sir,” announced the sergeant-major modestly.

“What is it?”

“I was thinking, sir, that we might invite John and Henry into the N.C.O.’s quarters this evening on some excuse.”

“M’yes. But the excuse? However, I have no doubt you have one manufactured already, sergeant-major.”

“Yes, sir,” admitted the sergeant-major, with humble pride. “Will you inspect the loft yourself, sir?”

“I am going out to dine with A Company this evening,” said Crombie. “Mr. Rumbelow will take on the job. Is that settled, Rum?”

Mr. Rumbelow nodded assent.

“It’s got to be done, I suppose,” concluded the tender-hearted Crombie, “but I don’t like it. This is a friendly country, and Madame is a good sort. Jean’s a decent little beggar, too. Personally, I hope it turns out to be Henri; he’s a shifty-looking tripe-hound: I should like to catch him bending. That will do, sergeant-major. You can report to me in the morning.”

II

Crombie, on returning home to Cow Corpse Farm, found that overcrowded establishment still rocking from an upheaval of capital dimensions.

Imprimis, Jean and ’Nnri were both under close arrest.

Item, most of the stolen property had been discovered under ’Nnri’s bed. This fact seemed to designate ’Nnri as the criminal, but the sergeant-major, who, like other great specialists in crime, disliked seeing his theories falsified, had confined Petit-Jean as well.

Finally, Madame, H el ene, Margu erite, and Sergeant-Major Coffin were all in the kitchen, waiting to exert undue influence upon the returning company commander. This, despite the fact that the phlegmatic Rumbelow had gone to bed, and was now sleeping soundly in their very presence.

The sensitive Crombie smiled feebly upon the tearful ladies, told the sergeant-major to bring up the prisoners in the morning, and withdrew, in

bad order, to his Armstrong hut behind the hayrick.

Meanwhile Petit-Jean and 'Nnri sat in the straw in the screened-off corner of the barn which served as a guard-room, talking. Most of the guard were sleeping heavily, but in no circumstances would they have been able to understand the *patois* employed by the prisoners. The President of the French Academy would not have been able to understand it.

Petit-Jean had wept copiously when arrested. 'Nnri had merely glowered, though as a matter of fact he was by far the more badly frightened of the two. Jean was now comparatively cheerful. He had partaken of bully beef and ration tea—much more luxurious fare than he would have received as a free man—and a friendly corporal had cried, “Hey, Johnny!” and tossed him a Woodbine. Petit-Jean was now feeling something of a daredevil.

“Hear me!” said 'Nnri, in a low, snarling voice. “To-morrow, when the pig of a *sergent* brings us before the camel of a *capitaine*, you will say that *you* stole the packets—you only.”

“But, 'Nnri,” argued Petit-Jean, “you know that I only entered myself into the kitchen, and passed the little packets out to you through the window.”

“Nevertheless,” replied 'Nnri grimly, “you will say that you alone were the thief.”

“Why?”

“Because they will not punish a little one like you. Me they might punish severely.”

“But no,” Petit-Jean pointed out eagerly; “you are a *réfugié*, 'Nnri. You know he is kind, that English. You will tell him who you are—that the Boches have taken all you have.”

“To-morrow,” announced 'Nnri, with unpleasant finality, “you will say that you alone are the thief. If you do not, I shall kill you.”

“How?” asked Petit-Jean, not because he wished to know, but in order to give himself time to think the matter over. He had always been more than a little afraid of 'Nnri, and now there was a look in the man's crafty little eyes which gave him a cold crawly feeling right up his spine.

“I shall wait,” explained 'Nnri, with relish, “until you are asleep one night in the loft. Then I will kill you with the bayonet of the Scotch whom we found dead in the ditch last winter. Your body I will slide into the cess-

pit below the cow-house. There will be a *tohu-bohu*, but they will not find you. And no one will suspect 'Nnri. Is it not so?"

Petit-Jean, tingling now in the pit of his stomach as well as up his spine, agreed that it was so, and, further, promised to shoulder the entire responsibility in the morning.

III

Next morning Captain Crombie, returning with B Company from church parade at battalion headquarters about half-past nine, found that the *affaire* Petit-Jean had entered another phase. 'Nnri was a free man, and Petit-Jean was out on bail.

Rumbelow explained.

"Just after you moved off with the company this morning, Petit-Jean owned up to the sergeant-major that he was the desperate criminal, and that Henri was as pure as driven snow."

Crombie frowned.

"I'm sorry to hear that," he said. "Are you sure Petit-Jean didn't say that Henri was the criminal? I would back the sergeant-major to get hold of the sticky end of the wand when conversing in the language of this country every time."

"No; apparently all was in order. Goffin was corroborated by the cook, who was called in as assistant interpreter. So Henri left the court without a stain on his character."

"What have you done with Petit-Jean?"

Rumbelow grinned.

"I thought you would prefer to deal with the case yourself," he said, "so I remanded him."

"Curse you!" replied the company commander cordially. "What am I to do with the little beast?"

"There is a *gendarmerie* in that village near Brigade Headquarters," said Cradock, who was reading by the window.

Crombie shook his head.

“If we hand him over to the local rozzer,” he said, “it will mean a civil action, and all sorts of complications.”

“Let the sergeant-major bend him over and give him six of the best,” suggested the practical Rumbelow.

The harassed Crombie shook his head again.

“It would mean a devil of a lot of unpleasantness with Madame,” he observed ruefully—“not to mention the young ladies.”

“Then why not give the youth a good telling off, and dismiss the case?”

“And a pretty fair Juggins I should look,” retorted Crombie, with justifiable heat, “sitting here and *strafing* Petit-Jean in a language which I can’t speak, and which he can’t understand!” He puffed savagely at his pipe. “However, the longer we look at it the less we shall like it. Where is the little swine? Still in the guard-room?”

“No. Madame has bailed him out for an hour or two. I am not a French scholar myself; but I gathered from her that there would be the father and mother of a row with the *curé* if I didn’t let Petit-Jean off for Sunday Mass.”

“The *curé*?” Over the troubled features of Captain Crombie stole a flicker of relief—almost of inspiration. “The *curé* here is a friend of mine,” he continued, “I gave him a lift in the mess-cart only the day before yesterday. Ha-ha! Tell the sergeant-major I want him, Cradock, like a good chap.”

When Cradock returned with the sergeant-major, five minutes later, Crombie was sitting in the judgment-seat behind the kitchen table, furtively scribbling certain sentences upon a sheet of official paper. Rumbelow, in the chimney-corner, was regarding his superior officer with an air of whimsical solemnity. Mr. Rumbelow possessed a keen sense of humour, but, unlike most humorists, preferred to consume his own smoke.

“Sergeant-major,” commanded Crombie, in his orderly-room voice, “bring in the prisoner.”

The great man saluted.

“Shall I fetch an escort, sir?” he inquired.

Crombie, immersed in the labours of composition, nodded absently. Straightway the sergeant-major withdrew to the yard outside, where his voice was heard uplifted in command:

“Escort—*tchu-urn!* Left *turn!* Quick—*march!*”

Clump! clump! clump! The sergeant-major entered the kitchen, followed by an enormous private. The pair tramped across the stone-floored kitchen, in solemn majesty, to the door of the inner room, where the escort, in response to an ear-splitting order, halted.

The sergeant-major, advancing one pace, knocked three times upon the door, and exclaimed in a terrible voice:

“Garsong!”

There was a flutter within: the door was opened by a person unseen, and the procession disappeared. Mr. Rumbelow turned his face to the brickwork of the chimney-corner, and held it there. Cradock hastily buried his features in an obsolete copy of *The Tatler*. Crombie, oblivious to his surroundings, still scribbled nervously.

“Prisoner and escort—*tchu-urn!* Into file, left turn! Quick—*march!*”

Clump! clump! clump!

Presently Captain Crombie, conscious of the near presence of several warm human beings, looked up. Before him, in a rigid row, stood the large private, Petit-Jean, and the sergeant-major. Petit-Jean was wearing his Sunday suit, already described, with the exception of his yachting-cap, which, in accordance with King’s Regulations, had been plucked from his head.

“The boy John, sir!” announced the sergeant-major, in a voice of thunder, and handed Crombie a yellow Army form, containing Petit-Jean’s “crime.”

Crombie took the paper, and from sheer force of habit began to read:

“*John, charged with stealing the following articles upon various dates, namely—*”

Then, realising for the first time the imbecility of the present procedure, he thrust the document away from him, and glanced stealthily at the first sentence on his scribbled sheet. After this he cleared his throat in a distressing manner, looked Petit-Jean straight in the face, and began:

“Er—h’m—*vous êtes voleur?*”

Petit-Jean promptly burst into tears. This gave Crombie an opportunity of studying the next sentence.

“*Voulez-vous,*” he continued when Petit-Jean had regained a measure of composure, “*que je vous donnerai*” (I’m not sure that oughtn’t to be in the

subjunctive) “*aux gendarmes?*”

Petit-Jean responded with a further outburst, supplemented by a violent attack of hiccups. Cradock rose unsteadily to his feet, and groped his way out of the kitchen. The conscientious Crombie proceeded to his next conundrum:

“*Voulez-vous que je vous—er—donne au sergent, pour être battu—n’est-ce pas?*” The last phrase was thrown in on the spur of the moment, and Crombie felt rather proud of it.

The prisoner, however, made no attempt to reply to these engaging propositions. Instead, he sobbed out a long and incomprehensible rigmarole, the only intelligible item of which was the word “pardon.” Crombie, again utilising his opportunity, made a further study of his brief. Then he launched his master-thrust:

“*Est-ce que vous avez fait—no, fit—no—never mind?—I mean, ça ne fait rien.*” He took a good breath, and started again.

“*Est-ce que vous avez fait confession à Monsieur le Curé—eh?*”

There was a dramatic silence, broken by a rending hiccup from the accused. Crombie continued hastily:

“*Demain, vous irez chez Monsieur le Curé, et vous ferez confession, tout de suite—complet—absolument*”—he was gagging wildly now—“*entièrement, et sans doute—que vous êtes voleur. Comprenez?* Anyhow, I’ll tell the *curé* myself, my son, so you’ll get it put across you either way. Now, then, clear out! *Allez vous en!* Sergeant-major, for heaven’s sake, take this hiccuping little blighter away!”

Whether Petit-Jean was duly appreciative of the linguistic effort made on his behalf by Captain Crombie will never be known. But the fact remains that on the following Tuesday afternoon Madame appeared at the kitchen doorway, and summoned Petit-Jean, who was engaged upon some professional duty in the pigsty, to the family living-room. He emerged half an hour later, uncannily clean and dressed in his Sunday suit, supplemented by a large umbrella, and set off with dragging feet across the fields which led to the *curé*’s house. What happened there I cannot tell, but it is probable that Petit-Jean duly “had it put across him,” as predetermined by that wise and merciful young judge, Captain Crombie.

For the next ten days life pressed very heavily upon Petit-Jean. He was in disgrace. The *officiers* no longer gave him a smile on passing, or made observations to him in a language which they imagined to be French and which Petit-Jean judged to be English.

It was an uncomfortable time for more important persons than Petit-Jean. The two six-inch guns, Ferdinand and Isabella, were receiving attentions from the Boche artillery which grew daily more tiresome and accurate. It was obvious that they had been “spotted.” One day a big howitzer shell swung lazily out of the blue and landed ten yards from the abiding-place of Isabella. Fortunately it was a “dud,” but the battery commander, realising the undesirability of tempting Providence too far, telephoned for his traction engine, and within a few hours the two big guns had been towed to a fresh anchorage some distance to a flank. The next morning was devoted to “registering,” with the aid of an aeroplane, upon a convenient château behind the Boche lines. This formality completed, regular business was resumed.

Exactly twenty-four hours later a salvo of hostile “crumps” descended upon the new emplacements. The guns escaped damage, but the bursts of shrapnel which followed the “crumps” accounted for the battery sergeant-major and two gunners. Once more transport was hurriedly summoned, and the royal pair removed to another portion of their realm.

The artillery captain, Maple, who lived in a wooden hut half a mile from the farm, rode over that evening to confide his woes to B Company, who had just returned from another turn in the trenches.

“That Boche battery didn’t open fire on my positions by accident,” he observed darkly.

“Well, it wasn’t any of us who gave him the tip,” said Rumbelow. “We have been in trenches all week.”

The captain, disregarding the pleasantries, put down his bowl of tea, and continued:

“We haven’t been in those positions a couple of days, and there hasn’t been a Boche aeroplane over since Monday. And yet they have us stiff. There’s only one explanation.”

Crombie nodded.

“Spies, of course,” he said.

“Of course,” grunted the gunner savagely. “But it’s hopeless to run them to earth in Belgium. There are lots of inhabited farms quite close up to the line, yet we aren’t allowed to bung anybody out. If I had my way I’d deport the whole bunch five miles back. The place must be full of refugees whom the *Maire* can’t account for. However, I suppose we must put up with it. That’s the worst of fighting in a friendly country; you have to consider everybody’s feelings so infernally. I bet the Boche has everybody on his side of the line trotting around with a number-plate on like a taxi. Well, I must wander off.”

“Stop and help us to struggle with our *Maconochie*,” urged the mess.

“Sorry,” replied the gunner; “but the present situation is too tricky.”

Crombie accompanied his visitor to the farm gate, where an orderly was dispatched for the battery commander’s horse.

“If I see any suspicious-looking stranger lounging about,” said Crombie, “I’ll run him in.”

“Thanks, old man,” replied the harried gunner, and trotted away into the dusty sunset. Crombie turned to go back to the kitchen, and found himself face to face with Petit-Jean. Petit-Jean, with hanging head, promptly sidled towards a pigsty. His demeanour was so dejected that Crombie, suddenly reminded of last week’s episode, and mindful of the acute sorrows of his own sinful youth, laid a hand upon Petit-Jean’s shoulder, and exclaimed affably:

“Halloa, Petit-Jean! *Comment vous portez-vous*—what?”

Petit-Jean, not sure what these incomprehensible words might mean, wriggled nervously.

“*Il fait beau temps*,” continued Crombie, warming to his work. “*Il sera joli chaud demain, n’est-ce pas?*”

He concluded with a smile so jolly that Petit-Jean realised with a joyous thrill that this *was* a friendly conversation, and that his period of ostracism was accomplished. He grinned gratefully, from ear to ear.

“*Et maintenant*,” concluded Crombie, soaring to fresh heights, “*venez avec moi dans la cuisine, et avez—avez—what I mean is, je vous donnerai une pièce de gâteau. Mouvons!*”

Petit-Jean lay awake under the red tiles of his loft, listening to the endless *plop-plop* of the Verey Lights, punctuated by occasional bursts of machine-gun fire along the distant line. Sleep had forsaken him to-night; but the cause was elation rather than depression of spirits. His youthful palate was still cloyed with Huntley and Palmer cake, but his heart, to quote the Psalmist, indited of a good matter.

It was a dark and cloudy night, and Petit-Jean was thereby deprived of one of his favourite sedative exercises—namely, counting the stars in those patches of sky which were visible through holes in the roof.

Suddenly his sharp senses told him that in some way the peace of the loft had been disturbed. The regular breathing of 'Nnri, who slept at the other end of the loft, had ceased, and had given place to a series of stertorous puffs, accompanied by a creaking sound. 'Nnri was awake and pulling on his boots. 'Nnri was going out.

All good civilians in the war-zone are supposed to be safely tucked up and in bed by nine o'clock. Yet here was 'Nnri about to snap his fingers at martial law at two o'clock in the morning. But at first Petit-Jean experienced no surprise. To be quite frank, 'Nnri was an invariable night-bird. He was in the habit of committing the military crime of "breaking out of billets" at least once a week. Whenever the accumulation of parcels from the kitchen made it worth while, 'Nnri was accustomed to pay a nocturnal visit to the establishment of a venerable female, who supported life, externally, by the sale of small beer, cigarettes, and picture postcards. The lady was known among the light-hearted soldiery of the district—possibly in reference to a figure which bore unmistakable testimony to some sixty years of generous diet and insufficient exercise—as Madame Zeppelin. To Madame 'Nnri bartered the cigarettes, cigars, condensed milk, chocolate, and other comforts stolen from the parcels; and Madame disposed of the same, at cent. per cent. profit, to the light-hearted soldiery aforesaid.

Presently 'Nnri's sketchy toilet was completed, and he began to move stealthily down the ladder. Petit-Jean, silent, but wide awake, was overtaken by a fresh thought. Why should 'Nnri be going to Madame Zeppelin's now? He had no wares to offer; recent legal proceedings had knocked that traffic on the head. A further thought. Was 'Nnri bound for Madame Zeppelin's at all? If not—whither?

After that, Petit-Jean began to think very hard indeed. He had always been afraid of 'Nnri, and since their conversation in the guard-room he had hated him as well. On the other hand, he loved *Monsieur le Capitaine* and

his officers like brothers—especially since this afternoon. Petit-Jean felt instinctively that these stealthy movements in the dark were directed in some wise against the safety and well-being of the present house-party at Cow Corpse Farm in particular, and of the British Army in general.

Five minutes later 'Nnri had effected an unostentatious departure from the back premises of the farm—thus avoiding the sentry out on the road in front—and was picking his way cautiously across country towards the trenches. The night was black as ink—so black that no object in the landscape cast a shadow. Yet a shadow followed 'Nnri—a small human shadow—inexorably, all the way to his destination; which, by the way, was not the establishment of Madame Zeppelin.

VI

Petit-Jean stepped out of the cow-house, took a deep breath, planted himself full in the path of Captain Crombie, and exclaimed feverishly:

“M’sieur le Capitaine!”

“Bonjour, Petit-Jean!” replied Crombie, who was in a hurry; and attempted to pass. But Petit-Jean repeated:

“M’sieur le Capitaine!”

Crombie paused.

“Well, what about it, old son?” he inquired.

In answer, Petit-Jean embarked upon a hurried recitation, casting anxious glances all the while in the direction of the beetroot-stack, where 'Nnri was selecting the cows' luncheon.

Finally the recitation ceased, and Petit-Jean eyed the captain eagerly. But all the reply he got was:

“C’est dommage, my lad, but no compree!”

Then upon Petit-Jean descended the inspiration of a lifetime.

“M’sieur le Curé?” he suggested eagerly. The *curé* could speak English of a sort.

“The *curé*?” said Crombie. “I thought that incident was closed.”

But Petit-Jean was urgent.

“Le curé, m’sieur, ce soir, à six heures!”

“Oh!” replied Crombie, beginning to see light. “Er—*ici*?”

Petit-Jean nodded his head vigorously.

“Right-o! Carry on with your mysterious project, and I’ll be here. But I wonder what the old man wants to see me for?”

As a matter of fact, the *curé* was quite unaware of the approaching symposium. For one thing it was Friday, and his busy day. Consequently, when Petit-Jean’s bullet head peeped shyly round his kitchen door, and Petit-Jean’s voice preferred the modest request that he would present himself at B Company’s billet, over a mile away, that evening at six o’clock, the old gentleman’s reply was a little testy. But when he had heard the tale which his small parishioner had to unfold, his eyes gleamed through his spectacles, and he said, quite simply:

“I come, my little! But meanwhile, silence thyself!”

As a matter of fact, the last arrival at the meeting was Captain Crombie. That afternoon Ferdinand and Isabella had been shelled out of a third position, and Crombie had ridden over to offer condolences. Finding Maple almost at his wits’ end, he bethought him suddenly of the *curé*.

“Look here,” he said, “I have a kind of notion that it might pay you to come over to my quarters. The *curé* will be there at”—he looked at his watch—“well, he’s there now. He’s a patriotic old cove. He may be able to suggest a possible renegade among his flock. Come and pump him dry.”

Ten minutes later the pair trotted in at the farm gate, to encounter the *curé*, a little ruffled, on the point of departure. But he was shepherded with fair words into the only arm-chair. The kitchen doors were shut—fortunately the rest of the household were out in the fields—and Petit-Jean told his tale.

Briefly it amounted to this.

He had tracked ’Nnri to an empty house, some three hundred yards behind the reserve line. The house, which had been badly knocked about by shell-fire, was called Five-Point-Nine Villa. ’Nnri had disappeared within. Jean, with some acumen, had crept round to the east end, facing the German lines, in order to detect suspicious flashes or other signals.

“What did you see?” asked Crombie eagerly.

The *curé* passed the question on. Petit-Jean, with a doleful grimace, shook his head.

“Nothing, eh?” said Maple.

“That doesn’t signify anything,” said Crombie. “’Nrri probably stood well back from the window, and Petit-Jean, being on the ground, couldn’t spot the flashes. Anything else, Petit-Jean?”

Yes, there was something else. Petit-Jean produced his trump card. Failing to extract any satisfaction from the house, he had turned his attention to the German lines.

“And what is it, my son,” inquired the old *curé*, eagerly, “that you have seen there?”

“My father,” replied Petit-Jean, with breathless solemnity, “I have seen a red light which made itself to appear three times.”

“And this light? It proceeded from——”

“From behind the trenches of the Boche.”

“*Ça suffit!*” said the old man briskly, and turned to the two officers.

Next afternoon the trap was laid. Fresh gunpits were dug, and Ferdinand and Isabella were ostentatiously installed therein. By ten o’clock the same evening Crombie and Maple were inmates of Five-Point-Nine Villa.

The villa possessed two stories, with the inevitable *grenier*, or loft, running from end to end under the tiles. At the eastern end of this loft, in the apex of the gable, glimmered a circular, unglazed window. Through this drifted the never-ceasing, uneasy sounds of trench warfare. The wood at this point thinned to a mere belt, through which it was possible to see right to the trench-lines. Crombie cautiously turned on his electric torch. The only visible furniture of the loft was a pile of lumber in one corner, and a curious edifice, comprised of British Army ration boxes, standing up like a pulpit in the middle of the floor. The torch went out.

“What is that erection for?” asked Crombie.

“I think I know,” said Maple.

He felt his way in the dark, and presently could be heard climbing.

“I thought so,” remarked his voice, proceeding apparently from just under the low roof. “Come up here; you’ll find a sort of staircase of boxes at the back.”

In a few moments the two officers were standing side by side on the top step of the staircase, looking over the summit of the pulpit at the circular

window in the gable end. Through this could be seen the tossing branches of trees, silhouetted against the flares of the trench-line.

“You see?” said Maple. “This is the signalling stand. It is exactly level with that little round window. Impossible to spot a flash sent from here, unless you were right in the line of the window and the lamp. I should say that the line of sight from this platform to the lower edge of the window just clears our front-line trenches. Pretty neat! Cunning fellow!”

“I wonder where he keeps his lamp?” mused Crombie.

“*Messieurs!*”

“I expect he brings it with him. Too risky to——. Halloa, what’s that?”

“*Messieu-u-urs!*” A sibilant panting whisper shot up the rickety staircase. It emanated from Petit-Jean, who had run all the way from Cow Corpse Farm, making a *détour* into the bargain. Crombie descended from the pulpit and went to the stairhead.

“*Il s’approche!*” hissed Petit-Jean, and vanished.

’Nrri’s first proceeding upon arrival was to mount the pulpit, apparently with a view to inspecting as much of the landscape as was visible through the circular window. Next, breathing heavily in the darkness, he betook himself to the eastern end of the room. This was fortunate for Crombie and Maple, who were among the lumber at the other end. A creaking sound was heard.

“He’s prising up a plank!” whispered Maple.

Crombie nodded his head in the darkness. Evidently ’Nrri was digging out his lamp.

Presently the shuffling footsteps returned, and to an accompaniment of groaning ration-boxes ’Nrri reascended his rostrum. Followed a click, and a dazzling spot of light struck the wall opposite, just under the window. Another click, and the light disappeared.

“Elevation too low, old son!” muttered Maple.

Next time the signaller made no mistake.

The spot of light could not be seen now, for it was impinging upon a Boche retina many hundreds of yards away. But the shutter of the signal-lamp could be heard working clearly enough.

Click-click-clickety-click! 'Nnri was calling up some invisible "exchange." He paused, waited, and began again. Then again. So immersed was he in the interesting occupation of getting into touch with his friends beyond the lines that he quite failed to note the somewhat surprising fact that his feet, which stood upon the topmost step of the pulpit, about a yard from the floor, had suddenly become luminous—or, at least, that they were being illuminated at close range by an electric torch. Three seconds later the torch, having served its purpose in locating the exact position of the feet, was switched off; four willing and muscular hands grabbed the ankles of the preoccupied 'Nnri; Captains Crombie and Maple, each planting a foot squarely against his side of the pulpit, gave a gigantic heave; 'Nnri precipitately abandoned the occupation of telegraph operator in favour of that of contortionist; there was a dull thud, followed by a rattle of cascading ration-boxes. Then silence.

Crombie's torch shone out again. 'Nnri, having just performed "the splits" in mid-air, and subsequently fallen downstairs upon the back of his head, lay quite still.

"Golly, he took a toss and a half!" observed Crombie. "Have we done him in, do you think?"

"No," said Maple. "He's breathing all right. Put the handcuffs on him, and I'll whistle up your sergeant-major and escort."

Ten minutes later 'Nnri, in full possession of his faculties and perspiring icily, was on his way back to Cow Corpse Farm, escorted by two large British privates, preceded by Petit-Jean, and supervised from the rear by Sergeant-Major Goffin.

Crombie and Maple remained in the loft.

"That chap was a Boche all right," said Maple. "He gave himself away when he came to."

"Was that German? I haven't the pleasure of knowing it."

"It was; and fairly profane German, too."

"No idea you were such a linguist."

"I had a German governess in my youth," explained Maple modestly. "Up to this moment I have always wished that she had been French. This lamp is a good instrument." He clicked the shutter. "Not damaged either."

“It will be useful as evidence,” said Crombie.

Maple chuckled.

“I have another use for it first!” he said, and began to rebuild the platform.

Presently the two captains stood level again with the round window. Maple began to manipulate the shutter of the lamp.

“I’m giving the Morse call-up signal,” he explained. “I have a notion to jape with the Boche. Let us see if we can draw him. My word, look!”

Far away in the darkness, beyond the fretful, spluttering trench-lines, there suddenly glowed out a red point of light—then again—then again.

“Three red dashes!” said Maple. “I presume that is the answering signal. Now, let me think. What is the German for——?”

He relapsed into silence, and clicked his shutter vigorously. Then he switched off, and abruptly descended to the floor.

“I have a feeling,” he said, “that we may have a few shells over here shortly. Let us hence!”

“What did you say to the blighters?” inquired Crombie, as the pair stepped out briskly along the muddy track which ran back to Cow Corpse Farm.

“I said: ‘*Number engaged! Sorry you’ve been troubled! Gott strafe England!*’ ”

The Cure VI

I

MR. McROBBIE, comfortably disposed in a deep leather arm-chair in the smoking-room of Invermutchkin House, was cleaning a gun and contentedly emitting through his nose what sounded like a bagpipe lament. He was a patriarchal old gentleman with a long white beard, wearing the plain kilt, homespun stockings, and tweed jacket of the Highland gamekeeper.

Incidentally it may be noted that Mr. McRobbie had no right to be cleaning guns in the smoking-room at all. But Invermutchkin House had recently changed hands, and its new proprietor had not yet arrived to take possession. McRobbie and his daughter Elspeth, supported by the firm of Cook and Tweeny, were in sole charge of the premises.

It was a perfect morning in late August. Invermutchkin House was a genuine shooting-box, set right on the moor; and waves of heathery turf, rolling down from the jagged skyline, lapped against the very foot of the verandah outside the smoking-room windows. On the other side of the house a pair of parallel wheel-tracks, with the courtesy title of carriage drive, connected the front door with the main road half a mile away.

The smoking-room door opened, and Miss Elspeth McRobbie appeared. She was a demure young woman of about twenty-five, distinguished in the presence of her superiors by the stately and insincere politeness of the Celt engaged in exploiting the Saxon.

“Father,” she announced, in a pretty Highland accent, “you had best be getting out of this. The young leddy has taken her breakfast and is coming in here. Take you the guns and go away down the kitchen stair.”

Mr. McRobbie swung himself from the deep-seated arm-chair, with an ease which many a city man of forty-five would have envied.

“When is ta shentleman arriving from ta south?” he demanded.

“This morning.”

McRobbie received this intelligence without enthusiasm.

“And what like,” he continued, collecting numerous oily rags from the surrounding furniture, “is ta young leddy herself?”

“She is very peautiful, and she takes a good breakfast, and”—Miss McRobbie shuddered delicately—“a cold bath in the morning.”

“Pless me!” exclaimed her father. “Is she daft?”

“I could not rightly say,” replied Elspeth: “I did not get speaking with her yet. It was late last night when she arrived; and she said she would take a cold bath in the morning at eight, and two eggs to her breakfast at nine, with a piece ham and scones and jeely.”

At this moment the lady under discussion entered from the verandah. She was an extremely pretty girl of twenty-one, attired in a short tweed skirt and a knitted yellow jumper, which formed an effective background for an armful of fuchsias, newly gathered from the southern wall of the house. Her name was Hilda Smithson; and besides being pretty, she was healthy, vigorous, and practical—such a type, happily, as this generation, for all its lamentations over its own offspring, still produces in attractive and reassuring quantities.

Like most pretty girls, Hilda was in the habit of asking for what she wanted and seeing that she got it.

“Elspeth,” she demanded, setting down the flowers upon the table, “how do you sweep out bedrooms in this house?”

“With a broom, mem,” replied Elspeth, with an indulgent smile. “Yes, mem. This is my father, mem.”

Hilda shook hands with the venerable McRobbie in a friendly fashion.

“How do you do, Mr. McRobbie?” she said. “Have you a gunroom in the house?”

McRobbie admitted that such was the case, and added that it was a peautiful gunroom.

“Then I think,” said Hilda, “that you had better clear up that mess behind you and take it there. And keep it there,” she added.

Mr. McRobbie, considerably flustered by such unexpectedly firm handling, gathered up his belongings and sidled towards the door.

“I will send for you when I want you,” added Hilda. “Don’t forget that oily rag you have left on the clock. And, Elspeth”—frustrating Miss McRobbie in an attempt to retreat under the lee of her parent—“wait a minute.”

The door closed, and Hilda sat down upon the arm of the chair recently vacated by her retainer.

“The cook, mem,” announced Elspeth rapidly, “was asking me just now what would you and the shentleman like to your dinners.”

“Thank you,” said Hilda: “I have just seen the cook. I fancy she will be too busy to-day cleaning up the kitchen to have much time for cooking. Now, to get back to the bedrooms; when you sweep a bedroom floor, where do you sweep the dust? Into a corner?”

“Oh no, mem,” protested Elspeth in a shocked voice. “It would be so untidy. Under the bed.”

“Well,” replied Miss Smithson, “I want you and the other maid to set to work at once and sweep out every room in this house, beginning under the beds. By the way, how is it that none of the bells will ring?”

“McMutchkin was not using them a great deal, mem,” explained Miss McRobbie. (McMutchkin had been the name of the aristocratic but somewhat primitive old gentleman who had spent the last forty years of his life as proprietor of Invermutchkin House.) “If he would be wanting anything he would just let a roar down the kitchen stair.”

At this moment a faint “ting-ting” was audible from the direction of the verandah.

“There seems to be one bell in the house in order, after all,” said Hilda.

“That is a bicycle, mem,” replied Elspeth. “It will be the postman, or Mr. Angus.” She walked to the window and looked out. “Yes indeed, it is Mr. Angus.”

“Mr. Angus?”

“Yes, mem. Captain Farquhar, the factor.”

“Captain Angus Farquhar?” inquired Hilda quickly.

“Yes, mem—a nice shentleman. Will I give him a cry?”

“Certainly not. If he comes to the front door show him in here, properly.”

Miss McRobbie, foreseeing much unnecessary labour ahead if such a precedent as this were established, hastened to point out:

“McMutchkin would never be doing that, mem. He would just cry out to any pairson that was passing, to come away in and have a dram—”

“At once, please, Elspeth!” said Hilda—and Elspeth was not.

As the door closed upon her, Angus Farquhar appeared on the verandah, wheeling a bicycle, which he propped against the rail. He was a tall young man in a much worn shooting-jacket.

Angus turned to the doorway leading into the smoking-room. Framed within it he beheld a vision in a canary-coloured jumper—a vision with parted lips and surprised eyes. Next moment two obviously pleased and faintly embarrassed young people were shaking hands vigorously.

“I’d no idea it was you who had taken this place,” said Angus, breaking the silence which usually follows sudden greetings.

“And I had no idea we should find you here. Sit down and have a cigarette. No, I forgot: I don’t think they’re unpacked yet: I only arrived here last night. Light a pipe, or something—anything!” Hilda was speaking with a shade less than her usual composure. There was a vivacious, almost nervous, note in her voice which Miss Elspeth McRobbie, for instance, would have entirely failed to recognise.

“Sit down,” she continued, “while I put these flowers into a vase. Aren’t they lovely? Fancy fuchsias growing in the open air so far north.”

“They grow all over the West Highlands,” said Angus. “There’s a vase on the mantelpiece. Let me get it for you.”

“Don’t bother,” said Hilda. “Sit still and go on answering questions. I presume you have some official connection with this place? Are you the agent, or whatever they call it in this country?”

“The factor—yes.”

“And are you responsible for the upkeep and good order of the establishment?”

“The correct expression,” said Angus, “is ‘the house and policies.’”

“Anyhow, you’re responsible?”

“To a certain extent,” admitted the young man cautiously.

“Then,” inquired Miss Smithson, wheeling round on him, “perhaps you can inform me why not a bell in the house will ring, and why I found twenty-seven empty whisky-bottles on the top of my wardrobe.”

“Possibly McMutchkin had finished with them,” suggested Angus. “And the next article?”

“Not one of the bedroom windows in the house will open,” said Hilda.

Angus Farquhar’s slightly sardonic features relaxed into a cheerful grin.

“The McMutchkins of Invermutchkin,” he explained, “trace back their ancestry to an era considerably antecedent to the birth of the lunatic who invented draughts. The clan was founded then, and has not changed its habits since.”

“Men,” commented Miss Smithson, “are all alike where ventilation is concerned. And why is there no bathroom in the house?”

“The McMutchkins,” replied Angus, “did not approve of total immersion.”

“Well,” announced Hilda, setting the bunch of fuchsias in the middle of the table with an emphatic bump, “the McMutchkins are out of this place for good and all, and the Smithsons reign in their stead—plain, dull, and *nouveau riche*; but clean! At present the roof of this house leaks, the chimneys smoke, the taps won’t run, the windows won’t open, and the bells won’t ring. I look to you to put all that right, and I intend to make your life a burden until you do.”

“We might collaborate,” suggested Captain Farquhar.

“I shan’t have much time to collaborate with you,” replied Miss Smithson. “We are all busy here. The cook and kitchen-maid are engaged in scrubbing the kitchen floor; the housemaid is sweeping under the beds. I personally—— Angus Farquhar, are you attending?”

“Oh yes,” protested Angus, detaching his gaze from Hilda’s flushed and pretty face with some difficulty. “*End of Part One. Part Two will follow directly.*”

Miss Smithson gazed at him indignantly.

“You haven’t changed much,” she observed.

Angus bowed. “Thanks for the compliment,” he said.

“It wasn’t a compliment. It was an insult!”

“That’s a matter of opinion. Now, to turn to brighter topics, when do you expect your father?”

“Any moment. He’s coming up by the night train from London, and the car has gone to meet him.”

“I wonder if he will want to shoot to-day,” said Angus.

Hilda looked up sharply. "Why?" she asked.

"That is why I came over this morning," Angus explained. "We have been corresponding a good deal on the subject. Mr. Smithson appears to be a keen sportsman."

"Sportsman? Nonsense!" Miss Smithson smiled affectionately. "He's a dear old thing, and my dad, and I love him; but after all he's Frederick Smithson, of Finsbury Pavement, E.C., and a city man to the soles of his boots. His proper place on a holiday is Brighton pier."

"But he tells me he's going to shoot every day."

"Well, that is just what you and I are going to prevent."

"I shall be most happy," said Angus, "to be associated with you in any enterprise, however delicate."

It is probable that this piece of impertinence would not have gone unrebuked, but at this moment a motor-horn boomed outside.

"There he is!" cried Hilda. "Come and meet him."

Two minutes later the new proprietor of Invermutchkin House was received at his newly acquired front-door by the full strength of his establishment. His daughter and factor stood upon the steps; the McRobbies, *père et fille*, were visible in the doorway behind them. Through a hermetically closed scullery window, level with the ground, surrounded by a halo of steam and soap-suds, could be discerned the crimson faces of Cook and Tweeny, who had temporarily abandoned the cleansing of the Augean stable to welcome the incoming chieftain.

Frederick Smithson, of Finsbury Pavement, E.C., and Laburnum Lodge, Surbiton, was of the type that you may see travelling up to town any weekday morning (except Saturday) from any suburban station, by any train that runs between half-past nine and half-past ten, after the early tide of clerks and stenographers has rolled forward out of the way; or contending profanely with a niblick on one of the more expensive suburban golf courses upon a Saturday or Sunday. He was a substantial, kind-hearted, rather boisterous creature of about fifty. He wore a knickerbocker tweed suit which, as his daughter at once remarked, spoke for itself, while a travelling-rug, thrown carelessly over one shoulder, furnished the necessary suggestion of deference to local tradition.

"Well, well, well!" exclaimed Mr. Smithson to nobody in particular. "Here we are at last—right in the middle of bonny Scotland! Grouse, and

haggis, and porridge, and everything! Who is this gentleman, my dear?"

Hilda introduced Angus Farquhar, and then drew her parent's attention to the McRobbies, who, needless to say, were quite equal to the occasion. Elspeth curtsied reverently, and wished her overlord good day.

"Good day to you, my dear!" replied Mr. Smithson. "You're a braw wee Scottie, ain't you?" Mr. Smithson was a kind-hearted and well-meaning man. He had been a good husband, and was an indulgent father, but he was insular to the bone. Like nine-tenths of his class, he was incapable of grasping the point of view or habit of mind of people outside his own immediate walk of life. For instance, he regarded the inhabitants of Scotland, in common with those of the other non-English countries of this globe, as a primitive and mentally retarded community, to be treated with humorous condescension, and addressed, as far as possible, in its own idiom and dialect. That is why he informed Miss Elspeth McRobbie that she was a braw wee Scottie.

"This is McRobbie," said Hilda, turning her father in the right direction of his retainer. "He looks after the shooting and the garden."

Mr. Smithson nodded affably.

"What ho, McRobbie!" he said.

"Good day to you, Invermutchkin," replied Mr. McRobbie politely.

"Have some whisky," said Mr. Smithson. "Whuskey, you know!" He produced a silver flask.

"There iss no occasion," said McRobbie, politely shaking his head and putting out his hand.

"Oh, well, I won't press you," said Mr. Smithson, returning the flask to his pocket. "Let's go into our humble home. What was that he called me?" he inquired, as the party proceeded to the smoking-room.

"Invermutchkin," said Hilda.

"But my name, to the staff," objected her father, "is Mr. Smithson, J.P.!"

"It's the custom of the country, sir," said Angus. "You must get used to being called by the name of your estate, up here."

Mr. Smithson's face cleared. "Oh, well," he said, "if it's usual, I'm agreeable. But that old Santa Claus must learn to call me *Mr.* Invermutchkin. Or do the gentry receive no titles of respect in this country?"

“In the Highlands,” Angus explained, “plain Invermutchkin is a much greater title of respect than Mr. Invermutchkin.”

“Very well,” said Smithson, shrugging his broad shoulders. “Put it down to my ignorance of foreign customs. I suppose when I get back to Surbiton my friends will have to call me ‘Laburnum Lodge’—eh?” He chuckled. “And is all this my estate?”

By this time the trio were out on the verandah, inspecting the vista of crag and heather.

“Yes. The Invermutchkin property runs right away to the skyline,” said Angus.

“It’s a heavenly place,” said Hilda, with a contented sigh.

“It would give me the hump to sit and look at it for long,” said her parent frankly. “What is there to do here, exactly?”

“One can do almost anything,” said Farquhar, with a reassuring glance towards Hilda. “You are only two miles from the sea, which means that you can go bathing, or fishing, or boat sailing. The Strathmore Golf Course is only five miles away by road. You’ve heard of it, I expect: it is almost up to championship standard. You can catch sea-trout in two lochs close by here, and there is quite a good-sized burn running through your own estate. There are two tennis courts on the north side of the house——”

“What about the shooting?” inquired Mr. Smithson a little impatiently. “What do you raise on this moor—parrots?”

Angus Farquhar hesitated. Here was the question put to him point-blank. He was an unprincipled young man, and if he could have carried out Hilda’s wishes by telling a falsehood to her father he would have done so. Unfortunately, he did not know what sort of falsehood to tell. In other words, he had been retained but not briefed. He glanced towards his accomplice for aid.

That resourceful maiden responded at once.

“It’s a pity the moor has turned out such a disappointment,” she said.

“Disappointment?” Mr. Smithson, who had been gazing proudly over his sporting property, whirled round to face its two detractors. As he turned his back, a large covey of grouse rose from the heather not two hundred yards from the house, and skimmed away towards the horizon.

“Disappointment?” repeated Mr. Smithson. “Do you mean to say there are no birds?”

“Very few,” replied Hilda.

“Practically none,” corroborated Angus, as the last bird dropped from sight.

“But why wasn’t I told?” demanded Mr. Smithson. “What’s happened to them all?”

Angus shook his head mournfully.

“Grouse disease,” he said. “It came on very suddenly. The birds were all right when you bought the place in the spring, but there has been an epidemic this summer. I hardly think it would be worth your while to go out this season.”

This opinion was promptly backed, with no uncertain sound, by an old cock-grouse communicating with his family in the heather close by. Fortunately Mr. Smithson was too agitated to notice.

“Something will have to be done about this,” he announced. “I have got half the Stock Exchange coming down here to shoot—one big party after another—and I have arranged for a photographer to come and take groups for the society papers. *‘Reading from left to right’*—and all that sort of thing. How can we——”

“What time, mem,” inquired a high-pitched and stately voice behind them, “will the shentleman be shooting over the moor to-day?” Mr. McRobbie had returned.

“The beans,” murmured Angus Farquhar to himself, “are now comfortably spilled.”

He was right.

“Shoot over the moor?” exclaimed Smithson. “Why, I’ve just been told there’s nothing to shoot.”

“There iss more birds than for twenty-seven years,” announced the old gentleman simply.

“That’s not saying much, is it?” inquired Hilda hurriedly, of Angus.

“No, not at all!” said Angus loyally, but desperately.

“Iss it not?” retorted McRobbie, with warmth. “Iss there not more than five hundred brace on the moor this day?”

Here the voice of that plain business man, Mr. Smithson, intervened.

“What’s all the mystery?” he demanded. “Are there birds on this moor, or are there not? That’s what I want to know.”

“None worth shooting,” replied Angus. McRobbie rolled up his eyes and gave a deep groan. But Frederick Smithson’s mind was now made up.

“I’m a practical man,” he announced, “and seeing is believing. I’m going upstairs to get my shooting-boots on; and then I’m going to get my gun and go out on that moor and investigate. McRobbie, my man, be ready for me in five minutes, and we’ll go together, and see whether your name’s Ananias or George Washington.”

II

The two conspirators were left alone.

“Well, that’s that!” remarked Angus Farquhar philosophically. “But why mustn’t papa shoot? You were just going to tell me. Is he unsafe?”

“He is the most dangerous shot in Europe,” replied papa’s daughter. “In Surbiton they call him ‘The Rabbits’ Friend.’ ”

“Why?”

“Because he has never been known to miss a ferret.”

“Oh!” said Angus thoughtfully; “so that’s it? Did he ever hit anything really big—his host, or the gamekeeper?”

“Mercifully, no,” said Hilda. “He never hits anything at all now.”

“What—never?”

“No. The only place where he shoots is the Richardsons’, near Weybridge. Whenever he goes there Tom Richardson takes him to the dining-room sideboard for five minutes, while his brother Reggie picks the shot out of dad’s cartridges and ballasts them with a little sand.”

Angus Farquhar’s face cleared. “What is sauce for Weybridge,” he said, “can be sauce for Invermutchkin. I will prepare some cartridges forthwith.” He slipped off the verandah rail and took a step towards the smoking-room. But a small hand detained him.

“Angus, I don’t like the idea.”

“Why not?”

“He would find out, sooner or later,” said Hilda, “and it would hurt his feelings dreadfully. Can’t you think of a way of curing him altogether?”

“Let’s both think!” suggested Captain Farquhar.

Silence reigned for a moment. Then Angus looked up.

“A shock-cure,” he said: “that’s what he wants! Father must be blooded.”

“Blooded? What do you mean?”

“He must draw blood. He must shoot somebody.”

“Who?”

“Who? McRobbie, of course.”

“Pless me!” exclaimed an indignant voice behind them. McRobbie had returned from the kitchen just in time to hear his own sentence pronounced.

Angus turned to Hilda.

“Miss Smithson,” he said, “I think you had better keep out of this.”

Recognising the wisdom of this suggestion, Hilda remained in the sunlit verandah while the two conspirators retired to the shady seclusion of the smoking-room. She had no desire to be regarded by Mr. McRobbie as a confederate. . . .

The conclave appeared to consist of a steady monologue by Angus Farquhar, punctuated by comments and (occasionally) protests from his audience. Presently the protests died away; then the comments. Finally McRobbie asked a question, evidently of a delicate and confidential nature.

“A five-pound note, I should think,” Angus was heard to reply. “Will that satisfy you?” Apparently it would, for the meeting broke up forthwith, and the general public, in the form of Miss Smithson, was readmitted to the smoking-room.

“At first I would walk right behind him,” McRobbie was saying as she entered, “and fire whenever he fired until we had a few birds shot.”

“Yes, and then get in front of him—right in front! That’ll do the business, I fancy,” said Angus, who was picking the cardboard wads out of the end of a pegamoid cartridge. “Come and sit down, Hilda.”

“What are you two doing?” asked Miss Smithson suspiciously.

“This is a Peace Conference. We are making the world safe for Democracy—reducing armaments, in fact.” Angus emptied a little stream of Number Five shot out of the cartridge, filled up the cavity with emery-powder, and carefully replaced the cardboard disc at the mouth.

“Do about a dozen like that, McRobbie, and all will be well. Finish them in the gunroom and then bring them up here. We don’t want to be discovered.”

McRobbie removed himself and his apparatus, chuckling softly. He had hardly departed when the new shooting-boots of Hilda’s parent were heard descending the stairs, and Mr. Smithson entered the room, carrying gun and cartridge-bag.

“Now,” he announced joyfully, “daddy’s ready to go a-hunting! All I want is ammunition. I see someone has left the cartridge magazine out for me: that’s very thoughtful. I’ll slip a couple into my gun, and fill up this bag.” He opened the magazine and pulled out a handful of gleaming brass cartridges.

“Don’t use those good ones,” said Angus hastily.

“Why not? Aren’t they my property?”

“Yes; but they are not suitable for walking up birds. They’re for driven grouse, you know.”

“I should like to use them,” said Mr. Smithson wistfully. “They look smart.”

“But you will never be able to save the empty cases, walking all over the moor,” said Angus; “and they are valuable. If you were going to stand in a butt, it would be different.”

“Oh, very well,” grumbled Smithson. “I suppose we must all economise these days. I’ll take some of the other kind.” He plunged his hand in the compartment containing the ordinary pegamoid cartridges.

“I think I saw McRobbie take some of that sort out of the magazine for you, dear,” announced Miss Smithson, glad of an opportunity to speak the truth amid somewhat sparse opportunities. “He has them with him; you won’t need any more.”

“This is the Château Anti-Waste, and no mistake!” commented Mr. Smithson humorously. “Ah, here is his Nibs—with hound! Have you got some cartridges for me, McRobbie?” he inquired, as the old gentleman appeared once more in the doorway, accompanied by an elderly red setter.

“Yes, sir. Put you these in your pocket, I will carry the rest in your bag.” McRobbie—looking, as Angus afterwards described it, “like the cat helping mother to hunt for the missing canary”—handed half a dozen cartridges to his employer, who put them in his pocket.

“Now I’m ready,” said Smithson. “Come along, McRobbie!”

“Ferry good, sir. Come, Frolic!”

“You may be bothered a bit by the echo at first, Mr. Smithson,” said Angus.

“Echo? What echo?”

“It’s a curious local phenomenon. Every time you loose off your gun you will hear a sound as if someone had fired just behind you. It quite bothers some people.”

“Nothing is going to bother me to-day,” replied Mr. Smithson confidently. “Are you coming to walk round with us, Mr. Farquhar?”

“Not this morning,” replied Angus. “I expect to have some business to attend to.”

“Quite right! Business before pleasure! I will be back for lunch, my dear. Just going for a potter round.”

The proprietor of Invermutchkin House walked with elastic tread down his verandah steps, passed through the gate in the fence which separated his so-called garden from the rest of the moor, and stepped out proudly across his heather.

“When are we liable to come across the birds?” he inquired over his shoulder to his venerable shadow.

“You will be seeing them any time now, sir,” was the reply.

“Righto! I may as well load.”

Mr. Smithson produced two cartridges, and snapped open the breech of his gun. He closed it again immediately, and returned the cartridges to his pocket.

“I forgot I had loaded already,” he said to himself.

“What do you think of the scheme?” inquired Angus, not without a certain pride, as he sat down beside Miss Smithson on a wicker couch in the verandah.

“I shall wait for results,” replied Hilda. “And now, Captain Angus Farquhar, D.S.O.,” she continued, rounding suddenly upon him, “I have a bone to pick with you!”

For a moment they eyed one another intently. They were a strong-willed young couple, not given to evading issues. Hilda realised without difficulty that her challenge had been accepted.

“Dish up your bone,” said Angus.

Hilda began at once.

“When did we last meet?”

“Two summers ago, just after I was demobbed.”

“Where?”

“At Hindridge, for the cricket week.”

“You remember that much, anyhow. When was the last time we spoke to one another?”

“In a corner of the Hindridge conservatory, between the last two dances of the evening.”

“You remember that too, do you?”

“Yes; I do remember that too!” There was a short pause. Angus began to fidget with his feet. He looked more than a little guilty. Then Hilda continued.

“Do you remember anything else?”

“Yes. I—I asked you for something.”

“What?”

“A flower.”

“Did I give it to you?”

“You did. And then—I asked for something else.”

“We need not discuss that,” said Miss Smithson hurriedly.

“And got it too!” added Angus with satisfaction.

“Then why,” blazed Hilda, coming tempestuously and prematurely to the point—“why did you bolt off next morning by the six o’clock train?”

“I felt,” replied Angus, evidently choosing his words carefully, “that I could not afford to—to——”

“To what?” inquired Miss Smithson softly.

“To tip the butler.”

Miss Smithson, deeply and justly incensed, rose to her feet and stood threateningly over her refractory examinee.

“That, Captain Farquhar,” she announced, “was *not* the reason!”

“What was, then?”

“I don’t know. But do you think it was quite considerate to leave without saying good-bye, after—after——”

“After the second thing?” inquired Angus, reaching for her hand.

“Yes,” said Miss Smithson, in a low voice. Obeying gentle pressure, she sat down again.

“It may not have been considerate,” continued Angus, “but it was honest.”

“Why?”

“Has a man who cannot afford to tip the butler any right to sit in a conservatory with an heiress—asking for things?”

“It depends,” was the judicial reply.

“On what?”

“On whether he really wants what he asks for.”

“I wanted it all right,” said Farquhar quickly.

“Also, on whether she wants to listen.”

“So far as I remember,” said Angus, stroking Hilda’s hand, “you signified that you did.”

The hand was withdrawn, and a cold voice inquired:

“Then why did you run away?”

“Because it seemed the decent thing to do.”

“It was a cowardly thing to do!”

“Believe me,” replied Farquhar earnestly, “it required more courage than any other action in my life. It seemed to me that I *ought* to run away. I didn’t want to; but I did.” He took Hilda’s hand again.

“You appear to have returned,” said the young lady. But this time she made no attempt to remove the hand. “Why?”

“Circumstances have changed—my circumstances.”

Hilda looked up.

“You mean you can now afford to—tip the butler?”

“Oh bless you, no! But I can afford to marry! The deceased McMutchkin was my relative. On his demise this property descended to me. Not having the wherewithal to keep it up, I sold it, remaining on the estate as factor to the incoming proprietor—just to keep myself occupied. *Voilà tout!*” There was another pause.

“Quite a coincidence,” observed Miss Smithson at length—chiefly for the sake of saying something.

“Yes, wasn’t it? I had no idea what Smithson I was selling the place to. There are so many Smithsons.”

“Alas, yes!” agreed Miss Smithson.

Then Angus Farquhar, tightening his grip on the hand, said:

“Why not reduce the number by one?”

Hilda slowly raised her eyes to meet his. Her answer was plain to read therein. But even as her lips parted to utter it, there came from the moor the sound of a shot, followed by a piercing howl, mingled with the frantic barking of a dog. The pair started to their feet.

“It’s McRobbie!” exclaimed Hilda.

“Yes. His celebrated entertainment has begun. An untimely moment, but no matter! Where are they?”

The answer to this question was soon forthcoming. Presently, round a heather-clad knoll not a hundred yards away, appeared the burly figure of Frederick Smithson, J.P.—protesting, explaining, expostulating, apologising. Beside him, leaning on his shoulder and roaring his sorrows to heaven, hobbled Mr. McRobbie. Round the two, in a series of ecstatic circles, with ear-splitting barks, danced the sedate Frolic.

“He’s doing it very well,” said Angus.

Suddenly the air was rent by further discords. Miss Elspeth McRobbie stood before them—weeping, moaning, and declaiming.

“Your father has shot my father!” she wailed. “What will my father no do to him? Woe iss me!”

“Don’t be alarmed, Elspeth,” said Hilda soothingly. “It can’t be serious.”

But you cannot cheat a Celt of an emotional opportunity.

With a long-drawn wail Miss McRobbie sped through the little gate and proceeded at the double across the heather to the succour of her sire.

IV

Five minutes later McRobbie lay prostrate in a long chair in the verandah, the not unwilling recipient of neat whisky. His left knee was roughly bandaged with a handkerchief, the property of his daughter. The agitated Smithson was delivering a monologue to Angus Farquhar in the corner of the verandah.

“I assure you, my dear fellow, it was the merest accident. If only he had kept out of the line of fire he’d have been all right.” He turned feverishly upon the groaning McRobbie. “What did you want to go rushing forward for, like an old sheep-dog—eh? Were you trying to catch a bird in your mouth, or what?”

Angus Farquhar interposed. It was time, he felt, to begin to rub things in.

“This is a grave business, Mr. Smithson,” he announced, leading the culprit apart.

“We may have to leave the country,” added Smithson’s unprincipled daughter, attaching herself to the party in her allotted rôle of Job’s comforter.

“But the silly old fool got in my way!” urged the unhappy man.

Angus shook his head.

“They will make little allowance for that,” he said.

“They?” replied Smithson in fresh apprehension. “What do you mean—they?”

“The McRobbies,” said Hilda simply.

“You little know the storm that this will rouse,” continued Angus—without a certain artistic joy in his own performance. “The clan may rise.

The fiery cross will go round. The last man who drew blood from a McRobbie was found lying stark upon the heather three days later.” Here a sharp twitch administered to his sleeve by the hand of his accomplice intimated to the rhapsodist that it is possible to spoil a good case by overstatement. “I will leave you to consult your daughter, sir, as to your best course of action,” he concluded.

Leaving Hilda to deal with her now thoroughly demoralised parent, Angus approached McRobbie.

“Well, old man,” he inquired, leaning over the sufferer with a frank grin, “how goes it?” He slapped the old gentleman covertly upon his bandaged knee.

McRobbie’s reply was to leap out of his seat with a roar like that of a wounded bull, and hop madly round the verandah, holding the damaged limb in both hands.

“I say,” urged Angus in a low voice, “don’t overdo it, old fellow.”

“Then what the duffle for,” roared McRobbie, “did you wish to hit a wounded man?”

“Can you not see my father’s leg is filled with small shot?” chanted Elspeth, who had just returned with hot water, and was now engaged in restoring her outraged progenitor to his seat.

“Yes, yes,” replied Angus soothingly. He was a little concerned over the course of events. McRobbie was taking his rôle too seriously. He decided to bring matters to a head at once.

“You will be compensated, of course,” he said.

“Indeed and I will!” replied the old gentleman ferociously.

“I will speak to Mr. Smithson at once,” said Angus. He crossed the verandah to where Smithson, now a complete prey to nervous shock, was in his turn imbibing restoratives, filially administered.

“I am afraid you will have to put your hand in your pocket over this, Mr. Smithson,” he announced.

Here was a solution which Mr. Smithson had no difficulty in appreciating.

“Certainly!” he said, eagerly, fumbling for his cheque-book. “How much?”

“I will inquire,” said Angus; and returned to the other end of the verandah.

“How much will you take, McRobbie?” he asked loudly; and sought to signify, by contortions of the eyebrows, that this was what actors call a “cue.”

“One hundred pound!” replied the sufferer promptly.

Angus, keeping his back to Smithson, shook his head and frowned.

“Come, come,” he said; “don’t be ridiculous! You haven’t really been shot, you know,” he added in a low voice.

“What’s that you’re saying?” screamed McRobbie. “I have not really been shot?”

“Not very seriously, anyhow,” replied Angus, working his eyebrows furiously.

“Cot pless me! Not seriously? *Look you at that!*”

With a dramatic gesture McRobbie tore off the bandage from his knee. Bloodstains were visible. “And look you here!” he continued. “My hose top iss full of shot; and there iss holes in my kilt whatever. Do you say that is not serious?”

He leaned back in his chair again, complete master of the situation, and fearfully submitted his damaged limb to ablutionary treatment.

Angus thoughtfully picked up Mr. Smithson’s gun, which was leaning against the rail. He opened the breech, and the key to the mystery was duly ejected from the right barrel—a cartridge-case of gleaming brass.

“The old boy will have to have a tenner at least,” he said to himself.

But already Mr. Smithson had torn a cheque from its book, and was at his victim’s side.

“I regret very much having caused you this inconvenience, McRobbie,” he announced, with apprehensive formality, “and I hope you will accept this small sum in slight compensation for any injury you may have suffered.”

McRobbie took the cheque, with an air which implied that he was doing so without prejudice, and examined it. But when he read the three figures inscribed upon it his features relaxed.

“Thank you, sir!” he said, in a dazed voice.

“Thank you, sir!” echoed his daughter, reading the cheque over his shoulder.

“Are you in great pain, McRobbie?” inquired Hilda, to whom the actual fact had just been disclosed by Angus.

McRobbie broke into a beaming smile.

“Pain? Oh, no, mem! It is nothing at all. I have been shot four times before—always by English shentlemen; and none of them ever gave me more than”—obedient to an obvious nudge from his daughter he pulled himself up—“so much as this shentleman here.” (In sober truth no previous solatium had exceeded five pounds.) “Thank you again, sir.” He rose majestically, and followed his daughter in the direction of the kitchen. Suddenly he looked back.

“Shall you be shooting again this afternoon?” he inquired.

“No,” replied Smithson, with great emphasis, “I shall not.”

“Ferry good, sir,” said McRobbie, and disappeared, obviously disappointed.

Mr. Smithson dropped into the long chair.

“My nerve’s gone—absolutely,” he announced. “It will take me months to get over this, and all my life to get used to this place. Me for Brighton tomorrow!”

“What are you going to do with Invermutchkin House, dad?” inquired Hilda, striking while the iron was hot.

“I don’t know. I don’t care. Sell it! Burn it! Cut it up into allotments! Build a picture palace on it!”

Miss Smithson waited until her parent had concluded. Then she proffered the timid suggestion:

“Dad, would you like to give it to me?”

Mr. Smithson looked up in a dazed fashion.

“You?” he inquired. “Whatever for?”

“For a wedding present,” replied Miss Smithson demurely, slipping her arm into that of Captain Angus Farquhar.

I

THE simplest way to study the development of Margaret Dale is to follow her successive changes of style.

When she was a fat little girl in a bassinette she was called Baby. However, a large number of quite ordinary people are called that at the outset of their careers, so we will not labour the point. About the time that she learned to walk, her mother, who was subject to outbreaks of imagination, called her Toddles; but this was sternly discouraged by Mr. Dale, who was a bluff, plain, straightforward Englishman, with no frills or nonsense about him—one of those men who have made the English race beloved throughout the world.

“Shut up!” he said; “and call the child Maggie. If the name my father called my mother for forty years isn’t good enough for you—well, I’m a reasonable man; tell me *why!*”

Mrs. Dale, however, preferred to call the child Maggie.

When Margaret was sent to a school for fat little girls in Wimbledon Park it was decided by the authorities to call her Daisy, there being a superfluity of Maggies on the strength of the establishment. So during the next three years she was known and addressed by the infant population of Wimbledon Park as Daisy Dale—which her papa said reminded him of a burlesque actress, but found himself powerless to prevent.

About the time that Daisy reached the age of fourteen, and had begun to develop a fondness for her own point of view—which her father attributed to lack of maternal discipline, and her mother (in an unpublished verdict) to heredity—she was sent to a large school for girls at Brighton. Here she contrived to imbue her preceptors with the belief that her name was Margu rite; and as such, despite vociferous remonstrances from the usual quarter, she continued to exist until the age of seventeen, when she was sent to be “finished”—which usually means “begun”—in an expensive establishment situated in a suburb of Paris almost entirely given over to such establishments. She returned home at the end of a year with her hair bobbed, and expressed a desire to be addressed in future as Margot.

After this she settled down to her foreordained calling of scalp-collectress.

She began upon second-lieutenants, undergraduates, and eighteen-year-old schoolboys home for the holidays. She smoked cigarettes with them, danced continuously, drank cocktails when invited, and was particularly gracious to such as were proprietors of two-seaters. She received sundry proposals of marriage, all of which she accepted in the spirit in which they were offered. At length, having rendered Wimbledon Park a devastated area incapable of further exploitation, she contracted the habit of slipping into the West End of London by the Underground Railway. You can get from Wimbledon Park Station to Charing Cross direct in about half an hour; which means that you can lunch domestically and virtuously in Wimbledon Park at one o'clock, yet keep an appointment at a matinée in the Strand by half-past two. Margot kept quite a number of these. But they were seldom with the same person. She was quite heart-whole.

One afternoon, after one of these agreeable excursions, she was handed into the Wimbledon train at Charing Cross Underground Station by an adoring youth named Reggie Bingham, and sank down, pleasantly fatigued, in the only vacant seat in the car, beside a City gentleman in a tall hat, whom she recognised at once without any difficulty as her father. During the scene which immediately ensued Margot seized the opportunity—which she had awaited for some time—to press the entire question of parental interference to a definite and victorious issue.

The battle raged all the way home. The advantage inclined at first to the side of Mr. Dale, whose voice could easily be heard above the roar of trains, while Margot's could not. But after Putney Bridge Station, where the train emerged into upper air and cavernous noises ceased, Miss Dale was enabled to bring her lighter artillery to bear with telling effect. Finally, on the walk home from Wimbledon Park Station to The Limes, Acacia Avenue, S.W.17, she launched a counter-attack of such a voluble and penetrating character that her slow-moving opponent was reduced first to inarticulate boomings and then to vindictive sulks.

“Had to take a pretty stiff line with her ladyship this afternoon,” he reported to his wife when he emerged from his dressing-room arrayed for dinner. “Caught her gallivanting round town with some half-baked young pup or other. I don't think she'll forget the telling-off I gave her. Not *my* job, of course; but if her mother can't handle her I suppose I must! Come along down.”

At the foot of the staircase, cool, fresh, slim, and provokingly pretty, stood Margot, wearing an exiguous frock and smoking a Russian cigarette.

“Hallo, Pongo!” she remarked cheerfully. “Out of your sulks, old man?”

Mr. Dale, who disliked being addressed as Pongo, began to boom again.

“Now for goodness’ sake pull yourself together!” urged his daughter; “and listen to me. I didn’t hear all you said coming out in the train, though most of the passengers did; but I heard enough to make it quite clear to me that it was time I put my foot down. I don’t intend to go into the matter again, because I gave it to you pretty straight walking home; and naturally you are like a bear with a sore head over it. I expect you have been taking it out of mother upstairs. She rather likes it, because she thinks being boomed at is one of her privileges as your wife. Well, I don’t happen to regard it as one of mine as your daughter. So keep a hold on yourself, my dear old Early Victorian progenitor, and leave me to live my own life. I’m no fool, despite my parentage. Now, what about a bite of dinner?”

That is all about Margot for the present. Let us turn to William Peck.

William Peck was roughly what his name implies. He did not know this, because he regarded himself exactly as Margot’s papa regarded himself—namely, as a bluff, plain, straightforward Englishman, with no frills or nonsense about him. As a matter of fact he was a serious-minded young man with a perfect passion for performing uncongenial duties. To him work was not worthy of the name if it was of a kind that could be enjoyed. So at the Bank which employed him they always allotted to him tasks of monotonous drudgery, because he was miserable doing anything which involved variety or initiative.

William Peck cherished two ambitions—one immediate, the other remote. The first was to maintain himself in the extreme of physical fitness. By characteristic methods, of course. At school he had been accustomed to sleep nightly wrapped in a sheet which he had previously soaked in cold water. This was to harden him. For exercise he preferred some pastime which would render him utterly exhausted, exceedingly muddy, and, if possible, a casualty from time to time—a broken collar-bone, or something of that kind. His passion for personal discomfort reached its apotheosis during the War. He was one of the few combatants on either side who honestly enjoyed trench-life. When home on leave he insisted upon sleeping on the floor of the smoking-room in his mother’s house, in his “fleabag,” rather than avail himself of the greater comfort and privacy of the spare

room. It was a pity, he considered, to sacrifice laboriously acquired physical fitness for the sake of a few nights' slothful ease.

As for his other and more remote ambition—it was this. At the right moment he intended to meet, woo, and marry the right girl. He did not propose to do this, though, until he was thirty-six. At present he was only twenty-eight—at which distance of time the enterprise appeared to him simpler of execution than it really was.

His ideas of the girl, and her functions as his wife, were quite clear in his mind. She would be beautiful, affectionate, and endowed with perfect taste. She would be fond of home and an economical manager. Every morning she would give William Peck his breakfast at eight, while William read aloud to her all about the Australian Eleven. She would then hand him his hat, kiss him, and dispatch him in good time for the nine-seven. She would be waiting to kiss him again on his return by the six-fourteen. On fine evenings she would sometimes meet him at the station and walk back with him, thus enabling William to tell her the Bank Rate ten minutes earlier than would otherwise have been possible. William would then change into shorts and a sweater and go off for a brisk trot by the River Thames—they were going to live at Twickenham—for naturally he would not permit domestic felicity to interfere with the gospel of physical fitness. On his return he would find that his wife had prepared a cold bath for him and put out his Indian clubs.

They would dine together in intimate cosiness, with a red-silk-shaded lamp over the table, and he would tell her some more about the Bank Rate and how his chest measurement was keeping up. Anon, they would proceed upstairs to William Peck's "den"—of course his wife would have her own dainty drawing-room, but that would be reserved for the entertainment of her own friends in the afternoon—and he would take down one of his trusty old pipes from the trusty old rack over the trusty old fireplace and puff away, while his wife sat on the other side of the hearth with her embroidery; and they would gossip about the Bank Rate again, or the English Fifteen against Wales, or the time when William Peck was kicked on the head when stopping a rush of the opposing forwards in the match against the West Ham Harriers. They would retire to bed early, because a man with a hard day's work behind and ahead of him must maintain a perfect standard of physical fitness. (Forgive me if I have referred to this already.) On Saturday nights, however, they would really kick up their heels a bit—dine somewhere, go to the Coliseum, and as likely as not not get home until the eleven-forty. It was right to unbend the bow occasionally.

By the way, on Saturday afternoons William Peck, once married, would relinquish manly sports and play some form of pat-ball game with his wife, or take her for a long country ramble: for of course William Peck's helpmeet must maintain a perfect standard of physical fitness too.

II

That is the sort of man William Peck was. Hence it was only in consonance with the general irony of things that he should fall helplessly in love with Margot Dale.

They met at a dinner-party given by one of the directors of William Peck's Bank. The director, whose name was Jobling, lived in a large house near the top of Putney Hill, while William occupied modest lodgings somewhere near the bottom, near the river. (Have I mentioned that upon Saturday afternoons in summer he excoriated himself on a fixed seat for the honour of the Putney Bridge Rowing Club?) William was invited to the party because a stockbroker disappointed Mrs. Jobling at the last moment, and there was no time to get anyone else. Mr. Dale was also there, and he brought Margot, who had volunteered, in a spirit of sheer irresponsibility, to deputise for her mother, who had influenza. (She had it twice a year.)

Margot looked distractingly pretty; and although William Peck could not fail to note that her evening frock was not of a material or cut calculated to promote that comfortable circulation of the blood which is so essential to physical fitness, he felt gratified when bidden to take her in to dinner. He found her a quiet, well-mannered, almost diffident partner. During the soup and fish she said practically nothing at all, which enabled William Peck to start upon the Bank Rate at once. After that he proceeded to consider the depreciation of the rouble and mark. Margot, with wondering eyes and parted lips, appeared to hang upon his words. When William desisted in order to eat a sweetbread she said he was marvellous. Confirmed in his favourable opinion of her, William proceeded to the material and mechanical side of banking. He told her how he reduced dollars to pounds by means of a graph. Then he explained to her what a graph was.

Suddenly he noted that Margot's attention was wandering. In fact, she was nipping a portion of salted almond across the table at her friend, Miss Rita Jobling.

"In this manner," said William Peck, raising his voice reprovingly, "the daily fluctuations of international exchange——"

Margot swung round upon him. Her former expression of adoration—what she herself was wont to term “the village-idiot stunt”—was gone.

“Do you ever do anything at all with yourself,” she demanded, “except hop about behind a counter?”

“The only members of the personnel of a bank,” William explained with an indulgent smile, “who actually do their work behind the counter are the cashiers. Now, I——”

“Never mind that,” said Margot hastily. “What I mean is, what do you do when they open the door of the hutch at five o’clock, and put you out?”

“You mean, what do I do for exercise? Ah!” . . . When William Peck paused for his next mouthful he had told her all about the difference between fixed and sliding seats, and also about the time he had been kicked on the head.

“I was insensible for three-quarters of an hour,” he said.

Once more Margot appeared impressed.

“It’s unbelievable!” she said—“absolutely!”

“Oh, not at all!” said William Peck, who really was a very modest fellow.

“It is unbelievable,” reiterated Margot emphatically, “that any human being should go about doing such uncouth and stuffy things and actually *boast* of it!”

William Peck, who for nearly twenty-eight years had cherished a belief that the one thing which a woman requires of a man is rugged strength (such as his own), merely gaped.

“Have you no recreations, my good Peck,” continued Margot compassionately, “except those of a hobbledehoy?”

Hobbledehoy? William Peck gasped—then pulled himself together for a great and stern effort. He must cope with this heresy. He must controvert this pernicious doctrine. It might be difficult, he knew. He was only a strong, silent Englishman, master of his job and in perfect physical condition; he was no dialectician. His strength lay in deeds, not words. How he wished Margot could see him casting up three columns of figures simultaneously, or taking a firm line with the office-boy, or being hacked off the ball on a wet Saturday afternoon. Still, he would do his best; it was his duty.

He turned to Margot, and opened his mouth to begin. It stayed open quite a long time—hanging open, in fact. For Margot lifted her long lashes deliberately and of set purpose, and gave him a look. It was a fleeting look—a mere artless glance—but it was the first time that he had met her eyes fairly. Instead of delivering the homily he had contemplated, he floundered, reddened, and said feebly:

“Other recreations? Oh yes, I have lots.”

Which was a lie.

III

Margot drove home not altogether unimpressed with William Peck. He was a clean-run and broad-shouldered youth. True, his hair cried aloud for unguents and his evening tie required tying more tightly. His moustache, which was red and entirely lacking in symmetry, must be dispensed with altogether. His conversation was bucolic, and his ideals were those of the Stone Age. Still, it would be rather fun to civilise him—without prejudice, of course. When his locks had been sheared and he had been trained to toe the line with the rest of the youth of Philistia, Margot could decide what she was going to do with him.

So William Peck was invited to a *Thé Dansant* at The Limes, Wimbledon Park. He accepted, smiling loftily to himself. With his masculinity and sturdy indifference to boudoir ways he would feel, he knew, rather like a Dreadnought at an up-river Regatta. But William Peck rather liked feeling like that; and of course he often did, associating, as a man often must, with puny folk. So he accepted. He was not conscious of being in love yet.

But he was wrong about feeling like a Dreadnought at a Regatta. What he really felt like was a worm at a convention of boa-constrictors. He “did not” dance—which means that he could not. Instead of sitting apart with his young hostess, as he had expected, smiling indulgently upon the antics of the pigmies around him, he found himself drifting sheepishly from the tea-room to the drawing-room and back again, with intervals of complete self-effacement in the cloak-room. Once or twice he endeavoured to put a bold face on things. He would dash out of his hiding-place, walk briskly into the dancing-room, look masterfully round as if for an appointed partner, glance at his wrist-watch, nod his head, and stride masterfully out, as if remembering that she was in the tea-room after all. In the tea-room he would

repeat the performance, and stride out again, ostensibly to the dancing-room. But where he really went was to his old refuge among the coats and hats. Here ultimately the housemaid found him. William Peck suddenly lost his head, became panic-stricken, broke from cover, and interned himself on the stairs above the first-floor landing for the duration.

He was dislodged about seven o'clock by damsels coming up for their outer garments; and descended in the hope of finding Margot at last disengaged. He had previously had speech with her upon arrival. She had offered to provide him with a partner, but his spirit being as yet unbroken he had refused, saying sarcastically that he had no "monkey-tricks." Consequently she had abandoned him to his wretched fate. Now, relenting a little, she allowed him to pour out some orangeade for her. By this time he was utterly broken. Still, Margot was minded to make the lesson permanent.

"My good Peck," she said, "I had no idea that you were as impossible as all this. I thought every human being with two feet could dance the one-step!"

"I don't dance," muttered William Peck doggedly.

"One-stepping isn't dancing. It's putting one foot before the other. Surely you can do that! Or is it that you're afraid to hold on to a girl?"

Dumb, driven, inarticulate, William Peck merely gaped like a fish. He realised now that he could never make this adorable—yes, she *was* adorable—but unreasonable being understand that he did not dance because he considered dancing effeminate, or that he objected to holding on to a girl not because he was afraid, but because he had decided not to do that sort of thing until he was thirty-six. Instead, he deliberately jettisoned the accumulated ballast of more than twenty years, and said:

"Won't you please teach me?"

"Good gracious, no!" replied Miss Dale frankly. "Why should I?"

In his complete abasement William Peck could think of nothing but to apologise; which he did.

"I only wanted to please you," he said humbly.

Margot lit a cigarette.

"Then go and learn, my child!" she said.

IV

“After all,” William Peck argued to himself as he trotted home in the dark—he made a point of running a mile every day, and the *Thé Dansant*, with its vitiated atmosphere, had rendered this exercise even more indispensable than usual—“she would not have told me to go and learn unless she had taken some interest in my progress, *would* she? . . . Besides, one must make allowances for women. They are”—*pant, pant, pant*—“wayward, and”—*pant*—“capricious. One must indulge them to a certain extent; come down to their level, and so on. If Miss—if Margot and I get into the habit of dancing together—the Side-Step, or whatever she calls it—I shall get more opportunities of conversing with her intimately, and forming her mind.” . . . He slowed down to a walk, for fear of rousing unworthy suspicions in the mind of the policeman at the cross-roads; then resumed. “I’m sorry she refused to come to the match on Saturday, though. It does help so to be seen in one’s proper environment. . . . I don’t think I shall play now. . . . I wonder if she will be at home at tea-time. No, I forgot: she said she was going to a *matinée*. What a way to spend a crisp autumn afternoon! . . . I wonder if she would come to one with me. I must find out about these things.”

So the next step in the downward path of our apostle of physical fitness was a letter to his divinity, suggesting an expedition to the theatre. If he had had the sense to leave the selection of the play to the lady herself, it is possible that William might have met with more success this time. But through an entirely unwarrantable overestimate of Miss Dale’s intellectuality, he proposed a visit to a Shakespearean revival at a local suburban theatre. The result was a horrified refusal. Recoiling abjectly to the opposite pole of error, William called at The Limes and suggested a certain musical comedy—the rage of the West End. Margot replied that she had seen it fourteen times, and inquired how William Peck’s dancing was progressing. She also commanded him, as she showed him to the door, to remove his moustache, or for ever remain invisible.

Incredible as it may appear, William Peck succeeded in extracting certain crumbs of comfort—even encouragement—from this barren interview. It implied, he considered, a certain interest in his appearance and personality. The main result was that on the following Saturday the Putney Hill Gladiators took the field without their usual heavy forward. About the time that the match commenced, on a crisp autumn afternoon, a clean-shaven young man might have been observed knocking timidly upon the door of a modest villa in Fulham, bearing the legend:

BALL-ROOM DANCING
FOX-TROT GUARANTEED IN
SIX LESSONS

V

“Well,” remarked Mademoiselle Estelle, at the end of a laborious and hardbreathing hour, “you may have brains, but they’re not in your feet.”

“Do you think if I work hard that I shall have a chance?” inquired William Peck earnestly.

“A chance to do what?” Mademoiselle turned off the gramophone and regarded her pupil quizzically. She was an alert little person with bright blue eyes and honey-coloured hair. Her cheeks and arms were too thin. The profession of Teacher of Ball-Room Dancing, especially when proficiency is guaranteed in six lessons, is more arduous than lucrative.

“A chance,” replied William Peck hesitatingly, “to—to dance well enough to—to——”

“To what?”

“To satisfy myself.”

“Yourself? H’m! They all say that!” Mademoiselle smiled indulgently. “I think I know your trouble,” she added. “When are you coming again?”

William Peck suggested Monday afternoon at five-fifteen, and departed in the gloaming in search of open-air exercise. He was still feeling a little dizzy, and far more tired than if he had taken part in the football match.

His constitutional, oddly enough, took him across Putney Bridge, up the Hill, and toward Wimbledon Park, where he ultimately found himself striding down Acacia Avenue, in which it will be remembered The Limes was situated. He did not run. Instead, he occasionally changed feet and broke into a curious double-shuffle. He was practising the one-step—or thought he was.

The gate of The Limes stood hospitably open. William Peck hesitated in a painfully indecisive fashion—his moral fibre had crumbled during the past few days—then finally turned into the short drive and approached the house itself. But his feet lagged. He had reached the phase of love-sickness at which the lover’s deadly fear is lest he should appear to be intruding.

Sounds of music greeted his ears; active shadows on the blinds of a large room on the ground floor apprised him of the fact that a *Thé Dansant* was in progress—to which he had not been invited. Well, a time would come!

The Dales possessed a powerful gramophone. At present it was in full blast close to the open window outside which William stood. Had Miss Margot pulled aside the blind at any moment during the next half-hour and looked out upon the moonlit lawn, she might have observed a substantial phantom methodically dancing the fox-trot with itself, counting audibly the while.

VI

“Will you stay and take a cup of tea?” inquired Mademoiselle after the next lesson. “I’ve no one else coming this evening, worse luck; and you don’t look as if you had too many people to talk to in your spare time, either.”

Now that William Peck came to think of it, this was true, though no one had ever said it before. His colleagues at the Bank were much too occupied with recurrent and continuous affairs of the heart to have any particular leaning towards the society of an apostle of strenuous celibacy; while the Putney Hill Gladiators, though stout fellows on the battlefield, were not socially entertaining. This discerning little creature was right. William *was* a lonely man; and at the present moment he was more lonely than he had ever been before. In fact he had reached the stage when a man simply has to tell someone about it—It.

So they took tea together; and over the cigarette which followed he recited to Mademoiselle the idyll of Margot Dale.

“I’m afraid I’m rather too muscular and masculine for her,” he said sorrowfully, when he had finished his recital. “Too big and blundering for a fragile little bit of Dresden china like that,” he added, growing lyric.

“Fragile?” commented his confidante. “To me she sounds the other way. Tough, I should call her.”

“You don’t know her!” said loyal William warmly.

“Don’t I?” Mademoiselle nodded her shapely little head wisely. “I knew one once just like her. I had good cause to remember her, too.”

“How?”

“She took my husband from me—or tried to.”

“Husband? You are married, then?”

“Widow,” replied Mademoiselle briefly.

“Then your name——?” William Peck began to feel that this was rather irregular. He had a natural sense of propriety.

“Oh, my real name is Esther Green. You can cut out the Estelle stuff—that’s only for the brass plate—and call me Esther if you like. It would do you a lot of good to be able to call a girl by her Christian name. Have you finished that cigarette? Well, I bet you’ve got a pipe in your pocket. Light it, and put your feet on the fender, and I’ll tell you,” commanded this discerning young person.

William Peck, feeling strangely soothed and comfortable, obeyed.

“I was married all right,” continued Esther presently. “All wrong, rather. It was one of those war weddings—me eighteen and Ted twenty-one. London was full of schoolboys dressed up as officers, all mad to have a good time dining and dancing before they went out and—and went west. You couldn’t blame them, either. Mother and I started a dancing school over a tea-shop in Regent Street. It was a little gold-mine to us for a year or so. Up to that time mother had kept rooms. She had always had to work hard, ever since father left her. She’s dead now—two years ago. She was never strong; and the raids, and the rationing, and things like that were too much for her. I met Ted at the dancing school. I taught him: he paid for private lessons: he was that sort. He was a second lieutenant in a split-new uniform, and I was about as green as grass; and when we came out of the chloroform we found ourselves married. Just like that!

“It was more than a year before he went out, and I had my hands full most of that time, I can tell you. He wasn’t a bad boy; not vicious; but weak—my word! Putty was strong to him! Anything in eyelashes could make him eat out of her hand. He was fond of me, though, and none of his little affairs ever looked like coming to anything until he ran into Babs Newberry. She was the same sort of girl as your Margot, I should say. Bobbed hair—liqueurs—despised her parents—and all that. Ted was in camp at Bramshott, and used to come up to me for week-ends. When he missed two week-ends running I began to think a bit. Finally another girl told me something, and I went to the Savoy the next Saturday night. There was my lord, dancing with his Babs.” Esther Green’s voice shook a little.

“Unutterable cad!” said William Peck firmly.

“No, it wasn’t that. It was just weakness. I spoke to them, and in ten minutes I had Miss Babs packing back to her people at Lewisham. As I suspected, *they* hadn’t known anything about the affair; and the moment I said a few words about seeing them about it I had her squealing Kamerad! There was no real harm in her—just want of looking after and the freedom the war gave to silly girls. I took Ted home with me. He was very much ashamed of himself—and we had no open trouble after that. I dare say he saw his Babs again sometimes, but I kept my mouth shut. I didn’t want to have a row so near the time of his going out. I was glad afterwards, because—because, when he did go, he never—never——”

“Came back?” said William gently.

“Yes.” A tear ran down the girl’s cheek. She wiped it away composedly, and continued:

“It was at the Second Battle of the Somme—a machine gun. He was Mentioned in Dispatches, though. I’m glad he was Mentioned in Dispatches.”

There was a long pause. William was trying, without success, to picture himself married to Margot and being caught by her dancing with some one else at the Savoy. Presently his eyes turned again to the slim figure on the other side of the hearth.

“I expect you miss him,” he said awkwardly.

“Yes, I do. Of course I dare say I should have had trouble with him; but he’d have been something to look after. Perhaps he would have gotten more sense as he got older, too. I don’t know, though. People don’t change much. Perhaps he wasn’t the sort of man I ought to have married.”

“What sort of man ought you to have married?” inquired William curiously. He was impartially interested in the question of affinities just now.

“A man who would like being taken care of,” replied Esther with great vigour. “I used to wish the war was over, so that I could really take care of Ted. You know? Look after his clothes, and see he got his meals properly, and get him off in comfortable time for the morning train, and be there when he came back in the evening——”

“And give him a kiss,” said William Peck automatically.

“Yes; that’s right. Then we would dine together and talk over all the gossip of the day. There’s nothing so dull in life as having a lot of interesting

things happen to you all day and know that there'll be no one to tell them to in the evening."

"That's very true," said William Peck with a sigh. Of late he had contracted the habit of jotting down memoranda of interesting things which happened to him, with the intention of retailing the same to Margot when an opportunity should arise. He had a rather congested list in his pocket now.

"Then," continued Esther, "we would have gone out together sometimes—to the theatre, or the pictures." She gave another little sigh. "I don't know, though. Perhaps things are best as they are. Ted didn't like staying at home much any evening, and if he had gone out I dare say he'd have gone out without me. I may be one of the lucky ones, really!" She smiled and looked up briskly. "Finished your pipe? I don't want to turn you out; but you know what neighbours are. When'll suit you again?"

William Peck suggested the following Saturday afternoon.

But he did not keep the appointment. Margot had returned a reply to a long-rehearsed invitation which exceeded his wildest hopes, and they had attended a *matinée* together. The excursion was not altogether as successful as it might have been, because William's ideas on the subject of *chic* restaurants and the best seats in theatres were on a considerably lower plane than his guest's; but Margot, softened probably by her cavalier's rapturous oblivion to all save her presence, and the misguided pains which he had lavished upon the details of the entertainment (down to the box of uneatable chocolates which he produced from his hat as soon as they sat down in the seventh row of the Dress Circle), suffered for once in silence. On the way home she reaped her reward, in the form of her seventeenth proposal.

William Peck accompanied his petition by a set speech of considerable length, which he had composed and carefully committed to memory against the moment when opportunity should arise to deliver it. Knowing William Peck, we can surmise its general trend. It included an outline of William's views on domestic routine which gave Margot chills down her spine; and she said so. But there was another item, which she had not expected and which roused emotions of an entirely contrary nature—to wit, a financial statement. Hitherto Margot had regarded William Peck as a bank clerk—a small-time cavalier; an escort of the Landsturm class. The fact that William Peck was sole relative and heir of the Chairman of the Board of the Bank, and had elected characteristically to ground himself in the rudiments of his profession by five years of monotonous routine before taking a seat on the Board itself, was a revelation to her. Though the halting proposal made but

slight impression upon Margot's resilient little heart, it made an appeal to her business instincts which could not be ignored. William Peck was immediately promoted, mentally, to the rank of Business Proposition. However, she realised that she need not be in a hurry to take up her option. Firmly hooked fish can wait.

"Don't be a sentimental idiot," she said. "And don't go and blow out your brains or anything, because it isn't done. We're having a *Thé Dansant* on Saturday. Come, and let me see if you can dance a one-step without treading on my feet. We can always be friends, can't we?" she concluded, a trifle mechanically.

"I believe you're right," said William Peck.

Margot stared at him.

VII

Two days later William Peck completed his course of six lessons, within the period of which, it will be remembered, proficiency had been guaranteed.

"Will I do?" he asked, as Esther turned off the gramophone for the last time.

"Do for what?"

"I mean, will I pass in a crowd?"

"That isn't what you came here to learn to do—is it? You wanted to make a real hit with a certain person, didn't you?"

"I suppose we are always trying to make a hit with somebody," said William Peck, regarding her thoughtfully. "In fact"—his face broke into a cheerful smile, the first for weeks—"I should like some more lessons."

"All right. You needn't pay in advance this time. I can trust you."

"I'm glad of that," said William, "because I shall want a lot."

"Certainly. How much of my valuable time do you propose to engage?" inquired Esther briskly.

William Peck told her.

He ultimately stayed to supper.

VIII

Margot, whose conscience told her that she had been perhaps a little too careless with her latest suitor, felt distinctly relieved when he duly appeared at the *Thé Dansant*. This time he boldly interrupted her in a dance and asked when he might have the pleasure.

“Come back in about five minutes,” she said, “when I have got rid of this infant.” The gentleman referred to was a Mr. Toby Deverill, a fair average specimen of the flower of modern chivalry.

William Peck withdrew, and Margot said:

“I think he’s rather a lamb, Toby.”

“Tripe!” growled the flower.

“Little boys mustn’t be jealous,” replied Margot, entering with zest into the game which she loved best in all the world.

“Muck!” rejoined Mr. Deverill.

Margot, with whom this brand of repartee was quite in order, gave him an affectionate pat.

“You’re rather a lamb too, Toby dear,” she said, and rising, signalled to William Peck to approach.

They took the floor together—with remarkable smoothness. (All the same, it was only by an effort that William Peck refrained from counting out loud.)

“You’ve made marvellous progress, Peck,” announced Margot graciously. “Who has been teaching you?”

“My wife,” panted William Peck.

I

DAD had promised that as soon as we got down to Saltways for the summer holidays he would take us all, without fail, deep-sea fishing. There are four of us—me, Belle, Kit, and Jerry (whose real name is not Jeremiah, as you might think, but Gerald).

But it was the *strangest* summer holiday. We had hardly arrived when everybody began to go away again. The band on the pier had gone already: dad said they had been summoned to Vienna, to “mobilise.” Dad went next—in uniform. He does not wear uniform very often now, although, years ago, even before I was born (I am the eldest), he used to wear it every day. Now he belongs to something called the Special Reserve, which only wears uniform sometimes. When he came down to breakfast in it, I said:

“Are you going back to the Old Regiment, Dad?” (I do not know how old the regiment is, but he always calls it the Old Regiment.)

“No such luck, my son,” said Dad.

“What regiment *are* you going to?” asked Kit, who is very inquisitive—so Fräulein says.

“I am going,” said Dad, “to command the First Service Battalion of the King’s Own Royal Moth-eaten Dug-Outs.”

“Where?” said Kit.

“Germany, I hope; Belgium, I expect,” said Dad.

“Is there really a war?” we all asked.

“So really,” said Dad, “that I dare say we shall have to fall back for help upon people like you, Rollo, old man, before we have finished.”

I was pleased at this, but Mother said to Dad: “Don’t! I can’t bear any more.”

The others did not hear; and Belle, who always wants to crush into everything—Mother says she is “very officious”—asked:

“Can’t Kit and me go too?”

“We could carry drinks of water to the wounded,” said Kit. “We *promise* not to speak to any of them, or bother them.” Kit is always getting into trouble for bothering people. She talks all day, more or less.

“Me too!” said Jerry. (He always wants to do what other people are doing.)

“That’s the right spirit,” said Dad; “but you must all stay at home and *grow* a bit first. I want you to be particularly law-abiding for the next few days, because Mother is going away with me, and Fräulein has to return to Germany.”

“How can Mother go into battles with you?” asked Belle.

“I’m not going into battle straight off,” said Dad. “The Royal Dug-Outs will require to be dusted and aired for a month or two before they are fit for service. I am going to Salisbury Plain, and Mother is coming with me for a few days to put my quarters in order.”

Kit said:

“Then we shan’t get any fishing after all!”

“I don’t see who is to take them,” said Mother to Dad.

“I’ll *tell* you what,” said Dad. “Why not wire to Sylvia?”

We all jumped for joy. Aunt Sylvia is Mother’s youngest sister. She is a nailing good sort. When she comes to stay we have all kinds of treats. We make fires in the plantations and roast potatoes at them. We have races, and high-jumping, and tree-climbing competitions, and Aunt Sylvia gives us prizes. She can climb any tree herself. When it is wet we make toffee in the nursery. The only drawback about her is that she is pretty old—quite twenty, I believe.

II

Well, Aunt Sylvia came, and that was where our adventures began.

The very first morning after Dad and Mother left—Fräulein had gone away the day before, crying, as she naturally would at having to go to a place like Germany—we all went down to the beach to hire a boat. We went to Mr. Snagsby. We always go to him. He is very fat, but good-tempered; and if you are out for an hour and a quarter instead of an hour, he only charges you a shilling just the same. We found him down by his boats, as usual.

“Good morning, Snagsby,” said Aunt Sylvia. “How is business?”

“Very bad, miss,” said Snagsby. “People are afraid to hire a boat these days, for fear of the Germans.”

“But surely the Germans know that *you* are here, Snagsby!” said Aunt Sylvia in a surprised voice.

Snagsby’s boy, Jim, began to laugh, but Snagsby replied, very politely:

“Even that won’t keep them away, miss, when they know *you* are here.”

This time Aunt Sylvia laughed, and said:

“That’s one to you, Snagsby.” We did not know what she meant.

“We shall be starving, miss, in less than no time,” Snagsby went on, as he pushed the boat into the water.

Jerry, who is only seven, looked rather frightened at this. Aunt Sylvia said quickly:

“Don’t be a silly old man, Snagsby. It would do you no harm to starve a little. Then you might be able to get that jersey off. You must have had to sleep in it for years!”

Jerry and all of us laughed at this; and Mr. Snagsby, who is a very old friend of Aunt Sylvia’s, just smiled and pushed us off.

We rowed to a good fishing-place that Aunt Sylvia knew of. It was between the mainland and a queer flat-topped island called “The Parson’s Hat.” I rowed. Aunt Sylvia said she would row back.

As a matter of fact, neither of us rowed back.

The fishing was tremendous fun. Aunt Sylvia invented a competition, and offered a shilling as the prize. The competition was this: If you caught a flounder you got one mark. If you caught a whiting you got two marks. If you caught a codling or a haddock you got three marks. If you caught a whale you got a hundred marks. (Aunt Sylvia made this bit up to please Jerry really.) But if you caught a dog-fish you got *minus four marks*.

It was no good trying to explain to Jerry what “minus” meant, so we let him fish in his own way, which is on the bottom, with simply yards of loose line out. He counts a hundred and then pulls up.

It was rather a close day, very still, with patches of thick white mist on the water—very pleasant for fishing, as the boat did not rock. Jerry, who had been muttering to himself in a low voice, soon said: “Ninety-nine, a

hundred!” and pulled up his line. Both baits were gone, which upset him very much; but Aunt Sylvia said it was a sign that there were fish about, so he cheered up.

We were all fishing hard now. Belle, who is rather religious, was caught by Aunt Sylvia praying that she might catch nothing but haddocks. (Three marks each.) Mother does not allow her to pray that she may win games or competitions. Aunt Sylvia knows this, and told her not to be a little prig. She also had to speak to Kit, who was trying to irritate Jerry by jerking his line when he was not looking. She does this very often—irritates Jerry, I mean.

However, it was Jerry who caught the first fish. Of course it was a flounder, and only counted one mark. But Jerry was delighted, and insisted on keeping it down inside his sailor suit. After that I caught a whiting (two marks), and Kit caught a codling (three marks). After that, unluckily, we caught a lot of minuses—dog-fish, I mean. We ate our lunch while we fished. We had hard-boiled eggs, and jammy scones, with a bottle of ginger-beer each. Aunt Sylvia had also thoughtfully brought some chocolate.

Just as we were finishing lunch Jerry screamed out:—

“Kit, will you leave my line alone!”

He had been helping with the other lines, and had turned round, to catch Kit doing something to his line. We all turned round too, rather suddenly.

Kit gave a jump. There was a splash, and something fell into the water.

“Kit,” said Aunt Sylvia, “what are you doing?”

“I was only playing a little joke on Jerry,” said Kit.

“What joke?”

“I was tying something heavy on to his line, so that he would think he had a fish.”

“What did you tie?” asked Aunt Sylvia.

“The rowlocks.”

“Put them back immediately,” said Aunt Sylvia. “Supposing they fell overboard?”

“They have,” said Kit, and began to cry.

We were in a nice fix. Belle and Jerry looked as if they wanted to cry too; but Aunt Sylvia did not seem to mind.

“We shall get home all right,” she said. “Rollo and I will kneel down and paddle the boat like an Indian war-canoë. We will pretend to be braves out on the war-trail. This calm sea looks just like one of the great American lakes. Get up the anchor, that brave in the bow!”

Then she gave us all names. I was Running Deer; Belle, the Princess Ipecacuanha; Kit, the maid Smiling Dewdrop; and Jerry, Bubbling River.

I had just got the anchor to the top, when Kit cried:

“Hallo, what’s that noise?”

The weather had grown more thick and misty than ever, and though we could just make out the land on our left, it was almost impossible to see anything out at sea. The only thing that was visible in that direction was the Parson’s Hat, very dim and ghostly on our right.

Suddenly, over our heads, we heard a buzzing, crackling noise. B-r-r-r-r-r-r!—like that!

“It’s a big motor-car!” cried Jerry.

We all laughed at the idea of a motor-car running over the sea. But Aunt Sylvia said:

“Jerry is very nearly right. It’s an aeroplane.”

And it was. We saw it now, high above our heads. It was all silver-grey, with a flat tail, like a fish.

“There’s something wrong with the engine,” said Aunt Sylvia.

“How do you know?” we all asked.

“Listen to that noise,” said Aunt Sylvia. “She is back-firing.”

And, sure enough, every now and then instead of the buzzing noise came half a dozen great *crack, cracks*, like a gun being fired. Then the engine stopped altogether, and the aeroplane began to circle slowly down.

“He’ll be drowned!” screamed Kit.

“No, he won’t,” said Aunt Sylvia. “I believe he is going to try to land on the Parson’s Hat.”

But the Parson’s Hat was so dim that we could not see whether the aeroplane landed there or not. However, it sank out of sight; so all we could

do was guess.

“And now, my braves,” said Aunt Sylvia, “we must see about getting home. Come along, Running Deer! You paddle with one oar and I’ll take the other.”

We set to work. It really was rather a splendid adventure, and we were all beginning to enjoy it thoroughly, when Belle said:—

“Aunt Sylvia, I don’t believe we have got *any* farther in the last half-hour. Look at the land!”

We all looked. The land seemed farther away, if anything.

“It’s the fault of the tide,” said Aunt Sylvia. “It turned about an hour ago, and is running strong just now. We must paddle harder, that’s all.”

So we set to work again. The sea was very calm, and we *seemed* to be going through the water quite fast; but we weren’t really. However, we stuck to it. Aunt Sylvia taught us a song to sing. It said:

*“Row, brothers, row! The stream runs fast;
The rapids are near, and daylight’s past.”*

Suddenly Jerry squeaked out:—

“The land’s out of sight altogether now! I want to go ho-o-me!”

Sure enough, we could not see the land any more—nothing but the Parson’s Hat, looking so creepy! Aunt Sylvia gazed through the mist for a while, but could not see anything. However, she did not seem at all frightened. She just smiled at us. She said:—

“Knock off work for five minutes, and we will hold a pow-wow.”

“What’s that?” asked Belle.

“A council of braves.”

So we held a pow-wow. I suggested that, as we were now cast away and might be some days in the boat, the provisions had better be counted, and rations served out very sparingly. Aunt Sylvia said this was a good idea, and gave us half a bar of chocolate apiece, as the first ration. This refreshed us greatly. She even gave a piece to Kit, whose fault it all was. She also talked about what fun it would be to remember this adventure when we got safe back to shore.

Belle said:—

“Aunt Sylvia, do you think we shall *ever* get safe back to shore again?”

“Why, bless you, Ipecacuanha,” said Aunt Sylvia, “of course we shall! If we don’t get there this tide we shall get there the next. But in all probability we shall be picked up by some other boat before that. There are usually lots out fishing in the evening.”

“Not since the war broke out,” said Kit. “We shall all be drowned, and it will be my fault!”

This was really rather serious, for Kit had never been known to be sorry for anything before.

“Now then, Smiling Dewdrop,” said Aunt Sylvia, “a little more smile and a little less dew, please, or you shall be reduced to the rank of wigwam-scrubber! Let us look round the horizon for a friendly sail. If there isn’t one we must just start paddling again.”

Then another tremendous thing happened. Aunt Sylvia had hardly spoken, when out of the mist came a ship!

IV

There was a sort of bank of mist lying on the water close to us, and the ship came out of that. She was a long, low vessel, painted grey, with four fat grey funnels and one silly little mast. She was going very slowly, because of the fog. As she passed us her engines stopped altogether.

“It’s a man-of-war,” said Belle.

“It’s a torpedo-boat destroyer,” said Aunt Sylvia.

“German?” asked Kit, rather frightened.

But I was able to point out that she was flying the White Ensign, and no German ship would ever dare to fly that.

Then a most exciting thing happened. A boat suddenly appeared from the far side of the ship, and rowed toward us. There were four men rowing, and two officers in the stern. One officer had a brown, smiling face, with nice white teeth. The other was a boy, not much older than me, I should say. (Aunt Sylvia said afterwards he was a midshipman.)

The boat stopped beside us, and the brown-faced officer touched his cap.

“Good afternoon,” he said, smiling at us all. “Are you proposing to invade Germany? You seem to be drifting in that direction.”

“On the contrary,” said Aunt Sylvia. “We are a party of Indian braves, paddling our war-canoe. This,” introducing me first, “is the great chief Running Deer; this is the Princess Ipecacuanha; that is the maiden Smiling Dewdrop; and that small brave in the bow, all over fish-bait, is Bubbling River.”

“And who are you, may I inquire?” asked the smiling officer.

“I am the grandmother of the tribe,” said Aunt Sylvia. “My name is Thousand Wrinkles.”

“You are the only member of the party whom I do not recognise at a glance,” said the officer. (I don’t know what he meant, or how he could recognise any of us, not having seen us before.)

“Who are you?” asked Aunt Sylvia, turning rather red.

“I? Oh, I am a pirate!” said the officer. “This is my bo’sun, Blood-stained Bartholomew.” He pointed to the young officer in the stern, who looked very much ashamed. Of course, I knew it was all a joke, but the others didn’t. They simply *stared* at poor Bartholomew.

“And these,” the officer went on, pointing to the men who had been rowing, “are the four fiercest men in my crew. They live on rum and broken glass, and they have to kill a man a day each before they are allowed any dinner.”

The four sailors, who looked very jolly and good-tempered, all laughed at this; but the officer warned us that they were always most bloodthirsty when they smiled.

“Have you far to go before you make your next portage?” he asked Aunt Sylvia.

“Saltways,” she answered.

“You have a long way to go,” said the officer, “and there is a strong tide against you. Why not try rowing instead of paddling? You could turn into an ancient Greek galley for the occasion.”

“Unfortunately,” replied Aunt Sylvia, “we can’t. One of our number has had a trifling accident with the rowlocks, so we simply *have* to be Red Indians.”

Kit went perfectly crimson, but the officer just nodded, and said:—

“In that case I think we may be of some assistance. I would take you all on board my ship and run you into port, but I happen to be rather busy just

now.” Still, he did not look very busy.

“Are you after a Spanish galleon, sir?” I asked.

“No,” said the officer. “I am after some German buccaneers.”

“O-oh!” we all said. And I asked:—

“Is it a big ship you are after?”

“I’m not particular,” said the officer. “Two or three small ones would do.”

Then Kit, who had been very quiet all the time (owing to losing the rowlocks), said suddenly:—

“Would you like to catch an aeroplane, sir?”

All the rest of us had forgotten the aeroplane.

“Have you *seen* one anywhere, Smiling Dewdrop?” asked the officer.

“Yes,” said Kit.

“Tell me,” said the officer, “was she silver-grey?”

“Yes,” we all shouted.

“Where did you see her?”

“Let Kit tell,” said Aunt Sylvia.

“It flew over our heads,” said Kit, very proud at being allowed to tell, “not long ago. Then it began to come down. Aunt Sylvia thought something might have gone wrong with the engine.”

The officer nodded his head.

“Very likely,” he said. “And where did it come down?”

“We *think* it came down on the Parson’s Hat,” said Kit.

“That flat-topped island?” cried the officer. “Just the place! He will wait till dark and then fly over on a scouting expedition to our coast. I don’t believe there is much wrong with his engine after all,” he said to Aunt Sylvia. “Now, supposing——”

“Oh, *do* be quick!” screamed Kit. “He may escape!”

The officer stopped talking to Aunt Sylvia, and laughed.

“Little lady,” he said to Kit, “you are right and I am wrong. I mustn’t lose any time.” He turned to the young officer.

“Bartholomew,” he said, “make fast this boat to your stern. Then put me back on board the *Lame Duck*. Then tow this party to within easy reach of Saltways, and rejoin us as fast as you can at the Parson’s Hat.”

The young officer said:—“Very good, sir!” Next moment we were being pulled along behind the other boat, and in a few minutes we reached the side of the ship. The officer shook hands with us all.

“Good-bye,” he said. “Owing to your invaluable information I am going to bring off one of the first scoops of the war. Blood-stained Bartholomew will see you home.”

Then he told a sailor to hand us down a pair of rowlocks.

“Some day,” he said, “I shall come and call for those rowlocks; so don’t lose them!” We promised not to.

“Now I must leave you,” he said. “Forgive me for not coming with you, but I have to go down to the kitchen, to heat the cannon-balls red-hot.”

He shook hands with Aunt Sylvia again, and we all waved good-bye to him. Next minute we found ourselves slipping along through the calm sea, leaving the ship behind. We had hardly left her when there was a gentle rumble from her engines, and she began to steal in the direction of the Parson’s Hat.

Blood-stained Bartholomew talked to us quite a lot on the way home, although he had seemed very shy before. He said that the smiling officer was not a pirate at all, but Lieutenant-Commander Naylor, and that the ship was called the *Golden Eagle*—not the *Lame Duck*. Bartholomew’s name was really Cecil Graham. He said that Commander Naylor was the finest commander in the Service, and the *Golden Eagle* the finest ship.

We gave him our names and addresses, and he promised to send us picture-postcards whenever he captured a German port.

Well, we reached Saltways all too soon. Then Bartholomew—I mean Cecil—untied our rope, and, having said good-bye to us, disappeared with his four jolly pirates into the mist.

They captured the aeroplane all right. There was nothing wrong with the engine after all: it was simply waiting on the Parson’s Hat for darkness. We saw about it in the papers; but our names weren’t mentioned, which was rather hard on Kit.

However, it was a first-class adventure for us all. For Commander Naylor and Bartholomew, because they caught the aeroplane. For me,

because I met Commander Naylor. For Belle, because she met him too. For Kit, because she was praised by him. For Jerry, because he won the fishing competition. (You see, the rest of us, having caught so many dog-fish, were all minuses; so Jerry, with his one flounder, got the shilling.) And, lastly, for Aunt Sylvia, because one day, long after, Lieutenant-Commander Naylor really *did* come back for the rowlocks. Aunt Sylvia said she could not find them anywhere; so the Commander said that, as a punishment, she would have to come away with him for good instead. And she went. I don't call that much of a punishment, do you?

I

THE summer rain lashed down; another gust of wind came sweeping round the corner; and the motor-bicycle skidded giddily across the glistening road.

“A near shave that time, old soul!” observed Mr. Archibald Wade over his shoulder.

The gentleman addressed, Captain James Pryor, who for the last two hours had been enduring the acme of human discomfort upon the luggage-carrier, with his arms twined affectionately round his friend’s waist, made no reply. Instead, he vacated his seat without warning or premeditation and assumed a recumbent attitude under an adjacent hedge. The motor-bicycle, unexpectedly lightened of half its burden, miraculously righted itself, and, starting forward with a flick of its tail, whizzed on its way.

In due course it returned, trundled by its owner, who addressed the prostrate James reprovingly:—

“Tell me, my dear James, why did you dismount from the flapper-bracket?”

“Dismount, you lunatic?” replied the injured Pryor. “I fell off! I was shot off, if you like.”

“Why, I wonder?” said Archibald thoughtfully.

“Because you came swinging round that last corner at forty miles an hour. We side-slipped, and I simply flew.”

“It was foolish of you to fly without proper equipment, James. You are too ambitious—too impulsive. Are you in the Royal Air Force? No! You are only a machine-gunner. Machine-gunners don’t fly: they pop—and stop. You have just stopped. Examine yourself, and decide——”

“For heaven’s sake, Archie,” exclaimed the exasperated James, “stop talking like a village idiot for a minute!” James was a serious-minded and slightly pessimistic young man at the best of times; he was also severely bruised and badly in love—a combination inimical to equability of temper.

“I fear you are unstrung, comrade,” replied Archibald, quite unruffled.

“Unstrung or not,” retorted James warmly, “I’ll see you at blazes before I trust myself on your rotten machine for another yard!”

“This is no time,” Archibald pointed out reprovingly, “for the venting of passion. Besides, I have troubles of my own: this blinking back tyre has burst. Do you happen to remember what the last milestone said?”

“Popleigh, one mile,” growled Captain Pryor.

“That is splendid.”

“Why should it be splendid? We want to get on to Tuckleford.”

“Why should we go to Tuckleford? What is Tuckleford to us?”

“Well——” James hesitated, and reddened.

“Well what?”

“Well, if you must know, I am expecting to meet some one there.”

“A girl, of course?”

“Yes.”

“Not—Dorothy? *The* Dorothy?”

James, with the rain streaming down his face, nodded dismally.

“Yes,” he said. “That was why I suggested the trip.”

Archibald considered.

“It is well,” he said at length. “We can push this condemned sewing-machine on to Popleigh; there we will obtain food and clothing, and I will get a new tyre. In the afternoon, if it clears up, I will convey you to Dorothy.”

“How can we get food and clothing at Popleigh?” demanded the irritable James. “Have you ever been to the place in your life?”

“Never.”

“Then why on earth——?”

“Because I have had a rush of brains to the head. Do you remember *The Old Flick*?”

James considered.

“Do you mean *Flick Windrum*, of *Trinity Hall*?”

“The same.”

“Yes. What about it? He became a Dodger, didn’t he? Curate in Kensington, or something.”

“He was, but not now. I have just remembered that he wrote to me a year ago saying that he had received a push up—promotion. A cure of souls—that’s what he called it—a cure of souls in Popleigh. He must have cured quite a lot by this time. We will drop in at his parsonage, and touch him for a couple of them, and perhaps a bottle of Bass, and get our clothes dried. Then, hey for Dorothy!”

“Archibald,” observed James, not without admiration, “you are quite balmy.”

“I know,” replied that irresponsible youth composedly. “The insanity of genius, really. You push the bike.”

II

Half an hour later the motor-bicycle, still propelled by James, drew up at the gate of Popleigh Vicarage. The Vicarage itself stood well back from the road in a spacious garden—a riot of roses and honeysuckle—under the lee of an ancient Norman church. Simultaneously the summer storm passed, the clouds broke, and the hot July sun broke out hospitably.

Archibald Wade wheeled the bicycle up to the front door and rang the bell. After repeating the performance three times he turned to his depressed companion.

“I wonder where the old sinner can be,” he remarked.

“We don’t know,” replied James through chattering teeth, “and we aren’t likely to find out. Let’s go and find the village pub.”

“Peradventure,” suggested Archibald, upon whose receptive soul the ecclesiastical atmosphere was already taking effect, “he is upon a journey, or sleepeth, what?”

He tried the handle of the door.

“Locked,” he announced.

“Let’s go round to the back,” suggested the practical James.

The procession, now steaming comfortably, moved off again. The back door was also locked. Upon the panel was pinned a fluttering scrap of paper which said, *tout court*:

"I wonder who wrote that," said James.

"From the spelling," replied Archibald, "I should say it was The Flick himself; but as it is written on buttery paper I expect it was the cook. Depend upon it, The Flick has taken the little creature out for a brisk country walk. Still, I know he would never forgive us if we gave him the go-by. Let us find a window."

The windows upon the ground floor were all closed, but one stood open above a verandah on the sunny side of the house. With the assistance of the faithful James Mr. Wade clambered up the trellis-work and effected his burglarious purpose. A minute later he opened the front door with a flourish, and admitted his shrinking accomplice. There ensued a tour of inspection.

"Dining-room!" announced Archibald, opening a door. "Table not laid for lunch. We will remedy that. Study—very snug! We will smoke there after. Kitchen! Aha, this is where we commandeer supplies. Now, my dear young friend, you will go upstairs and have a nice warm bath, while I raid the old man's dressing-room. Run along, or you will catch something."

The docile James departed upstairs. Twenty minutes later, emerging greatly refreshed from the bathroom, draped in a towel, he was confronted by a saintly figure in impeccable clerical attire.

"*Pax vobiscum!*" clanged Archibald, in a throaty baritone. "What do you think of my kit? It took a bit of getting on, I can tell you. James, I have discovered why parsons have to marry right away."

"Why?"

"Because they button up the back." The newly ordained clerk revolved slowly upon his toes. "A pretty good fit, on the whole. I expected to find it rather small for me, but Flick appears to have swelled. James, I am warming up to this part. I am going to be a success in it. Let us go downstairs and find the harmonium."

"Dry up," urged James, "and tell me where I can get some clothes. I suppose I shall have to make a holy show of myself too?"

"Unfortunately not," replied his friend. "This is the only parsonical outfit that I can find. Probably it is what The Flick wears on Sunday."

"Do you mean that there are no more clothes in the house?"

“There is nothing in the dressing-room. But root about a bit, and you may find something. In the last extremity you can lunch in that bath-towel. Meanwhile, I will lay the table.”

Archibald bounded exuberantly downstairs, his coat-tails flying. The disconsolate James tried yet another door. This time he found himself in what was plainly the spare room. The blinds were drawn; the bed was draped in a dust-sheet; the jug stood upon its head in the basin. Under a heap of clerical vestments in the wardrobe he discovered an old blue flannel suit—evidently a relic of The Flick’s secular existence. With this he returned to the dressing-room, and having helped himself to a cricket-shirt and a pair of socks, proceeded to invest himself in his borrowed plumes. They were a tight fit, for James was a large man.

“I wonder what that maniac is doing downstairs,” he mused. “I hope he has made up the kitchen fire, so that we can dry our things. I can’t face Dolly in this rig. Hallo! What’s that?”

From the garden outside came the toot of a motor-horn; then a buzzing and popping right under the window; then silence.

Downstairs Archibald, depositing a fine ham upon the dining-room table, tip-toed to the window and peeped through the curtain. Outside the front door stood another motor-cycle, this time with side-car attached. Within the porch he could descry two persons. One—a female—was disencumbering her head of a voluminous motor-veil. Her male companion was ringing the bell.

After a fortifying glance at his own *ensemble* in the mirror over the mantelpiece, Archibald strode into the hall and opened the front door.

“Good morning,” he said.

The male caller returned the greeting with a patronising nod. He was a slender young man, with large eyes and a low turned-down collar. But Archibald’s first impression of him was that his hair required cutting.

“I trust you will pardon me,” he said, “for coming to the door myself, but my servant”—a new inspiration came upon him as he spoke—“my manservant—is busy upstairs changing his clothes.”

“Are you the incumbent of this parish?” inquired the young man, in the same patronising tone.

“I am his *locum tenens*,” replied Archibald blandly. “Will you not enter?”

All this while the girl in the motor-veil had stood silent, with her large blue eyes fixed apprehensively upon Archibald Wade. Archibald mentally diagnosed her as a romantic and impulsive infant, without sufficient knowledge or discrimination to be aware that one must never be seen in public with a young man with bobbed hair.

He ushered his visitors into the study. Even as they crossed the hall he was conscious of the anxious and inquiring countenance of Captain James Pryor suspended in mid-air, like a harvest moon, over the banisters of the upper landing.

“And now,” he inquired, taking up his new rôle with characteristic enjoyment, as the couple seated themselves upon the sofa, “what can I do for you, this lovely summer day?” He leaned back in The Flick’s swing chair and smiled paternally. The young gentleman with the long hair gave a brief staccato cough.

“Are you licensed?” he inquired. Archibald sprang to his feet.

“My dear sir,” he said, “a thousand apologies! I ought to have remembered! On such a warm morning, too! What will you take?”

This hospitable invitation was received with such unfeigned surprise that he realised that he had made a slip, and sat down again with a feeble giggle.

“You mean——?” he said.

“Is your church licensed,” asked the young man, “for the performance of the marriage ceremony?”

“Oh yes,” replied Archibald with a smile—“fully licensed. We are open on Sundays, too!” he added playfully.

“In that case,” said the young man, with a glance at the girl by his side, “we desire that you should marry us.” The girl gave a little hysterical gasp.

“Quite so,” replied Archibald calmly. “To each other, I presume?”

The young man, after a brief stare, nodded his head.

“And when would you like the ceremony to take place?” continued Archibald, instinctively playing for time.

“At once,” said the young man.

Archibald turned inquiringly to the girl.

“Is that your wish?” he asked, smiling.

The girl turned crimson, and hesitated.

“Answer, Dorothy!” commanded the young man.

“Yes, please,” whispered Dorothy.

III

Upstairs, five minutes later, pandemonium.

“I tell you it’s little Dolly Venner!” reiterated the distracted James, upon whose toilet Archibald had broken in with the news of the emergency. “My little girl! And she’s doing a bolt with that bounder!”

“Do you happen to know his name?” inquired Archibald.

“Lionel Gillibrand, or something like that. I don’t know much about him, but he has been hanging round her ever since she and I had a row last November.”

“Oh, you had a row, had you? What was it about?”

“I have no notion: you know what girls are. We were half-engaged—but only half; and I suppose I took things too much for granted.”

“What do you mean, half-engaged?” demanded Archibald. “Be more succinct. Have you ever kissed her, for instance?”

“That’s my business!” replied James briefly.

“That means you have. Proceed, *mon enfant!* You took things too much for granted. Yes?”

“We had a bit of a turn-up,” continued James dolefully, “and she bunged me out for good and all. I haven’t seen her since; but being down here with you and knowing she would probably be at the garden-party, I thought I would go over to Tuckleford to-day and try and get her to make it up. And now she’s eloping with a feller like an Angora goat!” The unhappy young man groaned again.

“As things have turned out,” remarked Archibald complacently, “nothing could have been more fortunate.”

“Fortunate? What do you mean?”

“I mean that Providence has placed the matter in my hands. You are fortunate in having me to extricate your little friend from her predicament.”

“Predicament? She’s doing it of her own free will.”

Archibald shook his head judicially.

“She may have started out of her own free will,” he remarked, “but she’s scared stiff now. I think we can stop this marriage all right.”

“What are you going to do about it? Refuse to marry them?” inquired James, with gloomy sarcasm.

“No, I don’t think I shall refuse. If I do, they will only go to some one else, which would be a pity, because some one else might marry them, which I can’t do under any circumstances. *Ergo*, she is safer in my hands.”

“But what are you going to *do*?”

“I haven’t the faintest notion yet, but I have no doubt that something will occur to me at the proper time. I believe that Napoleon also relied a good deal upon the inspiration of the moment. For the present I shall temporise, and exercise extreme tact. It won’t do to put that little person’s back up. I should say she was the sort who would cut off her nose to spite her face.”

“She is!” agreed James, with feeling.

“Meanwhile,” continued Archibald, “I have invited them to have luncheon. I am afraid I can’t ask you to join us, under the circumstances, but you shall come in and wait at table.”

“Wait?”

“Yes. It will add a spice of pleasurable excitement to the proceedings.”

“But she would recognise me.”

“It is most unlikely that she will so much as look at you. She is far too agitated to notice anything. Still, she might; and that is where the pleasurable excitement would come in. I think I shall disguise you a little. There is a pair of blue spectacles lying on the study table: Flick must have taken to glasses. You can wear those. Blacken that beautiful golden moustache of yours with burnt cork, and speak, when necessary, in a husky whisper. I will explain that you have got diphtheria, or something. Don’t loiter about the room too much, of course. Just hand the dishes, and clear away, and so on.”

“I refuse altogether——” began James emphatically.

“It’s too late to refuse now,” replied Archibald. “I have already mentioned to them that I keep a manservant. They saw you hanging over the banisters as we crossed the hall, and I had to explain your face somehow. Luckily it was rather dark. Well, that’s settled. Don’t overdo your part, of

course. Don't lean over the back of Dorothy's chair, or blow on the top of her head, or tickle the back of her neck, or anything loverlike of that kind."

"How long," inquired James resignedly—he had ever been clay in the hands of his volatile friend—"is this tomfool entertainment to go on?"

"Until I have an inspiration, or until The Flick turns up. It's lunch-time now: go and sound the gong."

Five minutes later, the trio sat down to luncheon.

"Lenten fare, I fear, Mr. Gillibrand," remarked Archibald. "But a warm welcome goes with it."

"It is not Lent," said Mr. Gillibrand at once.

"Some of us," replied Archibald gently, "keep Lent all the year round, Mr. Gillibrand. Hand the cold salmon, Ja—John. Had you a pleasant ride, Mr. Gillibrand, until overtaken by the rain?"

"We had a fairly swift one, thanks," replied Gillibrand languidly. "I wish I'd had my car, though, instead of a hired motor-cycle. Still, we were doing thirty-five miles an hour through that last ten-mile limit, I should think." With some difficulty he helped himself to salmon, James's ideas as to the right distance from which to proffer food being elementary.

"Leo is a dreadfully reckless driver," said Dorothy, with timid admiration. "I was terrified."

She smiled in a half-hypnotised fashion at the intrepid Leo, who took not the slightest notice. Archibald disliked him more and more.

"Thirty-five miles an hour!" he exclaimed, shaking a playful finger. "What would my parishioners say? I hope you did not run over any of them."

"We flattened out two or three ducklings outside a cottage about a mile from here," replied the intrepid one. "A bumpkin of a policeman saw us, and had the impudence to blow his whistle. Luckily I had my identification number covered over with mud."

"You ought to have stopped, Leo," said Dorothy.

Mr. Gillibrand replied with a cold stare, which brought a blush to his beloved's cheek and nearly converted a small blancmange, which James was handing round, from a comestible into a missile.

Suddenly an inspiration came to Archibald the Erratic. He pushed back his chair, and fitting the tips of his fingers together after the traditional manner of stage clerics, addressed the couple before him.

“Now, my dear young people, with regard to the—ah—pleasant ceremony which is to take place this afternoon. I have already explained to you that certain formalities will be necessary, connected with a Special Licence, and Doctor’s Commons, and the Archbishop of Canterbury, and so on. Mere matters of form, but you know what red-tape is! John!”

James came briskly to attention.

“Hand me the telegraph forms from off that writing-table in the window, please,” said Archibald, and resumed:

“I propose telegraphing to His Grace for the necessary permission. It is a purely mechanical business; I need not even give your names. Ah, thank you, John!” He took the telegraph forms and proceeded to write. “Put on your hat, like a good fellow, and take this to the village. Let me see: *Cantuar, London*, is sufficient address, I think.” He handed the form to his dazed friend. “Can you read it, John?”

James glanced through the message. It said:

“Tell village policeman that man who ran over ducklings is here, and be quick about it, my lad!”

“Is that legible?” he asked.

James emitted a muffled sound, and departed.

“A strange, reticent fellow,” observed Archibald to his guests. “His tonsils are most unreliable, but he has a heart of gold. Shall we go into the garden? The birds are singing again. Indeed, yes!” He cooed, and rose to his feet. “The answer to the telegram,” he continued, “should be here within the hour, leaving ample time for the ceremony. I also expect a clerical friend about that time. Doubtless he will be glad to assist me, and so make assurance doubly sure!”

He led the way into the garden. He was still in a condition of utter ignorance as to how this escapade was to end; but he intended, if all else failed, to transfer the ensuing unpleasantness to the innocent shoulders of The Old Flick. Meanwhile, he calculated, the village policeman would incorporate an artistic element of complication into the afternoon’s entertainment.

IV

Suddenly, as the trio strolled in constrained silence down an aisle of high hollyhocks, there came to their ears a crunching sound upon the gravel of the drive, and a small governess cart, drawn by a fat grey pony, entered the vicarage gateway and proceeded in the direction of the stable. The driver of the cart had his back turned, but Archibald could see that he wore a soft black clerical hat. The Old Flick had arrived, and the cast was completed.

“I rather fancy that is my dear friend, Windrum,” he announced. “Forgive me if I leave you for a moment. You will doubtless bear my absence with fortitude!” He smiled archly. “The raspberries are at your disposal.” With a pontifical gesture of benediction he turned and walked in the direction of the house. This would be a surprise for The Old Flick.

He entered the library through the verandah windows. Before him, in the cool shade of the hall beyond, he beheld the tall, black-coated figure of the gentleman to whom he was acting as understudy. His principal’s back was turned, and he was gazing dumbly through the open door into the adjoining dining-room, where the *débris* of the recent feast were still visible.

The Old Flick’s attention, however, was immediately distracted from this spectacle by a shattering blow upon the spine, followed by a thunderous greeting. He whirled round, and faced his demonstrative assailant.

He was not The Old Flick at all.

Archibald the Erratic was stricken dumb for perhaps five seconds; then he put out a friendly hand.

“Good afternoon,” he said. “I consider it most neighbourly of you to have called. Sit down, won’t you?”

The stranger, a severe-looking man of about fifty, wearing spectacles over which beetling brows bent threateningly, declined the proffered hand, and faced the intruder with great deliberation.

“My name,” he said, “is Septimus Pontifex.”

“I am very glad to make your acquaintance, Pontifex,” said Archibald cordially. And reaching down a box from the mantelpiece, he offered Mr. Pontifex one of his own cigarettes.

“May I inquire,” said Pontifex, in a low, vibrating voice, “what you are doing in my house?”

“Your house?” replied Archibald with a rather uncertain smile. “Come, I like that!”

“You are pleased to be facetious, sir!” retorted Mr. Pontifex angrily. His spinal cord was still quivering. “If this house is not my actual property, it is mine in effect, so long as I remain Mr. Windrum’s *locum tenens*.”

So that was it! Archibald surveyed the swelling figure before him thoughtfully. He had better explain at once. No; on second thoughts he would wait a little. This was evidently a quarrelsome and inhospitable fellow—very different from The Flick—unworthy of great consideration. What would be an appropriate way of—

He was recalled from his meditations by the alarming demeanour of Pontifex, whose gaze for the last half-minute had been concentrated upon a small, crimson, circular object upon the right-hand leg of Archibald’s trousers. It was a spot of sealing-wax. Now he pointed a trembling finger, and almost screamed:—

“What do you mean, sir, by wearing my clothes? I recognise my trousers: do not deny it! I made that spot of sealing-wax myself, last night.”

“Yes, Pontifex,” replied Archibald in a soothing voice, “I am sure you did. You invent your own games, and play them by yourself. Very clever and resourceful!”

“Do not trifle with me, sir!” boomed Pontifex. “You are wearing my trousers: I *know* they are mine!”

Archibald shook his head mournfully.

“Really, Pontifex, really!” he said. “I had heard stories, of course, but I had no idea things were as bad as this. No wonder the dear Bishop was getting anxious.” He patted the astonished man upon the shoulder. “My poor friend, can’t you do anything—*anything*? My heart bleeds for you.”

Archibald choked—not from emotion, but from inability to decide what to say next. Mr. Pontifex saved him further trouble by turning on his heel and walking swiftly out of the room and upstairs. Presently he could be heard overhead, seeking confirmatory evidence in his rifled dressing-room.

Archibald lit a cigarette, strolled to the window, and looked out into the garden. Presently Septimus Pontifex came striding downstairs again, and stood framed in the doorway.

“You are a thief, sir,” he announced, “and an impostor. I do not know who you are or where you come from, but I presume that the motor-bicycle

which I noticed in the stables is yours. I shall now lock you in this room and send for a constable.”

“Do not put yourself to such trouble, my dear Mr. Pontifex,” Archie replied. “I have already done so.” He extended a hand and drew the bemused Pontifex to the window. “In fact, I see he has arrived.”

V

Dorothy Venner was still enough of a child to appreciate being left alone with the raspberries. But this afternoon her appetite was gone—which was not altogether surprising. Eloping is like riding a bicycle: you must go full speed ahead all the time, or you will begin to wobble. Dorothy was of a romantic disposition and barely twenty. She had been attracted by Mr. Gillibrand’s dark eyes and lofty attitude towards his fellow-creatures; and the fact that a peppery papa and a philistine elder brother had described her paragon as an effeminate young Nancy and a mangy little swine respectively had been in itself sufficient to convince her that she loved him to distraction. But, as already indicated, you cannot take an elopement *andante*. Dorothy was wobbling badly. The sunny, peaceful garden did not soothe her at all. She wanted to cry. She wanted to scream. Above all, she wanted some one to confide in.

Furtively, almost fearfully, she peeped through the raspberry canes to observe the movements of her beloved. He was wandering—one had almost said slouching—along a gravel path not fifteen yards away. Suddenly he halted, stiffened, and gave a startled glance in the direction of the house. Then he ducked, and, running with quite surprising swiftness, in the attitude of a Red Indian on the war-trail, dived into a large rhododendron bush and disappeared from sight.

Dorothy was too astonished to move or cry out. Now she was conscious of the thump of elephantine feet upon the grass close by, and next moment the explanation of Lionel’s peculiar conduct revealed itself in the form of a policeman—the largest policeman she had ever seen.

Now although we are pleased to be humorous upon the subject of policemen, it is in a spirit of pure bravado. Secretly we are all afraid of them: our upbringing at the hands of unscrupulous under-nurses has ensured that. Whether we are stealing jam or engaging in an elopement, the policeman is ever at the back of our thoughts. Dorothy trembled guiltily.

The policeman addressed her. He was a stout, jolly-looking man, and in his leisure moments was much in request at home as a minder of the baby. He was painfully conscious of this infirmity, and in the execution of his duty endeavoured to nullify it as far as possible. He spoke in a deep monotone, and his language was formal and official.

“Good afternoon miss I am informed that the gentleman what passed through Popleigh village about twelve-thirty p.m. to-day riding of a motor-cycle with side-car attached is on these ’ere premises can you give me any information as to his whereabouts?”

“He is somewhere about the garden, I think,” gasped Dorothy.

The policeman thanked her, and passed on. Dorothy watched him out of sight, and then turned and ran blindly in the direction of the house, straight into the arms of Captain James Pryor. He was wearing his own clothes, and had discarded his make-up.

Dorothy started back with an hysterical little cry.

“Jim!” she whispered. “You?”

“Yes,” said Jim simply—“just me.”

Dorothy gave him both her hands.

“Jim, dear,” she said, “I’m in awful trouble. I have been a little imbecile.”

“Oh, not at all!” said James tenderly.

“Yes, I have!” insisted Dorothy.

“No, you *haven’t!*” said James. “I tell you, I know about imbeciles. I’ve been spending the day with one.”

Miss Venner abandoned the argument, and wept comfortably, with her forehead resting upon Jim’s broad chest.

“I’m ashamed to look you in the face,” she sobbed.

“Never mind,” replied James, passing a protecting arm round her. “Have a look at my waistcoat instead: it’s been greatly admired in its time. Now, what’s your trouble?”

“It’s a long story,” said Dorothy; “but I simply must tell——”

“Don’t you tell me any stories you don’t need to,” interposed James swiftly. “I’m not an inquisitive sort of feller. . . . That’s a wretched little

handkerchief of yours: try mine!" He deprived Miss Venner of a small scrap of lawn and handed her a prismatic bandana.

"Now, cut out the explanations, and tell me what you want me to do," he said.

"I want you to take me away from this place. Back to Tuckleford—anywhere!" said Dorothy with a shuddering glance over her shoulder in the direction of the rhododendron bush.

"Righto!" replied James, who was always happy when there was plenty to do and nothing to say. "Let's go to the stable and start up your little friend's buzz-wagon. . . . By Jove, there's some one coming out of the verandah-window now. Run!" He seized his lady-love by the arm and fairly whirled her into the stable yard.

VI

Septimus Pontifex, dazed and bewildered, crossed the lawn and approached the raspberry canes, accompanied by Archibald. Ten yards behind followed an elderly female, carrying three dead ducklings. She had been brought to the Vicarage as principal witness for the prosecution, and, growing tired of waiting in the road outside, had decided to take a more intimate part in the proceedings.

The policeman had extracted Lionel Gillibrand from the rhododendron bush; and having produced a notebook and pencil from the interior of his chest, was well embarked upon a searching but stereotyped inquiry into his prisoner's identity and antecedents, when he became aware that two gentlemen in clerical dress—one elderly and lowering like a thundercloud, the other young and struggling with acute hysteria—had included themselves in the interview. Slightly flustered, he touched his helmet and returned to his cross-examination.

"Your name and address?" he repeated.

"You have no right to ask for it," persisted Lionel uneasily. "The law cannot touch me in this matter."

"Your name and address?" reiterated the policeman, with the steady insistency of a man who has the whole British Constitution at his back. "Surname? Christian name?"

"You had better give it, Mr. Gillibrand," advised the less sedate clergyman.

“Persons,” corroborated the policeman, “charged with a offence against the law and withholdin’ of their name and address when requested by a police officer is liable to be arrested summary. Now, my man, out with it!”

Lionel complied, sulkily.

“I say again,” he added, “that the law cannot touch me in the matter. There was no compulsion or undue influence. It was a purely voluntary act.”

The policeman ploughed on.

“I must ask you to show me your licence,” he continued.

Lionel grasped at this straw.

“Certainly!” he replied triumphantly. “I have a Special Licence!”

The policeman scratched his ear in a puzzled fashion, and then resorted to sarcasm.

“Special?” he said slowly. “What may a Special Licence be? Does it include liddle flappers?”

“Are you referring,” inquired Leo furiously, “to my future——?”

“I am referrin’,” replied the policeman doggedly, “to your licence.”

“I tell you I have a Special Licence,” shouted Lionel— “from the Archbishop of Canterbury.” He turned to Archibald. “Has the telegram arrived yet?” he inquired feverishly.

“Not yet,” replied Archibald.

“Touchin’ this licence,” persisted the adamantine policeman, “I don’t see what no Archbishop of Canterbury has got to do with liddle flappers. Mrs. Challice, will you step this way?”

The elderly female with the corpses, who had been standing respectfully aloof, glided mechanically forward.

“I was a-sittin’ outside of my door, sir——” she began rapidly to Archibald.

“You will be charged——” announced the policeman to Mr. Gillibrand.

“Hallo! What’s that?” exclaimed Archibald. From the drive came a whirring and a popping sound.

“It’s my motor-cycle!” exclaimed Gillibrand.

“BG seven-oh-two,” corroborated the policeman grimly. “I’ve got your number all right. *Here, stop!*”

Mr. Gillibrand was already half-way across the lawn. But he was too late. As he rounded the corner of the house his motor-cycle, carrying two passengers, swung out of the gate into the road and whizzed away, with a single derisive toot, in the direction of Tuckleford.

Desperately he sped after it. The policeman, stertorous but tenacious, followed. Last of all came the owner of the corpses, minus her evidence. Archibald the Erratic and Septimus Pontifex were left alone.

VII

“Well,” announced Archie cheerfully, “that’s that.”

Mr. Pontifex turned majestically upon him.

“Sir,” he announced, “I shall wait no longer——”

“Sorry you have to go,” said Archibald, extending a friendly hand. “Look in again, won’t you?”

Mr. Pontifex ignored this hospitable invitation and continued:

“You have broken into my house; you are masquerading in my clothes; you have entertained a party of friends to luncheon at my expense; and you have involved me in a grotesque and inexplicable brawl between a village policeman and an escaped criminal, to whom you have apparently promised a dispensation from the Archbishop of Canterbury. If you can explain all these things to me with any degree of plausibility I shall be grateful.”

Archie, who possessed the saving grace—rare in irresponsible humorists—of knowing when a joke has gone far enough, complied. His explanation was characteristically involved, and abounded in irrelevance. But Pontifex’s severe features had relaxed considerably ere he finished.

“Mr. Wade,” he said—“if that be your name—I am inclined to accept your narrative as substantially correct, and I applaud your design to prevent this marriage, though your methods of execution are open to criticism. But you will forgive me if I verify your statements by a direct reference to Mr. Windrum? I shall send a telegram——”

“I can save you the trouble,” replied Archibald.

“You seem to think of everything,” remarked Mr. Pontifex, with an indulgent smile. “Have you telegraphed yourself?”

“No, sir. My certificate of character is hanging in your own study.”

Archibald crossed the verandah and disappeared. Presently he returned, carrying a framed photograph.

“My passport, sir, and certificate aforesaid,” he announced.

Mr. Pontifex examined the portrait—a young officer in the uniform of the Royal Air Force, inscribed: “*To The Old Flick, from Archibald the Erratic.*”

“I recognise it,” he said. “And you are Archibald the Erratic?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And the—er—Old Flick?”

“Mr. Windrum, sir. We were boys together. At that age we are apt to be thoughtless and inconsiderate in the nicknames that we bestow.”

“That is very true,” agreed Mr. Pontifex. “I remember, in my undergraduate days at Oxford——”

What Mr. Pontifex remembered will never be known, for at this moment there was a sound of turmoil outside, the garden gate clicked, and the policeman reappeared, holding Mr. Lionel Gillibrand by the collar. The lady of the ducklings appeared to have been unable to stay the course: at any rate, she was no longer visible.

“I’ve got him, sir!” announced the policeman to Archibald—whom, not altogether unreasonably, he appeared to regard as the president of the tribunal.

“Excellent, officer!” said Archibald approvingly. “Put him there.” He indicated a chair, into which the representative of the law proceeded to bump his prisoner. This done, the policeman again extracted the notebook from his bosom, and resumed:

“Attemptin’ to escape from custody amounts to resistin’ of the police in the execution of their duty. That makes the charge much more serious.” He sucked his blunt pencil thoughtfully; then wrote. . . . “You will now be charged with driving a mechanically-propelled vehicle—to wit, one motorcycle—along the Tuckleford Road to the common danger; exceeding of the speed limit in a ten-mile control; destroying of live-stock—to wit, three flappers; refusing to stop when requested to do so by a police officer, and

resisting of the police in the execution of their duty.” He shut the book with a snap. Lionel Gillibrand gazed at him incredulously.

“Do you mean to say——” he began.

The policeman held up a hand about the size of a small ham.

“Stop one minute!” he commanded. “I have some evidence here.” He dived under his chair and produced the corpses of the ducklings. “Three flappers! That’s what you’re wanted for, my man!”

“Do you mean to say,” inquired Gillibrand, in a voice of mingled indignation and relief, “that that is all?”

“And quite enough too!” retorted the policeman, obviously more than a little piqued.

“But—but—I thought——”

Archibald intervened swiftly.

“Yes, that is all, Mr. Gillibrand. If you have any other crime on your conscience—well, forget it! Next Monday you will be penalised forty shillings or a month by the local beaks, like any other ordinary little road-hog, for running over three ducklings and resisting the police in the execution of their duty. I wouldn’t have the charge made more—romantic than that, if I were you. Believe me, it’s not done! See?”

Gillibrand favoured him with a lingering and malevolent glare; then turned away sulkily. Archibald rose to his feet.

“I suppose this gentleman is at liberty to leave us now, officer?” he said.

“I shall not require him further,” replied the policeman grandly—“for a day or two.”

VIII

Archibald the Erratic accompanied Mr. Gillibrand to the gate, and pointed out to that depreciated Lochinvar the nearest way to the railway station. He returned to find the Rector sitting alone in the verandah.

“Has our policeman left us?” Archibald asked.

“My housekeeper,” replied Mr. Pontifex, “who has just returned from an afternoon visit to her sister, is supplying him with refreshment in the kitchen. Mr. Wade, I think you handled the delicate matter of the true reason

of Mr. Gillibrand's presence here with great discrimination. I am glad now I trusted to my own judgment and allowed you to conduct the case in your own way. Will you remain and join us at supper?"

"Yourself and your housekeeper?" inquired Archibald, politely temporising until he should find a way of escape from what promised to be a somewhat parochial evening.

"Oh dear no! My housekeeper is a person of quite humble station. Myself and my daughter."

"Your daughter?"

"Precisely. Possibly I have not informed you that I am so blessed. There she is, coming in at the garden gate now. She has been to a garden-party."

Archibald turned quickly. In the open gateway stood a girl—fair-haired, slender, dressed in white, her face shaded by a large black-lace hat. There was a bunch of pink carnations at her belt. On seeing her father engaged in amicable conversation with a young and eminently presentable brother of the cloth, she broke into a smile. Archibald, who was an observant young man, noted she had a dimple in her left cheek. Concurrently, he was conscious of a slight shortness of breath.

"You will stay to supper, then?" said Mr. Pontifex.

Archibald the Erratic bowed his head reverentially, and uttered the first serious words of a frivolous career:—

"I will!"

I

THE COMING OF “BILL BAILEY”

FOR SALE—*A superb 3-seated Diablement-Odorant Touring Car, 12-15 h.p., 1907 model, with Cape cart hood, speedometer, spare wheel, fanfare horn, and lamps complete. Body, French-grey picked out with red. Cost £450. Will take . . .*

THE sum which the vendor was prepared to take was so startling that to mention it would be to commence this narrative with an anticlimax. The advertisement concluded by remarking that the car was as good as new, and added darkly that the owner was going abroad.

Such was the official title and description of the vehicle. After making its actual acquaintance we devised for ourselves other and shorter terms of designation. I used to refer to it as My Bargain. Mr. Gootch, our local cycle-agent and petrol-merchant, dismissed it gloomily as “one of them owe-seven Oderongs.” My daughter (hereinafter termed The Gruffin) christened it “Bill Bailey,” because it usually declined to come home; and a popular ditty of the moment—I am speaking of days before the war, when people could afford to go to entertainments and petrol was one and twopence a gallon—dealt tearfully with a renegade husband of that name.

I may premise this narrative by stating that until I purchased Bill Bailey my experience of motor mechanics had been limited to a motor-bicycle of antique design, which had been sold me by a distant relative of my wife’s. This stately but inanimate vehicle I rode assiduously for something like two months, buoyed up by the not unreasonable hope that one day, provided I pedalled long enough and hard enough, the engine would start. I was doomed to disappointment; and after removing the driving-belt and riding the thing for another month or so as an ordinary bicycle, mortifying my flesh and enlarging my heart in the process, I bartered my unresponsive steed—it turned the scale at about two hundredweight—to Mr. Gootch, in exchange for a set of new wheels for the perambulator. Teresa—we called it Teresa after our first cook, who on receiving notice invariably declined to go—was immediately put into working order by Mr. Gootch, who, I believe, still wins prizes with her at reliability trials.

To return to Bill Bailey. I had been coquetting with the idea of purchasing a car for something like three months, and my wife had definitely made up her mind upon the subject for something like three years, when the advertisement already quoted caught my eye on the back of an evening paper. The car was duly inspected by the family *en bloc*, in its temporary abiding-place at a garage in distant Surbiton. What chiefly attracted me was the price. My wife's fancy was taken by the French-grey body picked out with red, and the favourable consideration of The Gruffin was secured by the idea of a speedometer reeling off its mile per minute. The baby's interest was chiefly centred in the fanfare horn.

My young friend Andy Finch—one of those fortunate people who feel competent to give advice upon any subject under the sun—obligingly offered to overhaul the engine and bearings and report upon their condition. His report was entirely favourable, and the bargain was concluded.

Next day, on returning home from the City, I found the new purchase awaiting me in the coach-house. It was a two-seated affair, with a precarious-looking arrangement like an iron camp-stool—known, I believe, as a spider-seat—clamped on behind. A general survey of the car assured me that the lamps, speedometer, spare wheel, and other extra fittings had not been abstracted for the benefit of the gentleman who had gone abroad; and I decided there and then to take a holiday next day and indulge the family with an excursion.

I may add that all this happened at a time when the mechanically propelled vehicle had but recently emerged from the serio-comic stage, and was establishing itself as a domestic necessity. The main difference to the man of moderate means was that whereas he now buys a new Tin Lizzie, in those days he was restricted to an old Bill Bailey.

II

THE PROVING OF "BILL BAILEY"

Where I made my initial error was in permitting Andy Finch to come round next morning. Weakly deciding that I might possibly be able to extract a grain or two of helpful information from the avalanche of advice which would descend upon me, I agreed to his proposal that he should come and assist me to "tune her up."

Andy arrived in due course, and proceeded to run over the car's points in a manner which at first rather impressed me. Hitherto I had contented

myself with opening a sort of oven door in the dish-cover arrangement which concealed the creature's works from view, and peering in with an air of intense wisdom, much as a diffident amateur inspects a horse's mouth. After that I felt the tyres, in search of spavins and curbs.

Andy began by removing the dish-cover bodily—I learned for the first time that it was called the bonnet—and then proceeded to tear up the boards on the floor of the car. This done, a number of curious and mysterious objects were exposed to view for the first time, with the functions and shortcomings of each of which I was fated to become severally and monotonously familiar.

Having completed his observations, Andy suggested a run along the road. I did not know then, as I know now, that his knowledge of automobilism was about on a par with my own; otherwise I would not have listened with such respect or permitted him to take any further liberties with the mechanism. However, I knew no better, and this is what happened.

I had better describe the results in tabular form:

12.15. Andy performs a feat which he describes as “tickling the carburettor.”

12.16-12.20. Andy turns the handle in front.

12.20-12.25. I turn the handle in front.

12.25-12.30. Andy turns the handle in front.

12.30-12.45. Adjournment to the dining-room sideboard.

12.45-12.50. Andy turns the handle in front.

12.50-12.55. I turn the handle in front.

12.55-1. Andy turns the handle in front and I tickle the carburettor.

1-1.5. I turn the handle in front and Andy tickles the carburettor.

At 1.5 Andy announced that there was one infallible way to start a refractory car, and that was to let it run downhill under its own momentum, and then suddenly let the clutch in. I need hardly say that my residence lies in a hollow. However, with the assistance of The Gruffin, we manfully trundled our superb 1907 Diablement-Odorant out of the coach-house, and pushed it up the hill without mishap, if I except two large dents in the back of the body, caused by the ignorance of my daughter that what looks like solid timber may after all be only hollow aluminium.

We then turned the car, climbed on board, and proceeded to descend the hill by the force of gravity. Bill Bailey I must say travelled beautifully, despite my self-appointed chauffeur's efforts to interfere with his movements by stamping on pedals and manipulating levers. Absorbed with these exercises, Andy failed to observe the imminence of our destination, and we reached the foot of the hill at a good twenty-five miles an hour, the back wheels locked fast by a belated but whole-hearted application of the hand-brake. However, the collision with the confines of my estate was comparatively gentle, and we soon disentangled the head-light from the garden hedge.

The engine still failed to exhibit any signs of life.

At this point my wife, who had been patiently sitting in the hall wearing a new motor-bonnet for the best part of two hours, came out and suggested that we should proclaim a temporary truce and have lunch.

At two-thirty we returned to the scene of operations. Having once more tickled the now thoroughly depressed carburettor to the requisite pitch of hilarity, Andy was on the point of resuming operations with the starting-handle, when I drew his attention to a small stud-like affair sliding across a groove in the dash-board.

"I think," I remarked, "that that is the only thing on the car which you haven't fiddled with as yet. Suppose I push it across?"

Andy, I was pleased to observe, betrayed distinct signs of confusion. Recovering quickly, he protested that the condemned thing was of no particular use, but I could push it across if I liked.

I did so. Next moment, after three deafening but encouraging back-fires, Bill Bailey's engine came to life with a roar, and the car proceeded rapidly backwards down the road, Andy, threaded through the spare rim like a camel in a needle's eye, slapping down pedals with one hand and clutching at the steering-gear with the other.

"Who left the reverse in?" he panted, when the car had at length been brought to a standstill and the engine stopped.

No explanation was forthcoming, but I observed the scared and flushed countenance of my daughter peering apprehensively round the coach-house door, and drew my own conclusions.

Since Bill Bailey was obviously prepared to atone for past inertia by frenzied activity, our trial trip now came within the sphere of possibility. My wife had by this time removed her bonnet, and flatly declined to accompany

us, alleging somewhat unkindly that she was expecting friends to tennis at the end of the week. The Gruffin, however, would not be parted from us, and presently Bill Bailey, with an enthusiastic but incompetent chauffeur at the wheel, an apprehensive proprietor holding on beside him, and a touzled, long-legged hoyden of twelve clinging grimly to the spider-seat behind, clanked majestically out of the garden gate and breasted the slope leading to the main road.

Victory at last! This was life! This was joy! I leaned back and took a full breath. The Gruffin, protruding her unkempt head between mine and Andy's, shrieked out a hope that we might encounter a load of hay *en route*. It was so lucky, she said. She was not disappointed.

From the outset it was obvious that the money expended upon the fanfare horn had been thrown away. No fanfare could have advertised Bill Bailey's approach more efficaciously than Bill himself. He was his own trumpeter. Whenever we passed a roadside cottage we found frantic mothers garnering stray children into doorways, what time the *fauna* of the district hastily took refuge in ditches or behind hedges.

Still, all went well, as they say in reporting railway disasters, until we had travelled about four miles, when the near-side front wheel settled down with a gentle sigh upon its rim, and the tyre assumed a plane instead of a cylindrical surface. Ten minutes' strenuous work with a pump restored it to its former rotundity, and off we went again at what can only be described as a rattling pace.

After another mile or so I decided to take the helm myself, not because I thought I could drive the car well, but because I could not conceive how anyone could drive it worse than Andy.

I was wrong.

Still, loads of hay are proverbially soft; and since the driver of this one continued to slumber stertorously upon its summit even after the shock of impact, we decided not to summon a fellow-creature from dreamland for the express purpose of distressing him with unpleasant tidings on the subject of the paint on his tail-board. So, cutting loose from the wreck, we silently stole away, if the reader will pardon the expression, with a somewhat hirsute radiator.

It must have been about twenty minutes later, I fancy, that the gear-box fell off. Personally I should never have noticed our bereavement, for the din indigenous to Bill Bailey's ordinary progress was quite sufficient to allow a

margin for such extra items of disturbance as the sudden exposure of the gear-wheels. A few jets of a black and glutinous compound, which I afterwards learned to recognise as gear-oil, began to spout up through cracks in the flooring, but that was all. It was The Gruffin who, from her retrospective coign of vantage in the spider-seat, raised the alarm of a heavy metallic body overboard. We stopped the car, and the gear-box was discovered in a disintegrated condition a few hundred yards back; but as none of us was capable of restoring it to its original position, and as Bill Bailey appeared perfectly prepared to do without it altogether, we decided to go on *in statu quo*.

The journey, I rejoice to say, was destined not to conclude without witnessing the final humiliation and exposure of Andy Finch. We had pumped up the leaky tyre three times in about seven miles, when Andy, struck by a brilliant idea, exclaimed:

“What mugs we are! What is the good of a Stepney wheel if you don’t use it?”

A trifle ashamed of our want of resource, we laboriously detached the Stepney from its moorings and trundled it round to the proper side of the car. I leaned it up against its future partner and then stepped back and waited. So did Andy. The Gruffin, anxious to learn, edged up and did the same.

There was a long pause.

“Go ahead,” I said encouragingly, as my young friend merely continued to regard the wheel with a mixture of embarrassment and malevolence. “I want to see how these things are put on.”

“It’s quite easy,” said Andy desperately. “You just hold it up against the wheel and clamp it on.”

“Then do it,” said I.

“Yes, do it!” said my loyal daughter ferociously. With me she was determined not to spare the malefactor.

A quarter of an hour later we brought out the pump and I once more inflated the leaky tyre, while Andy endeavoured to replace the Stepney wheel in its original resting-place beside the driver’s seat. Even now the tale of his incompetence was not complete.

“This blamed Stepney won’t go back into its place,” he said plaintively. “I fancy one of the clip things must have dropped off. It’s rather an old-fashioned pattern, this of yours. I think we had better carry it back loose.

After all," he added almost tearfully, evading my daughter's stony eye, "it doesn't matter *how* you carry the thing, so long——"

He withered and collapsed. Ultimately we drove home with The Gruffin wearing the Stepney wheel round her waist, lifebuoy fashion. On reaching home I sent for Mr. Gootch to come and take Bill Bailey away and put him into a state of efficiency. Then I explained to Andy, during a most consoling ten minutes, exactly what I thought of him as a mechanic, a chauffeur, and a fellow-creature.

III

THE PASSING OF "BILL BAILEY"

It is a favourite maxim of my wife's that *any* woman can manage *any* man, provided she takes the trouble to thoroughly *understand* him. (The italics and split infinitive are hers.) This formula, I soon found, is capable of extension to the relations existing between a motor-car and its owner. Bill Bailey and I soon got to understand one another thoroughly. He was possessed of what can only be described as an impish temperament. He seemed to know by instinct what particular idiosyncrasy of his would prove most exasperating at a given moment, and he varied his repertoire accordingly. On the other hand, he never wasted his energies upon an unprofitable occasion. For instance, he soon discovered that I had not the slightest objection to his back-firing in a quiet country road. Consequently he reserved that stunning performance for a crowded street full of nervous horses. He nearly always broke down when I took critical or expert friends for an outing; and the only occasions which ever aroused him to high speed were those upon which I was driving alone, having dispatched the rest of the family by train to ensure their safe arrival.

Gradually I acquired a familiarity with most of the complaints from which Bill Bailey suffered—and their name was legion, for they were many—together with the symptoms which heralded their respective recurrences. In this connection I should like to set down, for the benefit of those optimists who, even in this enlightened age, persist in encumbering themselves with fifth-hand motor-cars, a few of the commonest causes of cessation of activity in the same, gradual or instantaneous, temporary or permanent:

A. Breakdowns on the part of the engine. These may be due to—

(1) Absence of petrol. (Usually discovered after the entire car has been dismantled.)

(2) Presence of a foreign body; *e.g.* a Teddy Bear in the water-pump. (How it got there I cannot imagine. The animal was a present from the superstitious Gruffin, and in the rôle of mascot adorned the summit of the radiator. It must have felt dusty or thirsty, and dropped in one day when the cap was off.)

(3) Things in their wrong places; *e.g.* water in the petrol-tank and petrol in the water-tank. (This occurred on the solitary occasion upon which I entrusted The Gruffin with the preparation of the car for an afternoon's run.)

(4) Loss of some essential portion of the mechanism; *e.g.* the carburettor. (A minute examination of the road for a few hundred yards back will usually restore it.)

B. Intermediate troubles.

By this I mean troubles connected with the complicated apparatus which harnesses the engine to the car—the clutch, the gears, the driving-shaft, and so on. Of these it is sufficient to speak briefly.

(1) The Clutch. This may either refuse to go in or refuse to come out. In the first case, the car cannot be started, and in the second, it cannot be stopped. The former contingency is humiliating, the latter expensive.

(2) The Gears. These have a habit of becoming entangled with one another. Persons in search of a novel sensation are recommended to try getting the live axle connected simultaneously with the top speed forward and the reverse.

(3) The Driving-Shaft. The front end of this is comparatively intelligible, but the tail is shrouded in mystery. It merges into a thing called the differential. I have no idea what this is. It is kept securely concealed in a sort of Bluebeard's chamber attached to the back axle. Inquiries of mine as to its nature and purpose were always greeted by Mr. Gootch with amused contempt or genuine alarm, according as I merely displayed idle curiosity on the subject, or expressed a desire to have the axle laid bare.

C. Trouble with the car. (With which is incorporated trouble with the brakes and steering apparatus.)

It must not be imagined that the car will necessarily go because the engine is running. One of the wheels may refuse to go round, possibly because—

- (1) You have omitted to take the brake off.
- (2) Something has gone wrong with the differential. (In this case abandon all hope. There is nothing else to do.)
- (3) It has just dropped off. (N.B.—This only happened once.)

After a time I was able not merely to foretell the coming of one of Bill Bailey's periods of rest from labour, but to diagnose the cause and make up a prescription.

If the car came to a standstill for no outwardly perceptible reason, I removed the bonnet and took a rapid inventory of Bill's most vital organs, sending The Gruffin back along the road at the same time, with instructions to retrieve anything of a metallic nature which she might discover there.

When Bill Bailey without previous warning suddenly charged a hedge or passing pedestrian, or otherwise exhibited a preference for the footpath as opposed to the roadway, I gathered that the steering-gear had gone wrong again. The Gruffin, who had developed an aptness for applied mechanics most unusual in her sex, immediately produced from beneath the seat a suit of blue overalls of her own construction, of which she was inordinately proud—I hope I shall be able to dress her as cheaply in ten years' time—and proceeded to squirm beneath the car. Here, happy as a queen, she lay upon her back on the dusty road, with oil and petrol dripping in about equal proportions into her wide grey eyes and open mouth, adjusting a bit of chronically refractory worm-and-wheel gear which I, from reasons of *embonpoint* and advancing years, found myself unable to reach.

Finally, if my nose was assailed by a mingled odour of blistering paint, melted indiarubber, and frizzling metal, I deduced that the cooling apparatus had gone wrong again, and that the cylinders were red hot. The petrol tap was hurriedly turned off, and The Gruffin and I retired gracefully, but without undue waste of time, to a distance of about fifty yards, where we sat down behind the highest and thickest wall available, and waited for a fall of temperature, a conflagration, or an explosion, as the case might be.

Bill Bailey remained in my possession for nearly two years. During that time he covered three thousand miles, consumed more petrol and oil than I should have thought possible, ran through two sets of tyres, and cost a sum of money in repairs which would have purchased a small steam yacht.

There were moments when I loved him like a brother; others, more frequent, when he was an offence to my vision. The Gruffin, on the other hand, having fallen in love with him on sight, worshipped him with increasing ardour and true feminine perversity the dingier and more repulsive he grew.

Not that we had not our great days. Once we overtook and inadvertently ran over a hen—an achievement which, while it revolted my humanitarian instincts and filled the radiator with feathers, struck me as dirt cheap at half a crown. (You only paid half a crown in those days). Again, there was the occasion upon which we were caught in a police-trap. Never had I felt so proud of Bill Bailey as when I stood in the dock listening to a policeman's Homeric description of our flight over a measured quarter of a mile. At the end of the recital, despite my certain knowledge that Bill's limit was about eighteen miles an hour, I felt that I must in common fairness enter him at Brooklands next season. The Gruffin, who came to see me through, afterwards assured her mother that I thanked the magistrate who fined me and handed my accusing angel five shillings.

But there was another side to the canvas. Many were the excursions upon which we embarked, only to tramp home in the rain at the end of the day, leaving word at Mr. Gootch's to send out and tow Bill Bailey home. Many a time, too, have Bill and I formed the nucleus of an interested crowd in a village street, Bill inert and unresponsive, while I, perspiring vigorously and studiously ignoring inquiries as to whether I could play "The Merry Widow Waltz," desolately turned the starting-handle, to evoke nothing more than an inferior hurdy-gurdy melody syncopated by explosions at irregular intervals. Once, too, when in a fit of overweening presumption I essayed to drive across London, we broke down finally and completely exactly opposite The Angel at Islington, where Bill Bailey, with his back wheels locked fast in some new and incomprehensible manner—another vagary of the differential, I suppose—despite the urgent appeals of seven policemen, innumerable errand-boys, and the drivers, conductors, and passengers of an increasing line of London County Council electric tram-cars, stood his ground in the fairway for nearly a quarter of an hour. Finally, he was lifted up and carried bodily, by a self-appointed Soviet, to the side of the road, to be conveyed home in a trolley.

But all flesh is as grass. Bill Bailey's days drew to an end. The French-grey in his complexion was becoming indistinguishable from the red; his joints rattled like dry bones; his fanfare horn was growing asthmatic. Old age was upon him, and I, with the ingratitude of man to the faithful servant

who has outlived his period of usefulness, sold him to Mr. Gootch for fifteen sovereigns and a small lady's bicycle.

Only The Gruffin mourned his passing. She said little, but accepted the bicycle (which I had purchased for her consolation) with becoming meekness.

At ten o'clock on the night before Bill Bailey's departure—he was to be sent for early in the morning—the nurse announced with some concern that Miss Alethea (The Gruffin) was not in her bed. She was ultimately discovered in the coach-house, attired in a pink dressing-gown and bath slippers. She was kneeling with her arms round as much of Bill Bailey as they could encompass; her long hair flowed and rippled over his scratched and dented bonnet; and she was crying as if her very heart would break.

IV

“BILL BAILEY” COMES AGAIN

A year later I bought a new car. It possessed a large number of cylinders and an innumerable quantity of claims to perfection. The engine would start at the pressure of a button; the footbrake and accelerator never became involved in an unholy alliance; it could climb any hill; and outlying portions of its anatomy adhered faithfully to the parent body. Pedestrians and domestic animals no longer took refuge in ditches at our approach. On the contrary, we charmed them like Orpheus with his lute; for the sound of our engine never rose above a sleek and comfortable purr, while the note of the horn suggested the first three bars of “Onward, Christian Soldiers!”

My wife christened the new arrival The Greyhound, but The Gruffin, faithful to the memory of the late lamented Bill Bailey, never referred to it as anything but The Egg-Boiler. This scornful denotation found some justification in the car's ornate nickel-plated radiator, whose curving sides and domed top made up a far-away resemblance to the heavily patented and highly explosive contrivance which daily terrorised our breakfast-table.

Of Bill Bailey's fate we knew little, but since Mr. Gootch once informed us with some bitterness that he had had to sell him to a Scotchman, we gathered that, for once in his life, our esteemed friend had been unable to dispose of his goods at a profit.

The Greyhound, though a sheer delight as a vehicle, was endowed with somewhat complicated internal mechanism, and I was compelled in consequence to retain the services of a skilled chauffeur, a Mr. Richards,

who very properly limited my dealings with the car to ordering it round when I thought I should be likely to get it. Consequently my connection with practical mechanics came to an end, and henceforth I travelled with my friends in the back seat, The Gruffin keeping Mr. Richards company in front, and goading that exclusive and haughty menial to visible annoyance by her supercilious attitude towards his parvenu bantling.

Finally we decided on a motor trip to Scotland. There was a luggage-carrier on the back of the car which was quite competent to contain my wife's trunk and my own suitcase. The Gruffin, who was not yet of an age to trouble about her appearance, carried her *batterie de toilette* in a receptacle of her own, which shared the front seat with its owner, and served the additional purpose of keeping The Gruffin's slim person more securely wedged therein.

We joined the car at Carlisle, and drove the first day to Stirling. On the second the weather broke down, and we ploughed our way through Perth and the Pass of Killiecrankie to Inverness in a blinding Scotch mist. The Greyhound behaved magnificently, and negotiated various horrific gradients in a manner which caused me to refer slightly to what might have happened had we entrusted our fortunes to Bill Bailey. The Gruffin tossed back to me over her shoulder a recommendation to touch wood.

Next day broke fine and clear, and we rose early, for we intended to run right across Scotland. I ate a hearty breakfast, inwardly congratulating myself upon not having to accelerate its assimilation by performing callisthenic exercises upon a starting-handle directly afterwards. At ten o'clock The Greyhound slid round to the hotel door, and we embarked upon our journey. Infatuated by long immunity from disaster, I dispatched a telegram to an hotel fifty miles away, ordering luncheon at a meticulously definite hour, and another to our destination—a hospitable shooting-box on the west coast—mentioning the exact moment at which we might be expected.

Certainly we were "asking for it," as my Cassandra-like offspring did not fail to remark. But for a while Fate answered us according to our folly. We arrived at our luncheon hotel ten minutes before my advertised time, an achievement which pleased me so much that I wasted some time in exhibiting the engine to the courtly and venerable brigand who owned the hotel, with the result that we got away half an hour late. But what was half an hour to The Greyhound?

Blithely we sped across the endless moor beneath the September sun. The road, straight and undulating, ran ahead of us like a white tape laid upon the heather. The engine purred contentedly, and Mr. Richards, lolling back in his seat, took a patronising survey of the surrounding landscape. Evidently he rejoiced, in his benign and lofty fashion, to think how this glittering vision was brightening the dull lives of the grouse and sheep. Certainly the appearance of The Greyhound did him credit. Not a speck of mud defiled its body; soot and oil were nowhere obtrusive. Bill Bailey had been wont, during periods of rest outside friends' front doors, to deposit a small puddle of some black and viscous liquid upon the gravel. The Greyhound was guilty of no such untidiness. Mr. Richards, to quote his own respectfully satirical words, preferred using his oil to oil the car instead of gentlemen's front drives. Under his administration my expenditure on lubricants alone had shrunk to half of what it had been in Bill Bailey's time.

But economy can be pushed to excess. Even as I dozed in the back seat, sleepily observing The Gruffin's flying mane and wondering whether we ought not shortly to get out the thermos containing our tea, there came a grating, crackling sound. The Greyhound gave a swerve which nearly deposited its occupants in a peat-hag; and after one or two zigzag and epileptic gambols came to a full stop.

"Steering-gear gone wrong, Richards?" I inquired.

"I don't think so, sir," replied Mr. Richards easily. "Seems to me it was a kind of a side sl— Get out, sir! Get out, mum! The dam' thing's afire!"

We cooled the fervid glowing of the back-axle with a patent fire-extinguisher, and sat down gloomily to survey the wreck. Economy is the foundation of riches, but you must discriminate in your choice of economies. Axle-grease should not be included in the list. Mr. Richards, whether owing to a saving disposition or an æsthetic desire to avoid untidy drippings, had omitted—so we afterwards discovered—to lubricate the back-axle or differential for several weeks, with the result that the bearings of the off-side back wheel had seized, and most of the appurtenances thereof had fused into a solid, immovable mass.

We sat in the declining rays of the sun and regarded The Greyhound. The brass-work still shone, and the engine was in beautiful running order; but the incontrovertible and humiliating fact remained that we were ten miles from the nearest dwelling and The Greyhound's career as a medium of transport

was indefinitely closed. Even the biting reminder of The Gruffin that we could still employ him to boil eggs in failed to cheer us.

Restraining an impulse to give Mr. Richards a month's notice on the spot, I conferred with my wife and daughter. We might possibly be picked up by a passing car, but the road was a lonely one and the contingency unlikely. We must walk. Accordingly we sat down to a hasty tea, prepared directly afterwards to tramp on towards our destination.

The wind had dropped completely, and the silence that lay upon the sleepy, sunny moor was almost uncanny. Imbued with a gentle melancholy, my wife and I partook of refreshment in chastened silence. Suddenly, as The Gruffin (considerably more cheerful than I had seen her for some days) was passing up her cup for the third time, a faint and irregular sound came pulsing and vibrating across the moor. It might have been the roar of a battle far away. One could almost hear the popping of rifles, the clash of steel, and the shrieks of the wounded. Presently the noise increased in intensity and volume. It appeared to come from beyond a steep rise in the long straight road behind us. We pricked up our ears. I became conscious of a vague sense of familiarity with the phenomenon. The air seemed charged with some sympathetic influence.

“What is that noise, Richards?” I said.

“I rather *think*, sir,” replied Mr. Richards, peering down the road, “that it might be some kind of a——”

Suddenly I was aware of a distinct rise of temperature in the neighbourhood of my left foot. My daughter, with face flushed and lips parted, was gazing feverishly down the road. An unheeded thermos flask, held limply in her hand, was directing a stream of scalding tea down my leg. Before I could expostulate she wheeled round upon me, and I swear there were tears in her eyes.

“It's *Bill!*” she shrieked. “Bill Bailey! *My Bill!*”

She was right. As she spoke a black object appeared upon the crown of the hill, and, incredible to relate, Bill Bailey, puffing, snorting, reeking, jingling, back-firing, came lumbering down the slope, in his old hopeless but irresistible fashion, right upon our present encampment.

His lamps and Stepney wheel were gone, his back tyres were solid, and his erstwhile body of French-grey was now decked out in a rather blistered coat of that serviceable red pigment which adorns most of the farmers' carts

in the Highlands. But his voice was still unmistakably the voice of Bill Bailey.

He was driven by a dirty-faced youth in a blue overall, who presented the appearance of one who acts as general factotum in a country establishment which supports two or three motors and generates its own electric light. By his side sat a patriarchal old gentleman with a white beard, in tweeds, hobnail boots, and a deerstalker cap—obviously a head ghillie of high and ancient lineage.

The spider-seat at the back was occupied, in the fullest sense of the word, by a dead stag about the size of a horse, lashed to this, its temporary catafalque, with innumerable ropes.

The old gentleman was politeness itself, and on hearing of our plight placed himself and Bill Bailey unreservedly at our disposal. His master, The M'Shin of Inversneishan, would be proud to house us for the night, and the game-car should convey us to the hospitable walls of Inversneishan forthwith. Tactfully worded doubts upon our part as to Bill's carrying capacity—we did not complicate matters by explaining upon what good authority we spoke—were waved aside with a Highlander's indifference to mere detail. The car was a grand car, and the Castle was no distance at all. Mr. Richards alone need be jettisoned. He could remain with The Greyhound all night, and on the morrow succour should be sent him.

Mr. Richards, utterly demoralised by his recent fall from the summit of autocracy, meekly assented, and presently Bill Bailey, packed like the last bus on a Saturday night, staggered off upon his homeward way. My wife and I shared the front seat with the oleaginous youth in the overall, while the patriarchal ghillie hung on precariously behind, locked in the embrace of the dead stag. How or where The Gruffin travelled I do not know. She may have perched herself upon some outlying portion of the stag, or she may have attached herself to Bill Bailey's back-axle by her hair and sash, and been towed home. Anyhow, when, two hours later, Bill Bailey, swaying beneath his burden and roaring like a Bull of Bashan, drew up with all standing at the portals of Inversneishan Castle, it was The Gruffin who, unkempt, scarlet, but triumphant, rang the bell and bearded the butler while my wife and I uncoiled ourselves from intimate association with our equipage and escort.

Next morning, in returning thanks for the princely manner in which our involuntary host had entertained us, I retailed to him the full story of our

previous acquaintance with Bill Bailey. I further added, with my daughter's hot hand squeezing mine in passionate approval, an intimation that if ever Bill should again come into the market I thought I could find a purchaser for him.

He duly came back to us, at a cost of five pounds and his sea-passage, a few months later, and we have had him ever since.

Such is the tale of Bill Bailey. To-day he stands in a corner of my coach-house, inert, immovable, an occupier of valuable space, a stumbling-block to all and sundry, and a lasting memorial to the omnipotence of human sentiment.

I

MR. JAMES RAPKIN emerged from the depths of a wave of his fellow-creatures emitted by the Golders Green Terminal of the Hampstead Tube, and felt his ribs from long habit. Finding these all present and intact he drew a full breath—the first for half an hour—and set off briskly through the gloaming of a fine spring evening in the direction of Hampstead Garden Suburb. Indeed, his briskness would have struck those who knew him as surprising. His step was almost elastic. Through teeth totally unused to such exercises he whistled something resembling a tune—a tune, moreover, acquired at second-hand from Albert, the office boy, and entitled “Whose Baby Are You, Dear?” Mr. Rapkin of course did not know this, but even if he had it is to be doubted whether, in his present somewhat abnormal frame of mind, he would have refrained.

For Mr. Rapkin was not of the jaunty type. Practically all of his little life had been spent in a wholesale hosiery house in the City, in which he now filled the post of Assistant Cashier, and the sun rose and set for him upon a world of lisle thread and spun silk. He was not of heroic mould. His height was five feet four; his head was somewhat large for his body; and the straggling sandy moustache which covered his rather tremulous mouth only accentuated a receding chin. Finally, he had been married to Mrs. Rapkin for twenty-one years. Indeed that is really the only thing that need be said about him.

But this evening, as already stated, Mr. Rapkin’s demeanour was almost jaunty. For one thing, it was springtime; and springtime means something to us even at forty-nine. For another thing, his wife was away from home, had been away from home for a fortnight, and was not expected home for another week. Lastly, Mr. Rapkin had had a sentimental adventure—the first since, some twenty-odd years ago, stimulated by mild Christmas cheer and a certain compelling glint in the eye of the young lady herself, he had felt constrained to kiss one Gladys Bagworthy under the mistletoe, with consequences which had permanently closed to him what is known as the primrose path.

In a quiet side road Mr. Rapkin paused at a neat green gate, and entered. With a disapproving expression he stooped to pick up two odd scraps of

paper which were fluttering about upon the gravel path. He was a tidy little creature. He paused again, this time to cast a displeased eye over the windows—there were five of them—at the front of the house. Then, having let himself in with his latchkey, he groped his way to the back parlour, turned on the light, and rang the bell with great firmness. A maid appeared.

“Jane,” said Mr. Rapkin, “I am sorry to note that the window-blinds, both of the drawing-room and dining-room and also of the rooms upstairs, are not only not drawn, but are all on different levels. Attend to it at once, please.”

“Righto, sir,” replied Jane pleasantly. “I suppose that doesn’t mean that the missis is coming home to-night, does it?” she added, a trifle sympathetically.

“It does not,” said Mr. Rapkin shortly, and Jane retired, with a contented little sigh.

But Mr. Rapkin was wrong. Half an hour later, while he was upstairs in his dressing-room, still whistling, and engaged upon some rather stealthy operations with the electric iron and his Sunday trousers, a cab creaked up to the door and reunited Mr. Rapkin in an unexpected and somewhat untimely fashion with the wife of his bosom.

“This is indeed a pleasant surprise, dear,” he said, as the cabman, having been paid by Mrs. Rapkin, drove sarcastically away. “I wasn’t expecting you until next Friday.”

“I didn’t intend to arrive till next Friday,” replied Mrs. Rapkin; “only mother sent me a post-card to say that she was coming up from Leicester and would like to spend Saturday to Monday with us. It was short notice. I simply had to pack up and leave Sophy Sackett’s right away. She was very disappointed, of course, but it couldn’t be helped. Mother will be here to-morrow morning, so you had better be ready to take her somewhere in the afternoon—a walk round the Heath, or the pictures if it’s wet. . . . What are you looking so queer for? I suppose I can invite my own mother to stay in my own house for a day or two? Of course if you grudge the food she eats, or the bed she sleeps in——”

Mr. Rapkin interposed, with strained heartiness.

“I shall be most happy at any time,” he said, “to entertain your dear mother beneath our roof.”

“Then don’t look as if you’d swallowed the cruet!” retorted Mrs. Rapkin.

Her husband smiled feebly.

“It’s a touch of indigestion, I fancy,” he said. “What with your being away, and a good deal to occupy me in the City——” He faltered, and flushed. Mrs. Rapkin regarded him curiously.

“No,” she said, “you don’t seem yourself. You aren’t even attending to what I am saying. Your mind’s wandering. You’ve been smoking and sitting up late all the time I have been away, I suppose. I’ll give you something before you go to bed to-night that will put you right at once. Why, where are you going?”

They were still standing in the little front hall. Mr. Rapkin, having edged his way to the hat-stand, was now struggling into his coat.

“I promised,” he explained, “to look in for a chat, and a smoke, and——er——so forth, with Bloxham to-night. Now that you have come home, dear, I must run round and put him off.”

“H’m! Bloxham?” Mrs. Rapkin sniffed. “If that’s where you have been running round to of an evening while I have been away, no wonder you look like half nothing. You’re a nervous wreck. But why not telephone? What’s the use of our having it put in if we don’t use it? Goodness knows I didn’t want it, but you were so set on being grand—— Why, what’s the matter now? Have you seen a ghost?”

Even under the roseate light of an electric bulb artistically draped in crinkly pink paper it could be seen that Mr. Rapkin’s features had assumed a sort of greenish luminosity.

“No, dear, no!” he stammered. “Just a sudden twinge. You mustn’t worry about me. The stroll will do me good. I will be back directly.” He closed the front door behind him and fairly ran down the gravel path.

“O lor’!” he muttered to himself. “The telephone! The telephone! I’d forgotten that! What am I going to do? What *can* I do? If Bloxham can’t advise me——”

Meanwhile Mrs. Rapkin, looking exceedingly thoughtful, walked slowly upstairs. There she discovered a portion of her husband’s Sabbath attire and the electric iron in a proximity provocative of interesting speculation.

“Well, you are a chump!” said Mr. Bloxham. “Have another spot of this; it won’t hurt you.”

With trembling hands Mr. Rapkin accepted a second glass of very pale sherry.

“There are two things I can’t understand,” said Mr. Bloxham, whose bluff and candid disposition enabled him at all times to criticise his friends without insincerity or false delicacy—“first of all, why your boss should invite a little whippersnapper like you to lunch, especially at the Ritz, and secondly why he should invite a girl to meet you. When I go out to lunch with a girl, I’m darned if I ever take anybody else with me.” (Mr. Bloxham was the gay bachelor of a district almost exclusively connubial.)

“He was expecting a second lady,” explained Rapkin, “and he invited me to make a fourth, so he said.”

“Ah! Well, that’s more reasonable. It relieves your boss of the suspicion of being a lunatic, anyhow. I wonder which one it was that didn’t turn up—the one he wanted or the one he didn’t want.”

“Perhaps he wanted them both,” suggested Mr. Rapkin mildly.

“No fear! If he’d wanted them both he’d have asked them separately. No, my lad, what you were invited for was to take the other one off his hands and act as gooseberry all round. Did he talk to this girl much?”

“No.” Mr. Rapkin blushed, and his watery blue eyes gleamed for a moment. “Most of the conversation was carried on between the young lady and myself.”

“Then she *was* the dud! His own little bit had jinked him. Bad luck on the boss! What was she like?”

“Er—extremely attractive.”

“Young?”

“About twenty-one, I should say.”

“What did you talk about?”

“Well, she—er——”

“What was her name, by the way?”

Again Mr. Rapkin’s eyes gleamed sentimentally.

“Miss Vivi Valentine,” he announced.

The sophisticated Bloxham grunted.

“Chorus?”

“Miss Valentine is on the stage,” replied Mr. Rapkin with dignity, “but disengaged for the moment. Indeed, she is thinking of taking up commercial pursuits. That is why she was anxious to have a chat with me——”

“Good night!”

—“About book-keeping, ledger work, and accounts generally.”

“It must have been a riotous party,” commented Mr. Bloxham. “What else did you talk about? The water rate?”

“It was a most interesting experience,” retorted Mr. Rapkin, in mild defiance. “But naturally we touched also upon lighter topics. Indeed, after Mr. Mossop left us——”

“Oh, he left you?”

“Yes. He——”

“I don’t blame him!”

“He had to get back to the office. After he left we sat on for a while, and indulged in a little—er—er—banter and chaff.”

“What do you mean, banter and chaff?” demanded Mr. Bloxham, who was a plain creature, and disliked vague phrases. “Did you try to flirt with her?”

“Certainly not!”

“Did she try to flirt with you?”

Mr. Rapkin hesitated. Then:

“Well—she told me I had wicked eyes,” he said modestly.

Mr. Bloxham rose suddenly from his seat and raised clenched hands to the ceiling. Then he sat down again.

“After that,” continued Mr. Rapkin hurriedly, “we discussed music, letters, and er—er—the drama. Ultimately”——he gave a nervous cough——“I invited her to take lunch with me to-morrow, Saturday, and come to a *matinée*.”

Mr. Bloxham uttered a deep groan.

“Lunch!” he exclaimed. “Where?”

“The Regent Palace.”

“What made you pitch on the Regent Palace? Have you ever been there in your life?”

“No. But I happened to be discussing the whole question of restaurants with Nash only yesterday.”

“Who’s Nash?”

“Our Chief Cashier. He is rather a society sort of person. He was telling me of the various places where he takes his friends out to supper, and so on. He gave me to understand that at the Regent Palace gratuities were not as a rule offered or accepted. That was what put it into my head.”

“But what made you do it at all, I mean? *You!*”

“Possibly some Bohemian strain in my nature,” replied Mr. Rapkin, simply. “You never know.”

Mr. Bloxham recommended him to cut it out, and inquired:

“What did you have to drink at lunch?”

“A little white wine of some kind.”

“What did you have after your boss left?”

“A liqueur. I am not accustomed to them, and possibly——”

“What did you order?”

“Benedictine.”

“Why?”

“It was the easiest to pronounce.”

“And she had a couple too, I suppose?”

“No. She took nothing all lunch.”

“Did she accept your invitation for to-morrow?”

For a moment Mr. Rapkin’s anguish had been allayed. Now it returned in an acute form.

“Yes. But—we did not arrange details. She was to inquire of her theatrical friends as to the most suitable entertainment to visit, and—and—oh, lor!—she is going to ring me up at my house this evening, and tell me!”

Mr. Bloxham, who was a man of coarse fibre, banged the table with his fists and laughed loud and long.

“And your wife has come home to-night?”

“Yes.”

“And that girl has got your telephone number?”

“Yes. She will ring up at nine o’clock, as we are sitting in the back parlour after dinner! That’s where the telephone is—within two yards of my wife’s chair! I’m at my wits’ end! That’s why I came to consult you, Bloxham. You’re a man of the world——”

Mr. Bloxham, made the recipient of the highest compliment that one nonentity can pay another, leaned back, inflated himself comfortably, and considered.

“Why not ring the girl up from here now,” he suggested, “and tell her you can’t come to-morrow?”

“I don’t know her number,” wailed Rapkin. “I don’t even know her address. I’m at her mercy! I’m at——”

“Well, don’t get the wind up,” counselled Mr. Bloxham soothingly. “I’ll think again. . . . It’s quite simple,” he said presently. “When the telephone-bell rings to-night, look up from your evening paper and say something impatient, like:—‘I expect that’s old Bloxham again.’”

“Yes?” said Mr. Rapkin respectfully.

“Then go to the telephone, take off the receiver, and have an imaginary conversation with me. There!”

“But how will that enable me to inform Miss Valentine——”

“You must be pretending to talk to me, but you must frame your words in such a way as to indicate to her all the time that what you say is meant for her. Finally, when you have made it clear that to-morrow’s party is off, say good night and hang up the receiver.”

“But what am I to *say*?” demanded Rapkin desperately.

“Say? Oh, say:—‘Yes, this is Rapkin. Hallo, is that you, Bloxham? You’re very kind, but I have a long-standing engagement to-morrow afternoon: otherwise I should have been delighted.’ Something simple, like that. Then you hang up the receiver and say to your wife:—‘That was Bloxham. He wanted me to go for a country walk with him to-morrow

afternoon; but of course I have refused, with your mother coming.' There you are! Just bluff it out."

Mr. Rapkin shook his head dismally.

"I don't like it," he said. "Supposing Miss Valentine doesn't understand? Supposing she says she's not Bloxham? Supposing she goes on saying it? Supposing she won't let me ring off? Supposing she keeps on ringing me up?"

"Shout her down," said Mr. Bloxham. "Keep on talking in a rather boisterous, masterful sort of way, like this:—'That's all right, old friend! It's no use pressing me, because I can't do it! But ring me up at the office on Monday, and we'll make another appointment.' And so on. All you want is a bit of nerve." He looked round the room. "I'll tell you what; go to that telephone there, and let me hear you answer a call. Do the thing properly: take off the receiver, and everything. Hold down the receiver-rest, though, or you'll have a song from the exchange. Now let me hear you do it. I'll be Miss What's-her-name."

Enjoying himself hugely, Mr. Bloxham herded his flinching friend towards the telephone, sat down beside him, and began in a shrill falsetto:—

"Is that you, dear old Wicked Eyes?"

Ten minutes later, after a remorseless rehearsal, the unhappy Rapkin, pronounced word-perfect and ready for a public appearance, turned his faltering steps homeward.

"Don't lose your head, but keep on bluffing," reiterated his host, opening the front door for him. "Don't stand and shiver, but say something! Anything you like—but something! And if ever you find yourself utterly cornered, just ask yourself:—'What would Bloxham do?' That ought to help you. So long!"

III

"You're very restless to-night, James," remarked Mrs. Rapkin from her chair by the fire. "Why are you prowling about like a strange cat?"

"I'm shivering a little, dear," replied Mr. Rapkin, with perfect truth. "I fancy I must have caught a touch of cold."

"Where?"

"In my feet."

“I suppose that is why you wanted to drag me out to the pictures to-night in the rain!” commented Mrs. Rapkin sarcastically. “I have no patience with you sometimes. Well, as I was saying, Sophy Sackett has been having trouble with her husband again. Of course she didn’t admit it to me, but when he slipped out after dinner three evenings running and didn’t come home before half-past eleven—well, naturally I have eyes in my head, besides a certain amount of common sense——”

The telephone bell rang sharply.

“I wonder who that can be?” said Mrs. Rapkin. “Thank goodness somebody uses the thing!”

Mr. Rapkin glanced at the clock. It was ten minutes to nine. Swallowing a mysterious obstacle which had suddenly appeared in his throat, and licking his dry lips, he rose to his feet and crossed to the writing-table.

“Perhaps it’s old Bloxham again,” said a voice which he knew, though he did not recognise it, for his own.

He sat down on the swivel-chair, interposed his shrinking person between the telephone and the fireplace, and with palsied hand took up the receiver. The time had come for him to give his carefully rehearsed performance.

“Hallo!” he remarked huskily.

A tense pause followed. Then a gruff voice inquired:

“Number, please?”

“You—you—rang me up,” said Mr. Rapkin feebly.

“Sorry you’ve been troubled,” replied the voice; and there was silence again.

Relieved for the moment, Mr. Rapkin hastily replaced the receiver and rose to his feet.

“Wrong number, I fancy,” he said.

He dropped into his arm-chair by the fire. Simultaneously the bell rang again. An idea occurred to him.

“Oh dear!” he exclaimed, “this is very tiresome! Perhaps they will go on doing it all the evening. We’d better take no notice: it will be no use answering every time.”

“Answer this time, all the same,” replied Mrs. Rapkin. “If you will have the telephone in your house you must take the consequences.”

Too agitated to consider whether this dark saying bore any deeper significance, Mr. Rapkin returned to the writing-table, and assuming the same humped attitude over the instrument, once more removed the receiver.

“Are you Golders Green 7654?” inquired a voice.

“Er—er—yes, I think so,” faltered Mr. Rapkin.

“Streatham wants you,” said the voice. “Don’t go away.”

Mr. Rapkin, devoutly wishing that he could, sat awaiting the stroke of fate.

“She lives at Streatham,” he said to himself.

“Who wants you?” inquired a voice from the fireplace.

“Somebody at Streatham. I can’t think who: I don’t know anybody there. I—I—expect it’s another wrong number. I’ll just give them another minute and then hang up——”

“James!” said Mrs. Rapkin suddenly.

The unhappy man started violently.

“Yes, dear?” he said.

“You have got your foot in the waste-paper basket. You are very preoccupied to-night.”

“I have had a lot to bother me at the office while you have been away, dear,” said Rapkin desperately, as he extracted his foot. “Sometimes I hardly know what I am doing. Hallo! Yes?”

The operator was speaking again.

“That call from Streatham seems to have got lost. I’ll ring you if it comes through.”

“Oh, that’s all right! Don’t trouble,” said Mr. Rapkin earnestly. “It’s getting rather late, anyhow.”

Once more he hung up the receiver.

“And what is the trouble at the office?” inquired Mrs. Rapkin, as her quivering lord sank once more into his arm-chair and began to fiddle with his pipe.

“Well, dear,” replied Mr. Rapkin, realising too late his own folly in gratuitously complicating an already involved explanation, “the fact is, it’s rather a delicate matter. Delicate, and—er—er—technical. And—h’m—confidential. I don’t know that I should be quite justified——”

“Then don’t tell me anything. Naturally a man should never tell business secrets to his wife—even though she’s been a faithful wife to him for twenty years—should he?”

Mr. Rapkin squirmed helplessly. This gambit was only too familiar to him.

“Of course I know I have always shown myself to be a thoroughly untrustworthy woman,” continued Mrs. Rapkin, smiling a little, but with heightened colour; “so naturally——”

It was almost a relief to Mr. Rapkin when the telephone bell rang a third time. Once more he rose to his feet and sat down at the instrument. It seemed too much to hope that this might be another wrong number. Still

“Hallo!” he remarked.

“Hallo, dear old thing!” replied a silvery voice, with appalling distinctness. Mr. Rapkin, in a blind instinct of self-preservation, hastily jammed down the receiver-rest with his right forefinger. Then, perspiring gently, he embarked upon the dolorous performance in which he had been schooled by the resourceful Bloxham.

“Yes, it’s Rapkin speaking,” he said in a low, trembling voice. “Is that you, Bloxham, old man? How are you? . . . Good! . . . Capital! . . . Splendid! What’s that? I can’t quite hear.”

He paused diplomatically, and listened. So did Mrs. Rapkin. Presently, after a strained and unconvincing silence, Mr. Rapkin resumed.

“Well, that’s uncommonly good of you—uncommonly good—er—uncommonly good. I am afraid I must decline, though. We have friends with us rather unexpectedly for the week-end, and my—er—my time will be fully occupied all to-morrow, I fear—I hope—that is, I expect. Otherwise I should have been delighted.”

He was interrupted in these hollow exercises by the sudden and prolonged ringing of the telephone bell. Realising, even in his present unbalanced condition, that the bell would continue to ring until he released the receiver-rest, he hastily relaxed the pressure of his finger and prepared to

resume his apostrophe to the fictitious Bloxham. But before he could find his faltering tongue the limpid voice of Miss Vivi Valentine again assailed his ear.

“Hallo! Is that you, Wicked Eyes? The silly idiots cut us off. Now I want to tell you something——”

“Good night!” Mr. Rapkin almost shrieked. “Ring me up at the office tomorrow morning, and we’ll try to fix a date next week!”

He hung up the receiver with a clatter, nipping Miss Valentine’s shrill protests in the bud, and returned to his seat by the fire.

“The telephone service is a disgrace,” he observed, resolutely avoiding his wife’s eye. “The wires are all jumbled up again. I was cut off right in the middle of a conversation just now.”

“Was that when the bell began to ring again?” inquired Mrs. Rapkin with ominous calm.

“Yes. It was most exasp——”

“I didn’t know it could ring when the receiver was off,” observed Mrs. Rapkin placidly.

“Crossed wires, I expect,” said Mr. Rapkin hurriedly.

“Ah! Who was it?”

“Who was it?”

“Yes; who was it! Who rang you up?”

Mr. Rapkin took a full breath.

“Bloxham,” he said, and swallowed violently.

“Bloxham?”

“Yes. He wanted me to go to a mati—to a billiard match with him tomorrow afternoon. At least I think so; but there was such a buzzing on the wire I could hardly hear.”

“That’s funny,” said Mrs. Rapkin. “The other person’s voice seemed quite distinct.”

“Whose? Bloxham’s?”

“No, the lady’s.”

“The lady’s? You—you mean the girl at the exchange?”

“They have male operators at the exchange after eight o’clock,” said Mrs. Rapkin, with an indulgent smile. “Besides, this one called you ‘Dear old thing.’ Who would she be, now?”

Mrs. Rapkin suddenly laid down her knitting and directed a basilisk glare upon her writhing victim. The velvet glove was off; the moment of reckoning had come. Mr. Rapkin, petrified, merely gazed at her like a fascinated rabbit.

“I am asking you a question,” repeated Mrs. Rapkin. “The young lady called you ‘Dear old thing.’ Of course it’s none of my business: I’m only your wife. But——”

“You’re mistaken, dear,” replied Mr. Rapkin with the courage of despair. “You couldn’t possibly have heard distinctly what anyone said from where you were sitting. She said”——(“*What would Bloxham do?*” he asked himself frantically; and the answer came like a ray of light from heaven)——“she said, ‘Hallo, did you ring?’ as far as I remember; not ‘Dear old——’ not what you said.”

Mrs. Rapkin surveyed her overwrought mate curiously. Taking her all round, she was a sensible woman. That Mr. Rapkin, at his age and with his appearance and disposition, should be conducting a flirtation with an unknown young female seemed barely within the bounds of human possibility. Still, he had undoubtedly been rung up on the telephone by a woman, and had pretended that she was a man.

“Very well, then,” she replied. “The lady said, ‘Did you ring?’——not ‘Dear old thing.’ But who was she? And why did you tell her to ring you up at the office to-morrow morning?”

“That was Bloxham,” said Rapkin miserably.

“No, James, it wasn’t. I know Mr. Bloxham’s voice quite well. He doesn’t speak falsetto. Or perhaps you mean some one speaking for Mr. Bloxham. Has he got married while I have been away? Or started a lady secretary?”

“It’s a funny thing,” said Mr. Rapkin, grasping at this most exiguous straw, “but I believe that’s what he must have done.”

“Got married? Well, you ought to know. You were in his house two hours ago.”

“No, I don’t mean that. But I think he must have some one with him——guests, perhaps. Now you mention it, I *did* hear a woman’s voice mixed up

with his.”

“Did you hear his at all?”

“Oh yes, certainly. At least, I thought it was his; but what with the buzzing on the wire and the—the—lady’s voice too, I couldn’t be certain. Of course it may have been a practical joke on somebody’s part, just to make a fool of me. You know what people are. Wh—hat are you going to do, Ada?” His wife had risen majestically to her feet. She was a large woman, and was at the moment drawn up to her full height.

“I am going to ring up Mr. Bloxham,” replied Mrs. Rapkin simply. “I am not going to have you worried just now, especially when you are not well and things are so upsetting at the office.”

“But what are you going to ask him, dear?”

“I shall ask him first of all whether he has anyone with him. Then I shall ask him if he rang you up to-night.”

“But if he didn’t,” objected Mr. Rapkin, “he would think it so strange.”

“You told me just now he did.”

“Well, of course one can’t be quite certain, dear. And the buzzing——”

“If he didn’t,” said Mrs. Rapkin calmly, “there will be no harm done; and I can then set to work and find out who did. It may take some time, but I shall find out. What’s his number?”

Once more the telephone bell rang clear and shrill.

“I will answer,” said Mrs. Rapkin. “Stay where you are.” She sat down at the table and took off the receiver.

“Well?” she inquired.

“Hallo!” replied a clear and all-too familiar voice. “Is that Golders Green 7654?”

“Yes,” replied Mrs. Rapkin grimly, “it is.”

Now that the guillotine had actually fallen, Mr. Rapkin was conscious of a certain sense of relief. He was numb, but at least the tension was over. With feeble bravado he filled his pipe and lit it. Never to the end of his married life would he hear the end of this episode. Still, he had been told that he had wicked eyes. Nothing could ever take away that glorious moment from him. He had lived his hour.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Rapkin was getting to work.

“Who is speaking, please?”

The reply which she received evidently surprised her. She looked across at her husband with a puzzled expression.

“It is some one speaking for Mr. Mossop,” she said, “from Streatham. Does he live there?”

“Now I come to think of it,” said Mr. Rapkin, “he does. What does she—he—want?”

“You. But don’t disturb yourself.” Mrs. Rapkin turned to the telephone again. “Can I take a message for Mr. Rapkin?” she asked.

The receiver uttered a single and unmistakable monosyllable. Mrs. Rapkin, looking considerably annoyed, rose to her feet and signalled to her husband to approach.

Mr. Rapkin mechanically took the receiver and sank down into the swivel-chair.

“Hallo!” he muttered.

“Is that Mr. Rapkin?” inquired Miss Valentine’s voice.

“Er—yes. Who is that, please?”

“Vivi. Vivi Valentine.”

“Oh! How do you do?” replied Mr. Rapkin, bowing nervously to the telephone. “I had the pleasure of meeting you with Mr. Mossop, I think?”

“What a memory!” said Miss Valentine. “But never mind that. I have got a confession to make to you, and an apology. Shall I make them now?”

“She’s going to cry off lunch,” said Mr. Rapkin to himself. “That’s something, anyhow.” Still, he knew that his wife would make no distinction between the will and the deed. This conversation must stop.

“Hadn’t I better speak to Mr. Mossop first?” he said. “I understand he wants me.”

“Always the little man of business!” commented Miss Valentine. “Righto! Here he is. Hold on!”

To the justifiable exasperation of Mrs. Rapkin the clear tones of Miss Valentine’s young voice now gave place to an ordinary and indistinguishable masculine growl. With a patient sigh she resumed her seat by the fire and

endeavoured by the exercise of the faculties of intuition and induction—with both of which she was exceptionally highly endowed—to glean what clues she could from her husband’s contributions to the dialogue. Her patience was taxed to the full: it was only by summoning up her entire stock of Christian forbearance that she restrained herself from crossing the room and shaking him till his teeth rattled. At last she could bear it no longer.

“James,” she said sharply, “what is it? What is it?”

But Mr. Rapkin took not the slightest notice. With his ear glued to the receiver, and his wide-open mouth breathing heavily into the transmitter, he remained absolutely silent and motionless, while Mr. Mossop’s bass voice boomed unceasingly along the wire. For the first time in his married life he failed to realise that his wife was speaking to him.

“Yes, sir,” he said at last, “I understand now. . . . Yes, it is indeed a relief to my mind. . . . I will be there at nine-fifteen. Good night, sir.”

He took the receiver from his ear, but not before a second voice—a silvery feminine voice—had officiously supplemented Mr. Mossop’s good night. Mr. Rapkin hung up the receiver in a dazed fashion, rose to his feet, and faced his wife. His hair was ruffled, his tie awry, and his appearance that of a man who has gone through deep waters. But one thing was obvious; he had recovered his *moral*—for what it was worth.

“Well?” inquired Mrs. Rapkin.

Mr. Rapkin sank down into his arm-chair.

“I can tell you everything now, Ada,” he said.

“And about time too!” rejoined that overcharged lady. “Go on!”

Mr. Rapkin hesitated. Disaster had been miraculously turned to triumph; but for all that the explanation would not be an easy one.

“Go on!” repeated Mrs. Rapkin. “I suppose it was about the trouble at the Office that you have been hinting at all the evening?”

“Yes,” replied Mr. Rapkin, smiling gratefully for this lead, “it was. That was just it.”

“What is the trouble about?”

“Nash.”

“Nash? He’s your Chief Cashier, isn’t he?”

“He *was* our Chief Cashier.”

“Was?”

“Yes.” Mr. Rapkin rose to his feet and took his stand before the fire, in order to impart due pomp to this, the one dramatic situation of his hitherto uneventful career. “He was—until about an hour ago. The fact is, it appears that there has been something wrong with the office accounts for some time. There was a serious leakage somewhere, and naturally suspicion fell upon two people.”

“Oh! Who?”

“Nash and—er—myself.”

“You?” exclaimed Mrs. Rapkin wrathfully. “Let them dare!”

“Well, after all, dear, it was probably one of us; as all the money had to pass through our hands in the first instance. So the firm decided to employ a detective, and have both of us—er—shadowed.” Mr. Rapkin swelled importantly. Never in all his life had he felt like this.

“A detective?” Mrs. Rapkin trembled.

“Yes—a woman detective! Apparently that’s quite the latest thing. That—ah—was the person talking to me on the telephone just now.”

Mrs. Rapkin’s protective impulse instantly evaporated.

“James,” she said sternly, “are you speaking the truth?”

“If you don’t believe me,” replied Mr. Rapkin with a happy smile, “ring up Mr. Mossop and ask him.”

Mrs. Rapkin, realising instinctively that this confidence could not be assumed, promptly shifted her ground.

“Then why did you say she was Bloxham?” she demanded.

Mr. Rapkin coughed gently.

“There, dear, I am afraid I deceived you,” he said. “But you put me in a very difficult position. The negotiations were at a most delicate stage, and I was sworn to secrecy; so I simply had to——”

“What negotiations? If you were being watched by detectives I don’t see what you had to do with negotiations. You don’t want me to believe that they consulted you before they set detectives on you, do you?”

“You are going ahead too fast for me,” said Mr. Rapkin, quite truthfully. “Let me explain. In order that the lady detective might be made familiar

with the personal appearance of Nash and myself, Mr. Mossop invited each of us to lunch with him to meet her—as a lady friend of his interested in finance, and so on. Didn't I mention to you that I had had a pleasant little luncheon party with Mr. Mossop a few days ago?"

"No, you didn't."

"Ah! I thought I had. Well, never mind! It appears that the lady detective _____"

"Why not call her Valentine, and have done with it?"

For a moment Mr. Rapkin's heart stood still.

"How do you know?"

"You can hear that telephone all over the room. Go on!"

Mr. Rapkin's heart resumed its functions.

"Well," he continued, "I suppose Miss—er—Vi—Valentine sized me up at lunch, and decided that I was—er—not that sort of man——"

"She *must* have been an expert!" commented Mrs. Rapkin sarcastically.

—"And concentrated on Nash. It appears that she had already prevailed upon him to take her out to dinner a few nights ago. After dinner they went on to one of those dance places——"

"Is she young?" interposed Mrs. Rapkin.

Mr. Rapkin considered.

"Not more than forty, I should say. But of course she may be older than she looks."

"Go on! They went to a dance place——?"

"Yes. And they didn't part company until nearly one o'clock in the morning. I fancy she must have wormed something out of Nash during that time, because——"

"Never mind Nash! What about you?"

Mr. Rapkin, politely puzzled, elevated his eyebrows.

"When and where did *you* take her out? That's what I want to know. Don't say you went dancing at your time of life, and with your cartilage!"

Mr. Rapkin laughed heartily.

“My dear Ada, is it likely? Would I, a man in my responsible position, with a wife of my own, be so indiscreet, so—er—well—— Of course, when one was a young man about town, one might have——”

“Never mind your position, and don’t talk that silly way to me. Did you or did you not take her out?”

“I most certainly did not. And I must say, Ada, I am just a little hurt”—the curious part about it was that Mr. Rapkin at the moment really did feel a little hurt—“that you should so doubt my discretion and—er—fidelity.”

“She must have got hold of something pretty definite from Nash, since she dropped you,” said Mrs. Rapkin thoughtfully. “And when did they catch Nash?”

“This evening. It appears that this afternoon Miss Valentine received some further clues which she had been waiting for, and followed them up at once. Nash is now under lock and key, and Mr. Mossop rang me up from Streatham to-night to tell me that I had been unjustly suspected, and to apologise for the unconscious indignity to which I had been submitted. He added that I am appointed Chief Cashier in Nash’s place. I am to be at the office half an hour earlier to-morrow to take over the books. Mr. Mossop also explained to me who the lady was whom I met at lunch to-da—recently. In fact, she was with him at his house when he rang me up this evening.”

“I suppose she had come to apologise to you too.”

“Er—precisely.”

“Still,” remarked Mrs. Rapkin, “I don’t see why you should have got so nervous and jumpy just because a lot of things were going on behind your back that you knew nothing about.”

“One has instincts—and intuitions,” said Mr. Rapkin grandly, “where one’s honour is concerned.”

His wife rose to her feet, and began to turn out the lights.

“You have had a narrow escape, James,” she said; and with this ambiguous comment departed upstairs to bed.

But human nature is a strange thing. Half an hour later, in his dressing-room, Mr. Rapkin sadly folded up and put away the garments which had been destined for the morrow’s festivities. For a man who had been saved by the hand of Providence from unspeakable disaster he looked singularly ungrateful. He surveyed himself in the mirror, and sighed.

“I suppose I haven’t got wicked eyes after all!” he said sorrowfully.

I

ST. ASAPH'S was one of the minor colleges of Cambridge. Its name was unfamiliar to the Man in the Street, and the modest nature of its academic achievements was only equalled by the lowly position of its boat on the river. But its members atoned for the collective shortcomings of their foundation by an individual brilliancy which made the name of St. Asaph's esteemed throughout the University. They were not a large college, they said, but they were a sporting one. They might not be clever, but thank heaven they were not good either.

Consequently, when I one day received a deputation from St. Asaph's, requesting that I would be good enough to coach their College Boat during the ensuing term, I felt that no light compliment had been paid me. It was the first occasion on which I had been asked to coach the crew of another college, and I accepted the charge with an enthusiasm not to be damped by the knowledge that the St. Asaph's boat was the lowest on the river.

I commenced my duties forthwith, and, mounted upon the tallest horse I have ever seen (provided by the St. Asaph's Boat-club), took my crew out that very day. My steed, I soon discovered, laboured under the disadvantage of possessing only one eye, an infirmity which rendered him liable to fall into the river whenever I rode him too near the edge of the towpath. On the other hand, he enjoyed the consolation, denied to his rider, of being unable to see the St. Asaph's crew. They were the worst collection of oarsmen that I had ever set eyes on, and I told them so, at frequent intervals and in different ways, throughout the afternoon. I was particularly direct in my references to the gentleman who was rowing Five. He seemed older than his colleagues, possessed a bald head, and was evidently one having authority. He was not the captain, for that highly inefficient officer was rowing Stroke: but this did not prevent him from shouting out directions as to time, length, and swing to sundry members of the crew whenever it occurred to him to do so, which was usually at the moment which I had selected for doing the same thing. He seemed to resent my comments on his own style, and answered back more than once—an unpardonable sin in any galley-slave.

At the end of the day's work I told my crew that they were showing improvement already (which was not true), and that all they wanted was

plenty of hard work and practice (which was approximately correct). Before I left the boathouse the apologetic captain led me aside, and asked me as a personal favour to be more polite to Five.

“Why?” I asked. “He is easily the worst man in the crew.”

“Yes, I know, but he was captain three years ago, and he likes to have his own way.”

“I wonder he doesn’t stroke the boat,” I remarked acidly.

“He would,” said the captain simply, “only he weighs nearly fifteen stone; so he rows Five. He says he can manage the crew quite as well from there. He sets the stroke, and I just have to look round over my shoulder, every now and then, to see if I’m keeping time with him.”

In grateful consideration of the fact that I had now acquired a story which would bear repetition in rowing circles for years to come, I swallowed my smiles and answered:—

“But, my dear man, this is simply idiotic. I think the best plan would be to fire him out of the boat altogether, at once. I’ll tell him, if you don’t like to.”

This altruistic offer caused the captain to turn quite pale; and after a certain amount of natural hesitation he confided to me the fearful tidings that the crew as it stood represented the whole available strength of St. Asaph’s College; the only possible substitute, if I “carted” Five, being one of the Dons. “And he’s got gout in both legs,” added the captain.

I accepted the situation, and Five.

I may as well describe my crew in detail. Nature has framed strange fellows in her time, but it is improbable that such a unique collection of oddities will ever again be seen at once.

Bow was a chubby and diminutive youth, with a friendly smile. He was the stylist of the crew, swinging and recovering with an elegance that was pleasant to behold. Since, however, he rarely if ever put his oar into the water, contenting himself for the most part with mysterious passes over its surface with the blade, he could hardly be regarded as anything more than a neat figurehead.

Two had the longest legs and the shortest body I have ever seen. No ordinary stretcher could contain him, and he only succeeded in flattening his knees when, in excess of zeal, he pushed himself over the back of his sliding seat. The valuable work done on these occasions by Bow in restoring his

colleague to his rightful position only goes to illustrate the great truth that the meanest creatures have their uses.

Three's presence in the crew was entirely due to that fact that St. Asaph's College only possessed eight undergraduates. I need say no more.

Four was a Scholar of the college, and, as he once informed me in a burst of confidence, had taken up rowing for his stomach's sake. I trust that organ benefited by his exertions: after all, it's an ill wind that blows nobody any good.

Five, as I have already mentioned, was a man of commanding presence. He was not intended by nature for an oarsman, but would have made an excellent chairman at a parish meeting. He regarded me with undisguised hostility, and received my strictures upon his performances in a purely personal spirit.

Six would have performed with considerably more comfort and credit at Two, or possibly as cox. He occupied his place, as far as I could gather, *ex officio*, by virtue of his office as captain of the St. Asaph's Cricket Club. He suffered much from the handle of Five's oar, which lodged constantly in the small of his back, owing to the fact that his swing back usually coincided with Five's swing forward.

Seven, incredible as it may appear, was a very fair oar. He was not popular with the rest of the crew, who, from a cause which I could never fathom—probably the instinct which prompts the true-born Briton to call a man who likes hard and regular work “a blackleg”—considered him “no sportsman.” It was chiefly owing to his unremitting efforts that the boat, overcoming the languid resistance of the Cam and the more strenuous opposition of Five, was enabled to move at all.

Stroke was handicapped from the outset by having to row with his chin glued to his left shoulder in an impossible effort to take the time from Five. He was the possessor, at the best of times, of a singularly distorted and ungainly style, and a month spent in endeavouring to stroke the boat with his eyes fixed upon a man sitting three places behind him rapidly developed him into something only witnessed as a rule after a supper of hot lobsters and toasted cheese.

Of Cox it is sufficient to say that he was a Burmese gentleman, exceedingly small, with a knowledge of the English language limited apparently to a few expletives of the most blood-curdling type, such as could only have been acquired from a sailor's parrot. These he lavished on

his crew in monotonous rotation, evidently under the impression that they were rowing maxims of the utmost value. He did not know his right hand from his left, which is an awkward defect in a cox, and he always addressed me as "Mr. Coachman."

Our daily journey to Baitsbite was distinguished from those of countless equally bad boats by a certain old-time stateliness and courtesy. No one ever arrived in time, and it was not considered good form on the part of the coach to make his crew paddle for more than about two hundred yards without an "easy." Also, three clear days' notice was required in the event of my desiring to send them over the full course.

The day's proceedings always ended with a sort of informal vote of thanks to Five, proposed by the captain, in tones that conveyed a mute appeal (invariably ignored) to me to second the motion, and carried with feverish acclamation by the rest of the crew. Five usually replied that he very much doubted if he could stand the company of such a set of rotters any longer; but he always turned out with unfailing regularity next afternoon, and took the chair as usual.

The boat made fluctuating progress. Sometimes it went badly, sometimes indifferently, sometimes unspeakably. More than once I found myself wondering whether, after all, a Don with gout in both legs would not be of more use than all my present crew put together. Still, a crew has to be very bad to be the worst on the Cam, and St. Asaph's were confident that the end of the races would see them several places higher on the river than before. Beyond possessing the unique advantage of occupying a position unassailable from the rear, I could see little cause for such hopes; but I mechanically repeated to them the mendacious assurances usual on these occasions, until presently I found myself sharing the enthusiasm of my crew; and when, the Saturday before the races, they rowed over to the Railway Bridge, accompanied by a whooping octogenarian on horseback, whom I first took to be Five's grandfather, but who ultimately proved to be the college tutor, in 7 min. 40 sec., it was felt that the doom of the boats in front were sealed.

Then came the races.

For the benefit of those who have never made a study of that refinement of torture known as a "bumping" race, it may be explained that at Oxford and Cambridge the college crews, owing to the narrowness of the river, race not abreast but in a long string, each boat being separated from its pursuer and pursued by an equal space. Every crew which succeeds in rowing over

the course without being touched (or “bumped”) by the boat behind, is said to have “kept its place,” and starts in the same position for the next day’s racing. But if it contrives to touch the boat in front it is said to have made a “bump,” and both bumper and bumped get under the bank with all speed and allow the rest of the procession to race past. Next day, bumper and bumped change places, and the victors of the day before endeavour to catch the next boat in front of them. The crew at the Head of the River of course have nothing to catch, and can accordingly devote their attention to keeping away from Number Two, which is usually in close attendance owing to the pressing attentions of Number Three. And so on.

The races take place on four successive evenings. It is thus possible for a crew by making a bump each evening to ascend four places. This was the modest programme which St. Asaph’s had mapped out for themselves, the alternatives of a corresponding descent being mercifully precluded by their geographical position on the river.

Though their actual performance did not quite reach the high standard they had set themselves, it cannot be denied that they had a stirring time of it.

For this they had to thank the Burmese cox, who in four crowded and glorious days made his unpronounceable name a household word in Cambridge.

On the first evening of the races, by dexterously crossing his rudder-lines at the start, he pointed the boat’s head in such a direction that the racing for that day terminated, so far as St. Asaph’s were concerned, with considerable violence at a point about fifteen yards from the starting-point, the entire crew having to disembark in order to assist in the extraction of the nose of their vessel from the mass of turf in which it had embedded itself. By the time that this task had been accomplished all the other boats were out of sight, and it was decided to walk home—a precaution which the coxswain was discovered to have taken already.

On the next evening St. Asaph’s, full of hope and vigour, once more took their places at the end of the long line of boats, determined to bump St. Bridget’s this time, or perish in the attempt. Cox’s rudder-lines had been carefully sorted for him; but in some inexplicable manner he became hopelessly entangled with the starting-chain, the end of which the coxswain is supposed to hold in his hand until the starting gun fires, in order to keep the boat from drifting. Consequently, when the signal was given, that last link with the land still adhered to several points of his person. Now, when it

comes to a tug-of-war between a snuff-and-butter miscreant, weighing seven stone, and *terra firma*, the result may be anticipated without much difficulty. Next moment the St. Asaph's crew, swinging out like giants to their task, were horrified to observe their pocket Palinurus, with a terrified grin frozen upon his dusky features and his objugatory vocabulary dead within him, slide rapidly over the stern of the boat and disappear beneath the turgid waters of the Cam.

Pity and horror, however, turned to rage and indignation when the victim, on rising to the surface, paddled cheerfully to the bank, scrambled out, and started off, with an air of pleased relief, to walk home again. He was sternly ordered to return, the boat was backed into the bank, and, with the dripping Oriental once more at the helm, the St. Asaph's crew commenced a rather belated effort to overtake a boat which had already disappeared round Post Corner. They finished, however, only about a hundred yards behind St. Bridget's, who had encountered numerous obstacles, including Grassy Corner, *en route*.

Next day St. Asaph's made their bump. The fact in itself is so tremendous that any attempt to describe it would of necessity form an anticlimax. Sufficient to say that both boats got safely off, and that St. Asaph's overlapped "Bridget" in the Plough Reach. The actual bump did not take place till some time after, as the coxswain, in spite of prodigious mental efforts, could not remember which string to pull; but when the bow of the St. Asaph's boat ran over the blade of the St. Bridget's Stroke's oar, the enemy decided that honour was satisfied, and unanimously stopped rowing. Not so St. Asaph's. Having made his bump, the coxswain decided to make the most of it; and the crew, the majority of whom were rowing with their mouths open and eyes shut, backed him up nobly. It was not until Bow found himself sitting amid the St. Bridget's crew, directly over Number Four's rigger, and Seven, surprised by a sudden resistance to his blade, opened his eyes to discover that he was belabouring the Stroke of that unhappy band of pilgrims in the small of the back, that the men of St. Asaph's realised that they had really made a bump, and desisted from their efforts.

Now comes the tragic part of my story.

If St. Asaph's had been content to let well alone, and to row over the course on the last day of the races at a comfortable distance in front of St. Bridget's, all would have been well. But, drunk with victory, they decided to bump the next boat—I think one of lower Trinity crews—and so achieve immortality on two successive occasions.

For the last time I sent them off, with many injunctions to eschew crabs and the bank. Surprising as it may seem, they made an excellent start, and were soon in full cry up Post Reach after the Trinity crew, with St. Bridget's toiling hopelessly behind them. So fast did they travel that their followers on the bank, including myself (gingerly grasping an ancient horse pistol that I had been instructed to fire as soon as they should get within a length of their opponents), began to fall behind. The boat swung out of sight into the Gut fifty yards in front of us; and to my undying regret I missed the earlier stages of the catastrophe which must have occurred almost immediately afterwards.

On rounding the corner and coming in sight of Grassy, we observed a considerable commotion on the towpath side of the bend. The centre of the disturbance of course proved to be the St. Asaph's boat, the greater part of which had in some inexplicable manner contrived to mount upon the towpath, together with its crew, who were still sitting gaping vacantly on the delirious mob around them.

The stern end of the boat was resting on the waters of the Cam, and Stroke, assisted by Five, who had left his seat for the purpose, was making a savage and successful effort to force the resisting form of the Burmese coxswain beneath them. The reason for this drastic procedure was hurriedly explained to us by an hysterical chorus of eyewitnesses. The "Jewel of Asia," as someone had aptly christened that submerged hero, seeing the stern of the Trinity boat dangling temptingly before him as it swung round the sharp Grassy Corner, and impulsively deciding that the time had now arrived for another bump, had abandoned his previous intention of circumnavigating Grassy himself and gone straight for the elusive tail of the retreating boat, in a brilliant but misguided attempt to cut off a corner. He had missed by not less than three yards, and had immediately afterwards piled up his vessel upon the towpath. Hence the highly justifiable efforts of Stroke and Five to terminate his miserable existence.

To crown all, at this moment the St. Bridget's boat, remote, unfriended, melancholy, slow, accompanied by a coloured gentleman ringing a dinner bell, and a solitary Don who trotted beside them making encouraging noises, came creaking round the corner. Their coxswain, suddenly beholding his victorious foes of yesterday lying at his mercy, with one wild shriek of joy headed his ship in our direction. Next moment the devastating prow of the St. Bridget's boat skittered gracefully over the half-submerged stern of the helpless wreck that protruded from the bank, just as Stroke and Five of the

St. Asaph's crew succeeded in getting their coxswain under for the third time.

How nobody was killed nobody knew. There were no casualties: of course coxes do not count. St. Bridget's claimed their bump, which was allowed, and St. Asaph's returned to their rightful position at the foot of the river. Fortunately they had had their Bump Supper the night before.

Eheu! That was nearly twenty-five years ago. I wonder if such things happen in University rowing to-day. I hope so.

TOOT, toot, too-o-o-t!

The punctilious motorist, bowling along a Scottish highway at twenty miles an hour, had espied a small farmstead by the roadside—a group of insignificant whitewashed buildings. He disengaged his clutch, applied gentle pressure to the footbrake, and blew three long and considerate blasts upon his horn.

Instantly there came a rush, a scramble, and a scurry; and a perfect avalanche of hens dashed out of a gateway into the path of the car, intent apparently upon indulgence in the risky but fascinating pastime of “last across the road.” They were followed by a waddling cohort of ducks. Both brakes went on hard, but it was too late to do anything. Before the slithering car could be brought to a standstill it had ploughed its way right through the squawking, fluttering mob of fowls—the ducks had prudently halted and turned tail—and taken full toll.

“Fairly asked for it that time, they did,” observed Charles, the chauffeur, reposing in the back seat.

But the conscience-stricken owner of the car drew up at the side of the road and alighted. Simultaneously a patriarchal and wrathful old gentleman in tweed knickerbockers and a Balmoral bonnet emerged at the double from the farm gate. He was followed by a silly-looking youth of fourteen.

The old gentleman surveyed the havoc—two hens lying dead upon the road, while another scuttered in the dust with a broken wing—and raised clenched hands to heaven.

“Is that the way,” he roared, “for a body tae gang raging past a man’s farm gate?”

He crossed the road, and picking up the hen with the broken wing wrung its neck indignantly. Then he turned again to the assassins, as if seeking further necks. The chauffeur, affecting extreme terror, took refuge behind the car. But the farmer addressed himself to the arch-culprit.

“What for,” he demanded, “could ye no give a bit toot on your horn?”

“I did,” said the owner meekly; “three times.”

The old gentleman turned to his simple-looking companion.

“Heard ye ever the like of that?” he inquired in outraged tones.

The boy shook his head, obviously pained that a man should be so depraved as to add falsehood to murder.

“I’ll need tae be asking you gentlemen for your names and addresses,” pursued the owner of the fowls grimly; “for tae give tae the polis. We canna allow——”

“Not *quite* so much of it, if you please,” requested the chauffeur, lighting a cigarette. “You know you ain’t got no legal rights over us at all. If you choose to allow your chickings to wander all over the bloomin’ road they must put up with the consequences—see? Ain’t that right, sir?”—to his employer.

The employer, who was quite as hazy upon Scots law as the chauffeur himself, nodded timidly.

“Of course I am quite willing to pay for the fowls killed,” he said.

At this the owner of the slaughtered animals made a distinct and obvious effort to mitigate the severity of his expression—no light feat when you possess a long, lean face encompassed by whiskers, together with a clean-shaven upper lip.

“I canna tak’ less than ten shillings a heid for them,” he announced.

“Reg’lation price for a hen is four-and-six,” interposed the chauffeur, glib from long practice in such computations.

The farmer turned a pitying eye upon him.

“Man,” he inquired witheringly, “have ye ever rin over a hen before?”

The chauffeur tactfully ignored this query. He turned to his employer.

“Six ’alf-crowns will do him proud, sir,” he announced confidently.

The bereaved owner fought for breath.

“Can you no see for yoursels what sort these hens are?” he roared. “There’s nane like them for twenty miles. It’s lucky for you the guidwife is no in, or ye’d get a sorting frae her, I’m telling you! She had a name for every birrd on the place.”

“What’s the name of that one in your ’and?” inquired the chauffeur. “George Washington?”

But his contrite employer begged him by a gesture to refrain from complicating the negotiations by badinage, and was about to speak, when the venerable orator broke forth afresh.

“They’re no the thrawn hauf-starved beasts ye would be getting in the south. Did ever ye rin ower sic’ hens as those in the streets of London?”

The owner of the motor-car, with the old gentleman’s basilisk eye piercing his very soul, was constrained to admit he never had.

“Then gie us seven-and-six a heid for them,” was the prompt reply.

“Tirpitz, old feller,” observed the chauffeur, with conviction, “you are absolutely It. Six ’alf-crowns is what you’ll get—and easy money too!”

The old man turned with a dramatic gesture to his companion.

“Away and bring the polis!” he cried.

“Can I drive you?” inquired the chauffeur politely. “I noticed a copper about fifteen miles back. Diggin’ potatoes in a field, ’e was.”

“Say six-and-six,” said the owner of the motor-car, looking at his watch.

The final compromise was six-and-nine. The chauffeur was anxious to retain the corpses, as was his undoubted right; but the owner of the car was five hundred miles from home and declined to burden himself with decomposing poultry. Five minutes later, after a constrained farewell, the car and its occupants disappeared from sight over the hill.

The old gentleman slipped the money into his pocket and handed the bodies of the slain to the silly-faced boy.

“Take you these tae the mustress, Jock,” he said, “and tell her I’m roarin’ for my dinner. And feed the hens before you get your ain!” His eyes snapped.

The silly-faced boy nodded and disappeared within. Presently he returned. In one hand he carried a bowl of Indian corn, in the other an aged motor-horn.

He walked out of the gate, and, having emptied the contents of the bowl into the very middle of the highway, sounded his horn long and loudly.

The hens rushed out.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *The Lucky Number* by John Hay Beith (as Ian Hay)]