

The Chronicles of Styme Court



By **H.M. RALEIGH**
Illustrated by BATT

THE CHRONICLES OF SLYME COURT

by

H. M. RALEIGH

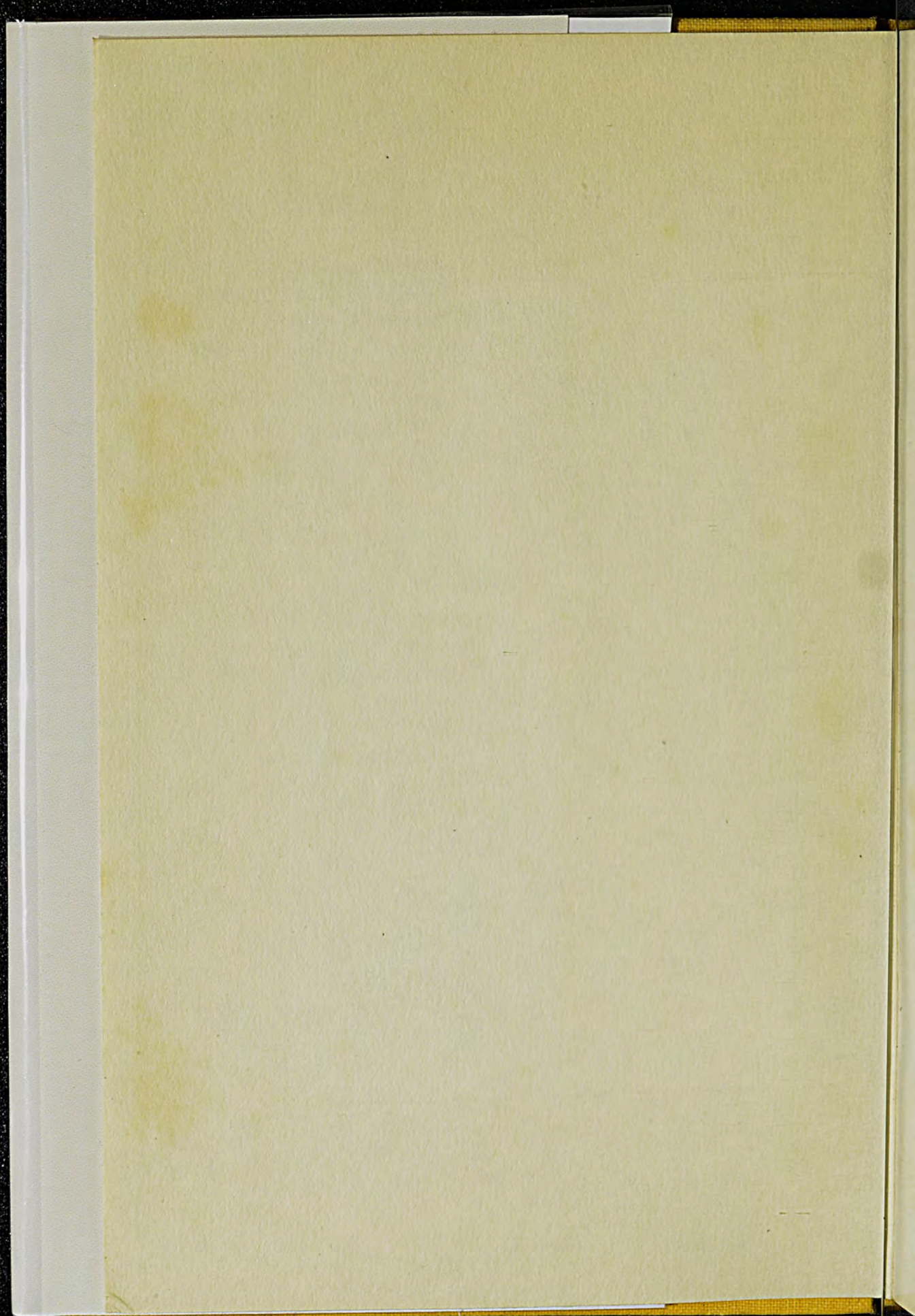
Readers of these Chronicles cannot fail to be impressed by the exalted surroundings into which they are introduced by the author.

They will renew their acquaintance with that ornament of the aristocracy, Lord Grebe, and his feudal retainers. They will hobnob familiarly with the Duke of Dillwater who, under the impression that he is the Prophet Elijah, keeps twenty ravens at Sideways, the ducal country seat. They will accompany the Bishop of Borchester (pronounced Booster) into the privacy of his episcopal bath. And they will listen to the remarkable reminiscences of General Gout, author of those notable works, *Across Pongoland on a Pogo Stick* and *Hunting the Box-Wallah in the Runn of Cutch*.

The author of *Excess Baggage* has narrated these heroic exploits in a manner worthy of the magnitude of his theme, and his ingenious illustrator, Batt, is well able to follow the highest flights of his imagination.

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THE CHRONICLES OF SLYME COURT

By the Same Author

EXCESS BAGGAGE
ROYAL EXCHANGE

THE CHRONICLES OF SLYME COURT

By

H. M. RALEIGH

With Illustrations by BATT

GEOFFREY BLES

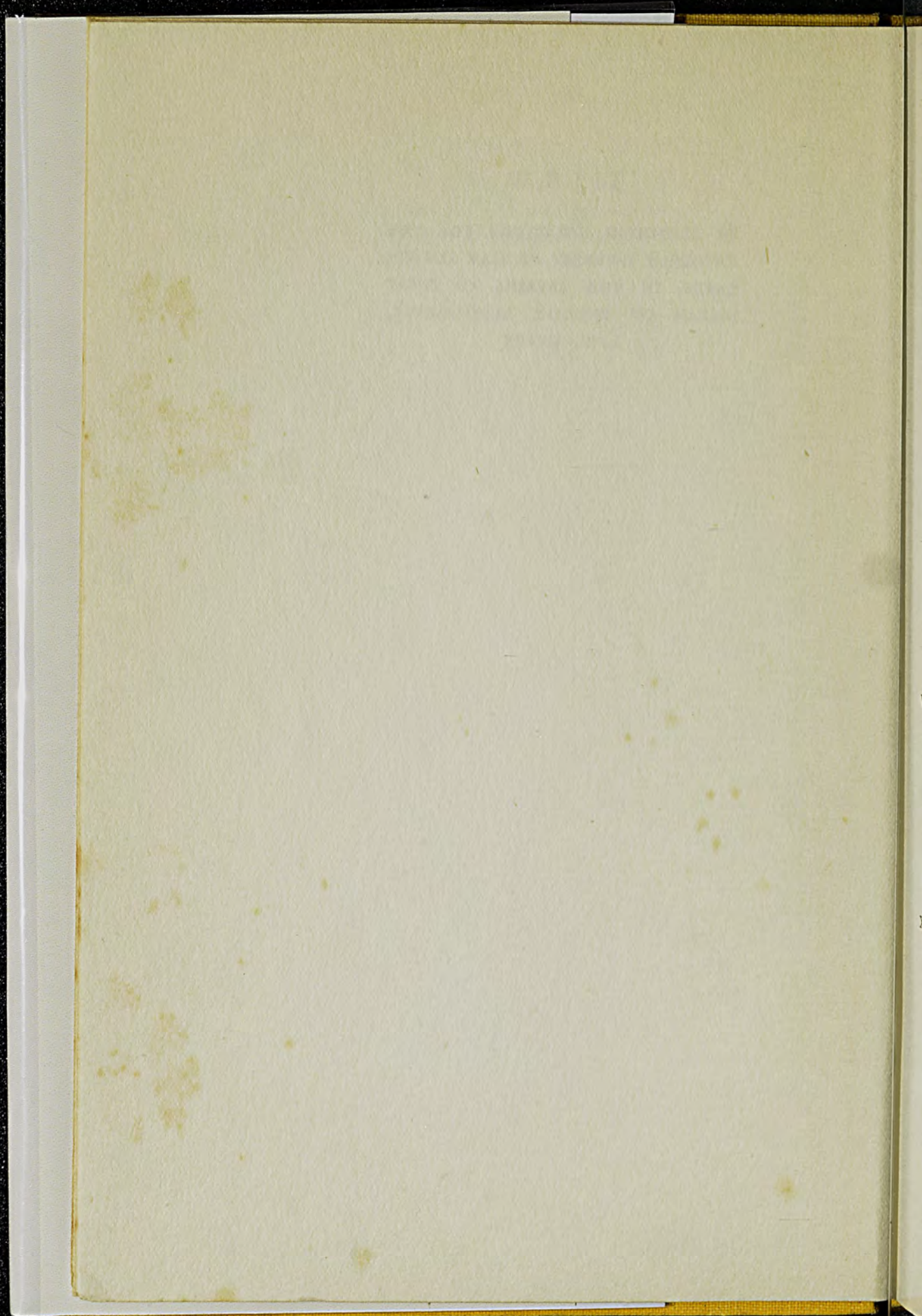
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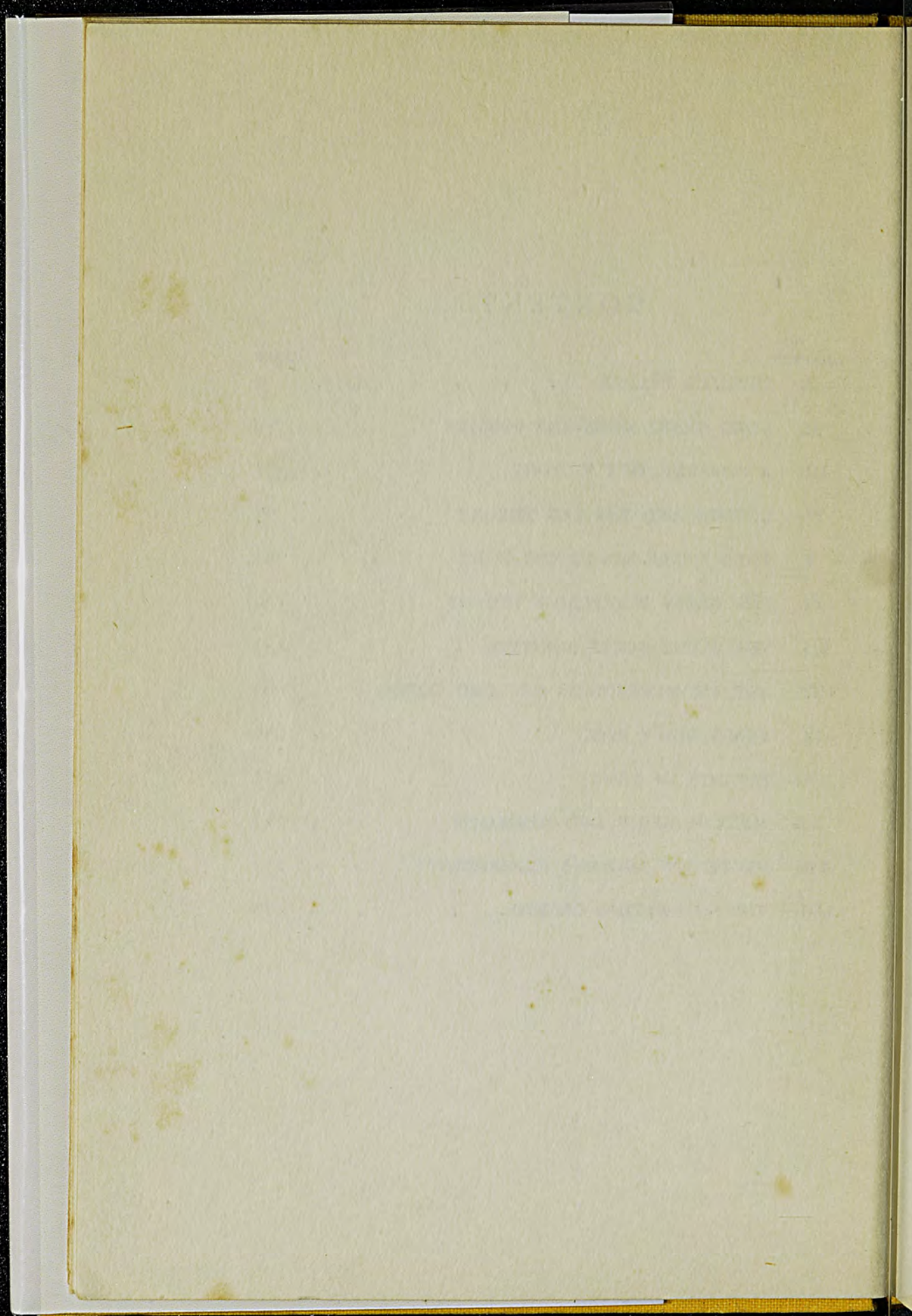
To J. R. W.

IN PROFOUND GRATITUDE FOR THE
FATHERLY INTEREST HE HAS ALWAYS
TAKEN IN THE AFFAIRS OF THAT
PILLAR OF ENGLISH ARISTOCRACY,
LORD GREBE



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Chapter I

Connie's Séance

LORD GREBE, that middle-aged ornament of the English Peerage, was at breakfast in the big dining-room of Slyme Court, his ancestral seat in Loamshire. It was one of those delightful mornings in early summer which our variable climate so seldom allows us nowadays, and the brilliant sunlight, entering the room slantwise through the tall French windows, made the silver dish-covers on the long mahogany sideboard glisten invitingly.

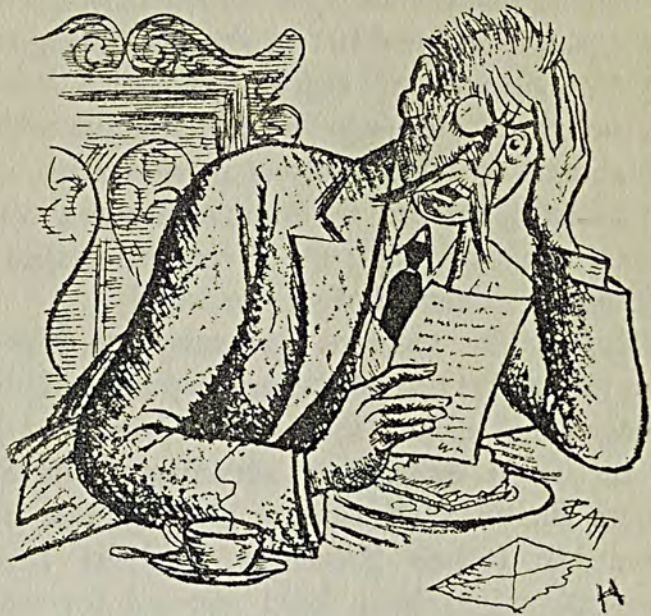
Outside, in the spacious grounds, the birds were carolling jubilantly; one of the under-gardeners, engaged in nailing some errant sprays of wistaria to a pillar beside the front door, was whistling "The Song of the Volga Boatmen" in time to his vigorous hammering; and Mr. Robert Browning, had he been alive and present, might have been excused for remarking that God was in His Heaven and everything O.K. with the world.

And yet, in spite of these portents, the vacant countenance of Lord Grebe was clouded by a frown. A steaming cup of fragrant Lapsang Souchong stood untouched at his elbow, before him on a broad plate of priceless china lay a golden helping of scrambled eggs, its symmetry undisturbed by the rude attack of knife or fork, and a copy of the current issue of the *Sportsman* stood propped up against the milk-jug, smooth and unfolded,

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just as it had come but half an hour earlier from the newsagent.

Lord Grebe, like Gallio, cared for none of these things. His attention was riveted, with the aid of his monocle, on a letter received by the morning's post, a letter inscribed in a sprawling feminine hand, and one whose contents



appeared to arouse in the ordinarily placid mind of the Peer the very gravest perturbation.

"Blast!" he muttered to himself. "Isn't that just like her?"

The dining-room door swung suddenly open, and there burst into the room a pleasant-featured young man attired in white flannel trousers and a rather shabby old school blazer. This was Clive Worthington, Lord Grebe's secretary, aide-de-camp, and nephew by marriage, who

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lived, with his young bride, Angela, in the gamekeeper's cottage on the estate, not a quarter of a mile from the Court itself. A young man of energy and resource, he had been employed, prior to his present engagement, as traveller for a firm of sausage-skin manufacturers, and his work in this field of endeavour had led him into a series of remarkable adventures, culminating in a marriage which showed unmistakable signs of having been made in heaven.

"Hullo, Uncle Charles," said Clive amiably, helping himself to a banana from a dish on the sideboard. "Still busy charging your batteries, I see. Hope I haven't come too early, but Angela said that what with the house-party arriving to-day and so forth, you'd probably be wanting me to get under way with the arrangements at cock-crow."

Lord Grebe grunted.

"Mornin', young feller," he said. "Look here, I'm dashed glad you've come. I've got a letter from Connie, and she's gone stark, staring cuckoo. You be warned in time, and never let your wife go gallivantin' up to Town without you. They're all the same; give 'em the merest whiff of Piccadilly Circus and they go clean bug-house."

"Why, what's the matter?" asked Clive. "I thought Aunt Connie was expected back from London this afternoon; isn't she coming?"

Lord Grebe gave vent to what was intended to be a hoarse, ironical laugh, but in reality resembled the bleating of an elderly sheep.

"Coming?" he said. "Of course she's coming. You don't suppose your aunt would be able to keep away

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with a house-party hottin' up, do you? No, the trouble is, she isn't comin' alone. She's bringin' a levitator with her."

Clive Worthington raised his eyebrows.

"Tut, tut," he said gently. "That's bad. Er—what exactly *is* a levitator?"

"I'm dashed if I know, my dear fellow," answered the Peer. "I never could read Connie's handwritin', but I fancy it's something to do with spirits."

"What, a whisky traveller? Stout fellows, those, as a rule. I remember when I was on the road there was a bloke called Smith, who——"

"No such luck; it's not that kind of spirits. Spiritualism, table-turning and so on."

Clive's face lit up.

"Ah," he said, "I know. Bogey-bogey stuff. Put a quid note on the table and speak to the Other Side. The last time I attended a séance I was nearly brained with some hard object in the darkness. It felt to me uncommonly like the leg of a chair, but the medium, who had been banging a tambourine and delivering messages in broad Cockney from the favourite minstrel of King Theodoric the Great, swore it was a chunk of ectoplasm. I wasn't in a condition to argue."

"Well, my dear fellow, I don't know anything about that," said Lord Grebe. "But this levitator seems to be a woman, a Mrs. Ghoul. All I can say is I hope she's respectable. Here, you'd better read Connie's letter for yourself."

Clive Worthington laid his banana-skin carefully down on the edge of a convenient saucer and took Lady Grebe's epistle from the hand of his employer.

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DEAR CHARLES [it ran],

Just a line to let you know I'll be motoring down this afternoon, arriving in time for tea. Most of the guests will be coming down later—old Sir Otto Gourmand, General and Mrs. Gout, Toddy Dalrymple, and the ffinch-ffolyots are sure to be on the 5.20; but you'd better ask Angela to come over and act as hostess in case anybody turns up before I do. Tell Clive not to worry too much about bridge tables; I've got a better plan for the evenings. Spiritualism, with a first-class professional medium from Harridge's, and we'll hold séances every night in the library. By a marvellous stroke of luck I managed to engage Mrs. Ghoul, the famous levitator and psycho-contortionist who's been causing such a stir in Society lately, and I'm bringing her and her husband down with me this afternoon. It's a great catch, and Agatha ffinch-ffolyot will be green with envy.

Had a great time at Mavis Haggard's moonlight bathing party on the Isle of Dogs last night. We drank champagne out of bath sponges, and Charlie Headforth did a high-dive from the top of a gasometer into the Thames. Got home at 4 a.m. in Charlie's racing Sunbeam, after knocking down two lamp-posts and a policeman.

Best love,
CONNIE.

"Now I come to think of it," said Clive, laying down the letter and helping himself to another banana, "I've read a good deal in the papers about this Ghoul woman. She goes off into a trance, rises into the air, and floats in and out of windows like—like Peter Pan. That must be what Aunt Connie means by levitation."

Lord Glebe pushed his scrambled eggs away untasted and rose to his feet.

"Confound it all!" he exclaimed. "We can't have a great

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fat woman floatin' in and out of the library windows. What the deuce do you suppose the servants will think?"

"Oh, come, Uncle Charles, you've never seen her," said the young man. "She may be as thin as a rake."

"Well, fat or thin, it's the same thing. I won't have her flutterin' about the house like a blasted butterfly. It isn't natural, and it dashed well isn't decent. If this Mrs. Ghoul comes here she must behave like an ordinary Christian, and I shall tell Connie so as soon as she arrives."

And the incensed Peer strode from the room, leaving his secretary to make all the arrangements for welcoming the guests. The task was one which Clive Worthington was quite competent to undertake single-handed, but he had not been long married, he was still very much in love, and he counted every minute wasted that was not spent in the company of his lovely young wife. Therefore, he went across to the telephone in the library, put a call through to the gamekeeper's cottage, and summoned Angela to his assistance.

The week-end house-parties at Slyme Court were notable gatherings of the intelligentsia of fashionable England, and a definite social cachet was conferred upon the aspirant who found himself or herself the proud recipient of an invitation from Lady Grebe.

The guests on the particular occasion with which this narrative deals included a number of personages of more than ordinary distinction. There was Lord Bletherwick, proprietor of the *Evening Echo* and other journals, with his beautiful daughter Julia, who, so rumour declared, was on the eve of becoming engaged to a Tibetan Lama. There was old Sir Otto Gourmand, eminent authority on gastronomy and donor of the Gourmand Trophy for the

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Pie-eating Championship of the World. With him came General Gout (the distinguished soldier, and author of *Across Pondoland on a Pogo-Stick*, *A Pukka Sahib on Safari*, *Hunting the Box-Wallah in the Runn of Cutch*, and other fascinating travel books), and his wife Otteline, who was awarded the Order of the British Empire in 1919 in recognition of her services in raising a sandbag-knitting organization on behalf of the Serbian Army.

Lady Grebe's sister, the Duchess of Dillwater, was there, with her eccentric husband, who believed himself to be the Prophet Elijah, and kept twenty tame ravens in an aviary at Sideways, the ducal country seat, as a precaution against famine, and Toddy Dalrymple, the famous cartoonist of the *Sunday Bulletin*, arrived with his sister Lucrezia and a bull-terrier named "Eggs."

The party was completed by Miss Sturgeon, the poetess, who had achieved considerable notoriety by writing verses for Christmas cracker mottoes, and the ffinch-ffolyots, already mentioned, an immensely wealthy couple noted for the costly and magnificent jewellery worn on all occasions and in all places by Agatha, the female of the species.

It was not to be supposed that a gathering so distinguished would escape the vigilance of the daily Press, and it was probably as a direct result of the "advance notices" published in the Society Gossip columns of several leading London newspapers that Clive Worthington, at about 3 p.m. on the day on which this story opens, found himself answering a trunk telephone call from Scotland Yard.

"Hullo, is that Slyme Court?" said a distant but hearty voice. "Scotland Yard speaking. Is Lord Grebe at home?"

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"Lord Grebe's secretary this end," replied Clive promptly. "His Lordship is busy, and can't be disturbed."

"Oh, well, you'll do," went on the minion of the Law. "Listen, you've got Mr. and Mrs. ffinch-ffolyot coming down for the week-end, haven't you?"

"Holmes, how could you?" answered Clive. "Your people must have taken to reading the papers."

"Information has reached us," continued the voice, "from a reliable source that an attempt is to be made this week-end to steal the ffinch-ffolyot emeralds. Mrs. ffinch-ffolyot is notoriously careless about her jewellery, and we've been watching for some time the movements of a gang of thieves who appear to have marked her down as an easy victim. My instructions are to warn Lord Grebe, and ask him if he would like us to send a man down. The local police have been told."

"In that case," said Clive without hesitation, for he knew his uncle well, "you can take it from me that his lordship would resent the suggestion that he is incapable of protecting his guests from robbery. Still, it was good of you to warn us, and between you and me, if you *could* manage to send down a man, or even a couple of men, without letting his lordship know anything about it, it might save a lot of heartburning later on. That ffinch-ffolyot woman would raise hell if she were robbed here."

"I quite understand," said Scotland Yard. "I will see what can be arranged. In any case the local police will be on the look-out. Good-bye."

"Good-bye, and thank you," answered Clive, and, hanging up the receiver, went in search of Angela. He found her standing on the front-door steps, listening intently to the distant drone of an approaching car.

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"Hullo, old man," she said. "That sounds like the Daimler, with Aunt Connie. I suppose she's got the conjurer woman, or whatever she is, with her. Wonder if we're supposed to treat her and her husband as guests, or if they feed in the servants' hall, like the man who comes to tune the piano."

"I'm afraid I don't know the drill in these cases," said Clive. "Look here, old girl, a queer thing has happened. Scotland Yard has telephoned to say that a gang of jewel thieves are after Agatha ffynch-ffolyot's emerald necklace. They'll try to steal it while she's here."

Angela Worthington opened both eyes very wide.

"What!" she exclaimed. "You don't mean to say those are real emeralds? I've always imagined they came from Woolworth's. Look out, here's Aunt Connie!"

The big touring car drew up outside the front door, and Lady Grebe descended, followed by Mrs. Ghoul, the levitator and psycho-contortionist, and Mr. Ghoul, her undistinguished husband. To Angela, as she came down the steps to meet them, the contrast between husband and wife appeared little short of startling. Mrs. Ghoul was tiny, dark, and vivacious; Mr. Ghoul was massive, blonde, and taciturn. Mrs. Ghoul was wiry and agile; Mr. Ghoul was slow and lumbering in his movements. Indeed, it was possible to believe that Mrs. Ghoul, urged upward by psychic forces, might rise into the air and float gracefully in and out of windows; that Mr. Ghoul should do likewise was utterly inconceivable. The spirits might buoy him up for a matter of a few seconds, but after that his great weight would be insupportable, and he would crash heavily to earth. No, it was clear from the first which of the two was the professional levitator.

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"Angela, darling," said Lady Grebe, "I want you to meet Mrs. Ghoul, who has kindly promised to help us penetrate beyond the Veil. This is Mr. Ghoul. Will you and Clive take care of them and see they have all they need?"

Aside she whispered to Angela: "I wanted them to come as members of the house party, but they prefer to keep to themselves. The library is to be put entirely at their disposal until the séance; they can have their dinner in there."

Angela nodded, and turned to the Ghouls.

"If you'll come with me," she said, "I'll show you the way to the library. The servants will take your boxes to your room."

Mr. Ghoul, however, hesitated, and glanced uneasily at a large trunk strapped to the luggage carrier at the back of the car.

"Excuse me, ma'am," he said, in a deep bass voice, "if it's all the same to you, the missus and me would like that big trunk carried straight to the library."

Clive stepped forward.

"That'll be all right, Mr. Ghoul," he said. "I'll see to it myself at once."

The house party assembled in due course, arriving in twos and threes by train and motor, and after a general distribution of cocktails Clive and Angela, who were dining at the Court, walked home to the game-keeper's cottage to dress.

"Clive, darling," said Angela, as they set off down the gravel path in the gathering dusk, "there's something queer about those Ghouls, something furtive and suspicious."

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"Oh, rot," answered the young man. "They're all right, though definitely of the people. Still, I'd give a lot to know what they had in that trunk. Tambourines, probably, and luminous paint. One needs a good deal of paraphernalia to call spirits from the vasty deep."

"Clive," went on Angela, in a strained voice, "I'll tell you something. I was passing the door of the library just now when I heard the sound of hammering. It sounded as if somebody was hanging pictures, but I knew it couldn't be that. Clive, I simply couldn't resist the temptation; I stooped down, and I—I peeped through the keyhole."

"Dearest, that was a risky thing to do," said Clive. "You might have got a chunk of ectoplasm in the eye. Could you see anything?"

"Yes, and I couldn't understand it at all. Mr. Ghoul was standing with a hammer in his hand and his mouth full of nails, while his wife stood down below and passed up an elaborate contraption of pulleys and wire."

"Ah," said Clive, "there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in your philosophy, Angel-face. I begin to perceive dimly how, by harnessing the resources of modern mechanical invention to the Powers of Darkness, it is possible for a not too scrupulous medium to perform such miracles as levitation."

"Clive, whatever do you mean?"

"I mean that this evening, when the company is gathered together in the library with all the lights out, Citizen Ghoul is going to hoist his spouse into the air with the aid of pulleys and wire."

"Gosh!" exclaimed Angela. "What a brainy scheme!"

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I say, darling, supposing they're the jewel thieves, after Mrs. Finch-Ffolyot's emeralds!"

Clive Worthington stopped dead.

"Great Scott!" he said. "I never thought of that! Angela, old girl, we'll have to keep our eyes skinned. Let's hurry home and change."

Meanwhile, in the big library at Slyme Court, Mr. and Mrs. Ghoul were putting the final touches to their preparations for the séance which was to take place that night immediately after dinner.

"Well, boy," said Mrs. Ghoul, looking complacently round the room, "I fancy everything's ship-shape now, eh? If we keep the lights low in here, nobody will notice anything different, and, of course, we'll douse all the glims when the séance begins. You know what you've got to do?"

"That's right, old lady," said Mr. Ghoul. "You leave it to me, and don't worry. Before the crowd comes in I slip out of the window and lie doggo in the flower-bed till you give the signal. Then I heave on the wires and out you come, emeralds and all, if you've done your stuff properly."

"I should worry," answered the lady levitator. "But, remember, as soon as you see me coming out, you beat it for the garage, and start up one of the cars. I'll join you with the sparklers as quick as I can."

"That's right, lovey, but there's just one thing you've got to remember. Before you give the signal, make sure you fix the steel hook well into the back of your corsets, or, as the old song says, 'There'll be no show to-night.' "

"Hezekiah Ghoul," said Mrs. G. severely, "I wasn't born yesterday. It's more likely you'll forget the signal."

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"Not I," protested her husband, screwing the cap on to a jar of luminous paint. "Two sharp tugs on the wire at your end, and up she goes."

"O.K.," said Mrs. Ghoul. "And now we'd better step upstairs for a wash and brush-up. They'll be bringing us a bite to eat presently."

From the foregoing conversation it will be seen that Angela Worthington's suspicions were only too well-founded, and that the evening's spectacular attempt to communicate with the spirits of the departed was to be made the cloak for a most nefarious robbery. Meanwhile, over the members of the house-party tense excitement held sway, and many of them found it difficult to do full justice to the excellent dinner provided by Lord Grebe's cook. There were, of course, confirmed sceptics, like old General Gout, who described the whole business as "confounded tomfoolery," and went on to tell a long story of his encounter with an Indian Fakir at Jubbulpore in '87, when, "damme, sir, I horsewhipped the fellow for insolence in the main street of the Sadar Bazaar." Toddy Dalrymple, who had taken in Miss Sturgeon, the poetess, became slightly coarse in his comments, especially with regard to the possibilities of levitation.

"I shall leave my bedroom window wide open to-night," he said, "in case any of the ladies feel inclined for a mild flutter. All are welcome—the ever-open door."

"If we had wings, my love and I," simpered Miss Sturgeon, all her soul in her eyes, "we'd build a cottage in the sky, and there we'd sit above the wind, two loving hearts together twined. Nor rain nor tempest would we fear, for Xmas comes but once a year."

"Quite," said Sir Otto Gourmand, who sat on her

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immediate right. "Just so. Could I trouble you to pass the mustard?"

On the other hand, there were several earnest seekers after truth among the company, some of whom already had a nodding acquaintance with spiritualism, and were prepared to believe in the genuineness of any manifestation that might be produced for their benefit in the library after dinner. Of such was Agatha ffinch-ffolyot, upon whose ample neck sparkled the famous emerald necklace.

"Oh, Lord Grebe," she murmured with passionate intensity to her host, who sat on her left, "I do so hope we'll be able to get through to-night."

Lord Grebe started, and dropped his monocle.

"What's that?" he said. "Dash it, my dear lady, there's nothin' the matter with the food; it's not poisoned. I don't see why we shouldn't all survive till to-morrow morning."

"Oh, I didn't mean that," explained Mrs. ffinch-ffolyot. "I meant, I hoped we'd be able to penetrate the Veil, get through to the Other Side, commune with those who have Passed Over. Lord Grebe, I have always longed to speak with Napoleon. Do you think there is any hope of my doing so to-night?"

"Couldn't say, I'm sure," replied the Peer. "Let's see, Napoleon—that's that head waiter fellow at the Barmecide Restaurant, isn't it? I shouldn't think he'd be comin' here to-night. Too dashed busy, you know."

"But I don't mean *that* Napoleon. I mean the famous general," wailed Mrs. ffinch-ffolyot.

"'Fraid I don't know any generals, my dear lady, barrin' old Gout over there," said her host. "I'm a pacifist nowadays, except for subscribin' to the Boy Scouts."

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The Lucullan banquet came to an end at last, and the male members of the party, despite the audible protests of Sir Otto Gourmand, forsook their port and cigars and accompanied the ladies into the darkened library. They were met at the door by Mrs. Ghoul, who showed them into their chairs, arranged round a large oval table in the middle of the room, and cautioned them to keep silent.

"Hush," she said in a tense, dramatic whisper, "there are spirits all round us to-night; we should obtain some excellent results. But there must be no noise, no talking; please take your seats quietly and keep perfectly still."

"Can't we have the lights on?" whispered Mrs. Gout to the Duke of Dillwater. "I've brought my knitting."

"Behold, she is a false prophetess," muttered the Duke darkly, "and the truth is not in her. I, even I, Elijah, have spoken. So let it be."

One by one they crept into their places and sat down, the medium herself taking a chair at the head of the table opposite the open window, between Lord Grebe and Mrs. Finch-ffolyot. Clive and Angela did not join the circle. Convinced that some mischief was afoot, the young man stationed himself in a corner of the room, within easy reach of the electric light switch, while his wife slipped out into the garden and crouched behind a rhododendron bush beside the drive, whence, in the faint light from a newly risen moon, she could plainly observe the activities of the bulky Mr. Ghoul as he squatted on all fours in a flower-bed just outside the library window. Crouching behind the same bush she found two officers from Scotland Yard, and they compared notes in hushed whispers. Meanwhile in the library the séance was going forward.

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"Are we all here?" asked Mrs. Ghoul in a cracked falsetto.

"Oh, for goodness' sake don't keep us waiting any longer," moaned Agatha ffinch-ffolyot. "Something clammy touched my throat just now, and I want to speak to Napoleon!"

"Very well," said the medium. "We had better start by singing a hymn. I will lead, and you can sing it after me."

She cleared her throat, and in a high, trembling voice began:

"Oh, hail, ye spirits, hail!
Pay heed to this our prayer.
Stretch out your hands across the Veil,
And let us know you're there.

"We fain would know what lies
Upon the Other Side.
Since only you can put us wise,
The truth to us confide."

The medium paused, to allow Sir Otto Gourmand, who had lagged a little behind in the singing, to make up leeway. Then she continued:

"Oh, raise our medium high,
And waft her through the air.
Oh, teach her doubters that they lie,
And let the truth appear!"

"Here, I say," whispered Toddy Dalrymple, "that doesn't rhyme—'air' and 'appear,' you know."

"Hold yer tongue, young fellow," snapped General

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Gout. "The sooner this tomfoolery's over, and we can settle down to a quiet rubber, the better."

Attention was now focused on the medium, who was rocking slowly backwards and forwards in her chair, and groaning audibly.

"Hush, everybody," whispered Lady Grebe; "she's going off into a trance. Someone must ask her questions. Agatha, will you begin?"

Mrs. Finch-folyot was delighted. This was what she had been looking forward to all through dinner. She leaned over towards the groaning Mrs. Ghou, and exclaimed dramatically:

"Speak! Who art thou?"

A shudder passed over the medium's frame, and a deep, guttural voice reverberated through the room.

"I am the great Napoleon," it said. "An army marches on its stomach."

These startling words, proving, as they did beyond doubt, the identity of the spirit possessing the medium, caused something in the nature of a sensation amongst the little company.

"How perfectly thrilling!" murmured Agatha Finch-folyot ecstatically.

"Well, you've got your Napoleon," said Toddy Dalrymple. "Go on, ask him some more questions."

Agatha thought hard for a moment; then she inquired: "Are you happy?"

"No," growled the voice. "Not happy. *Malheureux. L'état c'est moi.*"

"That's Tamil," protested General Gout. "Napoleon never spoke Tamil. The woman's a confounded impostor."

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"Why aren't you happy?" asked Mrs. finch-ffolyot, ignoring the interruption.

"Because," replied the voice, "the Battle of Waterloo was won by a nation of shopkeepers on the playing-fields of Eton."

"He's got that mixed, somehow," put in Toddy. "I believe the General's right; this isn't Napoleon at all."

But Agatha finch-ffolyot was growing bolder. In a voice pulsating with eagerness she put a fourth question.

"Can you—oh, do you think you possibly could manifest yourself to us to-night?"

"Certainly," replied the voice. "But it will cost you something. A materialization always costs a lot."

"What about the nation of shopkeepers now?" put in the irrepressible Toddy triumphantly. "Agatha, be careful."

But Mrs. finch-ffolyot was past caring. Her dearest wish was about to be realized, and she was ready to pay anything.

"What will it cost?" she cried wildly. "Oh, I'll pay, I'll pay. I'm a rich woman."

Once more the deep, guttural voice of the Little Corporal boomed out through the room.

"I do not trust perfidious Albion," it said. "I cannot come in to you until you have paid. Place your emerald necklace in the hands of the medium, and she will be borne out to me by levitation. Afterwards I will appear before you."

With trembling fingers, and heedless of the half-hearted reproaches of her husband, an insignificant little man with a bald head and an inferiority complex, Agatha finch-ffolyot unfastened the clasp of her emerald necklace and put the

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glittering jewels into the outspread hands of Mrs. Ghoul. Mrs. Ghoul closed her fists and gave a long, shuddering sigh. There was a tense, dramatic silence.

It was just at this moment that Lord Grebe, sitting on the medium's right, felt something cold and sharp prick him in the small of the back. Starting violently, and with difficulty suppressing an exclamation, he put a hand behind his back and found a stout steel hook sticking into his evening-dress coat. Attached to it was a wire, which appeared to be suspended from the ceiling. Being unable to disengage the hook from his coat, Lord Grebe seized the wire and gave it a sharp tug. Nothing happened, so he gave it another sharp tug. This time a great deal happened.

It would be impossible to analyse the feelings of the Slyme Court house-party, or to estimate the measure of their horror and alarm when they beheld in the dim half-light that filtered through into the library their host, a Peer of the Realm, rise swiftly into the air, apparently of his own volition, and sail gracefully through the open window out into the night. Nobody moved; they all sat spellbound, thunderstruck; and nobody said a word, except Lord Grebe himself, who was fully vocal.

"Here, I say, dash it all!" he cried, as he sped swiftly beyond human ken, "you fellow, whoever you are, let go of my coat! Dash it, I'm being abducted! Murder! Fire! Help!"

No sooner had the Peer departed in this unorthodox manner than the library was flooded with light by Clive Worthington, who, as we know, had been standing by the switch, and the whole company was thrown into confusion.

"Hold that woman!" shouted Clive, dashing across to

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Mrs. Ghoul, who stood, pale and defiant, beside her overturned chair, clasping the emerald necklace in one hand; "she's a jewel-thief! Ah, you would, would you?" And with a deft turn of the wrist he relieved her of the little nickel-plated revolver she held in the other fist. "General—Sir Otto—I leave her to you. Get that necklace off her and hold her till the police arrive. Toddy—ffinch-ffolyot—follow me, by the window. My wife's out there, and we've got to catch the man Ghoul."

"Jewel-thief? Necklace?" gasped Agatha ffinch-ffolyot. "Ah, Bonaparte, where art thou? Elba, Marengo, I come!"

And having delivered herself of this lucid observation she collapsed in the middle of the floor in a dead faint.

When Angela Worthington, watching events from the hiding-place she shared with the two Scotland Yard detectives, beheld the struggling form of her uncle come sailing out of the open library window, she was completely taken off her guard, for it was not what she had expected. What she and her two allies had been prepared to see was a dramatic reunion on the flower-bed between Mr. and Mrs. Ghoul, and everything was in readiness for the immediate arrest of the absconding couple. However, it was evident from his cries that the aerobatic Lord Grebe was in distress, and Angela and the detectives rushed forward, in time to help him to his feet and to slip the handcuffs on the bewildered Mr. Ghoul.

A little later in the evening Mrs. Ghoul, the famous levitator and psycho-contortionist, was led away in custody beside her massive husband.

"This is all your fault, Hezekiah, you clumsy great oaf," she said, as they climbed into the police car. "Why didn't you fix the hook properly before we started?"

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"Nonsense, girlie," replied Mr. Ghoul in a sullen tone, "it was your blasted corsets. I warned you to be careful."

It was left to Miss Sturgeon, the poetess, to sum up.

"Alas! that one so young and fair," she observed, as the car drove off into the night, "should be enslaved by such a bear! Poor, wretched bear. Throughout his life he hath a vixen for a wife."

Chapter II

Lord Grebe Dons the Buskins

THE motorist passing through the old-world village of Mudflats-on-Trym will observe, about three-quarters of a mile down the road on the London side of the village, a pretentious-looking building of red brick standing in spacious grounds surrounded by an unusually high wall. Unless he is stone blind, dead drunk, or very unobservant, he will also notice, along the top of the wall, a sort of zareba of broken bottles, and may possibly be led to wonder what dread secret the house contains, necessitating such stout defences against invasion from without. But when, in his progress along the London road, he reaches the heavily barred iron gateway, and studies the inscription on the large white notice-board placed immediately outside, the secret will be a secret no longer, and he will realize that the high walls and the broken bottles are intended, not to keep anybody out, but, on the contrary, to keep somebody in. For the inscription, couched in plain, forthright English and carried out in bold, black lettering, runs as follows:

HOLLY LODGE

*DR. TITTERTON'S
HIGH-CLASS SANATORIUM
FOR MENTAL INVALIDS*

VISITING HOURS 3.30-4.30

B. JARVIS, SIGNWRITER

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If the motorist has the curiosity to inquire further, he will discover that Dr. Titterton's sanatorium is under the distinguished patronage of no less a person than His Royal Highness Prince Eitel von Glucksburg-Augstein, and is held in high esteem by many of the very best families in the Southern Counties; he will learn, moreover, that should he himself at any time have the good fortune to be admitted as a patient within those bottle-crested walls he would find himself moving in a society whose antecedents were irreproachable. Indeed, as Dr. Titterton is wont jocularly to remark, the sanatorium is "a home from home for the nobility and gentry."

Not ten minutes' walk away, across the fields, lies Slyme Court; and Lord Grebe is himself keenly interested in the sanatorium, a good many of his relatives having from time to time discreetly sought shelter within its walls from the storms and tempests of a strenuous life. The annual ball given at Yuletide by the staff and inmates of the home is invariably graced by the presence of Lord and Lady Grebe, and a handsome silver trophy, presented by His Lordship, and known as the Grebe Cup, is competed for each Easter by golfing patients over the nine-hole course in the sanatorium grounds. To the rude peasantry of the neighbourhood, however, Dr. Titterton's delightful establishment is known by the simple yet effective title of "the loony-bin up yonder."

One warm evening in early June a casual passer-by might have observed a young man of prepossessing appearance and good address sitting astride the high wall of the sanatorium and looking anxiously up and down the road. He was immaculately attired in a suit of light grey tweed, a grey Homburg hat was poised upon his head,

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and in his hand he held a small tack-hammer. That part of the wall upon which he sat was clear of bottle-glass, for before ascending to his perch the young man had taken the precaution of chipping the glass off it with the tack-hammer



from a point of vantage in the branches of an adjacent elm. Having assured himself that the road in both directions was empty, he sprang lightly down from the wall on to the smooth turf and stepped out upon the highway.

"Well, that's that," he muttered to himself, pausing to extract a cigarette from the case in his pocket. "I've

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been on the wrong side of that wall too long. Now, the next thing is money. I can't get anywhere or do anything without money. The question is, how and where do I touch?"

He considered the point for a moment or two, puffing hard at his cigarette.

"No," he said at last, "I see no other way out of the impasse. Some poor soul must be imposed on. *En avant, mon brave.*"

And, whistling blithely, the young man set off at a brisk pace up the road in the direction of Mudflats-on-Trym. At the entrance to the village he overtook a farm labourer on his way to the "Red Lion" for the evening sacrifice, and accosted him politely.

"Good evening," he said. "Delightfully warm weather we're having."

The yokel eyed him suspiciously.

"Oo, ah," he grunted. "Wireless says it be goin' to snow."

"Oh, nonsense," said the young man. "You mustn't believe all you hear on the wireless. You should learn to listen with discrimination and taste, as the B.B.C. tells you to. I'll send you a pamphlet about it some time, but meanwhile I wonder if you could direct me to the Vicarage?"

Suspicion deepened on the countenance of the farm hand.

"Oo, ah," he said. "You be wantin' Vicar?"

"I'm not a detective, or the Devil, if that's what you mean," said the youth. "I just want to look at the Vicarage from the outside. I had an aunt who used to live there once, and I thought I'd like to run my eye over the old place."

The yokel jerked a thumb over his shoulder in the

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direction of a grey stone building standing well back from the road along which they had come.

"That be Vicarage, over yonder," he said. "You be past it, Mister."

The young man turned, and eyed with disfavour the house indicated.

"H'm!" he murmured. "Not a wealthy man, the Vicar. Still, we shall see what we shall see. Good night, Mr. Clutterbuck, and thank you."

"My name bain't Clutterbuck, it be Appleyard."

"Ah! A pity. Fine, honest name, Clutterbuck. However, it can't be helped. Good night, Mr. Appleyard, and thank you again."

The yokel made no reply, but trudged stolidly on in the direction of the "Red Lion." He would have something to tell his cronies in the bar parlour this evening, after all. Meanwhile the young man retraced his steps to the gateway of the Vicarage, lifted the latch, and walked lightly up the gravel path to the front door. Arrived there, he rang the bell, and when the door was opened to him by a trim parlour-maid, raised his hat with a flourish.

"Good evening, my dear," he said. "I wonder if I could have a word with Mr. Clutterbuck, the Vicar?"

"Vicar's name ain't Clutterbuck, it's Catchpole," replied the girl, who was chewing a Wrigley's "Spearmint."

"Tut-tut, too bad!" said the young man. "Will *nobody* in these parts plead guilty to the name of Clutterbuck? The mistake was mine. Would you be so kind as to tell Mr.—er—Catchpole that an old school friend is anxious to see him?"

"What name shall I say, sir?"

The young man thought for a moment.

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"You had better announce me as Smith," he said at last. "Just Smith. He will know me well enough when he sees me."

The Reverend Wilkinson Catchpole, Vicar of Mudflats-on-Trym, was an elderly man as short of memory as he was of sight. When, therefore, his servant showed into his study a shadowy figure who called himself Smith and claimed to be a companion of his schooldays, he had no alternative but to accept him at his face value.

"Ah, Smith, my dear fellow," he cried, "after all these years! What a delightful surprise! Come in and sit down. You must tell me all about yourself, and how the world has been treating you since you left the dear old place—let me see, how many years ago?"

"Eighty, as near as I can remember," said the young man, shaking his host warmly by the hand. "We're neither of us looking any younger."

"Oh, come, come!" laughed the Vicar. "It's not so bad as that. Say rather forty-eight, not eighty. But tell me, my dear old friend, now that you have reached a ripe and mellow age, how do you find this pleasant world of ours?"

"Damned awful!" replied the visitor promptly.

The Vicar was surprised.

"I—I beg your pardon?" he stammered.

"Granted," said the young man generously. "Believe me or believe me not, Catchpole, old fruit, I've lost four fortunes in as many weeks, and now I'm broke to the wide. I don't possess a penny in the world."

"You appal me!" gasped the Vicar. "Would it be an impertinence to ask how you lost your last fortune?"

"Not at all," replied Mr. Smith suavely "I put it all into an offertory-box."

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"B—but I don't understand. Why were you so generous?"

The young man laughed.

"Oh, it wasn't generosity, believe me. If the churches had supported me and bought up the invention, I should have netted a cool million. The box was guaranteed burglar-proof, and cheap at the price, but it didn't catch on with the clergy."

"I see," said the Reverend Wilkinson, in tones of bewilderment. "And what are you going to do now?"

Mr. Smith's answer came in a hollow, sepulchral voice.

"The River Trym," he whispered, "is a sluggish stream, but in its sullen depths a ruined man may find oblivion. I was on my way there when I passed your gate, and some strange prompting urged me to turn aside from my purpose. Forgive me. I will continue my journey now—my journey to the place from which there is no returning."

The Vicar was visibly affected.

"My poor fellow," he said, placing his arm affectionately round his visitor's neck, "you mustn't say such things; the hideous act you contemplate is an offence against both your Maker and the law of the land. Take heart of grace; you shall dine with me this evening and I will give you a bed for the night. To-morrow morning you shall come with me to Slyme Court and explain your troubles to my dear friend and esteemed patron, Lord Grebe; I am sure he will be able to find you some honest employment, or, failing that, to encourage you with words of cheer."

Mr. Smith's face brightened on the instant. "I say, you know, that's damned good of you, old boy," he exclaimed. "I can assure you Lord and Lady Grebe will find in me an

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invaluable addition to the Slyme Court ménage. I am ready to do anything, from drowning the Grebe kittens to bathing the Grebe baby, and at a pinch I make a tolerably efficient billiard marker."

"There isn't a baby at Slyme Court," said the Vicar gloomily. "I doubt very much if there are any kittens."

"No baby? No kittens? What *is* the aristocracy coming to these days? I shall certainly look into this to-morrow, and in the meantime, old egg, I wouldn't say 'no' to a spot of whisky."

The Vicar looked uncomfortable.

"I'm afraid I have no whisky to offer you," he said. "There is a little elderberry wine, made by my sister——"

"Fish it out, Catchpole, fish it out. It's probably got a kick like a mule."

The Mudflats-on-Trym Amateur Dramatic and Operatic Society had enjoyed a brilliantly successful career for ten years at the time when this story begins, and the annual productions, staged each midsummer in the old tithe barn at Slyme Court, had come to be regarded as milestones in Mudflats history. Lord and Lady Grebe always took a keen interest in the Society's activities, and when, at eleven o'clock on a fine June morning, the Reverend Wilkinson Catchpole made his way up to the Court in company with his guest, Mr. Smith, he did so with a dual object. He wished to interest his patron, Lord Grebe, in the desperate case of the companion of his schooldays, and to consult him with regard to the Society's forthcoming production. He found the Peer in the library, glancing through a catalogue of picture-postcards, of which he was a keen collector. Seated at his elbow was Clive Worthington, while on a sofa at the other end of

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the room Lady Grebe and Angela were engrossed in a chukker of "Snakes and Ladders."

"Ah, Catchpole, my dear fellow," said Lord Grebe, looking up and transfixing the Vicar with his eyeglass, "you're just in time for a glass of sherry and a biscuit. Who's your friend?"

"This is a very dear school chum of mine, my Lord," said the Vicar. "I brought him along to tell you his sad story. He has lately met with heavy financial reverses, and I thought perhaps——"

"I know," remarked Lord Grebe sympathetically. "Some of these jockeys ought to be dashed well warned off; I've had a rotten time myself lately. Well, how about this play business? What sort of a show are we goin' to put on this year. Got any ideas? Clive, ring for the sherry, there's a good fellow."

The Vicar coughed, deprecatingly.

"I'm afraid I can make no suggestions myself, my Lord," he said. "The schoolmistress wants us to do a Greek play."

"We once acted a Greek play at school," observed Lord Grebe reminiscently. "As far as I remember it was about frogs, and the chorus was all male. A rotten idea, my dear fellow. The only Greek word I know is '*tupto*'—'I strike'; and I'm dashed well goin' to do it if you put on anything like that."

"Miss Blenkinsop says there would have to be classical dancing—in the nude," put in the Vicar nervously.

Lord Grebe for the first time showed signs of animation.

"Oh, well, in that case we'll have the Greek play," he cried. "What girls were you thinkin' of gettin' for the dancin'?"

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"Charles, stop drivelling and talk sense," said Lady Grebe austerely. "I never heard of a more revolting suggestion. Nude dancing, indeed! We'd have half the young people in the village down with pneumonia. No; if we're to do anything at all, Mr. Catchpole, we must move with the times and stage something thoroughly modern. A Russian play for choice, full of new thought."

Unexpectedly, Mr. Smith, who up to now had sat silent, broke in upon the company's deliberations.

"Have you got any vodka?" he inquired succinctly.

Everybody stared, and Lady Grebe stammered.

"I—I don't quite understand, Mr.—er——"

"Can't do a Russian play without vodka," said the stranger. "Absolutely essential, both on and off the stage. Why, most of the dialogue is taken up with such sentences as 'Hey, little mother, tell Katinka to pass the vodka,' or 'Give the vodka a shove down to this end, little father.' I've had a good deal of experience in the theatre, and I know what I'm talking about."

"Look here, old bird," said Clive Worthington, voicing the general sentiment, "we're rather in the dark. The Vicar here didn't tell us your name."

"Shakespeare," replied the stranger, without an instant's hesitation, "William Shakespeare. Directly descended from the national bard, and have inherited all his instincts. Appoint me producer, at a fixed salary, and your show is a success from the outset."

The Vicar was taken aback.

"B—but, surely," he bleated, "you told me your name was Smith?"

"I may have done so," said the stranger airily. "A pure slip of the tongue. The two names, after all, are very

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similar, and both stand for something in the history of our great nation." He bowed. "However, that's beside the point. The point is that I'm here to serve you—a hundred per cent. service, that's my motto—and you have only to say the word, fix my salary, and I take over the running of your show as from to-day."

"What would you call a fair salary, Mr. Shakespeare?" asked Lady Grebe, to whom the prospect of being relieved of all responsibility in this matter was not unattractive.

"Give me sixty guineas a week, plus exes and perks," replied Mr. Shakespeare promptly, "and I'll undertake to produce in a fortnight. Only I must have a free hand."

Lady Grebe turned to the others.

"That sounds reasonable enough," she said. "The Dramatic Society can afford it, and it will save us all a great deal of trouble."

"Carried unanimously," announced Lord Grebe. "If you want me to appear, tell me what I'm to do and I'll do it."

In this manner did Mr. Smith, alias Shakespeare, lately an inmate of Dr. Titterton's High-Class Sanatorium for Mental Invalids, take up his residence at Slyme Court and become temporary arbiter of the destinies of the Mudflats-on-Trym Amateur Dramatic and Operatic Society. And in the meantime the worthy Dr. Titterton was almost beside himself with anxiety in his search for the Honourable Peter Dashwood, a young man of prepossessing appearance and good address, attired, when last seen, in a suit of light grey tweed and a grey Homburg hat, and believed to have lost his memory and found a tack-hammer.

During the ensuing two weeks the old-world peace of Lord Grebe's ancestral home was rudely disturbed by the

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bustle of preparation for the forthcoming dramatic production in the tithe barn. There were times, it must be admitted, when even the unconquerable spirit of Mr. William Shakespeare (junior) quailed at the magnitude of the task he had set himself, and he was impelled to wonder whether he had not, after all, bitten off more than he could chew. For the human material ready to his hand was not easily malleable, nor was it of a high order of intelligence, consisting as it did for the most part of simple peasant youths and maidens. There was the Slyme Court house-party, of course, from which to recruit the "stars," but the rank and file proved themselves so uniformly beetle-witted that Master William was early compelled to abandon his first project, a Congreve comedy with a rich Rabelaisian flavour, and substitute a series of historical tableaux, carried out mainly in dumb show. Even here he encountered unexpected difficulties. None of the village maidens was willing to play the part of Lady Godiva, even when it was explained that the decencies would be observed, that the lady would wear tights of the thickest texture, and that the donkey upon which she would perform her epoch-making equestrian evolutions—a horse was thought to be too unwieldy for the tithe barn stage—would be the most docile animal procurable. It was Lord Grebe who in the end stepped into the breach and saved the situation.

"Just as I thought," he said contemptuously, when the nature of the problem was explained to him; "none of these fillies has any spirit. Knock-knee'd, that's what they are, and afraid of lettin' the fellows see it. Connie, my wife, might have helped you, but she's gettin' too fat these days, and all the other girls of our party are booked for parts of their own. Dash it all, Shakespeare, my dear

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fellow, sooner than see this thing flop I'll act Lady Godiva myself. I'll wear a bathin' suit and a long wig, and I'll bet you a monkey the audience won't know Lady Godiva's a lord."

But, while Mr. Shakespeare was congratulating himself upon having secured the support of his host, secret forces were threatening to destroy him.

One morning, a few days later, Lord Grebe was sitting in an armchair in the library, smoking a cheroot and studying his part, when Clive Worthington entered, followed by Coombs, the butler.

"Are you busy, Uncle Charles?" asked Clive. "Coombs here would like to have a word with you. He has just made a most extraordinary statement."

Lord Grebe looked at his butler.

"Well, Coombs, what is it?" he said. "Come on, out with it, man; don't stand there gaping like a dashed cod-fish."

"I hardly like to mention it to your lordship," said Coombs nervously, "but your lordship's guest, Mr. Shakespeare, has been behaving in a very odd manner. Certain incidents have come to my notice which drive me to the reluctant conclusion that Mr. Shakespeare is not himself, my Lord."

"What the devil are you talking about?" asked the Peer testily. "Not himself? If the fellow isn't himself, who the deuce is he?"

"I beg your pardon, my Lord. As your lordship is aware, I have never been one to lend an ear to idle gossip, but they are beginning to talk in the servants' hall, and the gist of their talk is this: Mr. Shakespeare is not Mr. Shakespeare."

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"That's the second time you've said that," cried the Peer, now thoroughly exasperated. "Coombs, you've been drinking. Clive, Coombs has been whackin' the bottle, what?"

"I don't think so, Uncle Charles," put in Clive Worthington. "The fellow's queer, you can't get away from that. Only yesterday he asked Angela if she believed in free love, and when she smacked his head he murmured something about treasuring the scar to his dying day. What Coombs is hinting at is that Shakespeare and that escaped loony from Titterton's bughouse are one and the same man. Dashwood, I believe his real name is."

Lord Grebe sat silent for a few moments pondering this startling suggestion. Then he spoke.

"Well," he said, "if that's what you think, I suppose you'd better let the police know. But don't do anything until the show is well under way. We've paid this fellow Shakespeare a hundred and twenty smackers in advance, and we may as well get our money's worth. Use him—you get me? Use him, but don't trust him any further than you can see him. And now, for heaven's sake, get out—I'm busy!"

The annual dramatic representation in the tithe barn was an event seldom neglected by the London daily Press, partly because Lord Bletherwick, proprietor of the *Evening Echo* and other influential journals, was intimately acquainted with Lord Grebe, and partly because the fashionable world was accustomed to patronize the entertainment, and more than one famous Society personage could usually be found in the cast. On the present occasion, for example, the humble efforts of the Mudflats villagers were to be eked out by the brilliant histrionic talents

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of such notabilities as the Honourable Euphorbia Fitz-Faddeley, who was to play the Empress Messalina in a Roman fragment entitled "Bread and Circuses"; Sir Otto Gourmand, who was assigned the title-role in the episode of "King John and the Lampreys"; and the beautiful Duchess of Dillwater, who was to appear as Grace Darling in "Any More for the Shore," an ocean vignette. It had originally been Lord Grebe's intention to keep secret the identity of Lady Godiva until he actually disclosed himself to an astonished audience in all the glory of a one-piece bathing costume and knee-length flaxen tresses, but Mr. Shakespeare astutely pointed out that the truth, if it were allowed to emerge in advance, would be bound to increase the box-office receipts by at least a hundred per cent., and his lordship magnanimously agreed to subordinate his own inclination to the common cause.

The tithe barn, then, was filled to capacity half an hour before the advertised time for the commencement of the performance, and expensive-looking motor-cars were parked in serried ranks on either side of the Slyme Court carriage drive throughout its length. On the stage, behind the heavy plush curtains, excitement was tense, and the Vicar, who, in addition to acting as "compère" throughout the entertainment, was to lead a chorus of "waves" in the Grace Darling scene, took one peep at the closely packed audience and hurried into the wings to congratulate his friend and patron, Lord Grebe. He was attired as Father Neptune, in a costume of imitation seaweed and fish-scales, and carried a trident in his hand.

"Ah, there you are, Lord Grebe!" cried Mr. Shakespeare, bustling at that moment into the wings. "I think it's about time we got under way; the school-children in the gallery



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are beginning to stamp and whistle." His eye suddenly took in the striking picture presented by Lady Godiva and her donkey, and his jaw dropped. "My God!" he exclaimed, "you look positively obscene! I wonder if it's all right for you to go on."

"Of course it's all right," said the Peer testily. "Do you think I've got myself up in this rig for fun? Let's have the curtain up and get on with the show."

Mr. Shakespeare swung round and shouted across the stage.

The orchestra burst into a crescendo of chords and arpeggios, and the curtains swung apart. The eleventh annual production of the Mudflats-on-Trym Amateur Dramatic and Operatic Society was under way!

Meanwhile in the wings Lord Grebe persisted in his endeavour to calm the ruffled susceptibilities of his donkey. The animal had been at grass for some months, and was inclined to be restive. To him entered suddenly his secretary, Clive Worthington, dressed as a Crusader, and stopped short at sight of him, just as Mr. Shakespeare had done.

"Great snakes, Uncle Charles! You aren't really going on like that, are you?" he gasped. "You look like a cross between the Forsaken Merman and an advertisement for somebody's hair restorer. Has Aunt Connie seen you?"

"Look here, young fellow, I don't want any of your damned impertinence," said the Peer. "What are you supposed to be doin', anyway? Collectin' for the Red Cross?"

Clive lowered his voice and spoke very earnestly.

"About this fellow Shakespeare, Uncle Charles," he said. "I telephoned to the police just now, and they seem

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pretty certain that he's really Dashwood, the escaped lunatic. They're sending along straight away to pull him in."

"But dash it all, they'll wreck the show?"

"Oh, no, they won't. He's done his job, and the show can get along quite nicely without him now. I was afraid he might try to make a getaway as soon as it was over—I fancy he smells a rat already—and I believe his relatives are frantic with anxiety."

The performance was half-way through, and a tumult of applause from the auditorium testified to the brilliant success attendant upon the efforts of Mr. Shakespeare, the producer. That estimable young man, having snatched a moment's respite from his arduous labours, was standing just outside the stage door smoking a cigarette and drinking in the scented evening air when a car pulled up in the drive, disgorging four burly police constables, who approached him across the gravel. Seeing before him a well-groomed young gentleman faultlessly attired in a dinner jacket—the property of Clive Worthington—their leader touched his helmet.

"Beg pardon, sir," he said, "I want to speak to Lord Grebe's secretary."

Mr. Shakespeare smiled pleasantly.

"That's me," he replied. "So glad you were able to come."

"Yes, sir," said the officer, "we started out as soon as we got your 'phone message. Where is this man Dashwood?"

Mr. Shakespeare turned and pointed through the open stage door.

"You'd better go straight in," he said. "There he is,

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just going on to the stage riding a donkey. That fellow in the bathing suit with false hair and an eyeglass. Only I advise you to hurry; he's desperate and will probably try to get away. I'm not sure he isn't armed."

"Thank you, sir," said the officer, leading the way into the building, "you needn't worry. We'll fix him."

And Mr. William Shakespeare (junior) turned away, whistling nonchalantly, his hands thrust deep into his trouser-pockets. Once out of sight of the policemen he quickened his pace, walked along the outside wall of the tithe barn and turned in at the main entrance. In the box office sat one of the Slyme Court footmen, guarding the evening's takings and looking utterly bored. Mr. Shakespeare approached him.

"Ah, Jenkins," he said, "his Lordship's just going on. I'll take a turn at the box office for you if you care to slip inside for a few minutes. You'll see something worth seeing, I can promise you."

The grateful footman forsook his post with alacrity, and passed quickly into the auditorium. Left alone, Mr. Shakespeare hurriedly collected all the money and stuffed it into his pockets. Then, leaving the building, he crossed over to the serried rows of waiting motor-cars and selected, after a leisurely inspection, a fast two-seater. He climbed into the driving seat and put his foot on the self-starter.

"Farewell, a long farewell, to all my greatness," he murmured, as the car swung off down the drive. "I'm afraid those bobbies are going to have a lot of trouble with Lady Godiva."

His prophecy was astonishingly accurate. The four burly police officers whom he had left at the stage door, contemplating from a point of vantage in the wings the

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triumphal entry of Lady Godiva, astride upon an ass, into the main street of a canvas Coventry, were even now only at the beginning of their difficulties. They paused for a moment, held in check, perhaps, by the tumultuous cheers which rose from the crowded auditorium, and then, at a signal from their leader, pressed forward on to the stage. Lord Grebe's secretary had warned them that their quarry might be armed, and they were prepared to sell their lives dearly. They drew their truncheons, and their leader ostentatiously flourished a pair of handcuffs.

In his younger days Lord Grebe had been a superb rider to hounds, but even in his younger days he had never had the temerity to make a public appearance on horseback in a bathing suit, a costume in which it is not easy for the thighs to retain their grip, and the donkey, as has been said, was restive. It speaks volumes, therefore, for his lordship's grit and determination that he succeeded in remaining in (so to speak) *statu quo* when the donkey, terrified by the sudden onslaught of the police, bucketed its way down the flight of steps leading from the stage into the auditorium, and cantered, regardless of the panic-stricken shrieks of the ladies in the audience, down the central "aisle" and out through the main entrance of the tithe barn.

Meanwhile Lord Grebe, clad in nothing more substantial than a one-piece bathing costume, and with his flaxen hair flowing out a yard and a half behind him, was engaged in a moonlight ride that Mazeppa might have envied. For the trouble was that the dashed donkey would not stop. It knew, none better, the way to its stable, in the outbuildings of Dr. Titterton's sanatorium—whence, by courtesy of Dr. Titterton himself, it had that morning been borrowed

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—and it had been badly frightened. Ten minutes later the four police constables, breathless, but doggedly determined, overhauled their quarry outside the asylum gates, and found Lady Godiva in the act of descending from her refractory mount. They seized the lady roughly.

“Well, beautiful,” panted their leader, “I see you know where you belong. They’re waiting for you inside, all ready to tuck you up in your nice warm bed. Come along in and kiss the superintendent good night.”

It was Clive Worthington who, arriving in a car a few minutes later, extracted his uncle and employer from the clutches of the police and the lunatic asylum officials. Dr. Titterton himself, and those other members of the asylum staff who were acquainted with the Honourable Peter Dashwood, were absent for the evening—most of them having attended the performance at Slyme Court—and it was some little time before Clive could convince Lord Grebe’s captors of their error. And the real Peter Dashwood, scudding through the night in a high-powered, borrowed car, with well over a hundred pounds of borrowed cash about his person, was many leagues away by then. Still, as Lord Grebe remarked, when, fully clothed once more and in his right mind he told his wife the story of his adventures, “that fellow Shakespeare wasn’t so confoundedly dippy after all.”

Chapter III

A Conservative Victory

THE poet who invented that oft-quoted wisecrack about "the stately homes of England" and "how thingummy they stand" must have been thinking of Slyme Court: of Slyme Court, moreover, on a fine spring morning, with the twigs upon the ancient elms bursting into bud, the birds in the garden and the cook in the kitchen bursting into song, Lady Grebe bursting into her husband's library to demand a cheque in settlement of the chicken-feed account, Lord Grebe himself (save for a slight touch of lumbago) bursting with health, and other explosions of a like nature going on all over the place.

To the young man who walked swiftly up the broad, gravel carriage sweep on just such a morning the incomparable beauty of the scene must have made a strong appeal, and yet for some inscrutable reason he failed to register delight. Rather did he register disgust, which was accentuated when he came in sight of old General Gout and Sir Otto Gourmand, guests at the Court, whiling away an idle, post-breakfast hour on the putting green near the West Wing.

"Bloated plutocrats!" he muttered, as he mounted the steps to the front door and tugged impatiently at the bell. "Bloodsuckers! Ticks upon the public ox! Grinding the faces of the poor!"

He was a tall youth, lean and lantern-jawed, and his appearance, never at any time prepossessing, was not

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improved by the black felt hat, careless coiffure, and long, yellow mackintosh which formed the principal features of his make-up.

"Not a nice young man," one would have said if one had seen him, and yet as a matter of fact he was a gentle, friendly soul, of irreproachable character and correct upbringing, whose only handicaps in life were lack of money and the possession of an *idée fixe*, which led him into strange and not always profitable byways. By profession he was a reporter on the staff of the *East Loamshire Independent*, by choice he was a revolutionary agitator, and by instinct (paradoxically perhaps) he was a humorist. His name was Ogden Coote, but that was not his fault either.

Coombs opened the door and, recognizing the visitor, tried to shut it again, but the attempt was frustrated by Ogden's foot, deftly insinuated between the door-jamb and the door.

"All right, all right," said the reporter with a grin. "I haven't come about the wireless licence. Lord Grebe at home?"

The butler scowled.

"His Lordship is in the library," he said stiffly, "but it is quite impossible for him to see you. He is having his Yo-Yo lesson, and has given strict instructions that he is on no account to be disturbed."

This was true. Lord Grebe had lately fallen a victim to the Yo-Yo craze, and deeming nothing worth doing that was not worth doing well, had engaged a professor of the art to visit the Court twice a week and give him instruction. In his younger days he had been a keen sportsman, and it was now his ambition to set the seal on a brilliant athletic career by becoming proficient in "walking the dog."

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Ogden Coote, however, was persistent.

"Yo-Yo lesson my foot!" he exclaimed. "I've got to see him, and if you take my tip you won't go setting yourself up against the Press at your time of life. I represent the *Independent*, and I've come to interview your old man on the forthcoming East Loamshire by-election." He fished



in his pocket and produced a ten-shilling note. "Would half a thick 'un be any use to you?" he asked. "I know you hired wage-slaves are disgracefully underpaid."

Coombs, while agreeing that his invaluable services were inadequately rewarded by his employer, disliked being called a hired wage-slave. He held up a deprecating hand.

"I thank you, no," he said. "It is useless to attempt to bribe me. I am like Caesar's wife."

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"Are you?" Ogden Coote raised his eyebrows. "No wonder Caesar was away from home such a lot. Look here—as I can't see Lord Grebe—you've got the Conservative candidate staying here, haven't you?"

"Colonel Mowbray is a member of the house-party, yes. He has a final, eve-of-the-poll meeting in Milchester to-morrow at eleven a.m., which I have instructed all the servants to attend. They will applaud the speakers at appropriate moments, taking their time from Mrs. Gamble, the cook. We tolerate no Bolshevism at Slyme Court."

He glared meaningly at Ogden as he spoke, but the young man merely grinned amiably.

"That's the stuff," he said. "I see you've got 'em all well drilled. Anybody caught thinking for himself gets the sack, eh?"

"The Slyme Court staff, I am happy to say, know their place. They are not paid to think."

"No," agreed the reporter, "they're paid not to. Do you think Colonel Mowbray would see me?"

"I will ascertain," said Coombs. "I fancy the Colonel is in the pigsties, rehearsing his speech for to-morrow. If you will take a seat in the hall——"

The butler withdrew into the back regions, leaving Ogden to his own devices. The young man waited until the green-baize door had stopped swinging, and then, stealing on tiptoe across the hall, stooped down and peeped through the library keyhole. Evidently he was satisfied with what he saw, for he straightened himself, gave a twitch to his tie, opened the door and marched into the oak-panelled library.

Lord Grebe, clad in singlet and running shorts, and with his inevitable eyeglass screwed firmly into one eye, was

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standing in the middle of the room, balanced on one leg, and jerking a gaily painted Yo-Yo top up and down upon a string. Opposite him, watching his every movement with the eye of an expert, stood the instructor, a thick-set individual with a cauliflower ear, who in his white woollen sweater, attenuated shorts, and canvas boots looked for all the world like a professional pugilist.

"That's the way, your lordship," the professor was saying, "keep the little top a-spinnin'. Just a leetle bit more play with the third finger of the right 'and, and lean forward slightly from the 'ips, so. Wrist supple, and a gentle hup and down motion with the forearm—one—two—one—two—there now, your Lordship went and took your heye off the top. Wind 'im up again and start afresh."

But Lord Grebe was not attending. He was gazing with an expression of irascibility in the direction of the library door, by which Ogden Coote had entered unannounced.

"Here, you, young fellow, whoever you are," shouted the Peer, letting his Yo-Yo fall to the floor, whence it was at once retrieved by the professor, "what the deuce do you mean by walkin' in here without knockin'? Can't you see I'm busy, dash it?"

The reporter was unabashed. He advanced into the room, extracting as he did so a folded newspaper from the pocket of his mackintosh.

"Very sorry, my Lord," he said breezily. "Sorry to interrupt, and all that, but my paper, the *Independent*, is anxious to know what you think of the lies the Communist candidate has been telling about you."

He unfolded the paper and spread it out on Lord Grebe's writing-table.

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"Communist candidate?" the Peer's tone was querulous. "That'll be that wretched fellow Piggott; he'd tell lies about the Pope if it suited him. For heaven's sake go away, there's a good chap! Can't you see I'm playin' Yo-Yo?"

But Ogden Coote had found the column he was looking for, and was not to be balked of his purpose by a mere practice game.

"It was at a meeting last night in the Corn Exchange at Milchester," he said. "Piggott's speech is fully reported in the *Independent*, and as I understand your Lordship is speaking to-morrow morning in support of Colonel Mowbray, I think you ought to know that you're likely to be questioned on the point."

Lord Grebe sank into a chair, and motioned to the professor to leave the room, which he did with alacrity, only pausing to gather up the tools of his trade. It was clear that Yo-Yo was ended for the day.

"Same time on Monday, Stubbs," the Peer shouted after the retreating figure of his instructor, "and I'll walk that dashed dog yet! Now," he went on, turning to the reporter, "let's hear what this Piggott fellow has to say."

"The rank," began Ogden, reading from the sheet spread out in front of him, "'is but the guinea stamp, a man's a man for a' that.' That's what he said first of all."

"Sounds to me like one of those quotations you see on calendars hung up in lavatories and bathrooms," commented Lord Grebe. "What else did he say?"

"These Peers," quoted Ogden, warming to his work, "'these gilded popinjays, strutting hither and thither in their ermine robes, their garments of purple and fine linen

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—what are they? Wolves in sheep's clothing, tyrants, oppressors, seeking whom they may devour.' ”

“Is this fellow a parson or what?” demanded Lord Grebe, but Ogden ignored the question.

“‘Men of Milchester,’ ” he went on, “‘aye, and women—I will not insult you by calling you ladies—I understand that there is one such vampire at your very doorstep; a leech, who sucks the blood of the people and feathers his own nest with the wool torn from their taxation-burdened backs.’ ”

Lord Grebe was genuinely alarmed.

“I say,” he said, half rising from his chair, “if what this chap says is true, I’d better warn the keepers, what? We can’t have an animal like that runnin’ loose about the estate and scarin’ the game, dash it! I’ll tell ’em to set a trap for the creature.”

“I’m afraid you haven’t quite caught the allusion, my Lord,” said Ogden. “Mr. Piggott means you.”

“The devil he does! Go on, what else does the fellow say?”

“He ends up,” went on the reporter, “with a general tirade against the holders of titles. ‘Strip them,’ he says, ‘of their fine trappings, tear the costly garments from their backs, the gilded roofs from their fine houses, and what is left?’ ”

“A lot of stark-naked fellows gibberin’ with cold,” replied Lord Grebe promptly. “The man’s a fool.”

“Am I to print that in my paper, my Lord, as your *ipsissima verba*?” asked Ogden, reaching for his notebook.

“My what?”

“Do you wish me to give that as your answer?”

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"No, dash it, I don't want to give any answer at all. Oh, yes, I do, though. Hold on a minute, my dear fellow. I'll tell you what to say."

Lord Grebe rose to his feet, crossed over to the writing-table, and picked up a calendar which lay near the blotting-pad. It had been a Christmas present from his wine merchant, and contained one quotation for each day of the year.

"Here you are," he said, tearing off the topmost leaf and handing it to Ogden, "that'll do as well as anything. Print that in your confounded rag, and say I told you to."

Ogden Coote looked at the slip of paper in his hand.

"The apparel oft proclaims the man," he read. "Thank you, my Lord, a very apt reply."

He went out into the hall and sat down on a chair to await the return of Coombs, the butler. He was not particularly anxious to secure an interview with Colonel Melton Mowbray, the Conservative candidate; he had got all he wanted from Lord Grebe, and the Colonel, he knew, would only fire off a string of election platitudes. But he had another reason for lingering on the premises, a reason which presently manifested itself in the shape of an uncommonly pretty girl, who came down the broad staircase swinging a putter. At sight of the reporter she stopped dead, and looked anxiously this way and that before continuing her course down the stairs.

"Ogden," she said in a stage whisper, "what on earth are you doing here, in the enemy's camp?"

Ogden Coote drew her aside into a window embrasure and spoke rapidly in a low voice.

"I've come to give you your final instructions from Red headquarters, Sylvia," he said, "but I haven't much

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time; that butler fellow will be back any minute. I can't afford to be caught; if my editor found out I was working for the Cause I'd get the sack."

"I can't afford to be caught either, Ogden," whispered the girl. "I'm only in the house-party because Lady Grebe took a fancy to me. She thinks I'm a red-hot Tory."

"You won't be caught, darling." The young man slipped an arm round her waist and gave her a reassuring hug. "And when the wicked capitalists are overthrown we'll get married and live happy ever afterwards."

"What on, Ogden?"

"On their money, of course, silly." Ogden Coote became practical. "Look here, old girl, you know what you've got to do?"

"Yes, Ogden, but it's going to be a ticklish job. If any of them should wake——"

"We'll attend to that; I and the other fellows. You know where the things are? Remember, there must be a clean sweep; we can't leave any behind."

"That'll be all right, Ogden. What time to-night?"

"The gorillas will arrive at 2 a.m. Leave the front door on the latch and drug the dogs. All clear?"

"O.K., Ogden."

"Then give me a kiss and buzz off. Where are you going?"

"I've promised to play clock golf with Sir Otto Gourmand and General Gout. I must fly."

"Dirty capitalists!" grumbled the reporter as Sylvia sped away. "I'd like to brain the pair of them with a niblick!"

And, gently humming the refrain of the "Red Flag," he made his way out of the front door and down the drive.

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Little did the members of the Slyme Court house-party dream, as they sat in the drawing-room after dinner that evening sipping coffee and listening to Sylvia Scatterthwaite's finished performance of Chopin's Impromptu in A Flat on the piano, that they nourished a viper in their bosoms!

"Nice-lookin' filly, that," muttered old General Gout to Sir Otto Gourmand. "Where did Grebe pick her up?"

"Haven't an idea," replied Sir Otto. "I fancy she's a protégé of Connie's. Anyway, she's the only girl I ever met who could talk intelligently about food."

The house-party retired early, for it had been arranged that they should all support Colonel Mowbray on the platform at his final election meeting in Milchester on the morrow, and it was vital that they should come fresh to the task. Sylvia Scatterthwaite, on her way upstairs to bed, lingered for a moment outside Lady Grebe's bedroom door to empty a flask of old French brandy into the poodle's drinking-water.

"If that doesn't keep him quiet," she murmured, "nothing will."

Shortly before two in the morning she jumped out of bed, slipped a kimono over her pyjamas, and crept silently downstairs. She had some little difficulty with the heavy bolts of the front door, but she drew them back at last and pulled the door softly open. It did not squeak, for she had oiled the hinges on the previous day. The night was fine, and by the pale light of a myriad glittering stars she dimly discerned a dozen or more shadowy figures stealing across the lawn towards the house. Moistening her lips, Sylvia gave a low whistle, which was answered immediately from the shadows. The gorillas had arrived!

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It had never been Lord Grebe's practice to lie long abed in the mornings. Unlike his wife Connie, who thrived on it, he scorned the institution known as early-morning tea, and was often up and dressed long before Jenkins, the footman, had brought him his shaving-water. On the morning of Colonel Mowbray's election meeting he awoke earlier than usual, and remarking that the day was fine, sprang out of bed and went into his dressing-room in search of a towel. If he bathed and dressed quickly, he reflected, he would have time for a short Yo-Yo practice in the library before breakfast. A minute or two later there came a despairing wail from the dressing-room:

"I say, Connie, are you awake?"

Lady Grebe stirred faintly, opened her eyes, and blinked.

"Yes, Charles," she murmured drowsily, "what is it?"

"I say, some dashed fellow has taken my trousers!"

"Nonsense, Charles, they must be there. Or, if they aren't, I expect Jenkins has taken them down to brush. Get another pair out of the compactum."

"But, Connie," Lord Grebe's voice rose to a shriek of anguish, "they've *all* been taken! I've looked in every drawer and on every shelf, and there isn't a single pair of trousers anywhere."

Lady Grebe, now fully awake, sat up in bed.

"Ring the bell, Charles," she said. "There must be some silly mistake."

It was a long time before anyone answered the bell, but at last footsteps sounded along the passage, and Coombs the butler entered the room.

"Ah, Coombs," said Lord Grebe, looking up. "Where's

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that dashed fellow Jenkins? Some imbecile has taken—good God!”

He broke off suddenly in mid-sentence, and sat staring glassily at the butler's nether limbs.

“I say, dash it all!” he blurted out at last. “What the devil?”

There was reason for his amazement. The butler, who always prided himself on his appearance, was unimpeachably clad from the waist up. But below that point there was a decided departure from established convention. In place of the correct grey trousers in which Coombs was wont to go about his matutinal duties there hung, kiltwise, a large, striped Turkish towel, below the fringe of which the butler's purple sock-suspenders stood out in vivid contrast.

“What's the matter, Coombs?” inquired Lord Grebe, pulling himself together with an effort. “Have you joined the Caledonian Society?”

The butler looked down at his improvised kilt and coughed deprecatingly.

“No, my Lord,” he said, gravely. “I much regret being compelled to appear before your Lordship in this uncouth apparel, but I fear your Lordship has been the victim of a dastardly conspiracy.” He produced an ink-smudged sheet of note-paper and handed it to his employer. “If your Lordship will read that paper, I fancy everything will be clear to your Lordship. Gwendoline, the under-housemaid, found it lying on the front doormat when she went down this morning to let the cat in.”

Lord Grebe studied the document through his eyeglass, and his face as he did so wore a puzzled frown.

“Here, I say, Connie, what the deuce is the meanin' of this tomfoolery?”

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Lady Grebe, hastily donning a pink silk peignoir, had joined him in the dressing-room, and she too examined the mysterious missive, which was written in ink, in block letters.

"Strip these popinjays of their fine trappings," she read aloud, "'tear the costly garments from their backs, the gilded roofs from their fine houses, and what is left?'"

"Dash it, that's what that infernal Socialist fellow Pig-gott said!" exclaimed the Peer. "Go on, Connie."

"Every pair of trousers in Slyme Court, including breeches, plus-fours, shorts, and other equivalents, has been confiscated by order of the Third International. The garments will be returned in good condition on the morning after polling day in the East Loamshire by-election. Away with capitalist institutions! Let all tyrants tremble!"

"I may be a tyrant, Connie," observed Lord Grebe, plaintively, "and my trousers may be a capitalist institution, but unless I get hold of a pair dashed soon I shall tremble right enough. It's a confoundedly cold mornin'."

A concerted roar from somewhere down the corridor, reminiscent of feeding-time at the Zoo, told that Sir Otto Gourmand, General Gout, and the other male members of the house-party had simultaneously discovered their loss.

Lady Grebe turned to the butler.

"Are there no trousers in the servants' hall?" she asked.

"Not so much as a pair of bathing drawers, my Lady," replied Coombs. "I fear that the hideous threat was no idle one. Mrs. Gamble, the cook, my Lady, is in tears. She had set her heart on leading the applause at the political meeting this morning, and now it seems likely that there will be no meeting."

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"No meetin'?" said Lord Grebe testily. "Why the devil shouldn't there be a meetin'?"

"Well, my Lord," the butler lowered his voice respectfully, "Colonel Mowbray can hardly address the constituency in his underpants."

When the East Loamshire branch (or "cell") of the Third International planned their coup on the eve of the election they reckoned without the splendid temper of that fine aristocrat, Lord Grebe. The plot, devilish in its conception and far-reaching in its probable effects, seemed to them water-tight and secure. But Lord Grebe, descendant of a long line of blue-blooded ancestors, each one of whom had been noteworthy in his time for the agility with which he extricated himself from awkward situations, was not to be so easily defeated.

"Coombs," he said, "you're talkin' dashed nonsense. Of course there's goin' to be a meetin', and what's more, every man, woman, and child in this house is goin' to be there. There's no time to buy trousers in Milchester, but we must have a pair for Colonel Mowbray; he's the only one who matters. We can't take 'em off the postman—that would be interferin' with His Majesty's mails, a dashed serious offence—but when the milkman comes, Coombs, you get hold of him, take his trousers off, and give 'em to the Colonel. Jenkins will help you if the fellow resists."

"But, my Lord," protested the butler, "supposing the milkman makes trouble?"

"Let him. He's a Socialist, isn't he? Well, then!"

Lord Grebe picked up his towel once more.

"Breakfast," he announced, "will be at the usual time, and I don't care a tinker's curse what anybody wears, so



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long as it isn't indecent. Now get out of here, Coombs; I'm goin' to my bath."

Lord Grebe, anxious, no doubt, to avoid the appearance of being hustled by a pack of confounded Bolsheviks, took longer over his ablutions than was his wont, and entered the dining-room at Slyme Court to find his guests already assembled. He was wearing an abbreviated, sleeveless tennis-frock, once the property of his wife Connie, and with his bare arms, bright mauve socks, and inevitable eyeglass he looked like a Czecho-Slovakian folk-dancer or a private in the Greek Army.

To the astonishment of Sylvia Scatterthwaite, his entrance was hailed by the other guests with no more than a perfunctory "Good morning," and no reference whatsoever was made to the singular, even critical, situation which she herself had helped to bring about. Indeed, the whole demeanour of the house-party astonished her considerably, and she began to doubt whether her original estimate of the aristocracy of Old England as a set of effete nincompoops was, after all, correct.

She had come down to breakfast early, expecting to find that all the menfolk, deprived of their trousers, had elected to remain in bed, and as she entered the dining-room she dreamily whistled the "Ca Ira." The tune died on her lips, however, when she found old General Gout and Sir Otto Gourmand—the former encased in a complete suit of chain-mail, and the latter draped in a purple velvet window-curtain which, worn toga-fashion, lent to his portly figure something of an imperial aspect—standing at the side-board and eagerly helping themselves to eggs-and-bacon.

"Mornin', Miss Scatterbrain," General Gout greeted her. "Lovely mornin', eh? Can I help you to porridge? Mustn't

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stint yourself of corn, you know; it's a long time between now and tiffin. Ha, ha!"

Even so, Sylvia reflected, had the aristocrats in the French Revolution jested as they stepped into the tumbrils. There was certainly something rather fine about it. Was it possible that Ogden and she were wrong, and that birth and breeding really made a difference?

"You're not eatin' anything, Miss Skittleboot," said a deep, booming voice at her elbow, and, turning, she beheld a tall, cadaverous-looking man, wearing a long black beard and clothed in bear, leopard, and sheepskin rugs, who had seated himself at her side. "Now I'm a prophet," he went on, "a very distinguished prophet, as you are aware, and I prophesy that you'll be devilish hungry before lunch if you don't stoke up well while you have the chance. Of course, it's different with me; the ravens always feed me in times of famine; but without ravens—I mean to say, where are you?"

He waved a fork in the air to illustrate his point, and Sylvia at last succeeded in placing him. He was the Duke of Dillwater, in his customary role of the Prophet Elijah. What an air they had, these aristocrats! What perfect insouciance! Sylvia felt her revolutionary sentiments melting away as she looked round her. She had been wrong, she told herself, utterly, utterly wrong. And so had Ogden Coote.

Almost she could have screamed. As she looked at the menservants—Coombs and the two solemn footmen—moving silently about the room in kilts fashioned out of back numbers of the *Morning Post*; at Colonel Melton Mowbray, wearing the milkman's trousers and discussing the price of birdseed with his hostess; at Professor Grabbe,

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the celebrated antiquarian, who in some ingenious way had contrived himself a pair of knickerbockers out of straw bottle-containers and champagne wire, and who was now deeply involved in an argument with the Duchess of Dillwater on the best way of rearing young wallabies in captivity; at the whole motley throng, who, in spite of their unusual attire, were behaving exactly as if nothing untoward had occurred; as she looked at them all with wondering eyes; and realized that revolutionary plots, however diabolical, meant nothing to them, Sylvia was tempted to rise in her place and cry aloud: "I did it! I stole your trousers, curse you, you proud, overbearing aristocrats, and it serves you jolly well right."

Wisely, she refrained. She knew well enough what would be the effect of such an admission. They would all turn and stare at her, with slightly elevated eyebrows, and one of the men, speaking for the others, would say: "I'm sure, Miss Waterchute, every man here is satisfied that his trousers couldn't be in better hands."

Later on she would be certain to hear one of the women say to another: "My dear, who *is* this Scatterthwaite girl? Stealing the men's trousers and then becoming positively hysterical. Does anybody know anything about her? Who are her people?" Sylvia kept silent.

Lord Grebe, at the sideboard, carving himself a liberal helping of ham, addressed the gathering.

"Coombs has just told me," he said, "that the sparkin'-plugs have been taken out of every car in the garage. We can't phone to Milchester for taxis because some ass has cut the wires, so I'm afraid we'll have to start earlier for the meetin'. The ladies can drive in the carriage-and-pair and the dog-cart, and I can mount a good many of

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you, but some of us will have to walk. What's more, I think we'd better all keep together; you never know what these Communist monkeys won't be up to next, and we don't want anybody tarred and feathered."

"If it's all the same to you, Grebe," put in General Gout, "I'd rather not ride a horse. My sciatica's been very troublesome lately, and these knitted wire *jhodpurs* are deuced uncomfortable."

"That's all right, my dear fellow," replied the Peer. "There's an old tricycle in the pottin' shed. Better take that; and I want everybody to be ready to start in about half an hour."

At about a quarter to ten the procession assembled outside the front door, and moved off slowly down the drive. It was an imposing array. Colonel Melton Mowbray, the Conservative candidate, still wearing the milkman's trousers, rode at the head of the column, accompanied by his chairman, Lord Grebe, in his white tennis frock, astride a spirited chestnut. The ladies of the party had gone on ahead in the carriage and dog-cart, and most of the men were on horseback, though General Gout, in his suit of chain-mail, brought up the rear on a tricycle of antiquated pattern. At his side rode the Prophet Elijah—the Duke of Dillwater—on a push-bike. The Slyme Court servants, a motley crew headed by Mrs. Gamble, the cook, and Coombs, the butler, were on foot and occupied a position in the rear of the column.

"I say, Colonel," said Lord Grebe, as they swung out through the main gateway on to the high road, "do you know any patriotic songs?"

"No," replied Colonel Mowbray, "the only song I know is 'The Last Rose of Summer.' Why?"

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"I think we ought to sing, to keep our spirits up," explained the Peer. "Will you strike up, my dear fellow, and I'll follow your lead as well as I can. I don't know the song myself, but I expect the others do."

To find a comparison with the entry into Milchester of the Conservative candidate and his supporters we have to bridge the centuries and go back to A.D. 45, when the Tenth Roman Legion marched into that city carrying the eagles. But whereas on that earlier occasion there was no popular demonstration, Colonel Mowbray's strangely attired army, as it proceeded down the High Street into the Market Square singing in chorus "The Last Rose of Summer," was greeted by the townspeople with enormous enthusiasm. Never before had a candidate for political honours been so uproariously received.

The Loamshire Constabulary, rushed in lorries to the spot, had the utmost difficulty in controlling the crowd, and not until General Gout's tricycle had disappeared within the portals of the Town Hall, and it was realized that the procession was at an end, could order be restored.

The hall itself was a seething mass of struggling humanity, and Sylvia Scatterthwaite, separated from the rest of her party, found herself face to face with Ogden Coote. His hair was ruffled, his collar was half torn off his neck, and there was a strange light in his eye.

"Ogden," panted the girl, "we're beaten. This is the end."

"Yes," answered the young man, "Piggott doesn't stand an earthly chance after this."

"Ogden, listen to me," Sylvia spoke with passionate intensity; "from now on I'm a Tory, and if you love me you must be a Tory, too. We can't get away from it;

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birth and breeding do count for something, after all. Look at Lord Grebe."

She pointed to the platform, where the Peer, an imposing, statuesque figure in his abbreviated tennis frock, was screwing his monocle into his eye preparatory to addressing the multitude.

"Yes," shouted Ogden, and his voice was scarcely audible above the cheers that thundered through the building, "you're right, Sylvia. It's the Public School spirit. I'll go along now and see about returning those trousers. I say, Sylvia."

"Yes, Ogden?"

"You will marry me, won't you?"

"If you like, darling. But—Ogden."

"Yes, Sylvia?"

"No more Communism, mind."

"No, dearest. Only in the home."

Up on the platform Lord Grebe, as chairman of the meeting, was frantically trying to make himself heard above the tumult, but he might just as well have attempted to stem Niagara. Every time he opened his mouth to speak, the cheering broke out afresh, and at last, in despair, he took his gaily painted Yo-Yo top from the pocket of his sleeveless frock and began idly to jerk it up and down on its string. Silence fell on the huge gathering as though at the waving of a fairy wand, for there was not a man, woman, or child in that vast assembly who was not an ardent devotee of this royal and ancient sport.

Up and down leaped the Yo-Yo, and a man sprang forward from the front row of the crowd and began to beat time with his hands. A thick-set man with a cauliflower ear.

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"That's the way, your Lordship," he yelled hoarsely. "Keep the little top a-spinnin'. One—two—one—two. Wrist a teeny bit more supple; sway gently from the 'ips. Now, *now's* the moment; down with it, my Lord! Oh, splendid, splendid! By gemini, your Lordship's done it at last! Your Lordship 'as walked the dog!"

The crowd, bursting afresh into thunders of applause, surged forward madly, and Lord Grebe, Colonel Mowbray, and the other members of the Slyme Court house-party found themselves hoisted upon brawny shoulders and carried three times round the Market Square, while hats, caps, and umbrellas were hurled aloft in jubilation. It was a veritable triumph for the Old Order!

Next day the electors of East Loamshire went to the poll. Colonel Melton Mowbray was returned in the Conservative interest with a thumping majority. Mr. Alexander Piggott, the Communist candidate, forfeited his deposit.

Chapter IV

Coombs and the Leg Theory

THE deep peace of a summer evening brooded over Slyme Court, and in the conservatory abutting on the western wing of the great house the Peer and his guests sat sipping their post-prandial coffee, surrounded by that atmosphere of utter contentment which can only be generated by the knowledge of a day's work nobly done. In the servants' hall, too, this feeling of satisfaction was reflected, and with good reason; for had not the skill and dexterity of Coombs, the butler, Jenkins, the footman, Rogers, the head gardener, Hobson, the chauffeur, and Edgar, the boot-boy, contributed in large measure to the success achieved by Lord Grebe's XI on the first day of the annual cricket match against the village of Mudflats-on-Trym?

The Slyme Court team, batting first on a "shirt-front" wicket, had made hay of the gentle lobs sent up by the Reverend Wilkinson Catchpole, Vicar of the parish and captain of the opposing side, and after a brilliant partnership by the Duke of Dillwater and Toddy Dalrymple, some patient stone-walling by Sir Otto Gourmand, and a masterly display of hard hitting all round the wicket by old General Gout had brought the score up to 100, Lord Grebe had declared the innings closed. A rash decision, said the wiseacres, gravely wagging their heads, but his Lordship was banking on Coombs, the butler, transmogrified for the nonce into Coombs, the demon bowler, nor, in the event, was his confidence misplaced.

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An exponent of the dreaded "leg theory," the butler, with his "body-line" bowling, rendered a thousand times more venomous by the bumpiness of the pitch, had so shaken the nerves of the Mudflats batsmen that they had literally thrown their wickets away, electing, most of them, to return unscathed to the pavilion rather than remain valiantly in the field to risk a broken rib or a shattered knee-cap.

Not even the dauntless courage of the Reverend Wilkinson Catchpole and Mr. Josiah Bagworthy, the village postmaster, had availed to stop the rot; the former had been caught ingloriously in the slips off his left thumb by Edgar, the boot-boy; the latter had retired hurt after facing a couple of overs from the redoubtable Coombs, and the score recorded on the telegraph board at the conclusion of the villagers' first innings had amounted to a bare fifty runs.

Lord Grebe's XI were never at their best after the luncheon interval—a fact for which the excellence of the burgundy in the Slyme Court cellars was in part responsible—and at the close of their second innings just before tea they had amassed the not too satisfactory total of forty-nine. Thus, as the chartered accountant who had been brought over from Milchester to audit the score-books astutely pointed out, the Mudflats-on-Trym team were left with 100 runs to make to achieve the victory, and rather more than a whole day to do it in.

On the other hand, there was Coombs; Coombs and the leg theory; and when, as the lengthening shadows began to creep across the sun-baked turf of the village recreation ground, the proprietor of the "Cow and Skittles" braced himself to receive the opening ball from

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that demon bowler, a deep sigh of anxiety went up from the serried ranks of the spectators.

"They'll never do it," croaked the oldest inhabitant of Mudflats, shading his watery eyes with a gnarled and wrinkled hand. "Lor' bless 'ee, they'll never do it. Mars'r Coombs, 'e do 'ave got un licked to a frazzle, seemly. They be all skeered-like; that's what they be."

"It's not cricket," grumbled a young man near at hand—he was Josiah Bagworthy's nephew and something of a Socialist. "That 'ere Coombs didn't ought to be allowed to play. The Vicar's thumb's so swollen 'e can't 'ardly 'old a bat, and Uncle Joe's as lame as a three-legged mule from the crack 'e got this morning. Somebody ought to speak to Grebe about it."

It was the first discordant note, but it was not long before others joined in to swell a general chorus of disapprobation. For once again the butler's lightning deliveries played havoc with the nerves of the Mudflats side; four white-faced, panic-stricken batsmen returned in rapid succession to the pavilion, and when, at the close of the day's play, the telegraph board revealed that the first four wickets had been rattled down for the meagre total of ten runs, the indignation of the villagers knew no bounds.

There were "boos" and hisses as the Slyme Court team came off the ground, but the fieldsmen were too busy congratulating their champion bowler to notice these signs of disaffection, and it was not until late that evening that Lord Grebe and his merry men had any inkling of the feeling of animosity which had arisen in the breasts of their opponents.

Let us return, then, to the conservatory at the Court,

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where six out of the eleven members of his Lordship's team were holding a cheerful post-mortem on the day's play, enveloped in a blue haze of cigar smoke, and blissfully ignorant of the revolutionary bomb that was about to explode in their midst.

"By Gad, Grebe, I'm as stiff as a confounded poker!" exclaimed old General Gout, leaning forward in his deck-chair and massaging his nether limbs. "Haven't had such a strenuous day since the time I was runner-up in the All-India Tipcat Competition at Mussoorie in '89. What do you say, Gourmand; looks as if we'd got the match in our pockets, what?"

"What I always say about cricket," said Sir Otto, "is that it doesn't give one time to digest one's meals properly. There was a particularly appetizin' trifle at luncheon, of which I'd have liked a second helpin', but that dashed fellow Coombs whisked it out of my reach. I suppose he knew best."

"Of course he knew best," put in Toddy Dalrymple. "Coombs is a perfect marvel, and I don't know what we should have done without him to-day. By gosh, though, I shouldn't care to have to stand up to his bowling!"

"He ought not to have thrown the ball at the Vicar like that," objected Lady Grebe, carefully selecting a cigarette from the box at her elbow. There was a cry of horror from the cricketers all round her.

"Thrown? My dear Connie, he was *bowling*!"

Lady Grebe lit her cigarette and exhaled a cloud of smoke.

"Throwing or bowling, it's all the same thing. If Mr. Catchpole's hand goes septic or anything, he won't be

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able to officiate at the wedding of old Lady Harbottle's niece, and we'll never hear the last of it. You must tell Coombs to be more careful, Charles, to-morrow."

"My dear Connie," began Lord Grebe, but at that moment the door opened and the butler himself entered the conservatory.

"I beg your pardon, my Lord," he announced gravely, "but there is a deputation from the Mudflats Cricket Club, headed by the Reverend Mr. Catchpole. I have shown them into the library."

"Great Scott, Coombs, a deputation?" exclaimed the Peer. "What the deuce do they want? How many of 'em are there?"

"Three in all, my Lord. The Vicar, Mr. Bagworthy, the postmaster, and Mr. Hogge, the publican from the 'Cow and Skittles.' I have not yet ascertained the agenda of the proposed interview, but from the glowering manner in which I was regarded by the junior members of the deputation, I deduce that it has some connection with my own modest share in to-day's recreational activities. I distinctly heard Mr. Hogge murmur something under his breath anent a 'blasted human catapult,' my Lord."

"Do you mean to tell me these fellows have come to protest against your bowlin', Coombs?"

"That is what I surmise, my Lord."

"But this is Bolshevism!" broke in Lady Grebe. "Bolshevism, organized by the Vicar. Charles, you must write at once to the Bishop; if this thing isn't scotched at the source we shall all be murdered in our beds!"

"I hoped your Ladyship would adopt that view," said Coombs very earnestly. "In cricket, as in everything else, my Lady, it has always been my endeavour to play the

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game in accordance with the best traditions of our leading public schools. 'To set,' as the poet so aptly puts it, 'the Cause above renown, to love the game beyond the prize, to honour, while you strike him down, the foe that comes with fearless eyes.' "

"Just so, Coombs, just so," put in Lord Grebe hastily. "Your bowlin' to-day was tip-top; we were only sayin' so as you came in; frightened those fellows out of their wits. Well, now, we can't keep Mr. Catchpole waitin' in the library while you recite 'The Wreck of the Hesperus.' " He turned to Clive Worthington. "Go and see what he wants, Clive, there's a good chap."

Clive Worthington demurred.

"Much better ask 'em all in here, Uncle Charles," he said. "Safety in numbers, you know, and Coombs could bring some drinks. Bagworthy and Hogge won't refuse a whisky and soda, and I dare say the Vicar might be persuaded to toy with a tonic water."

"Offer him some of that burgundy we had for luncheon," suggested Sir Otto. "He couldn't possibly make trouble after a couple of glasses of that."

"Oh, Catchpole's all right," said Lord Grebe. "First-rate fellow, Catchpole. It's those other two I'm worried about. Well, I suppose we'd better have 'em in." He signed to the butler. "Ask 'em to come this way, Coombs, and you'd better wait here after you've announced 'em. As you seem to be the bone of what-you-call-it—contention, you'd better be on the spot, eh?"

"Very good, my Lord," said the butler, turning to the door. "And if I may take the liberty of reminding your Lordship, I have always done my best, throughout the fifteen years I have been in your Lordship's service, to

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live up to the standard of ethics expressed in the well-known lines:

“It’s not for the sake of a ribboned coat,
Or the selfish hope of a season’s fame,
But his Captain’s hand on his shoulder smote,
‘Play up! play up! and play the game!’ ”

“That’s right, Coombs, that’s the stuff. Forty years on, what? I’ll bear it in mind.”

“Thank you, my Lord.”

The Reverend Wilkinson Catchpole, as he was ushered into the Slyme Court conservatory at the head of the deputation from the Mudflats-on-Trym Cricket Club, felt ill at ease.

At an emergency meeting of the Club Committee held immediately after the close of play, he had done his best to restrain the hotheads who clamoured for Coombs’s head on a charger. He had addressed the meeting at some length on “sportsmanship” and “the spirit of the game,” taking as his text those very passages from Sir Henry Newbolt’s poems which Coombs was later to quote in defence of his own conduct, and he had striven to show that the man who, having been crippled for life by a cricket ball hurled without malice by a member of the opposing team, uncomplainingly allowed himself to be taken off to hospital in the ambulance, was likely to become a better cricketer and a worthier citizen than he who, having been slightly grazed upon the elbow or the knee-cap, proceeded to make a song and dance about it.

But it was all in vain. The Mudflats Cricket Club—known locally as the M.C.C.—considered that they had a legitimate grievance, and the Vicar, rather than see them make utter idiots of themselves, reluctantly consented to

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head the deputation which they insisted on sending to interview his friend and patron, Lord Grebe.

"Come in, Catchpole, my dear fellow, I'm dashed glad to see you," exclaimed the Peer heartily, as the deputation rather sheepishly entered the conservatory. "Hope you're not too stiff after to-day's exertions. Ah, good evenin', Bagworthy, good evenin', Pig. Always pleased to see you fellows here at any time, what?"

"Hogge is the name, my Lord, H-O-G-G-E," put in the landlord of the "Cow and Skittles" primly, "not Pig."

"Ah, yes, Hogge. I must make a note of that. Some of these fine old Anglo-Saxon names are apt to be confusin'. Well now, sit down, all of you, and Coombs shall bring some whisky. I believe you fellows wanted to see me?"

The Vicar sank into a deck-chair and held up a deprecating hand.

"I thank you, no, my Lord," he said. "We will not partake of any alcohol. Ours is a delicate mission, and I confess I find myself uncomfortably placed."

"Bring another chair for the Vicar, Coombs," said Lady Grebe. "He's sitting on the broken one."

"Pray don't trouble, my dear Lady Grebe," protested the Reverend Wilkinson. "I was speaking—ah—figuratively." He looked round him and smiled nervously. "We are here, my dear friends, at the request of the Committee of the Mudflats Cricket Club. The Committee feel that the—ah—'body-line' bowling tactics employed by Mr. Coombs, while being, of course, perfectly legitimate, *perfectly* legitimate, are not in the best interests of the game. There is, as we are all aware, no more potent factor for knitting together all classes of the community in a spirit of brotherly love and mutual trust than a healthy game of cricket played

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in accordance with the best traditions of our leading public——”

“You keep the public ’ouses out of this, Mr. Catchpole, sir, if you please,” interposed Mr. Hogge. “Wot we come ’ere to say is, as that Coombs mustn’t bowl no more.”

“That’s right,” supplemented Mr. Bagworthy. “’E’s a menace, that’s wot ’e is, a blinkin’ menace, and ’e ought to be warned off.”

Lord Grebe screwed his monocle firmly into his eye, and turned to his butler.

“You hear that, Coombs? This fellow says you’re a menace. What have you got to say?”

Coombs looked up at the glass roof of the conservatory.

“With your Lordship’s permission,” he said quietly, “I will confine myself to quoting the opening lines of a recitation which it was my privilege to render at the last social organized by the Mudflats-on-Trym Unionist Association. The author is Mr. Kipling, and the verse commences as follows:

“If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you——”

“That’s all right, Coombs,” interrupted the Peer. “Nobody’s blamin’ you.”

“I am,” said Mr. Bagworthy grimly. “I’m blamin’ ’im.”

“’Ear, ’ear,” added Mr. Hogge. “A ’uman catapult, that’s wot ’e is.”

For a moment or two it looked as if there might be trouble. Coombs had turned as white as a sheet, and was breathing heavily through clenched teeth. Messrs. Bagworthy and Hogge had risen from their chairs, angry and

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menacing. Then the calm, suave tones of Lady Grebe cut in across the discussion and poured oil on troubled waters.

"It's high time this asinine, childish quarrel came to an end," she said. "If a parcel of great, strong men spend a whole day throwing a hard ball about in the middle of a



field, it's morally certain that somebody will get hurt before the day's over. You're a Socialist, aren't you, Mr. Bagworthy?"

"Yes, my Lady." The postmaster bristled. "I stand for the liberty of the subj——"

"Very well, then. You'll agree with me that there ought not to be one law for the poor and another for the rich. When Coombs was batting, there was absolutely nothing

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to prevent you throwing the ball at him as hard as you liked. You had your chance, and you failed to take it; you can't complain if he profits by your mistakes. Now you go back and tell your Committee what I've told you. We'll cancel the second day's play if you like, but——"

"Oh, no, my Lady, there's no call for to do that," hastily put in Mr. Bagworthy, who, as Treasurer of the Mudflats Cricket Club, hoped for a substantial "rake-off" from the gate-money. "Come on, 'Ogge, it's no use 'angin' about 'ere. Let's get back and see the chaps."

"Won't you have something before you go?" asked Lady Grebe sweetly, as the two delegates, cap in hand, prepared to leave the conservatory. "Mr. Catchpole, you at least will stay? We were just going to have a little music."

"I should enjoy it of all things," murmured the Vicar, who had no desire to become involved at this juncture in a discussion with his fellow committee-men. "It is many weeks since I heard his Lordship sing."

In the tap-room of the "Cow and Skittles," half an hour later a gathering of Mudflats players and supporters listened with growing indignation to Messrs. Hogge and Bagworthy's somewhat garbled account of their unsuccessful mission to Slyme Court.

"But Coombs was there, Uncle Joe, wasn't 'e?" asked Mr. Bagworthy's nephew. "Didn't that Coombs 'ave nothing to say?"

"'E just stood there," said the postmaster, "with a blasted supercilious grin on 'is map, and burred something about knocking people's blocks off and getting blamed for it."

"Ah," mused a village worthy. "Pity us can't knock his'n off afore to-morrow."

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A chorus of approval greeted this suggestion, but Mr. Bagworthy held up a hand for silence.

"That's no good," he said. "Violence won't 'elp, and besides, it wouldn't be sporting. What we've got to do is find some way of getting that Coombs rattled to-morrow morning; so rattled 'e won't know if 'e's bowling round the wicket or through 'is 'at."

"'Ow are we going to do that, Joe?" inquired Mr. Hogge.

"Never you mind, Alfred. I got an idea. I won't say nothing about it now, except that I'm going to get out my Ford, drive over to Milchester, and 'ave a few words with my wife's sister Fanny."

"But what's your wife's sister Fanny got to do with it?"

"She's an actress," replied Mr. Bagworthy mysteriously.

"She and 'er kiddie is playin' the lead in *Little Lord Fauntleroy* for Scott Empires at the Milchester 'Ippodrome all this week. Now, don't ask me no more questions; you just leave it to me to fix Coombs. Rattled, that's what 'e'll be, you mark my words, rattled."

The second and last day of the match between Lord Grebe's XI and the village of Mudflats-on-Trym dawned bright and sunny. No rain had fallen overnight, and Coombs, who had risen early, mounted the footman's bicycle, and ridden down to the recreation ground to inspect the pitch, was overjoyed to be able to report to the house-party assembled at the breakfast-table that the wicket was even harder than before.

"Excellent, Coombs," commented Lord Grebe, deftly knocking the top off a boiled egg. "In that case, you ought to be able to buzz 'em in like rifle bullets, what? Frighten the poor blighters to death, eh?"

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"You've got to get 'em out, Coombs," put in Toddy Dalrymple anxiously. "They've six wickets to go and only ninety to make. Do you think you can do it?"

"You forget your own bowling, sir," answered the butler. "Even on a hard wicket they find your googlies puzzling. But I fancy that in any case, with his Lordship behind the sticks, Sir Otto as long-stop, and four men in the leg, I should experience no difficulty in taking all six wickets before luncheon. I flatter myself I have already to some extent lowered the morale of our opponents, sir."

"Lowered their morale?" exclaimed Lord Grebe. "I should think you *had* lowered their morale, Coombs. You've put the fear of Jupiter into the poor fellows! Here, you'd better take this egg away; it's an old model."

Play was to be resumed at 11 o'clock, and long before that hour little knots of spectators were hurrying down to the recreation ground, eager to secure good seats in the small grand-stand next to the pavilion. From twin flag-poles above the pavilion itself there floated out upon the breeze the spotted yellow burgee of the Mudflats Cricket Club and the blue-and-gold pennant under which an earlier Lord Grebe had fought at Crécy. There was a round of hearty applause as the Peer led his men out on to the field, for he was popular in the village; the "boos" and hisses were being kept in cold storage for the villain Coombs. Then a sudden hush fell on the assembly, for it was observed that the demon bowler lingered on the pavilion steps, involved in some kind of an altercation with a woman!

Coombs, attired in spotless white flannels, and with the gaudy colours of the Ponder's End Gladiators round his ample waist, had been about to step down on to the

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springy turf when a shrill, feminine scream rang out close at hand.

"Baldwin!"

Coombs swung round on the instant. Baldwin was his name; Baldwin Coombs; but he was very sure that no one in the village knew the horrid truth, save only Mr. Bagworthy, the village postmaster, with whom he had had official dealings from time to time. And here, on the pavilion steps, was a young woman, a fat and florid young woman, a young woman extravagantly and vividly overdressed, and with hair of a brilliant chemical fairness, calling upon him by his Christian name. What was worse, she was holding by the hand a loathsome small boy, dressed in a "Little Lord Fauntleroy" suit of black velvet and lace, with his gross, pasty countenance framed in a mass of long chestnut curls!

Coombs stood and stared for a moment at this gruesome pair, and then there occurred that which froze the marrow in his bones. The child in the velvet suit raised a fat and flabby hand, pointed it directly at the Slyme Court demon bowler, and in a voice that could be heard from one end of the grand-stand to the other shrilled a single word, a word pregnant with ill-omen:

"Dadda!"

Coombs stood transfixed with horror, the ball with which he had hoped to destroy the Mudflats wickets dropping from his nerveless fingers and trickling down on to the turf. And as woman and child advanced upon him, he was uncomfortably aware that he had become the cynosure of every eye.

"Baldwin!" cried the young woman, flinging her arms around his neck in an ecstasy of rapture. "I have found

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you at last, after all these years! Oh, why were you so cruel, so heartless, as to forsake your wife and your little son Rodney?"

The spectacle of this dramatic reunion was too much for the unlookers. With one accord they vacated their seats on the stand and crowded round the pavilion steps. Here, they told themselves, were all the elements of a first-class screen melodrama, a thrill not to be missed. Meanwhile, Lord Grebe, perceiving that his fast bowler was in difficulties, had retraced his steps to the pavilion.

"What's all this, Coombs?" he demanded. "What the deuce are you doin' to that woman?"

Coombs disengaged himself with difficulty from the lady's embrace.

"It is some hideous mistake, my Lord," he said. "This woman alleges that she is my wife, and that this"—he shuddered with horror as he spoke—"that this is my son."

"Upon my word, Coombs, I had no idea you were a family man, what?"

"But I—I'm nothing of the kind, my Lord," stammered the unhappy butler. "I never before set eyes on either of these—er—persons in my life."

The woman gave a low moan and, falling on her knees, clasped the child to her bosom.

"Oh, Baldwin," she cried, "do you stand there and disown your wife and your little Rodney in the face of all the world?"

"Shame!" said a voice in the crowd, and the cry was taken up on all sides, swelling into a chorus of hisses and "boos."

Lord Grebe stooped and began unbuckling his pads.

"Hi, Gourmand," he said, beckoning to Sir Otto, "you'd

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better take my place behind the wicket; I'm goin' to have a shot at bowlin'. Coombs is busy with his family affairs, and somebody's got to get these fellows out."

The demon bowler had turned very white, but his presence of mind had not deserted him. Clutching the woman by the wrist, he dragged her and the child round to the back of the pavilion.

"We must find a place where we can talk undisturbed," he hissed, pushing open with his boot the door of a store-room which was used by the groundsmen.

"This will do as well as anywhere," he said, dragging his companions into the room and slamming the door in the faces of several curious onlookers. And as he turned the key in the lock a thunder of applause from the grandstand told him that Lord Glebe had sent down the first ball of the opening over.

Coombs's next action was as dexterous as it was surprising. Stooping rapidly, he picked up an old cricket-stump from the floor, and then, seizing young Rodney with his left hand by the lace collar of his velvet suit, placed him face downwards, kicking and screaming, across a garden roller.

"Now then, my girl," he said, addressing the boy's mother in measured tones. "Don't attempt to interfere; it will be all the worse for young Rodney if you do. You tell me this is my son?"

"Yes, yes, you inhuman monster! You unnatural parent! Let him go!" shrieked the woman, but she kept her distance.

"In that case," went on Coombs, keeping a firm grip on the struggling child with his left hand, while holding the cricket-stump aloft with his right, "I can only say that the



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boy has been shockingly badly brought up. He is noisy, ill-mannered, and unwashed behind the ears. As his father, it is my intention to change all that. I am going to exercise my parental authority, and to begin as I mean to go on, by giving him six of the best with this cricket-stump."

The butler's right arm swung back, and Rodney's mother hurled herself screaming upon him.

"You brute, you devil!" she yelled. "Let the pore lamb up this instant minute or I'll bring an action for assault!"

"You can hardly do that," said Coombs, fending her off with his elbow. "The law permits me to chastise my own son." He hesitated. "Of course, if young Rodney is *not* my son—if you, in fact, are not my wife—the whole affair at once assumes a very different complexion."

"But he's not, I'm not!" wailed the distracted mother. "Let the pore kid go and I'll tell you the whole truth!"

"Ha," said Coombs, retaining a firm hold on the collar of the squirming urchin, "now you're talking. Who are you, and who are the organizers of this dastardly conspiracy?"

"I'm an actress," sobbed the woman. "Rodney and I are starring in *Little Lord Fauntleroy* at the Milchester Hippodrome. It was my brother-in-law, Joe Bagworthy, who asked me to pose as your wife. He—he said you'd enjoy the joke."

Coombs released young Rodney, and the boy ran snivelling to his mother.

"I am not insensible to the humour of the situation," said the butler, putting down the cricket-stump and picking up an old score-book that lay on the floor. "You are engaged by Scott Empires, are you not?"

The woman nodded.

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"I thought as much," continued Coombs, "and it so happens that my employer, Lord Grebe, is one of the largest shareholders in that enterprising concern. I have only to whisper a word in his Lordship's ear, and your engagement will terminate forthwith."

"Oh, I'm real sorry," cried the actress. "I didn't mean any harm, reelly I didn't! It was only Joe's little joke."

"Mr. Bagworthy and I will discuss the jest on some more suitable occasion," said Coombs, tearing a sheet out of the scoring-book. "What I wish you to do now is to write out, at my dictation, a full confession, which you will sign and hand over to me. You will then return to Milchester, taking your repulsive offspring with you. The boy may think himself fortunate in being able to sit down in comfort, though I remain convinced that half a dozen of the juiciest would do him a world of good."

Out on the cricket ground a miracle had happened. Lord Grebe was no bowler, but he was an observant man, and the lesson of Coombs's "body-line" tactics had not been lost on him. Taking, therefore, the butler as his model, he had sent the ball whizzing down the pitch with such devilish accuracy and speed that the Mudflats batsmen yielded up their wickets in rapid succession. Nevertheless, the score had crept steadily up, for, Sir Otto Gourmand being no expert behind the sticks, many "byes" had been let slip, and when, after the fall of the ninth wicket, Mr. Hogge came in to join Mr. Bagworthy, who had so far carried his bat, the Mudflats team had only twenty-one runs separating them from victory. And in Messrs. Hogge and Bagworthy, Lord Grebe found foemen worthy of his steel. Slowly the score crept up, and excitement in the grand-stand rose to fever pitch when it was realized that,

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with only two more runs to make, Mr. Josiah Bagworthy was about to face a fresh over from Lord Grebe.

At this critical moment in the fortunes of the Slyme Court side, Coombs, the butler, was seen striding across the turf. Straight up to the captain he went, rolling up his sleeves.

"Excuse me, my Lord," he said, "but if your Lordship will relieve Sir Otto behind the wicket, I will resume bowling."

"Good Gad, Coombs," cried the Peer, "you're only just in time! They've two more runs to make, and this is the last man in. What have you done with your wife and family?"

"That little matter has been satisfactorily disposed of, my Lord," he said. "I was the victim of a villainous plot, the nature of which I will explain to your Lordship in a few moments, as soon as I have taken Mr. Bagworthy's wicket."

How true it is that Nemesis lurks in wait for the wrongdoer! It was with a sense of guilt, albeit with an outward show of defiance, that Mr. Josiah Bagworthy squared himself to receive the first ball from the man whose honour he had impugned.

Coombs strode back some thirty paces, turned round, and began to run. Mr. Bagworthy edged nervously back to leg, then forward to the off, poking feebly at the air with his bat as the ball, whistling in like a high-velocity shell, struck him on the wrist with a sickening crack and passing on, spread-eagled his wicket. Dropping his bat on the pitch and yelping with agony, he bounded towards the pavilion, just as a mighty roar from the throats of the onlookers announced that the match had been lost and won!

Coombs and the Leg Theory

The Mudflats-on-Trym villagers had seen victory snatched away at the moment when it had seemed to be safely within their grasp, but so far from harbouring resentment they were filled with admiration for Lord Grebe's masterly display of bowling, and grateful to Coombs for a thrill. The crowd, yelling exultantly, surged on to the field, and the Peer and his butler were swept off their feet and carried shoulder-high to the pavilion.

"Three cheers," intoned the Reverend Wilkinson Catchpole, "for Lord Grebe's eleven."

The cheers were given lustily, and Lord Grebe was about to return the compliment by calling for further cheers for the defeated side when the voice of the village postmaster boomed across the field.

"Three more," it shouted, "for Mr. and Mrs. Baldwin Coombs and the nipper!"

Mr. Josiah Bagworthy had the last word.

Chapter V

Lord Grebe Holds the Fort

THE bathroom attached to the principal guest chamber at Slyme Court is a luxuriously fitted apartment so situated as to receive the full benefit of the slanting rays of the morning sun. The bath itself is spacious, there is a constant supply of hot and cold water, and the acoustic properties of the room are so remarkable that more than one visitor to the Court has been known, after a brief pre-breakfast rehearsal to the accompaniment of the running taps, to offer his services by telegram to the British Broadcasting Corporation at Langham Place.

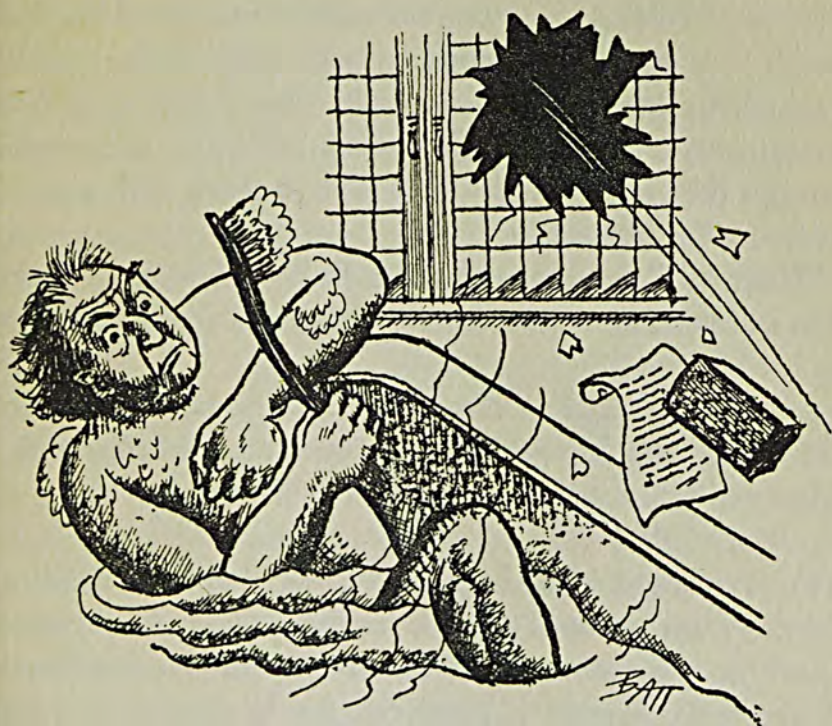
Lord Grebe, himself the possessor of a pleasant baritone voice, encourages his guests to sing in their bath, and has even gone so far as to provide a copy of the Cathedral Psalter in every bathroom, rightly holding that there is nothing like the Psalms of David, lustily rendered, for developing the vocal chords.

At half-past eight on a lovely morning in late summer, the bathroom specifically mentioned above was occupied, and clouds of steam poured through the half-open door into the guest chamber. Brilliant sunlight flooded the scene, causing the highly polished taps and other fittings to scintillate like jewels, and the vaulted roof echoed and re-echoed the rich and lovely notes of an exceptionally powerful bass voice.

In the bath, wallowing like a handsome hippopotamus, sat the Bishop of Borchester (pronounced Booster); he had

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just completed, to his own huge satisfaction, the third of a group of Canticles, and was even now well under way with the 104th Psalm. His head was thrown well back, to give full play to the larynx, in his left hand he grasped a tablet of scented soap, and with his right he vigorously



plied a loofah, but the power of his brazen lungs was in no way impaired by the mantle of soap-suds which enveloped him like a shroud.

"Wherein the birds make their nests," sang the Bishop, "and the fir trees are a dwelling for the stork. The high hills," he continued, "are a refuge for the wild goats: and so (crescendo) are the stony rocks for the conies."

At this point there came an interruption as unwelcome as

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it was unexpected. There was a deafening crash, the sound of splintering glass, and a large foreign body hurtled through the window and fell with a heavy thud onto the linoleum floor covering.

The Bishop stopped singing and peered anxiously over the side of the bath. The window-pane had been shattered, the floor was strewn with slivers of glass, and nestling up against the cork bath-mat lay the author of the interruption, an oblong, solid object which excited his lordship's curiosity. He gazed at it for a moment through the rising cloud of steam, and then, with a start, realized what it was.

"Heavens!" he thought, "the forces of anarchy have been let loose. My worst fears are realized. Red revolution has broken out!"

He stepped gingerly out of the bath, wrapped a towel round his dripping limbs, and, stooping, picked up the object and balanced it on the palm of his hand.

It was a half-brick.

For a moment the Bishop stood irresolute; then, treading delicately on account of the broken glass, he crossed quickly to the casement and threw it open. His courage in adopting this course is manifest, for it must have been clear to him that if the aggressor was lurking in the Slyme Court grounds with another projectile in readiness, his own half-naked and portly frame, thus rashly exposed at the open window, would offer a tempting target. But the Bishop was a man of iron nerve and indomitable pluck; it was not in him to falter. He gazed out across the velvet lawns, on which the dew glistened like a myriad diamonds in the sunshine, and in his eyes the light of battle gleamed. Christian forbearance is a commendable quality,

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but there is such a thing as righteous wrath, and his Lordship's muscles were tense, like the recoil spring of a gun, as he stood there with the half-brick poised ready in his right hand.

No one was in sight; the smiling gardens surrounding the house lay lapped in peace; and from somewhere near at hand a thrush trilled. Stay, what was that? Something was stirring in that clump of rhododendrons over to the right, just behind the tomato-frames. The Bishop stared harder, drawing the towel closer round his person with his left hand. Yes, there was not a doubt of it, somebody was hiding in the bushes; he could just make out the top of a human head. The recoil spring went slowly back, and once again the half-brick flew singing through the air.

In his schooldays at Wopham, the Bishop of Borchester had been a noted athlete; he had carried off the honours two years running for putting the shot, and as a demon bowler his formidable yorkers had made havoc of the wickets of visiting teams. But, though his eye was still good, he was sadly out of practice; moreover, the bath-towel to some extent hampered his freedom of movement; and his shot on this occasion, though well-directed, fell short.

There was a devastating crash from among the tomato-frames, and almost immediately from the clump of rhododendrons a man stepped into view, astonishment written large upon his countenance. The Bishop stared at him, horror-struck, and then dropped down on all fours below the level of the window-sill. For the man who had suddenly made his appearance from behind the rhododendrons, and who was even now leaping up and down upon the lawn

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roaring expostulations in a shrill, excited falsetto, was none other than his host, Lord Grebe!

Crouching there beneath the window-sill, the Bishop cudgelled his brains in search of a solution of the mystery. He was not intimately acquainted with Lord Grebe; this was, indeed, only his second visit to the Court; but he had heard he was eccentric. Could the incident of the half-brick have been a pleasantly conceived practical joke, a humorous gesture designed to make his guest feel at ease?

Then he remembered that he had been singing at the time. Perhaps his host objected to singing. That, he reflected, could hardly be, for the Psalter had been placed there by Lord Grebe's express wish. Had he, perhaps, some subtle inhibition against the 104th Psalm? That seemed more than likely, especially in view of the reference to "stony rocks." Well, it would be best to creep unobserved into the bedroom, dress hurriedly, and seek out and apologize to Lord Grebe. It would also be wise in future to avoid the Psalms and stick to the Canticles. Nobody, not even an atheist, could seriously entertain an inhibition against the Canticles.

His Lordship was just about to creep off in pursuance of his plan when his eye fell upon a dirty piece of paper lying in the middle of the bathroom floor. It was creased, and covered with reddish dust, and no expert in the science of detection was needed to deduce the fact that it had been wrapped round the half-brick.

The Bishop picked it up and smoothed it out. This, then, was the true explanation. The projectile had been intended as a vehicle for the conveyance of a message, not as a weapon of offence, and his own action in hurling it back across the garden had been hasty and ill-considered. He

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held the message up to the light and rapidly assimilated its contents, and what he read froze the very marrow of his bones.

"Heavens!" he cried, "but this is intolerable! I must consult Lord Grebe immediately!" And stumbling into the bedroom, he set about donning his episcopal uniform with feverish haste.

"I don't suppose any of you will believe me," Lord Grebe was saying to those of his guests who had as yet found their way down to breakfast, "but when I was out in the garden just now, takin' a breath of air, I heard a loud crash, and there was the Bishop of Borchester, as naked as on the day he was born, leanin' out of the bathroom window and heavin' showers of brickbats into the tomato-frames. Of course, I know he's my guest, and the Church is the Church, and all that, but one must draw the line somewhere, what?"

"I heard a devil of a shindy as I was havin' my *chota hazri*; I suppose that's what it was," put in old General Gout, helping himself to eggs and bacon from a chafing-dish on the sideboard. "I remember a very similar case at Bubblepore in '83. The garrison padre, a young feller named Smithers, was bitten by a mad dog in the bazaar, and started throwin' mangoes at the ladies who came to decorate the church for the Harvest Thanksgivin'. The mangoes were a bit over-ripe, and the wife of the Deputy-Commissioner, who had got a new frock out from England for Polo Week, made her husband write a snorter to the Bishop of Calcutta. They locked the poor feller up, and sent him to Kasauli for the Pasteur treatment, but it just shows that, even with the clergy, you never can tell."

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"Bitten in the bazaar, you say?" asked Toddy Dalrymple. "The Bishop opened a bazaar last Thursday; I wonder if anything could have fastened its teeth into him there. I've thought for some time he might be a bit unhinged; those articles of his on the modern girl in the *Echo* have been pretty steep lately. He ought to be more careful; one of these days he'll be assassinated by some rabid feminist."

As a fact, the Bishop of Borchester had been making himself decidedly unpopular among the leaders of advanced feminine thought by his trenchant newspaper articles, in which he uttered a scathing indictment of the manners and morals of the present emancipated generation of young women.

"To the modern bride," he wrote, "the perambulator is seldom of use save as a vehicle for propelling cocktail-laden trays between boudoir and bathroom, while, as for needlework, the only needles with which she has practical acquaintance are the gramophone and the hypodermic."

There was a great deal more in the same strain; savage, intolerant satire, a fresh "blast of the trumpet against the monstrous regiment of women"; and it was scarcely to be wondered at, in the light of these articles, that the members of at least one feminist society had openly sworn to choke the Bishop with his own gaiters if once they could lay hands on him.

"Isn't his daughter a feminist of some kind?" asked Lady Grebe. "His wife, I know, was a militant suffragette in the old, pre-vote days, and I have heard it said that the girl takes after her mother."

"Yes," said Toddy. "Diana's a charming girl, but pretty wild. As a matter of fact, she and her father parted brass-

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rags over this very question of women's freedom, and she left the parental roof-tree a year ago and fled to London, where she got mixed up with a very queer lot. I believe she and her cronies have been fairly gnashing their teeth over the old boy's articles."

"I don't care a damn—beg pardon, Connie, I don't care two hoots—about his articles," put in Lord Grebe. "So far as I'm concerned, he's welcome to accuse the modern girl of drinkin' her bath water and eatin' her young, but I will not have him bombardin' my tomato-frames with brickbats out of the bathroom window, and that's flat!"

"Hush, Charles, he's just coming downstairs," warned Lady Grebe. "Pass me the General's cup; I expect he's ready for some more coffee."

There was a tense moment of silence as the Bishop of Borchester, well-tubbed and immaculate, bustled into the breakfast-room. His cheeks were as rosy as ever, but he wore an anxious frown as he walked to the head of the table to wish his hostess "Good morning." Then he turned to her husband.

"I wonder, Grebe," he said, "if I might have a word with you in private upon a very urgent matter?"

Lord Grebe, who had been preparing to reason tactfully with his guest over the affair of the tomato-frame, was taken aback.

"Why—er—yes," he said. "Let's go into the library. Connie, you'd better keep the Bishop's breakfast hot."

And he led the way out of the room.

In the seclusion of the library the Bishop looked anxiously round him, and then produced from his pocket a crumpled piece of paper.

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"This missive," he said, smoothing it out with trembling fingers, "was flung through the window of my bathroom this morning as I was performing my ablutions. It was wrapped round a half-brick, and I fear some damage was done to the window. That, however, is not a very serious matter by comparison with the contents of the message, which you had better read for yourself."

Lord Grebe took the slip of paper and subjected it to a careful scrutiny through his eyeglass.

"Dash it all," he said, "it's written in Arabic. I can't make head or tail of it."

"I'm afraid it isn't very legible," said the Bishop. "It's in my daughter's handwriting. But if you hold it the right way up you may be able to construe it."

Lord Grebe tried again.

To the Right Rev. the Bishop of Borchester, D.D. [he read].

MY LORD BISHOP,

Take notice that since you have obstinately disregarded the repeated warnings of the League of Amazons, and have continued your scurrilous newspaper campaign against the womanhood of this country, it has been decided by unanimous vote of the members of the League to take disciplinary action against you.

Slyme Court is surrounded. If you give yourself up, before noon to-day, to the guard on duty at the main gateway, the other inmates of the Court will be free from molestation. Should you, however, fail to do so, or should any attempt at resistance be made by you or by anybody else with you, the League will be compelled reluctantly to resort to armed force, and cannot be held answerable for the consequences to others besides yourself. You have till noon to-day.

At the foot of this remarkable communication was

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scrawled: "Don't be a fool, Daddy. We mean business this time.—DIANA."

"Well," said Lord Grebe, when he had finished reading, "I'm dashed if I know what it's all about, but it looks to me like a pack of confounded nonsense."

The Bishop gripped him by the arm.

"You don't know my daughter, Grebe, do you?" he said in a voice that was husky with alarm.

There was a knock at the door, and Coombs entered the room. He looked pale and worried, but he preserved his traditional calm.

"What is it, Coombs, what is it?" asked Lord Grebe testily. "I'm very busy."

"I beg you pardon, my Lord," replied the butler, "but I thought your lordship ought to know that Jenkins has been unable to proceed to the post this morning with your Lordship's letters. There are two female persons at the gate who refuse to allow him to pass."

"But, dash it all, Coombs, you don't tell me a great, hulkin' feller like Jenkins is goin' to be stopped by a couple of women?"

The butler coughed deprecatingly.

"I beg your pardon, my Lord," he said, "but the two persons appear to be armed with a machine-gun. Jenkins, as your Lordship is aware, is an ex-Service man. He declares that the weapon is obsolete, but possibly effective nevertheless."

"It is worse than I feared," groaned the Bishop. "There is nothing for it. I must give myself up."

"Fiddlesticks!" said Lord Grebe. "Coombs, ring up the police in the village."

"I have already endeavoured to do so, my Lord,"

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answered Coombs quietly, "but up to now have been unable to obtain a reply from the young lady at the exchange. I suspect that the wires have been severed; the line is quite dead."

At this moment the French windows facing on to the lawn were thrown open and Clive Worthington entered the room accompanied by his wife. The couple had walked across from the gamekeeper's cottage.

"I say, Uncle Charles," panted the young man, sinking into a chair while Angela perched herself on the arm, "did you give permission for the Girl Guides to hold a field-day in the grounds? The woods round our place are simply lousy with young women, all armed to the teeth. I dare say they don't mean any harm, but there's the shooting to be thought of, and anyway they oughtn't to go lighting fires about the place in this dry weather. I thought I'd better mention it."

"You see?" said the Bishop, turning to his host. "It was no idle threat. These misguided young women are determined to kidnap me if they can. Now tell me, Grebe, what am I do to? If I give myself up, you and your other guests will be spared a distressing and possibly uncomfortable scene, while my captors will hardly be likely to proceed to drastic lengths, especially as my daughter Diana is with them. I confess, however, that I should like to see them taught a lesson."

Lord Grebe smote his right reverend guest approvingly on the back.

"You're dashed well right, my dear fellow," he cried. "A lesson they shall be taught, the young hussies, before the day is much older. If they didn't like your newspaper articles they shouldn't have read 'em—I never read these

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things myself—and I'm not going to have my woods infested with female Bolsheviks, trampling down the undergrowth and scarin' my pheasants. Coombs, just go round and collect the whole of the domestic staff, every man, woman, and child, and bring 'em along here. Clive, be a good fellow and ask all the guests to join me here in the library at once. Tell 'em it's most important; the place is besieged, and we've got to hold a council of war."

Diana, the Bishop's daughter, was not lacking in filial affection, nor, being a sensible young woman, was she seriously perturbed by the tenor of her father's articles in the *Evening Echo*. She knew well enough that for each of them he received a handsome cheque from the proprietors of the paper, and that in return he was expected to provide red-hot, provocative stuff capable of carrying an arresting headline, such as "Bishop Says English Dairymaids Are Dope Fiends," or "Prelate's Attack on Wigan, The Modern Babylon." Knowing this, she was not prepared altogether to condemn him for his indictment of her own sex, and it was rather in a spirit of girlish exuberance that she had fallen in with the extravagant schemes of her friend and mentor, Miss Julia Polkinghorne, President of the League of Amazons.

Miss Polkinghorne was one of those rare, free spirits who decline to bow the knee to man-made conventions. A woman on the wrong side of forty, she was accustomed to wear plus-fours, close-cropped hair, and an eyeglass, and to swear, on occasion, like a trooper. Moreover, she took life very seriously; so seriously, indeed, that it may well be questioned whether she would not have taken the Bishop's if she could have caught him. Altogether a tough baby.





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The arrival of the Amazonian expeditionary force, over a hundred strong, in the quiet village of Mudflats-on-Trym excited less comment than one would have expected. The people of Loamshire seldom allow themselves to be surprised at anything, and in this instance the more inquisitive spirits were silenced by the magical phrase "acting for the films," which satisfactorily explained the appearance in their midst of several lorry-loads of strange females, bristling with weapons of an obsolete pattern. Moreover, when it became clear that the invaders' destination was Slyme Court, curiosity received the *coup de grâce*.

Lord Grebe's eccentricity was a byword in the neighbourhood, wherefore the yokels shrugged their shoulders, dismissed the matter from their minds, and went about the daily round, the common task, heedless of the fact that less than half a mile away, in the grounds of the Grebe estate, a drama without parallel in the history of rural England was unfolding itself.

Arriving at the Court soon after dawn, Julia immediately so disposed her forces as to cut off any communication with the outside world. The estate was completely surrounded and the troops, remaining as far as possible in concealment, breakfasted frugally off ham sandwiches and set about furbishing their weapons. These were of divers shapes, sizes, and types, being for the most part antique curios borrowed from the walls of private houses, and ranging from the "bolas" of the South American Indians to the blunderbuss much favoured by gangsters and other tough eggs in the reign of King Charles II.

The machine-gun, relic of some Balkan campaign, was a happy afterthought, culled from a little-frequented museum in North London, of which Miss Polkinghorne's

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uncle was the curator. It frightened Jenkins, the Slyme Court footman, as we know, but it also frightened Diana, who was inclined to be nervous of firearms.

"I say, Julia," she protested, "won't there be the devil of a row if we're caught running about the countryside with that Maxim? We haven't got a licence, you know."

"Nonsense, child," replied her chief, "it isn't carrying it about that will lead to trouble; it's when we let it off. I'm told those things kick abominably. For the sake of the girl's shoulder-blades we'd better not use it except as a last resource, and then perhaps it will be as well to tie the gun to a gate-post and work the trigger with a string."

In other respects Diana showed no uneasiness, for it was she who volunteered to be the bearer of the League's ultimatum, and set off on her perilous journey through the rhododendron bushes with a light heart and a heavy half-brick. She had no difficulty in determining her father's whereabouts, for his melodious rendering of the 104th Psalm floated out, full and clear, from the window of his bathroom, and the delivery of the message was speedily accomplished in the manner already described. Three minutes later Diana was back at headquarters, making breathless report to her Commander-in-Chief.

"Excellent," commented Miss Polkinghorne, when the recital was completed. "He was singing, you say?" She laughed mirthlessly. "His swan-song, I fancy. He will be screaming for mercy before long."

"I say," put in Diana, anxiously, "you won't be too rough on my poor parent, will you? He ought not to have written those articles, I know, but I shouldn't like anything really beastly to happen to him."

Julia eyed her lieutenant severely.

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"Diana," she said, "this is unlike you; you are weakening. The League will know how to deal with traitors. Pull yourself together and pass me those ham sandwiches; we may have to wait some little while before the Bishop gives himself up."

But she had reckoned without the splendid temper of the Slyme Court household. The house was unusually empty at the time, the only guests being the Bishop, Toddy Dalrymple, old General Gout, and Sir Otto Gourmand, but in spite of the sparsity of numbers there was a unanimous resolve to hold the fort unflinchingly against those who sought to impound the Bishop.

"I suppose we must be prepared for a long siege," said Sir Otto gloomily. "Is there any danger of the victuals running out?"

"I'm not sure," replied Lady Grebe. "I have an idea the *pâté de foie gras* may be getting rather low. Still, I dare say we can make do with bloater paste."

Sir Otto shivered.

"I had an uncle who was in the Siege of Paris," he said. "He described the conditions as horrible, horrible. Game and fish were quite unprocurable, and the people lived like savages. Do you suppose we're likely to be shut in here for long?"

"It all depends on how badly they want the Bishop," said Toddy Dalrymple. "Wouldn't it be as well to put him in some place of safety? They may advance to the attack as soon as the ultimatum expires."

"We could put him in the wine-cellar," suggested Lord Grebe. "It's quite comfortable; the cook slept there for three years during the War."

The Bishop looked unhappy. Bishops of Borchester, he

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reflected, had wielded battleaxes doughtily in the Middle Ages; history held no record of any of his predecessors skulking in a cellar when trouble was in the wind. Still——

"My friends," he said, "I am in your hands. I should prefer, of course, to take my place, as it were, in the trenches beside you, but I realize that to do so might render you more vulnerable to attack. I am willing to descend into the wine-cellar whenever you say the word."

Accordingly the Bishop, armed with a copy of Paley's *Evidences* and a couple of packs of Patience cards, went down into the cellar, and Sir Otto Gourmand, a mashie-niblick in his hand, was appointed to guard his precious person. Meanwhile the others proceeded, under the direction of Toddy Dalrymple, who in some unaccountable way had assumed command of the beleaguered garrison, to their posts along the line of defence. Careful reconnaissance had established the fact that the attacking forces had closed in, and it was decided to limit the defence to the house itself; an arrangement which had the entire approval of General Gout, who believed in operating in close touch with supplies, and who, moreover, was convinced it was going to rain.

"D'you think it's wise," muttered the General to Toddy Dalrymple, as they moved off from the conference, "to leave Sir Otto on guard in the wine-cellar?"

"Why, what's the matter with him?" said Toddy. "I know he's more or less crippled with lumbago, but he'll fight like a tiger if he's attacked."

"I was thinkin' of the '68 port," said the General, tugging at his moustache.

The minutes dragged slowly on; it was now very nearly

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noon; and to the defenders of Slyme Court, crouching behind window-sills and peering out into the grounds, the suspense was becoming intolerable. What would the attackers do when the ultimatum expired?

Toddy's thoughts, as he stood by a window in the billiard-room, balancing a patent chemical fire-extinguisher on the sill, turned to Diana, the Bishop's beautiful daughter, now, apparently, one of the leaders of the attacking force and a potential patricide. He had been very fond of Diana; had even asked her to marry him.

Diana had half consented, but there had been a slight misunderstanding over an incident at a house-party down in Surrey, when Toddy, full of *joie de vivre*, *bonhomie*, and old brandy, had introduced a live lobster into her bed prior to her retiring for the night, and she had told him, in the night watches, a towering rage and a sky-blue silk kimono, that she never wished to speak to him again. Since then he had hoped against hope that she would change her mind, but this battle over her father's body would just about put the lid on everything.

The young man turned with a heavy heart, and tucking the fire-extinguisher under one arm, went in search of General Gout. He found him on a balcony outside one of the first-floor bedrooms overlooking the rose garden, sitting cross-legged on a tartan travelling-rug (the General's mother was a MacIntosh) and caressing a double-barrelled elephant rifle on his knee, while, with the aid of a powerful pair of field-glasses, he scanned the horizon.

"Hullo, Dalrymple," he said, without looking up. "Quite a good *machan*, this, what? I'm waitin' for the game to break cover."

Toddy stared at him in horror.

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"But, good Lord, General!" he exclaimed, "you can't go loosing that thing off at people. You'll kill one of those girls, and then there'll be the very devil to pay."

For answer, General Gout brought the weapon to his shoulder.

"Just watch me, young fellow," he said. "You see that filly in the claret-coloured topi peepin' over the top of the wall at the end of the rose garden?"

"Yes, but here, I say, for God's sake——"

"And you see that old kerosene-tin leanin' up against the side of the pottin'-shed?"

"Yes, but——"

"Well, you just keep your eye on the filly."

There was a roar like the bursting of the Assouan Dam as the veteran discharged one barrel of his elephant rifle, and a bullet hit the kerosene-tin by the potting-shed with a resounding clang. Next moment the lady in the claret-coloured hat was plainly to be seen running, as though the hounds of hell were after her, across the smooth lawns in the direction of the open country.

"An old hunter's trick," said the General complacently, slipping a fresh cartridge into the breech. "Learnt it at Poona in '86."

"I beg your pardon, sir."

Toddy turned, and found Coombs, the butler, at his elbow. He was wearing a steel helmet, an obvious relic of the Great Struggle, and in his hand he carried a pair of gardener's shears.

"His Lordship desired me to ask you to join him downstairs, sir," said Coombs. "The enemy are showing signs of activity in front of the library windows."

"What sort of activity, Coombs?"

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"They are propelling a heavy piece of ordnance into position on the lawn, sir. I fear it is their intention to discharge a projectile."

"Right-oh, Coombs, I'll be down in a jiffy. You'd better come along too, I think, General. Your military experience may be useful."

As he passed through the hall on the way to the library, Toddy glanced up at the clock. In less than thirty seconds it would strike the hour of noon. There was no time to be lost. He found Lord Grebe pacing angrily up and down the library carpet.

"Hullo, young fellow, hullo, General," said the Peer. "Just come and look out of this window. These confounded women are pushin' a dashed cannon across my lawn, and cuttin' the turf to pieces."

It was only too true. Looking out of the window, Toddy beheld a knot of muscular young women pushing a heavy field-gun slowly forward across the velvet turf.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed the young man, "I'll be bothered if they haven't pinched the old German field-gun from in front of Milchester Town Hall. I say, there'll be the father and mother of a row about this."

"What I'm wondering," put in Lady Grebe, who was seated on a pouffe by the fireplace, toying idly with a garden syringe and a bottle of cloudy ammonia, "is what will happen if they manage to let it off. You know quite well, Charles, if they smash the glass of the greenhouse, it's good-bye to the orchids."

"I shouldn't worry about that, Lady Grebe," said Toddy. "The gun's all rusty; it can't possibly go off."

"It's going off my land this minute," cried the exasperated Lord Grebe, "and the whole pack of mis-

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chievous monkeys with it. I've had enough of this tomfoolery!"

And before anyone could stop him the incensed Peer had burst open the French windows and was marching with long, raking strides into the cannon's mouth.

"Quick, Coombs, stop him!" exclaimed Toddy, as they all trooped out on to the terrace. "He's asking for trouble."

"I fancy his Lordship desires to speak to the young persons, sir," hazarded the butler.

Julia Polkinghorne looked up from the trail of the gun which she was helping to move into position and found a flushed and angry Peer standing before her.

"Here, you—you in the pantaloons," he roared. "What the deuce do you mean by trespassin' on my land and hackin' my lawn to pieces? What the devil do you mean by it, I say? I'm a regular subscriber to the Girl Guides, but if this is the sort of tomfoolery it leads to, I'll dashed well withdraw my subscription!"

"I shall be very happy, Lord Grebe," said Miss Polkinghorne with icy calm, "to hear anything you may wish to say at another time. For the present our quarrel is with the Bishop. Where is he?"

"I am here, my dear lady, at your service," answered a suave voice, and the Bishop of Borchester, followed by his portly bodyguard, Sir Otto Gourmand, stepped out on to the terrace.

"Gourmand and I found your cellar rather draughty," he said, turning to Lord Grebe. "Moreover, there were black-beetles. You appear to be holding a parley with the—ahem—enemy. If you will allow me, I will take charge of the negotiations."

At this moment there came an unexpected interruption.

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Diana, who had been standing with the members of the gun-team immediately behind Miss Polkinghorne, suddenly recognized Toddy Dalrymple among the defenders, and in two seconds was at his side.

"Toddy, darling, you loathsome reptile," she cried, "I've been hunting for you for simply *aeons* to tell you I'd marry you after all. I had no idea you were here."

"I say, that's uncommonly sweet of you, Diana," replied the young man, "but are you quite sure? That lobster business, now?"

"Oh, the lobster was a perfect dear, really. It shook me a bit at first, though. It—it goggled at me."

Upon this reunion of twin souls the acid tones of Miss Polkinghorne broke in harshly.

"This reconciliation is very touching, Diana," she said, "but you are forgetting your duty to your friends and to the Cause."

"Oh, damn the Cause," answered the Bishop's daughter lightly. "Julia, you can't possibly kidnap Daddy now. He's got to marry Toddy and me."

The Bishop was shading his eyes and looking across the garden.

"I fancy kidnapping is off for to-day," he said. "If I am not mistaken, here is the advance-guard of the police coming up the drive."

Julia Polkinghorne swung round as if she had been stung. Round the bend in the drive, pedalling slowly in the direction of the house, came a uniformed police-constable on a bicycle. Reaching the terrace, he dismounted. Then, removing his helmet, he walked across to the company assembled on the lawn.

"Excuse me, ladies and gents," he said, and his voice had

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an apologetic ring, "I've been sent up 'ere to see if I could sell some tickets for the Constabulary Sports next Thursday over at Milchester. Five shillings double, three-and-six single. Extra ladies——" The officer checked in mid-sentence, and his manner underwent a startling metamorphosis. His eyes had taken in the field-gun on the lawn.

"'Ere," he said gruffly, "wot's all this?"

"What's all what?" asked Julia feebly.

"That 'ere gun," went on the policeman, pointing an impressive finger, "was purloined early this morning from outside Milchester Town 'All. I 'ave instructions to take into custody the party or parties 'oo committed the felony. Now then, which o' you is responsible?"

Miss Polkinghorne drew herself up stiffly and addressed the constable.

"The gun," she said, and her voice had a defiant ring, "was brought here by my orders. These ladies pulled it."

"Ho, they did, did they?" replied the constable. "In that case I'll trouble you all to step along with me to the police station."

"Just one moment, officer." It was the Bishop who spoke, and all heads were turned to look at him. "I am the Bishop of Borchester; Lord Grebe here, of course, you know. I am sure we none of us want a scandal, and it occurs to me that you might be willing to withdraw the charge against these young ladies if they, for their part, would undertake to return the borrowed trophy immediately to its proper place outside the Town Hall. The ladies, of course, will all take tickets for the Constabulary Sports."

The policeman scratched his head.

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"Well, my Lord," he said, "that's all right as far as I'm concerned, but I don't know what the Superintendent will say. Maybe if you was to speak to 'im on the 'phone——?"

"I'm sure that can be arranged," said the Bishop. "The question now is, are the ladies agreeable to the compromise?"

"Go on, Julia," put in Diana, "you'd better give in. It was just bad luck that defeated us. How were we to know that a bobby would come round selling tickets just at the critical moment? And, anyway, it was great fun while it lasted."

"Fun!" cried Miss Polkinghorne in tones of bitter scorn. "Diana, you have betrayed our Cause; I could have borne anything but that."

Some ten minutes later, when the siege had been raised and the investing troops, with the exception of Diana, had departed, towing the cannon, Lady Grebe, arranging flowers in the morning-room, was approached by Coombs.

"I beg your pardon, my Lady," he said, "Sir Otto Gourmand desires me to ask at what hour luncheon is to be served. He instructs me to inform your Ladyship that he made a poor breakfast."

The brilliant morning sunlight flooded the bathroom attached to the principal guest chamber at Slyme Court, causing the highly polished taps and other fittings to scintillate like jewels. In the bath, wallowing like a handsome hippopotamus, sat the Bishop of Borchester (pronounced Booster); he was at peace with the world, and he sang joyously as he ran over in his mind the events of the previous day. Between his daughter Diana and himself

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there had been a complete reconciliation, and the dear girl had engaged herself to marry that charming fellow Dalrymple after all. Everything, in fact, was for the best in this best of all possible worlds. The Bishop's head was thrown well back, to give full play to his larynx, in his left hand he grasped a tablet of scented soap, and with his right he vigorously plied a loofah, but the power of his brazen lungs was in no way impaired by the mantle of soap-suds which enveloped him like a shroud.

"Wherein the birds make their nests," sang the Bishop, "and the fir trees are a dwelling for the stork. The high hills," he continued, "are a refuge for the wild goats; and so (crescendo) are the stony rocks for the conies."

Chapter VI

The Grebe Scarecrow Trophy

LORD GREBE was in the potting-shed at Slyme Court. He was also in his shirt-sleeves, and "a cold perspiration bespangled his brow" as, hammer in hand and with his mouth full of carpet-tacks, he stood and surveyed his masterpiece. For that it was a masterpiece he had not a shadow of doubt.

Just as Frankenstein, the young student who made a soulless monster out of fragments of men picked up from churchyards and dissecting-rooms, must have gazed with pride upon the finished article before putting it, so to speak, on the market, so Lord Grebe, looking in silent admiration at the magnificent scarecrow which he had constructed with his own hands in the seclusion of the potting-shed, felt a warm glow of self-approbation permeating his ego.

"Dash it," he muttered, removing the tacks from his mouth and screwing a monocle firmly into his right eye, "it's a winner! You can say what you like, but there isn't a farmer in the county who could make a scarecrow as strikin' as that, and if it doesn't dashed well win the championship I'll—I'll give up art! I only wish I dared show it to Connie," he added rather ruefully.

It is one of the minor tragedies so constantly recurring in the lives of most married men that they are precluded by circumstances from showing some of their finest achievements to the wives of their bosoms. The Emperor Shah Jehan, for example, was unable to show the exquisite

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Taj Mahal at Agra to his favourite wife because she was already dead.

Lord Grebe could not show his scarecrow to his wife, Connie, for other, no less forceful, reasons. Lady Grebe was not dead, but if she had walked into the potting-shed in this moment of her husband's triumph she would have been as wild as a ferret, and he, for his part, had no desire to see her reduced to such a condition. He stifled a sigh, laid down his hammer and began donning his coat with a slightly furtive air.

"A winner!" he repeated as one in a dream. "Dash it, it's the best I've done yet!"

Briefly the facts were these. Lady Grebe had been asked three years earlier to become a patroness of the Milchester Agricultural Society. In acknowledgment of the compliment thus paid her by the Society, and in order to give additional impetus to the legend, sedulously fostered in County circles, that her Ladyship was keenly interested in arts and crafts, she had presented a hideously ugly silver cup of vast proportions to the promoters of the Milchester Agricultural Show for competition among the designers of scarecrows. Competing scarecrows were to be displayed and judged at the annual Show, and the farmer or farm labourer who submitted the winning design was to hold the trophy for one year. In the event, however, of a competitor heading the field for three successive years, the Grebe Cup was to pass permanently into his possession, and the competition, failing the provision of a fresh trophy, would lapse.

At the time when Lady Grebe first conceived the project there had been a certain amount of dissension in the Slyme Court ménage. Lord Grebe, an ardent lover of birds of all

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kinds, objected to scarecrows on principle, and his opposition to the scheme had increased a thousandfold when he found he was expected to pay a hundred guineas for the solid silver monstrosity. But Connie, as usual, had ridden rough-shod over his objections.

"Don't be a miser as well as a fool, Charles," she had said. "Scarecrow construction is one of the vanishing arts of Rural England, and it's our duty to keep it alive as long as possible. Besides, Mavis Haggard is always blowing about the sweet pea contest she's organized among the Women's Institutes down in Clayshire; you don't suppose I'm going to let that peroxide cat get away with it, do you?"

Now to Lord Grebe, as indeed to most of us, a hundred guineas were a hundred guineas, and it went to his heart to see this nice round sum converted into a solid silver wedge of metal for competition among the local peasantry. He brooded mournfully on the subject for many weeks, and then one night it was revealed to him in a flash of inspiration what he must do. He must win the trophy himself, dash it! If he won it three years running it would become his property, and there was a jeweller fellow he knew of in the Fulham Road who——

The more he pondered on it the better it looked to him. All he had to do was to find some venal agriculturist who would be willing, for a consideration, to enter his (Lord Grebe's) scarecrows under his own name, and for the rest, well, he flattered himself he knew something about art, and it would go hard if he could not get his scarecrows past the post a good two lengths ahead of the other starters.

With Lord Grebe, to think was to act, and he lost no

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time in translating his theory into practice. The venal agriculturist was quickly found, the scheme was successfully launched, and for the last two years running the Grebe Scarecrow Trophy had been awarded to a smallholder named Ephraim Maggs, who lived in a cottage on the outskirts of Milchester, some four miles from Slyme Court, and was not above accepting an occasional *pour-boire* from his landlord, Lord Grebe.

One more supreme effort, the Peer told himself, and the cup would be his, to have and to hold, for better or for worse. He could not hope to recover his hundred guineas *in toto*, but at least the chap in the Fulham Road would give him the value of the silver, and the ghastly ornament was heavy enough in all conscience.

Once again he walked slowly around the scarecrow in the potting-shed, dumbly appraising it from every angle. Without a doubt it was his crowning effort; a veritable *chef d'œuvre*.

Lord Grebe's scarecrow was calculated to put the fear of everlasting damnation into a South American condor. The Peer, remembering that an artist's best work is produced under the influence of some strong emotion, had wisely selected as his model the man who in his time had caused him more pain than any other living being; pain, moreover, of the most acute kind. This was no less a person than Doctor Swishbitter Kane, who had been headmaster of Wopham in the days when Lord Grebe was a humble *alumnus* of that grey-walled, lichen-encrusted Alma Mater of the nobility and gentry.

Doctor Kane was now a bishop, and had long ago laid aside his mortar-board and his instruments of torture, but the memory of ancient wrongs still rankled in the breast of

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at least one of his past pupils, and Lord Grebe, who was wont to declare that in thundery weather he could feel again the smart of his Wopham wounds, had set to work on the effigy in the potting-shed like one inspired.

To clothe the scarecrow in the habiliments of a bishop was, he knew, quite out of the question. The great public, rightly solicitous of the dignity of high officers of the Church, would never suffer a prelate to be exposed, however delicately, to ridicule. Moreover, the adjudicators in the Scarecrow Competition would turn the entry down at sight.

Lord Grebe, by no means the dim bulb his wife believed him to be, gave the point his minutest attention. What trade, profession, or calling, he asked himself, gave most offence in the eyes of men? Obviously that of a collector of income-tax. Tax-collectors, albeit a thoroughly deserving class, were dashed unpopular, and if mankind found them distasteful it was a thousand to one the crow would detest them every bit as heartily. He set himself, therefore, to dress his prize-winner as a collector of income-tax, with assessment forms and schedules of all kinds protruding from every pocket; but despite this elaborate subterfuge the glaring central fact remained—the face that looked stonily up at him now from beneath the brim of the tax-collector's bowler hat was the face of Doctor Swishbitter Kane, Bishop of Sodbury and ex-headmaster of Wopham.

Lord Grebe passed a hand in front of his eyes and shuddered as some of the bitterest moments of his life at the old school came flooding back to him on the tide of memory.

He pulled himself together with an effort. There was work to be done; the scarecrow must be transferred from



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the potting-shed to the garage and concealed in his two-seater car. This evening, after dinner, and under cover of darkness, he would take the car out, drive over to Milchester on one pretext or another, and deliver his masterpiece to Mr. Ephraim Maggs for exhibition at the Agricultural Show on the morrow. But whatever happened his wife, Lady Grebe, must be kept in ignorance of the transaction. He was fond of Connie, and did not wish her to be as wild as a ferret.

Gathering up the effigy in his arms, he crossed swiftly to the door of the potting-shed and peered cautiously out. He had about two hundred yards to cover in order to reach the garage, but the coast seemed to be clear. From the direction of the house reverberated the deep, swelling boom of the luncheon gong.

Lord Grebe screwed his eyeglass more firmly into position, inflated his lungs, clasped his burden to his breast and ran like a whippet. Five minutes later, his task accomplished and his pulse beating only a shade more rapidly than usual, he strode jauntily into the dining-room at Slyme Court. In the garage, propped up in the seat of the Peer's small runabout, and gazing with a vacant yet menacing expression at a fire-extinguisher on the opposite wall, lolled the effigy of Doctor Swishbitter Kane. A dreadful sight! A scarecrow in a million!

The Milchester Agricultural Show was opened by Lord Grebe in the presence of a large and thoroughly representative gathering of the nobility, gentry, and peasantry. The weather was fine; the band of the 4th (Territorial) Battalion Loamshire Light Infantry played during the afternoon by kind permission of Lieut.-Colonel G. ffinch-ffolyot, C.M.G., D.S.O.; an aeroplane, appearing

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miraculously out of the empyrean, circled the show ground a number of times, performing complicated evolutions for the entertainment of the assembled multitude; and vast quantities of food and drink were consumed in a marquee at one end of the ground.

A comprehensive, though perhaps somewhat flowery, account of the proceedings was printed in the *East Loamshire Advertiser*, and this may be read at any time by anyone who cares to take the trouble to search the files of that influential organ.

Curiously enough very little reference was made to the Scarecrow Competition, in spite of the fact, confirmed by eye-witnesses, that the most popular feature of the day's proceedings was the presentation of the trophy by Lady Grebe to Mr. Ephraim Maggs, who secured the prize for the third year in succession and thus became holder of the cup in perpetuity. Little Mr. Maggs swelled visibly with pride as he took the repulsive piece of hardware from her Ladyship and responded shyly to her congratulatory handshake.

"Well done, Mr. Maggs," said Connie warmly. "You are a true artist. I think your scarecrows are simply lovely, and I hope you will keep up the good work and go on designing them for many, many years."

As the prize-winner, wearing a sheepish grin and staggering beneath the weight of his guerdon, turned away from the table amidst the plaudits of the multitude, he heard a faint, dry cough beside him and found Lord Grebe at his elbow.

"Excellent, Maggs, my dear fellow," vociferated the Peer. "Dashed strikin' piece of work, that scarecrow, what? Absolute masterpiece."

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Then, leaning forward, and whispering hoarsely in the other's ear, he added: "I'll come round to your place and fetch the cup late this evenin'. Have it ready for me, there's a good chap, and for God's sake don't breathe a word to a soul."

"Yes, my Lordship; I mean no, my Lordship," replied the worthy Mr. Maggs. "Thank you kindly, I'm sure."

"Clever chap, that Maggs," said Lord Grebe, returning to his wife's side. "Did you happen to notice that scarecrow of his, Connie?"

"Not particularly," answered her Ladyship, in the absent manner of one striving desperately to remember whether she has told the butler to put a piece of sulphur in the poodle's drinking water; "it was much the same as the other scarecrows, I thought."

"Much the same?" The artist in Lord Grebe was wounded to the quick. "Dash it all, Connie, it was worthy of that fellow what's-his-name—Einstein—what? Simply astoundin'. Funny thing, but he seemed to have caught the likeness of somebody I know quite well, but I'm dashed if I can think who it was. Probably some fellow at the Club."

"Charles," said Lady Grebe succinctly, "you're a fool."

"Just as you say, my dear," agreed her husband. "Shall we be gettin' back to the Court? The coco-nut shies are packin' up already, and I could do with a whisky and soda."

A little later, as they walked slowly in the direction of the car park, he nerved himself to speak again.

"I had thought, Connie," he said unsteadily, "of runnin' in to Milchester in the two-seater this evenin' after dinner to see if I could get a rubber at the Club. I wouldn't be late back."

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"But, Charles, you did that last night."

"I know, my dear." Lord Grebe swallowed twice. "But, as a matter of fact, I won so much money last night that it would be only decent to give the other fellows a chance of gettin' their own back, what?"

One point, it seemed to her Ladyship, emerged crystal clear from this announcement. Charles had won some money at bridge. She fastened on it eagerly.

"You never told me you'd won a packet. Where is it?"

Lord Grebe gulped hard several times. It was essential that he should conceal from his wife his activities of the previous night.

"Er—as a matter of fact," he stammered, "I lost it all to-day."

"Then you're a far bigger fool than I thought you were."

"Just as you say, dear."

It was after ten o'clock at night when Lord Grebe, wearing dinner-jacket and monocle, took his small two-seater out of the garage at Slyme Court and set off in the direction of Milchester. It was a warm evening, balmy and still, and a full moon, floating majestically in a cloudless sky, bathed with a milky radiance the long, white ribbon of road ahead of him.

Last night he had travelled the same road; it had been darker then, and the seat at his side had been occupied by the scarecrow. To-night he was unaccompanied, and at the thought of his solitary condition a sensation of prickly uneasiness came upon him, a one-who-on-a-lonely-road-walks-on-and-turns-no-more-his-head-because-he-knows-a-grisly-fiend-doth-close-behind-him-tread kind of

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feeling. On the whole, he reflected, he had felt more comfortable with the scarecrow for company. What was that bit Connie had read out of the paper about bandits who had robbed and murdered a solitary motorist on the road between Milchester and Whortlebury? On a moonlight night, too; on just such a night as this, and just such a deserted strip of highway.

Lord Grebe shivered slightly and, stooping forward in the driving-seat, felt about near his right foot until his hand encountered the butt of the water-pistol he now always kept, fully charged with ammonia, on the floor of the car. He caressed the weapon with his fingers, and the feel of it gave him fresh confidence. Motor-bandits, indeed! Dashed scoundrels! Just let 'em try holdin' up a fellow like him! Just let 'em try, the poor fish!

He reached Milchester without encountering anything more fearsome than a courting couple, and made his way to the cottage occupied by Mr. Ephraim Maggs. Mr. Maggs was at home, and it at once became apparent that he had been celebrating his victory of the afternoon. One does not, after all, win a scarecrow championship every day of the week. It was unfortunate, however, that the Peer should have inadvertently timed his arrival to coincide with the precise moment when Mr. Maggs's mood, from being one of wildly exuberant hilarity, changed abruptly to one of profound and morbid despondency. The smallholder stood in the doorway of his cottage, swaying slightly on his feet, and a single tear trickled slowly down his cheek.

"Evenin', Maggs," said Lord Grebe, speaking in an undertone. "I've come for the trophy."

Mr. Maggs regarded him gloomily for a moment, and then beckoned him into the parlour.

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"All ri', my Lordship," he said thickly, "it'sh in here. Empty," he added mournfully.

The cup stood in the centre of the parlour table, beside a whisky bottle and a couple of glasses, and Lord Grebe was astonished to behold his scarecrow, the masterpiece whose design had cost him so many days and nights of anxious thought, sprawling in a chair on the farther side of the table.

Mr. Maggs addressed the effigy severely.

"Stan' up, George," he said, "'n shay good evening to Lor—Lor'ship."

The scarecrow made no movement, and Mr. Maggs turned sorrowfully to his visitor.

"Sh'no use, my Lor'ship," he said, solemnly wagging his head from side to side. "He won' say anything; won' even have a drink. Sh'my belief he's drunk," he added suspiciously.

"Well, my dear fellow," said Lord Grebe, picking up the trophy and backing towards the door, "I won't keep you up. I'll just take this."

"Wait a minute, my Lor'ship." Mr. Maggs hoisted the scarecrow out of the chair. "Better take ole George, too. He's drunk, that'sh what he is, an' I won' have him in the house. Dishgraceful. Drunk's n'owl."

"No, no, my dear fellow," said Lord Grebe, retiring hastily down the passage. "I don't want the scarecrow. You keep it for yourself."

But Mr. Maggs was adamant. "George," he affirmed, had become abominably intoxicated while enjoying his hospitality, and was no fit company for a self-respecting smallholder. It was up to Lord Grebe, who had brought him, to take him away again. The Peer, for his part, judged it

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wise to humour Mr. Maggs. He did not want any to-and-fro business on the doorstep, with half Milchester listening-in, but he would have to get rid of the scarecrow before he reached home. If Connie saw it . . .

"All right, Maggs, my dear fellow," he said. "Put it in the seat of the car. And I wonder if you could lend me a spade?"

Mr. Maggs looked at him suspiciously.

"I won't be a party to murder," he said. "Ac—acsheshory before the fact. Might get myself hung."

"That's all right, my dear chap," answered Lord Grebe. "The district's simply crawlin' with motor-bandits, and a spade's a handy weapon."

Two minutes later he drove off and took the road to Slyme Court. On the seat at his side lolled the effigy of the ex-headmaster of Wopham, with the Grebe Scarecrow Trophy reposing in its lap. Projecting from the dickey of the car was the handle of a spade. The casual passer-by, observing the car with its strange load, might have been forgiven for supposing that there was to be dirty work at the crossroads!

The Reverend Wilkinson Cathpole was walking home in the moonlight after a busy evening spent in the company of the Mudflats Mothers' Sewing Guild. As he walked he whistled, with a kind of forced gaiety, excerpts from a Bach cantata, and struck viciously at the air with his umbrella; for, if the truth were told, he was feeling a little nervous.

The talk at the Guild meeting that evening had turned mainly upon motor-banditry, robbery with violence, and murder, and several of the sewing mothers had related hair-raising tales of desperate encounters on lonely roads

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at night; of indiscreet wayfarers who, accepting the offer of a lift from passing motor-cars, had been foully done to death and buried beneath the leaf-mould in roadside spinneys; and of others who, setting out alone from neighbours' houses to walk home late in the evening, had never been seen or heard of again. In the warm glow of the gas-light, and with the comforting hum of half a dozen sewing-machines sounding in his ears, the Vicar had pooh-pooh'd these stories with reckless bravado. That such shocking things should be possible in Christian England—pshaw, it was ridiculous!

Now, however, as he skirted the edge of the Home Wood of Slyme Court, and started at every unexpected noise, at every sudden rustle in the undergrowth, he was not so sure. After all, there *were* such things as motor-bandits; the newspapers were full of their exploits; and even St. Paul in his time had been "in perils of robbers" (2 Cor. xi. 26). The Reverend Wilkinson Catchpole gripped the handle of his stout umbrella a little more firmly, and switched over from the Bach cantata to a Sankey and Moody hymn.

He had not progressed more than two hundred yards along the side of the Home Wood when he came suddenly upon something which put a stop to his whistling and froze the blood in his veins. Drawn up beneath the shelter of the trees, but with the light of the full moon streaming down slantwise upon it, was a two-seater car, apparently deserted. Nothing very terrible in that, you will say. Perhaps not, but there was something more. Lolling in the seat of the car, with its head thrown back and features distorted in a ghastly grin, was the dead body of a man! In its lap was a large silver cup, glistening in the moon-

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light, and near its left foot, lying on the running-board of the car, was a wicked-looking pistol. The handle of a spade, projecting from beneath the lid of the dickey, added a final touch of horror to the hideous tableau.

The Reverend Wilkinson Catchpole's knees were trembling, but he was a courageous man. Once, not many years ago, he had gone unattended into the lions' cage at a travelling circus at Milchester to illustrate the story of Daniel for the benefit of his Confirmation class, whose members were present in force. The lions were aged animals, toothless and almost paralysed, but there was no evidence to show that he was aware of the fact at the time, and the local Press gave him full credit for his heroism.

On this present occasion he hesitated for no more than a fraction of a second before approaching the corpse in the car and prodding it in a gingerly manner with the ferrule of his umbrella. It made no movement. Obviously life was extinct. The Reverend Wilkinson Catchpole was about to pursue his investigations further when he chanced to catch sight of the features of the deceased, bloodless, and emaciated in the light of the moon, and in a flash realization came to him of the dreadful nature of his find. For, in spite of the bowler hat and rather loud tweed suit in which the body was dressed, there was no mistaking that square, heavy jowl, those beetling brows, and that sharp, aquiline nose. The dead man was none other than Doctor Swish-bitter Kane, Bishop of Sodbury and ex-headmaster of Wopham College!

The parish of Mudflats-on-Trym is not in the Sodbury diocese, and the Reverend Wilkinson had had no official dealings of recent years with Doctor Kane; but he, like his

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friend and patron, Lord Grebe, was an old Wopham boy, and although his eyesight was not of the best, it was impossible that he could have mistaken the identity of the body in the car.

Popular legend has it that the elephant, most sagacious of four-footed mammals, never forgets the face of anyone who has done it bodily injury. So it was with the Vicar of Mudflats-on-Trym. He was a two-footed mammal of a high order of sagacity, he had suffered much in his school-days, and he had not forgotten the lineaments of his principal persecutor. But while it is one thing to bear a grudge against a pedagogue, it is quite another thing to murder him, and the Vicar, whatever the nature of his private feelings, was not the man to condone so abominable a crime. His duty was plain. Here was a Prince of the Church, foully murdered, in a car. He must obtain assistance without delay and bring the murderer to justice.

Pausing only to make a mental note of the registered number of the vehicle, he trotted off as fast as his legs could carry him in the direction of Slyme Court. Lord Grebe, his friend and patron, would advise him what to do, and the police could be summoned by telephone.

He had no sooner sped off upon his urgent errand than the bushes at the side of the road parted, and Lord Grebe himself, breathless and dishevelled, emerged into the open. He had been exploring the Home Wood for a suitable dumping-ground for the prize-winning scarecrow, and, having found such a site, it was now his purpose to dig a grave and inter the evidence of his deception. To leave the scarecrow lying in the undergrowth would have been the direct negation of his principles as an influential member of the Anti-Litter League; besides, it might be

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found, questions might be asked, and the devastating truth might be revealed.

Taking the spade from the dicky, he put the Grebe Trophy in its place and shut down the lid. Then he dragged the effigy of the headmaster of Wopham out of the car and, transporting it to the place of interment, took off his coat and began to dig, blissfully ignorant of the fact that the Reverend Wilkinson Catchpole was at that very moment in the drawing-room at Slyme Court, pouring a tale of horror into the receptive ear of Lady Grebe.

"This dead body, now," her Ladyship was saying briskly. "Are you absolutely certain it was the Bishop of Sodbury? You say it was wearing a bowler hat?"

"I cannot possibly have been mistaken, my dear Lady Grebe," replied the Vicar earnestly. "The body was the body of Doctor Kane; the bowler hat may have been a disguise."

"But, heavens alive, man, why should the Bishop of Sodbury disguise himself in order to get murdered?"

"I don't mean that at all. It had occurred to me that his Lordship might have been escaping in disguise from some secret society; Frothblowers, or some such organization; and that, in fact, he . . . er . . . failed to escape."

"H'm!" mused Lady Grebe. "It sounds improbable. And how do you account for the silver cup you say was in his lap?"

"It was a chalice, my dear Lady, a large and costly chalice. I am driven reluctantly to the conclusion that Sodbury Cathedral has been the scene of an audacious and dastardly robbery. Doubtless the Bishop endeavoured to protect Church property and paid for his heroism with his life."

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"Wearing a bowler hat?" Lady Grebe's tones were faintly acid.

"Conjecture is useless," answered the Vicar, shrugging his shoulders. "I find myself drifting on an ocean of doubt."

Lady Grebe appeared to be similarly situated. She was silent for a long time, thinking deeply.

"I wish to heaven Charles were at home!" she said at last. "He's a fool, but he sometimes has lucid intervals. You didn't by any chance happen to notice the number of the car?"

"Oh, yes, my dear Lady Grebe, I made a careful note of it. It was—let me see now—it was A.D. 1066. The year of the Norman invasion; there could be no mistake."

To the consternation of the Vicar, Lady Grebe gave a little shriek of horror. For a moment she swayed as though she would faint.

"Mr. Catchpole, are you *sure*?"

"Absolutely, my dear lady. Is there any——"

"But that's the number of Charles's two-seater! He went out in it this evening to play bridge at Milchester. Stay where you are till I come back."

And before the astounded Vicar could assimilate the import of this statement her Ladyship had swept out of the room. She returned a few minutes later, looking pale and worried.

"I got through on the telephone to the County Club at Milchester," she said. "Charles hasn't been near the place all the evening. Either he was attacked and overpowered on his way there or else he never intended to go there at all. Do you think it's likely, Mr. Catchpole, that my husband is a murderer?"

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The Vicar sprang to his feet.

"My dear Lady Grebe," he exclaimed, twisting his clerical hat this way and that in his agitation, "you don't know what you're saying! His Lordship would never commit murder to gain possession of church ornaments!"

"I'm not so sure," Lady Grebe bit her lip doubtfully. "Charles would do a good deal for money, and I happen to know he's gone down heavily on the Turf lately. The question is: what are we to do? I suppose, as a parson, it's no use asking you to keep your mouth shut, but I can't have Charles hanged."

"Oh, come, my dear Lady, it may not be as serious as that!" said the Reverend Wilkinson soothingly. "Perhaps your first theory is correct, and his Lordship has himself been made away with."

Lady Grebe shook her head.

"No," she said, "nobody would murder Charles; he's much too big a fool. Anyone could sell him a gold brick, so why kill him? Hush, listen!"

Through the open drawing-room window came the sound of a car approaching up the long carriage drive. Lady Grebe rose to her feet.

"It's just as we feared, Mr. Catchpole," she whispered. "That's Charles's car; I'd know the sound anywhere. He's buried the Bishop, and now he's coming home to hide the spoils in the safe in the library. I know you're not a betting man, but I'll undertake to put five pounds in the offertory bag on Sunday if he doesn't make a song and dance about his bridge losses at the Club. Quick, switch out the lights and follow me!"

With his heart in his mouth the Vicar followed her

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Ladyship into the library. It was in pitch darkness, and the two of them took up their position behind the door.

"Don't make a sound," muttered Lady Grebe. "I'll do all the talking when the times comes."

For a long while they waited in the inky blackness, and it seemed to the Vicar that the drumming of his heart competed furiously with the relentless ticking of the grandfather clock in the hall. At last came the sound of the front door being opened cautiously, and Lady Grebe gave a little gasp. The tension was nerve-racking. Footsteps padded stealthily across the hall, the library door was pushed open, and in the half-light which filtered through from the hanging lamp over the staircase the two watchers could dimly discern the shadowy figure of Lord Grebe, carrying some weighty object. He crossed the room, and they heard him fumbling at the safe.

"Now!" whispered her Ladyship hoarsely, and stretching out her hand to the switch she flooded the room with light.

Lord Grebe sprang into the air like a shot rabbit, and stood gaping at his wife and the Vicar with an expression of dazed horror. The Grebe Scarecrow Trophy, dropping from his nerveless fingers, crashed to the floor.

"Good gad!" he exclaimed. "Connie!"

Lady Grebe stepped forward, followed more slowly by the bewildered Vicar.

"Charles," she said, and there was a note of anguish in her voice, "you had better tell us the truth. Why did you do it?"

The unhappy Peer stood blinking in the glare of the electric chandelier. So it had all been useless. Connie had discovered, in some diabolical way, the whole of his little

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deception in the matter of the Scarecrow Competition, and now she would certainly be as wild as a ferret, if not wilder.

"Well, my dear," he stammered, fiddling nervously with his monocle. "I mean to say, dash it all. I—I needed the money."

"Money, Charles? What for? You've got plenty of money."

"No, dear. You see—I didn't tell you before; I was afraid it would upset you—I've been deuced unlucky on the Turf lately; paralytic horses, fraudulent tipsters, and so on; and on top of that I've been losin' pretty heavily at bridge. But mind you, Connie, I wouldn't have done it just for that. The fact is, I wanted"—he drew a deep breath and played his trump card—"I wanted you to have those sapphire and diamond earrings you'd set your heart on."

"Charles!" Lady Grebe's eyes were shining as she moved impulsively towards her husband, who stood eyeing her nervously, like a kitten watching a dog. "You have done this thing for me?"

Lord Grebe hesitated, but only for a second.

"Yes, Connie. Just as you say, dear."

Lady Grebe turned triumphantly to the Vicar.

"You hear that, Mr. Catchpole?" she cried. "Who says the age of chivalry is past? For my sake Charles has murdered in cold blood his old headmaster, the man he feared most in all the world!"

Lord Grebe started violently.

"Eh, what's that?" he said. "Murder? Me? Confound it all, Connie, draw it mild. I haven't murdered anybody!"

"What?" Lady Grebe was taken aback.

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"No, I haven't. Not a dashed soul. What the deuce are you talkin' about?"

"But, Charles, the Vicar says you were burying the Bishop of Sodbury in the Home Wood. And what about the silver chalice you stole from the Cathedral?"

Lord Grebe burst into a fit of hysterical laughter.

"Chalice?" he sobbed. "Bless my soul, this is rich! Look for yourself, Connie, over there by the fender. It's not a chalice, it's your Scarecrow Trophy!"

Her Ladyship crossed the room in two strides and picked up the massive cup.

"I see," she said slowly. "Then whose was the body you buried in the wood?"

The Peer was still slightly hysterical.

"Body?" he replied with a snigger. "That wasn't a body. That was Maggs's scarecrow. The prize-winnin' scarecrow. *My* scarecrow!"

Lady Grebe sank down upon a sofa, clasping the trophy to her bosom.

"Sit down, Mr. Catchpole," she said faintly. "As soon as Charles has done giggling he's going to explain everything from the beginning."

Charles explained. It took him a long time, for he was in a highly nervous condition. Everything was made clear at last, however, and there was a long silence.

It was Lady Grebe who spoke first.

"I'm glad you won the cup, Charles," she said, "but you ought to have told me. It would have saved a lot of trouble."

Her words were as balm to her husband's tortured soul.

"Then it's all right, Connie?" he asked leaning forward eagerly. "You're not—you're not wild, are you, Connie?"

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"No, Charles. You'd better go up to Town to-morrow and dispose of the cup. How much did that man in the Fulham Road say he'd give you for it?"

"He won't go a penny above fifty guineas."

"You'd better take it, Charles," she said. "And if there's any change left out of the fifty guineas after you've bought those sapphire and diamond earrings, you can buy yourself an Old Wopham tie."

"Blast!" said Lord Grebe, but he said it under his breath.



Chapter VII

The Slyme Court Monster

"**M**INE," said the special representative of the *Dragon-Slayer*, official organ of the League for the Extermination of Drunkenness, "is a double Scotch and splash, and you'd better make it snappy, George; I haven't too much time."

The barman of the "Goat in Golden Boots" in Fleet Street measured out the generous liquor into a squat tumbler, set a siphon beside it on the counter and looked inquiringly at the next customer, a young man with sandy hair and a pleasant, freckled face.

"I'll have half a pint of bitter, please," said Jimmy Gosling, "and this gentleman is drinking with me."

"My name's Rogers," volunteered the first speaker, as he raised his glass to his lips; "Rogers of the *Dragon-Slayer*. Don't think I've met you before, have I? Here's luck! What's your paper?"

"Cheer-oh!" replied Jimmy. "I *was* on the *Evening Echo*, but I don't know if I still am. I had a spot of bother with the News Editor this morning."

He looked curiously at his companion's glass, which was now nearly empty. Looked, too, at the man himself: a tall, lantern-jawed individual of about thirty-seven, with grizzled hair, huge horn-rimmed spectacles, and a dirty yellow mackintosh.

"The *Dragon-Slayer's* a temperance organ, isn't it?" he asked. "I should have thought it was against your principles to drink whisky."

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"Principles?" answered Rogers with some heat. "Why in heck should I have any principles? I'm a reporter, not a chorus-girl. The proprietors of my paper want to legislate liquor out of existence. Watch me help 'em legislate!"

He drained his tumbler at a gulp, and rapped on the bar counter.

"I've just time for the other half," he said, "and while we put it back you can lay your troubles at my feet. If you're in difficulties with the *Echo*, I may be able to help you. One of the *Echo's* linotype men is my landlady's nephew. By the way, what did you say your name was?"

"Gosling, Jimmy Gosling," answered the other. "Don't suppose you've ever heard of me; I haven't been on the paper long."

"Oh, yes I have though. You were one of the ring-leaders in that debate at the Oxford Union last year; the time when both the Proctors were thrown over Magdalen Bridge into the Cherwell and the big new skating rink in the Cowley Road was burnt to the ground."

Jimmy Gosling nodded.

"That's right," he said. "I got sent down over that affair; but it was a rattling fine debate, for all that."

And he sighed regretfully.

"Let's see," went on Mr. Rogers, "aren't you a relative of Lord Grebe, the lunatic peer who lives down at that big place in Loamshire? They say he drinks like a fish and beats his wife; my paper has had its eye on him for some time."

Jimmy nodded again.

"Only a very distant cousin," he admitted. "I've never set eyes on him, and I don't know if what you've heard about him is true. I dare say he does whack the bottle a

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bit now and then, but I don't think it's likely he beats his wife. From what I've heard of Lady Grebe, *she* probably beats *him*."

"Ah, well, that accounts for the story I was told about screams issuing from Slyme Court at dead of night. Anyway, let's have a line on your own troubles."

Jimmy Gosling explained. The News Editor of the *Evening Echo*, a choleric gentleman who had been in Fleet Street for over forty years, had been badgering him on the score of his utter failure to secure a front-page story for the paper.

"What's the use of you, you young skrimshanker?" he had roared. "Just because you've had a University education I suppose you think you can sit about in this office all day and take a rest cure. That 'Loch Ness Monster' story, now. If it hadn't been for your idleness we could have made a first-class scoop out of that, but you sat on your hunkers in London while all the other papers were getting columns from Scotland. Get out of here, and don't come back until you've found something worth printing!"

"Ah!" said Rogers, when Jimmy had finished describing his own abasement. "The Loch Ness Monster; that's given me an idea. The *Dragon-Slayer* made a lot of capital out of that. 'Alcoholic Excesses in the Highlands' . . . 'Morbid Visions of Inverness-shire Inebriates' . . . you know the kind of stuff. Some of the Scottish papers were pretty mad with us, but the temperance fans were on our side to a man, and they form the bulk of our readers."

"I don't see how that's going to help me," objected Jimmy Gosling. "The thing's all over and done with now; we can't very well resurrect it."

"Resurrect my foot!" answered Rogers contemptu-

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ously. "Didn't I tell you I'd got a brain-wave? Look here, I can't waste any more time here now. Meet me at six-thirty to-night in the saloon bar of the 'Hoop and Toy' in Villiers Street, and I'll have the whole scheme cut and dried by then."

"But I say," put in the young reporter, catching his companion by the sleeve of his mackintosh as he made for the door, "can't you give me any idea . . . ?"

Rogers placed a finger on his lips.

"Not here," he whispered. "Too public. Besides, I've no time. But I'll tell you this much about the scheme; it concerns your distant cousin, Lord Grebe."

On a fine spring morning, about a week after the conversation recorded above, Lady Grebe might have been seen traversing the spacious grounds of Slyme Court in the direction of the Inigo Jones pigsties. It was not true that her husband was addicted to the bottle, nor was either spouse in the habit of belabouring the other . . . these were idle tales which had their origin in the fertile brain of Mr. Rogers, special representative of the *Dragon-Slayer* . . . but it *was* true that her comely face wore at the moment an anxious frown, and that she was even now in search of her lord and master. She found him at last, leaning over the wall of one of the pigsties, prodding a prize sow in the withers with a silver-mounted shooting-stick and regarding it through his monocle with an affectionate gaze.

"Hullo, Connie," he said, looking up. "I wish you'd give me your opinion of this pig. It's my belief it's dropsical; gettin' altogether too fat, what? Do you think I ought to try it with some of that cardboard stuff you generally eat at breakfast to keep your weight down?"

"Rubbish, Charles; the pig's as fit as you or I," said

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Lady Grebe shortly. "I hurried out to find you because Mr. Catchpole, the Vicar, has just rung me up and told me the most extraordinary story."

"Ah, I shouldn't worry about that, my dear," replied the Peer. "He's always tellin' queer stories, that fellow. He told me one the other day about some curate chap and a rotten egg, but I'm dashed if I could see the point of it."

"But, Charles, you don't understand; this is a serious matter. If what he says is true, there's something horrible in the fishpond!"

"I shouldn't be in the least surprised," said Lord Grebe dryly. "It hasn't been cleaned out for years, and I noticed the other day that it was beginnin' to niff a bit. I'll get one of the under-gardeners to drain it to-morrow."

"Don't be a fool, Charles! Stop whinnying in that asinine way and listen to me. The Vicar says that late last night Mrs. Claybody—you know, the old woman who fetches the laundry—arrived at the Vicarage in a thoroughly hysterical condition and asked to see him. She could hardly speak coherently, and evidently she had had a bad fright. It seems that she was crossing the grounds of the Court, on her way to the village with the laundry-basket, and just as she passed the fishpond, near the main gateway, she heard a splashing sound and saw a dreadful thing wallowing in the water."

"What sort of a thing?"

"She wasn't quite clear about that, for she only saw it by moonlight, but she said she thought it had a head like a horse."

"I expect it *was* a horse," observed the Peer. "I don't see anything to worry about in that. Hasn't the woman ever seen a horse before?"

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"Nonsense, Charles," retorted Lady Grebe impatiently. "What on earth would a horse be doing in our fishpond?"

"Oh, I don't know. It might have been havin' a swim, or tryin' to catch fish."

"Horses don't eat fish."

"Well then, it might have fallen in. Some horses are dashed unsteady on their feet, you know, Connie. Only last week I lost a packet on a horse that fell down three lengths from the winnin' post."

Lady Grebe drew herself up and snorted audibly.

"If, Charles," she said with painful earnestness, "you would postpone your revolting Turf reminiscences until some more suitable occasion and try to concentrate for a moment on the present ghastly crisis, I should be infinitely obliged to you."

The Peer humbled himself immediately.

"I'm sorry, Connie," he said. "I'll do anything you want, of course, and I didn't mean to be difficult, but I mean to say, dash it all, what's the use of a washerwoman who goes screamin' to the Vicar whenever she sees a horse? The horse," he added sententiously, "is the Friend of Man."

"Yes, Charles," answered his wife, somewhat mollified, "but it was in the fishpond."

"Very well, my dear. Just as you say."

They made their way back to the house, and on the way encountered Coombs, the butler. That usually imperturbable official wore a worried look.

"I beg your pardon, my Lord," he said, "but I have just returned from the post office, where I went to register your Lordship's grey flannels to the cleaners. The village, I regret to say, is in a somewhat disturbed state, and feeling

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is running high against your Lordship. It appears that Mrs. Claybody, the washerwoman, reported to the Vicar last night the presence of a malignant foreign body of monstrous proportions in the fishpond, and it is the considered opinion of the villagers that your Lordship should take immediate steps to eradicate it. I gather that the mothers have been afraid to send their offspring to school lest the monster should molest them."

"There now, Charles," said Lady Grebe under her breath, "what did I tell you? There's something horrible in the fishpond, and all you do is to drivel on about horses."

She turned to the butler.

"What do you think it is yourself, Coombs?" she asked tremulously.

"I have not yet had leisure to investigate the scene of the apparition, my Lady," answered Coombs, "but in view of the recent curious occurrences at Loch Ness, in Scotland, which, your Ladyship will remember, were the cause of considerable controversy in the daily Press at the time, I am inclined to the belief that this creature, if indeed it exists at all, is some prehistoric monster but newly awakened from the primeval slime where it has lain for centuries. I should advise extreme caution in approaching the fishpond," he added.

"Coombs, I believe you've been drinkin'," said Lord Grebe severely. "If it comes to that, it looks to me as if the whole village, beginnin' with the washerwoman and ending with the Vicar, must have been badly on the batter last night. Bring me my waders, there's a good fellow, and a silk handkerchief to tie round my nose. I'm dashed well goin' down to the pond to have a look."

Lady Grebe gave a shriek of horror.

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"Charles, for my sake don't do anything rash!" she exclaimed, clutching her husband frantically by the arm. "How can you possibly open the Milchester Iris Show next week if you go and get yourself eaten by an ichthyosaurus?"

"Very well, my dear, if that's how you feel about it, I won't go," said the Peer patiently. "We'll go back to the house now, and after lunch I'll send one of the under-gardeners down instead. He can take a pair of secateurs with him in case he meets anything, but I don't think he's likely to need 'em."

Footsteps crunched at this moment on the gravel carriage sweep and two strangers approached. One was a sandy-haired youth with a pleasant, freckled face; the other a tall, lantern-jawed individual wearing horn-rimmed spectacles and a dirty yellow mackintosh.

"Who on earth are these?" muttered Lady Grebe. "They're much too shabbily dressed to be vacuum-cleaner agents."

The Peer inspected the newcomers through his eyeglass.

"They look to me like a couple of racecourse touts," he declared. "Ask 'em if they know anything about this horse business."

"I beg your pardon, my Lord," put in Coombs, the butler. "I fancy they are newspaper gentlemen, in which case it would be advisable to say nothing that might offend them. The power of the Press in this country, as your Lordship is well aware, is a byword."

"It's you they're after, Connie, not me," said Lord Grebe hurriedly. "I expect they want you to sign an article on face cream, or some other religious subject, for one of the Sunday papers."

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As they drew near, the two strangers raised their hats, and the taller man, he of the yellow mackintosh, addressed Lord Grebe.

"Good morning, my Lord," he said. "A fine morning, is it not? My name is Rogers, and I represent the *Dragon-Slayer*, official organ of the League for the Extermination of Drunkenness. My friend here is on the staff of the *Evening Echo*. We happened to be on a walking tour together, and put up last night at the 'Cow and Skittles,' down in the village. Perhaps you will be kind enough to tell us what you know about the alleged monster in your fishpond. It seems to have caused a considerable stir locally, and our papers might be interested."

"All I can tell you is this," replied the Peer. "The washerwoman got drunk last night and thought she saw a horse in the fishpond, and the whole village promptly started drinkin' themselves silly. Go and ask the Vicar; he knows more about it than I do; but you'll probably find he's got a shockin' headache this mornin'."

Mr. Rogers looked at his companion.

"There now," he said, "what did I tell you? You can please yourself what line you take for the *Echo*, but for my paper this is a red-hot news story. 'Demon Rum Among the Rustics' . . . 'Awful Excesses of Country Cretins' . . . I can see the headlines."

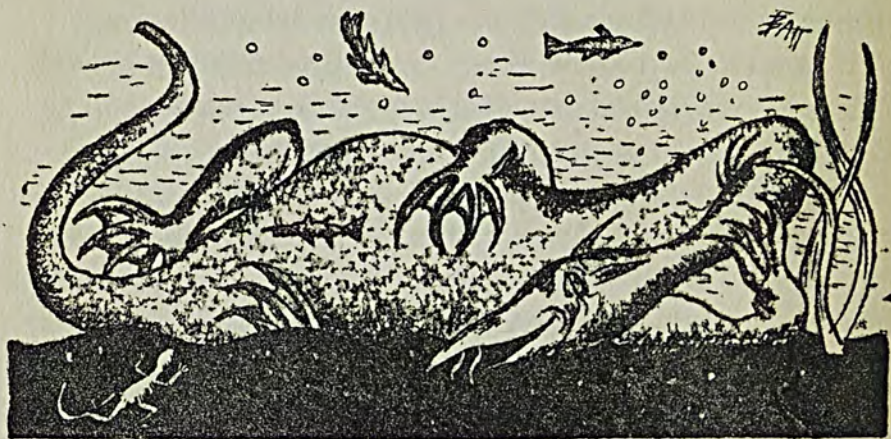
Jimmy Gosling shook his head.

"I'll have to treat it differently," he said. "Half the *Echo's* revenue comes from the whisky ads." He turned to Lord Grebe. "What about it, sir? Shall we all troop down and look at the fishpond?"

The Peer and the two reporters made their way across the Slyme Court grounds in the direction of the pond,

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Lady Grebe and the butler following reluctantly in their wake. The fishpond at the Court is screened on one side by a dense belt of rhododendrons, through which avenues have been cut to allow access to the pond itself. Lady Grebe resolutely declined to approach nearer than the outer fringe of this belt, but the others pushed on to the water's edge, and gazed long and earnestly into the slimy depths of the malodorous pool.



"Stinks a bit, doesn't it?" remarked Mr. Rogers. "But I'll be hamstrung if I can see anything."

"Doubtless the creature has subsided once more into the primeval slime," suggested Coombs nervously. "Let us hope it will remain there for an indefinite period."

"How about heavin' a brick in?" asked Lord Grebe.

"I should strongly advise your Lordship to adopt no such course," said the butler hastily. "These prehistoric lizards are notoriously of a truculent disposition."

"Very well, Coombs, I won't, but I'll say this much. If the laundry-woman has taken to seein' pink lizards in my grounds at night, I'm dashed well goin' to wash my

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own underclothes in future. Yes, and yours too, Coombs. Disgustin', I call it."

No fresh manifestations were reported that night, but on the following morning, as Lord and Lady Grebe sat at breakfast, a taxicab drew up outside the front door of Slyme Court, and there descended from it old General Gout. Coombs, the butler, met him at the door, and relieved him of the heavy gun-case he was carrying.

"How are you, Coombs?" he vociferated heartily. "Upon my word you're lookin' fatter than ever, but I scarcely expected to find you alive in the circumstances. Where's Lord Grebe?"

"His Lordship is at breakfast, sir," answered the butler. "He will be pleasantly surprised at your arrival. Will you step this way?"

"Delighted to see you, Gout, my dear fellow," cried Lord Grebe, as the veteran warrior was ushered into the breakfast-room. "We weren't expectin' you, but you know you're always welcome. Have some breakfast; the fish is bad, but Coombs will bring you a brandy and soda."

"Thanks, no; I breakfasted on the train. I had meant to play golf this mornin', but what I saw in last night's *Echo* sent me racin' down here hot-foot. I've brought my elephant-rifle, and between us we ought to be able to bag the blighter, what?"

Lord Grebe stared at him with an expression of blank bewilderment.

"My dear fellow, I haven't the least idea what you're talkin' about," he said. "Quite sure you're feelin' all right? No hummin' in the ears or throbbin' at the temples, eh? No foamin' at the mouth or sensation of giddiness?"

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"What," demanded Lady Grebe, "was in the *Evening Echo*? We don't often see it down here."

General Gout fished in his pockets and produced a crumpled copy of the paper.

"Here you are, my dear Connie; you can see for yourself," he said. "It takes up most of the front page."

Lady Grebe read, and was appalled. Jimmy Gosling had made the most of his opportunity, and had evidently been reinstated in the good graces of the News Editor.

"Slyme Court [she read], Loamshire, seat of Lord Grebe, the well-known sporting Peer, is haunted by a real, honest-to-goodness dragon. This monster, which is said to be of colossal dimensions and terrifying appearance, has its *habitat* in a small lake at the lower end of the Grebe property, and emerges nightly to prey upon the terror-stricken inhabitants of the village of Mudflats-on-Trym. Lord Grebe himself, whom I interviewed this morning, has made several attempts to kill or capture the creature, but unhappily without success.

"The lake is of considerable antiquity, dating back many thousands of years, and the opinion is widely held that its unwelcome inmate is some giant saurian, which, but newly awakened from an age-long sleep in the oozy depths, has now slithered out to menace mankind.

"The villagers are in a state of panic, refusing to stir outside their cottages either by day or night, and the landlord of the 'Cow and Skittles' is becoming seriously alarmed at the falling off in his business consequent on the non-attendance of his regular customers.

"The Government, with its usual callous indifference to the fate of the agricultural community, has so far taken no steps to rid the countryside of this prehistoric pest."

There was a great deal more in the same strain, and Lady

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Grebe read it aloud to her husband, her eyes widening with horror.

"You mustn't believe everything you see in the papers, my dear," was Lord Grebe's comment when the recital was ended. "Either the washerwoman had been at the bottle, or it *was* a horse in the fishpond. That's all there is to it."

"Come, come, my dear fellow," put in General Gout, "you mustn't libel the daily Press. I know these writin' *wallahs* are confounded liars, but they wouldn't have invented a yarn like that. No, Grebe, there's some kind of man-eatin' reptile in the pond, and to-night you and I are goin' to sit up for it, what? I've got my elephant-rifle, and if you bring a fowlin'-piece and some lethal bullets, we'll very soon bag the brute. You're surely not goin' to deprive me of a night's *shikar* when I've given up a whole mornin's golf to come down here and help you?"

"It *was* a horse, I tell you," persisted the Peer obstinately. "The washerwoman said it had a horse's head, and if you go canterin' round the countryside shootin' other fellows' horses you'll only get yourself into trouble. The owners won't stand it, to say nothin' of the punters. Anyway, there's nothing there now; Connie and I went down to look."

"Don't be so ridiculous, Charles," said Lady Grebe. "Anybody would think you were a child of three from the way you behave. The monster was just lurking in the mud when we went down there, and it'll come out again to-night to prey on the washerwoman. *Of course* you'll go with the General and help him shoot it, and don't forget to take your winter overcoat. The nights are chilly just now."

"Very well, my dear. Just as you say. I suppose you'll

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bring us out some sandwiches and coffee at midnight, like you did that time we sat up for poachers in the Home Wood?"

"I've got a lot of letters to write," replied Lady Grebe, "but you can take a 'Thermos' and a tin of biscuits."

Immediately after breakfast General Gout went upstairs to the guest chamber to unpack, assemble and load his double-barrelled elephant-rifle, of which he was inordinately proud. Lady Grebe, donning a green-baize apron and arming herself with a trug and a pair of scissors, went out into the garden, and Lord Grebe betook himself to the library, where he sat for at least half an hour, plunged in profound meditation. His active brain was trying to establish a connection between the two newspaper reporters who had visited Slyme Court yesterday and the unaccountable phenomenon in the fishpond. At last he rose to his feet, crossed over to the telephone, and took up the receiver. Half a minute later he was in earnest conversation with the Police Superintendent in the neighbouring market town of Milchester.

Dinner that evening was a silent meal. The Peer and his wife were strung up to too tense a pitch of excitement to admit of brilliant conversation, and even General Gout, that mighty hunter, was less talkative than was his wont, and limited his remarks to the task ahead of him.

"By rights, he said, "we ought to have a decoy. I suppose we couldn't tie the washerwoman up to a stake on the bank of the pond, what?"

Lord Grebe shook his head morosely.

"Afraid not, my dear fellow," he said. "She'd bring an action for assault, or wrongful imprisonment, and we'd never hear the last of it. What do you say, Connie? Scarcely practicable, is it?"

The Slyme Court Monster

"No, Charles," answered his wife; "but if only we'd thought of it earlier, we might have tied up that pig; the one you said was getting too fat."

"Connie!" exclaimed the Peer in a shocked tone.

Coffee was served in the library, and the Peer, having drained his cup at a single gulp, left the room with a muttered word of apology. Four or five minutes later he returned, humming gently to himself.

"I had to go upstairs for a handkerchief," he explained, "and while I was about it I thought I might as well bring your elephant-gun down, Gout. It's all ready for you in the hall. I'm not bringin' a gun myself; my eyesight isn't as good as it was, and somebody might get hurt in the dark; but I've got a shootin'-stick and a flask of cherry brandy."

"Excellent, Grebe, my dear fellow," said the General, rising to his feet with alacrity. "Shall we be gettin' along to the *machan* now? The moon will be up before long."

Arrived at the fishpond, the two disciples of Diana held a whispered consultation.

"If I were you, Gout," said Lord Grebe, "I'd lie down here, on the open side of the pond. If anything—a horse or anything like that—comes out of the water you'll be able to see it plainly. I'll skirt round to the other side, behind the rhododendron belt, in case anything tries to break cover. Give a shout if you see anything."

"I'll shout if you like, Grebe," replied the General, "but it's hardly necessary. My elephant-rifle makes a noise like a howitzer."

Lord Grebe shook his head.

"Better shout," he whispered. "You never know what may happen."

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He stole off, a shadowy figure, and disappeared from view behind the rhododendron belt, leaving the General to his own reflections. The latter lay down prone upon the bank, at a point from which he could command a clear view of the surface of the pond, and cuddled the stock of his mighty weapon against his chin. He was taking no chances with the Slyme Court Monster.

For a long time he lay thus, listening intently to the thousand-and-one sounds of a spring night in the English countryside. Somewhere down in the village a dog barked, and from far away in the distance came the shrill whistle of a train, but here by the fishpond all was quiet, and as the moon climbed slowly up into the heavens, General Gout began to wish he had not allowed his companion to depart with their only flask of cherry brandy. Yes, by Jove, he could have done with a drop of cherry brandy now; it would have warmed the cockles and steadied the nerves. But he dared not call out to Lord Grebe for fear of alarming the monster.

All at once his attention was riveted by a commotion among the bushes on the farther side of the fishpond, there was a terrific splash, as though some heavy body had hurled itself into the water, and bright in the moonlight a horse's head reared itself, dripping, above the surface.

But what a horse! It was like no quadruped General Gout could remember ever having seen. There was a curious fixity about its expression, as though it had been carved out of some solid substance; it had large, bulbous eyes that shone like twin lamps, and it heaved up and down in the water with a peculiar rocking motion.

The General wasted no time in idle speculation as to the nature or origin of the beast. He gave a lusty yell, took

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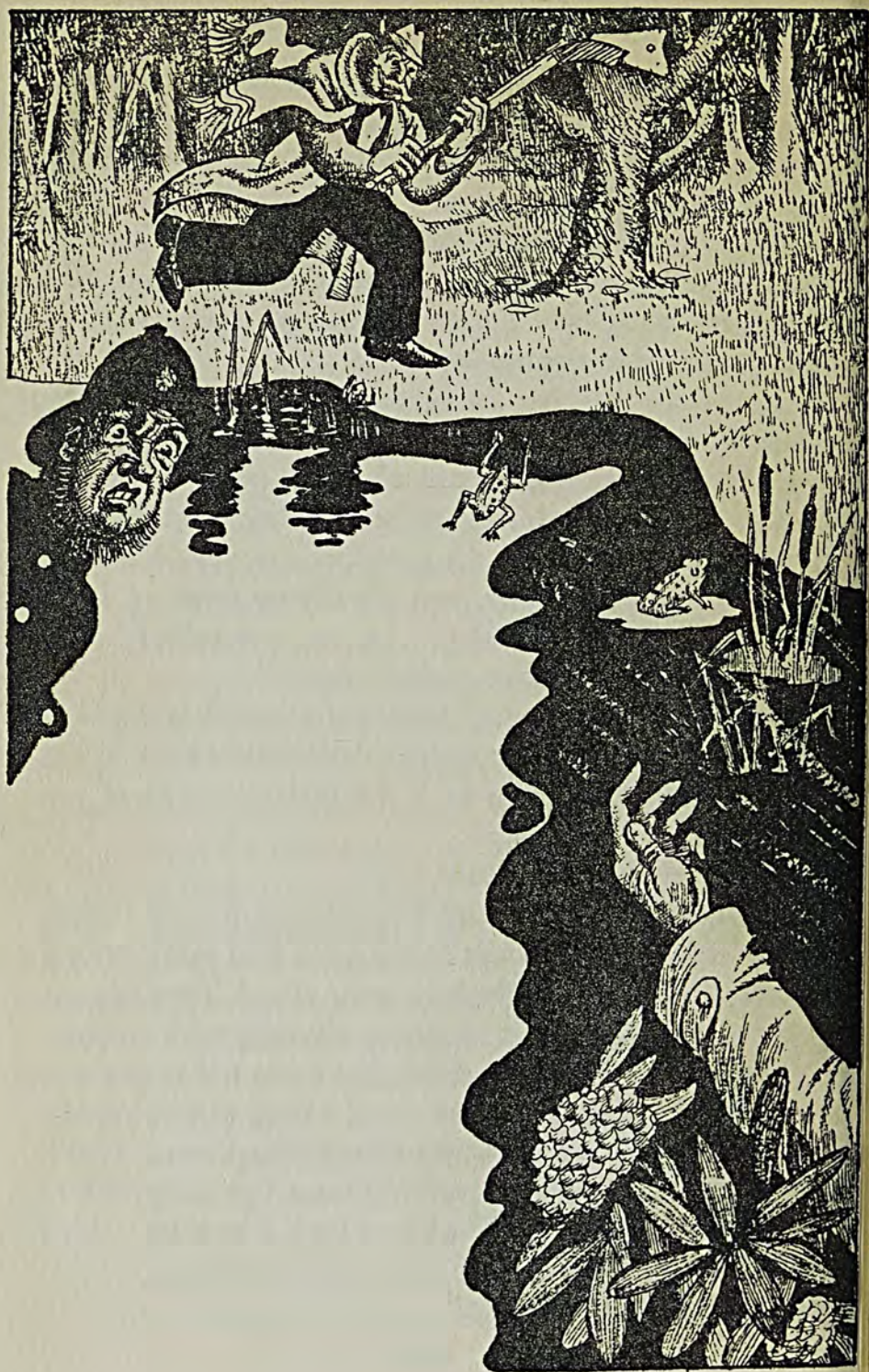
a firm grip of his rifle, brought the sights full on to the monster's head and pressed the trigger. To his amazement there was no deafening report, such as that to which he had so often been accustomed when using the weapon; nothing but a thin, metallic click as the striker shot forward. He tried the other barrel with no greater success, and finally, throwing open the breech, uttered a hoarse cry of dismay. The rifle was not loaded!

General Gout was a brave man, and this was by no means the first time he had found himself in a tight corner. Clubbing his weapon, he was about to plunge into the pool and do battle with the monster, when from amongst the rhododendrons came the sound of a scuffle, followed by a splash in the water, and the silvery tones of Lord Grebe, saying clearly, "Here you are, constable; here's your man. I seem to have pushed him in."

"It's my belief, Grebe," said the General, somewhat morosely to his host, as together they walked back to the house, "it was you who took the cartridges out of my rifle."

Lord Grebe nodded assent.

"My dear fellow," he said, "you'd have looked dashed foolish if it had leaked out at the Club that you'd shot a rockin'-horse with an elephant-gun, what? Those newspaper chaps had fixed it up pretty cleverly, with electric-light bulbs for eyes and a string tied to its tail to make it rock in the water. It's a pity the tall chap got away, but the youngster is on his way to the lock-up now. That'll teach him to go pushin' rockin'-horses into fishponds in the middle of the night. The joke of it is," he added, "that the fellow is some sort of a cousin of mine. I'm afraid Connie may be a bit upset."





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The Peer's prognostication proved correct. Lady Grebe *was* upset. Far more than anything else she feared the mocking laughter of County circles if the ludicrous truth became known.

"I don't believe it was a rocking-horse at all," she declared defiantly, but without much conviction.

"I'm afraid it was, my dear," replied her husband, pointing to a wisp of tow carried in the General's left hand. "Gout here has got the brush."

"In that case, Charles," said Lady Grebe, "you must go down to the police station at once and hush the whole thing up. What do you suppose Mavis Haggard or old Lady Harbottle will say if they hear that our washer-woman has been preyed on by a rocking-horse in our fishpond? We shall never hear the last of the scandal."

"There'll be no scandal, Connie," replied the Peer. "I saw the Inspector and arranged with him that the young fellow Gosling will simply be charged with bathin' in an unauthorized spot. It'll cost him about five bob, and he'll pay up and keep quiet. After all, the *Evenin' Echo* isn't likely to admit that it's been pullin' the public's leg. I told you all along it was a horse in the pond, and it was. Perhaps next time you'll believe me when I tell you something."

Chapter VIII

The Air-mindedness of Lord Grebe

IN a corner of a first class compartment on the train which, leaving Paddington at 5.15 p.m., is scheduled to arrive at Milchester at 6.49 precisely, sat Lady Grebe, pensively smoking a cigarette. In her lap lay a copy of Charmian Bilgewater's latest novel, *Pigs in Purgatory*, an old-world romance redolent of the English countryside, and rich with the fragrance of the midden and the sty, but, although the book had gone into thirty-seven editions and been translated into as many languages as were spoken by the builders of Babel, its tender love passages and simple, dignified prose made, at the moment, no appeal to the *châtelaine* of Slyme Court. Her thoughts were elsewhere, dwelling, as well they might, on the infinite possibilities for mischief and folly that lay hidden behind the vacant countenance of her husband. In brief, she had been away from home for six weeks on a visit to the Riviera, and she was wondering what Charles had been up to in her absence.

As usual, he had refused to accompany her on her trip abroad—it was always difficult to drag him away from Slyme Court and his treasured picture-postcard collection—and it would be ridiculous to suppose that he had been able to keep out of trouble when her eye was not on him.

This time, however, she was determined to catch him out, and, a providential outbreak of mumps at the Hôtel Magnifique affording her an excuse for cutting short her

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visit by two days, she was returning home unexpectedly, bent upon taking him unawares.

She had deliberately refrained from announcing her return to any of the domestic staff at Slyme Court, so there would be no car to meet her at the station, but it would go hard if she failed to catch Charles bending—as the delicate phrase goes.

Let it at once be made clear that Lady Grebe entertained no suspicions as to her husband's fidelity to herself; he had never, throughout their married life, given her occasion to do so; it was just that you never could tell what mad prank his eccentricity, unbridled by her absence, might not lead him into. She would not be surprised, for example, to find him organizing a tree-climbing contest among the upper servants, writing anonymous threatening letters to the Vicar, or shooting sheep on the Loamshire Downs with a scatter gun. Thoughtless escapades of this nature were likely to impair the prestige of the aristocracy among the local rustics, and it was important, she felt, that he should be taught a salutary lesson.

She was roused from her reverie by the unusual behaviour of the only other passenger in her compartment: a tall, elderly gentleman who gave one the impression that in childhood he must have been passed inadvertently through a mangle. He was scraggy and lean, wore a scrubby brown beard, and breathed heavily through his nose. Rising suddenly from his seat, this unprepossessing individual looked round him for a moment with an expression of horror and dismay, and then, letting down the window, threw his hat on to the line. The hat was followed, in rapid succession, by his coat, his collar, his tie, and his boots, and for one hideous moment Lady Grebe feared he

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was about to consign his trousers also to the permanent way. She leaned forward impulsively, with some thought in her mind of drawing his attention to the notice which prohibited the throwing out of the window of bottles or other articles likely to hurt men working on the line, but at that moment he turned, and bowed to her gravely.

"Madam," he said, "perhaps you are not aware that this train is seriously overloaded. What the officials of the Great Western Railway were about in permitting such a state of affairs I cannot guess, but the fact remains that unless immediate steps are taken to lighten the freight we must inevitably be dashed to destruction. I, as you have observed, have done my humble best, but it is not enough. Only one course is open to us as patriotic citizens and friends of the common weal; either you or me must go out of that window, and I *think*"—he stressed the last word ominously—"I *think* it had better be you!"

Not for a single instant did Lady Grebe's presence of mind desert her. Obviously the man was mad; as mad as a coot; and any ordinary woman might have been excused, in such circumstances, for uttering shrieks and screams, or clutching impetuously at the communication cord. But the mistress of Slyme Court was not an ordinary woman. The situation was fraught with peril for herself, but her invincible spirit, inherited from a long line of blue-blooded ancestors, enabled her to face each and every emergency with that same nonchalance and calm which impelled the *aristos* of the French Revolution to play "Slippery Sam" in the tumbrils on their way to the guillotine. Quite apart from that, she was not altogether unfamiliar with the habits of the mentally peculiar.

Her own immediate relatives, perhaps by reason of the

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rich ultramarine of their blood, had been known on occasion to exhibit strange tendencies, and besides, there was Charles, her husband. Charles was sane enough, though eccentric, but he too was the direct descendant of Crusaders, and ever since her marriage to him she had lived in a state of constant uncertainty. Like lightning there now flashed through her mind a piece of sound advice once given her by her old nurse—"Mad folks should be 'umoured; it's no manner of use setting yourself up to argify with such"—and she returned the stranger's courtly bow with equal gravity.

"I quite understand," she said quietly, "and I think you have been very noble and self-sacrificing. For my part I am ready and willing to do all I can to avert this terrible catastrophe, but do you not think it would be advisable, before we take a step from which there can be no drawing back, for us to invoke the aid of all the dukes in England?"

The stranger stroked his scrubby brown beard meditatively for a moment or two, pondering the suggestion. At last he spoke, and Lady Grebe with difficulty repressed a sigh of relief.

"Not dukes," he said. "Bishops. I have known many dukes in my time, and none of them was worth appealing to. Otherwise it appears to me that your suggestion is admirable common sense; but I insist on bishops."

"I expect you're right," replied Lady Grebe. "I merely offered you dukes for what they were worth, but I have no objection whatever to praying to the bishops. Shall I begin, or will you?"

"Ladies first," said the stranger gallantly, and together they knelt down on the floor of the carriage.

Lady Grebe's motive in making her singular suggestion

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had been, of course, to gain time, and she glanced anxiously at her wrist watch as she began to intone suitable supplications to the Princes of the Church. In less than ten minutes the train would be due at Milchester, and she would be able to escape from her precarious situation, but in the meantime she must keep her fellow-passenger's mind concentrated on the job in hand. She prayed, therefore, to the Bishops of Bristol, Birmingham, and Bath and Wells; of Ely, Exeter, St. Edmundsbury, and Ipswich; nor did she overlook the dioceses of Southwark, Salisbury, and Sodor and Man. When at last she was unable to recall the names of any more episcopal sees, inventive genius came to her aid, and prayers were said to a dozen or more prelates unknown to *Crockford's Clerical Directory*. Nevertheless, it was with feelings of the most profound relief that she realized the train was slowing down, and she just had time to put in a hasty word to the Bishop of Hackney Wick before it came to rest alongside the platform of Milchester station.

"Madam," said the stranger, rising to his feet and making way for her to pass out of the carriage, "you have averted a terrible tragedy, and I, at least, will never forget your public-spirited action."

"Not at all," muttered Lady Grebe, hastily descending to the platform. "I only did what any intelligent woman would have done in my place. If I were you, I'd sue the Great Western Railway for the cost of some new clothes."

She found a porter, collected her luggage, and boarded a taxi outside the station. It did not occur to her to report her unpleasant experience to the station officials or the police; it was enough for her that her presence of mind

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had saved her from disaster. But what a story she would have to tell Charles!

She was met at the front door of Slyme Court by Coombs, who paid off the taxi and instructed Jenkins, the footman, to carry up the luggage.

"I will apprise Mrs. Gamble of your Ladyship's unexpected return," he said. "His Lordship personally ordered the dinner, but no doubt there is still time to alter the menu."

"Oh, don't worry about that," said Lady Grebe impatiently. "Anything will do for me; a poached egg, or kippers. Where's his Lordship?"

"Your Ladyship will find him in the potting-shed," answered Coombs. "He is unpacking his parachute."

"His *what*?" Lady Grebe was thunderstruck.

"His parachute, my Lady. Perhaps your Ladyship was not aware that his Lordship contemplates making a balloon ascent into the stratosphere at ten-thirty to-morrow morning?"

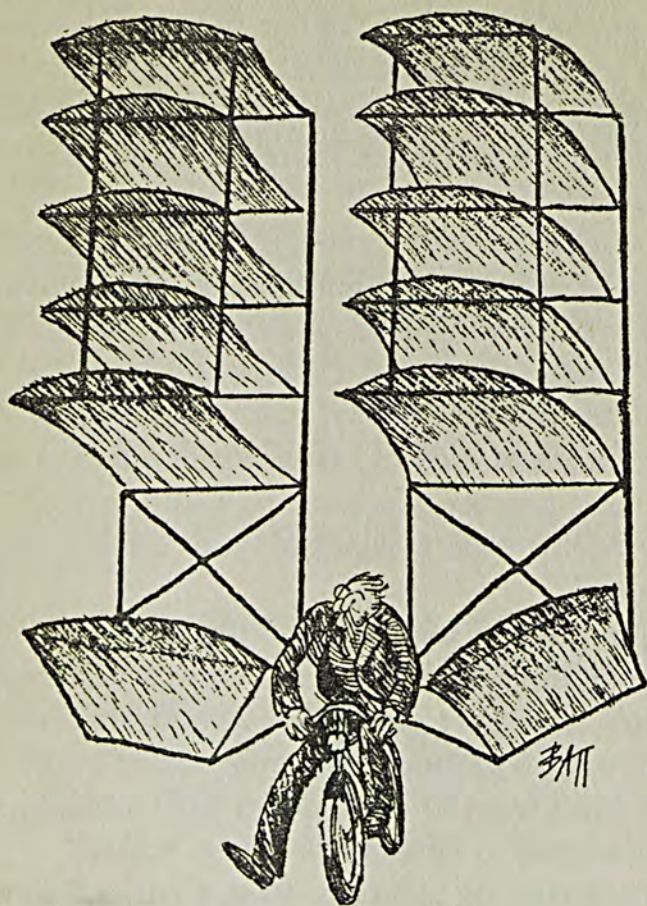
"I certainly was *not* aware of it, Coombs. Quickly, tell me all about it."

"It seems," began the butler, "that during your absence his Lordship has suddenly acquired air-mindedness in an advanced form. He has become a regular subscriber to *Popular Aviation*, and only last week he wrote up to Gamages and ordered a box kite. With the assistance of Rogers, the head-gardener, he has fitted a glider to the boot-boy's bicycle, and we of the servants' hall have watched with interest his aerial activities on the banks of the lower terrace."

"Yes, yes," put in Lady Grebe impatiently, "but what about this balloon business? And I think you said something about a parachute."

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"I was coming to that, my Lady. His Lordship's ambition seems to have been fired by the exploits of Professor Piccard and other intrepid balloonists, and he



has put himself in touch, through the medium of newspaper advertisements, with a gentleman who has purchased a balloon and is anxious to carry out experiments in the upper strata of the atmosphere. This gentleman—his name has for the moment escaped me—has consented to make an ascent from the grounds of Slyme Court to-

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morrow morning, taking his Lordship with him as a passenger."

"But gracious heavens, Coombs, he must be stopped!" cried Lady Grebe in tones of horror. "If Charles goes up in a balloon he's certain to fall out and break his neck!"

"That possibility had occurred to me, my Lady," replied the butler. "It was for that reason that I advised his Lordship to procure a parachute. It arrived this afternoon from the Army and Navy Stores."

Lady Grebe had heard enough. Hastily discarding her fur coat, she thrust it into the butler's hands and ran like the wind to the potting-shed, where she found her husband stooping over a large parcel. He looked up at her approach, and eyed her half timorously, half defiantly, rather in the manner of a snake suddenly confronted with a mongoose.

"Ah, there you are, Connie," he said nervously. "Back early, what? I wasn't expectin' you till the day after to-morrow."

"Thank heaven I was in time!" she answered. "What's all this nonsense Coombs tells me about a parachute?"

"It isn't nonsense; it's dashed sound common sense. I'm goin' up in a balloon to-morrow, and if anything goes wrong I don't want to come down with a bump. I mean to say, it's better to be safe than sorry, what?"

"You're not going up in a balloon, Charles," announced Lady Grebe.

"Eh?"

"I said, you're not going up in a balloon."

The Peer drew himself up and surveyed his wife sternly through his eyeglass.

"Now, look here, my dear," he said. "It's no use arguin'; the arrangements are all made, and my mind is

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quite made up. I've given up a great many things for you before now, but I'm not goin' to give up this ballooin'. The balloon is already here, in the grounds, and this fellow Tuttlebury, who's goin' to navigate the thing, is dinin' here this evenin', and stayin' the night."

Lady Grebe acknowledged defeat. Her husband, although as a rule he was clay in her hands, possessed a curious streak of mulish obstinacy which manifested itself from time to time, and on such occasions it was useless for her to oppose him.

"Very well, Charles," she said, turning to go back to the house, "have it your own way. But just remember this: if you break your neck it'll be no use coming and complaining to me. You'll have only yourself to blame."

In the hall, on her way up to dress for dinner, she met the butler.

"Look here, Coombs," she said, "has this Mr. Tuttlebury arrived yet?"

"Yes, my Lady, not two minutes ago. And, if I may be allowed to say so, he evidently means business. He is of workmanlike aspect."

"What on earth do you mean, Coombs?"

The butler shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, my Lady," he said, "he arrived in his shirt-sleeves."

"What?" Lady Grebe gave a horrified gasp. Could it be—was it—but, no, it was impossible. Shaking her head sadly, she ascended the stairs to her bedroom. Here weariness overcame her, and she rang the bell for her maid.

"I've had a long and tiring day, Lisette," she said. "Ask Mrs. Gamble to send me up a lightly boiled egg and a cup of *maté*. I'm going to bed at once."

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Half an hour later, having demolished the egg, drunk the *maté*, and soothed her frayed nerves with a powerful narcotic, she was sleeping peacefully.

Meanwhile, downstairs in the dining-room Lord Grebe was listening open-mouthed to an astonishing story retailed to him by his guest, Mr. Tuttlebury.

"I have a very good mind," the latter was saying, "to institute proceedings against the directors of the company. It is nothing short of scandalous that a passenger train should be overloaded in so reckless a fashion, and with such callous disregard for the sanctity of human life. I assure you that at one moment I really thought we were all going to be dashed to pieces."

"You don't say so?" said Lord Grebe. "Confoundedly dangerous, what? Coombs, give Mr. Tuttlebury another glass of Chablis."

"Of course," went on the guest in a tone of modest self-depreciation, "one did what one could. As an experienced balloonist I realized at once that ballast must be jettisoned, and I acted accordingly. But I fancy I owe my safety to the commendable presence of mind of a fellow passenger, a lady in the same compartment."

"Extraordinary, my dear fellow," commented the Peer. "What did she do?"

Mr. Tuttlebury sank his voice to an awed whisper.

"She advocated prayer," he said. "I had never before realized how efficacious it could be."

"Astoundin'," murmured Lord Grebe. "Simply astoundin'! Coombs, Mr. Tuttlebury's glass is empty."

Until a late hour that night the Peer and his guest sat up together in the library discussing the arrangements for the morrow's venture. The balloon had arrived at the

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Court some days before in a lorry, and now, fully inflated and ready for action, it tugged at its mooring ropes in an open space in the centre of the park, looking as it hung there in the moonlight like some Brobdingnagian electric-light bulb. The passenger car rested on the ground beneath it, a frail and flimsy basket of wicker-work, for Mr. Tuttlebury, with the recklessness of genius, had apparently overlooked the fact that when making balloon ascents into the stratosphere it is advisable to travel in an enclosed cabin equipped with oxygen apparatus as well as some device for counteracting the intense cold. The utmost secrecy had been preserved, and no word of the undertaking had been allowed to reach the ears or note-books of a sensation-loving Press. Mr. Tuttlebury had been most insistent on this point; indeed, it was the prospect of privacy that had attracted him most when he first received Lord Grebe's invitation to make his ascent from the Slyme Court grounds; and only the members of the Peer's household were permitted to know what was going forward.

"I say, my dear fellow," asked Lord Grebe, during a lull in the conversation, "I suppose there's no danger, eh? What I mean is, Connie, my wife, seemed to think I might fall out and break my neck."

"There is always a slight element of danger attached to these experiments," admitted Mr. Tuttlebury, "but we shall do our best to reduce it to a minimum. For example, should we find, after jettisoning all our ballast, that the balloon was descending too rapidly for safety, it would be necessary for one of us to jump out, and still further lessen the weight of the car."

"That's all very well," said the Peer doubtfully, "but after you'd jumped out, what would happen to me? I

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might go on up and up into the stratosphere, or whatever you call it, and not be able to come down again. I should look pretty silly if that happened, what?"

"That problem is very easily solved, my dear sir," replied the balloonist. "Indeed, it will never arise. You, not I, will be the first to jump."

On his way upstairs to bed, Lord Grebe gave secret thanks to Coombs for his admirable advice in the matter of a parachute. It looked very much as if the thing would be needed.

Lady Grebe usually awoke early, but on the morning after her perilous railway journey she overslept herself, and it was not until about a quarter past ten that she came downstairs, to find that her husband and Mr. Tuttlebury had already left for the park. She had had no opportunity for telling her husband the story of her adventure on the train, nor had she as yet set eyes on the balloonist; but the butler's cryptic utterance of last night preyed on her mind, and she hurried out of doors, filled with the liveliest apprehensions. She had no difficulty in locating the balloon, for the monstrous gas-bag reared itself in the very middle of the park, not three hundred yards from the house. Lord Grebe and his fellow aeronaut were already in the car, the entire domestic staff of Slyme Court, instructed by Coombs the butler, clung tenaciously to the mooring ropes awaiting the signal to let go, and Lady Grebe, observing something familiar in the cut of Mr. Tuttlebury's jib, broke into a run.

"Charles," she screamed at the top of her voice, "get out at once! That man's mad! He tried to throw me out of the train yesterday, and as sure as eggs are eggs he'll throw you out of that balloon!"

"Eh, what's that?" inquired Lord Grebe, screwing his

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monocle into his eye and leaning over the side of the car as his wife came running up. "My dear Connie, whatever's the matter?"

In a rapid, breathless staccato his wife roughed out the scenario of her distressing experience of the previous day, while the Slyme Court staff, clinging desperately to the guy ropes, listened open-mouthed. Mr. Tuttlebury, that intrepid aeronaut, paid little attention, being engaged at the moment in removing the stopper from a bottle of seasick remedy, but Lord Grebe was thunderstruck. Here was a situation which in his wildest moments he had never envisaged. He found himself cribbed, cabined, and confined in the passenger car of a balloon, about to undertake a journey into the stratosphere with a man who, if Connie's story were correct in every detail, was nothing less than a dangerous lunatic; at any moment the balloon would go up, and—horror of horrors—he had forgotten his parachute! was ever Peer of the Realm in so ghastly a predicament?

"Bless my soul!" he muttered to himself. "This is confoundedly awkward, what? How could I have been such a consummate ass as to leave the thing behind?"

He was, however, allowed little time for idle speculation, for at this moment a sudden gust of wind sprang up, the balloon gave a great bound, wrenching the mooring ropes from the grasp of the Slyme Court servants, and ascended majestically in the direction of the stratosphere. With a howl of terror the Peer precipitated himself over the side of the basket, hoping to reach *terra firma* before it was too late. Alas, it was! A distance of some twenty feet separated him from Mother Earth; for him to drop off now would be to court the risk of injury to life or limb; and the only course open to him was to remain where he was, clinging

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like a limpet to the side of the car, his legs kicking feebly in the air.

"Say not," observes the poet, "the struggle naught availeth, the labour and the wounds are vain," and what a world of truth underlies his sage counsel! For now, when all seemed lost, and Lord Grebe looked despairingly downwards into the void beneath him, he perceived something which inspired him with renewed hope. The balloon, instead of continuing its ascent, was travelling slowly in a horizontal direction, carried along by the breeze, and seemed incapable of rising any higher. Nor was the reason far to seek. The ever-faithful Coombs, and Edgar, the young and agile boot-boy—both of them more prehensile than the rest—had not released their hold on the mooring ropes, and were now being dragged along the grass and through the undergrowth towards a dank and evil-smelling pond that lay on the outskirts of the Home Wood. The screams of the boot-boy, who dared not let go, made the welkin ring, but the butler, true to the traditions of his honourable calling, remained taciturn and tenacious.

"Stick to it, Coombs, there's a good fellow!" yelled the Peer. "If once you let go, it's all up!"

To this earnest entreaty Coombs made no reply, which was scarcely surprising, seeing that his mouth was full of duck-weed. The pond had been reached, and butler and boot-boy, loyal to the last, had now become aquatic. Through the slimy depths they were dragged like a pair of drenched frogs, and scarcely had they emerged, dripping and malodorous, upon the farther bank, when the situation assumed an entirely new aspect. The car of the balloon, dragged downwards, perhaps, by the additional weight of the water, scraped the top of a tall oak, brushing Lord

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Grebe off as though he had been a blue-bottle; the Peer subsided, with a crashing and crackling of twigs, into the upper branches of the lordly tree; and the balloon itself, thus suddenly relieved of a part of its burden, leaped swiftly skyward, catapulting the two heroic servitors into an exceptionally luxuriant bed of nettles.

Of these occurrences Lady Grebe and the rest of her servants had been agonized spectators. They had not failed to remark the distressing predicament of the master of Slyme Court and his two faithful henchmen when the balloon first eluded their grip; they had witnessed the subsequent acts of this amazing drama, and they had set out to run, helter skelter, towards the Home Wood. Panting and exhausted, the head of the column arrived at the foot of the oak tree just as the butler managed to stumble to his feet.

"Good heavens, Coombs," cried Lady Grebe, "you must do something at once! Your master has stuck in the tree!"

Coombs the butler had never been known to fail his mistress in an emergency. Bruised, torn, and bleeding though he was; soaked to the skin, encrusted with slime, and tortured by the venomous stings of countless nettles, he nevertheless succeeded in upholding the dignity of his office. Turning to one of the under-gardeners he indicated with a simple gesture the upper branches of the oak, where Lord Grebe now hung suspended, head downwards, between heaven and earth.

"Run and fetch the longest ladder you can find, Oliphant," he commanded, and added, turning to his mistress: "It would be unwise, I fancy, to attempt to dislodge his Lordship without one."

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"Let's 'ope the branches'll 'old 'im," said Edgar the boot-boy. "'E don't look any too secure, perched up there among them brittle twigs."

"When your opinion is required it will be asked for, my lad," answered the butler sharply. "Don't stand gaping there. Climb up the tree and see if you can assist his Lordship into an attitude more consonant with his dignity."

But the boot-boy, cowed though he was by the butler's austerity, seemed reluctant to obey. He took a hesitating step forward, keeping his back carefully turned away from the crowd as he did so, and whispered something into Coombs's ear.

"Indeed?" said the butler. "In that case you had better sit down again at once. And ask the housekeeper to have them mended for you," he added cryptically.

Meanwhile, the company assembled beneath the tree to await the return of the under-gardener with his ladder, were watching the balloon, which had continued its upward progress, and soon vanished into the *Ewigkeit*, carrying with it the remarkable Mr. Tuttlebury, his hopes, and his fears.

"'E's gone, anyway," observed Jessica, the under-housemaid. "We shan't see 'im no more."

Strange how the gift of prophecy is sometimes vouchsafed to even the lowliest among us! Jessica was right, but she did not know it at the time. Mr. Tuttlebury was seen no more at Slyme Court.

In the meantime, the unfortunate Lord Grebe had himself been growing restless. His abrupt descent into his arboreal bower had not been accomplished without scathe; he had barked his shins, peeled the skin off his right elbow,

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and acquired an ugly swelling immediately below his left eye.

"Hi! You down there!" he yelled, in tones of marked impatience. "Don't stand loafin' about doin' nothing. Can't you see I'm stuck in this confounded tree?"

Coombs made a megaphone of his hands and shouted back.

"Keep perfectly still, my Lord; the slightest movement may dislodge your Lordship from the branches. Lady Grebe is here, and should our efforts to extricate you prove unavailing, she proposes to summon the Fire Brigade from Milchester."

"Fire Brigade? Tchah!" exclaimed the Peer querulously. "They won't be any good, those fellows. Much better telephone for a steeple-jack, or the President of the Alpine Club."

"Have patience, my Lord," replied Coombs soberly. "We are doing everything possible to effect your rescue. The other gentleman, I fancy, is less happily situated than your Lordship."

At this moment the under-gardener returned, staggering beneath the weight of a long ladder. This he propped up against the side of the tree.

"Ah, thank you, Oliphant," said the butler in condescending tones. "I venture to suggest, my Lady, that it would be best for me to make the ascent in person."

Lady Grebe inclined her head.

"Just as you like, Coombs," she said. "Only for heaven's sake get a move on."

Fully sensible of the gravity of the occasion, Coombs advanced to the foot of the ladder and began, with dignified deliberation, to make the ascent into the branches. Arriving

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at a point on a level with his employer, he paused for breath.

"If you will pardon the liberty, my Lord," he said, "I propose to carry your Lordship down the ladder on my shoulders, employing the grip known to Boy Scouts as the 'fireman's lift.'"

"You can use a luggage lift for all I care," answered the Peer. "Only get me down."

There was tense silence among the onlookers as the butler carried the limp and bedraggled form of his master slowly down the ladder, but a wild burst of cheering broke out as soon as the ground was safely reached.

"Thanks, Coombs," said Lord Grebe as he was set down upon the turf. "That's dashed good of you. But how in thunder did you manage to get yourself so wet; and what's happened to that fellow Tuttlebury?"

The answer to the second question was not forthcoming until late that afternoon, when the story of Mr. Tuttlebury's descent (by parachute) from the stratosphere into the middle of an open-air performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at Stratford-on-Avon was fully related in the evening papers. He declared that he was a visitor from Mars. The police took charge of him, pending an inquiry into the state of his mind. The wreckage of the balloon was picked up, a week later, by a tramp steamer entering the port of Avonmouth.

"You can have my parachute for your Women's Institute bazaar if you like, Connie," said Lord Grebe generously, when he read of this latest development. "I shan't be wantin' it any more. I've definitely given up aviation."

"I'm glad to hear it, Charles," replied his wife. "If you don't give it up it's certain to let you down sooner or later."

Chapter IX

Bears Don't Bite

GENERAL GOUT decanted himself and his suitcase from a first class smoking carriage and stood, gazing this way and that, on the platform of Mudflats-on-Trym station. He was on his way to Slyme Court and he had been given to understand that a car would be sent, as usual, to meet him; yet nowhere upon the platform could he discern the familiar, stocky figure of Hobson, the Slyme Court chauffeur.

He had just picked up his suitcase and was on the point of approaching the stationmaster with inquiries when his host hurried on to the platform from the booking-hall entrance, and bore down upon him with extended hand. His face was flushed, betokening unusual exertion, and the monocle in his right eye flashed and sparkled in the brilliant summer sunshine.

"Ah, here you are, my dear fellow," he cried. "Hope I haven't kept you waitin' long, but that dashed idiot Coombs never reminded me that the train was due in at ten-thirty, and I had the deuce of a rush to get here. Hobson's on his holiday, or I'd have sent him."

General Gout shook hands warmly.

"Not at all, Grebe, my dear chap; you oughtn't to have put yourself out; I could easily have chartered a fly. All well at the Court, I hope? How's your wife?"

"Connie's up in Town," replied the Peer, as together they passed out of the station to the waiting car, "but she's

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motorin' down this afternoon with her sister Millie and the Duke. Jump in, my dear fellow; I dare say you could do with a glass of sherry and a biscuit, what?"

"Thanks, Grebe, I could. Had to leave my club at half-past seven, and couldn't get *hazri* on the train. Rotten service on this line; ever thought of writin' to the *Mornin' Post* about it?"

Lord Grebe and his guest were met at the front steps of Slyme Court by Coombs, who signed to Jenkins, hovering in the background, to take charge of the General's suitcase. With the General himself he shook hands gravely. They were acquaintances of long standing.

"Glad to see you back at the Court, sir," he said. "I trust Mrs. Gout keeps perfect health."

"A r, Coombs," responded the General. "A r. How's the sciatica, eh?"

"Yielding to treatment, sir, I am happy to say. I have put you in the Tapestryed Chamber, acting on her Ladyship's instructions."

They passed into the house, and once inside the hall Lord Grebe turned to his butler.

"Just bring the sherry and biscuits into the library, Coombs, there's a good chap. And tell Mrs. Gamble to put lunch half an hour earlier. The General's had no breakfast."

"Very good, my Lord. And with regard to the bear?"

Lord Grebe started, and dropped his eyeglass.

"Bear, Coombs? What bear? What the devil are you talkin' about?"

Coombs looked faintly surprised.

"I had supposed that your Lordship was fully cognisant of the animal's arrival," he said. "The party who brought

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it gave me to understand that he was acting under instructions from her Ladyship."

"B—but, great heavens, Coombs, do you mean to tell me that Con—her Ladyship—has sent a live bear down to the Court?"

"Yes, my Lord—at least, so it would appear," answered the butler. "It is a very large bear," he added, by way of emphasizing his point.

"But where did it come from?"

"The party did not say, my Lord. He simply informed me that her Ladyship had ordered it, and left me—er—holding the bear."

"What have you done with it, Coombs?"

"At the present moment, my Lord, it is immured in the potting-shed. The animal, I fancy, is of a somewhat erotic temperament; it endeavoured to embrace Mrs. Gamble, the cook, and I judged it wise to incarcerate it without delay. I should be glad, however, to receive your Lordship's instructions as to its future disposal. The door of the potting-shed, if I may take the liberty of encroaching on the gardener's preserve, is sadly in need of repair."

Lord Grebe turned to his guest.

"I say, Gout, my dear fellow, do you hear that? Connie's sent a confounded bear down here!"

The veteran of fifty campaigns went characteristically to the root of the matter.

"What for?" he inquired. "What's the good of a bear in a place like this?"

"I'm dashed if I know," replied the Peer, "unless—by Gad, I wonder if that's it!" He began feverishly to search his pockets, and at last drew out an unopened letter. "I clean forgot about this letter from Connie. It came by the

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first post, but what with walkin' across to the Home Farm to look at the pigs and motorin' down to the station to meet you, I haven't had time to open it. We'd better have a look at it together, eh, Gout? You never know; there might be somethin' in it about the bear."

They went into the library, and Lord Grebe called loudly to the butler.

"Bring the sherry and biscuits, Coombs—no, dash it, you'd better bring brandy and soda. We'll go into this bear business in a minute or two."

Lady Grebe's letter, singularly enough, was lucid and to the point.

MY DEAR CHARLES [she wrote],

Just a line to let you know I have ordered a bear from Sampach's, the animal people in Canning Town. They promise delivery to-morrow morning, so very soon after you get this letter the bear should be with you. Beethoven—that's the creature's name—quite a musical ring, don't you think?—is a real beauty, a big black Himalayan, and Mavis Haggard will be green with envy when she sees him. She's always blowing about the chameleon she drags round with her to cocktail parties, and I was determined to go one better. Sampach's people assure me that Beethoven is perfectly docile, so you needn't lose your nerve, Charles, even if he slavers at you. Remember, *bears don't bite. They hug.*

I shall be motoring down some time to-morrow afternoon with Millie and the Duke of Dillwater, so you might ask Coombs to have tea ready from four-thirty onwards.

Best love,

CONNIE.

"There you are, Gout, what did I tell you?" said Lord Grebe, when he had read the letter aloud to his guest. "Didn't I say there might be somethin' about the bear?"

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"What beats me, Grebe," observed the General, sipping his brandy and soda, "is what you wife wants a bear *for*. Nasty, bad-tempered brutes, especially the black Himalayan *wallahs* with the white shirt-fronts. Why, when I was on *shikar* in the Murree Hills in the hot weather of '85——"

"Connie wants it so that she can score off that Haggard woman and her chameleon," put in Lord Grebe hastily. "I say, Gout, my dear fellow, you know a bit about bears, don't you? I mean to say, you've shot a few of 'em in your time, and all that?"

The old hunter swelled visibly with pride.

"Shot a few of 'em?" he exclaimed. "My dear Grebe, I've shot so many bears that at one time the Government actually thought of givin' me the sole contract for supplyin' hats to the Grenadier Guards. If I hadn't been in the Service I'd have taken the job on; I flatter myself I know all there is to be known about bears."

"Well, then, I wish you'd come with me and have a look at this one. Just to vet. it, you know, and make sure it's as docile as Connie says. Can't say I care for the name Beethoven myself; I seem to have heard it before somewhere, and it sounds to me arty and immoral."

The General looked uncomfortable.

"If it's all the same to you, Grebe," he said, "I don't think I'll come out just at present. Had a very early start this mornin', and a tirin' journey, and there'll be heaps of time to look at the bear later on. You may take it from me that one bear is very like another."

Lord Grebe glanced suspiciously at his old friend.

"Upon my word, my dear fellow," he exclaimed, "if I didn't know you so well I'd be tempted to say you were afraid."

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"Good Gad, no!" The General bristled. "I've never been afraid of a bear yet, and I'm not goin' to begin now. I'm simply givin' you the benefit of my experience. I think Coombs said this bear was shut in the pottin'-shed, and my experience is that once a bear has been shut in a pottin'-shed it's best to let him stay there. Especially a Himalayan bear. Most of 'em are man-eaters."

The Peer, however, was obstinate.

"But, dash it all," he protested, "Connie distinctly says bears don't bite."

"She's thinkin' of the grizzly, I expect. If she'd been in the East as long as I have she wouldn't make sweepin' assertions like that. When I was in Kashmir in the spring of '86——"

"Anyway, Coombs says we can't leave the confounded brute in the pottin'-shed. The door's as rotten as the very deuce."

General Gout moved quickly towards the library entrance.

"You please yourself, my dear fellow," he said, "but if you don't mind I think I'll get along up to the bathroom and have a tub before *tiffin*. There's a good view of the pottin'-shed from there, and I could shout advice to you out of the window. That is, if you're bent on interferin' with this bear."

"It seems to me," remarked Lord Grebe, swallowing his brandy at a gulp, "that if we don't interfere with the bear, it'll dashed well interfere with us. I wish to heaven Connie were here."

General Gout left the room and ascended to the bathroom adjoining the Tapestry Chamber. Once inside, he locked and bolted the door—which, he was gratified to

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observe, was constructed of stout oak—and proceeded to undress, to the accompaniment of the running taps. From the bathroom window he had a good view of the potting-shed, and presently saw his host, accompanied by Coombs and Jenkins, emerge from the house, and move stealthily across the gravel. They were on their way to visit Connie's bear.

"I recommend extreme caution, my Lord," whispered Coombs. "The animal, I fear, is temperamental, and if it were to catch sight of your Lordship unexpectedly——"

Lord Grebe was muttering to himself as he crept forward.

"The brute's name is Beethoven," he said. "A German name, I'm almost sure. Dash it all, Connie might at least have bought British!"

Arrived in front of the potting-shed he halted and drew a key from his trouser-pocket. General Gout, his body enveloped in a large Turkish towel, leaned out of the bathroom window and hailed him.

"I say, Grebe," he shouted in stentorian tones, "you aren't goin' to unlock the door, are you?"

The Peer swung round and gazed upwards, his monocle screwed into his eye.

"Eh, what's that, my dear fellow? Of course I'm goin' to unlock the door. Must have a look at the bear, what?"

"Well, then," continued the General, in his best professional manner, "remember when it chases you to keep on high ground. Keep well above it. If you get below it, it'll roll on top of you, and very few fellers have ever been rolled on by a bear and lived to tell the tale. That's one of the elementary principles of bear-huntin', but I've known chaps forget it in moments of crisis. There was a

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feller up at Srinagar in '86—or was it '87?—who actually started to climb *up* a hill to look for bears at the top! We stopped him, of course, in the nick of time, and took him to another hill where he could climb *down* to look for bears at the bottom, but we might have saved ourselves the trouble. He was bitten by a mad hyena the same day, and left at once to take up an appointment at the Staff College."

Lord Grebe turned nervously to his butler.

"I say, Coombs, what do you think we'd better do? If we leave the bear in the pottin'-shed it'll get out, and if we let it out it'll come after us. Either way we stand a dashed good chance of bein' hugged."

Coombs considered the point.

"I should suggest," he said at last, "that your Lordship transfer the animal to the coal-cellar. The creature is equipped with a strong collar and chain, and if the door of the shed is flung suddenly open, your Lordship can step in and lead it out. Should your Lordship's grasp of the chain prove insufficiently prehensile, Jenkins and me, standing some little distance away, would endeavour to shoo the animal towards your Lordship. Your Lordship could then secure it."

"That's all very well, Coombs, but why the devil shouldn't I shoo the beast towards you and Jenkins?"

The butler shook his head emphatically.

"I should not advise that course, my Lord," he said. "Bears are notoriously slow-witted, and your Lordship's intentions might be misunderstood, with tragic consequences for your Lordship."

Lord Grebe turned again to the door of the potting-shed.

"Very well, Coombs," he said, "I'll take your tip. You

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and Jenkins had better stand well back. I'm goin' to open the door."

It was a moment of breathless suspense, and old General Gout, up in his bathroom watch-tower, hitched the towel more closely round his portly frame and leaned still farther out of the window. Immediately beneath him, clustered in the kitchen doorway, he became aware of a knot of Slyme Court servants with scared, white faces; in the foreground crouched Coombs and Jenkins in attitudes suggestive of fieldsmen at the Oval; and farther back, cynosure of all eyes, was Lord Grebe, wrestling with the handle of the potting-shed door.

"Take care, Grebe," shouted the General. "Remember, if the brute attacks you, get above it!"

The words were scarcely out of the old warrior's mouth when the door of the potting-shed opened suddenly inward, and the Peer, dragged off his feet, dived headlong in through the doorway. There was a wild, blood-curdling shriek, followed by an agitated, pig-like grunting, and a huge black bear, standing erect upon its hind-legs, shambled into the open and gazed around with an inquiring expression. Of Lord Grebe there was nothing to be seen at first, but he presently emerged on all fours from the potting-shed and attempted to edge away along the outside wall without attracting the bear's attention. In this he was unsuccessful, for the great beast, catching sight of him out of the corner of its eye, swung round on the instant and began to amble towards him with arms outstretched and an eager glint in its eye.

Beethoven, as a fact, bore him no ill-will. He was accustomed to human society, and hated being deprived of it. Thus, when the door of his temporary prison burst

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open and a strange gentleman entered so unceremoniously, his first move was to escape into the sunshine, and his second to make the better acquaintance of his liberator.

But of this, unfortunately, Lord Grebe knew nothing. In the bear's gesture of greeting he saw only dire menaces, in his conciliatory grunts only the savage growling of a hungry carnivore. With a howl of terror he fled past Beethoven, and, remembering General Gout's advice, sought sanctuary in the upper branches of an adjacent apple tree.

Meanwhile, what of Coombes, and Jenkins, whose allotted task it was to shoo the animal in the direction of his Lordship? Observing that their employer had gone up a tree, both felt that they could not do better than follow his example, and two more apple trees thereupon bore unusual fruit. Obviously, shooing was off for the day.

Beethoven, knowing nothing of the secret forces which had urged three presumably intelligent human beings to behave like a troop of monkeys, looked about him with wondering eyes.

Mrs. Gamble the cook, and all the other servants, had disappeared within the fastnesses of the Slyme Court kitchen, and the back door was firmly shut, but high up, framed in a window embrasure, he saw what he took to be a fat, white baboon. This was General Gout, and in his hand he held a tablet of Old English Lavender bath soap. Filled with curiosity, the bear waddled towards the house.

"Well, Gout, my dear fellow," shouted Lord Grebe from his apple tree, "we've done what you said, and here we are. What do we do now?"

"Stay where you are, all of you, and don't move,"

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replied the expert in commanding tones. "As soon as the brute comes within range, I'll try a shot from my *machan*. I've got a better stand than you have."

Beethoven the bear, ignorant of the meaning of this threat, blundered straight into the danger zone. For a well-bred bear, accustomed to the manners and customs of good society, to be struck on the snout by a tablet of Old English Lavender bath soap deftly hurled from an upper window is a disarming experience, and Beethoven, being of a high order of intelligence, placed upon it the only possible construction. He was not wanted at Slyme Court. Very well then, he would go elsewhere, and seek company less reluctant to receive him. Shaking his head mournfully, he shambled off round the corner of the house and down the broad carriage drive in the direction of Mudflats-on-Trym.

Lord Grebe, his butler, and his footman, forsook their arboreal perches and from a safe distance watched the departure of Beethoven the bear.

"He's gone," announced Lord Grebe at last. "Down into the village. What the deuce are we to do now, Coombs? If he hugs old Lady Harbottle we shall never hear the last of it."

Coombs scratched his chin in some perplexity.

"It is hard to know what to advise, my Lord," he said. "The repercussions consequent on the unexpected arrival of a Himalayan bear in the main street of a quiet Loamshire village are likely to be widespread, particularly if the occurrence comes to the notice of the daily Press. Perhaps if your Lordship were to telephone to the parties who supplied the bear to her Ladyship——?"

Lord Grebe slapped his thigh.

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"By Gad, Coombs, that's a first-rate idea. Ask 'em to send fellows down to catch the bear and take it away, what? I'll go indoors and put a call through at once."

He went into the house and rang up Sampach's, the animal people in Canning Town, and while he waited in the library for the call to come through he was joined by General Gout, clothed and in his right mind.

"They won't take the bear back, my dear chap," pronounced the veteran, when the situation had been explained to him. "Nobody but a certifiable lunatic would take back a savage brute like that, once he'd managed to sell it."

"Well, then, I'll refuse to pay for it. I'll bet you a monkey Connie got it on tick. She'd no right to pledge my credit in this way."

"No good, Grebe. You should have put a notice in the papers if you wanted to stop her doin' that. There goes the telephone bell."

General Gout's prognostication proved to be correct. Sampach's politely but firmly declined to cancel the transaction or send for the animal.

"But, dash it all," cried the Peer, "you can have the money; I don't care a tinker's curse about that. All I want you to do is to send some fellows down here to take the animal away."

"I'm very sorry, my Lord"—the voice on the 'phone was cold and distant—"at any other time we should have been willing to oblige, but it so happens that immediately after the delivery of the bear this morning an order was issued by the Ministry of Agriculture prohibiting all movement of livestock in the County of Loamshire, owing to a serious outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease. For the

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bear to be moved now would constitute an infringement of the regulations."

"But, confound it all, the dashed bear is movin' itself! I tell you it's got loose, and is wanderin' all over Loamshire at this very moment, terrorizin' the inhabitants and snatchin' babies out of their cradles!"

"I'm exceedingly sorry, my Lord," said the voice, "but, as you see, we are helpless. Please don't hesitate to give us a ring any time you are requiring another bear. We are always happy to oblige customers in the country districts."

A crackling sound on the line put an end to further argument, and the Peer replaced the receiver.

"You were right, Gout," he said gloomily, "those fellows won't do anythin'. I tell you what; we'll have lunch quickly and go down into the village. If there's any trouble we may be able to smooth things over."

The General shook his head.

"I doubt it," he said. "The creature has probably chawed up the Vicar by now. Still, I'm game to come with you." An idea struck him. "I say, I suppose we couldn't protect our faces in some way? Bears always go for the face."

"I've got a couple of old fencin' masks," replied the other after a moment's thought. "Would they be any use?"

"Excellent, my dear chap; the very thing. After all, there's no point in spoilin' our beauty for the sake of a confounded bear."

Soon after luncheon the intrepid pair, armed with sharp-pointed shooting-sticks and wearing a fencing mask apiece, set off down the gravel carriage sweep into the village of Mudflats-on-Trym. They walked quickly, for the Peer was in a fever of anxiety lest Beethoven should have done anything unbridled in the interval.

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The bear, in point of fact, had been enjoying himself hugely since his departure from Slyme Court. He had sauntered down the main street of the village with his hands, so to speak, in his trouser-pockets, observing with a supercilious smile the antics of the villagers as they fled from him in panic terror.

Dallying for a while in the entrance to Mr. Josiah Bagworthy's general store, he had consumed at his leisure fifteen yards of liquorice bootlaces, a gill of paraffin, six packets of jelly crystals (assorted flavours), and a jar of Polywog paste. Strengthened by this *hors d'œuvre*, he had passed on to Travers's Temperance Hotel, where a rubber doormat clearly inscribed "Welcome" had excited his cupidity. This item proving somewhat indigestible, he had finished it quickly and transferred his attention to the tap-room of the "Cow and Skittles," on the opposite side of the road. The tap-room, which at this hour of the day was well patronized by the village elders, boasted two doors, and as Beethoven entered by one door the elders made an undignified and hasty exit by the other. As for the publican, he stood not upon the order of his going, but fled *instantly* into the back premises, where he shut himself up in the skittle-alley.

Beethoven the bear, left alone in the deserted tap-room, found himself monarch of all he surveyed. He could not understand why all these people had run from him, for he was accustomed to being petted and made a fuss of by human beings, and the thought that there might be something terrifying in his appearance never crossed his mind. He sat down on the sanded floor of the tap-room and sniffed the air. Then he pricked up his ears.

From somewhere close at hand a delicious aroma stole

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forth to caress his nostrils, a scent more suggestive of Paradise than any he had yet encountered. He rose to his feet and began a careful search for the origin of this heavenly odour, nor was he long in finding it. In the wild scramble to reach the exit when the bear first made his appearance, someone had overturned a keg of rum, and the rich, brown liquor was welling out across the floor in an ever-widening pool. Now rum, as all the world knows, is made of fermented molasses, a delectable substance. Beethoven sat down again.

Lord Grebe and General Gout, wearing their fencing masks and defiantly flourishing their shooting-sticks, walked slowly down the main street of Mudflats-on-Trym, marvelling at the uncanny stillness that prevailed.

"Dash it all!" exclaimed Lord Grebe. "It's like the ruins of Pompeii, or that poet fellow Goldberg's 'Deserted Village.' What's happened to all the people?"

"I expect they're half-way to Milchester by now," said the General. "You know, Grebe, you ought to tell your wife it's no use bringin' bears down to a place like this. You can see for yourself it only causes trouble."

Lord Grebe said nothing, and the strangely attired pair walked on. Throughout the length and breadth of the village street there was no sign of life. The doors were barred, the windows shuttered, and not a sound came to break the eerie stillness. There were no yokels clustered round the public-house entrances, no yelling crowd of children disported itself in the playground of the village school, and no cottagers' wives exchanged acrimonious repartee across the trim hedges dividing the garden plots.

Stepping into this unwonted silence, the Peer and his guest felt much as the Prince in the fairy-tale must have

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felt when he discovered the palace of the Sleeping Beauty. And then suddenly, as if to break the spell, from the lower end of the village street came the eldritch shriek of a motor-horn, and a vast and sumptuous limousine slid into view.

Lord Grebe stopped dead.

"It's Connie," he said. "That's the Duke of Dillwater's car. Thank heaven she's back!"

The car approached them, slowed down and stopped, and Lady Grebe, the Peer's young and lively wife, put her head out of the window. With her in the car were her sister Millie and the Duke himself.

"Why, it's Charles," she exclaimed, "and General Gout. What on earth are you doing with that thing on your head, Charles? And what's come over the village? There's nobody about."

The Duchess gripped her sister's arm.

"Quick, Connie," she said, "shut the window and let's get out of here. Those are gas-masks; in some unaccountable way the village has been poison-gassed!"

Lady Grebe sniffed the air.

"I can't smell anything," she said, "except the usual boiled cabbage. What's it all about, Charles? What have you been up to?"

Lord Grebe removed his helmet and wiped his brow.

"It's that confounded bear of yours, Connie. It's got loose in the village and devoured all the inhabitants."

"Don't be so ridiculous, Charles. Beethoven wouldn't hurt a fly. Besides, bears don't bite."

For answer, Lord Grebe pointed to the deserted playground.

"Then where," he demanded triumphantly, "are the school children?"

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"Great heavens, I can't believe it!" exclaimed Lady Grebe, jumping out of the car. "Where's Beethoven now? We must find him."

At this moment the front door of the Temperance Hotel was gently pushed ajar, and a grinning urchin—obviously the boot-boy—peered out.

"Hi, mister," he whispered hoarsely, "are you looking for the bear?"

Lord Grebe wheeled round and examined the youth through his monocle.

"Yes, my lad. Have you seen anythin' of the brute?"

"It's in the pub across the way. Lucky for us this is a temperance place; it would 'ave been in 'ere else."

The Duke and Duchess descended from the car, and the whole party crossed the road to the "Cow and Skittles." And there, in the tap-room, they found Beethoven the bear, snoring stertorously in the middle of the sanded floor, a drunken leer upon his face and at his side an overturned keg and an ever-widening pool of rum. A revolting spectacle!

Lord Grebe took in the situation at a glance and turned to his wife. Now, if ever, was his chance to do battle for the sanctity of the home.

"There you are, you see, Connie," he said, "the creature's as drunk as an owl. And that, if you please, is the animal you wanted to introduce into the Slyme Court family circle, just for the sake of scorin' off the Haggard woman and her miserable chameleon. You ought to be dashed well ashamed of yourself, what?"

Lady Grebe bit her lip in vexation, but she said nothing. Her husband proceeded to elaborate the theme.

"The beast arrived all right, as you said," he went on,

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"and Coombs put it in the pottin'-shed. But no sooner were our backs turned than the wretched dipsomaniac must needs go sneakin' off down the village, scarin' the wits out of the peasantry and bringin' everything to a



standstill, and start moppin' up rum by the hogshead in a common pub!

"Well, Connie, what I want to know is, what are you goin' to do about it? You can't leave the animal here—Lord knows, there's likely to be enough trouble about this business as it is—and I won't have it at the Court, that's flat." He turned to General Gout. "Come on, Gout, my

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dear fellow; there's no point in our hangin' about here; let's get back to the house, what? You can take off that fencin'-mask now; the bear's far too drunk to push your face in."

And arm-in-arm, swinging their shooting-sticks as they went, the Peer and his guest strode out of the tap-room of the "Cow and Skittles." For once in her life, Lady Grebe was forced to acknowledge defeat.

"What on earth am I to do, Millie?" she whispered hoarsely, clinging to her sister's arm. "Charles is perfectly right; we can't have a bear like that at the Court. It would disgrace us all, and I should never hear the last of it from Mavis Haggard. I wish to goodness I'd thought of something smaller, such as a duck-billed platypus or an armadillo."

At this critical moment, from the deserted street outside came the unmistakable, wheezy moaning of a hurdy-gurdy. It was not a tuneful sound, and upon Connie, the Duke, and the Duchess, as they stood gazing down at the inebriated animal in the middle of the floor, it made no particular impression; but in the breast of the bear Beethoven, despite his rum-sodden condition, it seemed to waken half-forgotten memories of long ago. The huge, ungainly creature lurched drunkenly to his feet, and stood for a moment with shaggy head on one side, listening intently. Then, walking erect upon his two hind legs, he shuffled with a peculiar, mincing gait towards the door. He was about to renew acquaintance with his old dancing-master!

Outside in the street, whither Lady Grebe and her companions had bolted precipitately, stood an organ-grinder of almost unbelievable antiquity. Greasy, grizzled

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locks protruded from beneath his battered, broad-brimmed hat, his face, the colour of an Egyptian papyrus, was seamed and wrinkled with age, and his stunted frame was bent and wizened as he crouched over his horrid engine, grinding out a hideous travesty of the "Londonderry Air." A pair of heavy gilt rings depending from the ears proclaimed his foreign origin.

At sight of him Beethoven the bear delivered himself of a joyous grunt and broke into a shuffling run. The aged musician looked up, the "Londonderry Air" broke off abruptly, and next moment, before the astonished eyes of Connie and her relations, beast and man had clasped one another in a tender embrace.

"Ah, Verdi, Verdi, *amigo mio!*" sobbed the old man, pillowing his head upon the bear's chest and allowing the huge animal to lick his face. "I looka for you all over da shop, and at last you come back to me, yes no?"

The Duke of Dillwater, a motionless spectator of this affecting scene, felt his arm being violently nudged, and, turning, found his sister-in-law at his side.

"He knows the bear," she whispered.

She beckoned to the old man, who disentangled himself from the bear's embrace, swept off his hat and bowed deeply. "This bear is an old friend of yours, eh?"

"*Si, si, signora,*" cried the old man ecstatically. "Verdi is my *amigo carissimo*, my brother, my dancing bear, better far than Pavlova, yes? For years we travel together, we playa da hurdy-gurdy, we dance, but we no get mocha da money." His voice broke. "At last I can feed him no more. I sell him, *signora*, to an animal trainer, a German. We say *Addio*. It is better so, yes?"

"So Verdi became Beethoven," put in the Duchess in

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excited tones. "Connie, don't you see? Here's a way out of all your difficulties."

But Lady Grebe had already seen.

"Listen," she said. "Beethov—Verdi is my bear now, but I don't want him any more. Would you like to have him back?"

The old man looked at her with a puzzled expression.

"*Signora?*" he asked.

"I will give you the bear. To keep for always. There's nothing to pay."

Next moment the aged organ-grinder had prostrated himself at her feet in the middle of the high road, while Verdi, *alias* Beethoven, solemnly executed a *pas seul* round the abandoned hurdy-gurdy.

"You'd better bring the bear up to the big house," said Lady Grebe, drying her eyes with a lace-edged pocket-handkerchief. "Coombs shall give you both something to eat."

An hour later Lord and Lady Grebe, the Duke and Duchess of Dillwater, and General Gout stood grouped upon the gravel outside the front door of Slyme Court, waving a kindly farewell to the old organ-grinder as he wheeled his hurdy-gurdy down the drive, the bear trotting happily by his side.

"That brute," mused the General, "would make a deuced fine hearthrug. Haven't seen a better specimen since the one I bagged at Naini Tal in '86. Pity you went up that tree, Grebe; you might have strangled the beast if you'd waited."

But this time Lord Grebe paid no attention to the expert.

"Now then, Connie," he said, speaking with some heat,

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"just you listen to me for once. Gout and I have spent a confoundedly perilous mornin' on your account, and I hope you're feelin' thoroughly ashamed of yourself, what? Dash it all, we might both have contracted foot-and-mouth disease!"

"I'm sorry, Charles," stammered Lady Grebe, "I didn't think——"

"Think? You don't have to think. You'll go down now, this very minute, to the village and pay the publican for all the rum that liquor-swillin' corybant soaked up. And it's no use you comin' to me for a cheque, because I'm dashed if I'll pay a penny of the damage. I'd rather——"

A faint, dry cough from behind him stemmed the flow of his Lordship's eloquence, and turning, he found Coombs, the butler, at his elbow.

"What is it now, Coombs?"

"I beg your pardon, my Lord," said the butler gravely, "but there is a party to see you."

"A party? Confound it, we've had enough of parties for one afternoon. What the——"

"A party from the 'Cow and Skittles.' He wishes to see your Lordship with reference to the bear Beethoven. I fear he is in a somewhat intractable mood, my Lord."

Lord Grebe looked meaningfully at his wife.

"Connie," he said.

"Very well, Charles," answered Lady Grebe.

Chapter X

Infants in Arms

A FEW years ago it would, perhaps, have been no exaggeration to say that in all the county of Loamshire there was no more enthusiastic rider to hounds, no more accomplished horseman, than Lord Grebe. For a whole decade he held office as Master of the Trym Valley Hunt, and even now, when lumbago has torn his Lordship from the saddle, his pink hunting-coat, the last word in sartorial correctness, is a familiar spectacle at the annual Hunt Ball. Although he follows hounds no more, he is occasionally to be seen hacking quietly along the leafy lanes in the neighbourhood of Slyme Court, astride a gentle, glossy-coated cob built more for comfort than for speed, and there are indications that his interest in horse-flesh is as keen to-day as ever it was. As witness his secret vice.

Lady Grebe would never have approved; she would have thought it vulgar—this quaint craving for equestrian exercise of the kind to be had on steam-driven merry-go-rounds. She would not have understood the wild exhilaration, the almost savage joy, experienced by her spouse as he sat crouching in the gaudy saddle of his wooden steed, his hands gripping the fluted, brazen pillar that rose perpendicularly from the animal's neck, and the wind whistling past his ears as he swung riotously round and round to the accompaniment of a braying mechanical organ. And it was because he was aware that his wife,

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Connie, would be unsympathetic towards this very human failing of his, and would unhesitatingly condemn his visits to crowded country fairs, basing her objection on the risk of mumps, measles, or other infectious complaints, that Lord Grebe felt compelled to indulge his craving "under the rose."

"Dash it all," he would mutter to himself, "a fellow must get a bit of ridin' now and again." And if by good fortune the annual fair at the market town of Milchester, four miles away, coincided with one of her Ladyship's periodical visits to London, he would attire himself in boots and breeches of irreproachable style and cut, and placing, by way of disguise, a pair of blue-tinted spectacles upon the bridge of his nose, would set out stealthily and on foot across the fields to enjoy a few hours of exhilarating sport in the saddle at threepence a turn. "Give a man," sings the poet, "a horse he can ride." And we can scarcely blame Lord Grebe because the instincts inherited from a long line of fox-hunting ancestors proved, on occasion, too much for him.

Milchester Fair begins, by ancient custom, on the first Monday in September, and lasts three days. If Lady Grebe had been aware of her husband's secret craving, it is likely that on the occasion with which this narrative deals she would have postponed her three-day visit to the Metropolis until after the Fair was over, in which event there would have been no story to tell; but the Peer was not in the habit of making a parade of his emotions, and nobody watching him as he handed his consort into the sumptuously appointed Daimler would have dreamed that there glowed within him fires of unholy satisfaction at the prospect of three whole days of uninterrupted sport

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upon the wooden horses. Indeed, he simulated regret at his wife's departure with a realism that Bluebeard might have envied.

"I say, Connie," he murmured, "must you really go? It's goin' to be dashed dull at the Court while you're away."

"Oh, you'll be all right, Charles," replied Lady Grebe, sinking into the cushioned seat of the limousine. "You've got your postcard albums, and you can get Coombs or one of the footmen to give you a game of Halma in the evenings. I hate leaving you, but I promised Aunt Alison I'd help her choose the wallpaper for her new flat, and besides, I've got to buy a christening present for Angela's baby."

"Ah yes, of course, I was forgettin' the baby. When's the christenin'; next week, isn't it? Better get an electric toaster; they're dashed useful instruments. Good stuff, toast."

The arrival of a baby boy at the gamekeeper's cottage on the Grebe estate had been a great event in the annals of Slyme Court, and there had been great rejoicing at the Court when Clive Worthington had burst in upon them at breakfast with the news that his young wife, Angela, had presented him with a son and heir. Lady Grebe, whose nature it was to fasten eagerly upon any excuse for making whoopee, had invited half the County to the christening of her new great-nephew, and her present visit to London was not unconnected with the preparations.

"Well, Charles," she said, "I must be pushing off. What are you going to do with yourself this morning?"

Lord Grebe started, and dropped his eyeglass. A full confession trembled for a moment on his lips; then he

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thought better of it. Connie must never know. On the other hand, it might be as well to put out a feeler.

"Eh, what's that?" he said, with an assumption of easy indifference. "Oh, I—well, to tell you the truth I had half thought of strollin' over to Milchester, just to have a look at the houses and so forth. Brainy scheme, what?"

Lady Grebe stiffened.

"Charles, don't be a fool," she said. "You can't possibly go to Milchester while the Fair's on. The place will be crowded with all sorts of people, and you'll be sure to pick up some horrible disease; glanders, or thrush—something beastly like that. Besides, you'll be deafened for life by the noise of those appalling merry-go-rounds. They ought to be prohibited by law."

"Oh, all right, my dear, just as you say. I dare say I'll find something to do. Might walk down to the cottage and see the baby. Or across to the Home Farm and look at the pigs. Anyway, don't you worry about me."

"Righto, Charles. Good-bye."

"Good-bye, Connie."

And the luxurious Daimler went smoothly away down the gravel carriage sweep. Lord Grebe waited until the rear number-plate of the car had disappeared from view round the bend, and then, turning into the house, made straight for his dressing-room. As he strode with purposeful tread along the passage there was an expression on his face such as one would expect to see on the countenance of a confirmed opium-addict when fresh supplies of the forbidden drug are offered to him for a mere song.

He was about to indulge his secret vice.

Milchester Fair is one of the largest surviving institutions of its kind in the British Isles. It takes place on a broad

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expanse of open common just to the north of the town, and gipsies, travelling showmen, and the purveyors of all kinds of cheapjack merchandise flock thither from near and far to participate in the great work of gulling the simple peasantry of Loamshire. For three days and three nights Milchester holds high carnival, the hotels and public-houses reap a rich harvest, and the roads leading to and from the fair-ground are thronged with seething masses of innocent merry-makers flourishing coloured paper "ticklers," balloons, and streamers, and playfully bombarding one another with bags of meal and confetti. At one end of the fair-ground is Hancock's World-Famous Menagerie, well patronized at three o'clock in the afternoon, when the two lions are fed; the centre is occupied by the side-shows—fat ladies, living skeletons, mermaids in bottles, waxworks, fortune-tellers' booths, and games of skill or chance; and at the other end are grouped the mechanical amusements—swing-boats, helter-skelter, and merry-go-rounds. And it is the merry-go-rounds that are responsible for the nerve-shattering orgy of sound blared forth unceasingly throughout the period of the Fair, making night hideous and day abominable.

Lord Grebe, immaculately attired in riding-kit, and wearing his blue-tinted spectacles, stood patiently in a queue awaiting admission to the booth of the Fat Lady. He had come to the Fair, as we know, principally for the sake of the riding, but the crowd near the merry-go-rounds had been dense on his arrival, and in these days of dieting, punkt-rollers, and the slim silhouette, one seldom, he reflected, got a chance of seeing a Fat Lady. He stood, then, in the queue, his sixpence ready in his hand, and a pleasurable thrill pervaded his being at the thought that he was

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tasting forbidden fruit. Suddenly an oily voice spoke at his elbow.

"Well, I'll be sugared if it ain't the Captain," said the voice. "You remember me, Captain, don't you? Ain't forgotten the bloke wot saved your life in days gone by? I was your right-'and man in the old Squadron when the 'Orse Guards charged the Turkish trenches at Achi Baba. Orful carnage there was that day, but Lor' bless you, sir, you and me and the boys put it acrost 'em, good and 'earty."

Lord Grebe turned and examined the speaker through the tinted glasses. He had no very clear recollection of having served in the Horse Guards, either during the Gallipoli campaign or at any other time, and the features of the speaker stirred no answering chord in his memory. He found a seedy-looking little man in a battered bowler hat and a loud check suit sadly out at the elbows, a man whose boots were in need of repair, but who, in spite of his impoverished appearance, breathed a rich aroma of hops.

"Go away, my dear fellow," said the Peer. "I've nothing for you."

The stranger looked pained.

"Oh, come now, Captain, you ain't goin' to pretend you've forgotten me? *Me*, wot saved you from a 'orrible death by liquid fire at the Battle of Mons? Why, I was with you all through that show; I was with you when you saw them angels. 'Angels my foot,' I says to you at the time, thinkin' it was the oficers' mess whisky, but sure enough out comes the 'ole story next morning in a newspaper. I 'ad to believe you then."

"I don't know you," persisted Lord Grebe. "What's your name?"



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"There now," replied the stranger in an awed voice. "I wouldn't 'ave believed it possible, s'welp me I wouldn't. If anybody 'ad come up to me this morning and said, 'the Captain's forgotten you, 'e's forgotten 'is old batman double-six-eight-four-o Smith, J. W.,' I'd 'ave laughed in 'is face. Well, well, the captains and the kings depart, put not your trust in princes, as the poet Wordsworth said, but it's cruel 'ard."

"I'm afraid, my dear chap, I don't remember your face in the least," said the Peer, "but no doubt you're right. As a matter of fact, I did once know a fellow of the name of Smith, but I fancy his initials were W. J. He was a bookmaker."

"Look 'ere, Captain," the stranger's voice changed to a husky whine, "you don't 'appen to 'ave such a thing as a fiver on you, for the sake of old times? You remember that night at Le Cateau in nineteen-sixteen, when the Squadron was lying in ambush for the Kaiser in a 'ail storm? 'Corporal,' you says to me, 'I'm a temperate man by nature and upbringing, but I'd give a couple of months' pay for a drink.' 'Right you are,' I says, 'it's a bargain,' and next moment there you was, as 'appy as a lark, with a double tot of rum in your 'and. And now 'ere you are, a bloated plutocrat, on your way to see the Fat Lady; and 'ere am I, double-six-eight-four-o Corporal Smith, J. W., without the price of a bed for the night."

Lord Grebe eyed the speaker with suspicion.

"It's my belief," he said, "you're one of these dashed impostors."

Lord Grebe was in a quandary. It was on the tip of his tongue to threaten the fellow with the police, but he reflected that he could scarcely put the threat into execution

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without disclosing his own identity and inviting a lot of undesirable publicity. Meanwhile, the man looked like clinging indefinitely to his coat-tails.

"I'm sorry, my dear chap," he said, diving a hand into his pocket and producing a card-case, "I have practically no money on me at the moment, but if you like to call on me at that address early this afternoon I'll see what I can do for you. I suppose," he added as an afterthought, "a couple of tickets for the helter-skelter would be no use?"

The queue surged suddenly forward, bearing Lord Grebe with it into the Fat Lady's booth, and double-six-eight-four-o Corporal Smith, J. W., was left standing on the grass outside, examining a slip of pasteboard with rapidly growing interest.

"Strewth!" he muttered to himself as he turned away, "the perisher was one of them blasted Lords!"

In times of depression or mental fatigue there is no better tonic than a visit to a Fat Lady. Julius Caesar spoke a jugful when, on meeting that thin slab of misery, Yond Cassius, he expressed a preference for gentlemen of full habit, and it is reasonable to suppose that he liked his womenfolk to run to *embonpoint*. Calphurnia probably had to pay double fare on the Roman buses. So now Lord Grebe, entering the crowded booth at Milchester Fair, feasted his eyes on the Fat Lady and came away immensely cheered by the spectacle of those opulent rolls of flesh. A world in which so monumental a figure lived, moved, and had her being could not, he felt, be wholly bad, and he whistled a merry stave as, emerging once more into the daylight, he made his way through the jostling throng in the direction of the merry-go-rounds. The crowds near these braying engines of amusement seemed to him, as he

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approached them, to have appreciably thinned, and the old craving assailed him with renewed vigour. He would get his riding after all. One of the roundabouts was slowing down on the completion of a ride, and the Peer was just on the point of climbing into the crimson-plush saddle of a wooden animal with the head and neck of an ostrich and the body of a dromedary when he felt a light touch on his arm. For a moment he was afraid that it must be his old friend double-six-eight-four-o Corporal Smith, J. W., returned to renew his importunities, but on looking round he found a diminutive nursemaid carrying a baby, and gazing up into his face with an expression of wistful appeal.

"Excuse me, sir," said the girl, who could not have been much more than fifteen. "Cook said as 'ow I didn't ought to speak to strange gentlemen, but you got such a kind face I couldn't 'elp meself. Wearin' them glasses you look just like 'Arold Lloyd."

"Well, my dear, it's dashed good of you to say so," replied Lord Grebe.

"Be a sport and 'old the baby for me while I go on the 'urdy-gurdy, sir," went on the girl. "I've always wanted to ride on one of them ostriches."

Lord Grebe's eyes sparkled as he reflected that light was sometimes vouchsafed to even the lowliest of God's creatures. In this pathetic, illiterate little nursemaid there glowed a spark of the divine fire. Here was a kindred spirit, a fellow-worshipper at the shrine of the wooden horse, one who was prepared to confide her sacred charge to a perfect stranger for the sake of a few brief, exhilarating minutes astride a mechanically propelled steed. Such devotion, he felt, should not go unrewarded.

"By all means, my dear," he said. "Give me the child,

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and run along and enjoy yourself. I'll wait for you here."

Next moment, the nursemaid was gone, and Lord



Grebe, clutching the infant awkwardly to his chest, found to his dismay that he was exciting the curiosity and criticism of his neighbours in the crowd.

"Hi, mister," said a stern-visaged, elderly woman with

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feathers in her hat, "you're 'oldin' that kid upside down. It's goin' purple in the face, the pore little thing."

"Oh, thanks very much," stammered the Peer in confusion, hurriedly though clumsily correcting his error. "I'm not used to babies. Dashed tricky things to handle, what?"

The stern-featured woman snorted disapproval, and Lord Grebe judged it advisable to move away from her. The roundabout began to slow down, but the little nursemaid, who was evidently enjoying herself, showed no signs of preparing to vacate the saddle of her wooden charger. Perhaps she meant to sit out another turn. And then, just as Lord Grebe was considering the possibility of tucking the baby under one arm and signalling to the girl with the other, he saw something which drove the blood from his veins and left him a blanched and quivering husk. A large and costly motor-car drew up on the outskirts of the crowd, and from it descended two familiar figures—his sister-in-law, the Duchess of Dillwater, and Connie, his wife!

What Lady Grebe was doing at Milchester Fair, when by all the rules governing correct conduct she should have been well on her way to London, the Peer did not pause to ask himself. "His not to reason why, his but to do a guy," and, clutching the baby to his bosom, he dived precipitately through the close-packed multitude and made for the open country. It was, he told himself, of the first importance that Connie should not know that he had visited the Fair against her wishes; he trembled to think of what would happen if she found him there carrying a baby, even though the baby had been acquired in perfect good faith, and his only object now was to get home to

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Slyme Court as quickly as possible. Swearing horribly under his breath, and still clasping the infant to his chest, Lord Grebe set off across the fields in the direction of his country home.

The residence of Clive and Angela Worthington lies on the edge of the Home Woods, close to the Milchester road. Lord Grebe, treading delicately, like Agag—partly through caution, and partly because his corns, at the end of his four-mile tramp across country, were hurting him like the very devil—approached the cottage and peered in at the windows. Nobody was about, but just outside the front door stood a luxurious perambulator, in which Angela's first-born lay sleeping peacefully in the September sunshine. Lord Grebe, his unwanted burden in his arms, crept stealthily up to the vehicle and peeped in, and as he did so there came to him one of those vivid flashes of inspiration that from time to time governed (or misgoverned) his actions. The pram was a large one; the Worthington child a small infant. There was ample room for two babies side by side upon the same pillow. Looking quickly this way and that to make sure his movements were unobserved, he raised the coverlet and popped the infant he was carrying into the pram. Both children slept on undisturbed. Then, thrusting his hands deep into the pockets of his breeches, Lord Grebe strolled off in the direction of the Court, whistling nonchalantly as he went. After all, he reflected, Clive Worthington was his secretary, and it was a secretary's job to get his employer out of scrapes.

Some twenty minutes later, having stripped himself of his riding-kit, he was wallowing in the luxury of a hot bath and wondering whether Coombs had remembered

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to pour port into the new Stilton, when there came a thunderous hammering on the door of the bathroom, and Clive Worthington clamoured for admittance.

"I say, Uncle Charles," he cried, "let me in, quick. I must see you."

"You can't. I'm in the bath."

"Then you must get out and open the door. An extraordinary thing has happened, and I've got to see you at once."

Lord Grebe reared himself up out of the water, swung a leg over the side of the bath, and, reaching out, unbolted the door. Then he got back into the bath as his secretary burst into the room.

"I say, Uncle Charles, what are we to do?" cried the young man. "We've found an extra baby in our pram."

"What do you mean—you've found an extra baby?"

"Exactly what I say, Uncle Charles. Angela put the kid in his pram about an hour ago—I saw her do it—and stuck the pram outside our front door in the sunshine. When she went out just now to bring him in, she found him there all right, fast asleep, but there was another baby in the pram as well—a strange baby, of about the same age. The uncanny thing is that the two kids look exactly alike."

Lord Grebe took a deep draught of bath water from his loofah.

"There's nothing in that, my dear fellow," he said. "All babies look alike at that age. No hair, no teeth, no features to speak of. Undistinguished. You're quite certain Angela hadn't been whackin' the gin bottle, just to keep her strength up, what? Lots of nursin' mothers do, I believe."

"Oh, rot, Uncle Charles. I tell you I saw both the kids with my own eyes, and I'm as sober as a judge."

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"Well, then," pronounced Lord Grebe, standing up and reaching for a towel, "all I can say is, there must have been some silly mistake at the start. You can't have counted right in the first place. As soon as I'm dressed I'll send a wire to your Aunt Connie tellin' her to buy two christenin' presents instead of one. It's twins you've got, young fellow."

"Oh, damn it all, Uncle Charles, stop talking nonsense!" exclaimed Clive petulantly. "This is a serious matter. What the devil are we to do?"

Lord Grebe considered the point for a moment or two, massaging himself briskly with the towel as he did so. His wife, for some reason best known to herself, had not gone to London according to plan, and at any moment she might return to the Court. To avoid possible recriminations it would, he reflected, be better for him to decline to be mixed up in this baby business.

"I don't see what it's got to do with me, young fellow," he said crossly. "Why don't you wire to Connie? You've got her address."

"Look here, Uncle Charles"—Clive Worthington's voice was stern—"Angela's got this new baby downstairs now; she brought it here in the pram; and if you don't stop drivelling and do something about it I'll bring it up and dump it outside the bathroom door."

"Don't do that, my dear fellow. I'll be down in a jiffy."

And with feverish haste the Peer began to scramble into his clothes. He listened while Clive's footsteps receded down the passage, and then, crossing to the window, drew the muslin curtain aside and looked out on to the gravel carriage sweep. Two objects of interest at once obtruded themselves upon his notice. The first was a

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perambulator standing alone and unattended, although from his point of vantage he could see that it was not unoccupied; the second, approaching the house with slouching gait from farther down the drive, was his familiar spirit, double-six-eight-four-o Corporal Smith, J. W. Lord Grebe's mind worked rapidly. Here was a happy association of ideas. Rapidly completing his toilet he left the bathroom and darted across the passage to his dressing-room, where he took from a drawer a well-filled note-case and stuffed it into his pocket. Then, moving stealthily by way of the back stairs, he joined the Corporal in the drive.

"Hist!" he said—or words to that effect—placing a finger to his lips. "Don't make a sound."

"That's all right, Captain," whispered the veteran of Achi Baba; "I 'ardly recognized you without them blue glasses. Sorry I'm a bit before me time, but the wolf 'as been 'owlin' at me door something chronic, and I thought maybe if I came early I might get a bite to eat. Didn't know you was a family man," he added, pointing to the pram.

Lord Grebe, with fingers that trembled with agitation, produced his note-case and extracted a couple of crisp five-pound notes.

"You see that baby?" he said hoarsely. "It's got here by mistake."

Corporal Smith grinned from ear to ear.

"Lor' bless you, Captain, don't I know it?" he replied. "That's wot we always say, when it's too late." He examined the occupant of the pram with interest. "'And-some child, ain't 'e? The livin' image of 'is dad."

"Don't be a fool, Smith, or whatever your name is,"

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retorted Lord Grebe indignantly. "That's not my baby; I don't know whose it is. I want you to take it away."

"Gorblimey, guv'nor, you ain't serious?"

"Of course I'm serious. I want you to take the baby back to Milchester Fair and hand it over to the first policeman you meet. You can leave the pram here."

"Oh, I couldn't do that, Captain; reely, I couldn't. I ain't *persona grata* with the police in these parts. Gawd only knows why."

Lord Grebe became impatient.

"Well, never mind about that," he said. "Get rid of the child somehow, and don't say anything about me. Here's a couple of five-pound notes for you, and there'll be more where those come from if you do as I say."

Corporal Smith took the notes and fingered them dubiously.

"I don't like it, guv'nor, and that's a fact," he said. "Wot am I to say if anyone asks me where I got the kid?"

"Whatever you like, so long as you don't drag me into it," replied the Peer. "Tell 'em you found it in the bulrushes, or on the front-door step of the Chief Constable of the County. Only take it away from here."

The Corporal hesitated, and was lost.

"All right, Captain," he said with a gulp, "I'll do it. But you'll forgive my sayin' as you've become a very wicked man since the old days in the trenches at Boulong-sur-Mer."

And, crossing to the perambulator, he deftly removed the sleeping infant.

Lord Grebe, whistling softly to himself, joined Clive and Angela Worthington in the Slyme Court library. He was of opinion that he had extricated himself with

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considerable astuteness from a thoroughly awkward predicament. After all, he reflected, no ordinary dim-wit would have conceived so brainy a scheme, and the only fly in the ointment was that he would never be able to tell Connie of his strategic triumph.

"Well, children," he said, "where's this baby there's all the fuss about?"

Next moment he stood as one thunderstruck, yammering feebly in the doorway, his tongue adhering to the roof of his mouth. His senses swam, there was a drumming in his ears, and the whole of his past life unfolded itself, panorama-fashion, before the eyes of his mind. For Angela Worthington was advancing towards him across the library floor, and in her arms she carried a baby—the baby, *fons et origo* of all his troubles.

"Here he is, Uncle Charles," she said. "He's rather a duck, isn't he, but not nearly so sweet as our own darling Tootles?"

It was as though ice-cold fingers had clutched at Lord Grebe's heart.

"Where," he stammered, but even as he put the question he knew the answer, "where is darling Tootles?"

"We left him outside in the pram," said Angela. "He was sleeping so peacefully it seemed a pity to disturb him."

"My God!" said Lord Grebe.

Sideways, the country seat of the Duke of Dillwater, lies a little off the main road from Milchester, on the London side. The Duchess is not often to be found there, for she spends a large part of the year in Town or at Monte Carlo, at which latter place she contrives to dispose of a considerable proportion of her husband's not uncom-

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fortable income. At the time with which this narrative deals, however, she was spending a few days on the ducal estate, and it was therefore in no way remarkable that her sister, Connie, London-bound in the big Daimler, should have instructed her chauffeur to turn off to Sideways after passing Milchester, and so afford her an opportunity of a few minutes' sisterly exchange of chin-music. She found the Duchess in her boudoir, cooking patent baby food over a stove.

"Hallo, my dear," she exclaimed, "how are you? I'm just on my way to Town, so I thought I'd blow in. What on earth are you doing? Is Theobald on a diet again?"

"Oh, come in, Connie," said her sister. "I'm glad to see you. As a matter of fact, I've been meaning to ring you up and ask you to come over. I've adopted a baby."

"Millie, you haven't!"

"But I have. That's why I'm cooking this foul muck. Theobald and I felt we'd like to hear the patter of tiny footsteps along the ancestral corridors, so we advertised in the Press, and got *the* niftiest morsel of humanity you ever saw. Eyes like limpid pools of blue-black ink, and a mouth like Aladdin's cave. He's out with the nursemaid now, the little pet, but if you'll stay to lunch you can see him when he comes in from his walk."

"I'd love to, Millie," said Lady Grebe regretfully, "but I simply can't stop. Charlie Headforth has promised me lunch at the Senior Ghouls' Club—*so* exclusive, my dear—and I'd never forgive myself if I kept him waiting. I tell you what, though. If you've any idea where the nursemaid has taken the child for his walk, we can probably find them in a couple of shakes in my car. I could bring you back, and then go on to Town. I'm dying to see the kid."

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"My dear, you've hit it," exclaimed the Duchess. "If you don't mind watching this saucepan, I'll nip downstairs and find out where Katie has taken my little jewel."

"O.K., sister," said Lady Grebe facetiously.

As the perspicacious reader will have already guessed, the lure of the roundabouts at Milchester Fair had proved too much for Katie, the nursemaid. She had pushed the perambulator all the way to the fair-ground, and then, parking the vehicle on the outskirts of the merry, shouting throng, had taken the infant in her arms and plunged headlong into the vortex. Before leaving Sideways, however, the wayward girl had confided in the cook her intention of visiting Milchester, and her mistress thus had no difficulty in securing a clue to her whereabouts. Every revolution of the Daimler's engine brought the Duchess of Dillwater nearer to her adopted child's custodian, and Lord Grebe nearer to bad trouble.

After a fruitless search of the fair-ground, Lady Grebe and her sister turned the car, and it was not long before they overtook a tear-stained, distracted nursemaid wheeling an empty perambulator. They drew up at the side of the road and swooped down upon the girl, the Duchess with womanly intuition scenting something amiss.

"Katie," she cried, "where *have* you been? Where's baby?"

"'E's bin took, mum—I mean, your Grace," replied the little nursemaid, through her sobs. "A gentleman at the fair took 'im. I don't know where 'e is."

"What do you mean, Katie? For God's sake pull yourself together. You took baby to the fair?"

"Yes, your Grace. I thought 'e'd like listenin' to the music. And as we was standin' by the roundabouts a orful

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man came and threatened me with a club. 'All is lost,' 'e says, just like that; 'give me the cheeild, curse you,' an' I—well, I don't remember nothin' more."

The Duchess glanced at her sister. Kidnapping, in America, had become a popular recreation, but so far the infection had not crossed the Atlantic. Still, everything had to have a beginning.

"Can you describe this man?" asked Lady Grebe, not unkindly.

"No, mum," answered the girl. "'E was dressed for ridin', and 'e looked rather like the happaration in that film, *The Phantom of the Circus*. Flashin' eyes, and lascivious lips, if you know what I mean, mum."

"Come on, Connie," said the Duchess, "there's no time to be lost. We'd better go back and have another hunt round the fair-ground. If we can't find baby there we'll have to go to the police. But I was forgetting. How about your trip to Town?"

"Oh, that can wait, Millie," replied Lady Grebe. "This baby-hunt is far more important than Charlie Headforth's lunch. Let's get back into the car."

The second search of the fair-ground was exhaustive, and occupied a considerable time, but neither in the menagerie nor in the booth of the Fat Lady did the Duchess of Dillwater and her sister run the missing infant to ground. It had disappeared as completely as if the earth had opened and swallowed it up. At last they abandoned their quest, at Lady Grebe's suggestion, and adopted a new plan of action.

"Let's go back to Slyme Court," she said. "You'll be able to rest there, we can telephone the police, and Charles can be turned on to do something. He's an incompetent

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ass in many ways, but he's got some kind of a graft with the local constabulary."

About a couple of furlongs from Slyme Court they came upon a shabby-looking gentleman sitting on a milestone. He wore a battered bowler hat and a loud check suit, and in his arms he nursed a sleeping infant. Double-six-eight-four-o Corporal Smith, J. W., was exceedingly weary; moreover, he had a strong distaste for the task which lay ahead of him. He had been ready, so he would have said, to face without flinching the enemy guns at Achi Baba, Mons, and Boulong-sur-Mer; during the long years of his career he had been in many tight corners; but this business of disposing of an unwanted baby was the toughest proposition he had yet struck. He sprang expectantly to his feet as the big Daimler pulled up alongside.

"Excuse me," he said, and his voice assumed a professional whine, "I wonder if either of you two ladies could do anything for a couple of Russian refugees, victims of the revolution? I've tramped all the way from St. Petersburg—Leningrad, they call it now—and me and the child 'ere ain't 'ad nothin' since early this mornin'. I was a Grand Duke once," he added regretfully.

The two ladies thus addressed had descended from the car, and were examining the baby with interest.

"It's not mine, Connie," said the Duchess. "We're on the wrong track. Give the poor man half a crown and let's go on."

But Lady Grebe was exhibiting marked signs of agitation.

"You brute," she cried suddenly, "you've stolen that child! Millie, I tell you this is Angela's baby; we're only just in time!"

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"Angela's baby?" cried the Duchess incredulously. "But, my dear, I don't understand."

Corporal Smith came gallantly to the rescue of beauty in distress.

"Bless you, lady, there's more things in 'Eaven and earth than ever went through the heye of a needle," he said. "I dunno 'oo this child belongs to, but I can only remark, which I know to be gospel truth, and may I drop dead if I tell a lie, Lord Grebe give it to me."

"Lord Grebe gave you this baby?"

"S'welp me Gawd, cross me 'eart," said the Corporal in emphatic tones. "'E give me the baby and told me to take it to the police."

Lady Grebe touched him on the arm.

"Here," she commanded, "give the child to me. I don't believe a word you say." And as the bewildered warrior prepared to obey she turned to her sister with a helpless gesture.

"Charles has gone clean off his rocker," she said. "For God's sake let's get home."

Meanwhile, Lord Grebe had been getting into serious trouble at Slyme Court. Confronted by an infuriated nephew and niece, he found himself compelled to admit that he had disposed of their child to a perfect stranger; a stranger, moreover, of very doubtful reputation.

"I tell you, Clive, my dear chap," he protested, "I only did it to help you. You complained that there was an extra baby in your pram, and when this ex-service johnny turned up it struck me that here was an excellent way of gettin' rid of it. I had no idea the kid in the pram was Tootles. As I said before, all babies look alike, and upon my soul I'm dashed if I know what you're squealin' about

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now. You've got one infant, which is what you started with. You aren't down on the deal."

But in spite of the Peer's protests, Clive and Angela persisted in the illogical view that they had got the wrong baby, and that it mattered. The situation, indeed, was growing somewhat strained when Lady Grebe and the Duchess arrived at the Court with their roadside find, and both babies having been restored to their respective owners a happy reunion was enjoyed by all.

By all, that is, except Lord Grebe, who was subjected to a severe cross-examination, and resented it.

"I don't know what the devil you're talkin' about," he exclaimed crossly. "You're not fit to have babies, any of you, if you can't take better care of 'em and prevent 'em gettin' mixed up. When I was a kid, I had a face that could be recognized, and nobody ever mistook me for anyone else. Connie," he added, "I shan't be in to tea. I'm goin' to drive over to Milchester and have a look at the fair, and be damned to the scarlet fever!"

Early that same afternoon a visitor to the merry-go-rounds at Milchester Fair might have observed a middle-aged gentleman, in faultless riding-kit, seated astride a wooden animal with the body of a dromedary and the head and neck of an ostrich. It was Lord Grebe, and a happy smile played over his vacant countenance as his uncouth steed swung round and round to the accompaniment of a braying mechanical organ. At his side, mounted upon another strange-looking beast and racing him neck-and-neck round the ring, was a little man in a battered bowler hat and a loud check suit.

"This is a bit of all right, ain't it, Captain?" shouted the little man above the roar of the machinery. "Puts you in

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mind of the day the 'Orse Guards stormed the 'Indenburg Line."

"Eh, what's that?" yelled Lord Grebe. "I can't hear a word you say, my dear fellow, but I expect you're right."

Two ex-service men had got together.

Chapter XI

Marksmanship and Mermaids

THAT Coombs should have had a constitutional aversion to cats was scarcely remarkable, for the pages of history are rich in examples of this antipathy. Henri III of France, for instance, swooned if he caught sight of a cat, Napoleon Bonaparte showed a morbid horror of the same harmless, necessary creature, and Sir Richard Whittington was so bored by the cat in his Newcastle home that he walked all the way to London and became principal boy in a Christmas pantomime.

Coombs's reactions were no less violent, and it speaks volumes for his stoical self-possession that he was able to keep his feelings well under control in the presence of Lady Grebe, who, like so many of her sex, was fond of cats and liked having them about the place. There was one occasion, however, when his inherent dislike of these gentle, fireside animals betrayed him into an indiscretion whose repercussions were to bring him to the very brink of disaster and put in jeopardy the continuance of his butlerial career at Slyme Court. There were other contributory causes, of course, such as the impertinence of Jessica, the scullery-maid, and the insufferable conceit of Edgar, the boot-boy, but the *fons et origo* of the trouble, as Coombs himself subsequently admitted, was undoubtedly the cat, and the knowledge that it was the cat which had come within an ace of encompassing his downfall increased his antipathy to the whole species.

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It was eleven o'clock on a bright, sunny morning in early September, and Coombs, who had been engaged in supervising the efforts of the second footman to clean the silver in the pantry, repaired, as his custom was, to the servants' hall to partake of a glass of sherry wine with Mrs. Gamble, the cook. In his hand he carried Lord Grebe's christening mug, a noble piece of Victorian silver, weighing anything from one and a half to two pounds, for it was his intention to restore it to its proper position on the mantelpiece in his Lordship's library.

The window overlooking the kitchen garden was wide open, and the butler, glancing idly across the green expanse of cabbages, asparagus, and runner beans, was brought up sharply by the spectacle of an enormous tabby cat sunning itself lazily on the top of a low brick wall not twenty yards away.

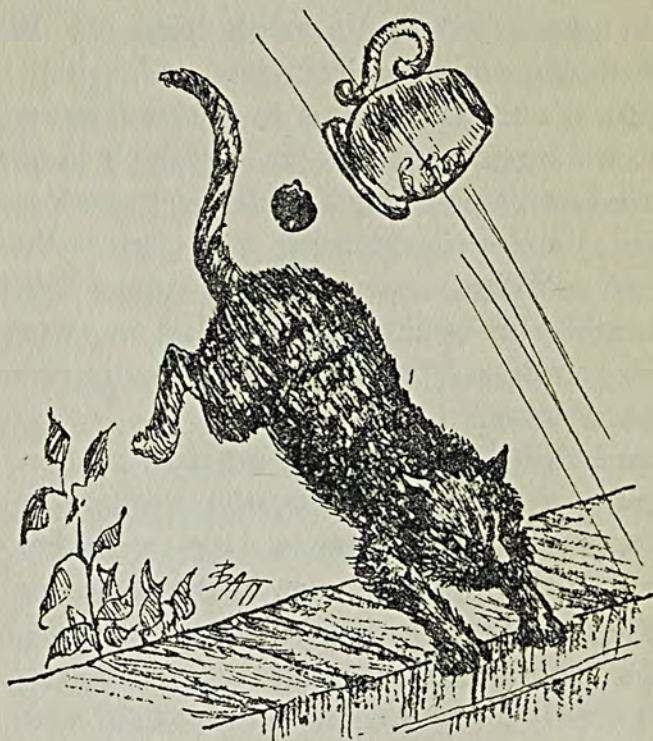
Seldom indeed is a confirmed cat-hater presented with so tempting a target, and Coombs, realizing that her Ladyship was at that moment busy with her correspondence in the morning-room at the other end of the house, was not slow to profit by this heaven-sent opportunity. His right hand, grasping the christening mug, travelled slowly back, then sharply forward with terrific force, and the mug, flying as clean as a whistle through the open window, went singing across the garden in the direction of the recumbent feline.

The butler's aim was unerring, and the shot sped true to its mark, but unhappily the target, from being stationary, was suddenly galvanized into swift activity. The cat sprang nimbly from its perch in the nick of time, and the heavy missile sailed harmlessly overhead, to come to rest with a nerve-shattering detonation in the middle of a glass

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cucumber-frame. Every bullet, so runs the old adage, has its billet.

Coombs stood and contemplated the damage in some dismay, and a suspicion of a frown overshadowed his normally impassive countenance. What, he asked himself,



would Rogers, the head-gardener, say when he found that the privacy of his treasured cucumbers had been so rudely disturbed? What would Lady Grebe say when she learned that her butler had been making use of the cat as an Aunt Sally? What, above all, would his Lordship say when it was reported to him that his christening mug, the gift of an uncle long since dead, had been employed as a missile?

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Shaking his head sadly, the butler was about to turn away from the open window when he heard a faint snigger at his elbow, and swinging round on the instant, found Jessica, the scullery-maid, quivering with barely suppressed merriment.

"And what, may I inquire," he said, sternly, "is the matter with you?"

"Lor', Mr. Coombs," giggled Jessica, "that was a rotten shot and no mistake. You 'ad ought to take lessons from young Edgar; 'e's a oner at shyin'. You should 'ave seen the coco-nuts 'e brought back from Milchester Fair last night."

Coombs drew himself up stiffly.

"When I require your advice, my girl," he said, "I shall not hesitate to ask for it. In the meantime, have the goodness to go into the garden and retrieve the object of virtue from the cucumber-frame."

Jessica bridled.

"All right, all right, Mr. Coombs," she answered, "there ain't no call for you to get 'uffy. I was only sayin' as that young Edgar's a better shot than you are, and that's true enough, by the look of things. 'E won six coco-nuts at the fair yesterday; you ask 'im to show you."

"I am not interested in young Edgar or his coco-nuts," said the butler coldly. "Kindly do as I tell you at once, my girl, or you'll find yourself in Queer Street."

"Now then, you pert young 'ussy," put in Mrs. Gamble, the cook, "don't you go givin' Mr. Coombs none of your sauce. 'E's old enough to be your father."

"Great-grandfather, more like," tittered Jessica, backing towards the door. "All right, Mr. Coombs, I'm just going."

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"These modern gals," observed Mrs. Gamble, when the door had closed upon the insubordinate scullery wench, "want keepin' in their place. When I first went into service I wouldn't 'ave dared to address any of the hupper servants that disrespectful. I don't know what the world's a-comin' to, Mr. Coombs, that I don't. We shall 'ave that Jessica makin' eyes at 'is Lordship before long, I shouldn't wonder."

Coombs, who was engaged in pouring out two glasses of Amontillado, made no reply, and at that moment the door opened again, and Edgar, the boot-boy, stepped jauntily into the room. He was whistling a lively air, and piled up in his arms were half a dozen coco-nuts.

"'Ere you are, Cookie," he said cheekily. "Roll, bowl, or pitch. Every time a bag o' nuts or a fat cigar. Look what I won over at the fair yesterday. Six lovely nuts, all wi' faces just like old Grebe 'imself."

Something seemed to snap in Coombs's brain, causing him suddenly to see red. He had always prided himself on his marksmanship, and Jessica's suggestion that he should take lessons from the boot-boy had come as a damaging blow to his self-esteem. Now, to crown all, came the boot-boy himself, with his coco-nuts, his swaggering insolence, and his derisive remarks concerning his employer, Lord Grebe. It was too much. In three strides the butler crossed the room, and effaced the grin from Edgar's impish countenance with a singing box on the ear which sent him reeling back to the wall, while the coco-nuts, released from his grasp, bounced and rattled across the linoleum-covered floor.

"You had better run along back to your duties, my lad," he said calmly, "and if I ever hear you again speaking

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disrespectfully of your betters I shall advise his Lordship to discharge you without notice."

The boot-boy, a hand pressed to the side of his head, took himself ruefully off, and Coombs lifted a brimming glass of sherry.

"Mrs. Gamble," he said gravely, "your very good health."

"My best respects to you, Mr. Coombs," replied the cook, raising the other glass. "You 'ad ought to 'ave done that to Jessica, the impudent young minx."

Coombs set his glass down on the table and raised a deprecating hand. "I have never in my life struck a woman," he said. "Such an action would be the negation of all my principles."

When Jessica returned, shortly afterwards, with the christening mug, the butler took it from her and examined it minutely for signs of damage. Happily there were none, although the missile had been hurled with considerable force, and Coombs, having finished his sherry, carried the mug along to the library.

Lord Grebe was lying flat on his stomach on the hearth-rug, engaged in a solo game of Corinthian bagatelle. His eyeglass was screwed firmly into his right eye, and he contemplated with an expression of stern determination the polished walnut board across which the little metal balls chased one another at the behest of his dexterously wielded cue. He looked up irritably as the butler entered the room.

"Yes, Coombs, what is it?" he asked testily. "Can't you see I'm busy playin' bagatelle? Swan *versus* Edgar, and Edgar's got a lead of three hundred and fifty on the first two games. Whatever it is, put it down on the writin'-table, there's a good chap."

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The butler closed the door noiselessly behind him.

"I regret being obliged to disturb you, my Lord," he said, "especially when your Lordship is working, but the fact is, a most unfortunate incident has occurred, which I conceived it my duty to report. I shall not detain your Lordship long."

"I should dashed well hope not!" said the Peer, raising himself to a sitting position. "This fellow Swan has been simply pilin' on the fifties, and it looks like bein' a confoundedly close thing. What's the matter? If the cook's got chicken-pox it's no use comin' to me; I'm not a doctor."

The butler coughed.

"Mrs. Gamble," he said, "when I left her two minutes ago appeared to be enjoying robust health, my Lord. The trouble is, I fear, more deeply seated."

Lord Grebe struggled to his feet and screwed his monocle even more firmly into position.

"Come on, Coombs, out with it," he said. "There's no point in beatin' about the confounded bush, what?"

"No, my Lord, I will endeavour to expedite my report. Not ten minutes ago I had an unhappy *contretemps* with a cat in the kitchen garden. The animal was preening itself in an insolent manner on the top of the low wall overlooking the asparagus bed, and in a perhaps too hastily conceived attempt to dislodge it with the aid of a projectile, I had the misfortune to destroy a pane of glass in one of the cucumber-frames."

"My dear fellow, you don't mean to say you missed?"

"Not precisely, my Lord. My aim, I flatter myself, was accurate enough, but the animal side-stepped. I need hardly add that I shall make good the damage to the cucumber-frame from my own private resources."

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Lord Grebe waved the suggestion aside.

"That's all right, Coombs," he said. "You'd much better write it off as an act of God, or whatever they call it. How were you to know the dashed cat was goin' to jump sideways?"

"I am very much obliged to you, my Lord," replied Coombs, with a sigh of relief. "I should be still more deeply obliged if your Lordship would refrain from mentioning the distressing affair to her Ladyship. She has, as your Lordship is aware, a leaning towards cats."

"Good heavens, Coombs," cried the Peer, "I'd no more dream of tellin' Connie—her Ladyship—about it than of ridin' a mule in the National! Don't you worry about it any more, there's a good fellow, and I'll tell Rogers to have the frame repaired."

"Very good, my Lord."

The butler reverently placed his employer's christening mug in the centre of the library mantelpiece, while Lord Grebe resumed his prone position before the bagatelle board. Coombs coughed again.

"I beg your pardon, my Lord," he said, "but there is one other little matter before you recommence work. If your Lordship could spare me for this afternoon, I should like to visit the fair at Milchester."

Lord Grebe sat bolt upright, dropping his eyeglass with a tinkle on to the bagatelle board.

"You, Coombs?" he exclaimed. "What the deuce do *you* want to go to the fair for? Are you a helter-skelter fan?"

"No, my Lord." The butler dived a hand into his trouser-pocket and produced a folded slip of paper. "I understand from this advertisement, which was introduced into the

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house by Edgar, the boot-boy, that a couple of mermaids are on view at the fair this year."

"Mermaids, Coombs? I expect it's a misprint for barmaids, and you can take it from me, my dear fellow, you don't have to go to Milchester Fair to see those."

Coombs unfolded the slip of paper, smoothed out the creases and handed it to his employer.

"Your Lordship may care to peruse the advertisement," he said.

Lord Grebe studied the document carefully with the aid of his monocle. It was couched in simple language, and the spelling in some places was slightly inaccurate.

MARVELLS OF THE DEEP

(First Time At Milchester)

TWO GENUINE MERMAIDS

CAUGHT BY PROFFESSOR JAKE SKINNER
OFF THE COAST OF QUEENSLAND

WALK IN AND SEE

Admission 6d.

"I say," said the Peer, crumpling the paper into a ball, "this ought to be dashed interestin', what?"

"Yes, my Lord. I have never seen a mermaid."

Lord Grebe thought for a moment.

"I've a good mind to run over to the fair myself and have a look at 'em. If they're anything like the pictures in the art galleries they ought to be well worth seein'. I say, Coombs," he dropped his voice to a stage whisper.

"My Lord?"

"Don't say anything to Connie—I mean, her Ladyship

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—about these mermaids. She might not care for 'em. It's cats she's fond of, not mermaids."

The butler winced.

"Very good, my Lord. Then your Lordship can spare me for this afternoon?"

"That's all right, Coombs; but remember, mum's the word."

"Thank you, my Lord. I shall be as silent as the grave."

Immediately after lunch Coombs donned his bowler hat, mounted the footman's bicycle and rode off in the direction of Milchester. He was bound for the fair, and upon his pale countenance sat an expression of invincible determination. To him, in his present frame of mind, Professor Jake Skinner's mermaids appealed not at all; it was not these he sought. None, indeed, knew better than Coombs that the mermaids were simply two well-preserved specimens of the dugong, a herbivorous mammal inhabiting the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean, and North Australian waters, and were as far removed from the golden-haired, fish-tailed young ladies of song and story as a mandrill is from a beauty queen; but it had suited his book to remain reticent on this point during his interview with Lord Grebe.

How could he possibly have revealed to his employer that his sole motive in visiting the fair was to score a petty triumph over Jessica, the scullery-maid, and Edgar, the boot-boy, and, by returning to Slyme Court laden with coco-nuts, to repair his damaged prestige in the servants' hall? His Lordship, doubtless, would have sympathized, but his faith in his butler's imperturbability would have been rudely shaken.

Meanwhile the Peer himself, drinking coffee in the

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library with his young and beautiful wife, was nibbling on the fringe of a ticklish subject.

"I say, Connie," he began nervously, "I thought of runnin' over to Milchester for a bit this afternoon in the two-seater."

Lady Grebe's face became a frozen mask. It was evident that she suspected something.

"What for, Charles?" she asked in the soft, purring tones of a tigress about to spring.

"Oh," stammered her husband, "I just thought I'd have a look at the shops, and so forth."

"It's early-closing day in Milchester. The shops will all be shut."

"So they will, Connie; I'd forgotten that. Anyway, the run would do me good—I've had a dashed strenuous mornin' at bagatelle—and I could have a look at the *outsides* of the shops, what?"

"Charles," there was an ominous ring in Lady Grebe's voice.

"Yes, Connie?"

"Why don't you tell the truth? It's the fair you want to go to."

Lord Grebe started. Was it possible that he had been double-crossed by his own butler?

"How the deuce do you know that?" he demanded.

Lady Grebe produced for his inspection a familiar slip of paper. It had been rolled up into a ball and smoothed out again, but there was no mistaking the bold lettering of Professor Jake Skinner's advertisement.

"You might credit me with a faint smattering of intelligence, Charles," she said. "I found this on the hearthrug in here when you were washing your hands before lunch."

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I knew perfectly well that any exhibition of that kind would excite your curiosity, whether it was mermaids or milkmaids. That's why you want to go to Milchester, Charles; to feast your eyes on a couple of fish-tailed frumps."

"Dash it all, Connie, you're quite wrong!" protested the Peer. "Coombs gave me that bit of paper; he got it off Edgar, the boot-boy. Why the devil should I go chargin' about the countryside after mermaids? All I want is a run in the fresh air to blow off the cobwebs after beaverin' away all the mornin' at bagatelle."

"Very well, Charles, you can take the car out, but you're not to go near the fair. I'm not going to have my husband sued for breach of promise by a mermaid, and, anyway, you'd be certain to catch some horrible infectious disease, such as measles or mange. You keep away from the fair; you remember what happened the last time?"

"Just as you say, Connie," answered Lord Grebe in tones of humility, "but it's a dashed long time since I had a ride in a swing-boat."

Coombs reached the fair-ground on the outskirts of Milchester just as the clock over the Town Hall was striking three. It being early-closing day, the shop assistants had attended the revels in force, and a seething mass of perspiring humanity surged and eddied round the swing-boats, merry-go-rounds, helter-skelters, and other side-shows which dotted the ground. The blare of half a dozen powerful steam organs, braying out half a dozen different tunes at one and the same time, lent colour to the reproach, so often levelled at the English people by ignorant foreigners, that they are an unmusical race; but no foreigner, observing the light-hearted gaiety of the

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Loamshire peasantry as they disported themselves on the various mechanical amusements, could conscientiously have accused them of taking their pleasures sadly.

Coombs parked the footman's bicycle in a convenient alley-way, removed and pocketed his trouser-clips, and, pulling his bowler hat well forward to protect his skull from possible injury, plunged into the maelstrom. It was like diving suddenly into ice-cold water; all the breath seemed to have been knocked out of him, and for a time he felt himself being swept along like a piece of flotsam on the human tide. It was with difficulty that he saved himself from being carried right into the maw of a non-stop cinema show, and it was not until he had weathered such dangerous reefs as the "Wiggle-Woggle," the "Caterpillar," and the "Central African Village," that he at last fetched up, panting and dishevelled, at his port of destination, the coco-nut shy. Here, after a short rest to enable him to recover his breath, he purchased a shilling's worth of balls from the seedy-looking ruffian in a striped sweater presiding over the shy, and took up his position at the butts.

In his younger days Coombs had been a famous performer at the coco-nuts, and now, as he stood there with the wooden projectiles ready to his hand and the thought of Jessica's insolence and Edgar's cockiness racing through his mind, he felt himself keyed up to perform prodigies of skill. Take lessons from young Edgar, indeed! The very idea! And then, just as he was about to swing his arm back for the first throw, he heard a gurgle of silvery laughter behind him, and, turning, beheld the grinning countenances of Jessica, the scullery-maid, and Edgar, the boot-boy.

Coombs set his teeth grimly. Somehow or other these

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two must have discovered his intention and followed him all the way from Slyme Court. Very well, he would show them something. They had come to scoff; they should remain to pray. Swinging back his arm again, he sent his first ball whistling through the air.

There was a dull, resonant "click" as the hard, wooden missile came into violent contact with the object aimed at, but although the ball had been flung with considerable force, the coco-nut adhered firmly to its iron stand. Coombs was thunderstruck. He had demonstrated his prowess at many fairs in his time, and never before had anything like this happened to him. He beckoned to the seedy-looking ruffian in the striped sweater.

"Hi," he shouted, "I claim that coco-nut. It was a direct hit."

The seedy-looking ruffian regarded him dispassionately for a moment, and then turned a lack-lustre eye on the row of targets.

"'Ard luck, cully," he said, "but you gotta knock 'em clean off, you see? It ain't no use just 'ittin' the pin."

A peal of inane laughter from immediately behind him reminded Coombs of the presence of Jessica and Edgar, and he bit his lip savagely. At all costs he must uphold his dignity in the eyes of the lower orders. Once again his right arm swung back, and once again the ball sped true to the mark. There was the same dull, resonant "click," and the wooden sphere dropped harmlessly to the ground, leaving the triple row of coco-nuts intact upon their metal perches. This time the ruffian in the striped sweater anticipated Coombs's ire.

"Perfect shot, grandpa," he said in tones of encouragement. "Just a little 'igher up, and you'd 'ave got the nut."

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Coombs was about to reply when a female voice, which he recognized as belonging to Jessica, the scullery-maid, was uplifted above the murmurs of the fast-gathering crowd.

"Shame!" it said. "You 'ad ought to let the poor old gentleman go close up, same as the kiddies do!"

The suggestion, loaded with irony as Coombs knew it to be, appeared to find favour with the crowd, whose members applauded vigorously, and the be-sweatered ruffian evidently judged it wise to bow to the popular verdict.

"Come this side of the rail," he said to the butler, who was preserving his traditional impassivity with the utmost difficulty. "Weight for age is only fair, and we ain't all as young and spry as we'd like to be. You try a shot from the kiddies' stand, and don't forget to aim at the coco-nut."

Coombs was breathing heavily through clenched teeth, and his face had gone white with anger, but he suffered no word to pass his lips. Instead, he ducked swiftly under the rail, and brushing the seedy-looking proprietor aside as if he had been a fly in the Slyme Court pantry advanced with rapid strides upon the triple row of coco-nuts. Grasping one of them firmly between the finger and thumb of his right hand, he gave it a vigorous tug, but it adhered securely to its stand.

Coombs thereupon extended the field of his experiments, testing coco-nut after coco-nut, but in spite of all his efforts not one of them would budge. A derisive groan arose from the onlookers, for in the face of this practical demonstration not even the most beetle-witted among them could fail to recognize the simple, damning fact. The coco-nuts had been wired on!

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Coombs turned slowly round to face the proprietor, who, his anaemic countenance suffused with an angry flush, was already rolling up the sleeves of his striped sweater in a business-like manner. The butler's face had assumed a deathly pallor, and his eyes glowed like red-hot coals. Gone was the traditional impassivity, the unruffled imperturbability, with which all who had known him during his fifteen years' service at Slyme Court were wont to associate the name of Coombs, the butler, and in their place blazed a white-hot flame of fury.

Goaded beyond endurance, here stood a new Coombs, a Coombs metamorphosed, a Coombs instinct with the savagery of dark, primeval forests. The situation was fraught with peril for the onlookers, and woe betide the scoffer who should venture within reach of those tightly clenched fists!

Unfortunately for himself, the proprietor of the coco-nut shy failed to comprehend the danger. He was an unimaginative man, and knew nothing of the dark thoughts that were chasing each other madly through Coombs's brain. He squared up to the butler, assuming a threatening attitude, and attempted to reason with him.

"'Ere," he bellowed, "wot the blazes do you mean by meddlin' with my coco-nuts? D'you want your clock pushed in?"

"Go on, mister," shouted Edgar, the boot-boy, who was dancing up and down on the edge of the crowd, "'it 'im 'ard; 'e ain't got no pals!"

"You 'old your tongue, young Edgar," hissed Jessica. "Mr. Coombs is a gentleman, which is more than what you are, and I'm sorry I ever sauced 'im."

"Coo!" ejaculated Edgar, and relapsed into a shamed

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silence. It was his first encounter with the fickleness of woman.

His earlier remark, however, had been overheard by Coombs, and the words applied the spark to the powder-magazine. With a yell of fury the butler sprang forward and dealt the coco-nut shy proprietor a terrific blow on the point of the nose. The other promptly retaliated with a straight left to Coombs's stomach, and a deep sigh of contentment ran through the crowd of onlookers. The battle was joined!

It was with a slightly furtive air that Lord Grebe parked his two-seater on the outskirts of Milchester and made his way across to the fair-ground. His conscience was uneasy, for although he had given no definite promise to keep away from the fair, he was deliberately setting his wife's instructions at defiance. But, dash it all, mermaids! It was unreasonable to expect a fellow to let slip the opportunity of seeing a couple of real mermaids in the flesh.

He was just about to plunge into the crowd and ask his way to the booth which sheltered the mermaids when he became aware of a disturbance immediately ahead of him. Breasting their way through the mob came two stalwart policemen, leading between them a battered and dishevelled object.

The strange trio emerged into the open, and Lord Grebe's heart stood still. Was it—could it be—dash it, it was impossible—that this miserable-looking captive, hatless, coatless, with necktie askew, collar half torn from its fastening, one eye swollen out of all recognition, and a nose from which the blood flowed profusely, could be one and the same person as the ever-immaculate Coombs, for fifteen years butler at Slyme Court?

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Lord Grebe stood rooted to the spot, and one of the policemen, recognizing him, saluted respectfully.

"This man says 'e's your butler, my Lord," he said. "We're takin' 'im to the station. Assault and battery, *and* disorderly be'aviour at a coco-nut shy. The other bloke's in 'ospital," he added darkly.

"Great Scott, Coombs, what the deuce have you been doin'?" asked the Peer.

The butler made no reply, but regarded his employer with an expression of mute appeal.

"I 'ave already cautioned 'im, my Lord," said the policeman. "Better not ask 'im questions now."

Lord Grebe thought rapidly.

"Look here, officer," he said. "My car's just over there, a two-seater with a dickey. Let me run you all to the police station, what? I suppose they'll allow bail?"

The Peer was well known to the County Police, and the formalities at the station were quickly disposed of. Then Lord Grebe and his butler re-entered the car and drove off towards Slyme Court, while Coombs, in halting, penitent phrases, apprised his employer of the facts of the case.

"I am more grieved, my Lord, than words can say," he concluded. "I can assure your Lordship, if your Lordship will overlook this lapse, that such a thing shall never occur again."

"That's all right, Coombs, my dear chap, don't say any more about it," replied the Peer. "I don't see what else you could have done, with that fellow swindlin' you out of your coco-nuts and so on. But the whole business has put me in a dashed awkward position. The fact is, Con—her Ladyship—didn't want me to go to the fair,

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and when she hears I brought you home she'll want to know what I was doin' there."

The butler thought hard for a moment or two.

"I appreciate the gravity of the situation, my Lord," he said at last. "The dilemma is one of considerable magnitude, but a harmless subterfuge occurs to me. Your Lordship, let us say, was motoring in the neighbourhood, and, chancing to pass me on the high road, kindly offered me a lift back."

"But your eye, Coombs, dash it, your black eye? How the devil are we goin' to explain that away?"

"I fancy we can surmount that little difficulty also," replied the butler. "I was riding the footman's bicycle, and met with an unfortunate mishap on the Milchester road."

Lord Grebe heaved a sigh of relief.

"That's a first-rate idea, Coombs," he said. "You stick to your story and I'll stick to mine. But I say, Coombs."

"My Lord?"

"I'll square this business with the police to-morrow—pay the fine, and so forth—but don't let it happen again, there's a good fellow. I mean to say, it might have been deuced awkward, what?"

"Your Lordship may rest assured that there will be no repetition of the offence," replied Coombs gravely.

"And, Coombs!"

"My Lord?"

"Tell me about those mermaids; I never got a chance to see 'em. What sort of fillies were they?"

"I could not say, my Lord, but if your Lordship wishes I will ascertain from Edgar, the boot-boy."

"Thanks, Coombs, I wish you would."

Chapter XII

Professor Beeker's Experiments

"CHARLES," said Lady Grebe sharply, "don't be so stupidly obstinate. Just because you're a Conservative, you think it's smart to put obstacles in the way of progress. Here is an eminent scientist claiming to have made a discovery that will reduce the cost of living and turn the world into a happier place for the lower classes, and you, in your disgusting pride and obstinacy, won't do a hand's turn to help him."

Lord Grebe laid down the *Sporting Times*, screwed his monocle into his right eye and rose from his leather-padded armchair. A faint shade of irritation passed across his vacant countenance, and he took two or three paces up and down the library hearthrug before replying.

"Look here, Connie," he said at last, "you know very well I don't care two straws about the lower classes. Why the deuce should I worry about turnin' the world into a happier place for them? If this Professor Mug, or whatever his name is——"

"Beeker, not Mug. Professor Bunsen Beeker."

"Oh, well, if this Professor Beeker thinks he can do it, he's welcome to try. What I won't stand for is his turnin' Slyme Court into a cross between a lunatic asylum and a tannery. Let him make his revoltin' stinks in a proper laboratory—in Budapest, or wherever it is he comes from; there's no earthly reason why he should come down to the heart of Loamshire and do it in my house."

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Lady Grebe dropped her voice to a tone of entreaty.

"Charles," she said gently, "you expect to pass through this world but once, don't you?"

Her husband grunted non-committally.

"And you will not pass this way again?" she continued.

"I should dashed well hope not," exclaimed the Peer, "if this is the way I'm to be treated in my own home."

"Well, then," cried Lady Grebe triumphantly, "there you are; you ought to be showing kindnesses to your fellow men. Let's hear no more about this, Charles, and after lunch I'll send the Professor a wire telling him we shall be glad to have him at the Court."

Lord Grebe sat down again in his chair and mopped his brow with a silk handkerchief of polychromatic design.

"Let's get this straight, Connie," he said. "Where did you meet this Professor fellow, and what exactly does he want?"

Lady Grebe gave a deep sigh.

"Really, Charles, I've explained so often. Must I go over it all again? I met Professor Beeker at a Patchesi Drive organized by Agatha ffinch-ffolyot, in aid of decayed Czecho-Slovakian noblemen. He's a perfect lamb, and he's made the most amazing discovery. It's all a tremendous secret at present, and we're not to let anybody know, but he has invented a method of treating earth which makes it fit for human consumption."

"Treatin' what?"

"Earth, Charles, common or garden earth. It's terrific, don't you see? It means that in future everybody, from the highest to the lowest, will be able to live entirely on earth."

"But who the devil," objected Lord Grebe querulously,

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"*wants* to live on earth? I don't. Nasty, gritty stuff; I tried some once, when I took a toss in the huntin' field, and I give you my word it's perfectly beastly."

Lady Grebe made a gesture of impatience.

"Charles," she said, "you're very tiresome this morning. Don't you realize the enormous possibilities of this epoch-making discovery? Practically speaking, it means that nobody will have to work for a living any more. There'll be no need to. We shall all just sit at home and, whenever we feel hungry, go outside and eat a little earth."

"Well, it sounds pretty dashed dull to me," grunted Lord Grebe. "Like that fellow what'sisname in the Bible—Nebuchadnezzar. Anyway, what does this Professor chap want to come down to Slyme Court for? There must be lashin's of earth round about Budapest."

"Because England is the only country where he'll be free from interference, and he wants some peaceful spot in which to conduct his experiments. Of course, I told him at once that he could come here; I never thought you'd be so stupid about it, Charles. He can have the Walnut Room in the East Wing for a laboratory; it's large and airy, and nobody ever goes near it."

"But, dash it all, Connie, a fellow like that, with his stinks and chemicals, he'll blow the place up!"

"Well, it won't really matter if he does. The East Wing is architecturally an eye-sore; it was added long after the rest of the house was built, and it clashes with the Inigo Jones pigsties. You said yourself the other day that if only somebody would burn it down we could rebuild it more in keeping with the general design, and still make a handsome profit on the insurance money."

Lord Grebe fell back upon his last line of defence.

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"I suppose you realize, Connie," he said, "that if this invention business gets about we shall have newspaper fellows buzzin' round here like bluebottles round a jam-pot?"

"Exactly," replied Lady Grebe. "And that's why you mustn't breathe a word of it to a soul."

"Not even to Clive? After all, dash it, he's my confidential secretary as well as my nephew, and he's a young fellow with a head on his shoulders."

"Not even to Clive," said Lady Grebe firmly.

"Oh, very well."

The master of Slyme Court took up the *Sporting Times* again and spread it out. But something seemed to be worrying him, and he found it difficult to concentrate on the latest racing intelligence. At last he lowered the paper and glared at his wife aggressively over the top.

"All the same, Connie," he said in a defiant tone, "I'm dashed if I'll eat earth. I hate the taste of the stuff!"

A few mornings later Clive Worthington awoke from a troubled sleep. For a while he lay passive, staring up at the whitewashed ceiling, and wondering dreamily why a dead weight of black depression was crushing him as a toad is crushed beneath a County Council steamroller; then, as full consciousness returned to him, he leaped out of bed with a strangled cry and began hurriedly to dress. His wife's parents, the Reverend Septimus and Mrs. Murgatroyd, were expected to arrive that morning on a fortnight's visit to the cottage, and Clive had many duties to attend to up at the Court before he would be free to drive down to Mudflats-on-Trym station to meet them.

Not that he wanted to meet them; it was, indeed, the knowledge of their impending visit that had been re-

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sponsible for the feeling of malaise, amounting almost to nausea, by which he had been overtaken as he lay in bed gathering his forces for the coming encounter; but he had promised Angela that he would take the car down to the station, and he must assuredly do so, more especially as Angela (bless her heart) was much too busy with the new baby to meet her parents herself. A tolerant and good-natured husband, he seldom argued with his wife or questioned her decisions, but on this occasion he permitted himself a mild "grouse" across the breakfast eggs and bacon.

"Your people, Angel-face," he remarked, "ought to have been strangled at birth. Why they want to come rushing down here on a day when I'm likely to be specially busy, and inflicting themselves on us for two whole weeks, I cannot imagine. Hasn't your father got enough work to do in the parish at Much Warlock?"

Angela made a face.

"Clive, darling," she said, "you oughtn't to talk about them like that. I grant you Mother's a bit of a menace to the peace of the realm, but Dad's an old dear, and he has to work so hard all the year round in that parish of his that he deserves a holiday when he can get one. Besides, they're both naturally anxious to see how baby is getting on."

"I'm sorry, old girl," said the young man. "I shouldn't have said what I did about strangulation. If your people had been strangled there would never have been any you, and I should have been forced to remain celibate all my life. But it's dashed inconvenient, their arriving to-day."

"Why, what's happening up at Slyme Court? Aunt Connie never told me anything?"

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"There's a visitor expected, someone rather special, a Professor Beeker, or Boker, or something. Incidentally, he'll be arriving on the same train as your people, but the Daimler's been ordered to meet him, so I needn't worry. It seems the old boy is to stay at the Court some time and conduct experiments; the Walnut Room in the East Wing has been turned over to him for a laboratory, and we've all been warned that while he is to be given every assistance, he is on no account to be disturbed."

"I expect he's working on some invention for swindling the Totalisator," suggested Angela, who was well aware of Lord Grebe's passion for speculation on the Turf.

"I don't think so," demurred Clive. "I've had to arrange for a pick and shovel and a wheelbarrow to be put at his disposal in the potting-shed, so it looks as if most of his work would be agricultural."

"Perhaps he's going to dig for buried treasure," put in Angela.

"Either that, or he's a resurrection man," added Clive, whose thoughts, in view of the approaching visit of his mother-in-law, were running in a morbid groove that morning.

Meanwhile, in a third class compartment of a very slow train the Reverend Septimus Murgatroyd and his wife were being jolted over the metals on their way to Mudflats-on-Trym. They sat side by side, facing the engine, for Angela's mother, albeit a woman of unusual strength of character, was occasionally subject to train sickness.

The Vicar of Much Warlock was partially concealed behind the *Morning Post*, and was thinking of his daughter's baby; Mrs. Murgatroyd, affecting to read an article on Women's Institutes in the *Spectator*, was wondering

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whether that extraordinary story she had heard at the Diocesan Bazaar last week about the Bishop's wife could possibly be true. But they were neither of them so deeply engrossed in their thoughts that they failed to remark



the singular behaviour of a cadaverous-looking man, with a bushy black beard and horn-rimmed spectacles, who sat opposite them in a corner of the carriage.

This gentleman, after the train had been in motion for some minutes, unexpectedly rose to his feet, took down from the rack, designed for light articles only, a heavy brown bag covered from stem to stern with foreign hotel labels, and proceeded to unpack it, placing the contents,

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as he took them out one by one, on the seat at his side. The Murgatroyds watched him—surreptitiously, but with steadily growing wonder—as the following articles, among others, were brought to view: an indiarubber sponge-bag which had seen better days, a stuffed baby alligator about eight inches long, a woollen night-cap, a little black note-book covered with cabalistic signs, a suit of Jaeger pyjamas, a human skull, and a small tin box labelled “Herbs and Simples.”

Mrs. Murgatroyd nudged her husband and whispered in his ear.

“Look, Septimus,” she said, “the man’s a sorcerer. I thought that kind of thing had gone out with the Middle Ages, but it seems I was wrong. Watch him carefully; he’s going to do Black Magic.”

The Vicar felt uncomfortable.

“This,” he observed, “is positively immoral. In the heart of Christian England! I’m not sure it isn’t my duty to speak.”

But the stranger, however satanic and mysterious the contents of his bag, performed no pagan rites. He had found what he sought, a packet of ham sandwiches and a banana, and these he proceeded to consume, methodically and tidily, wrapping the banana-skin in the discarded sandwich paper and throwing both out of the window. Then, after repacking the bag and replacing it on the rack, he took up the little black notebook and devoted himself to its perusal, muttering, as he did so, some strange incantation.

The Vicar’s suspicions as to the unholy nature of the man’s trade came flooding back. They had been lulled for a short time by the appearance of the banana and the

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sandwiches, but now that these were gone it became easy to picture the stranger in a steeple-crowned hat and a long black cloak. The Reverend Septimus was not sorry when the train at last drew into Mudflats station, and he beheld the stalwart form of his son-in-law, Clive, awaiting him on the platform.

For the next few minutes all was bustle and activity, and the Vicar and his wife had little time to think of their hirsute fellow traveller. Indeed, it was not until they and their luggage were in the car, bowling merrily along towards the Worthingtons' cottage, that they remembered his existence, and then, singularly enough, it was Clive who reminded them.

"You noticed that tall bloke with the face fungus and the brown grip who travelled in your carriage?" he said. "That was Professor Bunsen Beeker, the Czecho-Slovakian scientist, who is staying up at Slyme Court with Aunt Connie and Uncle Charles. Most extraordinary bird. I had to see about his luggage after I'd got you into the car—that was why I kept you waiting so long—and you'll scarcely credit it, but he had about half a dozen socking great wooden crates full of nothing but earth."

"Do you know anything about this Professor?" asked the Vicar's wife thoughtfully.

"Not a thing," answered Clive, "except that his name's Bunsen Beeker, and he comes from Budapest."

"And these boxes; they were full of earth, you say?"

"Yes. We had to leave 'em at the station to be called for. They were much too heavy to send up in the Daimler."

"I noticed that he had very red lips," said Mrs. Murgatroyd solemnly. "Septimus, I fear the worst."

The Vicar was startled.

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"What *do* you mean, my dear?"

"Did you ever read a book called *Dracula*?" asked his wife. "You will recall that the principal character in that book was a Hungarian vampire, whose practice it was to travel about with boxes of earth in which his body would find repose when it was satiated with the blood of his victims. It's my belief that this so-called Professor Bloater is just such a vampire."

"Beeker, my dear, not Bloater," corrected the Vicar mildly.

"It's all the same. These vampires have many *aliases*."

The Vicar felt bound to protest.

"My dear," he said, "forgive me for saying it, but you're talking nonsense. All that is just Hungarian folklore, utterly mythical. You can't really suggest——"

"Septimus," replied Mrs. Murgatroyd austere, "there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in *your* philosophy. But I see we have arrived. There's Angela at the gate, waving to us. Why is she carrying that pig?"

"That isn't a pig," exclaimed Clive indignantly. "It's baby—your grandson."

"Ah, so it is. I fear my sight is not what it used to be," said the Vicar's wife, as she climbed out of the car.

"That's all very well, my dear fellow, but I'm dashed if I see why you want everybody to start eatin' earth. I've got nothing against earth, in its proper place; it looks very well on the ground, and in flower-pots; but you're not goin' to get me to believe that anyone in his senses will eat the stuff, and like it."

Dinner was over at Slyme Court, and Lady Grebe had

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gone into the drawing-room leaving her husband and Professor Beeker together over their coffee and cigars. Charles had been unusually off-hand, almost surly, in his reception of her protégé, and it was in the hope that some, at least, of the latter's enthusiasm might be communicated to the former that she had left them to the enjoyment of one another's society. But Lord Grebe, as will be seen from the above-quoted sample of his conversation, was difficult to convince.

"I don't believe," he added hotly, "you like it yourself."

Professor Beeker, who was wearing a dinner-jacket of plum-coloured velvet, white satin knee-breeches, and flaunted the broad ribbon of the Order of the Sacred Boot across his snowy shirt-front, rose from his chair and bowed from the waist.

"Your Excellency," he said, speaking with a slightly foreign accent, "is—how shall I say?—bally incredible. You do not believe, my friend, now; but you shall believe. By ze sewers of Buda, you shall believe, for I shall exblain! Come, your Excellency, let us join your so gracious lady in ze ozzer room, and we shall see what we shall see. Not so? Hein?"

They moved together into the drawing-room, where they found Lady Grebe seated on a pouffe by the fireplace and brooding over a crossword puzzle in the *Evening Echo*. Lord Grebe sought immediately his favourite armchair and sank into it, but the Professor, sauntering over to the grand piano, picked up a pot of prize begonias and tested the soil with his finger.

"Ach," he remarked, "so! Now, your Excellency, I shall broceed to demonstrate."

Dragging the begonias out of their pot by the roots,

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he tossed them lightly into the fire. Then, drawing a small phial containing a colourless liquid, not unlike gin, from his waistcoat pocket, he swiftly uncorked it and emptied its contents into the flower-pot. There was a sound of hissing and bubbling, and acrid fumes arose from the vessel, filling the spacious drawing-room with a dense cloud of vapour. Lord Grebe, coughing and spluttering, leaped from his chair and was about to protest when he was struck dumb with amazement by the spectacle of Professor Beeker scraping handfuls of earth out of the flower-pot with his hands, shovelling them into his mouth and devouring them with every appearance of relish.

"Good Gad!" exclaimed Lord Grebe. "The fellow must be batty."

"Now perhaps your Excellency will believe," said the Professor, speaking with his mouth full, and setting down the now empty flower-pot on top of the piano. "Ze mixture is not yet perfect; it does not yet make ze earth altogether pleasant to ze palate; and it may be, perhaps, zat I shall later on be seeck just a little; but I shall persevere mit my experiments, and zen—ach, what a blessing I shall confer upon mankind!"

"Just so," remarked Lord Grebe, a look of disgust upon his features, "just as you say, my dear fellow. If you don't mind, I think I'll take a turn in the garden for a bit, what? Rather close in here, and I'm not feelin' up to the mark. If you're goin' to be sick, Professor, you'd better join me."

"Don't be a fool, Charles," snapped Lady Grebe. "It's pouring with rain. Sit down and listen to the Professor. He wants to explain about the materials he will need for his experiments. Most of his work, I gather, will be done at night—he finds it easier to concentrate after he has dined—

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and we've got to have a large furnace and a Diesel oil-engine installed in the Walnut Room."

"I shall also require, gracious lady," said the Professor, "one leetle, small baby and a boy or girl, ten year old."

"What the deuce for?" exclaimed Lord Grebe.

"It is for my experiments, your Excellency, you understand? I make my mixture, so, and I add him to ze soil, so, and for myself he is good, hein? But ze leetle, small babies and ze young children, zey are not at all ze same in zeir—how you say?—gizzards."

"You mean 'innards,' Professor," suggested Lady Grebe. "Well, we must see what we can do for you. I can't think of anybody at the moment, but the local peasantry are accommodating, and I dare say we shall be able to hire the children you require. Yes, what is it? Come in."

A knock at the door was followed by the entry of Coombs, the Slyme Court butler.

"I beg your pardon, my Lady," he said, "but there has been a slight contretemps over the preparation of the Professor's bedchamber for the night. The maids are afraid to enter the room."

"But why?" demanded Lady Grebe. "What are they afraid of?"

"I fancy it is the Professor's skull, my Lady."

"What on earth are you drivelling about, Coombs? There's nothing wrong with the Professor's skull, as you can see for yourself, and anyway, he's not in his bedroom now."

"No, my Lady. I understand the Professor brought a human skull with him in his bag. Jenkins placed it on the dressing-table when he unpacked, and the maids do not

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take kindly to its appearance. They are also disturbed by the presence of the alligator."

"The alligator? What alligator?"

"A stuffed alligator, my Lady. It was in the Professor's bag together with the skull. The maids refuse to believe that it is defunct, and declare that it has adopted a menacing attitude towards them."

Professor Beeker, origin of all the trouble, burst out laughing.

"Ach, so!" he cried. "Forgive me, gracious lady, a thousand times. It is my—how you say?—absence of mind. I slip zese leetle treasures of mine, zese souvenirs of a scientific career, into my bag when I pack him, in mistake for my tooth-brush and my hair-brushes. I beg you do not disembowel yourself on my account; I mineself will arrange my room."

"Do you mean to tell me, my dear fellow," asked Lord Grebe, as soon as the butler had withdrawn, "that you put a stuffed alligator and a human skull into your bag in a fit of sheer absent-mindedness?"

The Professor bowed.

"Then all I can say is," muttered the Peer under his breath, "the sooner you give up eatin' earth and bury yourself in it the better for everybody."

In spite of occasional grumbling protests from Lord Grebe, the arrangements for Professor Bunsen Beeker's experiments proceeded apace, and although nobody besides the Peer and his wife was admitted into the secret, it was not long before the villagers of Mudflats-on-Trym and the simple peasant folk of the district became aware that something out of the ordinary was going forward up at Slyme Court.



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Farm labourers, passing the outskirts of the estate at dusk on their way to the "Red Lion" for the evening sacrifice, told strange tales—of mysterious rumblings and eerie flashes of vivid blue light proceeding from the East Wing of the ancient building; of horrid, grotesque shadows thrown upon the blinds; and of a dull red glow that was always to be seen in one particular window of the gaunt pile of masonry. And from these stories other legends sprang to birth—of a tall, loose-limbed, cadaverous man, with hollow, sunken cheeks, a formidable black beard, and long, skinny arms, who was often to be met with in the grounds of the Court as dusk was falling, pushing a wheelbarrow laden with Heaven knew what horror.

Young mothers of the village, scared out of their wits, related, between their sobs, how they had encountered this monstrous being (who, they were quite sure, was not of this world) as they wheeled their offspring abroad in the perambulator of an evening, and how he had attempted with bribes and menaces to snatch their babies away.

School children of the age of ten or thereabouts came running home to their parents, sweating with terror, and described, when they grew calmer, how this same fiend incarnate had sought to lure them away with promises of cake, toffee-apples, and all manner of succulent sweetmeats.

The outcome of it all was that the village elders, after a hurriedly convened meeting in the bar-parlour of the "Red Lion," proceeded in a body to Slyme Court for an interview with Lord Grebe. They failed to find him, but instead found his lady, from whom they could get no satisfaction whatever.

"Really, Mr. Grubb, I don't understand what you're talking about," she told the spokesman. "It's no concern

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of the village how my guests choose to amuse themselves in the evenings, but I suppose you're all going Bolshevik, and will start singing the 'Red Flag' at the next parish dinner. It's most inconsiderate of you, seeing that Lord Grebe and I have always done our best for the village, with subscriptions and so forth. No, you cannot see his Lordship; he's busy with his picture-postcard collection, and doesn't wish to be disturbed."

So the deputation, a metaphorical flea nestling in each worthy ear, withdrew from Lady Grebe's presence and proceeded, with many black looks and mutterings, to the Vicarage, where they put their case before the Reverend Wilkinson Catchpole. He, good soul, although himself sorely perplexed, reassured the deputation and shepherded them out into the street, bidding them go home and think no more of the matter. Then, taking down his clerical hat from its peg in the hall and picking up a stout ash-plant (a Christmas gift from the churchwardens), he made his way to the gamekeeper's cottage on the outskirts of the Slyme Court grounds. He would talk things over with that young fellow Worthington, Lord Grebe's secretary and nephew.

The hour was late when he set out, for the deputation had approached him soon after his frugal supper, and as he passed through the entrance gates of the Court it occurred to him that before tackling Clive it might be as well to test with his own eyes the truth of the fantastic allegations made by his leading parishioners. Accordingly, he made a wide detour, and taking advantage of all available cover (for he did not wish his scouting operations to be detected), reached a point in the ground which commanded a clear view of the East Wing.

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For a moment or two he stood spellbound with horror. It was true, then! Over there, in a window on the second floor, was the dull red glow which had struck terror into the hearts of the simple villagers; strange blue flashes and muffled explosions came from the building itself; and awesome shadows projected themselves upon the drawn blinds!

Next moment the Reverend Wilkinson Catchpole, Vicar of Mudflats-on-Trym, was stumbling in panic fear down the slope in the direction of the gamekeeper's cottage, with the thunderous roar of Professor Bunsen Beeker's Diesel engine echoing in his ears. And as he hammered frantically on the door of Clive Worthington's abode he muttered to himself a quotation from Blake, the half-demented poet. Something about "dark, satanic mills."

As luck would have it, Clive and Angela were both out when their visitor arrived in this precipitate and breathless fashion. They had driven over to a dance in Milchester, the neighbouring market town, and did not expect to be back much before three in the morning. But they had left Angela's parents, the Reverend Septimus and Mrs. Murgatroyd, in undisputed possession of the parlour, and in the room set aside as a night nursery a rosy-cheeked village maid was keeping watch and ward over their precious offspring. The Reverend Septimus opened the door to the trembling Vicar, and it was not long before the latter was seated in the parlour pouring his shocking tale into the sympathetic ear of his brother cleric and the strong-minded Mrs. Murgatroyd. They heard him out to the bitter end, and then Septimus spoke.

"It's a most extraordinary business, my dear Vicar," he said. "Most extraordinary. If I were an imaginative man I

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should be inclined to call it uncanny. But I don't think we can afford to pay too much attention to the idle superstitions of ignorant village people. The man of whose behaviour they complain is one Professor Beeker, a Czecho-Slovakian scientist, now staying as a guest at the Court. At least, so my son-in-law tells me, but he also admits that ever since the Professor's arrival an atmosphere of secrecy has brooded over the house which he, my son-in-law, has been quite unable to penetrate. As for the complaint about the children, it is a singular fact that only this afternoon my son-in-law's nursemaid was accosted by this man when she was taking my grandson for an airing in his perambulator, and asked if he could have the loan of the child for a short time. The poor girl was quite upset."

"This Professor Bloater," said Mrs. Murgatroyd very firmly, "is a vampire. That is why he preys on young children."

The Reverend Wilkinson Catchpole started. Here was a new and terrible explanation.

"I'm afraid my wife is inclined to be a little extravagant in her theories," said Septimus, with a nervous laugh. "All the same——"

"What do you think yourself?" asked the Vicar.

Septimus hesitated. He had no wish to commit himself too deeply.

"It has occurred to me," he said at last, "that this Professor Beeker is a student of ancient folk-lore, and has been practising, for his own unholy entertainment, certain pagan religious rites. Is it not possible, my dear Vicar, that when you stood just now upon rising ground and witnessed eerie lights proceeding from the windows in

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the East Wing, you were in actual fact assisting (quite against your will, of course), at the celebration of a Black Mass? The children—I hate to suggest it—would doubtless be required for—er—sacrificial purposes.”

The Reverend Wilkinson Catchpole shuddered.

“Can such things be,” he whispered, “in civilized Christian England?”

“Fiddlesticks!” put in Mrs. Murgatroyd shortly. “The man’s a vampire; that’s clear enough; and it’s high time something was done about it. Two parsons, working together, ought to be able to put a stop to the nuisance.”

The Vicar shrugged his shoulders helplessly and looked across at his colleague.

“It’s hard to know what is best to be done,” he said. “One might write to the Bishop, of course, but——”

“What on earth would be the use of that?” interrupted Mrs. Murgatroyd impatiently. “No, we’d better all three go up to the Court at once, and insist on seeing this vampire, and you two between you must exorcise him, or whatever it is you do to vampires.”

“But, my dear,” protested her husband in a tone of indecision, “I don’t think——”

“Nobody asked you to think, Septimus. Get your hat and goloshes, and you’d better bring the big carriage umbrella.”

In their bedroom at Slyme Court, all unaware that Mother Church was even now interesting herself in their affairs, Lord and Lady Grebe were engaged, while in process of retiring for the night, in heated controversy. The steady thud-thud of the Diesel engine, as well as sundry strange cracklings and explosions which emanated from the East Wing of the old house, told them that Pro-

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fessor Bunsen Beeker was busy with his experiments. It also prevented them from hearing the crunch of footsteps approaching up the gravel carriage sweep.

"Look here, Connie," Lord Grebe was saying, "I'm just about fed up with this. How much longer is this Beeker fellow to be allowed to go on makin' night hideous with his confounded stink-bombs and machinery? The villagers are beginnin' to talk, and I wouldn't be in the least surprised if the Inspector of Nuisances blew in on us one of these days."

"Charles," replied Lady Grebe, "you make me tired. Surely even you, with your limited intelligence, can appreciate the immensity of the benefits which the Professor is going to confer upon mankind?"

"But, Connie, you know, that's all dashed nonsense. My intelligence may be limited, but I do know what's edible and what isn't, and let me tell you this: that special earth the Professor imported by the ton and treated with his filthy chemicals is not only inedible, it's rank poison. I tried some the other day, when he wasn't looking, and I've had the most ghastly stomach ache ever since. He's a fraud, that fellow, that's what he is. And even if he wasn't, and the discovery was all he pretends it is, I'm not so sure about the benefit to humanity. Look at poor old Sir Otto Gourmand; he'd drop off the hooks to-morrow if you told him he'd got to eat nothing but earth for the rest of his life; and, believe me, Connie, there are lots of fellows like him."

Lady Grebe was about to reply when there came a knock at the door, and the butler craved admittance.

"What is it, Coombs?" asked the Peer. "Speak up."

"I beg your pardon, my Lord," answered the butler

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through the keyhole, "but the Vicar is downstairs with the Reverend and Mrs. Murgatroyd. They desire to speak to you very urgently, my Lord."

"But, dash it all, Coombs, it's nearly midnight. I'm just goin' to bed. Ask 'em to call again in the morning."

"I have already put that suggestion to them, my Lord, but Mrs. Murgatroyd brushed it aside. A very masterful lady, if I may make so bold as to say so. She struck me on the head with an umbrella."

"All right, Coombs," said Lady Grebe, "tell 'em we'll be down in two minutes. Charles, slip a dressing-gown over your pyjamas. We'll have to see them."

Downstairs in the library they found the redoubtable Mrs. Murgatroyd with the two clergymen. It was consistent with her character that she did not waste time over empty civilities, but came straight to the point.

"We have come here," she said, "to exorcise Professor Bloater. Where is he?"

"Beeker, my dear, not Bloater," put in the Reverend Septimus timidly.

"Beeker, then. It's all one. Where is the monster?"

Lord Grebe stepped forward eagerly.

"What did you say you were goin' to do to him?" he asked. "It's high time somebody did do something to that fellow. He's a confounded nuisance."

"Exorcise him," said Mrs. Murgatroyd laconically. "He's a vampire."

Lord Grebe shook his head. He knew, as well as the next man, what a vampire was; he had seen them times without number on the screen at the local cinema, he had their portraits in his picture-postcard collection; and Professor Beeker, whatever else he might be, was certainly

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not one of those. Who, for example, had ever seen a vampire with a bushy black beard?

"What absolute nonsense!" exclaimed Lady Grebe. "You must all be crazy. Professor Beeker is an eminent scientist, who is going to confer an immeasurable boon on humanity."

"Yes," said her husband acidly, "he's goin' to make us all eat mud. The sooner you people get on with the exercisin' the better. I'll go and call the fellow now."

"You'll do nothing of the kind, Charles," snapped Lady Grebe. "Professor Beeker is a guest under my roof. This is an outrage."

A knock at the door put a stop to a discussion that was in danger of becoming acrimonious, and Coombs, the butler, entered the room, an expression of more than ordinary gravity upon his austere countenance.

"I beg your pardon, my Lord," he said. "The Professor desires me to inform you that there has been a slight mishap. In the course of his experiments an explosion has occurred, setting fire to the panelling in the Walnut Room. He is of opinion that it would be advisable to telephone for the fire brigade at the earliest opportunity. I am inclined to agree with him, my Lord; the whole of the East Wing is ablaze."

It was a good half-hour before the fire brigade, urgently summoned from Milchester, arrived on the scene, and by that time the fire had got a firm hold of the timbering of the East Wing, and there was little that could be done beyond taking steps to prevent it from spreading to the rest of the house. Clive and Angela Worthington, driving home from their dance in the small hours, saw the red

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glare in the sky, and leaped at once to the correct conclusion.

"Golly, Angel-face!" said Clive. "That Professor bird has gone and set fire to the Court. Uncle Charles will be as wild as a ferret."

But Lord Grebe was not "wild." The East Wing, fully covered by insurance, was completely gutted, and could now be rebuilt to fit in with the general design of the house. Lady Grebe actually went so far as to admit that she had been mistaken in the Professor, and for some weeks after the fire was unusually subdued and easy to handle. But, best of all from the Peer's point of view, Professor Bunsen Beeker lost the only existing copy of his formula for the preparation of earth for human consumption. Sir Otto Gourmand, and many others of the same kidney who took a lively interest in their food, could breathe again.

Mrs. Murgatroyd, Angela's mother, steadfastly refused to believe that Professor Beeker was not a vampire.

"Septimus," she remarked to her husband, as they stood in the Slyme Court grounds on the morning after the fire, watching a thin wisp of blue smoke curling heavenwards from the smouldering embers, "the powers of darkness have been brought low. See, the smoke of their burning goeth up for ever and ever."

"I dare say you're right, my dear," said the Reverend Septimus timidly.

Chapter XIII

The Man-eating Orchid

THE orchid house at Slyme Court, containing rare and exotic flowers culled from many parts of the world, is the jealously guarded preserve of Lady Grebe. With that passion for the weird and uncouth which doubtless guided her some years ago in her choice of a husband, she takes a keen interest in these highly specialized monocotyledonous plants, and may often be seen, attired in a green-baize apron, sun-hat of floppy straw, and huge gardening gauntlets, making her way across the shady lawn in the direction of the glass-roofed palace which houses her treasures.

Lord Grebe himself does not share his wife's enthusiasm for this particular branch of horticulture; although he confesses to a weakness for the delicious *orchis salep* which she sometimes prepares from the decaying tubers of certain orchidaceous plants, and has been known to wear a prize orchid in his buttonhole on occasions of ceremony. He seldom goes near the orchid house, and never attempts to interfere in the almost sacred rites performed by her Ladyship behind its glazed and usually bolted doors.

Not that he would be allowed to interfere, even if he were so minded, for Lady Grebe is loth to heed the advice of so experienced a horticulturist as Rogers, the head gardener, and it is scarcely likely that she would lend an ear to the less authoritative counsel of her dull-witted spouse.

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At the time when this narrative opens, Lady Grebe was but newly returned from one of her periodic visits to the hub of the Empire. She entered the library just as her husband, who had been drowsily scanning the pages of *Ruff's Guide to the Turf*, was trying to make up his mind whether to rise from his comfortable armchair and take a stroll in the grounds before tea or to press the bell and challenge Coombs, the butler, to a rubber of Halma. It was at once obvious from her excited manner as she came into the room that he would be able to do neither of these things. Both Halma and hiking were off for the afternoon.

"Hullo, Connie!" said the Peer, looking up with an expression of nervous anticipation on his usually vacant countenance. "Got back from Town, what? You're lookin' confoundedly worked up about somethin'; I suppose Aunt Alison hasn't suddenly dropped off the hooks and left you a packet?"

Lady Grebe shook her head, and, laying a small brown-paper parcel down upon the writing-table, sank languidly into another armchair.

"No, Charles," she said, "nothing like that. Aunt Alison is as fit as a fiddle; she's just come back from a slimming course at Aix-les-Bains, and you wouldn't believe how vastly the treatment has improved her appearance."

"Then what on earth," demanded Lord Grebe in faintly querulous tones, "have you got to be so confoundedly bucked about? The old woman's worth a quarter of a million, if she's worth a monkey. And what have you got in that parcel? Cocaine, or a new consignment of artificial eyelashes?"

By way of answer her Ladyship stretched out a slender arm, took up the brown-paper package and began feverishly tearing off the wrappings.

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"I've got a surprise for you, Charles," she said. "Something very special."

Lord Grebe nervously removed his monocle from his eye and began polishing it with a silk handkerchief.

"If it's cigars," he said, "you needn't trouble to undo the parcel. I don't want to go lookin' a gift horse in the mouth, but you remember what happened the last time you brought me back a present of cigars from London?"

"I know, Charles, you were disgustingly sick; but that had nothing to do with the cigars. The fact is, you'd been stuffing yourself with pignuts in the Home Wood all that morning; no wonder you couldn't square up to a really good cigar. Anyway, this isn't cigars; it's something much rarer and more exciting. Look!"

She ripped off the last paper covering and disclosed a small cardboard box, wherein lay, embedded in cotton-wool, a brown, shrivelled object not unlike the preserved heart of some dead and gone Saint. Picking up this object between the finger and thumb of the right hand, and handling it very delicately, she held it out for her husband's inspection.

Lord Grebe examined it with evident distaste.

"What the deuce is that thing, Connie?" he asked. "It looks as if it might be some kind of a cheroot, but I tell you straight I'm not goin' to smoke it. It smells perfectly revoltin' as it is."

Lady Grebe looked quickly round the room, and lowered her voice.

"Hush, Charles," she said. "It's the tuber of a man-eating orchid."

"The tuber of a *what*?" Lord Grebe started from his chair and dropped his eyeglass.

"A man-eating orchid, from the upper reaches of the River Cassiquiare, in South America," explained Connie.

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"It was given me by that perfectly adorable Professor van Rudebeek—he's the famous Dutch botanist, you know—and he told me it was very rare indeed."

Lord Grebe looked puzzled.

"What do you mean, a man-eating orchid?" he asked.

"Exactly what I say. It eats men."

The Peer rose from his chair and walked quickly across to the French windows. Then he turned.

"Of course, you must please yourself whether you keep it or not, Connie," he said; "but I can tell you this, if it eats anyone, it won't be me."

"Nonsense, Charles," said Lady Grebe, carefully replacing her trophy in its cotton-wool bed. "Sit down and try not to be a bigger fool than you can help."

"But it isn't nonsense, I tell you," broke out her husband petulantly. "If you plant that thing in the orchid house, and it grows up into a man-eater like you said, I'm goin' off for a Mediterranean cruise until it dashed well withers. I hope it's blighted; it looks to me uncommonly like it," he added savagely.

"Charles, you make me tired. Of course it won't eat anybody here at Slyme Court. I don't suppose it's anything more than a native superstition; but the professor told me that the Aztecs, or whoever the people are who live in the country where this bulb comes from, are terrified of it. They say that if they stumble across it growing in the jungle they become intoxicated with its perfume, and the plant puts its tendrils round their throats and drains every drop of blood from their bodies. Isn't it just too thrilling! And this will be the first time anyone has tried to grow it in this country."

Lord Grebe paced up and down the library hearthrug in a state of profound agitation.

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"You can't do it, Connie," he said at last. "You simply daren't take the risk. Supposin' the Vicar, or old Lady Harbottle, were to go into the orchid house one afternoon and become intoxicated with the perfume, what do you imagine the County would say? Then again, there's Rogers and the under-gardeners; I don't believe blood-suckin' is covered by the Government insurance."

Lady Grebe rose, took up the cardboard box containing the strange orchid and turned towards the door.

"After tea, Charles," she announced with an air of finality, "I want you to help me plant it."

The art, or science, of horticulture affects its victims in divers ways. To some it is an abiding joy, an ever-increasing delight; to others fatigue and drudgery unspeakable; while to others again it is a religion; and it is to this third class of victim that Lady Grebe belongs. Most of us, no doubt, if confronted with the uncongenial task of potting an orchid tuber, would shovel earth into the pot, stuff the tuber in and repair to the local hostelry for a wash-and-brush-up, secure in the knowledge of a day's work nobly done. Not so Lady Grebe. With her the potting of an orchid tuber is a sacred rite, at which the entire gardening staff of Slyme Court is expected to assist. The ceremony is very similar to that usually observed at the laying of a foundation-stone, except that there are no formal speeches, and the trowel with which her Ladyship bestows a final benedictory pat upon the earth covering the interred bulb is not of silver.

So on this occasion, as soon as tea was over, Connie the high priestess, with Lord Grebe and a host of attendant priests, acolytes, and so forth, assembled in the orchid house for the planting of the strange root presented by Professor van Rudebeek. There was no music, for Lady

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Grebe has not yet gone to the extreme of having an organ installed in the glass-roofed building, but the very silence in which the ceremony was conducted rendered it, if anything, more impressive and awe-inspiring, and there was a touch of blasphemy about the brutal and direct manner in which the Peer addressed his wife as they walked back together to the house.

"Well," he said, "there's one comfort. The dashed thing won't come up."

Lady Grebe pulled up short and looked at him with a startled expression.

"What do you mean, Charles, it won't come up? Of course it'll come up. I planted it half a spit deep in the very best coco-nut fibre, with a mulch of decayed onion stalks round the bottom of the root and a top dressing of ammonium chloride, gas liquor, and Peruvian guano. *And* Rogers syringed it carefully with eau-de-Cologne."

"I know, Connie, you did all those things," replied Lord Grebe. "But you put the tuber in upside down. If the orchid flowers anywhere, it'll flower in Australia; it won't flower at Slyme Court."

Lady Grebe resumed her journey in the direction of the house.

"Charles," she said succinctly, "you're an idiot."

"Well," answered her husband, "all I can say is, don't blame me if it grows downwards."

The weeks which followed the interment of the man-eating orchid tuber were fraught with anxiety for Lady Grebe and her husband; anxiety on her Ladyship's part lest the plant should not come up, and on his Lordship's lest it should. Many were the clandestine visits paid by the Peer to the orchid house, while Lady Grebe herself refused several invitations in the County for fear of being

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absent from the Court when the first young shoot should peep shyly through the crust of coco-nut fibre, ammonium chloride, and Peruvian guano. Something of the excitement and suspense of that period of watching and waiting communicated itself to the servants' hall, where bets were freely exchanged on the ultimate outcome of the ceremony in the orchid house.

"I confess," remarked Coombs, the butler, to Mrs. Gamble, the cook, one day, "I am at a loss to understand why his Lordship should regard with so much apprehension the possibility of her Ladyship's new orchid coming to maturity. The family *Orchidaceae* contains plants of great interest to the horticulturist; almost all are specially modified for insect fertilization, and it is fascinating to note the arrangement of pollen in club-shaped pollen masses or *pollinia*, which become glued to the head of any insect seeking the flower's nectar, and are so borne to other flowers."

"Lor', Mr. Coombs," exclaimed Mrs. Gamble, "I always did say as you was a walking cyclometer. There ain't nothing you don't know! All the same, on this occasion I see heye to heye with 'is Lordship. It don't seem natural to me that a flower should go clubbing pore, defenceless insects on the head, and this particular orchid is worse than that, far worse."

"What precisely do you mean, Mrs. Gamble?"

The cook sank her voice to an awed whisper.

"Mr. Coombs," she said, "they do say as 'ow it sucks the blood of 'uman beings. Just think of it! Supposin' one of the flowers was to get glued to 'is Lordship's head, just like you've been saying. What then? I tell you, Mr. Coombs, the thought of that 'orror in the horchid 'ouse keeps me awake at night."

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"I fancy, Mrs. Gamble," replied the butler gravely, "you are allowing your imagination a little too much rein. Such a contingency as you suggest would be contrary to all accepted scientific dicta."

Mrs. Gamble wagged her head sagely.

"Ah," she said, "there are more things in 'eaven and earth than are dreamed of in your philanthropy, Mr. Coombs."

The weeks rolled by, weeks of uncertainty and doubt, and at last there came a day when Lady Grebe, visiting the orchid house immediately after breakfast, was overjoyed to find a tiny, blood-red spike projecting through the evil-smelling compost in the fateful flower-pot. Bubbling with excitement, she ran back to the house and burst into the library just as her spouse was settling down to a quiet hour with his picture-postcard collection.

"Charles," she cried, "it's up at last!"

"What's up?" demanded Lord Grebe, turning a fishy eye upon his wife. "How do you think I'm ever goin' to get these postcards sorted if you come batterin' your way in here like this, Connie? Can't you see I'm confoundedly busy, dash it?"

Lady Grebe ignored this exhibition of churlishness.

"You must come at once to the orchid house, Charles," she said. "Professor van Rudebeek's man-eater is shooting. There's *the* dinkiest little plant in the middle of the pot."

"I'm not quite such a fool as you take me for," replied the Peer, shaking his head. "I've often heard of fellows shootin' man-eaters—old General Gout has done it before now—but no one's goin' to make me believe that the thing can work the other way round."

"Idiot! I'm talking about the blood-sucking orchid. It's growing, I tell you!"

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Lord Grebe screwed his eyeglass firmly into his eye and surveyed his wife ill-humouredly.

"In that case," he growled, "you'd better tell Rogers to dig it up and burn it at once. What with the income-tax people and so on, we've got enough blood-suckers in this part of the world already. And understand me once and for all, Connie; I will not have that confounded plant suckin' the blood of old Lady Harbottle. The game isn't worth the candle."

"The trouble with you, Charles," said Lady Grebe acidly, "is that you're a coward. Fancy being afraid of a harmless flower! I expect it's some kind of inhibition you've got, due to your nurse upsetting your pram into a bed of nettles when you were three months old. It must have been then that you got that blow on the head."

"What blow on the head, Connie?"

"Think it over, Charles, if you can."

And the *châtelaine* of Slyme Court stalked out of the room, slamming the door behind her.

Professor van Rudebeek's strange orchid, having poked its nose, so to speak, through the yielding coco-nut fibre into the upper air, set about the business of growing with a rapidity which Jack's beanstalk might have envied. It reared itself up at an amazing pace, stretching out suckers and tendrils on every side, and ruthlessly shouldering out of its way the foliage of other, less pugnacious plants.

Then at last it flowered, and Lord Grebe, beholding it, found his fears increased a thousandfold. For there was something definitely evil about this blood-red, exotic blossom, something greedy and menacing, as though it were lying in wait to pounce upon its prey. It was quite unlike any other orchid commonly to be seen in English

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hothouses, being strangely misshapen and carrying upon its crimson lips a complicated arrangement of suckers and tentacles.

"You ought to burn it, you know, Connie," said the Peer, examining this remarkable botanical specimen from a safe distance through his monocle. "The Vicar's comin' to supper to-morrow night, and if it got hold of him by the leg I don't see who would take the services. Besides, there's the rest of us to be considered." He backed hastily towards the hothouse door. "I don't like the way it's lookin' at me now; it's sort of slaverin', lickin' its chops, if you know what I mean."

Lady Grebe snorted contemptuously.

"I *don't* know what you mean, Charles, and I don't care. I'm going to send the orchid in to the Milchester Horticultural Show, and score off Mavis Haggard. She took first prize last year with her giant aspidistra, but I happen to know she made it herself out of oiled silk and electric-light wire. That woman has no moral sense."

In pursuance of this plan Lady Grebe made the most careful preparations. The utmost secrecy, she felt, was essential for the success of her scheme for scoring off Mavis Haggard; and she therefore took precautions lest the news of the flowering of the strange orchid should reach the ears of the sensation-loving daily Press. Apart from anything else, she didn't want a host of reporters snooping round the orchid house at Slyme Court at all hours of the day and night. Rogers and his underlings, as well as Coombs, the butler, Mrs. Gamble, the cook, and, last but not least, Lord Grebe himself, were sworn to secrecy, and the orchid house was kept locked and bolted, the key remaining in Lady Grebe's custody.

Meanwhile, the malevolent-looking flower increased in

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size and ugliness every day. Even if the story of its carnivorous habits were no more than an idle native superstition, it was easy to understand how such a legend could have gained credence among the aborigines of the upper reaches of the River Cassiquiare, for although the orchid might not actually drink human blood, it certainly looked as if it



wanted to. And according as the flower grew, so Lord Grebe's apprehensions increased, until he became a veritable prey to nervous dread whenever his wanderings took him in the neighbourhood of the orchid house.

There came a night when he felt that he could bear the strain no longer. He told himself over and over again, as he tossed and muttered in his bed, that this could not go on; if Connie would not destroy the orchid he must take

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the law into his own hands and destroy it himself. At last, his mind made up, he slipped stealthily out of bed, donned a pair of bedroom slippers, and having assured himself that his wife was sleeping peacefully, removed the key of the orchid house from her dressing-table and crept from the room, attired in yellow silk pyjamas and the inevitable eyeglass.

Downstairs in the hall he paused for a few moments to equip himself with an electric torch and an enormous scimitar of Oriental pattern, which hung on the wall among a host of other trophies. He heaved a deep sigh of satisfaction as he ran his finger along the edge of the finely tempered blade, and then, giving a defiant hitch to the trousers of his pyjamas, passed silently out into the night. And as he softly closed the heavy front door behind him the grandfather clock in the hall chimed sonorously the hour of three.

The night air was chill, and the Peer shivered as he strode with unfaltering tread across the gravel in the direction of the Slyme Court greenhouses, but he found some comfort in the reflection that his work would very quickly be accomplished, and that in any case it would be warm inside the orchid house. It was—unpleasantly, stickily warm—and, as he threw open the door and passed in among the luxuriant foliage of his wife's botanical treasures, he was greeted by a wave of hot air laden with heavy, exotic perfume. Instantly he recalled the legend of the River Cassiquiare, and his fears returned to him with renewed potency.

"Confound it all," he muttered, holding a silk pocket-handkerchief to his nostrils, "I mustn't get drunk on this smell or I shall be done for."

And it was at this precise moment that he made a hideous discovery. The electric torch refused to function!

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It was a very dark night, and the pale illumination of the stars was almost completely obscured by the thick, tropical growths in the hothouse; but Lord Grebe was not the man to be turned aside from his purpose by the power of darkness. He had a rough idea whereabouts the malevolent orchid was situated, and, gripping the handle of the scimitar firmly in his right hand, he made his way along the duck-boarded floor in the direction where he supposed the plant to be.

Nevertheless, it would be untrue to say that he was yet altogether free from fear, and when, as he stumbled forward, the prickly tendril of some outlandish plant brushed gently against his naked throat, he gave a squeal of terror and turned sharply in his tracks. As he did so, another stouter tendril twined itself round his neck, the air became heavy with a sickly perfume, and next moment, having lost his head completely, he was grappling like one possessed with this unseen adversary from the vegetable kingdom, while his frenzied screams echoed and re-echoed through the length and breadth of the glass-roofed building.

To and fro he swayed in his efforts to gain the mastery, his scimitar fell with a clatter on to the duck-boards, and before the Peer had time to realize what had happened he had tripped over the hilt of the weapon and measured his length on the ground, while flower-pots, vegetation, ammonium chloride, and Peruvian guano showered themselves down upon him from all sides. And as he lay there, prostrate among the wreckage, he screamed louder than ever.

"Here, I say, dash it all, help!" he yelled. "Coombs! Rogers! The orchid's got me! It's suckin' my blood, confound it!"

Lady Grebe is a light sleeper. Unlike her uncle, the

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Earl of Pentonville, who is reputed to have slept right through the San Francisco earthquake while the hotel wherein he was staying subsided steadily, storey by storey, into the main sewers of that great Western American city, she is easily roused from slumber, and on this occasion her husband had scarcely closed the bedroom door behind him when she was out of bed and hurriedly investing herself in a blue satin dressing-gown and a pair of satin mules. Charles, she concluded, was sleep-walking and, if left to his own devices, might set fire to the garage or throw the pigs into the fishpond.

Snatching up an electric torch, companion to the instrument that was to fail her husband so grievously in his hour of need, she sped along the passage in the wake of her lord and master, pausing only to rouse Coombs, the butler, from his dreams and bid him follow her as expeditiously as possible. When, therefore, Lord Grebe opened the door of the orchid house and passed in, his wife, with a sleepy butler panting in her train, was not far behind, and, realizing at last what it was that he was after, uttered a shriek of protest and broke into a shambling run.

The frenzied screams which subsequently issued from the hothouse only served to quicken her pace, and she broke open the glass-fronted door just as the peer slid down on to the floor, carrying with him in his fall a cascade of flower-pots, plants, earth, and chemical manure.

Hesitating on the threshold, she heard the laboured breathing of Coombs, the butler, at her elbow, and thanked Heaven that in this moment of peril so trustworthy a retainer was close at hand.

"My Lady," said Coombs, in a hoarse whisper, "I should advise extreme caution. His Lordship does not appear to be quite himself, and I understand that homicidal

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mania usually drives the afflicted party to attack his nearest and dearest. Perhaps your Ladyship will permit me to enter first; I ventured to bring the front-door scraper with me as a weapon, and will not hesitate to use it if his Lordship should show violence."

"Nonsense, Coombs; stand out of the way," said Lady Grebe impatiently. "I'm perfectly capable of dealing with this situation myself. Just keep a good look-out while I shine the electric torch."

The brilliant beam of the flashlight illuminated as strange a scene as it would be possible to imagine. At the far end of the orchid house, writhing on the floor and emitting shrieks and yells akin to those of a soul in torment, was Lord Grebe, attired in yellow silk pyjamas and entangled in a voluminous swathe of yellow bass, such as is used by gardeners for tying up plants.

The swathe had been hanging from a hook on one of the battens of the orchid house roof, and the Peer, in his frantic struggles to free himself from the grip of what he took to be orchid tendrils, had succeeded in knotting several lengths of split bass round his naked throat. There was an inverted flower-pot on his head, and in some inexplicable manner he had contrived to get himself entangled in the luxuriant foliage of an overturned orchid plant; but that which gave Coombs and her Ladyship pause was the expression of stark horror upon his countenance.

They had, however, little time to speculate as to the causes of this extraordinary phenomenon, for in that same all-revealing second things began to happen, and to happen rapidly.

A furtive figure, which had been lurking in the shadows behind Lord Grebe, slipped past him, elbowing Lady Grebe out of the way in his panic flight, and only hesitat-

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ing in the doorway of the orchid house just long enough to administer a savage punch to the stomach of the outraged Coombs before vanishing speedily into the night.

Coombs went down like a pole-axed ox; Lady Grebe, realizing in a twinkling that her treasured orchids had been at the mercy of a thief, screamed shrilly: "Stop him! He's after my man-eater!" and began to run, as fast as her satin mules would allow her, along the duck-boards towards the door; and Lord Grebe, to whom had come a sudden flash of inspiration, sprang to his feet, gripped his scimitar and went into action.

"Out of my way, Connie!" he yelled. "I'll get the scoundrelly fellow yet!" And next moment, leaping with astounding agility over the body of the prostrate Coombs, he, too, disappeared in the darkness.

He returned a few minutes later, breathless, but holding his head high.

"The confounded rascal got away among the rhododendrons," he reported, "but I'll put the police on his track to-morrow. Has he stolen the orchid?"

Lady Grebe regarded her husband with an expression of unwonted admiration.

"I don't know, Charles," she answered. "I haven't had a chance to look; I've been too busy attending to Coombs. I wish you'd tell him to stop howling and get up off the floor. I'm sure he can't have been hurt so badly as all that."

"Give me the torch and we'll have a look round," commanded the Peer, in authoritative tones. "Coombs, my dear fellow, stop that confounded moanin' and get up. There's no point in rollin' on the ground and bellowin'. The infernal scoundrel gave me a rougher handlin' than he did you, but you don't hear me screamin' the orchid house roof off, do you?"

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"Oh, Charles," cried Lady Grebe, her face drawn with anxiety, "did he attack you? Are you badly hurt?"

"Attack me?" replied the Peer. "I should dashed well think he did attack me, otherwise he'd never have got away. I gave him one or two nasty clouts with my scimitar that he's likely to remember for some weeks to come."

He swung the beam of the torch round the orchid house.

"There you are, my dear," he said, allowing the beam to come to rest on Professor van Rudebeek's blood-sucking orchid. "I got here in the nick of time, as you can see. I've been afraid for some little while that the news would leak out, and that somebody would try to steal the man-eater; and this evenin' I thought I heard someone movin' about in the hothouse, so I came down to see. I'd no sooner opened the door than the fellow flew at me like a jaguar, and we had the deuce of a rough-and-tumble. I fancy, if you and Coombs hadn't come buttin' in when you did I'd have got him down."

"Oh, Charles," said Lady Grebe in an awed whisper, "I had no idea you were so brave!"

"Nonsense, my dear," replied her husband modestly. "Can't have fellows pinchin' your orchids, what? Coombs, if you've quite recovered from your fright, we'll lock up the hothouse and go back to bed."

Soon after eleven o'clock on the morning following these sensational happenings Lord and Lady Grebe stood near the entrance to the orchid house watching Rogers and the under-gardeners loading Professor van Rudebeek's gift on to the Slyme Court garden cart, by means of which it was to be transported to the Milchester Horticultural Show. Seen in the full glare of the sunlight, its blossoms and

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foliage, though undoubtedly magnificent, appeared somehow less menacing, and the Peer caught himself wondering how he could ever have been such a consummate ass as to suppose, when he became entangled in the darkness in the swathe of bass, that he had been snared by the tendrils of so patently innocuous a plant.

"Man-eatin' orchid, my foot!" he exclaimed. "It wouldn't hurt a fly!"

And as the cart rumbled slowly off down the gravel carriage sweep he turned in triumph to his wife.

"Well, Connie, my dear," he said, a ring of pride in his voice, "I can't say I ever cared for your blessed orchid—it looks to me a pretty anaemic specimen—but I'll be sugared if I allow anybody to pinch it. I hope it wins the first prize!"

"I hope so, too, Charles, after your heroic conduct of last night," murmured Lady Grebe, looking up at him shyly. "I shall never forget the noble figure you cut with that flower-pot upside-down on your head and the scimitar in your hand. You looked like Horatius defending the bridge."

She appealed to the butler, who stood a little way apart on the gravel drive.

"Didn't his Lordship look a hero, Coombs?" she asked. The butler coughed.

"So far as I was able to discern his Lordship from my prostrate position on the floor of the orchid house, my Lady," he answered, "it seemed to me that he might very well have posed for a statue of Ajax defying the lightning."

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