

The Merry Mug

by

H.M. Raleigh



THE MERRY MUG

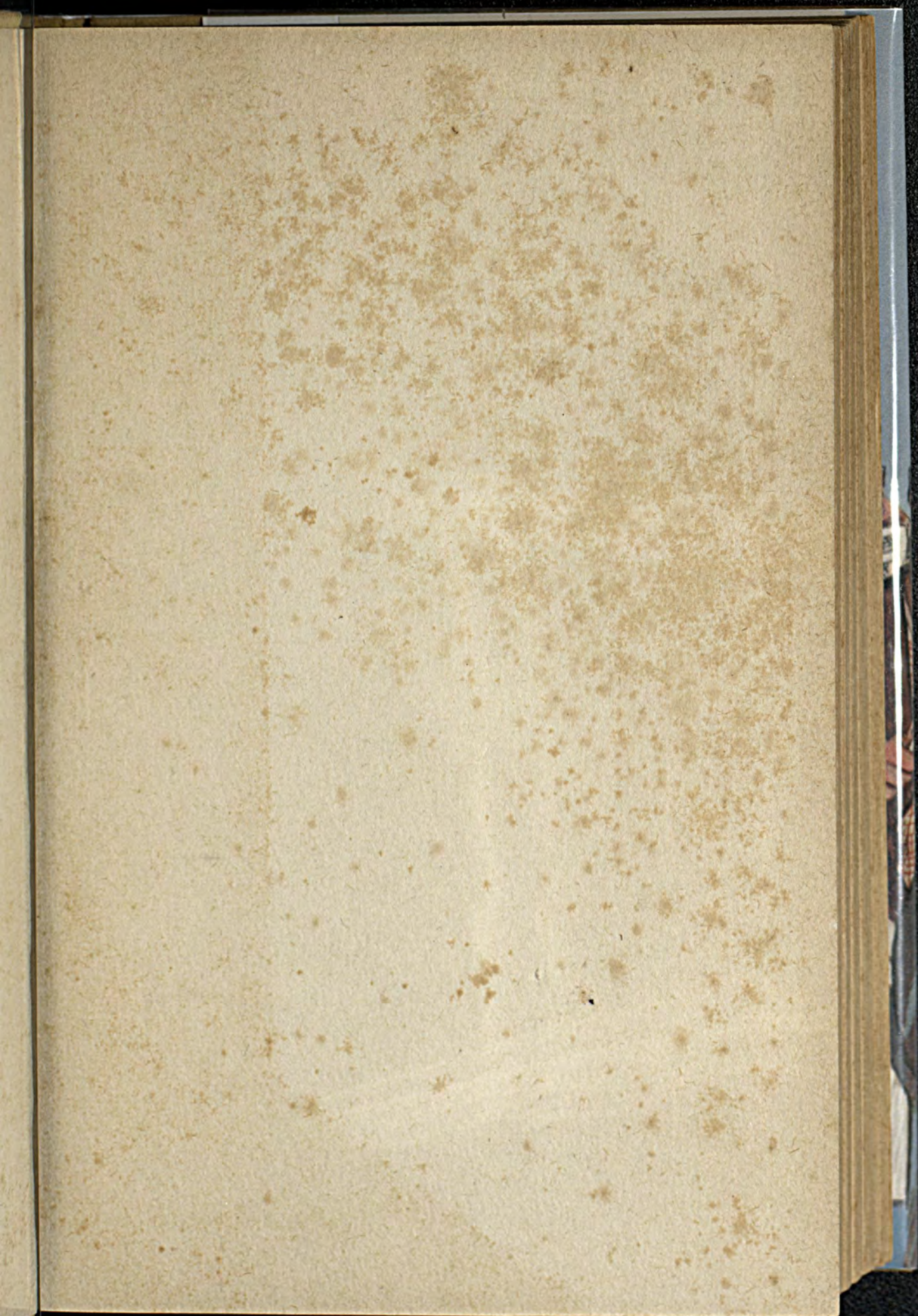
Simon Elliott, returning from South Africa to reign in his ancestral home, was a bit puzzled by receiving offers of immense sums for the infructuous acres of Doom Hall.

But worse was to follow. On arrival at the village of Doom he found himself in the midst of a Pagan Revivalism with marked tendencies towards human sacrifice, and only in the nick of time did he rescue a worthy A.A. patrol from the Corybantic frenzy of the villagers.

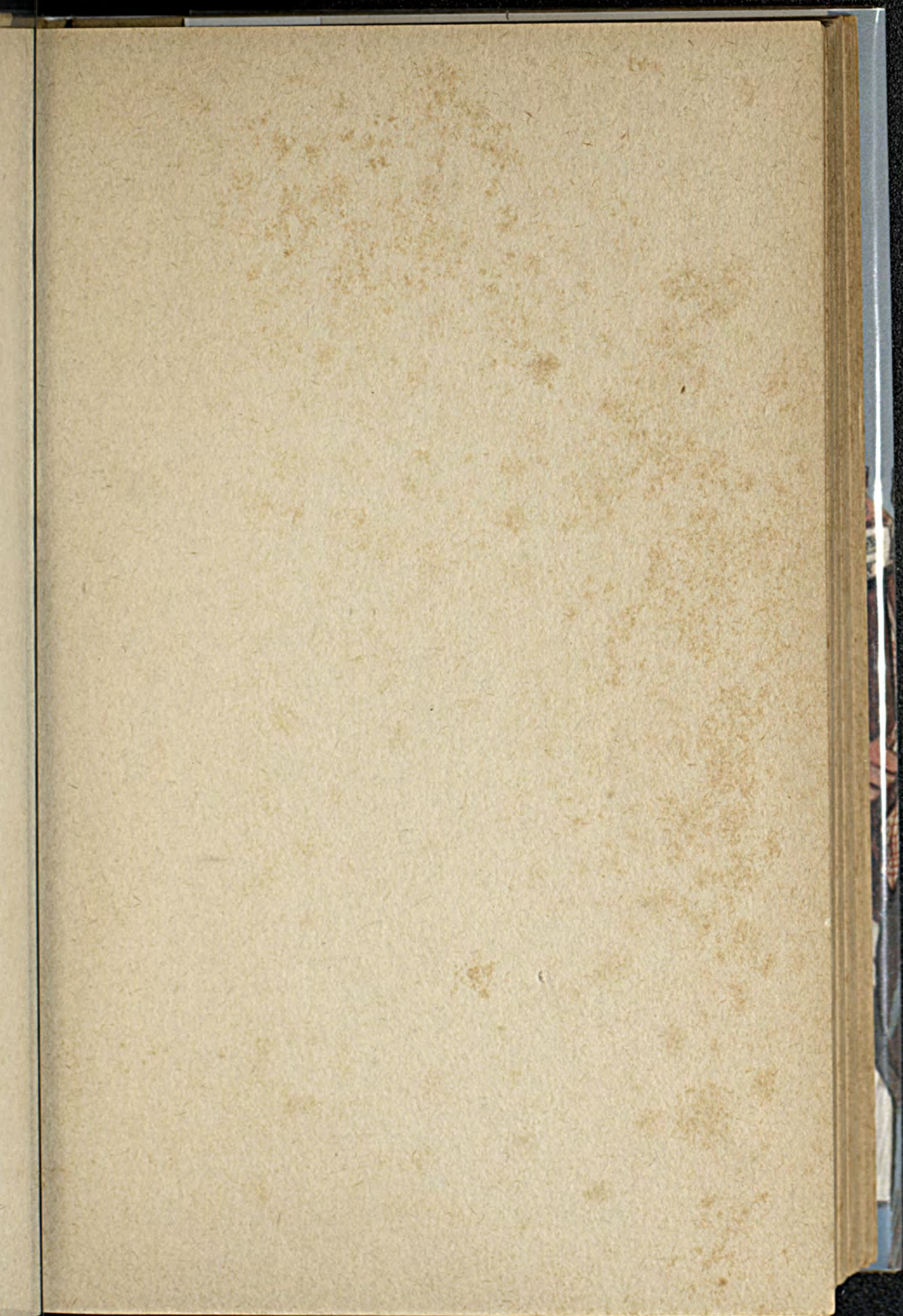
It seemed that the chief spot of trouble came from the infamous Mungo Sneyd, mine host of 'The Merry Mug.'

'Mr Raleigh is at the top of his form in this story of the survival of pagan rites in a remote English village. Bless him!'—MR. HOWARD SPRING in *The Evening Standard*.

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THE MERRY MUG

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE CHRONICLES OF SLYME COURT

THE MERRY MUG

BY
H. M. RALEIGH

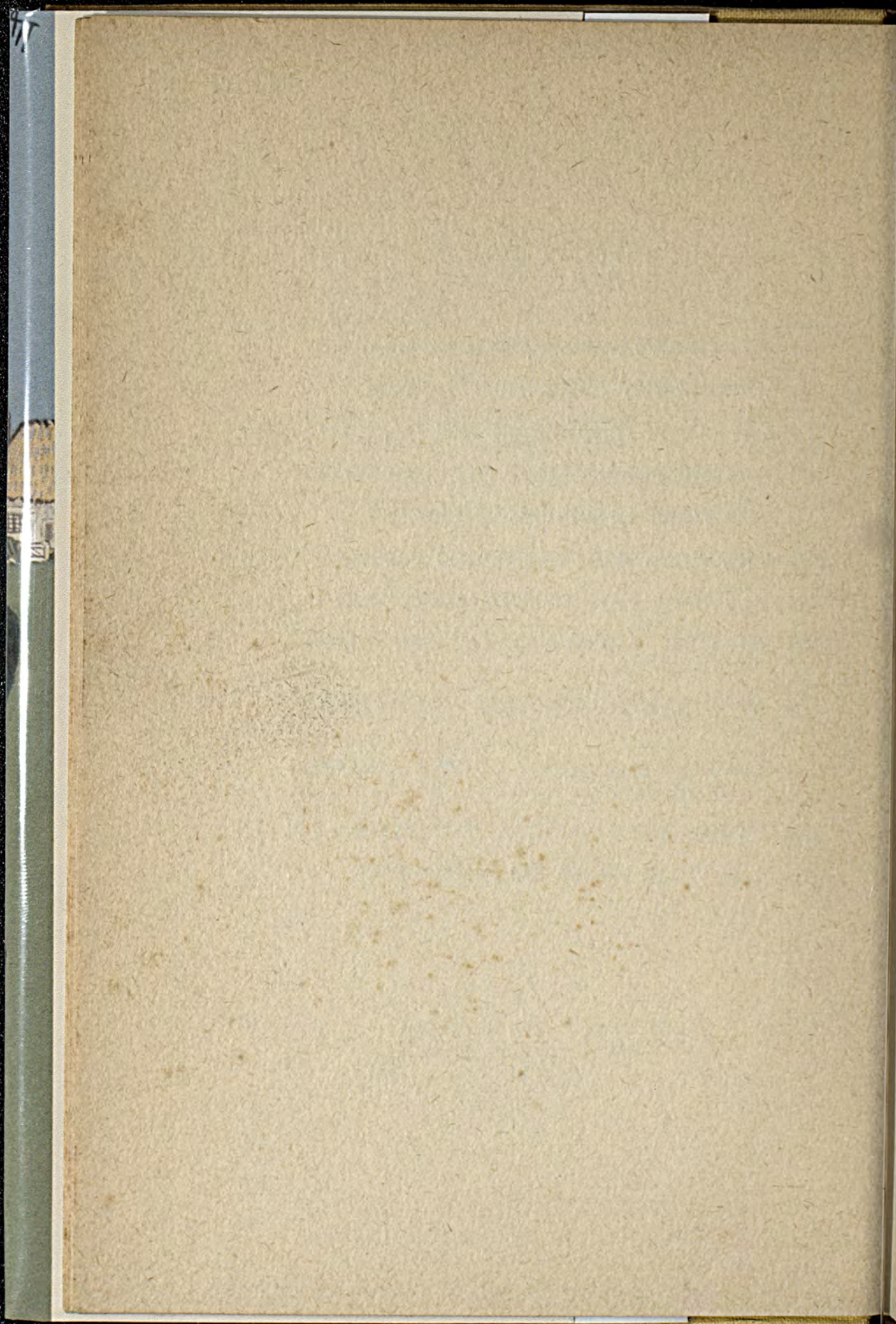
GEOFFREY BLES
TWO MANCHESTER SQUARE, LONDON
1936

NOTE.—The characters in this book are entirely imaginary, and no reference is intended to any person, living or dead. The author especially desires to emphasize that however uncouth the behaviour of Mr. Albert Whelk may appear, no reflection is cast upon the Automobile Association, that splendid organization of which Mr. Whelk was a humble though fictitious servant, and of which the author is proud to be a still humbler member.

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I.—*Mr. Fidoe's Wash-Basin is Upset*

THE offices of Messrs. Fidoe, Chitterling and Fidoe, solicitors, are situate in Tontine Alley, a dingy cul-de-sac not far distant from the main entrance to Cannon Street Station, and are bounded on the one side by a Salvation Army citadel, and on the other by a rather disreputable tavern known as "The Hoop and Toy." Mr. Fidoe, Junior, now the only active partner in the firm, remains, at the mellow age of sixty-eight, stolidly deaf to the entreaties of some of his wealthier clients that he should remove his premises to a more prepossessing neighbourhood, and has been heard to remark jocularly that his office stands, "where every lawyer's office ought to stand, midway between the forces of heaven and of hell." But then Mr. Fidoe lives in Kent, and Cannon Street is his terminus; moreover, he likes to bury himself occasionally in the bookshops of St. Paul's Churchyard.

Shortly before noon upon a grilling day in early summer, when Mr. Fidoe's clerks were drowsing over their briefs, affidavits, powers of attorney, and what-not, the traditional calm of the office was rudely shattered. Not, as had often happened before, by the sound of revelry at "The Hoop and Toy,"

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nor by the lugubrious wailing of a cornet played by an inexpert Salvationist bandsman, but by an episode as singular as it was sudden.

A young man of smart apparel and good address—though his broad-brimmed soft felt hat imparted a slightly colonial flavour to his appearance—jumped out of a taxi-cab at the corner of Tontine Alley, cast a rapid glance up and down the street, as though he were afraid his movements might have been observed, and, darting into the offices of Messrs. Fidoe, Chitterling and Fidoe, ran quickly up the stairs and burst unannounced into Mr. Fidoe's private room on the first floor. The affair was quite unprecedented, for the head of the firm never interviewed clients without an appointment, and nobody had ever been known before to march so brazenly through the barrage of clerks in the outer office. But if the clerks were surprised, their amazement was as nothing compared with that of Mr. Fidoe, Junior, who had been engaged in washing his hands in an enamelled basin placed in a curtained alcove in a corner of the room, and who now stood, towel in hand, gaping in astonishment at the unprincipled intruder.

The newcomer made no attempt to apologize for his uncouth behaviour. He took off his hat, tossed it into the correspondence basket upon Mr. Fidoe's desk, and, stepping swiftly across to the window, threw up the sash and gazed down into the street.

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"I thought as much," he remarked, withdrawing his head and turning to the astounded lawyer. "Excuse me half a second."

And before Mr. Fido could recover sufficiently to make any reply the youth had crossed the room, snatched up the wash-basin full of soapy water, and deftly precipitated its contents out of the window into the street below.

"God bless my soul!" ejaculated Mr. Fido, regaining at last the power of speech.

The young man said nothing for a moment or two, but stood, empty wash-basin in hand, contemplating his handiwork with an expression of profound satisfaction. Then he turned, replaced the basin on its stand in the alcove, and advanced upon the lawyer with an ingratiating smile.

"That's settled *his* hash," he announced. "Sorry to have been a bit offhand, but something had to be done about it, you know. Are you Mr. Fido?"

The lawyer, who was now convinced that he had to deal with a lunatic, inclined his head gravely, and took a pace in the direction of the electric bell-push on his desk.

"I am," he assented. "But really, Mr.—er——"

"Elliott," put in the stranger promptly. "Simon Elliott. I had an appointment with you for eleven o'clock, but I've spent the last half-hour trekking round London trying to shake off that fellow out there. He stuck to my spoor like a hunter, but thanks

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to your wash-basin he'll have to go home and change now. It was a direct hit."

Mr. Fido was not yet assured of his visitor's sanity, but at all events he now knew who he was. He shook him warmly by the hand, motioned him to a leather-padded arm-chair, and seated himself at his desk.

"I was expecting you, Mr. Elliott," he said, "but I must confess you took me by surprise. Do I understand you to imply that you have just emptied the contents of my wash-basin over a man who has been following you?"

"What a thing it is to have a trained legal mind!" exclaimed the young man in tones of wonder. "You've put your finger right on the knub of the situation. The persevering citizen who has just gone home to change into dry underpants has been shadowing me ever since I left the boat at Tilbury last night. If it comes to that, he's had me more or less under observation since I embarked at Capetown."

"What? You mean he travelled home with you?"

Simon Elliott nodded.

"That's right," he said. "He was in the steerage, and I was first-class, as befits a man who has just inherited his uncle's country estate; but the fellow must have had some kind of graft with the captain, for he was always hanging about at the sharp end of the boat, where steerage passengers are not

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allowed to go, and I knew he was watching me. Then there was the unpleasant affair at Madeira. I nearly got jugged there."

"I'm afraid I don't quite follow you, Mr. Elliott. You mean you were nearly imprisoned?"

"I went ashore with some friends off the boat," explained Simon, "and somebody started a rough house in a Bodega where we were toying with a stoup of canary. I and my party played the rôle of innocent onlookers while it rained bottles and glasses all round us, but when the local *gendarmerie* arrived they seemed to think I'd had something to do with the hostilities, and I had to beat it back to the boat for fear of being incarcerated in the calaboose. That dirty little rat who's just had a bath out of your wash-basin was at the back of the whole business; I'd seen him in conference with a tough-looking gang of thugs as we went into the wine shop."

"But who is this villain?" exclaimed Mr. Fidoe. "Why should he wish to torment you in this way?"

Simon shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't actually know who he is," he replied. "But I've a very good idea what he's after. He's acting for somebody else, and that somebody else is mightily anxious that I should sell him my uncle's estate."

"Sell Doom?" cried the lawyer. "God bless my soul, your uncle would turn in his grave if he thought the old place was passing out of the family!"

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"Exactly. That's just how I felt about it myself. Listen to me, Mr. Fidoe. It's several months now since Uncle Ebenezer died, and you wrote to me in South Africa to say that he'd left me the village of Doom, with Manor House and all complete. At first I wasn't at all anxious to chuck up my sheep-farming operations in the great open spaces, come home, and settle down to the unexciting life of an English country squire. Somehow I felt that a few measly acres of Berkshire downland would look flat and silly after our great rolling African hills. Then something happened to make me change my mind."

"Indeed, and what was that?"

"I received one day by the post an anonymous offer of a quarter of a million pounds cash down for the Doom estate."

"God bless my soul!" exclaimed Mr. Fidoe for the third time. "But the place isn't worth anything like that amount. It must have been a practical joke, Mr. Elliott."

"That's what I thought myself at first," said Simon, "but it turned out to be all square and above board. The letter came through a reputable firm of solicitors in Capetown; I went to see them, and they assured me that the offer was genuine enough. Only, of course, they refused to disclose the identity of their client."

Mr. Fidoe nodded.

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"Naturally," he said.

"Well, of course," went on the young man, "I thought to myself that there must be some pretty substantial motive lurking behind this apparently insane desire to purchase at a heavy loss, so I refused the offer and sat down to await events. Some weeks later I got another letter from the Capetown legal birds. I can't remember the exact wording, but I'll post you the whole correspondence when I get my gear unpacked. The offer was repeated, and I was warned that unless I accepted it the consequences to myself might be very serious."

"What? You were actually threatened?"

Simon laughed.

"It looked uncommonly like it. Anyway, the second letter put my back up, so I wrote off a rude note to the Capetown firm, definitely refusing the offer once and for all, and asking just what exactly was the nigger in the wood-pile. Nothing happened for several more weeks, and I had practically completed the arrangements for selling my farm and coming home, when some person or persons unknown tried to murder me. Beastly, it was."

The lawyer moved impatiently in his chair.

"Mr. Elliott, you're joking."

"A pretty poor joke, believe me. Have you ever had much to do with sheep dip, Mr. Fidoe?"

"Sheep dip? I can't say that I have. But what——"

"Well, I have, and you can take it from me that

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it doesn't go well with coffee. It's a very strong disinfectant."

"Are you suggesting——"

"I'm not suggesting anything; I'm *telling* you. On the very morning when I was packing up to leave the farm there was sheep dip in my breakfast coffee. What's more, there was a puff-adder in my cabin trunk when I went to pack my gear. I yelled for the Kaffir servants, to put them through the third degree, but found they had all flown the coop. So I killed the snake with a boot-tree, emptied the coffee down the kitchen sink, finished packing my kit, and skinned out of the place, pronto."

"But God bless my soul, did you not communicate with the police?"

"Not on your life. I didn't want to be held up indefinitely in South Africa to give evidence against some poor, misguided blackamoor: I wanted to come home. Besides, I had a pretty shrewd idea what was at the bottom of it. Well, that's all finished with for the moment, and here I am, thirsting to know all about this place Doom."

The lawyer glanced at his watch.

"Are you staying in Town for long, Mr. Elliott?"

"Just at the moment I'm parked at Grubb's Hotel, in Bloomsbury. It's a lichen-covered sort of establishment, but the food's good, and it was recommended to me by some people on the boat. A great many South Africans go there when they come over."

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Mr. Fidoe nodded.

"I once dined there," he said. "It is very convenient for the British Museum. Well, Mr. Elliott, there is a good deal to explain, and I see that time is getting on. Perhaps you will do me the honour of lunching with me at my club?"

"That's very kind of you, Mr. Fidoe," said Simon. "Say where and when, and I'll be with you. In the meantime I must go and buy a car. I thought of running down to Doom to-morrow to look at the place, and anyway, if the little fellow I washed this morning is going to keep me on the hop I shall find it easier to dodge him in a really speedy bus."

He rose to his feet and rescued his hat from the lawyer's correspondence basket. Mr. Fidoe rose too, and held out a hand.

"Half-past one then, Mr. Elliott," he said, "at the Senior Ghouls Club in Piccadilly. I shall expect you."

In the Used Car department of a garage in Great Portland Street Simon Elliott found a vehicle which suited him admirably—a second-hand two-seater Howitzer, of phenomenal horse-power. A new car, he reflected, would be useless for his purpose, which was to show a clean pair of wheels to his relentless pursuer, for although that worthy's ardour had been damped by the contents of Mr. Fidoe's wash-basin, Simon was convinced that he would resume the chase before very long, and it would be easier to

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keep him guessing with a car that had already been "run in." He told the immaculately clad nobleman who conducted the negotiations on behalf of the garage that he would call for the Howitzer on the following morning, and was on his way out when his attention was arrested by a young girl of surpassing loveliness who was just climbing into a dilapidated Ford tourer. She was tall and slim, with a mop of glorious red hair, and her beauty drew him like a magnet.

Mr. Fidoe, if he had seen her, would probably have exclaimed "God bless my soul!" Simon contented himself with the simple but expressive word "Gosh!" and removed himself to a position whence he could study her features more closely. In the driving seat of the ancient Ford, engaged in a heated altercation with yet another immaculate nobleman, sat an elderly female of forbidding aspect, and on the radiator of the car was fixed a card bearing a scarlet capital letter "L." The elderly female dismissed the nobleman with an imperious wave of the hand, and turned to the girl at her side.

"It will be your duty, Imogen," she announced in a loud voice, "to keep a sharp look-out upon the highway, and give me due notice when we are approaching traffic lights, Belisha beacons, and other symbols erected by the Ministry of Transport. You will also, for as long as we are within a restricted area, watch the speedometer closely, and inform me

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at once should our speed exceed twenty-nine miles per hour."

"That's not a bit likely, Aunt Hannah," said the girl, and Simon thrilled at the sound of her voice.

"In the event of an accident," continued the old lady inexorably, "you will make it your business to collect the names and addresses of all eye-witnesses, as well as those of the party or parties responsible. In case I should be incapacitated, you will remember that my smelling salts are in the inside pocket of my reticule. You clearly understand?"

"Yes, Aunt Hannah."

"Very well then, we will start. It occurs to me that we have no map. Do you know the way to Doom?"

"I think so, Aunt Hannah. You go out along the Great West Road."

Simon, who had been gradually edging nearer to the Ford, started at the old lady's question. This lovely girl was actually going to Doom, his own newly inherited Doom. Perhaps she lived there; anyway, he would very soon find out. He marched up to the car, whose driver was performing a Hungarian folk-song on the self-starter, and took off his hat.

"I beg your pardon, madam," he began, but the rest of his sentence was drowned by the roar of the engine and the crashing of gears.

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"Stand out of the way, young man," shouted Aunt Hannah. "I am about to let in the clutch."

Simultaneously she did so, and the venerable Ford leaped backwards several yards, narrowly avoiding collision with an expensive limousine.

"You must have got into reverse, Aunt Hannah," suggested the girl quietly, "and I'm afraid you've stalled the engine. Start her up again, and try pulling the lever the other way."

The driver snorted.

"When I require your advice, Imogen, I shall ask for it," she said. "It was all the fault of that young man, distracting my attention at a critical moment."

"I'm awfully sorry," said Simon. "I only wanted to ask——"

Aunt Hannah clamped her pince-nez firmly on the bridge of her nose, and transfixed him with a baleful glare.

"I suppose you are one of those officious young constables from the Police Training College. I can assure you that you are wasting your time if you hope to convict me of driving dangerously, under the influence of drugs or alcohol, or without due care and attention. My car is fully insured, I hold a learner's licence, and my niece, whom you see with me, is acting as my instructor."

"But you're quite mistaken," said Simon. "I——"

"If I have any more trouble from you, young

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man," interrupted the old lady, "I shall report you to Sir Philip Game. Stand out of my way; I am in a hurry."

There was a nerve-shattering roar as the engine started again, and Simon side-stepped rapidly as the palpitating monster charged forward through the exit and into the street. Aunt Hannah sounded her horn defiantly, and she and her red-headed instructress were quickly swallowed up in the traffic stream. Simon turned, and beckoned to one of the immaculate noblemen.

"Tell me, comrade," he asked. "What is the name of the redoubtable lady who is about to lay waste the highway between here and Oxford Street? She has the Boadicea touch."

"That, sir, is a Miss Gudgeon," replied the nobleman. "She has a place somewhere in Berkshire, I fancy."

"And the fairy with her, the niece? Does she also live in Berkshire?"

"I couldn't say, sir. I've never seen either of them before. They came in to buy a car."

"And you sold them one." Simon patted the nobleman on the shoulder. "Be of good cheer, brother. You have this day lit such a candle in Berkshire as shall never be put out."

In the entrance hall of the Senior Ghouls Club, in Piccadilly, Simon found his host, Mr. Fidoe, awaiting him. The lawyer had reserved a table for

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two in a corner of the big dining-room, and thither they presently repaired, pausing on the way to consume a couple of glasses of old brown sherry.

"It is a very hot day," observed Mr. Fido, studying the menu thoughtfully, "and no doubt you would prefer something cold, but I cannot allow you to leave the club without sampling our celebrated arrack omelette, a speciality of the Senior Ghouls."

"I've heard of it," said Simon. "I believe it's got a kick like a mule. Well, I can do with something fierce; I've had a tiresome morning."

"Have you been bothered again by the—er——"

"The little fellow who's trailing me? No, I've shaken him off for the time being, but I don't doubt he'll be waiting for me outside Grubb's Hotel. His signature tune is *The Long, Long Trail*. And now I want to hear all about Doom. I've bought a car, and I'm going to run down there to-morrow, but there's a lot you can tell me before I go. Uncle Ebenezer was squire of the place for a good many years, wasn't he?"

"Yes," said the lawyer. "He died suddenly last November; on Guy Fawkes Night, to be exact. It was his custom to build a bonfire on top of the downs each year for the Boy Scouts, and it was thought that the excitement was too much for him. Heart failure was the cause of death, poor fellow; but of course I told you all that in my letter."

"You did. You also inundated me with sordid

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financial particulars; details of rents, tithes, and so forth; but the human element was lacking. Tell me about the neighbours; does anybody else live in Doom?"

"Very few people of your own class, Mr. Elliott. There is the Vicar, of course, the Reverend Anthony Grayling; he is a widower, and something of a recluse. He writes a letter to the *Morning Post* once a year on the subject of the cuckoo, but beyond that he has very few interests outside his own vicarage. Then, let me see, there's the Moat Farm, a rambling old house with some very fine oak panelling. You have a tenant there, an elderly antiquarian named Humphrey Chard. I've never met him myself, but I believe he is quite a good fellow. He moved in last autumn, and has been busy ever since with excavations among the ancient British barrows. You were aware, no doubt, that Doom itself stands on the site of a British village, and that the main road running through it is of Roman origin?"

"I'll take your word for it," said Simon. "Any other neighbours?"

"There is a Miss Hannah Gudgeon, of the Grange. Some relation of the Vicar's, I fancy, but I recommend you to give her a wide berth. She is an obstinate female who knows what she wants and goes out of her way to get it. We've had a good deal of trouble with her, I'm afraid, and if you'll take

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my advice you'll leave the handling of her to Phipps, the agent to the estate. He lives in Oxford, and if you like I'll wire him to meet you down at Doom to-morrow."

"No, thanks. I think I'll nose round by myself for a bit first; I can always get hold of him later. But tell me more about this Miss Gudgeon. Hasn't she got a girl living with her, a niece?"

"Not that I ever heard of. She lives alone, except for a Breton manservant who waits at table and looks after the garden. I think that exhausts the social resources of the village."

"How about public buildings? There is a church, of course?"

"Yes. Very small, but one of the oldest churches in England. Saxon mostly, though the Romans had a hand in the building of it. There's a leper window and a beautifully carved rood screen."

"I suppose there's a pub?"

"Indeed, yes. 'The Merry Mug,' another ancient landmark. It used to be a sort of clearing-house for smugglers, who brought their stuff across the downs from the Hampshire coast, and I'm told the inn itself is riddled with secret passages, cupboards, and the like. The present landlord, Mungo Sneyd, is a surly fellow, but he pays the rent on the nail, and we've never had any complaints regarding the management of the house. While we are on the subject of antiquities, I should tell you that the Stone

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Circle at Doom is the pride of the district. Next to Stonehenge, and perhaps the stone circle at Avebury, it is considered the finest example of an ancient British cromlech in the south of England. It stands on your estate, but has been taken over by the Office of Works."

"They're welcome to it," said Simon. "I've never been passionately fond of stones myself. And now tell me about the Manor House. I understand there's a domestic staff of some kind left there by my uncle. I mean there'll be somebody to put the kettle on the hob over against my arrival to-morrow, what?"

"Of course," answered the lawyer. "There is your uncle's butler, Evan Rhys-Davies, and his wife Annie, the cook-housekeeper. Rhys-Davies is a Welshman, but the woman comes from north of the Tweed. Both were in your uncle's service for more years than I care to remember."

"Good. I'll send them a telegram after lunch, telling 'em to kill the fatted calf in honour of the new squire. Well, Mr. Fidoe, you've given me a lot of valuable information, and I'm very grateful, but I'll tell you who interests me most. Miss Hannah Gudgeon, of the Grange."

"Indeed, and why is that?"

"Ah," said Simon mysteriously. "That would be telling."

An hour later the Squire of Doom took his leave

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of Mr. Fido and strolled out into Piccadilly. He felt at peace with all the world, for he had given the arrack omelette a nasty clout, and the liqueur brandy at the Senior Ghouls was unique. He found a post office, sent off his telegram to Rhys-Davies, the butler at Doom Manor, and then sauntered slowly back to his hotel. His mind was full of plans for the future, but all of them had for their central figure a tall slim girl of astonishing beauty, whom he had last seen in the front seat of a venerable Ford car, and whose christian name—Imogen—was graven upon his heart. Nothing would induce him to sell Doom now, and he was resolved, despite the lawyer's warning, to lose no time in cultivating the acquaintance of Miss Hannah Gudgeon, of the Grange.

Outside Grubb's Hotel his eye was caught by a familiar figure standing on the kerb, and he was brought back with something of a shock to realities. This confounded little rat, it seemed, had failed to profit by his cold bath. Simon quickened his pace and advanced upon his pursuer, but the man took to his heels and bolted down an alleyway.

"Just you wait until to-morrow, my lad," muttered Simon, as he entered the hotel by the swing-door. "You'll have to run faster than that if you want to keep up with my Howitzer."

Crossing the hall towards the lift, he was accosted by the hotel porter.

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"Beg pardon, sir," said that worthy, "but are you Mr. Elliott?"

Simon bowed.

"Well, there's a lady and gent called to see you; party of the name of Rhys-Davies. They asked for you most particular, and said they'd wait till you come in, so I showed 'em into your sitting-room."

"Thank you," said Simon, and wondered, as the lift bore him skyward, what his uncle's butler and cook-housekeeper could be doing in London when they should have been at Doom preparing the Manor House for his reception.

Mr. Evan Rhys-Davies was a wizened little man with grey side-whiskers and a nearly bald head. He was dressed in sober black, and carried in his hand a shabby bowler hat. His wife, Annie, by contrast, was large and florid, with chemically treated hair, and a face that had been liberally doctored with rouge. Both had been seated side by side on the extreme edge of the settee in Simon's private sitting-room, but they rose at his entrance and advanced to meet him, manifestly ill-at-ease.

"Good afternoon," said Simon, holding out a hand. "Mr. Rhys-Davies, I believe. And this"—he turned to the lady—"will be Annie?"

"Aye, it will that," answered Mrs. Rhys-Davies. "I'm gey glad to see you, Mr. Elliott."

"What I don't understand," went on Simon, "is

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how you knew where to find me. Won't you sit down?"

"It wass your telegram, sir," explained the butler.

"My telegram? But, suffering snakes! I've only just this minute sent it off!"

Annie Rhys-Davies fumbled in her bag, and produced a crumpled telegraph form. She smoothed it out, and handed it to her employer.

"Ye'll no be telling us ye did not send this telegram, Mr. Elliott," she said. "The bairn frae the post office delivered it at the Manor this morning."

Utterly mystified, Simon studied the message. It had been sent off from Bloomsbury at 6.55 the previous evening, very soon after his first arrival at the hotel, and was signed with his own name. "Arrived London," he read. "Staying Grubb's Hotel Bloomsbury till further notice." Only one person besides himself could have sent that telegram, for only one person besides himself had the necessary knowledge. For some obscure reason the watcher on the threshold had thought it necessary to apprise the Rhys-Davies of his, Simon's, arrival, and to that end had taken his name in vain. He handed the telegram back to the cook-housekeeper, sat down, and lit a cigarette.

"Of course, how stupid of me," he lied. "I'd forgotten all about that wire. Well, now you are here, what can I do for you? You haven't travelled

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all the way up to Town just to thank me for my telegram, I take it?"

Mr. Rhys-Davies fidgeted nervously with his bowler.

"We haf come to give notiss, sir," he said. "We are leaving your service."

"What?" exclaimed Simon, completely taken aback. "You can't possibly leave now; you've both been at Doom since the year dot. You've neither of you ever seen me before, so you can't have taken a dislike to my face or my habits. What's the trouble? Is there something the matter with the drains, or does Annie want to better herself? I'll raise your salaries if you like; but I was counting on you to show me my way about the place."

Mr. Rhys-Davies shrugged his shoulders and assumed a helpless expression.

"There iss things going on, look you," he said.

"Things going on? What things? For the love of Mike, man, pull yourself together and explain what's worrying you."

"We're unco sorry for to put ye out, Mr. Elliott," said Mrs. Rhys-Davies, "but we canna stay at Doom anither minute. What wi bogles screamin' and yammerin' all nicht long in the policies, and muckle puddocks lowpin' out frae the cupboards, Doom Manor is no a place for a Christian body to bide. If ye'll tak my advice, Mr. Elliott, ye'll sell the

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estate and gang awa hame to South America, or whaurever it is ye came from."

"What in thunder do you mean?" demanded Simon. "Muckle puddocks leaping out of the cupboards?"

"It iss hop-toads she means whateffer," explained the butler, with a perfectly wooden countenance.

"Hop-toads? You mean the place is infested with frogs? But that's no reason for throwing up a perfectly good job. I expect it's the damp; we'll very soon have that trouble put right."

"Aye, Mr. Elliott," said the butler's wife, "but did ye ever see a hop-toad the size of a mon? I tell ye it's no canny. The place is haunted, and neither I nor my mon Evan will bide there anither minute. Ye maun find yerself, some new servants, but I doot ye'll no keep them."

"There iss things going on," repeated Mr. Rhys-Davies monotonously.

II.—*A Geologist Loses His Trousers*

DEPRIVED thus suddenly of his domestic staff—for neither bribes nor entreaties could induce the Rhys-Davies couple to reconsider their decision—the new Squire of Doom was puzzled and angry. He showed his two visitors out, bade them a curt farewell in the passage, and returned to his sitting-room to consider the situation. The butler had handed over the keys of the Manor, and assured him that the house was well stocked with food and drink; but what was all this talk of “hop-toads,” “muckle puddocks,” and “bogles in the policies”? Well, there was only one thing to be done; he must go down to Doom and find out. He would have a talk with the Vicar, and no doubt with his assistance he could persuade some woman from the village to come in and “do” for him. Failing that, he would have to put up at the inn—what was it called? “The Merry Mug”—until such time as he could collect an efficient staff. He rather wished now that he had arranged for Phipps the agent to meet him at Doom; but Phipps lived in Oxford, some thirty miles away, and it was no part of the duty of an estate agent to act as a registry office for domestic servants.

The Merry Mug

All at once Simon felt most terribly lonely. He had no surviving relatives in England, and having been five years in South Africa he had lost sight of his English friends. What he needed now was an ally, someone with whom he could discuss his problems, and who would help him to tear aside the veil of mystery which cloaked his affairs. There was Mr. Fidoe, of course, but the lawyer was a busy man; moreover, Simon suspected he would cut a sorry figure in anything in the nature of a rough house. Then he remembered Cyril Jukes, a companion of his schooldays at Wopham. Jukes had been expelled for writing an obscene poem which had for its central characters the headmaster's wife and the school groundsman, but before this untoward event he and Simon had shared many a hair-raising escapade. Together they had tarred and feathered, at dead of night, the statue of Archdeacon Jupp, founder of the school; together they had secretly imported, on the eve of Speech Day, several quarts of old Jamaica rum, with which potent spirit they had liberally laced the lemonade and claret cup intended for parents and guardians; together they had rejoiced over the surprising results of the visitors' carefree potations. Yes, beyond a doubt, Cyril Jukes was the man he needed now.

Simon went downstairs to the telephone, and rang up the office of the *Evening Echo*. So far as he could recall, Jukes had obtained a post as reporter on the

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staff of that enterprising journal; it was just possible that he was still so employed.

"Mr. Jukes," said the *Evening Echo*, "left us over a year ago, but he's still knocking about Fleet Street. You'll be pretty certain to find him in the bar of the 'Goat in Golden Boots' round about opening time. If he isn't there, the barman will tell you where to look for him."

The newspapers know everything.

Six o'clock, then, found Simon Elliott entering the saloon bar of the "Goat in Golden Boots." He had no very great hope of finding Cyril, and in any case the journalist was probably working for some other paper, and would have little time to spare for his, Simon's, troubles. Still, it would be a relief to have somebody to talk to, and he could do with a drink, for the arrack omelette at the Senior Ghouls Club was a thirst-promoting agent. The bar was practically deserted when he went in, but at one end of the room he descried a lean figure in a dirty yellow mackintosh sitting on a very high stool in an attitude of profound dejection. There was something familiar about the cut of the stranger's jib, and when he raised his head to toss off a whisky and soda Simon, seeing the hatchet face in profile, realized that his quest was at an end. Undoubtedly this was Jukes; Jukes in huge horn-rimmed spectacles and a shabby raincoat; but Jukes nevertheless. Simon crossed the room and touched him on the shoulder.

The Merry Mug

"Simon Elliott, by the great horn spoon!" ejaculated the journalist, swinging round upon his stool. "Well, well, well, thus the whirligig of time brings in his revenges. How did you get here, old boy? I thought you were milking ostriches in the Kalahari Desert. Barman, bring us two of your extra special double Scotches and soda; this must be celebrated. For there is neither east nor west, border nor breed nor birth, when two strong men stand face to face, though they come from the ends of the earth!"

"I'm mighty glad I've found you, Cyril," said Simon, drawing up another stool. "I need your help badly."

"You shall have it, old boy, you shall have it, even down to the half of my kingdom," replied the other. "At the present moment, however"—he dived his hand into his trouser pocket and drew it out disconsolately—"I'm afraid the exchequer is not in funds. In point of fact I have just enough to pay for the drinks."

"That's all right," said Simon. "It isn't your money I want. Look here, are you very busy just now?"

Cyril Jukes finished his whisky and soda at a gulp, and set the glass down on the counter.

"Alas, no," he sighed. "Until a week ago I was a promising young reporter on the staff of the *Daily Scream*, but an unfortunate misunderstanding over

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the law of libel led to the severance of my connection with that organ, and in me you now behold a member of the monstrous regiment of unemployed. You look opulent, Simon; I suppose you haven't by any chance become a newspaper proprietor?"

"We will have some more drinks," said Simon, "and you will give me your closest attention for about half an hour. After that you will dine with me and do a show, and to-morrow morning we will dive together into the depths of rural England."

"Just as you say, old boy. Mine is the same as before."

It was well after eleven o'clock the next morning when Simon met his friend by appointment at the garage in Great Portland Street, and together they boarded the Howitzer two-seater. They lunched at Henley, and Simon related, with a wealth of descriptive detail, the circumstances of his encounter with Miss Hannah Gudgeon and her adorable niece.

"There is an ancient and fish-like smell about this story," observed the journalist thoughtfully. "The youthful heir to the Doom-millions, the blackavized thug who shadows his every step, the grey-haired adventuress with the lovely niece—I'll bet a dollar there's a little bald-headed man with a domed forehead and eyes he can hood like a hawk somewhere in the background. I expect it's the parson; do you know anything about him? In any case, you take my tip and steer clear of Aunt Hannah and

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her alleged niece. Otherwise, one of these days your torso will be found in a suitcase in a railway-station cloakroom somewhere on the south coast; your head, wrapped in sacking, will subsequently be fished out of the Regent's Canal by a boy scout; your left leg will be discovered under a seat in a cinema at Galashiels; your right arm will cause a good deal of discomfort to passengers in an electric train running between Liverpool and Southport; and your right leg and left arm, done up in a brown paper parcel together with your ears, will be delivered by the postman at the house of an unsuspecting haulage contractor at Weston-super-Mare."

"Don't be an ass," said Simon. "As soon as we're settled in at the Manor I'm going to make it my business to call on Miss Hannah Gudgeon. I tell you, Cyril, that girl——"

"That's all right, old boy," interrupted the journalist impatiently. "You can cut out the word-picture. I see you're determined to do all the right things, and it would wreck the story if the young hero failed to fall a victim to the wiles of the beautiful vampire. Incidentally, you seem to have given your faithful sleuth-hound the slip."

"Who? The little bloke who was following me? I saw him outside the hotel when I left this morning, but I expect he's abandoned the chase. Probably he's travelling down to Doom in comfort by train; he must have known where I was going, and it's a

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million to one he'll be waiting for us at the other end. Well, what about it? Shall we take the road?"

They came to Doom in the early afternoon, after losing their way several times in the winding Berkshire lanes. It was a scorching day, and the whole of the landscape danced under the heat haze, while the rolling downs, stretching stark and bare as far as eye could see, looked brown and parched like a desert. Doom itself, however, nestling among the foothills, is thickly wooded, and Simon was forced to pull up at the cross-roads on the outskirts of the village, where the old Roman highway is traversed by a sunken road, to take counsel with an A.A. patrol.

"Doom Manor, sir?" said the man. "It's over there beyond that belt of trees, just to the left of the church. Keep straight on till you come to the village green, and then bear left. You'll see a sign-post 'to the Stone Circle'; that's the road you take. The circle lies at the back of the Manor grounds."

"We ask for the Manor, and he offers us a stone circle," said Jukes. "I say, comrade, what time do they open?"

"Six o'clock, sir," answered the patrol. "You have to keep straight on through the village for the inn. 'The Merry Mug.'"

"Thanks. I wish I was a camel. Come on, Simon; we'll have to live on our humps till six."

There was something dark and mysterious about

The Merry Mug

Doom Manor, even upon that blazing afternoon in early June. It was a squat, ugly-looking house, low-lying, and overshadowed by monstrous elms; a gravel carriage sweep, sadly overgrown with weeds, led up to the front door, and the grounds on either side showed signs of grievous neglect. As Simon's car turned in at the entrance gates a solitary magpie flew across in front of the windscreen.

"One for sorrow, two for joy, three for a girl, and four for a boy," chanted Cyril Jukes. "I don't think I like this place, Simon, it gives me the creeps. In the words of the immortal Garbo, I tenk I go home."

"I am beginning to suspect," said Simon, gazing in dismay at the tangled undergrowth that should have been a garden, "that comrade Rhys-Davies was never trained at Kew. He was supposed to look after all this, and have you ever seen such a mess?"

He stopped the car opposite the front door, and the journalist climbed out.

"It's a great responsibility being a landed proprietor," he said. "I'm going to stay at the inn. Come up and see me some time."

"You'll do no such thing," grunted Simon. "Hoick the suitcases out of the dickey while I see if the front door key will fit the lock. I wouldn't put it past that butler to have given me the keys of a bathing cubicle at Littlehampton, just to make it more difficult."

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The butler's neglect of the garden was not reflected inside the house, for here everything was spotlessly clean. Ebenezer Elliott had evidently been an enthusiastic collector of junk, and Simon, stepping into the hall, feasted his eyes upon a strange assortment of curios: Chinese vases of the Ming Dynasty, Chippendale commodes, blunderbusses, Zulu assegais, and so forth ranged round the walls in no sort of order. Cyril Jukes, staggering beneath the weight of two large suitcases, called him back to the front door.

"I say, old boy," he said. "What's the idea of the dead crow hanging over the porch? It's got a bunch of bay-leaves tied round its neck, and it looks to me as if its throat had been cut. Do you suppose it's a signal to the milkman to leave an extra pint, or what?"

"Good Lord, let's have a look," said Simon. "I never saw it as I came in. Pull the filthy thing down and chuck it into a flower-bed; we'll bury it later on. I expect some ass has been trying to pull our legs."

"Right-ho, old boy. Catch hold of the suitcases; I'll be with you in a moment."

Together they explored the house, and found, as the butler had said, that everything was in readiness for their reception. The beds were made up, the larder contained a cold joint and a good supply of groceries, and the journalist, ferreting about in the

The Merry Mug

lower regions, found a well-stocked cellar and a dozen bottles of beer. Two of these he bore, rejoicing, to the dining-room, a long, low, oak-panelled chamber with french windows opening on to a sun-parched lawn.

"Stop prowling about, Simon, and come and concentrate," he shouted, unscrewing the top of one of the bottles. "A pint in the hand is worth two in 'The Merry Mug.'"

Simon came in, wearing a puzzled frown.

"I've just been having a walk round," he said, "and there are six more of those darned crows hung up at different points round the house. All of 'em with their throats cut and garlands of bay-leaves round their necks. What the devil does it mean?"

"It means," pronounced Cyril Jukes, pouring out a second glass of beer, "that that butler you told me about is just the tiniest little bit crackers. He has queer ideas on the subject of house decoration, but I expect it was done in your honour. Probably an old Welsh custom."

"Well, all I can say is, it's pretty disgusting."

"Oh no, it might have been very much worse. Dead crows he hung up, but just fancy if he had omitted the letter 'r'!"

* * * * *

Cheered by the generous ale, the two friends abandoned the idea of staying the night at the inn.

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The Manor House was dark and gloomy, and the garden was a wilderness, but at any rate there was food and drink, and the sleeping arrangements were adequate.

"We'll fend for ourselves to-night," said Simon, "and to-morrow I'll see the Vicar and try to charter a daily woman. If there's one thing I detest more than another, it's washing up."

"There is a grand piano in the drawing-room," announced Cyril. "A far better instrument than you deserve, you mutton-headed vandal. After supper I shall play Bach until it's time for bed."

"In that case I shall explore the grounds," said Simon. "Your Bach is much worse than your bite."

Accordingly, after a satisfying supper of cold mutton and tinned asparagus Simon lit one of his Uncle Ebenezer's cigars and strolled out into the garden. The grounds of the Manor, he found, were not extensive and were entirely surrounded by a high stone wall, having, at first sight, no other entrance than the main gateway through which he had driven the car. At the back of the house, however, and about three hundred yards from the dining-room french windows, he came upon a door in the wall, and pushing this open found himself upon the very edge of the famous Doom Stone Circle. At some time, many centuries ago, it had been a temple, and heavens knows what grim pagan rites it had witnessed; but now it was simply a circle of

The Merry Mug

vast monoliths, surrounded by a ring of beech-trees, and having in the centre a huge slab of rock placed horizontally across two smaller stones.

"I suppose that was the altar," said Simon to himself. "Gosh, this place gives me the creeps, even in daylight! I shan't come here often after dark."

He shivered slightly, and turned back through the doorway into his own grounds. For some reason the evening had suddenly turned chilly, and he began to feel that even the torture of listening to Jukes murdering Bach would be preferable to wandering about by himself in this lonely wilderness of a place. He returned to the house, and, finding in the library a copy of Matheson's *Antiquities of Berkshire*, read solidly until bedtime.

That night he slept soundly, untroubled by "muckle puddocks" or "bogles screaming in the policies," and going downstairs to the dining-room in the morning found Cyril laying the table for breakfast. The journalist was in his shirt-sleeves, his long black hair was tousled and unkempt, and his huge horn-rimmed spectacles were balanced precariously near the tip of his nose. He looked at Simon reproachfully.

"If you'd had any sense of hospitality," he said, "you'd have got up long ago and done something about the hot-water system, if any. I've been compelled, against my better judgment, to have a cold bath."

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"So have I," said Simon cheerfully. "What's for breakfast?"

"Sardines, old boy, and black coffee. I suppose you realize that there isn't any milk?"

"Gosh, no, no more there is! We ought to have come to some arrangement with a cow last night. This business of supplies must be thoroughly gone into to-day; we'll discuss it with the Vicar. Have you made any toast?"

"No, old boy, I cannot make bricks without straw. There's no bread."

"Oh, damn it all, this is too much!" exclaimed Simon. "Let's get the car out and go and have breakfast at the inn."

"That," said the journalist, "is a counsel of despair. The coffee is ready, I've opened the tin of sardines, and there are some Petit Beurre biscuits."

"What? No Thin Captain?"

"Just for once you must make do with Petit Beurre. Pull up a chair and fall to. There is much to be done this morning."

Simon was about to do as he was told, when a faint sound from the far end of the room caused him to look up sharply.

"Suffering polecats!" he exclaimed. "What in thunder is that?"

Framed in the open french window, half in, half out of the room, was a most extraordinary apparition.

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It was a stout little man with grey hair and gold-mounted pince-nez; in so far as the upper part of his anatomy was concerned he was dressed in a lounge suit of mustard-coloured tweed, but his nether limbs were encased in a large Turkey bath towel hung kiltwise round his waist. Purple sock suspenders, grey woollen socks, and a pair of brown boots completed the ensemble, and in one hand the stranger carried a pigskin suitcase.

"It's the secretary of the local branch of the Caledonian Society," said Cyril Jukes. "I expect he's come to see Annie Rhys-Davies. Humour him, old boy; say 'hoots' or 'wheesht,' or something like that."

The little man advanced into the room, put the suitcase down on the floor, and looked timidly at Simon.

"I must apologize for this intrusion," he said in a shrill falsetto, "but the fact is I find myself in an extremely delicate situation. My—er—trousers, as you can see for yourself, have been purloined."

"Too bad," said Jukes sympathetically. "They were insured, I hope."

"My name," went on the little man, "is Higginbotham, and I am professor of geology at Worksop University. No doubt you have read my treatise on the Moine and Dalradian Schists of Eastern and Southern Scotland? It was very well reviewed."

"I've been trying for weeks to get it out of Boots'

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Library," said Jukes, "but it always seems to be out. A very popular book."

"I came down here last night by train," said the Professor, "and put up at the inn in the village, 'The Merry Mug.' It had been my intention to spend to-day walking in the neighbourhood, for I wished to make notes on the various subdivisions of the upper cretaceous stratum of which the chalk downs are composed. I was also anxious to examine the celebrated Doom Stone Circle, for although geology is my subject, I have always been keenly interested in the ancient pagan religions. Now, however, I have been compelled to cancel my expedition. I can scarcely wander at large on the public roads without trousers."

"But you say your trousers were stolen. Who can have done that?" asked Simon.

The Professor passed a hand across his forehead.

"I had them when I retired last night, of that I am positive," he said. "There were a great many rough fellows at the inn, and they were making a shocking disturbance up to a late hour, which I confess I found very confusing; but I have a clear recollection of taking my trousers off, folding them up neatly, and placing them on the chair at the foot of my bed with my other garments. When I rose this morning they were no longer there."

"Confoundedly awkward," remarked Simon. "What the devil did you do?"

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"I rang for the chambermaid, but she professed complete ignorance on the subject; indeed, I fancy she is mentally deficient, poor girl. The landlord, a surly ruffian named Sneyd, behaved in a decidedly offensive manner when I sent for him, and there was a most unpleasant scene. He drew my attention to some obscure statute of the reign of Queen Victoria, which appears to absolve innkeepers from all responsibility for their guests' goods and chattels, and he had the effrontery to tell me I should have handed my trousers over the night before and obtained a proper receipt from him. The situation was further complicated by the fact that all my ready cash was in the pockets of the missing garment, and I was thus entirely without funds and unable to pay my bill. Not to put too fine a point on it, I was thrown out, bag and baggage."

"But, good heavens," exclaimed Simon, "you're not going to leave it at that? I should get hold of the village policeman. *Somebody* must have got your trousers."

"My dear sir, I could not dream of bringing the police into the business. Think of the publicity; within a week I should be the laughing-stock of Worksop. However, I told the landlord that nothing would induce me to visit his inn a second time. I had intended to stay there with my wife for some weeks later on in the summer, but of course that is out of the question now. If I have my trousers

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stolen there, what might not be the fate of my wife?"

"Something worse than death," said Cyril Jukes. "What a harrowing experience, Professor. I think you'd better sit down and have a spot of breakfast; there's only sardines and black coffee, but to a trouserless man that will not come amiss; and in the meantime my young friend the Squire of Doom will have a hunt through his deceased uncle's wardrobe, and find you something a little less *outré* than that bath towel."

"My dear fellow, it is extremely kind of you. I am naturally anxious to take the first train back to Worksop, but garbed as I am I fear I should be a conspicuous figure at the railway station. If your friend could possibly oblige me with the loan of a pair of trousers, or even a kilt—no, I don't think I should boggle at a kilt—I would return them by post as soon as I reached home. It is, of course, faintly possible that I was myself in error, and that I did actually arrive here without my nether garments—but the train was crowded when I travelled down last night, and I feel sure somebody would have drawn my attention to the omission."

"That's all right, Professor," said Simon. "You get stuck into the sardines while I have a look at Uncle Ebenezer's trousseau. Later on I'll run you to the station in my car; there's sure to be a train

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to Town in the course of the morning, and you can get on to Worksop from there."

Half an hour later Professor Higginbotham went upstairs to change into the more orthodox raiment provided by the Squire of Doom, and Simon turned to his companion.

"What I can't understand," he said, "is why that fellow at the inn should want to pinch the old blighter's trousers. I don't suppose there was much money in the pockets, and the trousers themselves—well, I mean to say, a geologist's trousers would probably be encrusted with oolite clay or something like that."

"Nothing that happens in this place can surprise me," said Jukes. "We seem to be living in a bad dream. I'll tell you what, old boy, it isn't a village you've inherited, it's a colony for the feeble-minded. All the same, I think we ought to go and pass the time of day with this innkeeper bird Sneyd, or whatever his name is. He sounds to me a toughish sort of citizen."

"I was thinking that myself. We'll look in there for a pint later on in the morning. Hullo, here's the Professor. My uncle's unmentionables seem to be a bit long in the leg for him."

Doom Manor was connected by telephone with the local exchange, and ringing up the station Simon ascertained that there was a fast train to London at about nine.

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"We needn't leave for another twenty minutes, Professor," he said. "I think you said you wanted to see the Stone Circle. We could walk across there now if you felt like it."

"I should enjoy it above all things," said the Professor. "I promised my friend, Professor Backfisch, that I would examine the structure. He is perhaps the greatest living authority on ancient religious cults, and he assures me that your Stone Circle is well worth a visit."

"If you're going to look at stones," said Cyril Jukes, "I'll stay behind and do a spot of washing up. I once visited Stonehenge on a pouring wet day, and did my sciatica a bit of no good. By the way, Simon, have you told the Professor about the crows and the bay-leaves?"

"No, by Gosh, I haven't," answered Simon. "Look here, Professor, what do you make of this?" And he described the finding of the seven dead crows round the outside walls of the Manor House.

Professor Higginbotham looked serious.

"Throats cut? Bay-leaves round their necks?" he said. "You are sure it was bay-leaves?"

"Positive."

"And there were seven of them, you say? Really, Mr. Elliott, what you tell me fills me with alarm."

"But I don't understand. It was only some fool playing a practical joke."

The Professor rose to his feet.

The Merry Mug

"I think not, my friend," he said. "Come, let us go and look at the Stone Circle."

They went out by the french windows, crossed the lawn, and passed through the doorway in the wall. Professor Higginbotham swept the circle of monoliths with a comprehensive gaze, and walked across to the altar stone in the centre, Simon following at his heels.

"I feared so," muttered the Professor. "Look at that."

Simon looked in the direction indicated, and saw a small heap of grey wood-ash lying on the altar stone.

"Some hiker's been making a fire here," he said. "It ought to be reported to the Office of Works."

The Professor shook his head.

"This was no tripper's camp fire. Do you see this?"

He stooped swiftly, and picked a small object from the ground.

"A white cock's feather," he said, and his voice was pregnant with alarm. "Mr. Elliott, if you will take my advice you will leave this place immediately. You are in deadly danger."

"Danger? What from? What the devil do you mean?"

"I mean," said the Professor slowly, "that I now understand the significance of the singing which came from the bar parlour of 'The Merry Mug' at a late hour last night. It was no ordinary singing,

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it was more like a Gregorian chant. Mr. Elliott, I can tell you no more until I have talked with my friend, Professor Backfisch. As soon as I have done so I will send you a telegram. In the meantime, if you will not profit by my advice and leave the place, at least go and consult the parish priest. I think you will find he has something to tell you."

Together they walked back to the house, the Professor muttering to himself as he shambled along in Ebenezer Elliott's trousers.

"That such things should happen in Christian England!" he said. "It is monstrous, incredible!"

"I don't wonder they turned that geologist fellow out of the inn," said Simon Elliott when, having put the Professor safely into the London train, he returned to Doom Manor. "He's absolutely bug-house. And as for that wild story about his trousers being stolen, I don't believe he ever had any!"

"You may be right, old boy," said Cyril Jukes reflectively. "It takes all sorts to make a world. And now what about that pint at 'The Merry Mug'?"

"Before we do anything else," announced Simon, "I'm going to call on the Vicar."

III.—*Professor Higginbotham's Telegram*

THE Vicarage at Doom is only a short distance from the Manor, and Simon and Jukes went there on foot, leaving the car in Ebenezer Elliott's rather primitive garage. They had no difficulty in finding the house, for it stood near the church, whose square stone tower, built upon rising ground, was a landmark visible for miles around. A trim but adenoidal maidservant opened the door, and the two callers were ushered into the Vicar's study, a small ill-lit room which at first sight appeared to be full of people. The Reverend Anthony Grayling, a spare, elderly man with a lean, ascetic face, came forward to do the honours.

"Mr. Elliott," he said, "I am unfeignedly thankful to see you. Without a squire in Doom we have been as sheep without a shepherd, and just at present we are passing through a difficult time, and feel the need of youthful and inspired leadership. Allow me to introduce you to my daughter. Imogen, my dear, this is Mr. Simon Elliott, the new lord of the Manor."

Simon found himself shaking hands with a tall, slim girl with a mop of glorious red hair.

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"We have met before, Miss Grayling," he said.
"In a garage in London."

The Vicar's daughter regarded him for a moment or two with a puzzled expression, and then smiled.

"Oh, of course, I remember you now," she said.
"You're the young man Aunt Hannah mistook for a policeman. I'm afraid she was rather rude, but then she couldn't possibly have known who you were."

"I have a friend with me," said Simon, indicating Cyril, who hovered in the background. "He is a journalist, and his name is Jukes, but that's not his fault either. Cyril, you oaf, come and say how do you do."

"Charmed to meet you," said Cyril, beaming through his spectacles. "I usually tell strangers that I'm editing the *Daily Telegraph*, but I cannot lie in a country parsonage. I was sacked last week by one of our leading national dailies, and Simon, whose domestic staff has gone rusty on him, took pity on me and employed me to fetch and carry."

"We have two other strangers in our midst," announced the Vicar. "Permit me to present Miss Sadie McGuffin and Mr. Otis McGuffin. They are visitors from across the Pond, 'hiking'—I believe that is the modern expression—in the district, and they have come here with a strange story of cavalier treatment meted out to them at the public-house in the village. Perhaps you, Mr. Elliott,

The Merry Mug

as owner of the inn, may be able to adjust their grievance."

Two figures dressed in lumber jackets and khaki drill shorts detached themselves from the shadows and advanced on Simon; a young man and a young woman, both of gigantic stature and uncannily alike, with large round faces utterly empty of expression. It was easy to see that they were twins, brother and sister, and they moved forward together with clockwork precision, like a couple of grenadiers.

"From Rattlesnake Gulch, Arkansas," chanted Miss Sadie McGuffin and Mr. Otis McGuffin in unison. "Pleased to have you know us."

"How do you do," said Simon, shaking hands with each of the twins in turn. "I'll do what I can, of course, but I only arrived last night, and I've never even met the innkeeper. In what way have you been annoyed?"

"That guy way back at the ho-tel tried to steal my pants last night," explained Otis without emotion. "Sadie heard him coming out of my room at about 2 a.m., and kinda reasoned with him in the passage. Didn't you, Sis?"

Miss McGuffin nodded emphatically.

"I sure did," she said. "I half strangled the poor skate. He dropped the pants and beat it down the passage, so I woke Otis and put him wise. Did you hear any noise, brother?"

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"Nope," replied the other twin. "I was in the arms of Murphy, I guess."

"Wal, that's how it is. Otis and me figured we'd better inform the parson; we thought maybe he could tell that hombre where he stepped off."

"This is a dashed queer thing, Mr. McGuffin," said Simon. "You're the second man this morning who's told me a yarn about the innkeeper stealing his trousers. You aren't a geologist by any chance, are you?"

"Why, no," answered Otis. "I'm a mining engineer. Does that signify any?"

"I don't know. It might; I'm not sure yet. After all, mining and geology go hand in hand. Do you know anything about this innkeeper fellow, Mr. Grayling? It looks as if he was a bit mental."

The Vicar shook his head.

"Mungo Sneyd is a queer, surly fellow," he said. "I never before heard of his stealing anything, but perhaps he is a kleptomaniac, in which case, of course, he ought to see a doctor at once."

"Huh!" put in Otis McGuffin. "We don't trouble the doctors with kleptomaniacs way back in Arkansas, do we, Sis?"

"I'll say we don't," agreed Sadie. "We treat 'em rough."

"Yes, *sir*," went on Otis. "There was a guy once in Rattlesnake Gulch who kinda got into the habit of holding up the pony express. The boys got him

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away from the Sheriff, and he was tarred and feathered before he was hanged."

"There's something very odd going on," said Simon. "Since I inherited the Doom estate I seem to have been living in a sort of nightmare. Perhaps I'd better tell you about it."

And he related the story of his experiences from the day when he first heard the news of his uncle's legacy up to the arrival at Doom Manor that morning of the trouserless professor of geology.

"This Professor chap seemed to think you might be able to throw some light on the mystery," he told the Vicar. "He was quite worried when I told him about the seven dead crows, and when he found a white cock's feather and a heap of ashes on the altar stone in the Circle, I thought he was going to throw a fit. He's consulting another Professor, a fellow named Flatfish or something, and has promised to send me a wire; but what the deuce it's all about I haven't the remotest idea."

The Reverend Anthony Grayling looked solemn.

"What you tell me, Mr. Elliott," he said, "convinces me that those things which up to now I have tried to dismiss as figments of a disordered imagination are material and real. What I have to tell you will strain your credulity to the utmost, but you must remember that here in Doom we live in a world of our own, paying little heed to what goes on in the greater world outside. The villagers of

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Doom have progressed but little. They have wireless sets in their cottages, it is true, and they go to the cinema in Farlingham on Saturday nights when they can afford it, but their secret thoughts are the same as the secret thoughts of their ancestors of many centuries ago, and who can say how dark and unhallowed those thoughts may not be? Beneath the surface Doom has not changed since the days when the Tenth Roman Legion camped on yonder hill."

"You mean that the stalwart citizens I've seen plying mattock and spade in the meadows round about are little better than troglodytes?" asked Jukes.

"Something of the sort," admitted the Vicar.

"In that case, Simon, old boy, you'd better take Professor Thingummy's advice, and come back with me to the haunts of civilization. There's no sense in wallowing in primeval slime."

"Lately," went on the Vicar, "I have observed a marked falling off in the attendance, not only at church, but at church functions. Our annual jumble sale, for example, which a year ago brought in a total of seven pounds thirteen shillings and fourpence, has this year had to be abandoned owing to lack of support. The adult members of my choir have resigned, ostensibly on account of an alleged grievance against the organist, but actually, I suspect, for quite other reasons; and it was with the

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greatest of difficulty that I managed to round up half a dozen Sunday School children to cheer the Bishop when he came to lay the foundation-stone of the new parish hall last Friday. The villagers of Doom are no longer interested in the work of the parish; they have gone awhoring after strange gods."

"Tut, tut," said Simon. "Do you mean that the whole village has turned atheist?"

The Vicar sighed.

"Worse, far worse," he said. "They have forsaken the true religion and returned to the superstitions of their pagan forefathers. Last night, in the moonlight, they sacrificed a white cock on the altar in the Stone Circle. To-night—who can say? I wish I could be certain they would stop short at sacrificing poultry."

Simon was thunderstruck.

"You don't mean," he stammered in awed tones, "that you think they might go so far as *human* sacrifice?"

"I fear the worst," answered the Vicar. "Alas, my poor, misguided flock!"

"How do you mean, misguided?" asked Jukes. "It seems to me they've only themselves to blame."

"No, they have been led astray. The change in their demeanour dates from the arrival in the village, only a few weeks ago, of a party of strangers; foreigners, some of them, but all evil-looking men, who have taken up their quarters at the inn, 'The

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Merry Mug,' and gone about among the people, talking to them and poisoning their minds."

"Upon my soul," said Simon, "I came over here to ask if you could help me find a servant of sorts—my butler and housekeeper have left me—but you've given me something else to think about. What in thunder are we to do?"

"You won't get a servant in the village, Mr. Elliott," said the Vicar. "The villagers would be afraid to work in a house which had been sealed by the seven dead crows; it is a form of taboo."

"I see, bogey-bogey stuff," commented Cyril Jukes. "What I don't understand is this business about the stolen trousers. Surely that can't have any religious significance. After all, people didn't wear trousers in the days of the ancient pagan gods."

"That may explain why Mungo Sneyd doesn't wish his guests to wear them now," said the Vicar. "No, Mr. Elliott, I think it is at 'The Merry Mug' that we must seek the root of the trouble. You will not forsake us in our hour of need?"

"Good lord, no," said Simon. "I'm going to see this thing through, and Jukes, the blighter, is going to see it through with me. Confound it all, we can't have this sort of thing going on in a Berkshire village. It's worse than Bolshevism."

"Say, folks," put in Otis McGuffin quietly. "Sadie and me ain't in no special hurry to get back to Rattlesnake Gulch. I figure we'd be more use

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staying right here than wearing out our puppies on the highroad. If you'll say the word, Squire, I'm game to stop and help instil a proper respect for Christian principles into the minds of these benighted heathen. What do you say, Sis? Do we stand in on this crusade?"

"We surely do," replied Sadie McGuffin.

"That'll be fine," said Simon. "We shall need all the help we can get. If you can put up with the discomfort of a servantless house, I'd like you and your sister to stay at the Manor with Jukes and me. I take it you won't worry about the seven dead crows?"

"No crow, dead or alive, ever came between me and my beauty sleep," answered Otis solemnly. "Sis and me'll be right glad to come."

Imogen Grayling, the Vicar's daughter, had so far kept silence, but she broke it now.

"I don't know why Dad didn't tell me about all this before," she said, "but anyway it's perfectly obvious what we ought to do. The proper person to handle this affair is Aunt Hannah. If you'd seen the determined way she drove that old Ford through the London traffic yesterday, you'd realize that once she sets her mind on a thing nothing and nobody can stand in her way. She's a sort of human juggernaut, and if she can't put a stop to all this pagan tomfoolery in Doom, then nobody can."

"You're quite right, my dear," said the Vicar.

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"My sister-in-law, Hannah Gudgeon, would be of great assistance. I will send a note up to the Grange immediately, and ask her to call and see us."

"You can save yourself the trouble, Dad. That isn't a traction engine you hear coming up the drive; it's Aunt Hannah's car. She's just going to change into bottom gear to take the corner; I recognize the dialling tone."

Two minutes later the study door opened, and the adenoidal maidservant announced, "Biss Haddah, sir."

Seen at close range, Miss Gudgeon's appearance seemed to Simon even more forbidding than when he had first set eyes on her in the Great Portland Street garage. She wore a short tweed skirt, a shirt, collar and tie which gave her a distinctly masculine air, and a Tyrolese hat of green felt with a feather in it. Clamped firmly upon the bridge of her aquiline nose was a pair of rimless pince-nez. She stalked majestically into the room, and disregarding the presence of strangers addressed herself directly to her brother-in-law, the Vicar of Doom.

"Anthony," she said, and her voice was deep and booming, "you must take action immediately. I understand that a young woman has appeared in the village wearing knickers—'hiking shorts' I believe is the vulgar term. This disgusting modern trend is bad enough, heaven knows, in the towns, but when it encroaches on the countryside it is time

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to call a halt. You will interview this female, Anthony, and instruct her either to clothe herself properly, as nature intended, or leave the neighbourhood at once. Why, gracious heavens, the woman is actually here in this room!"

Her eagle eye had caught sight of Sadie McGuffin's unconventional costume, and she rounded upon her in a fury.

"I wonder you are not ashamed, miss, to parade your indecency within the precincts of a vicarage," she said. "Perhaps, now that you have heard my views on the subject, you will take the hint and go."

"Shucks!" observed Sadie McGuffin, without rancour.

"Don't be so stupidly Early Victorian, Aunt Hannah," put in the Vicar's daughter anxiously. "Heaps of quite decent people wear shorts nowadays; I've even seen them advertised in the *Morning Post*; and this lady is a friend of ours. Cut out the purity stuff and sit down; the most frightfully exciting things are happening, and we want your help."

Rumbling like a distant thunderstorm, Miss Gudgeon obeyed, and the Vicar performed the necessary introductions.

"I think we have met before," said Simon pleasantly, "in a garage in Great Portland Street."

Aunt Hannah studied his features carefully through her pince-nez.

"I remember you perfectly," she said. "You are

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the officious young police constable who distracted my attention when I was about to start my car. I suppose you are here to arrest me, so I will tell you here and now, and you may make a note of it if you wish, that I think this police persecution of harmless motorists is perfectly monstrous."

"Nonsense, Aunt Hannah," said Imogen. "This is Mr. Elliott, the new Squire of Doom."

"In that case, young man, I have a few words to say to you. As my landlord it is your duty to keep my house and outbuildings in proper repair. A slate has fallen off the roof of the garage, the death-watch beetle is at work in the summer-house, and the handle of the front door operates imperfectly. Added to that, I have found living organisms in the drinking water. I am sick and tired of carrying on a fruitless correspondence with that imbecile Phipps; perhaps you will be good enough to attend to the matter yourself."

"I can promise you I will go into it at the earliest possible moment, Miss Gudgeon," said Simon.

"Thank you. I shall also be obliged, since my brother-in-law professes his impotence in the matter, if you will assert your authority as Squire to the extent of preventing brazen hussies from parading their nether limbs in the village streets. I have——"

"Oh, for goodness sake put a sock in it, Aunt Hannah," interrupted her niece. "Dad has something very important to tell you."

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"Very well," grumbled Miss Gudgeon. "Speak up, Anthony, I am all attention."

Briefly the Vicar described the events leading up to the present situation, and outlined his theory with regard to the revival of pagan worship in the village of Doom.

"I am not in the least surprised," said Miss Gudgeon, when he had finished. "It is merely another manifestation of the loose thinking into which so-called modern civilization has allowed itself to drift. To a very large extent it is your own fault, Anthony, for not taking a firmer stand against the forces of disruption and anarchy in the parish. Well, it's no use crying over spilt milk; we must put a stop to this business before it goes any further. We cannot allow human sacrifices in Doom; it would get the place a bad name."

"It's all very well saying we must put a stop to it, Hannah," groaned the Vicar. "The question is, how are we to set about it?"

"My car is outside," replied Miss Gudgeon. "This young man"—she indicated Simon Elliott with a nod of her head—"will accompany me to 'The Merry Mug,' and we will give that drunken sot of a publican a good talking to. At the very least he will have to explain his extraordinary conduct in the matter of his guests' essential garments."

"I'm game," said Simon. "If this fellow Mungo Sneyd is at the bottom of the trouble we may be

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able to frighten him between us, but personally I'm inclined to think he's working for somebody else. I don't pretend to understand this business about pagan worship, but one thing is as clear as daylight. Someone was desperately anxious to keep me out of Doom, and was prepared to go to almost any lengths, even as far as murder, to do it. It follows that my presence here is likely to interfere with that someone's little game, whatever it is, and I'm going to take darned good care that it does."

"Bravely spoken, old boy," put in Cyril Jukes. "The young knight dedicates himself to the cause. And while you're coming the tyrannical landlord over the cowering Mungo, and Miss Gudgeon is cross-examining him on the subject of Professor Higginbotham's trousers, I will conduct Mr. and Miss McGuffin over to the Manor, and look into the matter of bedrooms, clean sheets, and so forth. In the circumstances we will forgo our pint at 'The Merry Mug,' but there will be beer on the dining-room table at twelve noon."

"Do not dare to mention myself and alcoholic liquor in the same breath, Mr. Jukes," said Aunt Hannah severely. "Come on, young man. I have only a learner's licence, so you must pose as my instructor if we meet the village constable."

They went out to the ancient Ford, followed as far as the front door by Imogen Grayling.

"You'll come straight back here, won't you, Mr.

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Elliott?" asked the girl. "Dad and I will be dying to know what's happened."

"You bet I will," answered Simon, climbing into the front seat alongside Aunt Hannah, who was already doing dreadful things to the gear-box. "Turn it on, Miss Gudgeon, you've a clear road ahead of you."

They reached the inn three minutes later, after a perilous journey in the course of which Miss Gudgeon, who drove fearlessly and with no regard whatsoever for the provisions of the Highway Code, on five separate occasions narrowly missed going into the ditch, and pulled up opposite the sign of "The Merry Mug" with a sound of screaming brakes. A small group of villagers was standing outside the front door, but when Simon wished them a cheery "good morning" they drew back and regarded him with surly looks.

"Not much of a welcome to the new Squire," remarked Simon to his companion. "That little lot didn't seem best pleased to see me."

"Their consciences are troubling them, Mr. Elliott," answered Miss Gudgeon. "And so would yours trouble you if you had been up half the night sacrificing white cocks. I can't think what Anthony was about allowing them to get into this state. He should have written to the Bishop if he couldn't handle the business himself."

Entering the inn they found themselves in a long,

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narrow, stone-flagged passage, with doors opening off it on either side. One of these was the door of the bar parlour, which stood open; for the pubs in Berkshire begin dispensing at 10 a.m., and the time was now well after eleven o'clock; and Simon, glancing in as Miss Gudgeon swept on ahead of him, beheld as ugly-looking a bunch of ruffians as he had ever seen gathered together in one place. There were about a dozen of them in all, swarthy scoundrels with greasy black locks and ill-shaven chins, and they were muttering among themselves in some foreign tongue. On the outskirts of the crowd, and a little aloof from the others, stood a familiar figure, that of the shabby little man who had followed him all the way from Capetown.

"The plot thickens," thought Simon, as he hastened after Miss Gudgeon, who was even now disappearing round a corner at the end of the passage.

They found the innkeeper in his kitchen, a dark, saturnine individual with a receding forehead and a marked squint. Simon noticed with some pleasure that he had a black eye, and mentally congratulated Sadie McGuffin on her agility in the small hours of the morning.

"Good morning, Mr. Sneyd," said Aunt Hannah. "This is Mr. Elliott, the new Squire of Doom. We would like to have a few words with you in private. Kindly show us into your sitting-room."

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The innkeeper scowled, and spat into the fireplace.

"Reckon we can talk here well enough," he said. "If the Squire wants to speak to me, he can say what he's got to say in my kitchen as well as anywhere else."

"The brute has obviously been drinking," said Miss Gudgeon to Simon, "but it is just possible that his brain is not so fuddled that he cannot understand plain English. Mungo Sneyd, you wretch, what have you done with Professor Higginbotham's trousers?"

"Never touched them," replied the innkeeper. "What should I want with his trousers? The man was mad, and he couldn't pay his bill. I threw him out."

"And can you explain what happened last night, when you got that black eye?" demanded Simon.

"I'm not going to argue with you, Mr. Elliott. I'm busy. You'd better get out of here."

"Not so fast, comrade. Remember I'm your landlord. I could easily have you evicted."

Mungo Sneyd snorted.

"That you couldn't," he said. "I hold this house on a long lease, and I pay my rent regular. You'd have a job to turn me out."

"We'll see about that," said Simon. "Who are those dagoes in the bar? They don't belong to Doom."

"They're guests of mine, staying in the house."

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Foreign gentlemen on holiday. But that's none of your business."

Simon was about to reply, but Aunt Hannah was before him. She advanced upon the innkeeper, and prodded him violently in the stomach with a sharp forefinger.

"Mungo Sneyd," she said in a voice charged with menace, "you're as drunk as an owl, and doubtless you don't know what you're saying, but there is a faint chance that some of what I have to say may penetrate to your alcohol-bemused mind. I know all about your unholy practices; the black doings in the Stone Circle at dead of night, the white cocks, and the dead crows; I know also that you are only a wretched tool, paid to do somebody else's dirty work. Well, the Squire may do as he pleases; he may call in the police and have you arrested for theft, or get that incompetent ass Phipps to have you ejected for mismanaging the house; but I can tell you this—you will live to be very, very sorry that you ever crossed the path of Hannah Gudgeon. Come on, Mr. Elliott, we will leave the brute to wallow in his beastliness, and get out into the fresh air. The smell of liquor in this place nauseates me."

They left the inn and went back to the car, and as he climbed into his seat Simon heard roars of raucous laughter coming from the bar parlour. Mungo Sneyd had evidently joined his friends, and was relating with gusto the story of his victory over

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the Squire and "that interfering woman from the Grange."

"Well," said Simon, as Aunt Hannah started the car with a jerk which nearly hurled him into the gutter, "Citizen Sneyd seems to have won the first round, though I must say you told him where he got off. We'd better go back to the Vicarage and talk it over. I hardly know what I ought to do."

"I can tell you this, young man," said Miss Gudgeon, swerving violently to avoid a tramp with a perambulator, "it's no manner of use trying to have the wretch evicted. That man Phipps is a fool, and although you might get Sneyd put out in the end, it would involve you in months of wearisome litigation, and in the meanwhile the mischief would have been done."

"Is it any good going to the police?"

"None at all. You can't prove anything, except perhaps the attempt to purloin Mr. McGuffin's nether garments, and we have only Miss McGuffin's word for that. No English magistrate would pay attention to the evidence of a young woman who made a practice of parading the countryside in a state of semi-nudity. Of one thing you may be quite certain, however. I have not yet finished with Mungo Sneyd."

Arrived at the Vicarage, they found the Reverend Anthony Grayling and his daughter anxiously waiting to hear the result of their interview with

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the innkeeper. Jukes and the McGuffin twins had already left for the Manor.

"The brute was intoxicated," reported Miss Gudgeon. "It was quite impossible to get him to talk sense."

"Oh, come, Miss Gudgeon, I don't think he was really drunk," said Simon. "He was just abominably rude. I felt like kicking him, but it wouldn't have done any good."

And he described in detail the interview at "The Merry Mug."

"I'm still not at all sure," he said, "that I ought not to call in the police. Miss Gudgeon says it would be useless, but after all if there's any dirty work going on at the Stone Circle or anywhere else, the bobbies could lie on their tummies in the undergrowth, and nip the thing in the bud."

Aunt Hannah snorted contemptuously.

"And what, young man, do you think they would say if you went to them with a wild story about pagan worship and human sacrifice? They would refer you to the Marines, and you would be lucky if you were not arrested for *lèse-majesté* or contempt of court, or something of the kind. Take my advice and keep the police out of this."

"I agree with my sister-in-law," said the Vicar. "After all, these poor, misguided souls are our own people, and it is for us, not outsiders, to make them

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see the error of their ways. Besides, as Hannah says, you would not be believed."

"But look here, Dad, oughtn't we to watch the Stone Circle?" asked Imogen. "There are seven of us now, counting Mr. Jukes and the two McGuffins; we ought to be able to do something between us."

"You're right, Miss Grayling," said Simon. "I'll talk it over with the others, and we'll make a plan. Hulloo, here's a telegraph boy coming up the drive. I wonder if it's my wire from the Professor."

It was. The boy had been first of all to the Manor and had been redirected from there by Cyril Jukes.

"It beats me what the old boy can have to say," said Simon, ripping open the envelope. "He said he was going to talk to some other Professor bird. Blue heaven, just listen to this!"

The others crowded round while Simon read aloud the contents of the telegram.

PAGAN PRACTICES RIFE IN DOOM BACKFISCH SAYS DEAD CROWS INDICATE YOURSELF MARKED DOWN VICTIM HUMAN SACRIFICE EARLY DATE STRONGLY URGE LEAVE VILLAGE IMMEDIATELY HIGGINBOTHAM.

"What do you know about that?"

"Who is this Backfisch?" asked the Vicar.

"He's an expert on the religious cults of the ancients," said Simon, "so I suppose he knows what he's talking about, but it all sounds potty to me."

"Well, Mr. Elliott," said the girl, "you'll call in

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the police now, won't you? After all, your life is in danger."

"That is just what I won't do," replied the young Squire. "I hadn't quite made up my mind before, but this absolutely settles it. There's somebody at the back of all this tomfoolery, and I won't rest until I've found out who it is, and given him something to remember me by. I must get back to the Manor now and talk this over with old Jukes, but I'll see you later in the day."

Miss Gudgeon rose, and accompanied him to the door.

"I must be going home, too," she said. "That imbecile Batz—my Breton butler, you know—will be wondering what has become of me. Can I give you a lift to the Manor gates, young man?"

"No, thank you, Miss Gudgeon; it will do me good to walk, and I'm not likely to be molested in broad daylight."

"Just as you like, but don't you be too sure. Hullo, here's another of these filthy crows."

Aunt Hannah had reached the porch, and was pointing upwards with a lean finger to where a black object was swinging in the wind. Simon gasped.

"Wait a minute," he said, "while I have a look round the house. I'll swear that wasn't there when we came in just now. Do you think the telegraph boy could have left it?"

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"I've known that boy ever since he was in long clothes," said Aunt Hannah, "and I'm prepared to believe that he'd be up to any trick."

Simon raced round the outside of the Vicarage, and returned in a few minutes with a grave face. He brushed past Miss Gudgeon and walked into the study.

"Why, what on earth is the matter, Mr. Elliott?" asked Imogen. "You look as if you'd seen a ghost."

"I've seen something far worse," said Simon. "Your house, Miss Grayling, has been sealed with the seven dead crows!"

"Dear me, how tiresome!" exclaimed the Vicar. "Now I suppose Fanny and the cook will give notice!"

IV.—*Ghastly Predicament of an A.A. Scout*

SIMON walked back to the Manor with his mind in a state of tumult. All this talk of pagan worship, dead crows, and human sacrifice seemed to him absurd and preposterous, yet the Vicar, a cultured, scholarly man who had lived in the parish for many years, was inclined to take it seriously; and Professor Higginbotham, backed by his learned friend Professor Backfisch, was evidently convinced of the stern reality of the threatened danger. Besides, the dead crows were an indisputable, though unpleasant, fact. Vaguely he wondered what was the precise significance of this new instalment of corvine corpses encircling the Vicarage. Was the Vicar himself to be offered up as a sacrifice to some heathen deity, or had his daughter Imogen been earmarked for the altar? This last thought froze the blood in Simon's veins. If one of the two was to suffer, let it be the father—for the living of Doom was a good one, and it ought not to be difficult to find some earnest young curate willing to replace the Reverend Anthony Grayling—whereas Imogen, that lovely girl, nobody could ever replace her. She should go to the altar in due time—Simon was

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already resolved upon that point—but it should be a Christian altar, and he would be by her side.

He walked on, busy with his thoughts, and taking a wrong turning found himself on the village green. It was a broad expanse of rough turf, in the centre of which was a curious wooden erection; the village stocks, a relic of Puritan days. Seated on one end of this contrivance was a very old man, bent and withered, who clutched a gnarled stick in one bony claw and muttered to himself through toothless gums. Nobody else was in sight.

"Good morning, granfer," said Simon, sitting down beside the ancient and lighting a cigarette. "Terribly dry weather we're having; they tell me there hasn't been a drop of rain in Doom since early in February."

The old man turned slowly and blinked at him with red-rimmed, rheumy eyes.

"That doan't want to rain, that doan't," he quavered. "Maas'r Jupiter, he woan't let that rain till he do say the word."

Simon started.

"Master *who*?" he asked.

"Maas'r Jupiter," replied the old man simply. "He do be angry with we. Proper awkward he be."

"But who is this Master Jupiter? Does he live in Doom?"

"No, sir, that doan't bide hereabouts. I doan't rightly know where he be."

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"But who is he angry with? The whole village?"

The old man nodded his head emphatically.

"That's right," he said. "Proper awkward he be."

"I see," said Simon. "Then you think it won't rain until Master Jupiter stops being proper awkward. What are you going to do about it, granfer?"

"My daarter, Mrs. Bugbird, her do say us be going to give Squire to Maas'r Jupiter," replied the ancient.

The young Squire rose hastily to his feet.

"Oh, so Mrs. Bugbird says that, does she? And where is Mrs. Bugbird now?"

"Her do be gone to public-house."

"And when is this to happen? When is the Squire to be given to Master Jupiter?"

"I doan't rightly know. Some time afore next muck-spreadin', maybe. At the full of the moon."

"Does Mrs. Bugbird often visit the public-house?"

The old man nodded again.

"Her do sit there all day, chattering about the drought and suchlike, seemly. But doan't ee worry, young man; us'll be all right when Squire do be given to Maas'r Jupiter."

"I'm very glad to hear it," said Simon, pressing half a crown into the old man's hand. "It's a good thing somebody's going to be all right. Well, so long, granfer; remember me to Mrs. Bugbird."

"Thank 'ee, sir, thank 'ee. Now I'll tell 'ee summat else." Mrs. Bugbird's father dropped his voice to a

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hoarse whisper. "Us be goin' to give Vicar's daarter to Maas'r Jupiter. But doan't 'ee tell anyone, see?"

"Good God!" exclaimed Simon under his breath.

He left the village green and found his way to the Manor, where Cyril Jukes and the McGuffin twins were fortifying themselves with beer.

"Well, old boy," said Jukes. "I take it you've wiped the floor of 'The Merry Mug' with the mangled remains of the man Sneyd? The postman has just brought a letter for you, and there's one bottle of beer left."

Simon took the letter, but waved the beer aside.

"Not just now," he said. "As a matter of fact, Miss Gudgeon and I weren't very successful with Mungo Sneyd, but since then there have been developments. It's rather serious."

And he described in detail his experiences since setting out from the Vicarage with Aunt Hannah to interview the innkeeper.

"The situation appears to be fraught with peril for all of us," remarked Jukes. "Especially for you and the fair Imogen. On the other hand, the information volunteered by the male parent of Mrs. Bugbird—whoever she may be—throws a beam of light into dark places. I gather the general feeling in the village is that if Jupiter can be appeased by the sacrifice of the young Squire and the Vicar's daughter, he will at once withdraw his embargo on the water supply, rain will fall in abundance, and

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prosperity will return to Doom. Well, there may be something in it, and we certainly do need rain badly."

Simon slit open the envelope of his letter and drew out a typewritten sheet. It was from his solicitor, Mr. Fidoe.

DEAR MR. ELLIOTT [he read],

After we parted yesterday I was a little disturbed in my mind about what you had told me regarding the offer for the Doom estate. Frankly, I found it difficult to believe that you had, as a fact, been offered so huge a sum as a quarter of a million pounds. The story of the attempts upon your life, and of the man who, you alleged, had followed you from Capetown, I was inclined to regard as an attempt on your part to "pull the leg" of a rather foolish old gentleman. Now, however, something has happened which convinces me that you were perfectly serious. I have received a letter from the firm of Messrs. Chepe, Chepe and Costley, solicitors, of Fenchurch Street, asking to be put into touch with you. They have a client, it seems, who is prepared to pay no less than *half a million* pounds for the immediate possession of the Doom estate, but they say they are not empowered to reveal his name until they have received from you a definite answer accepting the offer.

I am aware, as I think I told you, that your Uncle Ebenezer always refused to envisage the possibility of the estate passing out of the family, but I feel sure that if he were alive to-day he would not hesitate to accept so amazing an offer, and I should be failing in my duty if I did not counsel you to take advantage of an opportunity such as comes but once in a lifetime. The offer, I understand, will remain open for a month.

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Simon tossed the letter over to Cyril Jukes.

"What do you make of that?" he said. "Read it aloud; I'd like to hear what the McGuffins have to say about it."

"I guess it don't make sense," observed Otis McGuffin, when the recital was finished. "The guy must be scatty."

"Say, look at here, folks. I got a hunch," exclaimed Sadie, displaying unwonted signs of excitement. "Otis, you're a mining engineer, ain't you?"

"Sure, Sister," said Otis, "but I don't——"

"And that Professor Hoodlum, or whatever his fool name is? He's a geologist, ain't he?"

"Surely."

"Wal, the Professor's pants was stolen, so he couldn't go places and see things, and if it hadn't been for little Sister Sadie, yours would have gone the same way."

Simon brought his fist down on the table with a thump which set the beer bottles dancing a cachuca.

"By Gosh, Miss McGuffin, I begin to see it now!" he cried. "You mean——"

"I mean that Otis had better go out and start panning the soil right now. I guess we're sitting on a gold mine or somep'n!"

There was an electric silence, broken by the excited chattering of Cyril Jukes.

"She's right, old boy, the lady's right!" he shouted. "You've inherited a great deal more than

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a few acres of mud and a collection of sticks and stones. This explains everything; the attempts on your life in South Africa, the dead crows, the bogey-bogey stuff. You were offered a fortune for the place, and you turned it down. Now, in addition to increasing the offer, they're trying to frighten you into selling. It may be gold, diamonds, radium, macaroni, anything, but whatever it is we'll find it. We'll stitch Brother Otis into his shorts to avoid further mishap, and he shall go out and about with his little divining-rod. And to think that I've just finished the last bottle of beer!"

"I expect you're right," said Simon slowly, "but I'm just a tiny bit worried about that old man, Mrs. Bugbird's father. He didn't seem to me the sort of fellow who could be bribed to change his religion all of a sudden. There was a childlike simplicity about him when he spoke of 'Maas'r Jupiter' which I found rather frightening."

"You're talking nonsense, old boy, and you know it," said Jukes. "The whole of this pagan worship business is obviously a stunt, engineered by the prospective purchaser of your property to drive you out of the place. You don't imagine there's really going to be any human sacrifice, do you? All we've got to do now is sit back and watch the entertainment. It ought to be darned amusing."

"Us be goin' to give Squire to Maas'r Jupiter," chanted Simon in a dreary voice. "Some time afore

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next muck-spreadin', maybe. At the full of the moon."

"You're getting morbid, old boy, that's what's the matter with you. It's time we thought about lunch. Cold tongue and Petit Beurre biscuits; but I've found a bottle of brandy, and Miss McGuffin has promised to distil some New Orleans coffee. At all costs let us hold fast to realities."

"I still think we ought to watch the Stone Circle at night," said Simon. "And it wouldn't be a bad idea if somebody kept an eye on 'The Merry Mug.'"

"But of course," replied Jukes, with enthusiasm. "We don't want to miss any fun there may be going, and after all the entertainment, whatever form it takes, is being specially staged for your benefit. We'll have another council of war at the Vicarage this afternoon and mobilize all our forces. I don't mind watching the pub myself; I haven't been seen about much, so I have a better chance than the rest of you to worm my unobtrusive way into the enemy's confidence."

"Say, do you figure there's a spade anywhere in this joint?" inquired Otis McGuffin. "I guess I'll take a walk around later on. Looks like I might find something real interesting."

"Go to it, Comrade McGuffin," said the journalist. "There's sure to be a spade somewhere about. But I don't think you ought to go digging for diamonds all by yourself. You might get a crack on the head."

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"Aw, shucks, Mr. Jukes. Sadie'll be with me, won't you, Sister? Folks don't generally get fresh when Sadie's around."

"I'll say they don't," remarked Miss McGuffin, ostentatiously flexing her biceps.

* * * * *

At eight o'clock that same evening Mr. Albert Whelk, the A.A. Scout on duty at the cross-roads on the outskirts of Doom, mounted his motor-bicycle and rode slowly into the village. He had had an exceptionally trying day, for the heat had been more intense than usual, and he had been persistently tantalized by the empty beer bottles tossed nonchalantly into the ditch from passing charabancs. Directing traffic in hot weather is thirsty work, and he is scarcely to be blamed for deciding, before embarking upon the forty-mile ride to his home in Reading, to call a halt at "The Merry Mug" for the purpose of lubricating his parched throat. We find him then, a trim figure in his khaki uniform with black leggings, entering the bar parlour of "The Merry Mug" at about five minutes past eight, and calling in a loud voice for a pint of mild and bitter.

The bar was crowded, and Mungo Sneyd, the saturnine innkeeper, was kept hard at work dispensing liquor to the thirsty villagers. But not only villagers were present. Looking round him as he put

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his brimming mug to his lips, Mr. Whelk remarked about half a dozen strangers; dark, ruffianly-looking fellows, who talked volubly with a foreign accent, and spent their money lavishly on beer for the citizens of Doom. He had seen several of them before, sometimes in the inn, sometimes in the village street, and in spite of the Englishman's inborn distrust of foreigners they appeared to be popular.

Mr. Whelk swallowed his pint with relish, and called for a second. Then his roving eye fell upon a stranger sitting by himself on a bench in a far corner of the room; a gaunt stranger, wearing a dirty yellow mackintosh and huge horn-rimmed spectacles; and being in a talkative mood, he crossed the floor and accosted him.

"Dry weather for a mackintosh, sir," he said, by way of opening the conversational ball.

Cyril Jukes looked up, and recognized the A.A. Scout who had directed him and Simon to the Manor on the previous afternoon.

"I always wear it," he explained. "It's the only way I can keep the dust off my one decent gent's suiting. Besides, I can carry things in the pockets without spoiling the shape of my clothes."

Silence had fallen upon the assembly, and everyone seemed to be listening attentively to this singular explanation.

"Aren't you the gentleman who arrived in a car

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with the other gentleman yesterday afternoon, and asked me the way to the Manor?" inquired Mr. Whelk. "I hope you found the place all right."

The effect of this apparently innocent question was immediate and sensational. At a sign from Mungo Sneyd the six foreigners pushed their way through the crowded bar towards Cyril's corner, and the journalist found himself surrounded by a ring of ugly-looking scoundrels. One of them stepped forward and seized him by the arm.

"You come with me, my friend, yes?" growled the man in a hoarse whisper. "Quickly. You no make any trouble."

For answer Cyril Jukes let drive with the full force of his left arm, and caught the foreigner squarely upon the point of the chin, sending him reeling back among his fellows. After that the fun waxed fast and furious.

Mr. Albert Whelk was a loyal servant of the Automobile Association. He knew, none better, that it was his duty to render all assistance in his power to such members of that widespread organization as he might find in difficulties; and this gentleman's car, when he had seen it yesterday, undoubtedly carried the familiar A.A. badge upon the front of the radiator. He was presumably a member, and he was certainly in difficulties. Snatching up a chair, Mr. Whelk with a dexterous turn of the wrist detached one of the legs, and using this as a weapon

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cleared a way for himself and the mackintoshed stranger through the menacing ring of foreigners.

"Outside, sir," he shouted, "and make for my motor-bike. I'll hold this mob back till you're clear."

The journalist did not stand upon the order of his going. With a swinging uppercut he laid low an over-enthusiastic assailant who tried to trip him up, and reaching the door made good his escape along the passage and out into the village street. He had scarcely reached the familiar yellow-painted motorcycle combination when his rescuer was beside him, panting heavily, and next moment they were chugging down the street with Cyril Jukes on the pillion and a howling mob streaming out behind them in pursuit.

"Where to, sir?" asked Mr. Whelk, whose speedometer was now registering forty-five. "Shall I drop you at the Manor?"

"Yes, please," panted Jukes, "and you'd better come in for a drink. My ghost, but that was a warm two minutes! I'm infinitely obliged to you."

"Oh, that was nothing, sir. It's my duty to help A.A. members. Those chaps seemed to have it in for you, sir, and no mistake. What was it all about?"

"I wish I knew. They didn't start anything until you spoke to me. Then they realized that I was staying at the Manor, I suppose, and they turned nasty. It's a queer business altogether."

"I suppose I'd better report it," said Mr. Whelk,

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"though as a matter of fact I'd come off duty when it happened, and it wasn't exactly a motoring matter. What do you advise, sir?"

They had reached the front door of Doom Manor, and Cyril dismounted from the pillion.

"If you don't mind, I'd rather you didn't say anything about it, Mr.—er——"

"Whelk, sir. Albert Whelk."

"You see, Mr. Whelk, it might be awkward for me. After all, I hit out first, and it might be difficult to convince a bench of magistrates that I wasn't responsible for the rough house. Come inside and have a drink."

Mr. Whelk shook his head.

"If it's all the same to you, sir, I'll be getting along home. I've some way to go, and the wife will be wondering what's happened to me. Don't you worry, sir. I won't say a word about this affair to a soul."

"Thanks very much, Mr. Whelk. I shan't forget what you've done for me this evening. Good night."

"Good night, sir."

And turning his machine the A.A. Scout chugged off down the drive. Reaching the gates he swung off to the right, for he had no wish to go through the village, and as he came out on to the main road he touched his accelerator. Too late he saw, stretched breast-high across the road ahead of him, a length of stout rope. With a sickening jar he was wrenched

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out of the saddle and hurled violently head foremost on to a heap of stones at the roadside; he heard a crash as his machine cannoned into a telegraph-pole; then he knew no more.

When he came to his senses it was nearly dark. His head ached abominably, and over one temple there was a lump the size of a turkey's egg. He tried to raise a hand to his head to examine the extent of the damage, and found to his dismay that he was bound hand and foot with stout cords. Slowly and with infinite pains he lifted his head and looked about him, striving to pierce the semi-darkness. At first he could see nothing, but by degrees his eyes became accustomed to the gloom, and he realized where he was. He lay, trussed like a fowl, in a little hollow in the ground immediately behind one of the monoliths of the Stone Circle, and two men stood a short distance away mounting guard over his helpless form. The place was familiar to him, for he had often come here at lunch-time on windy days to shelter from the blast and eat his modest packet of sandwiches.

"Oi!" he shouted. "Come here, you with the face!"

His warders turned, and one of them, stepping across to where he lay, kicked him violently in the small of the back. Mr. Whelk set his teeth, and swore.

"All right, you low skunk," he muttered. "Just

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you wait till I get loose; you shall have that back with interest."

All at once a third man appeared on the scene, carrying a white bundle, and the two warders approached their captive. One of them knelt down and cut the cord which secured Mr. Whelk's legs, jumping clear before a vicious kick could register on its target.

"Get up, pig-dog!" he said. "Prestissimo!"

And struggling frenziedly, the unfortunate Mr. Whelk was dragged forcibly to his feet.

* * * * *

All unconscious of the fate which had overtaken his rescuer, Cyril Jukes sat at the table in the dining-room of the Manor and ate a hearty supper. As he ate he recounted to a gathering consisting of Simon Elliott, the McGuffin twins, Miss Hannah Gudgeon, the Vicar, and the Vicar's daughter his experiences at "The Merry Mug."

"That was a close call," commented Simon. "It's a lucky thing that A.A. chap happened to be there."

"Lucky?" said Jukes solemnly, speaking with his mouth full. "I tell you, old boy, in future I shall raise my hat reverently every time I go past Fanum House."

"Did you find out anything at the inn? Before the racket started, I mean."

"Nothing definite, but the villagers all seemed to

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be in a state of suppressed excitement. Those foreign blighters kept taking them aside one by one, standing them beer by the quart, and whispering in their ears. I'm pretty certain something's going to happen to-night, though most of the lads of the village will probably be as drunk as owls when it does. Pass over the Worcester Sauce, there's a good fellow."

"In that case," said Imogen, "we'd better watch the Stone Circle. We'll wait till it's quite dark, and then creep out through the gateway in the wall and hide in the long grass on the edge of the Circle. I'm dying to see what they do."

"It will be your duty, Anthony, to stop it, whatever it is," said Miss Gudgeon firmly. "As soon as they begin their unhallowed rites you must step from your hiding-place and send them about their business."

"Quite, my dear Hannah," said the Vicar in dubious tones. "Oh, quite."

"I think," suggested Cyril, "that might be a bit risky. We all admire the Vicar's courage, but we must remember these people are in a very nasty mood. There are some uncommonly ugly chairs in the best bedroom, Simon, and I learned this evening from the excellent Mr. Whelk how absolutely invaluable a good stout chair-leg can be in a mix-up. It would be as well for us to go armed. By the way, did Comrade Otis find any diamonds or other dross?"

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"He's collected some samples," answered Simon, "and he has a theory, but he refuses to say any more about it until the samples have been analysed. Isn't that so, Otis?"

"Sure," said the male McGuffin. "I got a hunch, but I guess I'll wait a while before I spill the dope."

"On the other hand," went on Simon, "he emphatically advises me not to accept the offer of half a million for Doom. I've written to old Fidoe, and told him I'll let him know for certain before the month is up."

"In that case," observed Jukes, "our theory is pretty certain to be correct, and these people are only trying to scare you. Well, I vote we scare *them*. Come on, folks, let's get some of the legs off those chairs."

Miss Hannah Gudgeon moved towards the door.

"I must go home," she said, "or that idiot Batz will set fire to the house lighting the lamps. I shall not keep watch with you, because I dislike the idea of lying on my stomach in the long grass and being bitten to death by midges, but I shall come down later in the evening and deal faithfully with these foolish people. It is quite clear to me that Anthony is going to shirk his duty."

And clamping her pince-nez more firmly upon the bridge of her nose, she swept out of the room.

As soon as it was dark the party from the Manor stole across the lawn at the back of the house and

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out through the door in the wall. Each of them carried a stout chair-leg, with the exception of the Vicar, who declared that his Bishop would never approve of his bearing arms in battle, and his daughter Imogen, who had armed herself with a light mashie niblick, once the property of Ebenezer Elliott. The moon was not quite full, but it was well up in the sky, and beneath its milky radiance the Doom Stone Circle was an eerie sight. The beech-trees surrounding the ring threw vast and oddly-shaped shadows across the turf, but the great altar-stone in the centre stood out grey in the moonlight, a mighty monument to the fears and superstitions of mankind throughout the ages. The place was apparently deserted, but the watchers had scarcely taken up their position outside the ring of beech-trees when there reached them from somewhere in the distance the unmistakable sound of a brass band.

"Great Sousa's ghost!" exclaimed Cyril Jukes under his breath. "If we're only to see the Salvation Army holding a Saturday night get-together in the Stone Circle, it's going to be a bit of an anticlimax!"

"There is no Salvation Army citadel in the village," whispered the Vicar. "That is the band of the Doom Women's Sewing Guild, led by Mrs. Bugbird; it usually only performs at Yuletide. For what unholy purpose has it now been resurrected?"

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"Hush, Dad," said Imogen. "It's coming nearer."

She shivered slightly despite the oppressive heat of the summer night, and drew closer to Simon, who was by her side.

"Feeling jumpy?" he asked, and the girl shook her head. "You'd better stick close to me."

The discordant strains of the Women's Sewing Guild band drew nearer, bright lights flashed at the far end of the Stone Circle, and a motley procession poured on to the ground. Flaming torches were borne aloft, and by their light it was possible to see clearly.

"That's Mrs. Bugbird in front of the band, flourishing the drum major's staff," said Imogen in a voice that trembled with excitement. "Look, she's halted in front of the altar-stone. Miss Hopkins, the postmistress, plays the cornet, and that's old Mrs. Wetherbee banging the big drum. You'd hardly believe she's over eighty. The whole village seems to be here. There's young Mr. Porkiss, the stonemason—he sings in the choir—and old Jebber, the cobbler. That man in the top hat is Holdsworth, the sexton, and the woman with him is his mother. She keeps a sweet shop at the far end of the village."

"Is not that Mungo Sneyd, the innkeeper, dressed in white?" asked the Vicar. "And who are those other people wearing white robes? What on earth have they got on, Imogen, my dear?"

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"I know what it is, Dad," answered the girl. "I'm almost certain those are our best damask tablecloths; I missed them a week ago, and raised hell with Mrs. Ghoul the washerwoman about them. She swore she'd never seen them. Yes, that's Sneyd all right—look, his tablecloth's slipping off; and I think the man behind him is Mucklow, the thatcher, but I don't recognize the others."

"I don't see any of the dagoes," said Jukes. "I suppose, having harangued the populace into a state of religious frenzy, they've faded unobtrusively into the background. It's always the way with these agitators."

The strange procession had halted and spread out fanwise, to form a half-circle. The Women's Sewing Guild band stopped playing, and moved to a position out on a flank, while the half-dozen or so of tablecloth-clad villagers ranged themselves in front of the altar-stone. They were evidently to enact some priestly rôle.

"Great snakes!" muttered Jukes. "I really believe they're going to start community singing!"

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when the band struck up again, and the whole of the vast gathering burst into a full-throated chorus. The tune was familiar, for it was that of a well-known negro spiritual, but the wording was decidedly novel, constituting, so far as the watchers behind the beech-trees were able to distinguish, a prayer to

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Jupiter Pluvius for the blessing of rain. The Vicar was greatly upset, and began muttering to himself in a confused way, but the attention of the others was concentrated upon what was happening at the altar-stone, where there was much coming and going.

"They're lighting a bonfire," said Simon. "This is getting interesting!"

He was right. There was a crackling sound as the bonfire was kindled; then one of the white-robed figures was seen approaching the pyre, carrying a tin of kerosene in his hand; there was a moment's pause, and the flames leaped roaring skyward.

All at once the singing ceased as suddenly as it had begun, and the attention of the multitude was concentrated upon three figures who had appeared as if by magic from somewhere behind the altar-stone. Two men, each carrying a stout club, were leading a third, who was dressed, like the priests, in a flowing robe of white. By the light of the dancing flames the onlookers could see that his hands were bound together behind his back. Mungo Sneyd drew a huge butcher's knife, which glistened in the firelight, and Imogen gave a sharp cry of horror.

"Steady," said Simon. "We'd better get ready to rush them."

But Cyril Jukes had been gazing intently at the captive. Surely there was something familiar about

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his figure and carriage. Suddenly he gave a startled exclamation.

"My sainted aunt!" he cried. "It's Mr. Whelk, the A.A. Scout! I can see his black gaiters sticking out underneath the tablecloth!"

V.—*The Fight in The Stone Circle*

MRS. ALBERT WHELK, inured by years of experience to the erratic and sometimes startling ways of motorists and other users of the highroad, frequently told his wife that nothing that happened in this world could ever surprise him, and he accepted his present lamentable situation with commendable fortitude and calm. This was just as well, for it is doubtful if any A.A. Scout had ever before found himself in so terrifying a predicament. He had been hustled forward roughly by his two gaolers into the ring of light, where the heat from the blazing bonfire scorched and dazzled him, a wreath of wild flowers was placed upon his head instead of his uniform cap, which had long since disappeared, and a wicked-looking butcher's cleaver was flourished ostentatiously before his eyes.

"I suppose I shall have to make a report about all this," he told himself, "and what they'll say at Fanum House I tremble to think. If it comes to that, what'll the wife say when I tell her? Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging; I didn't ought to have gone into that pub."

And being in no condition to argue with his captors, he sat down on the turf and looked about him.

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Meanwhile the watchers behind the beech-trees were girding themselves for action. Imogen's eyes were glistening, and she had taken a firmer hold on her mashie niblick; the Vicar was intoning solemnly a verse from the Book of Jeremiah—"a sound of battle is in the land, and of great destruction"; Cyril Jukes was making his chair-leg whistle through the air as he cut down imaginary enemies; and the McGuffin twins were humming softly in unison the refrain of that sprightly old-world ditty, *By My Black-Faced Mammy's Grave in Old Kentucky*, a sure sign that they were moved by strong emotion.

"Come on," shouted Simon, jumping up and running forward across the turf, "let 'em have it!"

Cheering madly, the rescue party from Doom Manor followed their leader over the top, and raced across the grass towards the altar-stone, where Mungo Sneyd, having hitched his tablecloth clear of his right arm, was already making passes with the butcher's cleaver over the devoted head of Mr. Albert Whelk. Simon was the first to reach the objective, and his chair-leg descended with shattering force upon the innkeeper's wrist, causing him to drop his knife and turn to face his assailant. The Vicar, who had gone into action with head down and clenched fists working like pistons, tried to go to the assistance of the young Squire, but found himself confronted by a raging Mrs. Bugbird, who prodded at him viciously with her drum major's staff.

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"Stand out of my way, my good woman," he cried, but her only reply was to hurl herself upon him like a tigress, bringing him heavily to earth. Instantly the rest of the villagers, who had been taken momentarily by surprise, rallied to the support of their leader, and the party from Doom Manor, hopelessly outnumbered, soon found themselves fighting desperately in self-defence. Imogen Grayling laid about her valiantly with her mashie niblick, but it was a puny weapon at best, and she was quickly overpowered and made prisoner by young Porkiss the stonemason and old Mrs. Wetherbee, the octogenarian big-drummer. Cyril Jukes, although he performed prodigies of valour with his chair-leg, breaking several heads and tripping up Miss Hopkins the postmistress, fared little better, for his weapon snapped in his hand, possibly owing to the ravages of the death-watch beetle, and he went down under an avalanche of infuriated villagers.

Meanwhile Otis and Sadie McGuffin, the two massive grenadiers, fighting stubbornly side by side, were performing yeoman service on their own and each other's account. Their tactical procedure, born no doubt of long practice in the speakeasies of Rattlesnake Gulch, Arkansas, was simple in the extreme. Sadie McGuffin, whenever one of the enemy came within reach of her muscular arm, would smite him over the head with her chair-leg, exclaiming, "Laugh that off, you big stiff!" in

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measured tones, whereupon Otis McGuffin, remarking "Bully for you, Sister!" would give the victim a stunning blow on the other side of the head, thereby temporarily readjusting the balance. It was an impressive performance, carried out with machine-like precision, and even the ranks of Tuscany, had they been present to witness it, could scarcely have refused to give the stalwart couple what in theatrical circles is known as "a hand."

Simon himself was sorely beset. Mungo Sneyd, recovering quickly from the first shock of surprise, had managed to get hold of him by the throat and was slowly and methodically choking the life out of him; old Jebber the cobbler, with a painstaking precision worthy of a better cause, was trying to unscrew one of his ears with toil-hardened fingers; and old Mrs. Holdsworth, the sexton's mother, who kept a sweet shop at the end of the village, had fastened her few remaining teeth in the fleshy part of his right leg. It looked very much as if Providence on this occasion was on the side of the big battalions.

But no battle is lost until it is won, and just as Simon, fighting desperately for breath, was beginning to think that his last hour had come, and even Otis and Sadie, that invincible pair, were being driven slowly back towards the bonfire, there came an unexpected and welcome interruption.

There was a sound reminiscent of a ceremonial

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march-past of the Royal Tank Corps, which completely drowned the noise of battle, and the combatants, desisting from their struggles and looking up in an attitude of mingled astonishment and apprehension, beheld Miss Hannah Gudgeon's antiquated Ford tourer come bumping over the turf, to pull up with a frantic squealing of brakes in the very middle of the theatre of war.

In a silence that could be felt Aunt Hannah grimly descended from the driving seat. She carried in her hand a portable fire-extinguisher, and was accompanied by a giant of a man with a mop of grizzled hair and a huge bushy moustache, whom Simon correctly diagnosed as Batz, her Breton manservant. The latter was armed with a short length of rubber hose-pipe.

"Now then," said Miss Gudgeon, stepping into the circle of light cast by the now dwindling sacrificial fire, "will somebody have the goodness to explain what all this hubbub is about?"

Mungo Sneyd let go of Simon's throat and advanced upon the newcomer in a threatening attitude, but Miss Gudgeon promptly raised her fire-extinguisher and projected a stream of evil-smelling chemical into his face, and he reeled back, coughing and spluttering, all the fight knocked out of him.

"That," observed Aunt Hannah drily, "will be all from you."

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She looked round her at the ring of lowering faces, and tapped her foot impatiently on the turf.

"I am waiting for an explanation," she said. "Anthony, I can't think what you are doing, rolling about on the grass with Mrs. Bugbird, but you had better get up. Your attitude is both undignified and unsightly. As for you, Wilfred Porkiss, I had always thought you a quiet and well-behaved young man, and now I find you clasping the Vicar's daughter round the waist in a manner which I can only describe as licentious and unbridled. Have the goodness to release her at once."

The youthful and rather bewildered stonemason, who had been congratulating himself on his easy capture of Imogen, sheepishly obeyed, and slunk away into the background, followed by the aged Mrs. Wetherbee, who endeavoured to conceal herself behind her big drum. The crowd round Otis and Sadie had drawn back, many of them nursing damaged limbs, and were scowling at Miss Gudgeon with an odd mixture of defiance and trepidation.

"Are those people molesting you, Miss McGuffin?" shouted Aunt Hannah. "Anthony, I have told you over and over again that I will not have the villagers imposing on the good nature of visitors with impudent demands for subscriptions and the like. Our charities in Doom are organized on a business basis, and no really deserving case is ever neglected. And perhaps you can explain, Mr. Elliott, why

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that old nincompoop Jebber is holding you by the ear?"

"I don't really know, Miss Gudgeon," answered Simon faintly. "He may be doing it for a bet. I wish you'd ask this horrible old woman to take her teeth out of my calf. It hurts, and I feel certain she can't really be enjoying it."

The villagers, including even the redoubtable Mungo Sneyd, were now thoroughly cowed, and huddled together in small detached groups, whispering among themselves. Somehow the newcomer's forthright common sense had administered a cold douche to the pagan fervour which had possessed them. But Miss Gudgeon had not done with them yet.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourselves, the whole pack of you," she continued, "turning this peaceful beauty spot into a cockpit for your vulgar brawling. I do not wish to bring the police into this, for I dislike their methods—which savour to me of dictatorship and bureaucratic oppression—but if this sort of thing goes on I shall have no other course than to put the matter into their hands. I see you have the Women's Sewing Guild band here. You had better all form up behind it and march back to the village green, after which you will disperse quickly and quietly to your homes."

She turned to her Breton manservant, who stood patiently waiting beside her, his rubber truncheon in his hand.

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"Batz, you see to it that they form into their ranks without further delay. If you meet with any opposition, do not hesitate to use force. You have my authority to do so."

"Bien, ma'amselle," answered the giant, his features transformed by a grin of singular ferocity. "I shall beat them with my pipe. It is necessary that they dance to my piping, hein?"

And he advanced upon the cowering villagers, swinging his hose-pipe nonchalantly to and fro. Five minutes later the votaries of Jupiter had formed up into a more or less orderly phalanx, and were marching back to the village to the strains of *Under the Double Eagle*, leaving Miss Hannah Gudgeon and the party from the Manor in undisputed possession of the field.

Cyril Jukes got slowly to his feet and shook himself like a terrier dog.

"My stars, Miss Gudgeon, I don't know how you do it!" he said. "There must be something after all in the yarns about the power of the human eye. One moment they were a juju-maddened mob of howling dervishes thirsting for human blood, and the next they were as dumb and docile as a flock of sheep with the staggers."

Aunt Hannah pointed to Mr. Albert Whelk, round whose helpless form the battle had raged like a hurricane, and who now sat, the picture of bewilderment, his hands securely bound with cords.

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"Who is that man?" she demanded. "Why are his hands tied, and why is he wearing a floral tribute on his head? Take that white sheet away, somebody, and let us have a look at him."

Everybody seemed to have forgotten poor Mr. Whelk, the original bone of contention, but they made amends now. Willing hands untied his bonds, the damask tablecloth, emblem of purity, which had been draped round his shoulders in preparation for his sacrifice, was removed, and he was helped to his feet. Cyril Jukes was especially contrite.

"I say, Whelk, old boy, I'm most fearfully sorry about all this, you know," he said. "I had no idea those brutes had got hold of you again. I pictured you humming serenely along the road to your home, and being welcomed on the mat by Mrs. Whelk and all the little Whelks. How did you get caught?"

The A.A. Scout explained.

"I shall have to make a report about this, you know, sir," he said. "It's a very serious matter, even though I wasn't actually on duty when it occurred. You see, my motor-bike is missing, along with my uniform cap, and though I dare say I could fake up some kind of story to satisfy Fanum House, I don't like doing it, and in any case I couldn't deceive the wife."

"Dear, dear, this is terrible," groaned the Vicar. "If he reports this sad affair officially the police are

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certain to hear about it, and there will be inquiries, prosecutions, and all manner of unpleasantness. It might even get into the newspapers."

"It'll do that all right," said Jukes. "Only my loyalty to Simon prevents me from going to the telephone right away and sending off a red-hot story for the morning papers. They'd eat it whole, unless they thought it was a leg-pull; but in any case they'd be sure to send someone down here to find out."

"What is all this?" demanded Aunt Hannah. "I seem to recognize this man; his gaiters are familiar to me; but at the moment I cannot exactly place him."

"This is Mr. Whelk," said the journalist. "He got me out of a very tight place earlier this evening, as I think I told you at the time. He is the A.A. Scout from the cross-roads outside the village."

"Good evening, Mr. Whelk; I remember you now. It was that ridiculous wreath on your head that confused me; I can't think why you wear it. You saluted me at the cross-roads yesterday when I passed in my car, but I was unable to return your salute. To do so would have involved the removal of one of my hands from the controls, a course which in the interests of public safety I was reluctant to pursue. Well, Mr. Elliott, I think we had better all adjourn to the Manor and discuss what is best to be done. Batz, start up the car and bring it round

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by the road. You can wait for me outside the front door."

"But what about my report?" asked Mr. Whelk anxiously. "The Vicar says——"

"Never mind what the Vicar says," interrupted Miss Gudgeon impatiently. "He has shown himself to be hopelessly incapable of dealing with the simplest parish problem, and in future I hope he will have the sense to leave me to run the village and confine himself to the writing of sermons and the conduct of the services in church. If you will come to me to-morrow morning, Mr. Whelk, I will give you a written report which you can hand in to the Association's officials. I don't care what lie you tell your wife."

"But—my motor-bike? How am I to get home?"

"Bless my soul, was there ever such a man for making difficulties? Batz shall run you home in Mr. Elliott's car. I take it you live in Reading?"

"Yes, miss. Thank you very much, miss. But if it's all the same to you I think I'll have a nose round and see if I can find my bike."

"Well, you must please yourself about that. All I ask is that you shouldn't worry me with trivialities at a time like the present. I have a great deal to attend to. The villagers are quiet now, most of them nursing sore heads, and they'll be very sorry for themselves in the morning; but I don't trust that man Sneyd, and it will be as well to prepare for

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the worst. A certain amount of light-hearted jollification is inevitable from time to time in a small community like ours, where the opportunities for recreation are so limited, but I draw the line at human sacrifice. It's un-English."

With the exception of Mr. Whelk, who wandered off in search of his motor-bike and his uniform cap, and Batz, who had departed in the Ford, the whole party left the Stone Circle and returned to the Manor, where Sadie McGuffin, assisted by Imogen, set about the preparation of coffee.

"There can be no doubt about it," mused the Vicar aloud, when they were all seated in the dining-room. "What we want is rain. Not just a shower or a slight drizzle, but a good tropical down-pour, beginning for choice with a thunderstorm."

Miss Gudgeon snorted impatiently.

"Don't be a fool, Anthony. Of course we want rain; everybody knows that. My garden is as dry as one of your sermons, and Batz is in despair. But what's that got to do with the present disgraceful situation? Here is the whole of the village gone stark, staring mad, and you sit there yammering about rain!"

"But don't you see, Hannah? The villagers have got it into their heads that they have offended the ancient pagan deities in some way, and that until they are appeased the drought, already very serious, will continue?"

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"I quite see the Vicar's point, Miss Gudgeon," put in Simon. "Perhaps the others didn't tell you of my interview with Mrs. Bugbird's aged parent. 'Maas'r Jupiter,' he said, 'woan't let that rain till he do say the word.' He also expressed the opinion that Maas'r Jupiter was being 'proper awkward.' I have a feeling that if we could arrange for a trough of low pressure, or a disturbance from the Azores, or something of the kind, Maas'r Jupiter would retire into the shades from whence he came, the adult members of the choir would call off their strike, and the Vicar would be able to hold his jumble sale as arranged."

"From your point of view, old boy, and from that of Miss Grayling, a heavy precipitation at an early date would seem to be rather vital," said Cyril Jukes. "I gather there is a movement on foot to offer you both to Jupiter in exchange for a break in the drought. Hence the dead crows."

"What I don't understand," said Imogen, "is why they should have tried to sacrifice poor Mr. Whelk. Surely Jupiter hasn't got it in for the Automobile Association. It's different with Mr. Elliott and me, because he's the Squire, and a sort of rival deity in the village, while I'm the daughter of a Church of England parson. Naturally he'd want to get rid of us."

"It was probably what they call in the Navy a 'dummy run,'" suggested Jukes. "I expect Mungo

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Sneyd and his fellow priests had arranged to have a dress rehearsal to-night in any case, and when Citizen Whelk fell into their hands they couldn't resist the temptation to stage a really slap-up performance with all the cameras clicking. Besides, I fancy they were rather peeved with Mr. Whelk. They'd have had me in their clutches now if the gallant Albert hadn't gone and thrown a monkey-wrench into the works."

"I remember once, way back at Rattlesnake Gulch," murmured Otis McGuffin reminiscently, "the boys had gotten hold of a horse thief. Before they hanged him they figured they'd better try out the drop, so they dealt a round of poker hands to fix who'd act like he was the condemned man. Hank Jefferson, who kept the bottle store at Bone-meal Creek, laid down a full house, and we all hitched up our pants and got ready to string him up, but the Sheriff dealt himself a royal straight flush, so Hank Jefferson had to hang the Sheriff. We laughed over that for weeks, didn't we, Sister?"

"We sure did, Brother," agreed Sadie McGuffin.

"I've been wondering," said Simon, after a pause, "where these simple-minded villagers get their knowledge of the technique of the thing. This business of the crows, for instance; that seems to be genuine ancient British or Roman poo-jah—Professor Higginbotham and his pal recognized it at once, and they're by way of being experts. Do you suppose

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Mrs. Bugbird has been mugging up the subject in the Farlingham Public Library?"

"Some of it," opined the Vicar, "is inherited tradition, handed down from generation to generation since the Dark Ages. The rest they will have learned from Mungo Sneyd, who is a newcomer to Doom, and from those foreigners at the inn. But there must be something—and somebody—behind it all."

"There you are, Simon, what did I tell you?" said Jukes. "What you've got to look out for is a little bald-headed man with a domed forehead and eyes he can hood like a hawk. Depend upon it, he's lurking somewhere in the background."

There was a knock at the door, and Mr. Albert Whelk stood in the entrance, a smile of self-congratulation upon his countenance.

"I've found my bike and my uniform cap," he announced. "They were in the ditch a little way down the road. The bike's all right, though the handlebars are a bit bent. With your permission, ladies and gents all, I'll be getting along home to the wife. And, by the way, there's an old gentleman in the hall asking for Mr. Elliott."

"What sort of an old gentleman?" asked Simon.

"Well, sir," replied the A.A. Scout, "he's bald-headed, with a sort of domed forehead, and eyes like some kind of bird—a parrot maybe, or a hawk."

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"There now," said Jukes. "Everything is panning out just as I foretold. You are about to be interviewed, old boy, by the most diabolically clever criminal the world has ever known. A past master of the art of disguise, he has successfully evaded the net spread for him by the police of three continents. He has the gift, possessed by only a few, of being able to be in several different places at once. He is a brilliant linguist, and the intimate personal friend of all the crowned heads of Europe, a fact which enables him to worm his way into——"

"Ask him to come in, Mr. Whelk," interrupted Simon. "Did he give any name?"

"My name," piped a thin, reedy voice from the doorway, "is Humphrey Chard. Good evening, everybody. I am looking for Mr. Simon Elliott."

Up to a point Mr. Whelk's description of the visitor had been correct, but he had not said enough. He had not touched, for example, upon the stranger's extreme smallness of stature, on his deformed and shrivelled frame—for he was a hunchback—nor on his yellow parchment skin. Simon told himself that he had never seen an odder figure than this diminutive cripple with his restless, darting eyes; but in spite of Cyril's warning he could not, somehow, associate the newcomer with international crime on the grand or any other scale. Mr. Chard stood there in the doorway peering myopically into the room over the top of a pair of plain, steel-rimmed spec-

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tacles, and supporting his frail body with the aid of a cane of polished ebony.

"Stand out of the way and let the dog see the rabbit, Mr. Whelk," said Jukes; and the A.A. Scout, replacing his newly recovered uniform cap upon his head, discreetly withdrew. Simon rose to his feet and held out a welcoming hand.

"Come in and sit down, Mr. Chard," he said. "You're just in time for a cup of coffee. My name's Elliott; can I do anything for you?"

Mr. Chard limped into the room, his ebony cane tap-tapping upon the polished floor, and sat down painfully in the chair provided for him by Imogen Grayling.

"Thank you," he said. "I should like a cup of coffee very much. I think, if you don't mind, I will take a couple of aspirin tablets. They are soothing to the nerves, and I am very much upset."

He drew a small bottle of aspirin from his pocket, and helped himself daintily.

"Are you not the Mr. Chard who has taken the Moat Farm for the summer?" asked Miss Gudgeon. "I called a month or two ago, but you were not at home, and your servants appeared to be half-witted. I hope you haven't been having trouble with the drains. The last man who rented that house died of diphtheria."

"It is neither drains nor diphtheria that troubles me now," answered Mr. Chard. "I find myself, in

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point of fact, in a very difficult position; I have a confession to make, and I hardly know how to begin."

"Begin at the beginning," quoted Jukes, "go on until you get to the end, and then stop."

Mr. Humphrey Chard removed his spectacles from his nose and polished them carefully with a silk handkerchief.

"You may perhaps remember, Mr. Elliott," he said, "receiving an offer, first of a quarter of a million, and then of half a million, pounds for the Doom estate?"

"Remember? I should think I do remember. It isn't the sort of thing one would forget in a hurry."

"No? Well, the fact is I was responsible for both those offers."

Simon leaned across the table and stared at his visitor.

"Oh, you were, were you?" he asked. "Then I take it you were also responsible for the two attempts to murder me before I left South Africa, for my being shadowed all the way from the Cape, for an abortive attempt to get me locked up at Madeira, for frightening away my servants, and finally for the sensational entertainment that was staged in the Stone Circle this evening? I suppose it's you who has been going about slaughtering crows and hanging up their decomposing corpses in other people's gardens? I suppose it was you who bribed

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Mrs. Bugbird to strangle the Vicar, and persuaded poor old Mother Wetherbee to bang the big drum to the glory of Jupiter? They told me you were a distinguished archæologist, but upon my Sam I think you're a raving maniac."

Mr. Humphrey Chard held up a deprecating hand.

"Please, Mr. Elliott," he said, "hear me out before you condemn me. I deserve some part of your censure, but not all of it. In the first place, are you prepared to consider my offer of half a million for the Doom estate? Think carefully, Mr. Elliott; an offer like this does not come often in a lifetime, and half a million is a very large sum."

"I don't believe you've *got* half a million," said Simon, "and even if you had I wouldn't accept your offer. I know all about it, you see."

"Ah, then you have found out about the spurium. I was afraid you would, when Sneyd told me he had failed to confiscate the American's trousers." He looked across at Otis McGuffin, who was leaning back in his chair with his eyes closed, smoking a panatella cheroot. "We were successful in the case of the geologist, and we would never have molested the American if he had not entered his occupation in the hotel register as a mining engineer. I take it you went prospecting, Mr. McGuffin?"

Otis opened one eye.

"Sure I did," he replied.

"And you found the spurium?"

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"I brought home a few samples, I guess," said Otis. "I aim to have 'em analysed to-morrow."

"You can save yourself the trouble. I have established beyond any doubt that the soil of the Doom estate contains an enormously rich deposit of that precious mineral, worth many millions of pounds."

"Will somebody have the goodness to enlighten me?" asked Miss Hannah Gudgeon peevishly. "I have no wish to sit here all night listening to fairy tales. What is this stuff spurium?"

"The whole world will soon know, madam," answered Mr. Chard. "It is the most valuable mineral yet discovered; far more precious even than radium. There is practically no limit to the uses to which it can be put. It can be used to boil a kettle, drive an aeroplane, cure rheumatism, dye fabrics, and destroy black beetles. Small quantities of it sprinkled on the roads before an advancing army will rot the boots of the infantry, cause an outbreak of bog spavin among the horses, and rust the wheels of the gun-limbers. Mixed in the right proportion with other chemicals it can be made to generate gas, electricity or steam, while sticks, stones and earth, after being treated with spurium, become not only fit for human consumption but actually palatable."

"When did you first discover there was spurium on the estate?" asked Simon.

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"I had long suspected it," said Mr. Chard. "There were various indications, such as the colour of the soil, the brittleness of the chalk, and a peculiar odour which rises from the ground on warm summer evenings. Perhaps you have noticed it yourself? Anxious to make sure, I rented the Moat Farm some months ago, and in the guise of an archæologist made the most careful researches. The offer to you followed, and I assure you it was genuine. I have wealthy partners abroad, anxious to profit by my discovery. I suppose if I were to raise the offer to a million, you wouldn't reconsider——"

"No, Mr. Chard, I would not. I'm not specially anxious to turn this lovely old village into a mining camp, but if it's to be done at all I'd rather do it myself than allow it to be done by a bunch of dagoes. And talking of dagoes, I suppose you imported that ugly gang of foreigners now stopping at 'The Merry Mug'? You've still a lot to explain, Mr. Chard. This pagan worship stunt, for instance."

"I was coming to that, Mr. Elliott. When I found that you wouldn't listen to reason I hit on the idea of encouraging the villagers to revive the pagan customs of their forefathers. I thought that if I could really get the thing going strong here in Doom, you might take a dislike to the place and be only too thankful to accept my offer. It wasn't a difficult job, for I had made a study of my subject and I had my accomplices, the foreigners, well drilled. Mungo

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Sneyd, who has a good deal of influence, I found especially useful, and the villagers themselves took to it as a duck takes to water."

"I expect they were so heartily sick of your dreary sermons, Anthony, that they were ready to embrace any other religion, whether Christian or pagan, by way of a change," said Miss Gudgeon.

"Mea culpa!" groaned the Vicar in great distress. "Mea maxima culpa! My poor, misguided flock!"

Simon had risen to his feet and was frowning upon his visitor.

"It seems to me, Mr. Chard," he said, "that you've got a nerve. You try to swindle me out of a fortune, and when that fails you try to murder me. That doesn't come off either, so you then coolly proceed to tamper with the religious principles of a whole village, and arrange for not only myself but Miss Grayling here and a perfectly harmless official of the Automobile Association to be sacrificed to Jupiter. If that had succeeded, a number of ignorant clods in the village would most assuredly have been hanged, while you, I suppose, would have got off scot free."

Mr. Chard turned a little pale, and bit his under lip.

"You are doing me an injustice there, Mr. Elliott," he said. "It was no part of my plan that there should be any human sacrifice."

"Then what the devil—— You're not trying to

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make out that it was Mrs. Bugbird's idea, or old Mother Wetherbee's?"

"The thing got beyond my control," said the old man humbly. "Sneyd and my foreign accomplices exceeded their instructions, but even if they hadn't, I doubt if it would have been possible to keep the villagers in check. Centuries, æons ago the people of Doom offered sacrifices to Jupiter and other pagan gods. The people of Doom to-day, weary and sick at heart by reason of this merciless drought, have returned to the ancient faith, the faith of their ancestors, and no power on earth can turn them back again. It is easy to light a fire in the forest, but it is not so easy to check a forest fire when it has been raging for days. That is why I have come to you, Mr. Elliott. I am afraid—terrified at the magnitude of the thing which I have evoked."

"Stuff and nonsense!" said Aunt Hannah. "Nobody with the intelligence of a rabbit could possibly be afraid of Mrs. Bugbird or old Mother Wetherbee. You saw what happened this evening?"

"I did. Heaven help me, I watched from among the beech-trees."

"Very well, then. You could see for yourself that all those nincompoops needed was a good straight talking to. Mark my words, we shall have no more trouble after to-night."

There was a sudden disturbance in the hall, the dining-room door was thrown open, and Batz, Miss

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Gudgeon's Breton manservant, burst into the room.

"Miss Hannah! Miss Hannah!" he cried. "Sacred name of a little yellow monkey, but you must come quickly, at once, *ventre à terre*! Those sons of Lucifer have set your house on fire!"

VI.—*The Vicar Has Need of His Tricycle*

THE Fire Brigade at Farlingham, the little market town some six and a half miles by road from the village of Doom, is a voluntary organization made up for the most part of mechanics and other hands employed by the four or five garages in the neighbourhood. It possesses an up-to-date motor fire-engine, of which the Farlingham Rural District Council are justifiably proud, and the captain, who is also chief operator at the local cinema, has a brightly burnished helmet in which it is his custom to appear at the annual open-air service on Armistice Day. On the evening of the outbreak at Doom Grange, the residence of Miss Hannah Gudgeon, it so happened that he was without his helmet, for he had lent it a few days before to his sister-in-law, who was to enact the rôle of Britannia at the forthcoming Farlingham Carnival. Summoned urgently from his bed to answer the telephone, he found himself involved in a spirited discussion with Simon Elliott, the new Squire of Doom.

"There's a fire at Doom Grange, Miss Hannah Gudgeon's place," announced Simon breathlessly.

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"You'd better come at once; it's blazing like billy-o."

"Can ye no speak a wee bit mair disteenctly?" inquired the Captain, whose name was MacTavish. "I canna hear juist what ye say. There's a kin' o' a queer buzzing noise on the line."

Simon repeated his first statement, adding, by way of speeding things up, "For Heaven's sake get a move on, or you'll be too late."

"Whaur are ye speaking from?" asked Mr. MacTavish cautiously. There had been several false alarms lately, and he was determined not to be caught out again.

"Doom Manor," said Simon impatiently; "but I'll meet you up at the fire. Hurry."

"Will it be the hoose that's burning, or the pigsties? If it's juist the pigsties, I'll no be needing my helmet."

"The house, of course. I didn't know there were any pigsties."

"Losh, mon," said Mr. MacTavish in tones of astonishment. "Whaur were ye brought up? There are twa-three grand pigsties up at the Grange."

"Well, there won't be any left if you don't come quickly."

"But I thocht ye said it was the hoose that was burning."

"Of course it's the house! The whole place is a sheet of flame."

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Mr. MacTavish pondered this information very carefully for a minute or two. Then he spoke again.

"Hullo," he said. "Are ye still there?"

"Of course I'm still here. For God's sake——"

"I thocht maybe ye would ha' gone to take a keek at the fire. Listen, will Miss Hannah be within the hoose?"

"What's that you say?"

"I'm asking ye, will Miss Hannah be in the hoose? I wouldna like her to see me wi'out my helmet. She's unco' particular."

"Yes—no, she's not in the house, and it doesn't matter whether she is or not, you damned fool! Get your engine out and come at once."

"I'll tell ye what I'll do," said Mr. MacTavish tolerantly. "I'll get my bit bicycle, and ride over to my wife's sister Annie's place for my helmet. Then I'll call the lads. Juist ye bide whaur ye are, and don't get putting the fire out till I come."

Simon banged the receiver down and turned to Miss Gudgeon, who stood at his elbow.

"We'll have to get help from the village," he said. "The fire-engine won't be here until some time next year. Queer we didn't find anybody up at the house."

"That man Batz is a fool," replied Miss Gudgeon. "The villagers never started the fire; they wouldn't have dared. The idiot forgot to shut the cat up before we came out this evening, and it must have

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knocked one of the lamps over. It's happened before."

"Well, look here. You walk back to the Grange and join the others. Mr. Jukes and the Vicar and the McGuffins are doing what they can with buckets, and I've lent Batz the extinguisher out of my car. Miss Grayling and I will buzz down into the village and mobilize the troops. No, you'd better not come too. After what happened earlier on they're probably feeling rather bitter against you."

"I dare say you're right, young man," said Aunt Hannah. "I've no doubt they are thoroughly ashamed of themselves. I will return to the Grange."

Simon had seated himself at the wheel of his Howitzer, and Imogen was just about to scramble in beside him, when they heard footsteps on the gravel, and a thin, reedy voice hailing them.

"Would there be room for me in the dickey, Mr. Elliott? It occurs to me that you may have difficulty in persuading the villagers to help, whereas I can at least command the services of my—er—hired bravos, and possibly of Mungo Sneyd."

"Good Lord, it's Mr. Chard! I'd forgotten all about you in the excitement," said Simon. "All right, climb into the dickey. I don't suppose you'll be any use, but as you started all this trouble you may as well have a shot at cleaning it up. No funny business though, or I'll—damme, I'll sacrifice you to Jupiter!"

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They found the bulk of the inhabitants of Doom standing in little knots round the ancient stocks on the village green. In defiance of Miss Gudgeon's orders they had not dispersed to their homes, but stood gazing sullenly upward to where, high above the distant elm-trees, a rosy glare in the sky advertised the destruction of Doom Grange. Simon stopped the car and stepped out on to the turf.

"Come on," he said, "don't stand gaping there. Miss Gudgeon's house is on fire, and I want every able-bodied man in the place to come up to the Grange at once with buckets, axes, shovels, and any other fire-fighting appliances there are available."

There was no answer. The villagers continued to stare vacantly at the glare in the sky.

"What's the matter with you?" shouted Simon. "Didn't you hear what I said? I want you all to come up to the Grange and help put the fire out."

There was a slight movement in the crowd, and Mrs. Bugbird's aged father hobbled forward, leaning upon his gnarled stick.

"That doan't want to be put out, that doan't," he croaked. "Us caan't put that out till Maas'r Jupiter he do say the word. Maas'r Jupiter he set fire to un hisself. Proper awkward he be."

And from the lips of the assembled multitude came a moaning chorus.

"Oo, ah. Maas'r Jupiter he do like to see un burn, seemly."

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"Nonsense," said Simon. "It's got nothing to do with Master Jupiter. The cat did it. And if it hadn't been for that tomfool performance of yours at the Stone Circle it would never have happened. Pull yourselves together, and come up to the Grange."

The old man hobbled forward another two or three paces, and wagged an admonitory finger at the young Squire.

"Doan 'ee talk like that 'bout Maas'r Jupiter," he said. "I be mindful of the half-crown 'ee do give I, and I doan't wish 'ee no harm. Miss Hannah she do talk disrespectful of Maas'r Jupiter, and just 'ee look what do be happened to she."

Simon turned in some perplexity to Mr. Chard, who was whispering earnestly in his ear.

"I'll go along to the inn, and see if I can bestir Sneyd and my own ruffians. This is a shocking situation, Mr. Elliott, but I will do what I can."

Mr. Chard disappeared in the darkness, and Simon, turning to continue his harangue, found himself confronted by the redoubtable Mrs. Bugbird.

"Would you add blasphemy to your other crimes, young man?" she thundered in a rich, deep-throated baritone. "Great Jupiter, Lord of the Thunderbolts, has exacted vengeance, and lo, the smoke of her burning goeth up for ever and ever! Even so perish all unbelievers!"

"This is the very worst thing that could have happened," muttered Simon to Imogen, who had

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left the car and was standing at his side. "All the good done by your aunt's ticking off this evening has been completely washed out by this unfortunate fire. I'm quite certain now that it was an accident, but these poor imbeciles regard it as a sign from heaven—or rather, from Olympus. We're going to have a lot of trouble, I'm afraid."

"I know Daddy would never approve," whispered the girl, "but try offering them money."

"I haven't any on me," said Simon.

"That doesn't matter; promise it to them. I'll bust open the missionary box at the Vicarage; it's a legitimate charge on the fund for converting the heathen."

"Listen," said the Squire in a loud voice. "I'll give half a crown to every man who comes up to the Grange and helps put the fire out."

Mrs. Bugbird's father once more took the centre of the stage.

"Nay, young man," he said. "Us doan't covet your silver. Us only wants to give 'ee to Maas'r Jupiter; aye, and the young maid along of 'ee. My daarter, Mrs. Bugbird, she do be right, I reckon."

"Come on, Imogen," said Simon impatiently. "It's no use arguing with these half-wits; we'd better go back to the others. That fellow Chard may be able to bring help, but I wouldn't trust him any further than I could see him."

They turned to retrace their steps to the car, and

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an ugly look came into Simon's eyes. Their way was barred by a solid phalanx of villagers, who closed in upon them silently but full of purpose.

"Stick close to me, old girl," said Simon. "I've got to get you out of this, and I think there's going to be a rough house."

Suddenly the night sky was pierced by the powerful headlamps of an approaching car, sweeping like twin searchlights over the downland, and from far in the distance came the clanging of a fire-engine bell. Mr. MacTavish had recovered his helmet!

* * * * *

Miss Hannah Gudgeon sat upon a charred horse-hair sofa in the garden of the Grange, and gazed disconsolately upon the blackened ruin that had once been her home. With her were the Vicar, Cyril Jukes, Sadie and Otis McGuffin, and her faithful retainer Batz, whose combined efforts had at last succeeded in getting the fire under control in time for the arrival of MacTavish and his gorillas. MacTavish had added to the general chaos by flooding the place with water from his hose, and had then taken his leave.

"I'll awa hame the noo," had been his parting words. "Ye'll no be having ony mair trouble yet awhile, and I've a matinée at the cinema the morn. I maun gang seek my bed."

"It's just beginning to get light," said Miss

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Gudgeon wearily, "and I think I will profit by that young man's example. I cannot very well sleep here, so I shall drive down to the inn and make that scoundrel Sneyd give me a bed. No, thanks, Anthony, it's good of you to offer to put me up, but I've never been beholden to anybody yet, and I'm not going to begin now. Mercifully, everything was fully insured."

"But, Hannah, do you think it's safe?" protested the Vicar. By the grey light of dawn he looked a sadly bedraggled spectacle, smoke-begrimed and drenched from head to foot, while the others, who had fought the fire like demons, were in no better case. "I mean, after all, Sneyd has shown himself to be the reverse of friendly."

"Stuff and nonsense!" said Aunt Hannah. "What could he possibly do to me? I frightened the life out of him last night, and he's not likely to forget it. In any case, I always carry a talisman against evil; an Egyptian scarab, given to me years ago by a fellow student at the Slade. I keep it tucked inside my stocking, where it is extremely unlikely that anyone would look for it."

"Guess you gotta be careful," said Sadie McGuffin thoughtfully. "There was a girl back at college useter keep her accident policy in her stocking. One vacation she went on a swell pleasure cruise in the tropics, fell overboard, and had her leg bitten off by a shark. She had a whole team of real smart

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lawyers hunting that insurance company, but they wouldn't pay up without seeing the policy. That's right, ain't it, Brother? Elmer Spudd's daughter never got the money for her leg?"

"Sure, Sister," replied Otis, nodding sagely. "The insurance folks said it was a phoney claim."

"There are no sharks in Doom," said Miss Gudgeon, rising from her sofa and tottering across to her car. "Batz, you had better stay here; you may be useful at the Manor, and you'll be no use to me at the inn. Good-morning, Anthony; I shall see you later in the day."

And starting up her engine she rattled and bumped away down the road in the direction of the village. Meanwhile Cyril Jukes had drawn attention to the prolonged absence of Simon Elliott and the Vicar's daughter.

"They can't still be haranguing the villagers," he said. "Do you think anything can have happened to them?"

The Vicar looked round him with a tired expression.

"Mr. Jukes," he said, "I don't know if you have a daughter of your own, but if you have you will agree that it is fruitless to speculate on the manner in which the modern young woman spends her evenings. Perhaps they have eloped together; I rather hope so. He seemed to me a pleasant young man, and the union would be popular in the parish."

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"That guy Chard was with them," Otis pointed out. "Do you figure the little runt's got them locked up some place?"

"Comrade Elliott is not the man to allow himself to be incarcerated without registering a pretty vigorous protest," said Jukes. "I dare say we shall find them both at the Manor or else at the Vicarage."

"What worries me," wailed the Vicar, "is the publicity. I don't see how we can hope to keep this lamentable business dark very much longer. Mac-Tavish, as in duty bound, will report the fire to the Rural District Council, the local Press will get hold of the story, and reporters will be sent down here to investigate. Then it will all come out; the worship of Jupiter, the attempted human sacrifice in the Stone Circle, everything. There will be leading articles in the *Church Times*, and the Bishop will call upon me for an explanation."

They had left the blackened ruin behind them, and were now walking slowly down the road towards the Vicarage.

"I shouldn't let that worry you, Mr. Grayling," said Jukes. "We can easily fake up some story; say we're doing it for the movies, or rehearsing a pageant, something like that. Of course, if things get really bad we may have to call in the police, and possibly the military, but don't let us cross streams till we come to them."

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"You may be right," sighed the Vicar, halting outside his front gate. "Well, I'm going to bed. I'm not as young as I used to be, and these late nights don't agree with me. I see there are no lights in the Vicarage, so my daughter must still be out. What a nuisance. Good-night to you all."

"Good-night, Mr. Grayling."

Cyril Jukes and the McGuffin twins walked on to the Manor, the titanic Batz following stolidly at their heels. In his right hand he still carried his rubber truncheon, while tucked under his left arm was a large and opulent tabby cat, the property of his mistress, and supposed innocent cause of the conflagration at the Grange. The Manor was deserted when they reached it, and after an exhaustive search of the house and grounds they held a rapid council of war.

"It looks bad," confessed Jukes. "Comrade Elliott would never have kept that girl out as late as this unless he was compelled to. He's too much of a gentleman."

"I remember one time way back at Rattlesnake Gulch," mused Otis McGuffin, "when young Jake Peabody was courting Lemuel Cobb's daughter Judy. He toted the dame to the pictures over at Blue Creek township one evening in a buggy, and when the morning came and they hadn't showed up at Lemuel's place folks began to gossip considerable. Old man Cobb was worried; he was a Methodist

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elder, and the family reputation was kinda sacred to him, I guess; he went down to the store and bought himself a dog-whip, and he was just sitting in his parlour with a bottle of hooch at his elbow, getting ready to erase Judy's name from the family Bible, when in walks young Jake with the girl on his arm, smelling like he was a whole regiment of polecats. They'd fallen into the town sewer at Blue Creek, and had to holler themselves hoarse before help came. They got married after that, didn't they, Sister?"

Sadie McGuffin nodded.

"I reckon they had to," she said. "Lemuel Cobb had Jake get a certificate from the Blue Creek sanitary engineer, but folks said they was compromised just the same."

"I don't think there are any sewers in Doom," said Cyril Jukes, "so that can't be the trouble this time. I suppose we'd better go down into the village and have a look. Batz, my friend, I shall want you to stay here and see if you can't fix us up with breakfast; you'll find some bacon lying about somewhere."

A little way down the road, not far from the Manor gates, they came upon an elderly farm labourer standing on the grass verge and gazing at a large shining object in the ditch. This object upon closer inspection proved to be Simon's Howitzer two-seater, and judging by its condition it had

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recently come into violent collision with a telegraph pole close at hand. The windscreen was smashed to atoms, the near-side front wheel was buckled, and what had once been a powerful engine was battered beyond recognition. It was almost as if a party of navvies had attacked the car with sledge-hammers.

"Good God, that's Simon's car!" exclaimed Jukes, and turned to the farm labourer. "What's happened? Has there been an accident?"

The elderly farm hand came close up to him, and cupped his ear with his hand.

"Eh, mister?" he croaked. "I caan't rightly hear what 'ee do say. I be a bit hard of hearing, see?"

Jukes repeated his question, bellowing at the top of his voice.

"Has—there—been—an—accident?"

"Oo ah," replied the yokel, scratching his head. "That be young Squire's moty-car, that be."

"I know it's the Squire's motor car, but how did it happen? Where's the Squire?"

"Eh?"

"I said, where's the Squire? How did the accident happen?"

"Oo ah, that be a proper accident, that be."

Exasperated beyond endurance, Jukes turned to Otis McGuffin, nor did the American fail him. He stepped forward and transfixed the farm labourer with a horny, compelling eye.

"Look at here, son," he said. "Jest you quit

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stalling and spill the dope. How come the automobile's gotten in the ditch?"

The light of comprehension dawned in the yokel's eyes.

"Oo ah," he said. "I understand 'ee, mister, when 'ee do talk plain English. Um do say as how young Squire were in yon moty-car, aye, and Vicar's daarter along of 'un. That doan't want to stay on road, so her goes into ditch, see?"

"Sure," said Otis. "And where's the Squire at now?"

"Mister Sneyd he come along road," continued the yokel, who was beginning to fancy himself in the rôle of raconteur, "and he do find Squire and Vicar's daarter all of a heap like. Proper bloody they be. He goes back into village and fetches I and some of the chaps, and they carries un down to public-house. Mister Sneyd he do tell I to bide here and watch yon moty-car. 'Doan't 'ee let nobody steal un,' he says. 'I be going to telephone for help.' "

"Were they badly hurt?" asked Jukes.

"Proper bloody they be," repeated the yokel, dolefully shaking his head.

Jukes turned to his companions.

"There's something pretty queer about all this business," he said. "That fellow Chard has vanished, and I'm beginning to think it wasn't the cat, after all, that started the fire. Why didn't Sneyd bring them up to the Manor? It's much nearer than the

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inn, and there's a telephone there. And why didn't he come up to the Grange and let us know what had happened?"

Otis McGuffin shook his head.

"Search me," he said. "Some folks is kinda secretive."

"Another thing that makes me suspicious," went on Cyril, "is that Simon has driven a car ever since he could walk. He's a damn good driver. How in thunder did he manage to ram that telegraph pole?"

"Maybe he got absent-minded," suggested Otis. "That's just how young Jake Peabody got himself in the main sewer over at Blue Creek township, I guess. He kept his lamps on Lemuel Cobb's daughter instead of on the road, and the steering had to look after itself. It most always happens when folks goes buggy-riding with janes; ain't that so, Sister?"

"Sure, you know best, Brother," replied Sadie. "How about that time you took Virgie Manhattan for an automobile tour in the Adirondacks, and came back home with your neck half broken and no seat to your pants?"

"Aw hell, Sister, can the boloney!"

And Mr. McGuffin relapsed into sombre silence.

"Come on," said Jukes, "we'd better get along down to the inn, only somebody must let the Vicar know what's happened. His daughter may be seriously injured."

"Proper bloody she be," contributed the yokel,

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lingering lovingly on the words, and Jukes turned angrily upon him.

"Here, you," he said, "don't stand there using foul language. Run on up to the Vicarage, wake the Vicar, and tell him what you've told us. We're going straight to 'The Merry Mug.'"

But the countryman proved unexpectedly obstinate.

"Noa, mister," he answered. "Mister Sneyd told I to bide here and watch yon moty-car. That might be stolen away if I didn't bide wi' she."

And neither bribes, threats nor entreaties would move him from his position.

"Look at here, Mister Jukes," suggested Sadie McGuffin, "quit arguing with that lop-eared moron and go get the preacher man yourself. Me and Otis will beat it for the ho-tel right now, and you'll be better able to give the Reverend the low-down. Come on, Brother, pick up your puppies."

"O.K., Sister," replied Otis, and the two grenadiers swung off down the road in the direction of Doom village with an air of purposeful determination. Cyril Jukes, left behind with the yokel, grasped him firmly by the collar and deposited him, swearing and kicking, in a large bed of nettles at the roadside. Then, tilting his battered Homburg hat on to the back of his head, he retraced his steps to the Vicarage. It was now broad daylight, but a lamp was burning in the Reverend Anthony's bedroom, nor was it

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long before the journalist had gained admittance to the house itself. He found the Vicar in his nightshirt, preparing to retire, and while that saintly man hurriedly scrambled back into some clothes, told him of the finding of the wrecked two-seater.

"I suppose," he concluded, "the Vicarage isn't on the telephone? If so, we could ring up 'The Merry Mug' and find out what's really happened. The McGuffin twins must have reached there by now."

"Alas, no," said the Vicar, whose state of agitation was such that his trembling fingers could with difficulty adjust his clerical collar. "Imogen, poor child, has repeatedly implored me to have an instrument installed, but I feared to put myself at the mercy of every Tom, Dick, and Harry who cared to ring me up. This is terrible, Mr. Jukes, quite terrible. We must go to the inn at once."

"Come on, then," urged Jukes, who was growing impatient. "It's a pity you haven't a car either. You're shockingly behind the times, Mr. Grayling."

They had reached the front door, and were just about to set off down the drive when the Reverend Anthony remembered something.

"Wait a moment, Mr. Jukes," he cried. "I have a tricycle in the coal-shed. It is of antiquated pattern, I fear, but it is in good condition, and should easily carry both of us, if you were to stand erect upon the back axle and hold on to my shoulders. I assure

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you we shall travel at a round pace; in my younger days I was considered something of a performer on the track."

The ancient vehicle was led out from its hiding-place at the back of the house, and the Vicar, after carefully removing the coal dust from the saddle with his pocket handkerchief, laboriously mounted it. In normal circumstances Cyril would have found it hard to refrain from laughter, for Imogen's father cut a grotesque figure enough couched astride this pathetic relic of a bygone age, with his shoulders hunched over the handlebars, his clerical hat perched at a rakish angle upon his head, and a look of mingled anxiety and determination upon his lean, ascetic countenance. But this was no time for mockery; the intrepid tricyclist was beckoning to him to take up his precarious position on the rear axle. Commending himself to his maker, the journalist climbed up, and simultaneously the machine began to move forward over the gravel, gathering impetus as it approached the Vicarage gate.

It needed oiling badly, and the abominable squeaking set up by its protesting springs provided a sort of orchestral accompaniment to Jukes's thoughts as, clinging frenziedly to the Vicar's neck, he was jolted and bumped at breakneck speed along the road towards Doom village. Whither, he asked himself, Jukes? Where was all this to end? If he had known, when Simon Elliott had first sought to

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enlist his services in "The Goat in Golden Boots," that he was to be involved in so wild, so chimerical an adventure, would he not have refused the offer and turned again into the quiet, restful pastures of daily journalism? Then he remembered the philosophic stoicism exhibited last night, in the face of unknown but hideous perils, by Mr. Albert Whelk, and he felt ashamed.

"Hold tight!" shouted the Vicar, frantically jangling his bell. "There's rather a sharp corner just here."

"That's quite all right, my dear old devil dodger!" Cyril shouted back with affected carelessness, but his words streamed away behind him in the wind.

They shot round the corner on one wheel, rattled straight across the village green—for the Vicar was in no mood to waste time going round by the road—galloped past the Post Office, the Village Hall, and the Council School, and fetched up all standing before the shuttered façade of "The Merry Mug."

"As Malcolm Campbell's my witness, Mr. Grayling," murmured Jukes, dismounting from the machine and leaning helplessly up against the post which supported the inn sign, "I would never have believed it possible for mankind to cover the ground at so prodigious a speed!"

"Got my—Blue—at the university—for tricycling," panted the Vicar, smiling a little as he climbed

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from the saddle. "Flatter myself—did—pretty good time, eh?"

Together they approached the front door of the inn and hammered on the knocker. There was no sound from within, and no sign of life without, and Jukes remembered that in the course of their head-long journey from the Vicarage they had not passed a single human soul. Even the yokel whom he had left reclining in a bed of nettles had apparently deserted his post.

"Surely somebody must be about," said the Vicar. "If my daughter and young Mr. Elliott were carried in here injured, one would expect to find the place a hive of activity. Do you think they can have been taken off to hospital?"

The journalist shook his head.

"I don't know what to think, Mr. Grayling," he answered in puzzled tones. "It's possible, of course, but I don't see why Citizen Sneyd, whom we know to be rather short on the milk of human kindness, should have gone with them. And anyway, where are the terrible twins, Otis and Sadie McGuffin?"

At this moment the shutters of one of the upstairs windows were thrown back, and the saturnine countenance of Mungo Sneyd the innkeeper appeared.

"What the devil do you want?" he demanded in gruff and surly tones. "Waking everybody up at this unearthly hour with your blasted hammering. Oh,

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I see, it's you, Vicar? Bit early to be out visiting folks in the parish, ain't it?"

"What have you done with my daughter?" demanded the Vicar. "Was she badly injured? Has she been taken to hospital? Come down at once, Sneyd, and let us in."

"I don't know what you're talking about," answered the innkeeper. "It's not my business to look after your daughter."

"Look here, Comrade Sneyd," put in Cyril Jukes. "I don't know what your game is, but Miss Grayling and Mr. Elliott were injured in a motor smash last night and carried here by you. I dare say you were too drunk to remember it, but if so there must be somebody else in this boozing-den of yours who can give us some information. The American lady and gentleman, for instance, Mr. and Miss McGuffin; they came down here a few minutes ago. Where are they?"

"And my sister-in-law, Miss Gudgeon?" went on the Vicar. "She came down here early this morning in her car to get a bed."

The innkeeper spat contemptuously.

"You're mad, both of you," he said. "You ought to be locked up. I've not seen Miss Gudgeon, nor her motor car, nor those two blasted Americans, and I've other things to do than stand at this window all the morning."

Cyril Jukes was about to make an angry retort

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when he happened to glance over his shoulder. He was just in time. From round the corner of the building four men, armed with heavy bludgeons, were advancing cautiously upon himself and his companion. In a flash he recognized them as four of the foreigners who had given him trouble at the inn on the occasion of his previous visit. To stand and fight against such odds, he realized, would be hopeless folly, for he and the Vicar were unarmed. He grabbed the Vicar by the wrist, and, swinging him round, bundled him into the saddle of his tricycle.

"Step on it, you old son of a gun!" he roared. "Beat it for the Manor as you value your life!"

The Reverend Anthony Grayling was regarded by most of his acquaintances as a slow thinker, but on this occasion was on to the knub of the situation with the agility of a Pelman scholar. He had set his ancient vehicle in motion a full five seconds before a concerted rush from the foreigners could reach him, and was soon bumping and rattling up the road at a speed which far outstripped his previous record, with Cyril Jukes perched as before upon the rear axle, and his baffled assailants puffing and blowing in his wake.

It has been said that owing to the vast sums contributed annually to the Road Fund by the owners of automobiles the highways of England present so smooth a surface to the road user that it

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is nowadays virtually impossible for a cyclist or tricyclist to suffer the inconvenience of a punctured tyre. This may be true, but human nature is still human nature, and so long as small, ill-disciplined urchins are permitted to play their wicked pranks in the main streets of our country villages, cunningly concealed deposits of tin-tacks or broken glass will ever lie in wait for the unwary. In the present instance Cyril Jukes and the Vicar were to fall victims to the ill-timed jesting of young Willie Bugbird, who had amused himself on the afternoon of the previous day by sprinkling rusty nails over the road surface just outside the Post Office. With a report like the bursting of a paper bag the near-side rear tyre of the Vicar's machine exploded suddenly, the tricycle spun round in an appalling skid, and, crashing over on to its side, sent its two passengers sprawling into the ditch.

The Vicar was the first to scramble to his feet. He looked wildly round him, saw his pursuers rapidly advancing, and went to the assistance of his companion, who still lay where he had fallen, all the wind knocked out of his body.

"Are you hurt, my dear fellow?" he inquired anxiously. "I fear it was my fault; I should have been more careful."

Cyril Jukes, bereft of speech, merely shook his head and groaned.

"This is dreadful," muttered the Reverend

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Anthony, "quite dreadful. I wonder what I had better do."

The problem was solved for him almost before the words had left his mouth, for the four foreigners had now come up, and the two intrepid tricyclists were quickly made prisoner. They showed no fight; the Vicar, perhaps, because his cloth forbade him to do so, and the journalist because he was for the time being *hors de combat*. Two of the foreigners dragged Cyril to his feet, and another gave the Reverend Anthony Grayling a vicious jab in the small of the back with his bludgeon.

"March!" he commanded.

The Vicar marched.

VII.—*In the Cellars of The Merry Mug*

MEANWHILE, what of Simon Elliott, Squire of Doom, and the Vicar's daughter, Imogen Grayling, whose joint disappearance had been the occasion of so prodigious a tricycling feat on the part of Cyril Jukes and the Vicar? We left them, it will be remembered, on the village green trying with little success to enlist recruits for a volunteer fire brigade, and the situation was already beginning to look awkward. The Doom villagers were in an ugly mood. Cowed at first by the ruthless onslaught of Aunt Hannah in the Stone Circle, dazed by the hypnotic influence of her powerful personality, they had now begun to come out of the ether, and the knowledge that they had allowed themselves to be browbeaten and herded off the field in the wake of the Doom Women's Sewing Guild brass band made them sore and angry. Moreover, as Humphrey Chard had declared, the worship of Jupiter had become to them a very real thing; a living, breathing force driving them ruthlessly onwards to all manner of excesses; and there is no doubt that if the Vicar, setting aside his religious scruples, had organized a jumble sale in aid of pagan funds, it would have been attended by the full strength of the parish.

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"I've got to get you out of this," Simon had said to the girl. "I think there's going to be a rough house."

Then the Farlingham fire-engine, in charge of the methodical Mr. MacTavish, had gone clanging past on its way to the blazing Grange, and the villagers of Doom, maddened by the drug of pagan superstition, had closed in upon Simon and Imogen. It was all over in the space of a few seconds. Simon, going to the assistance of Imogen, who had been seized by a dozen pairs of toil-hardened hands, was deftly tripped up by Mrs. Bugbird; old Mrs. Wetherbee, still clinging to her big drum, sat heavily down upon his head, and Mucklow the thatcher hastened to secure his feet. The girl, although she managed to score a red furrow across the moon face of Miss Hopkins the postmistress, was quickly overpowered, and the two captives, bound hand and foot with stout cords, were carried, helpless and inert, to "The Merry Mug." Here they were received by Mungo Sneyd the innkeeper, upon whose saturnine countenance was an expression of the liveliest satisfaction.

"Well, Mister ruddy Squire," he growled, and by the light of the oil lamp in the passage his squint seemed to Simon more pronounced than usual, "you reckoned you'd get me thrown out of here, did you? Well, we'll see about that. As for you"—he turned to Imogen—"I've no particular quarrel with

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you, except that your father's a canting, mewing parson, always poking his nose into other folks' business; but you're a good-looking wench, and I dare say we can find a use for you."

"Which is more than anybody will ever find for you, you big stiff!" retorted Imogen, and the innkeeper favoured her with a horrid leer.

"You'll be a bit more dainty in your talk in a day or two, my pretty," he said. "Come on, lads, carry 'em down to number three cellar. Number one's full of coal, and number two's already occupied. They can cool their heels down there until I'm ready for 'em."

"What'll us do with Squire's moty-car?" inquired one of the yokels. "Her do be standing on village green, with lights a-burning plain for all to see."

"I'll come and see to that in a minute," answered Sneyd. "We must smash it up and push it in the ditch, and tell folks there's been an accident."

"What about Constable 'Iggins, mister?" asked another yokel. "If 'ee do see Squire's moty-car in ditch, that woan't satisfy 'ee, surely?"

"Never you mind, my lad; I'll attend to Constable Higgins," said the innkeeper. "He's not likely to ask questions, but if he does I'll answer 'em."

Down in number three cellar, their gags removed, and the cords that bound them loosened enough to allow comparative freedom of movement, Simon and Imogen faced each other in the darkness.

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"I say, old girl," stammered Simon, "I'm most awfully sorry about all this. I ought never to have allowed it to happen, but that Bugbird woman tripped me up, and old Mrs. Wetherbee sat on my head. It was all a bit difficult."

"Don't apologize, Simon, it wasn't your fault," said the girl. "It was the sort of thing that might have happened to anybody. Gosh, what a horrible place! I've often heard about the cellars of 'The Merry Mug,' but I've never been down here before. They say the cellars stretch for acres underground, and that there's a sort of labyrinth of secret passages made by the smugglers. Just like those what-you-may-call-ems in Rome—the cata—cata——"

"Catapults?" suggested Simon, who was not at the moment feeling very bright.

"No, not catapults, catacombs," suggested Imogen. "I say, what do you suppose they'll do to us now they've got us?"

"They do be going to give we to Maas'r Jupiter," quoted her companion gloomily. "Some time afore next muck-spreading, at the full of the moon."

Imogen shivered.

"How perfectly beastly!" she said. "I suppose that means we'll be dressed up in the Vicarage tablecloths, the best damask ones, and led into the Stone Circle. And they'll light a bonfire, and the Women's Sewing Guild band will play hymn tunes, and Mungo Sneyd will cut our throats with a cleaver

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borrowed from young Liddiard the village butcher, and there'll be dancing afterwards in the Parish Hall, and buns and ginger-pop for the children, and Daddy'll have to make a speech. I do hate these rustic revels."

"So do I," said Simon. "There's a spirit of compulsory heartiness about them that is very unconvincing. One always feels that the men would rather be in the bar of the local pub, the women at the cinema, and the children in the middle of the main road playing 'knuckle down' and 'alley tor.'"

"I know, poor dears, they'll hate it really, but they'll have to be there. Don't you think—isn't there a chance we may be rescued? After all, there's Daddy, and Aunt Hannah, and Batz, and your friend Mr. Jukes, and the McGuffin twins; they ought to be able to do something between them. Besides, there's Mr. Chard. What's happened to him, I wonder?"

"I don't trust that fellow," answered Simon. "He said he was coming here to fetch help, but there was no sign of him when we were brought in. You heard what Sneyd said? They're going to smash up my car and stage an accident, so all the others will be put off the scent. Of course, the truth is bound to come out sooner or later, but I'm afraid it'll be later; too late, in fact."

"Why too late?"

Simon shrugged his shoulders in the darkness.

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"My darling girl, don't you realize that there's a full moon to-morrow night? Unless a miracle happens you and I will be the big attraction at the midsummer village sports in the Stone Circle. We can't all expect to have the luck of Mr. Whelk. I can't see my watch, but it must be getting on for to-morrow morning now, which means that to-morrow night is to-night, if you understand me."

But Imogen did not appear to be paying much attention.

"Simon," she said, "what was it you called me just then?"

"My darling girl," replied Simon, "and I meant it."

He moved towards her.

"Imogen, dearest, I've wanted to ask you ever since I first saw you—you remember? in the garage at Great Portland Street—will you marry me?"

"I don't see how I can, if we're both to be sacrificed to Jupiter to-night," objected the Vicar's daughter.

"Well, if by any chance we *aren't* sacrificed to Jupiter, if we get out of this alive, will you marry me?"

Imogen hesitated.

"I like you awfully," she admitted, "and I suppose Daddy would be pleased, but isn't this a little sudden? Besides, if what Mr. Chard says is true, and the Doom estate really *is* worth all that money,

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you'll be terribly rich, and people will say that's why I married you."

"I'll tell you what," said Simon, and there was a new note of triumph in his voice; "you'll *have* to marry me, whether you like it or not. Do you realize what you're doing now? You're staying the night in an hotel, sharing a room with the young Squire of Doom, and if that doesn't compromise you, I don't know what will. Why, the whole village knows we're here; in a day or two it'll be all over the county; and people will say the most poisonous things, unless you let me make an honest woman of you."

"Oh, Simon, do you really think they will?"

"Of course they will. Perfectly loathsome things they'll say."

"In that case, perhaps you'd better——"

"Better what?" cried Simon, straining at his bonds.

"Make an honest woman of me, of course, fathead."

"Darling!"

The cords that bound Simon's arms parted like gossamer, and a moment later he had Imogen in his arms.

"Half a minute, Simon," she said. "Can't you get these beastly ropes untied? How can I kiss you properly when I'm trussed up like a Christmas turkey?"

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"All right, I'll have those cords off in a jiffy. Look, Imogen, it's beginning to get light. We've simply got to get out of this place somehow."

"But we can't. You don't know these cellars. In the old days heaps of people starved or were gnawed to death by black beetles down here. Excisemen, and people like that, who made themselves unpopular with the smugglers."

"I can't help that. We've got to get out. Apart from the fact that after what has passed between us I definitely refuse to allow either you or myself to be sacrificed to Jupiter, it's absolutely vital that I send an announcement of our engagement to the *Morning Post*."

High up in one wall of the cellar was a window heavily barred, and through this, after a period that seemed like eternity, the first pale rays of daylight began to filter. The sight inspired Simon with new hope.

"They won't do anything until to-night, the night of the full moon," he said. "We've the whole day before us in which to make plans for our escape."

The girl, now freed from her bonds, hesitated once more.

"Simon," she breathed, "do you really *want* to escape?"

"Of course I do. Why?"

"Well"—Imogen snuggled up to him—"it seems an awful waste of a whole day making plans of

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escape, and—and—wouldn't it be too marvellous if we went to Jupiter together?"

The Squire of Doom was shocked.

"Imogen," he said, "you've been reading the newspapers, and you're becoming maudlin. That's the sort of thing old Jukes turns out by the yard; suicide pact stuff, 'young lovers embrace death with a smile,' 'they could not live together so they died together'; beastly. I'll cheerfully go to the Devil *for* you, my darling pet, but I'll be blistered if I go to Jupiter *with* you, so you'd better think again. I'll get you out of this mess somehow, and we'll be married and——"

"Have sausages for tea. Exactly, that's just what worries me. Housekeeping bills, making out the washing list on Fridays, sacking cooks, rows with the man who comes to take away the wireless set we bought on the 'never-never'—all the rest of the sordid business. It would save an awful lot of trouble if we were sacrificed together to-night under the midsummer moon."

"Nerts!" said Simon firmly. "Give me another kiss."

It was now almost full daylight, and the two captives were able to see in what manner of prison they were confined. The sight did not inspire them. The cellar was small and dank, with an arched roof of brickwork and stone walls that oozed and sweated. The only window was high up in one wall, and

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immediately opposite to it a short flight of steps led up to a heavy oak door.

"I shouldn't think Sneyd, if he wanted to keep us here, would have been such a fool as to leave the door unlocked, but there are no limits to human frailty," said Simon. "It's worth trying."

And he ran quickly up the steps and pulled and pushed at the oaken door.

"I was afraid not," he said, descending again and sitting down on the bottom step. "Sneyd is like the elephant; he never forgets. Well, old girl, we can't get out by the door. What does A do now?"

"Oughtn't we to tame a rat, and train it to gnaw a hole in the woodwork?" suggested Imogen. "The only trouble is, I don't see any rats, and I rather hope there aren't any."

Simon shook his head.

"No good. I believe it takes years to train even an abnormally intelligent rat to gnaw a decent-sized hole through a heavy oak door, and in any case we'd have to bribe the beast with some grub. Which reminds me, I'm beginning to feel pretty peckish. I wonder if they'll have the decency to bring us anything to eat."

"I'm hungry too, Simon. It seems centuries since I last had a square meal. So many things have happened in the meantime."

Simon got up off the step and began walking

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slowly round the cellar, kicking at the masonry with his shoe.

"It's no use losing your temper and kicking the walls, darling," said Imogen. "You'd much better come and sit down over here."

"Hush, I'm testing the stonework. If it makes a hollow sound when I kick it, it means there's a weakness in the structure or something. Listen carefully; can you hear a hollow sound?"

The two prisoners strained their ears to listen as Simon administered three more smart kicks to the masonry. They did not hear a hollow sound, nor anything that could be said remotely to resemble such a phenomenon. What they did hear, clear and unmistakable, and from very close at hand, was the deep, booming voice of Miss Hannah Gudgeon!

"Kindly desist from that abominable hammering," said the voice. "I have a splitting head, and am trying to snatch some sleep. If you have anything to say, open the door and say it to my face. Don't be afraid, I shall not attack you."

Simon and Imogen looked at each other with a wild surmise.

"Miss Gudgeon!" exclaimed the young man in awestruck tones.

"I've often been told this place was haunted," said Imogen, "but I don't understand why it should be haunted by Aunt Hannah. Do you suppose she's been murdered?"

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"Darling, I'm so glad you heard it too. For one ghastly moment I thought my reason must be tottering. No, I don't think your Aunt's been murdered; I dare say there are heaps of people who would like her out of the way, but when it comes to murdering her—well, I very much doubt if it could be done."

"Let's call out to her, and see if she answers," suggested Imogen. "It sometimes works with ghosts."

"Right-ho, old girl, you yell first."

Imogen cleared her lungs, took a deep breath and let out a piercing scream, which went echoing madly round and round the dripping walls of the cellar.

"Aunt Hanna-a-a-a-ah!"

Once again the eerie but familiar voice boomed forth in tones even more querulous than before.

"Ah, it is you, Imogen. Kindly unbolt the door at once and release me from this evil-smelling den. Don't stand there bellowing, child; I am not deaf, and I can hear you quite distinctly. Open the door, and let me out."

"But I can't," shouted Imogen. "I'm locked in, too."

"Don't talk such nonsense, child. This is no time for practical jokes. Let me out immediately."

"Aunt Hannah, I see what's happened. We're both prisoners, and I'm in the next-door cellar to yours. I've got Simon Elliott with me; are you alone?"

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Miss Gudgeon was not alone, and said so with considerable emphasis. Her dungeon, it appeared, was infested with black beetles. Imogen nudged her companion, as who should say "I told you so," and raised her voice once more.

"Are there any bones lying about in your cellar, Aunt Hannah?" she inquired.

"Bones? Bless the child, what are you drivelling about? Yes, now you come to mention it, there *are* some bones; the floor is littered with them."

"Do they look like excisemen's bones?"

"Good gracious, child, how should I know? My glasses have been smashed, and it is very dark in here. I dare say they may be excisemen's bones, but I'm not interested in them."

"I'm afraid," said Imogen, turning to Simon, "Aunt Hannah's in for a sticky end. You heard what she said about the black beetles and the excisemen's bones?"

"Ask her how she was taken prisoner," suggested Simon.

Miss Gudgeon, it appeared, had only just arrived, and in a most unusual manner. After the disastrous fire at her home, the Grange, she had driven in her Ford down to the village, pulled up outside "The Merry Mug," and sounded her horn clamorously until Mungo Sneyd the innkeeper came out. He did not seem altogether pleased to see her, but

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grudgingly consented to give her a bedroom for the night, and showed her into a small, dingy room on the ground floor. He even went so far as to lend her a suit of his own pyjamas, for all her night things had been destroyed in the fire, and hurriedly arraying herself in these she tumbled into bed, for she was thoroughly worn out. No sooner, however, did her head touch the pillow than some hidden mechanical device came into operation, the foot of the bed sank slowly through the floor, and the hapless Miss Gudgeon, dressed in Mungo Sneyd's striped flannel pyjamas and frenziedly clutching the bedclothes about her, was precipitated into the cellar beneath, her pince-nez being smashed in the descent. The bed then hoisted itself back into its normal position, leaving her a helpless prisoner underground. All this she described to Imogen and Simon, her narrative being freely interspersed with acid comments on the character and habits of the innkeeper.

"Have you got the bedclothes with you, Aunt Hannah?" asked Imogen.

"That," replied Miss Gudgeon, "is about the only thing I have to be thankful for. I should be still more thankful if you would stop chattering and allow me to go to sleep."

"Oh, very well, Aunt Hannah."

No further sounds came from the adjoining cellar, and Simon and Imogen concluded that Miss

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Gudgeon had fallen into what Otis McGuffin would have described as "the arms of Murphy."

"And now," said Simon, "to make a plan. From the ease with which it was possible to hear your Aunt's tale of woe, I deduce that the wall dividing the two cellars must be very thin, but I'm afraid we shouldn't be any better off if we broke through."

"We could help ourselves to some of Aunt Hannah's bedclothes," Imogen pointed out; "but to do that would turn this cellar into a bedroom, and I suppose it wouldn't be considered proper, seeing we're not married yet."

A long time after this—neither of them could be sure how long—they heard unmistakable footsteps approaching from outside the cellar. Quick as a flash Simon snatched up the cords which had bound them both, and draped them round himself and Imogen.

"Keep quite still," he whispered hoarsely. "If anyone comes in, I want him to think we are tied up. And get ready to run when I shout. Don't wait for me, whatever you do; I shall have to see if I can't rescue Amy Robsart from the *oubliette* next door."

The footsteps drew nearer, and Imogen could hear her heart throbbing like a piston as a key grated in the lock. Then the door opened, and a man came down the steps carrying a loaf of bread and a jug of water. Simon recognized him; the

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newcomer was none other than the little rat who had followed him all the way from Capetown; but he did not wait to exchange courtesies. With a spring like a panther he hurled himself upon him, bearing him to the ground, while the jug smashed itself to atoms on the stone floor, and the loaf went bounding away to the farther end of the cellar.

"Run, Imogen!" he shouted. "Make for the Manor! Find Jukes and the McGuffins!"

And as his fingers closed upon the throat of his victim he saw the girl run quickly up the steps and out of the cellar.

"Now, my friend," he muttered between his teeth, "I am going to massacre you!"

Imogen found the inn passage deserted, but she did not linger in it. She knew that for her to be recaptured would sorely handicap Simon, and she did not doubt his competence to deal faithfully with that odious little gaoler. She darted out of "The Merry Mug" and set off up the road at top speed, intent upon reaching the Manor as quickly as possible, finding the others, and telephoning to the police.

She had not travelled further than a couple of hundred yards when she saw, far down the road ahead of her, a welcome sight. Striding along at a round pace, with arms and legs swinging in unison, and an air of easy nonchalance about their gait, came the redoubtable twins, Sadie and Otis

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McGuffin! They sighted her at the same moment, for they waved encouragement and broke into a steady jog-trot, and her lips were just about to frame a shout for help when disaster, sudden and unforeseen, overtook her. She tripped and fell, and before she could stumble to her feet she was surrounded by half a dozen villainous-looking ruffians! One of them, more powerful than the rest, picked her up and slung her over his shoulder as if she had been the Vicarage washing, and she was hurried swiftly back into the inn. She could see little, but just as she was being carried through the doorway she caught a lightning glimpse of the road along which she had attempted to flee—the road to freedom—but it was empty. The McGuffin twins had disappeared as completely as if the earth had swallowed them up!

Her captor set her down in the inn passage, and she was rudely thrust into one of the bedrooms on the ground floor. Before the door was slammed upon her, however, she had the satisfaction of taking a bite out of the ruffian's wrist, and of hearing him cry out in anguish. She reflected rather bitterly that this was the only bite she had had since supper the night before, and that unless the fates—or Mungo Sneyd—were kind it would be a long time before she had another, and then fell to wondering how Simon had fared in his struggle with that detestable little gaoler. Had he overpowered the creature, and,

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if so, had he succeeded in releasing Aunt Hannah from the pit into which she had made so sudden and unexpected a descent?

~ The memory of her aunt's story gave her an idea, which she at once put into execution. Aunt Hannah, she recalled, had spoken of being shown into a bedroom on the ground floor, which had proved in the event to be neither more nor less than a high-class booby-trap. She had not, prior to the disturbing happenings of the last few days, been a frequent visitor to "The Merry Mug"; her father would have discountenanced "pub-loafing" of that sort; but she knew that it was very old, and had been the scene of many dark doings in the bad old smuggling days. The mechanical contrivance which had shot Aunt Hannah into the cellar as if she had been a sack of coals had no doubt been installed by the smugglers. Was it not possible that every bedroom on the ground floor was similarly fitted?

"Take a pull at yourself, my girl," she murmured. "You know very well that these rooms are often occupied by visitors to the inn. What sort of a name do you think the place would get if the guests were compelled, against their will, to sleep in the cellars?"

Still, she reflected, it was worth trying, for if once she could get down into the cellars she could find out what had happened to Simon, and might even be able to escape a second time. Anything was better than sitting in this stuffy bedroom, and gaping

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at the discoloured chintzes and the Marcus Stone prints.

Her mind made up, she climbed cautiously on to the bed, and commending herself to Providence laid her head upon the pillow. For a moment or two she thought nothing was going to happen; then she heard a whirring noise from somewhere at the back of the bed, and its lower end began slowly to subside. The rate of subsidence increased rapidly, and Imogen felt herself beginning to slip. Then there was a violent jerk, and she tobogganed down, down, to come to rest on a cold stone floor.

"Am I never to get any sleep?" demanded a querulous, booming voice from near at hand. "Good heavens, child, is that a proper way to enter a room?"

Imogen sat up, ruefully massaging the tenderer parts of her anatomy, and looked round her, while the bed, rising swiftly, resumed its original position in the room above. She found herself in a cellar, very similar to the one from which she had escaped, and near at hand, huddled up in blankets on a mattress laid out on the floor, was her Aunt Hannah looking the picture of misery.

"Sorry to disturb you," said the girl, "but I was caught out the same way as you, only my bedding seems to have stuck to the bed. What has happened? Didn't Simon rescue you? I made sure he would."

"No one has rescued me, child," replied Miss

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Gudgeon tartly. "Nor, so far as I can see, is anybody ever likely to do so. The whole world appears to have gone raving mad, and this is the one sane corner in it. We ought to be very thankful that we are allowed to remain here."

"But—but didn't you hear any noise from the next-door cellar? No shouts, no sounds of a struggle?"

"I heard nothing. I have been trying, in the face of apparently insuperable obstacles, to snatch a little sleep."

Imogen jumped to her feet, and, stepping over her aunt's prostrate form, began kicking frantically at the cellar wall.

"Simon darling," she shouted. "It's me, Imogen. Are you there?"

But there was no reply, and at last she turned from the wall and slumped gloomily down on the end of her aunt's mattress.

"I wish I knew what had happened," she said. "If Simon got away, he will fetch help, and we shall be rescued. If he didn't, goodness knows what horrible things they may not be doing to him."

"It is fruitless to indulge in academic speculation," said Miss Gudgeon. "You should be thankful, as I am, that you are still alive and in good health. If you like, you may have one of these blankets; and my advice to you is, try to get a little sleep. You're looking quite washed out, child."

After a while Imogen, wrapped up in the borrowed

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blanket, found herself nodding. She had gone through a great deal in the last twenty-four hours, and felt desperately sleepy. Soon, profiting by her aunt's example, she fell asleep, her red head propped up against the cellar steps.

She must have slept for a long time, for when she awoke it was already beginning to get dark. Somebody had entered the cellar in the meanwhile, for there was a jug of water, a loaf of bread, and a plateful of sliced ox-tongue on the top step of the cellar. Imogen was ravenously hungry, and the temptation to wolf the whole supply before Aunt Hannah woke up was well-nigh overpowering, but she resisted it, and crossing over to her elderly relative shook her violently.

Aunt Hannah stumbled to her feet, rubbing her eyes, and in spite of herself the girl burst out laughing.

"My gosh, Aunt Hannah, you *do* look a sketch! Those pyjamas of Sneyd's are miles too big for you. I wish you could see yourself in a glass."

Miss Gudgeon made no reply. Her eye had fallen on the meal spread out at the top of the steps, and she was advancing upon it with an expression of grim purpose.

It was not an appetizing banquet, but the two prisoners did full justice to it, demolishing the whole plate of tongue and leaving only the crusts of the bread. The jug of water they shared between them,

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passing it from one to the other with the grave courtesy of a couple of Sir Philip Sidneys.

"Golly, I needed that!" sighed Imogen when the meal was at an end. "It's getting dark, Aunt Hannah; I can't understand why we haven't been rescued. Even if Simon didn't manage to get away the McGuffins should have done something by now. They saw me taken prisoner the second time."

"We are in the hands of Providence, Imogen," said Aunt Hannah gravely. "I think I shall sing a hymn. It may serve to keep our spirits up."

"Sing away," said the girl. "It can't do any serious harm, whatever else it does."

Miss Gudgeon rose from the mattress on which she had been sitting, and began to chant in a cracked and quavering voice one of the hymns associated with the Baptism of Those of Riper Years. She cut a strange figure in that gloomy cellar, a fast fading light, and the innkeeper's pyjamas, as the notes of her recitative echoed round the vaulted roof, but somehow this time Imogen did not feel inclined to laugh. Their situation was too perilous, and the moment too solemn, for mirth.

The uncouth chorister had finished the third verse of her chant and was passing on to a fourth when a key turned in the lock, the door was thrown violently open, and Mungo Sneyd the innkeeper stood in the entrance, his twisted form silhouetted in the light of a lantern carried by somebody at his back.

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"Stop that infernal caterwauling," he snapped, "and come with me, the pair of you! You're wanted upstairs."

The two prisoners, thankful to be released from their evil-smelling dungeon, obeyed without question. They followed their gaolers up the stairs and into the inn passage, and were ushered into a large, well-lighted room at the back of the building. Imogen, plunged thus suddenly from darkness into light, blinked and rubbed her eyes. The room seemed to be full of people. Against one wall, bound hand and foot and guarded by foreign ruffians, stood her father and Cyril Jukes the journalist. In the centre of the room, seated in a chair to which he was firmly tied with stout cords, was Simon Elliott. He looked pale and exhausted, his hair was unkempt, his collar and tie awry, and there was a thin smear of dried blood across his forehead. He started forward at Imogen's entrance, and struggled frantically to free himself from his bonds.

"Good evening, my dear; good evening, Miss Gudgeon," piped a thin, reedy voice. "I am so glad you were able to attend our little conference."

Imogen looked up, and what she saw made her blood run cold. At the far end of the room a long deal table had been placed, and seated behind it in a magisterial attitude was Mr. Humphrey Chard of the Moat Farm, with Otis and Sadie McGuffin one on either side of him! Behind them, stiff as a ramrod,

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and still carrying his rubber truncheon, stood Aunt Hannah's Breton manservant, Batz!

So Batz and the McGuffins were traitors, and Humphrey Chard had been lying all the time! The girl's heart sank. Now that her father and Jukes were prisoners all hope of deliverance had fled, for there was nobody outside, except perhaps Mr. Albert Whelk, who had any knowledge of their desperate plight.

"Now, Mr. Elliott," continued the thin, reedy voice of Mr. Chard, "you see we have all the birds in the cage. Would it not be better to reconsider your decision? I should not like anything unpleasant to happen to any of your friends, least of all to so charming a young lady as Miss Imogen."

"Batz," commanded Aunt Hannah in ringing tones, "I cannot think what you are doing here, but I order you to strike that horrible old man a severe blow on the head!"

The Breton giant winced at the familiar voice, but made no move to obey.

"Come, Mr. Elliott, we are wasting time," said Chard, drumming impatiently with his fingers on the table. "Will you give us your answer, or must we proceed to extreme measures?"

VIII.—*Further Activities of Mr. Albert Whelk*

IT will be recalled that Mr. Albert Whelk, that scrupulously loyal employee of the Automobile Association, had departed into the night after showing Humphrey Chard into the presence of the Squire of Doom. His had been a harrowing experience. He had been involved in a rough house at "The Merry Mug," he had been violently thrown from his motor-cycle and stunned, he had been roughly handled by a couple of foreign thugs, and he had come within an ace of having his weazand slit with a butcher's cleaver by Mungo Sneyd in the presence of a devout, albeit pagan, congregation of villagers. But his spirit was undaunted, and now that he had recovered his motor-cycle and his uniform cap he was ready to face the world anew. His first duty, as he saw it, was to return home and reassure his wife as to his safety, for she was a nervous woman, and his occupation—the highroads of England being what they were—was several degrees more perilous than that of a coal miner or a fireman. Every morning, when he set off to take up his post of danger at the crossroads outside

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Doom village, she would fling her arms round his neck and beseech him to be careful, and not allow himself to be knocked down by "one of them terrible sports cars," while his five-year-old son Cuthbert, his chubby cheeks liberally smeared with marmalade, would stand rigidly at attention, giving the A.A. salute. For Cuthbert, even at that tender age, was already determined to break his mother's heart and follow in the footsteps of his dad.

"Great Hore Belisha, it ain't half been a night!" muttered Albert to himself, as mounting his battered bike he chugged off down the drive and out of the gates of Doom Manor. He rode slowly, for although the hour was late and his home lay some forty miles away he was unwilling to try his mount too high, being uncertain as to the precise extent of the damage it might have suffered. And as he rode he made up sentences to himself, sentences which should form the nucleus of the report he would present at Fanum House in the morning. How, he wondered, was he to account for the damage to his motor-bike and the tattered condition of his uniform? If he told the truth, they would think he was either drunk or mad, and he would assuredly get the sack. An accident? He had never been involved in an accident in his life, and his pride rebelled against so ignoble an excuse. Ah, well, he would have to leave it to his Lizzie. She would think of a way out; she always did. Mr. Albert Whelk rode on.

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He had completed about a quarter of his journey when the engine, which for some time had been emitting ominous coughings and splutterings, petered out altogether, and pulling in to the side of the road he dismounted and set about locating the source of the trouble. A perfunctory examination was sufficient to convince him that the defect was serious; so serious, indeed, that he marvelled at having been able to travel so far. Certainly it was not a matter to be put right with the tools at his disposal; it was a garage job, and a long job at that. He stood upright and looked round him. Three things at once attracted his attention: a vivid glare in the sky in the direction whence he had come, an all-night service garage about a hundred yards down the road ahead of him, and, drawn up outside the garage, a fish-and-chip cart, its chimney smoking merrily. It was a long time since Mr. Whelk had dined, and the fish-and-chip cart decided him. He seized his bike by its twisted handlebars and began laboriously pushing it towards the service garage. The glare in the sky could wait.

The garage hands expressed some surprise on seeing the condition of his steed, but resource came to his aid, and he told them a story of a drunken lorry driver from Swindon who had charged his machine as it stood unattended at the roadside. It was not an explanation which would have satisfied Fanum House, for they would have demanded more

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exact particulars concerning the lorry, and he would have had to draw a rough sketch to illustrate the accident, but it served its purpose now. He handed the motor-cycle over to the garage assistants, and turned his attention to the fish-and-chip cart.

It has been said, although the truth of the assertion has yet to be confirmed, that it is possible for a man, when he is very tired and has not eaten for some considerable time, to get drunk on a beef steak. Mr. Albert Whelk was an abstemious man, but his sensations after consuming a liberal portion of fish and chips were on this occasion in no way dissimilar to those of the earlier stages of alcoholic intoxication. A warm glow of self-approbation pervaded his being, his flagging spirits revived as though by magic, and he felt ready to go anywhere and do anything. A further helping of fish and chips produced in him a truculent mood, and catching sight at this moment of the distant glow in the sky he suddenly decided that he had played the coward in deserting the Squire of Doom at so critical a time. Well, he reflected, least said soonest mended. He would walk back to the village and have a word or two with that blackguard Sneyd. *He'd* teach him to go threatening honest folks with butchers' cleavers! *He'd* show him what happened to lousy publicans who dishonoured the uniform of the A.A.! *The idea!* Trussing him up like a chicken and half smothering him with a tablecloth! Sneyd should get what was

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coming to him before the night was very much older.

The prospect of a ten-mile walk along a deserted country road had no terrors for Mr. Whelk. He went into the garage and selected a heavy spanner from the tool-chest in his motor-cycle combination, returned to the fish-and-chip cart and purchased a vast supply of provendor, which, wrapped in a copy of *The Times*, he thrust into one of his pockets, and set off at a round pace down the road in the direction of Doom village, whistling as he marched the refrain of *You Can't Do That There 'Ere*.

It was full daylight by the time he reached Doom, but although Mr. Whelk had been walking—a form of exercise to which he was little accustomed—for well over two and a half hours the potent effect of the fish and chips had not yet worn off, and as he strode into the village swinging his spanner he continued to make up sentences to himself, sentences which now related to the horrible things he intended to do to the proprietor of “The Merry Mug.” When he came within sight of the inn, however, he reflected that it would perhaps be as well to rest for a while and recruit his strength for the coming encounter. He jumped, therefore, down into the ditch at the side of the road, seated himself comfortably with a pile of stones at his back, and opened the newspaper containing his fish and chips. Thus it came about that when Imogen Grayling made her desperate

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though unsuccessful bid for liberty Mr. Albert Whelk was an unseen spectator, and when, almost immediately afterwards, Otis and Sadie McGuffin came running down the road to the rescue their advance was checked by a low whistle from the A.A. Scout.

Otis and Sadie stopped short, while the unfortunate Imogen was carried struggling back into the inn.

"What in heck was that?" asked Sadie. "That kinda whistling noise?"

"Search me," replied her brother. "I guess it was just a buzzard or somep'n. Come on, Sis, let's go give those guys the works."

"Don't be so dumb, Otis. There ain't no buzzards around here."

"Well, then, it was a whiskeyjack. There's a heap of whiskeyjacks way up in Alaska. Come on, let's get going."

"But this ain't Alaska, you poor lizard," objected Sadie, and at this moment Mr. Whelk's whistle was repeated.

"There was a guy back at college useter whistle like that," mused Otis, interested at last in spite of himself. "Folks said his mother had gone bughouse and cut his throat when he was a baby, and he'd been that way ever since. Say, Sister, do you figure this could be the same guy?"

"How the heck should I know?" replied his sister impatiently. "Guess we'd better rubber around awhile. Why, if it isn't Mr. Whelk!" as the travel-

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stained servant of the Automobile Association rose from his place of concealment and advanced to meet them. "Well, this is great! Now you're here we can clean up that saloon and go back to breakfast."

"That's just what I was anxious to do, miss," said Mr. Whelk. "I've had it in for that Sneyd ever since he tried to do me in with a butcher's knife, and I was on my way to knock his block off now, only I thought, as I'd walked a fairish distance this morning, I'd have a bit of a sit down first, as the saying is."

"Bully for you, Mr. Whelk."

"Yes, miss. Of course, I ought by rights to report the affair to headquarters—interfering with an A.A. patrol in the execution of his duty—but the Squire asked me to keep it dark, and I don't want to get anybody into trouble. I want to knock Sneyd's block off, that's all. While I think of it, do you or the gentleman care for fish and chips? I've got more here than I can manage, and it would be a pity to waste it."

The two grenadiers eagerly accepted Mr. Whelk's invitation. Neither of them had breakfasted, and the fish and chips exuded an enticing aroma. All three sat down on the edge of the ditch behind the heap of stones, where they were concealed from the vision of anybody coming up or down the road, and their host passed round his newspaper with its appetizing contents. The fastidious reader will no doubt object

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that nobody, not even an American hiker, would eat cold fish and chips with any degree of relish; but it must be borne in mind that Mr. Whelk had carried the provender in his pocket, and it was still at least warm. All at once Sadie, who had been sitting with *The Times* in which the food had been wrapped spread out on her knee, gave a sharp exclamation.

"Say, Otis," she cried, "look at here. This is yesterday's paper, I guess. Do you see what it says? This spurious dope ain't no use to nobody, after all."

"Gimme," replied Otis, speaking with his mouth full, and extending a hand like a leg of mutton for the newspaper.

The paragraph to which his sister drew his attention contained startling information. The new mineral spurious, it stated, which had been the cause of so much sensational gambling on the Stock Exchange during the past few months, had now been definitely proved worthless. The most careful experiments had been conducted in laboratories on both sides of the Atlantic, and in no single case had it been found to justify the claims made for it by its discoverers. Spurious, in fact, was worth no more than the chalk soil from which it was dug!

It now became of the first importance to get hold of Simon Elliott and urge him to close with Humphrey Chard's offer. It seemed to Sadie and Otis—

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and, indeed, to Mr. Whelk—that if Simon could sell the village of Doom for half a million to the bald-headed little runt who had been the cause of all the trouble it would be a brave day's work nobly done. The question was, where was Simon? If, like Imogen, he was a prisoner in "The Merry Mug," they would have to batter their way in and fish him out, but to do so might take time, and in the meanwhile Chard, frightened by the unbridled behaviour of the Doom villagers, might have fled the district. Moreover, there was no knowing how soon he might not discover the truth concerning spurious, in which case the deal would certainly be off.

The discussion which followed was a lively one, becoming at times almost acrimonious. Sadie McGuffin was in favour of going in search of Humphrey Chard, and telling him that Simon had changed his mind and was now willing to sell; Otis and Mr. Whelk both inclined to the view that a concerted attack on "The Merry Mug" should be the first item on the agenda. Neither side would give way, and it was beginning to look as if it would be necessary to appoint an outside arbitrator when the Vicar of Doom shot past them on his tricycle at breakneck speed, with Cyril Jukes perched upon the rear axle. Otis, who at one time in his chequered career had been a professional hog-caller, shouted after them with the full power of his lungs, but they

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seemed not to hear, and Sadie laid a restraining hand on her brother's arm.

"Can the operatic stuff," she said. "Hollering ain't gonna get us no place. What we gotta do is sit tight and watch what eventuates."

Her patience was rewarded, for very soon afterwards she and her companions found themselves, as it were, in the front row of the stalls when the Vicar's sensational tricycling act came to its abrupt and disastrous conclusion.

"That's one of our members," observed Mr. Whelk morosely, as he watched Cyril Jukes being dragged by his assailants towards "The Merry Mug," "and he's in trouble. It's my duty, miss, to go to his assistance, so with your permission I'll just step across and reason with those dagoes."

He fondled his spanner lovingly as he spoke, but Sadie McGuffin applied a cold douche to his enthusiasm.

"See here, Mr. Whelk," she said. "There ain't no sense in running your head up against a brick wall. Remember what happened the last time you got fresh with those guys."

If Albert Whelk had a fault, it was that he was prone to sulk. Sadie's last remark wounded his pride, and he gave way now to a fit of sulkiness.

"Well, miss," he said in bitter tones, "as I don't seem to be wanted here I'll be getting along to my post at the crossroads. Sitting all day in this ditch

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won't buy the baby a new bonnet, and if you should happen to want me you'll know where to find me. Good morning to you, miss; good morning to you, sir."

And raising his uniform cap he walked off rather stiffly in the direction of the crossroads. Sadie stood for a while watching the stocky little figure marching across the village green, then she turned to her brother.

"I'm real sorry the little guy went up in the air like that," she said. "Makes me feel kinda mean, but he was too durned pugnacious. Come along, Otis; quit cramming yourself with fish, and follow me; I got a hunch."

"Sure, Sister," replied Otis, but his tones were surly.

They made their way together back to the Manor, where they found the titanic Batz engaged in frying bacon over an oil stove in the kitchen. Sadie went at once to the telephone, but her brother, who had a healthy appetite, lingered in the kitchen to share the bacon with Batz. The Breton manservant betrayed no emotion on being told of the capture of the Vicar, the Vicar's daughter, and Cyril Jukes, but he appeared to be exercised in his mind regarding the fate of his mistress, Miss Hannah Gudgeon.

"Miss 'Annah," he demanded, "where is she? They 'ave captured 'er also, hein?"

"Looks like she was locked up with the rest," opined Otis, with a shrug.

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"Species of cretin!" exclaimed Batz. "I will beat them with my pipe, no?"

"Sure," agreed Otis amiably.

Meanwhile Sadie, at the telephone, was trying to get into communication with the Moat Farm, on the outskirts of Doom. She wanted to speak to Mr. Humphrey Chard on a matter of the utmost urgency. She was pretty certain in her own mind that the bald-headed archæologist, despite his protestations of repentance, was still plotting against the Squire and was responsible for the outrageous activities of Mungo Sneyd and the foreigners at "The Merry Mug," but she wanted to make sure. Also it was important to discover, if possible, the whereabouts of Simon Elliott, though it seemed probable that he too was a prisoner at the inn.

Mr. Chard was at home, and answered the telephone in person. He was distressed to learn of the ruffianly behaviour of his hired foreigners, whom it had been his intention to discharge that very morning, but they were certainly not acting under his instructions. After the interview at the Manor House on the previous evening he had gone straight home, and had been at home ever since. Certainly he would be delighted to see Miss McGuffin and her brother at any time, if they cared to call at the Moat Farm. Yes, he would be in all the morning.

"Otis," said Sadie, replacing the receiver and going into the kitchen, "that guy Chard's aiming

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to double-cross us. It's time you and I got our lamps on him and kept 'em there. We'll tote Batz along with us; that rubber night-stick of his may be kinda useful."

"O.K., Sis," answered Otis. "When do we start?"

* * * * *

Meanwhile, down in the village Mrs. Bugbird, who was a woman of deep religious convictions, was holding an emergency meeting of the votaries of Jupiter in the Parish Hall. There was a large attendance, for after the sensational events of the previous night the peasantry had by common consent declared a public holiday, and the hall was filled to overflowing.

"To-night," announced Mrs. Bugbird, who had graduated with honours at the Farlingham High School, and therefore naturally assumed the office of chairwoman, "is the night of the full moon, and great Jupiter demands a sacrifice. We are met here, my friends, to arrange the details. It is a thousand pities the Vicar is not with us, for it is his place to attend to such matters, but I saw him just now riding a tricycle, and he can be no priest of ours. Who ever heard of a priest of Jupiter astride a tricycle? The idea is ludicrous!"

There was a general clicking of tongues at the absurdity of the conception, and Mrs. Bugbird resumed.

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"No, my friends, we must manage without the Vicar, and to-night our programme must be carried through without a hitch. I have no doubt that Jupiter was seriously annoyed at last night's fiasco, and if we are to reinstate ourselves in his good graces, and thus ensure a bountiful supply of rain, we must see to it that he is offered the sacrifice that is his due."

"Who be we going to sacrifice, Mrs. Bugbird?" inquired old Mother Wetherbee, the octogenarian big-drummer.

"Well, now, that is just what we are met here to discuss," said the chairwoman. "I was about to suggest that it might be as well to sacrifice as many people as possible, just to be on the safe side. It's no good making two bites at a cherry, and the bigger the sacrifice the better Jupiter will be pleased—or so I am given to understand. Mungo Sneyd has already rounded up a number of unbelievers, and has them safely under lock and key at 'The Merry Mug.' They include young Mr. Elliott, the new Squire, who has already affronted our religion in the most bare-faced manner; Miss Hannah Gudgeon, another arch-enemy of the Faith; and Miss Grayling, the Vicar's daughter, whose father, as you have just heard, has contracted the irreverent habit of tricycling about the village. I dare say by this time Mr. Sneyd has added others to the bag."

"Be we going to give Vicar to Maas'r Jupiter?"

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asked Mrs. Bugbird's father. "Vicar be proper hard on we if us doan't go church-along on Sundays."

"What I would like fine to know, Mrs. Bugbird," said Mr. MacWhirter the schoolmaster, who was notoriously close-fisted, "is whaur will ye get the money for this entertainment? Bonfires is costly things, and ye canna' hae a sacrifice wi'out a bonfire."

"There will, of course, be a collection," replied the chairwoman promptly; "but if you, Mr. MacWhirter, or anybody else present, would like to make a donation now it would be very gratefully received. Miss Hopkins, our efficient postmistress, has kindly consented to act as treasurer. Now with regard to the lemonade for the band——"

"What do 'ee say?" croaked old Mother Wetherbee. "I be a bit 'ard of 'earing. Did 'ee say lemonade? Us doan't want no lemonade; a glass of beer with a drop of gin in it'll be good enough for we, and doan't 'ee go for to say different, Agnes Bugbird."

"Nonsense, Mrs. Wetherbee. I have no intention of allowing this evening's ceremony to degenerate into a Bacchanalian orgy. I said lemonade, and lemonade it shall be, otherwise I shall resign my post and leave you to worship Jupiter in any way you please. Only don't blame me if you're all struck by lightning."

There was a ripple of applause, which Mrs.

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Bugbird took to imply a vote of confidence in her administration. She continued.

"I shall make it my business to see that six dozen bottles of lemonade and six dozen of ginger-beer are sent up this evening to the Stone Circle from my husband's store. My boy Willie will mount guard over them and see that the empties are returned."

"There won't be anything *but* empties to return if Willie Bugbird 'as charge of 'em," muttered an irreverent member of the congregation, but the chairwoman ignored the interruption.

"Now I want you all to assemble as before on the village green at ten o'clock to-night, each carrying a lighted torch. Torches can be purchased at my husband's store, price ninepence each. We shall march up to the Stone Circle, headed by the band, and taking with us the sacrificial victims. Now I am going across to the inn to see Mr. Sneyd and arrange about the victims. Has anyone else any questions to ask?"

"Yes, Mrs. Bugbird," said the irreverent member who had spoken before. "Does Jupiter buy 'is thunderbolts at your 'usband's store?"

There were cries of "shame!" and "blasphemy!" and the meeting broke up in some disorder.

* * * * *

Otis and Sadie McGuffin, taking Batz with them as guide, set out from Doom Manor to pay a call

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upon Mr. Humphrey Chard at the Moat Farm. Their way did not lead them through the village, so they saw nothing of the disorderly scenes outside the Parish Hall at the conclusion of Mrs. Bugbird's meeting. They did not see old Mother Wetherbee kicking the shins of Mrs. Bugbird in a fruitless effort to persuade her to supply gin instead of lemonade for the evening's performance: they did not see young Willie Bugbird let off a squib at the feet of old Jebber the cobbler, nor did they hear Miss Hopkins the postmistress, who by reason of her sudden elevation to the rank of treasurer had begun to put on airs, tell young Porkiss the stonemason that she would never speak to him again. They went by a path across the fields; a strangely assorted trio of giants, two of them in hiking shorts and the third in a sombre suit of black alpaca; nor did they encounter a soul until they reached the front gate of the Moat Farm, when they ran plumb spang into Mungo Sneyd, who was just coming out. If Mr. Albert Whelk had been with them, there would certainly have been trouble. As it was the innkeeper scowled at them and passed on, without being molested or interfered with in any way.

"Well, now, isn't that just too bad?" said Sadie to her brother, as they turned in at the gate. "Here's this guy Chard trying to have us believe he's mother's little ray of sunshine, and up comes Sneyd and gives the game away. Now we know just where we stand,

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I guess. Go ahead, Otis, ring the bell for the hired help."

Humphrey Chard opened the front door to them in person, and it occurred to Sadie that the man must be either a magnificent actor or a very great fool, for he gave every outward indication of being delighted to see them. He led them into his study, offered them comfortable, leather-padded arm-chairs, and plied them with cigarettes. Batz remained on guard outside the house, swinging his india-rubber hose-pipe and chewing dandelion leaves.

Sadie McGuffin came straight to the point.

"See here, Mr. Chard," she said. "Me and Otis ain't accustomed to driving a buggy round to the back door when we can walk right in at the front. Get this into your dome; we know all about you and Sneyd kidnapping folks and holding them at the ho-tel. You aim to have the young Squire sign away his estate, but you won't do it. No, sir. That Elliott hombre was born refusing to listen to reason, and he's pretty mad at you right now, I guess."

"Really, Miss McGuffin, I hardly know——"

"Aw hell, can the boloney! I'm telling you this for your good. Me and Otis is just as keen as you are to have Elliott sign. Ain't that so, Brother?"

"Sure, Sister," replied Otis. "You betcher."

"But I don't understand——" began Humphrey Chard.

"You don't have to understand. You just listen

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while I tell you somep'n. Otis here was planning to marry the Vicar's daughter, and he don't want no God-durned sons of guns from nowhere muscling in and half-inching his girl. Do you, Brother?"

"Hell, no," said Otis, with considerable emphasis.

"Well, then," went on Sadie, with an air of triumph, "that's the lay-out. Have you got the documents all fixed up, so as Elliott can sign?"

"Certainly," said Mr. Chard. "The transaction is practically complete. It only awaits his signature."

"Fine. And how about the jack?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"How about the half million, or whatever fool amount it was?"

"As soon as Mr. Elliott has signed I shall give him a cheque for the purchase money. It will be drawn on a London bank, and I have made arrangements for it to be honoured."

"Well now, I call that swell. Come on, Mr. Chard, lead us to Mr. Elliott. We'll make him sign, if we have to hit him over the head with a sockful of wet sand."

Humphrey Chard rose from his chair and walked up and down the room in a state of manifest agitation.

"The fact is, Miss McGuffin," he said at last, "Simon Elliott has escaped. My men had him shut up in one of the cellars at the inn, but he got away, half murdered the poor wretch who was taking him

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some food, and barricaded himself in the skittle alley. He can't get out, but we, on the other hand, cannot get in. Mungo Sneyd has just been up to tell me about it. He seemed to think the best plan would be to wait until it gets dark, when the young man is almost sure to make a dash for liberty. We ought to be able to catch him then."

"We surely will," said Sadie. "Otis and me'll fix him, yes sir. I guess we better park ourselves right here until then, Mr. Chard, if you can feed us. And say, Mr. Chard, we toted that guy Batz along with us—Miss Gudgeon's hired help. He ain't got no love for Miss Hannah, and he's kinda wishful to have a crack at her with a rubber club."

"Don't say another word, Miss McGuffin," said Humphrey Chard. "I am overjoyed to have discovered three such staunch allies. We will remain here until nightfall, and I hope you will make yourselves as comfortable as possible in my humble cottage."

"We surely will," said Sadie. "This is a real swell place you got here, Mr. Chard."

Miss McGuffin, it will be observed, believed in spoiling the Egyptians.

As soon as it began to get dark the party set out from the Moat Farm and joined Mungo Sneyd and the foreigners at "The Merry Mug." All attempts to dislodge Simon from the skittle alley had so far proved abortive, and several of the foreigners were

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nursing wounds inflicted by the business end of a heavy wooden skittle. The newcomers had scarcely arrived, however, when the door of the skittle alley burst open, and Simon made a wild dash down the passage, whirling a ninepin round his head.

"Out of my way, you rats!" he roared, and the foreigners cowered back against the passage walls, leaving the way clear for his escape. Sadie and Otis McGuffin, however, were made of sterner stuff, and it was no part of their plan that he should vanish into the darkness, perhaps summon the police, and shipwreck their carefully thought out scheme for the amelioration of his lot.

"Better clock him one, Brother," said Sadie calmly, as the young man came galloping towards them.

"O.K., Sister," said Otis.

A fist like a block of granite shot out and caught Simon squarely on the point of the chin. He went down like a pole-axed ox, scraping his forehead against the lintel of the door as he fell.

"You've killed him!" exclaimed Humphrey Chard in some alarm. "I'll be no party to murder!"

"Shucks!" replied Sadie. "That guy's as tough as a boarding-house steak. Have somebody throw cold water over him, and he'll sign your papers for you, I guess."

IX.—*A Business Transaction at The Merry Mug*

TO the perspicacious reader it should now be clear why Imogen Grayling, when she and her aunt were released from their dungeon and conducted upstairs to join their fellow captives, found the McGuffin twins ranged apparently on the side of the enemy, and why Batz, who had served Miss Gudgeon with dog-like fidelity for a great number of years, openly defied her command to strike the infamous Chard over the head with a short length of rubber hose-pipe. To Imogen herself, as indeed to Simon and the rest of what may be described as the Doom Manor faction, it was by no means clear at the time, and much unnecessary heart-burning and smouldering resentment was the result.

For Sadie McGuffin had guessed wrong. Simon Elliott, when he recovered consciousness, obstinately refused to sign the papers conveying the Doom estate to Humphrey Chard, and it was therefore deemed advisable to exert pressure. Simon was strapped into a chair, lest in the heat of the moment he should do anything unbridled, and the other prisoners were brought up from the dungeons where

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they had lain all day. It is possible that if the McGuffins, or even one McGuffin, could have contrived to be left alone for five minutes with the young Squire, Simon might have been convinced of the desirability of signing the documents without more ado, but it is always difficult to believe in the *bona fides* of a man who has just given you a sock on the jaw, and in any case the opportunity was not forthcoming. Humphrey Chard, being himself shifty by nature, was inclined to be suspicious, and Sadie and Otis decided that it would be most unwise to run any risks. They seated themselves at the table, one on either side of the bald archæologist, and frowned austere upon the prisoners.

"Come, Mr. Elliott, we are wasting time," said Chard, drumming impatiently with his fingers on the table. "Will you give us your answer, or must we proceed to extreme measures?"

It was Cyril Jukes who answered, for Simon was too dazed to speak. Jukes was feeling better, for although he had sustained a severe blow on the head when he was thrown off the tricycle, he had been carefully tended by the Vicar throughout the day, which they had spent together in one of the cellars of "The Merry Mug." The time had passed pleasantly enough, for the Reverend Anthony had shown himself to be a perfect demon at the game of "animal, vegetable and mineral," and they had played several exciting chukkers.

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"I wouldn't sign anything, old boy, if I were you," said Cyril. "You never know what you won't let yourself in for. Don't worry about the rest of us; short of murder there's not much they can do to any of us that they haven't done already, and I've got an uncle at Scotland Yard. There'll be the father and mother of a row if little Cyril disappears."

"Batz," boomed Miss Gudgeon in a voice of thunder, "unless you do as I tell you instantly, and hit that detestable creature over the head, I shall discharge you from my service without a character!"

Batz looked uncomfortable, but did not move. He had been carefully coached by Sadie McGuffin in the part he was to play.

"I warned you before, old boy," went on Cyril cheerfully, "that you were going to have trouble with a bald-headed little man of repulsive appearance with eyes he can hood like a hawk. Don't you have any truck with him, Simon. Even if he does us all in, and leaves our torsos in station cloak-rooms as far afield as Penzance or Strathpeffer, my uncle will get him in the end. He's a devil on torsos is my uncle. Great friend of Sir Bernard Spilsbury."

Imogen Grayling took a pace towards Simon.

"Darling," she said, "if you sign the papers I'll never speak to you again as long as I live. Let the old beast do what he likes; I don't care. We love each other, and that's all that matters. Daddy," she

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looked appealingly at her father, "tell him he mustn't sign."

The Vicar, who had been day-dreaming, woke with a start.

"Eh, what's that, my dear?" he said. "No, of course he mustn't sign. I would be the last to encourage any man to strive vainly after filthy lucre, but this is a matter which involves the spiritual well-being of a whole parish. The craven conduct of these two Americans, Mr. and Miss McGuffin, should be a lesson to us all. Let us remember that we are Christians, and English."

All this while Simon, huddled in his chair, had been staring at Sadie McGuffin. She was making the most extraordinary faces at him, and appeared to be afflicted with conjunctivitis or St. Vitus's Dance, for she kept opening and shutting her left eye in a series of jerks. She looked, indeed, as if she was suffering considerable pain, and in view of her traitorous behaviour he devoutly hoped that this was the case. Humphrey Chard now leaned forward and rapped with his knuckles on the table.

"When your friends have quite finished their tirade, Mr. Elliott," he piped, "I will endeavour to explain to you exactly what will be the consequences of your refusal to sign the documents. Outside on the village green at this very moment the worthy Mrs. Bugbird is marshalling the people of Doom for

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a further sacrificial orgy in the Stone Circle. They have worked themselves into a state of fanatical frenzy over the worship of Jupiter, and nothing will satisfy them short of a human sacrifice on a generous scale. If you sign the papers, you and your friends will be allowed to slip out of the inn by the back door, and make your escape before the villagers have time to realize that the victims have flown. Miss Gudgeon's car is in the yard, also the Vicar's tricycle, and these will of course be placed at your disposal. If, on the other hand, you prove obstinate and refuse to sign, I shall be reluctantly compelled to surrender you and your companions to Mrs. Bugbird, to do with you what she will."

"Look here, my dear old Humphrey," put in Cyril Jukes, "I think you are forgetting my uncle at Scotland Yard."

"Not at all, Mr. Jukes. Your uncle at Scotland Yard will naturally be perturbed when he learns that you have been made the victim of a human sacrifice, and I don't doubt that he will waste little time in arresting Mrs. Bugbird and her fellow worshippers on a charge of murder. He will find me very helpful in rounding up the criminals, but no blame will attach itself to me personally."

"Mrs. Bugbird will give you away."

"I think not, Mr. Jukes. I have been careful to remain in the background. And in any case Mrs. Bugbird and her followers are so fanatically inspired

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that they will go to the gallows like early Christian martyrs, embracing death as the supreme expression of their devotion to the old pagan gods."

"You devil!" cried Imogen hotly. "Simon, I tell you again, if you sign *anything* I'll never speak to you as long as I live!"

For the first time Simon spoke. He had been fascinated, as a bird is fascinated by a snake, by the hideous faces Sadie McGuffin was making at him, and he had heard very little of what Humphrey Chard had been saying.

"No," he said firmly. "I'll see you damned before I'll sign!"

Cyril Jukes tried to applaud, an operation in which he was hampered by the cords binding his wrists together.

"Bravely spoken, comrade," he said. "You stick to that line of reasoning, and you can't go far wrong. For how, as Thingummy says, can man die better than facing fearful odds for the something of his fathers and the whatnot of his gods?"

Sadie McGuffin leaned across and said something to Chard and her brother, and the three of them whispered together for some time. Then Otis dived a hand into his hip pocket and produced a flask, which he laid on the table in front of him, while at the sight of this wicked weapon Aunt Hannah snorted disapproval.

"Miss McGuffin," announced Humphrey Chard,

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"has made a most admirable suggestion, and I propose to revise the terms of my offer. Sneyd, bring the girl forward, up to the table."

The innkeeper caught hold of Imogen roughly by the wrist, and dragged her across the room. Chard picked up the flask and held it aloft, where all could see.

"Now, Mr. Elliott," he said, "you will agree that Miss Grayling is a very pretty girl, but I can promise you that if you persist in your pig-headed obstinacy she will be a pretty girl no longer. This flask contains vitriol, a corrosive acid with whose properties you are doubtless familiar. Sign the documents, and you all go free. Refuse to sign, and Miss Grayling alone goes free, but not until my friend Mr. McGuffin has applied a little of this—er—face lotion to her complexion!"

The Vicar gave a hoarse cry of horror, and Simon struggled frantically to rise from his chair. Imogen turned very white, but she set her teeth and uttered no sound. Sadie McGuffin continued to make faces at Simon, faces even more extraordinary than before. Simon surrendered.

"All right," he said. "I'll sign. But on one condition."

Humphrey Chard raised his eyebrows.

"On what condition?" he asked.

"That you untie us all first. I can't possibly write in this cramped attitude, and I'm damned if I'll

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sign anything while my friends are trussed up like a parcel of Christmas turkeys."

Chard seemed to demur, but Sadie McGuffin whispered something in his ear, and he nodded assent. The cords which bound Simon, Jukes, and the Vicar were cut, and the Squire of Doom rose from his chair and stretched his cramped limbs.

"What do you want me to sign?" he asked, approaching the table. "And how about the money?"

Humphrey Chard smiled.

"The papers are all here, on the table," he said. "Mr. and Miss McGuffin will witness your signature. I have already made out a cheque for the half million, and instructions have been given to my London bank to honour it on sight. It gives me great pleasure to think that this little transaction should have been put through without any haggling or unpleasantness."

There was silence in the room for a little while, broken only by the scratching of Simon's pen upon the paper. He completed his task at last, took the cheque offered him by Humphrey Chard, examined it, folded it up, and put it away in his pocket. Then he crossed over to Imogen.

"I'm sorry, darling," he said, "but you see there was no other way out."

"I'm sorry, too," said Imogen. "I'm afraid you've been had for a mug."

She snatched up the flask from off the table,

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unscrewed the top, and held it out for Simon to smell.

"If that isn't Scotch whisky," she said, "I'll eat my new cami-knickers!"

"By Gad, you're right!" exclaimed Simon, taking one sniff at the flask. "I thought somehow it wasn't like Otis to go about the place with a flask of sulphuric acid stuffed in his hip pocket. But it's too late to do anything about it now; I've signed those precious papers."

It all happened in the twinkling of an eye. One moment Sadie and Otis McGuffin were bending over the long deal table industriously appending their signatures to Humphrey Chard's documents; the next they had sprung to their feet, vaulted lightly over the table, and with a cry of "Attaboy! Give 'em the works!" hurled themselves upon the foreigners who still guarded Cyril Jukes and the Vicar. Simultaneously the gigantic Batz had raised his rubber truncheon on high and brought it down with a resounding thwack on the glistening bald pate of Mr. Humphrey Chard. The little hunchback sagged forward and sprawled, an inert heap, across the table.

This sudden *volte face* came as a complete surprise to everybody in the room, and Jukes, the Vicar, Simon, and Imogen were at first utterly bewildered. Not so Aunt Hannah. She had been watching eagerly for an opportunity to come to grips with

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Mungo Sneyd the innkeeper, and she was quick to take advantage of this unexpected change in the situation. With a yell of savage frenzy she sprang upon the publican, threw her arms round his neck, and fastened her teeth in his left ear.

"I warned you, Sneyd," she mumbled, speaking with her mouth full, "that you would live to be very sorry you ever crossed the path of Hannah Gudgeon!"

Meanwhile the rest of the Doom Manor faction, realizing that the McGuffins' desertion to the enemy had been a ruse, hurled themselves into the fray, and in a very short space of time Mungo Sneyd and the foreigners had been overpowered and securely lashed with the cords they had used upon Simon, Jukes, and the Vicar. Humphrey Chard, who had been knocked senseless by the admirable Batz, was left sprawling across the table—a tactical error of the first magnitude, for when Simon, flushed but triumphant, surveyed the field of battle he found that the bald archæologist had vanished into the *ewigkeit*!

"What the devil has happened to Chard?" he panted. "I thought you knocked him out, Batz?"

"I have beat him with my pipe, yes," replied the Breton giant. "Sacred name of a little yellow monkey, but the *sale type* has evaporated!"

"Well, he's gone, and taken his precious papers with him," said Simon. "I only hope he won't have the sense to stop that cheque."

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"I think the time has come," observed Cyril Jukes, who had seated himself on the edge of the table and was lighting a cigarette, "when the old-established firm of McGuffin and McGuffin should state their position unequivocally and without further deception. I for one would like very much to know whether they are for us or against us."

"Yes, by thunder!" exclaimed Simon, with some heat. "Otis McGuffin socked me over the jaw, and if that wasn't a lousy thing to do I don't know what is!"

Sadie and Otis were all contrition.

"Say, folks, you got us all wrong," said Sadie. "We done it all for your own good. Just you listen while I tell you somep'n."

And in a few well-chosen words Miss McGuffin explained the circumstances which had driven her and her brother to side for a time with the enemy. The cutting from Mr. Albert Whelk's newspaper, impregnated with grease, was handed round and carefully examined, and for a time there was silence as the facts began to penetrate to the bemused minds of the assembled company. It was the Vicar who spoke first.

"Then am I to understand," he asked, "that Mr. Elliott has sold to this man Chard, for no less a sum than half a million pounds, an estate which is worth only a fraction of that huge amount?"

"Sure," answered Sadie, "unless the bank don't

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honour his cheque. Pity we let the little runt get away."

The Vicar was silent for a moment or two, turning the matter over in his mind.

"I don't like it," he said at last. "It appears to me to savour of sharp practice. This fellow Chard, when he bought the estate, must have done so in the hope of making a profit out of the sale of—er—spurium. If, as you now tell me, spurium is worthless, the poor chap will lose a great deal of money."

"Don't be a fool, Anthony," boomed Aunt Hannah irascibly. "The 'poor chap,' as you call him, has behaved abominably, and deserves to lose every penny he possesses. I am only sorry Batz did not hit harder and put him out of the way for good and all."

"Speaking of putting people out of the way," said Jukes, "what shall we do with these pretty things?" He indicated with the tip of his cigarette the prostrate bodies of Mungo Sneyd and the foreigners. "They can't do much harm trussed up like that, but they don't improve the look of the room, lying about all over the floor. I abominate untidiness."

"Let's put them in the cellar, the one full of excisemen's bones," suggested Imogen. "I'm sure Sneyd has a horror of ghosts."

"An excellent idea," said Jukes, jumping down from the table. "Come on, Simon, we'll take Comrade Mungo first. You catch hold of his legs,

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and I'll hoist the other end. Holy smoke, Miss Gudgeon, what have you done to his ear?"

One by one the prisoners were carried down to the cellar and dumped on the floor among the bones and the black beetles. They made no protest, for each one of them had been securely gagged with a pocket handkerchief.

"We'll leave them there till morning," said Simon. "They can't come to any harm, and they're better under lock and key. Hullo, here's Mr. Whelk."

It was indeed Mr. Albert Whelk who entered the inn at that moment, a pugnacious Mr. Whelk, a Mr. Whelk prepared to do battle. He had consumed no more fish and chips, but he had fortified himself with three pints of old ale, and the effect was very much the same.

"Good evening, gents and ladies all," he said. "Where's that brute Sneyd? I want to knock his block off."

"You're too late, comrade," answered Jukes. "Miss Gudgeon has already attended to him, and the remains have been laid to rest in a vault below, among the bodies of his comrades and the bones of dozens of excisemen."

Mr. Whelk gave a low whistle.

"Coo!" he said. "You don't mean to say as you've done 'em all in? How about Chard, that horrible little man with a head like a skating-rink?"

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"He is still at large, I'm sorry to say, but I don't think he can have got far."

And Jukes related the story of the fight in the inn, and the incidents leading up to it.

"Ah," was Mr. Whelk's comment, "I'm glad you've done 'em down. But I'm sorry about Sneyd; I owed him something for insulting the A.A. uniform. Well, ladies and gents, now I'm here is there anything I can do to help? I've got my motor bike—boarded a chara this morning and fetched it from the garage—and as I'm off duty now I'm at your disposal, as the saying is."

"Simon, old boy," said Jukes suddenly, "I've had a brain-wave. Have you still got Chard's cheque, or did you carelessly leave it lying on the table with the documents? Comrade Whelk shall take it up to London right away, before that bald-headed loon has a chance of stopping it. In the lounge you will find, if I am not mistaken, pens, ink, and paper. Write a note to that lawyer bird of yours—Ponto, or Fido, or something—and enclose the cheque. Our Mr. Whelk will descend upon him in the small hours of the morning, tell him the whole story, and chase him along to the bank as soon as it opens. I take it you won't mind a trip to town, Mr. Whelk?"

"Fidoe lives at Sevenoaks," said Simon. "Let's see, it's just after ten now; you could get there in five hours, hand over the cheque, and be back here by 9 a.m."

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The excellent Mr. Whelk expressed his willingness to go anywhere and do anything, so long as he could be back at his post on the crossroads the following morning, and so long as he was not called upon to go home to his wife. After his prolonged and unexplained absence he was a little doubtful as to the reception he would get from his Lizzie. Simon went into the lounge, sat down at the writing-table, and had begun to draft a letter to Mr. Fido, when he found the Vicar at his elbow.

"I don't wish to interfere, my dear fellow," said the Reverend Anthony, "but do you really think it is wise to put temptation in the path of that poor lad by entrusting him with so vast a sum of money?"

Simon looked at the Vicar with a pitying smile.

"You don't own a motor car, Mr. Grayling, do you?"

"No, my dear chap, I don't; but I can't see what that has to do with it."

"And you're not a member of the A.A.?"

"No."

"In that case you couldn't be expected to realize that what you have just said is an insult to that great organization. In any case, I know Albert Whelk, and I'd trust him with—with—oh, damn it all, I'd trust him with Imogen herself."

"If that is so, my dear fellow," said the Vicar, "I have nothing more to say."

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Meanwhile Mr. Whelk, blissfully ignorant of the doubts cast upon his integrity by the Vicar of Doom, had remembered something, and was talking excitedly to Cyril Jukes and the McGuffin twins.

"I quite forgot to tell you gents as there's a bit of a song and dance going on down on the village green. That Mrs. Bugbird is up to her games again; she's got the band paraded in front of the post office, and the whole village has turned out with torches. They didn't interfere with me as I came past, but I shan't go back that way, and if you'll take my advice, gents, you'll steer clear of them. They're in what you might call an ugly mood; old Jebber the cobbler is marching up and down flourishing a butcher's knife, and that Mrs. Ghoul—her that does the laundry for the Vicarage—has got a basketful of white tablecloths. I hope you don't mind my mentioning it, but we don't want any more awkwardness like there was last night."

"Not at all, Mr. Whelk, you did quite right to tell us," said Jukes. "We might easily have walked slap into Mrs. Bugbird's clutches. I suppose you didn't happen to see Chard anywhere about? He's sure to be sculling around in the background, egging the villagers on to further excesses."

Mr. Whelk shook his head.

"No, Mr. Jukes," he said. "He wasn't there, as I could see. But there's a big crowd down there, and I didn't wait long enough to take a good look at

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them. You wouldn't like me to phone the police from the A.A. box at the crossroads?"

"Not on your life," replied the journalist. "We can handle this job without their help, and if they're brought into it there will be endless complications. Ah, here's Mr. Elliott with the letter. You'd better get away, Mr. Whelk, before the situation warms up."

"You know, Mr. Jukes," said the A.A. Scout, taking the letter with its precious enclosure from Simon and stuffing it into a pocket of his uniform coat, "I wouldn't do this for everyone. But seeing as how you're one of our members——"

"I think you're mistaken, comrade," put in Jukes. "I'm not a member of the A.A."

Mr. Whelk looked up sharply.

"Eh, what's that?" he asked. "Not a member? In that case——"

"But Mr. Elliott is. He can show you his membership card, if you like."

Mr. Whelk heaved a sigh of relief.

"That will be quite all right, sir," he said, saluting smartly and turning to the door. Simon and Jukes watched him mount his motor-cycle and chug off into the darkness; they stood for a while in the doorway of the inn gazing after the dwindling rear-light, and then, turning, found Miss Hannah Gudgeon at their elbow. She presented a strange and terrifying spectacle, for although she was still

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wearing the innkeeper's pyjamas, which were several sizes too big for her, she had now perched upon her head the familiar Tyrolean hat with a feather in it, and the whole ensemble was very striking.

"I've been hunting everywhere, Mr. Elliott," she said, "and I cannot think what that scoundrel Sneyd has done with my clothes. I have found my hat, as you see—it was lying on the table in the kitchen—but my other garments are nowhere to be seen."

"I shouldn't let that worry you, Miss Gudgeon," said Jukes cheerfully. "It's a very warm night. I expect Sneyd's hidden your things somewhere. If you like, we'll go down to the cellar and torture him until he confesses."

Aunt Hannah held up a hand for silence.

"Hush," she said. "I thought I heard singing."

* * * * *

On the village green, wearing the satin dress she had bought for her sister's wedding earlier in the summer, the redoubtable Mrs. Bugbird was holding a review of the Doom peasantry prior to marching to the Stone Circle for the sacrificial rites. The temper of the crowd was uncertain, for the night was hot, and the villagers had worked themselves up into a frenzy of pagan enthusiasm. She marshalled them—with some difficulty, for they were inclined to resent the imposition of any form of disciplined control—into a hollow square, with the Doom

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Women's Sewing Guild band in the centre, and allowed them to sit down upon the grass while she made the final arrangements for the ceremony. Every one of them carried a flaming torch, although the moonlight was almost as bright as day, and even the stolid and unemotional Albert Whelk, as he shot past them on his motor-cycle on his way to the inn, admitted to himself that the effect was most picturesque.

Old Mother Wetherbee, frustrated in her attempt to secure a free distribution of alcoholic refreshment, had been compelled to fall back upon the resources of her own home. She had brought with her several bottles of home-made dandelion wine, a very potent brew, and she now sat upon the edge of her big drum fortifying herself every now and again with long pulls at the fiery liquor. Mrs. Holdsworth, the sexton's mother, who kept a sweet shop at the end of the village, did a roaring trade in acid drops, and two ice-cream vendors on tricycles, whom some uncanny instinct had drawn to the scene all the way from Farlingham, were kept hard at work dispensing "twopenny tubs" and "snowfruits" to the thirsty company.

The male members of the congregation were a little subdued, for they had assembled earlier in the evening at "The Merry Mug" for their evening pint, only to find the doors of the inn barred against them, Sneyd being busy at the time trying to dis-

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lodge Simon from the skittle alley, and they had come away dry and disgruntled.

"'Tisn't right, I reckon," muttered one old greybeard, giving voice to the sentiments of the many. "Us caan't go a-sacerficing folks to Jupiter without beer in our bellies."

Only Mrs. Bugbird's father preserved his usual cheerful demeanour, and even he seemed a little anxious. He hobbled across to his daughter and poked her in the ribs with his gnarled stick.

"When be we a-going to give Vicar to Maas'r Jupiter?" he inquired. "Proper awkward he'll be if us doan't give that to he."

"You go and sit down, Father," replied Mrs. Bugbird irritably. "I'm just going to say a few words to the congregation."

"All right, all right, Agnes, I be a-going. Only I be that excited-like I doan't 'ardly know which way to turn."

And the old man hobbled back to his place in the ranks and sat down.

Mrs. Bugbird mounted a soap-box brought from her husband's shop, and held up a skinny arm for silence. The result was a half-hearted burst of cheering, which quickly subsided, and Mrs. Bugbird, some sixth sense telling her that religious fervour had drugged her audience into a state of torpor, decided that something must be done to pull them together.

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"We will begin the evening's programme," she announced, "by singing the *Hymn to Jupiter* composed by myself for the occasion. You all know the words, and the band have been practising the tune for some weeks. Mrs. Wetherbee, will you kindly throw away that disgusting bottle and get up off the big drum."

Old Mother Wetherbee meekly obeyed, the band scrambled to its feet, followed by the rest of the congregation, and after a few preliminary bars the multitude, conducted by Mrs. Bugbird from her soap-box, burst into song.

It has not rained for weeks on end,
The fields are parched and dry.
Take pity on us, Jove, and send
A deluge from the sky.

The villagers sang without gusto at first, but as the meaning of the words penetrated to their minds they began to warm to their work. They were parched and dry themselves, and the district wanted rain badly.

Send rain, and tell us what we owe,
What tribute you require.
For if you'll only let us know,
We'll sacrifice the Squire.

"Ah," thought the choristers, "now we're talking business. This is what we've been waiting for. Let's

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get on with it." And throwing back their heads and opening their mouths wide they gave full value to every note.

And if a further offering
Will bring the rain down quicker,
Why then, 'tis but a little thing,
We'll sacrifice the Vicar.

There was a terrific burst of cheering at the conclusion of this verse, for the Vicar was popular in the parish, and it was generally felt that to offer him up on a pagan altar would be a fitting expression of the affection and esteem in which he was widely held. Mrs. Bugbird was overjoyed to find that her stirring anthem had already begun to rouse the villagers from their apathy, and she waited patiently for the cheers to subside. Then the band got under way again, and the hymn was continued.

Water, O Jupiter, we need
For fields and lawns and gardens.
See, to your altar-stone we lead
A couple of churchwardens.

It was perhaps fortunate that neither of the churchwardens was present, or there might have been an unpleasant scene. One of them, however, was confined to his bed with a chronic attack of hay fever, and the other had gone to Oxford on business connected with the parish.

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If these, great Jove, should not suffice,
And your demands be higher,
How gladly would we sacrifice
The members of the Choir!

At this point there was a yell of angry protest from young Porkiss the stonemason, who was himself one of those thus threatened with sudden death, but it was drowned by the rumbling of the big drum, beaten furiously by old Mother Wetherbee, as the whole multitude, now wild with enthusiasm, swept thunderously into the final verse of Mrs. Bugbird's pæan.

O Jupiter, we sing to thee
This hymn of prayer and praise.
For why, it has not rained, you see,
For many, many days.

After this there was no holding the mob. They broke their ranks and surged forward madly, upsetting Mrs. Bugbird's soap-box and throwing her heavily to earth. Amid whistles, cat-calls, and wild cries of "Where be Squire?" "Where be Vicar?" and "Us'll find un at 'The Merry Mug,'" they moved in a solid phalanx in the direction of the inn. Mrs. Bugbird's father, hobbling gamely in the rear, muttered to himself over and over again: "Us be a-going to give Vicar to Maas'r Jupiter; oo ah, and Squire too, seemly!"

Simon Elliott and Jukes, hearing the noise of the

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advancing mob, made haste to slam and bolt all the doors of the inn, while Aunt Hannah frantically resumed the search for her missing garments.

"If I am to go to my death," she explained, with feeling, "I should prefer not to do so in Mungo Sneyd's pyjamas!"

X.—*Admirable Conduct of the Kinkajou Patrol*

PERCHED high upon a shoulder of the downs, overlooking the main road from Farlingham to Newbury, is a camping site patronized throughout the summer months by hikers, boy scouts, girl guides, and the like. It is an excellent site, for although it lies not more than twenty-five yards from the road it is quiet and secluded, commanding a magnificent view of the surrounding country, and there is a first-class water-supply from springs in the hillside. At the time with which this narrative deals the site was occupied by the summer holiday bivouac of the Kinkajou Patrol of Girl Guides from St. Ethelburga's School, Hurstbourne, near Reading, and the road itself was kept under constant surveillance by the sentries posted, both by day and by night, to watch over the camp. Thus it came about that when Mr. Albert Whelk, who had elected to journey to Sevenoaks by way of Newbury, Basingstoke, Farnham, and Guildford—and so avoid Reading, where his Lizzie anxiously awaited him—came chugging up the white ribbon of road on his motor-cycle combination, his advent was noted by Patricia

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Winterbotham, the youngest member of the Kinkajou Patrol.

Mr. Whelk was familiar with the camping site, and was also aware of the existence of the springs in the hillside, where crystal-clear water could be obtained. He had consumed that day a very large quantity of fish and chips, the immediate effects of his three pints of old ale had worn off, and he was now the possessor of a raging thirst. He steered his machine well into the side of the road just below the Girl Guide encampment, stopped his engine, and dismounted. Patricia Winterbotham, leaning on her guide's staff, watched him with interest, for his movements were clearly visible in the moonlight. She saw him take off his uniform cap, cross the road, and begin ascending the hill in the direction of the springs; then, her gaze returning to the motor-cycle combination, she saw something which gave her a rather uncomfortable thrill.

In place of a side-car, Mr. Whelk's motor-cycle was fitted with one of those large yellow boxes on wheels which are officially known as "road service outfits." They are designed primarily for the carriage of petrol, oil, and tools, for your A.A. patrol is expected at all times to be ready to play the good Samaritan to stranded motorists—always provided they are members of the Association—and there is also a portable fire-extinguisher for use in sudden emergency. To most of us these yellow vans have

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become common though welcome objects of the roadside, and we bestow upon them no more than a passing glance; but Patricia Winterbotham, in spite of her tender age, was a trained observer—had she not a special badge for detective work in addition to her badges for first aid, knotting and lashing, and needlework?—and something curious about Mr. Whelk's road service outfit attracted her attention. The lid was slowly opening, apparently of its own accord!

Patricia Winterbotham watched spellbound as the lid opened to its fullest extent, and a small, wiry figure climbed out of the box. Was it a baboon, she asked herself, and, if so, what could have prompted an A.A. Scout to carry so incongruous a companion in his road service outfit? Then a horrid thought occurred to her. Perhaps the Thing was not of this world! She had read stories in magazines—prohibited at St. Ethelburga's—of haunted motor cars, in which malignant elementals, travelling on the back seat, leaned over and strangled the driver upon lonely roads at dead of night. Beastly! And if motor cars could be haunted, why not motor-bikes? Patricia shivered, though the night was warm.

The elemental—for she was now convinced that it could be nothing else—stooped over the box, took out a heavy spanner and closed the lid, and the watching girl now saw that its head was completely bald. A bald-headed elemental! With the utmost

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difficulty she suppressed a cry of horror. Then she heard the cheery whistling of Mr. Albert Whelk as he descended the hill from the spring, and quick as a flash the elemental darted to the roadside and disappeared in the long grass. Mr. Whelk jumped down into the roadway, replaced his uniform cap on his head, and slowly began to mount his motorcycle. Clearly he suspected nothing amiss, nor did he remark the rustling in the long grass where the Thing lay concealed. This time Patricia tried to shout a warning, but the cry froze upon her lips, as she watched the elemental wriggle from its hiding-place, creep up behind the A.A. Scout, and raising the heavy spanner aloft bring it down with a sickening thud upon his skull. Mr. Whelk toppled slowly over without a sound and fell in a heap in the roadway, and his assailant, leaping upon him, began hurriedly to search his pockets. Patricia Winterbotham had seen enough. Running back to the encampment, with screams of panic terror she roused her sleeping companions.

There was a considerable commotion inside the tents, and several tousled heads were poked out from beneath the canvas.

"What on earth is the matter with you, Winterbotham?" asked a cross voice. "There's a bottle of bisurated magnesia in the first-aid wallet; go and help yourself and stop that fiendish din."

"Young Winterbotham's throwing a fit," said

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another. "It's that tinned lobster we had for supper. I told you the tin was blown."

"Shut up, Winterbotham!"

"Stow it, Winterbotham!"

"Put your head in a bucket, Winterbotham!"

The chorus of complaint swelled to a discordant crescendo, but Patricia's screams did not abate, and at last Irene ffosbery, leader of the Kinkajou Patrol, crawled out from her blankets, seized the howling girl by the scruff of the neck, and shook her as a terrier shakes a rat.

"Now then, young Winterbotham," she said sternly. "Stop bellowing and tell us what it's all about. If you've got ptomaine poisoning, say so, and we'll give you an emetic, but for heaven's sake stop that beastly row and let the other girls get some sleep. We've got a long hike ahead of us to-morrow."

The yelling changed into dry, choking sobs, as Patricia Winterbotham tried to relate what she had seen to an incredulous patrol leader.

"I'll tell you what's the matter with you, young Winterbotham," said Irene ffosbery. "You've had a nightmare, which means you've been asleep at your post. You know the penalty—a basting with a tent-pole, and no ginger-pop for two days."

"I never," wailed the unhappy Patricia. "If you don't believe me, go and look for yourself. You'll

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see the motor-bike and the body in the road, and that horrible creature crouching over it."

By this time the other members of the Kinkajou Patrol had scrambled out of their tents and clustered round, and Irene ffosbery, realizing that it was hopeless to try to get a more coherent story from the hysterical Patricia, turned impatiently to her second-in-command.

"Take Winterbotham well away from the camp and give her a mugful of salt and water," she ordered. "Come on, the rest of you; we'll go and see if there really is anything on the road."

The moaning Winterbotham was led away, none too tenderly, and the other Kinkajous, hurriedly donning some clothes, followed their leader down the slope to the highway. They arrived not a moment too soon. In the middle of the road beside his motor-bike lay the apparently lifeless body of Mr. Albert Whelk, and crawling away into the long grass on the farther side was Patricia Winterbotham's elemental, a hideous, bald-headed little creature, half monkey, half man!

Irene ffosbery was a girl of quick decisions and even quicker actions. She turned to the half-dozen Kinkajous who followed her and issued rapid instructions in a whisper.

"Marjorie Piggott, Dorothy Goop, you stay behind and look after the man in the road. If he's dead don't touch him, but one of you run to the next

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village and fetch the police. If he's only injured, get Connie Matheson and the Winterbotham kid to help you lug him into one of the tents, administer first-aid, and wait till I come back. Tell Connie she needn't give Winterbotham the salt and water. Come on, the rest of you, we've got to catch that gorilla, or whatever it is."

The elemental had disappeared from view, but the Kinkajous were expert trackers, and they very soon picked up its trail in the long downland grass. Uttering shrill war-whoops and flourishing their staves above their heads, they dashed forward in pursuit, while Mr. Humphrey Chard—for the elemental was none other than he—began to run as fast as his short wind and high blood-pressure would allow him in the direction of the village of Doom. As he ran he congratulated himself on his astuteness. After his escape from the inn he had hidden himself in the shadows outside the front door, and thus, by great good fortune, had chanced to overhear the instructions issued by Simon to Mr. Albert Whelk. To nip across to the motor-cycle and conceal himself in the road service outfit had been the work of a moment, and he flattered himself that the means by which he had now possessed himself of Simon's letter and cheque had been both swift and efficient. It was annoying that he should have been spotted by those nasty little girls, but he would very soon shake them off, and even if they managed

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to overtake him they would be no match for him and his spanner.

Meanwhile Marjorie Piggott and Dorothy Goop, assisted by Connie Matheson and the Winterbotham kid, had succeeded in dragging the unconscious form of Mr. Albert Whelk into one of the tents, where they wrapped him in blankets and set about administering artificial respiration. If he had been seriously injured the treatment no doubt would have had fatal results, but he was only stunned, and in a very few minutes opened his eyes and looked round him.

"All right, Lizzie," he murmured, "I heard you. Get me a cup o' tea, there's a dear."

"He's coming round," whispered Connie Matheson in great excitement. "We ought to give him brandy by rights, but of course we haven't got any. I wonder if ginger-pop would be any good."

"There's a bottle of methylated spirits in the cooks' bivouac," suggested Marjorie Piggott. "I should think if you emptied that down his throat it would do just as well as brandy. Shall I go and fetch it?"

"Yes, yes, hurry up," said Connie impatiently. "I believe he's going off again."

The bottle of methylated was quickly brought, and a desperate attempt was made to administer it to the hapless Mr. Whelk. Dorothy Goop held his head, while Marjorie Piggott prised his mouth open

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with a tablespoon and Connie Matheson tried to pour the spirit down his throat.

"Don't stand gaping there, Winterbotham," said Connie. "Make yourself useful; sit on his legs, or hold his nose, or something."

The operation was not very successful, for most of the spirit ran over the patient's face and down his neck, but it had the desired effect, for he sat up with a start, coughing and spluttering, and his head came into violent contact with that of Patricia Winterbotham, who had been trying to catch hold of his nose.

"Lemegellup!" exclaimed Mr. Whelk. "What in thunder are you kids trying to do? Where am I?"

"Keep quiet, don't move; you'll be all right in a minute," said Connie Matheson soothingly. "A chimpanzee or something came out of the box fixed to your motor-bike and slogged you over the head with a spanner. Irene ffosbery and the other Kinkajous have gone after it; they'll be back in two ticks; and in the meantime you'd better stay here and lie still. You're perfectly safe."

"See here, kiddies, you're trying to pull my leg," said Mr. Whelk. "I remember now; I was on my way to Sevenoaks with Mr. Elliott's letter, and I stopped for a drink of water. Tell me exactly what's happened."

Connie Matheson beckoned to the junior member of the troop.

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"You tell him, Winterbotham. You saw it all. And don't let's have any of that tosh about elementals, or I'll tell Irene when she comes back, and you'll get scragged. Go on, out with it; tell the casualty what you saw."

With some difficulty, for she had not yet recovered her equanimity, Patricia stammered out her story, while Mr. Whelk hung attentively on her lips.

"I—I would have come to your help," she concluded lamely, "only there was something the matter with my legs, so I called the others."

"Crikey! You little liar!" exclaimed Connie Matheson indignantly. "You'll get a basting for that when Irene comes back. Hullo, what's the matter?"

Mr. Albert Whelk was searching feverishly through all his pockets, and alarm and consternation were written large upon his features.

"Great Hore Belisha!" he cried, "the letter! The little swine has stolen the letter! Here, I must go after him. Which way did he go?"

And he scrambled to his feet and crawled out of the tent.

"It's quite all right," Connie Matheson assured him. "Irene ffosbery—she's our patrol leader—has gone after him with the others. They'll catch him all right, don't you worry. Of course, if you must go you must; I know the direction he took, and we can very soon pick up the trail; but don't hurry. You'll only come over all queer, and we shall have

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the job of lugging you back to the camp. I don't suppose, after that crack on the head, you've got any blood-pressure at all."

But blood-pressure or no blood-pressure, Mr. Albert Whelk was bent on pursuing the thief and regaining the stolen letter with its priceless enclosure. Accordingly, Patricia Winterbotham was left behind to guard the camp, while Connie Matheson, Marjorie Piggott, and Dorothy Goop set out with Mr. Whelk in pursuit of the rascally Humphrey Chard.

"That'll teach you not to be such a little tick, Winterbotham" were Connie's parting words. "And I hope while we're away the whole camp will be simply lousy with elementals."

Poor Patricia! She was not of the stuff heroines are made of. No doubt in years to come she would make a dutiful and efficient wife to some stalwart citizen, but one could never go tiger-shooting with her. After her companions had left she sat down on the grass and wept bitterly. Then, remembering that in Connie Matheson's tent there was a tin containing a rich plum cake, she brushed away her tears, rose to her feet, and went in search of plunder. There was a streak of astuteness in the mental make-up of Patricia Winterbotham.

Puffing and blowing, Mr. Albert Whelk crossed the road and raced down the hill, his three youthful companions scampering on ahead of him. The trail of their quarry was very clearly defined, for Irene

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ffosbery and the other Kinkajous had trampled down the long grass as they ran, making a wide path through the pasture-land. Soon from a spinney about a hundred and fifty yards ahead came the sounds of combat, and Mr. Whelk quickened his pace. Obviously, Irene ffosbery and the Kinkajou storm-troops had overtaken Humphrey Chard and compelled him to turn and fight.

In point of fact the little hunchback was having an uncommonly thin time. Irene and her companions had overhauled him without difficulty, and had at once launched an attack. Nor were they so foolish as to fight at close quarters, and so run the risk of being brained with his formidable spanner; they began by throwing clods of earth, sticks, and stones at the enemy, after which they kept darting in one at a time, and pinching, scratching, and slapping his face in a fashion which he found both irritating and painful. He laid about him wildly with his spanner, but the Kinkajous were too quick for him, and he simply wore himself out beating the empty air. When Albert Whelk and his escort arrived on the scene there was little left to do, for the enemy had planted himself with his back against a tree, covered his face with his hands, and given himself up for lost, what time Irene's storm-troops, surrounding him on all sides, bombarded him with earth clods at close range. Two minutes later they had him down on the ground, and Mr. Whelk was

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able to bind him hand and foot with leather belts borrowed from his new allies. This done, he went through his captive's pockets and regained possession of the precious letter. Then he turned to Irene.

"I'm sure I'm very much obliged to you kiddies," he said. "That's saved me a deal of trouble, that has, and I don't know what I should have done without you. If ever any of you gets yourselves into an 'ole—and I know what you young ladies are, artful as monkeys, the lot of you—just you come to Albert Whelk, and he'll 'elp you out. Whelk's my name, Albert Whelk, and don't you forget it, thanking you one and all."

"Three cheers," said Connie Matheson, "for Mr. Albert Whelk!"

So enthusiastic was the response to this suggestion that a young farm labourer from a neighbouring village, who was setting snares on the outskirts of the spinney at the time, hurried home to his wife with a white face and shaking limbs, announcing that he had heard "something 'orrible a-screamin' and a-moanin' up by 'Obson's Spinney."

"What," asked Irene ffosbery, when the cheering had subsided, "are we to do with the prisoner?"

Albert Whelk scratched his head.

"H'm," he said. "It's a bit awkward-like. We can't leave him here; somebody might find him and set him free, and the Lord knows what tricks he wouldn't be up to. I suppose you young ladies

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couldn't keep him for me till I get back from Sevenoaks?"

"I'm afraid not," answered Irene. "You see, we've got a long hike ahead of us to-morrow, and he'd be a bit of a nuisance on the march. Besides, people would ask questions."

Mr. Whelk stood for a moment or two plunged in thought.

"There's only one thing to be done, as far as I can see," he said at last. "I'll just have to pop him back into the road service outfit and take him with me. If you kiddies wouldn't mind giving me a hand . . ."

"Of course, Mr. Whelk," said Irene, with enthusiasm. "Don't you bother at all; you've got a sore head, and you ought to keep quiet. We'll lug him up the hill and put him back in the box."

Mr. Whelk was grateful for the respite, for he had run fast and was sorely out of breath; moreover, he was still feeling the effects of the blow on the head. He stood passively by while the Kinkajous, swarming like ants over the carcass of the wretched Chard, hoisted it up on to their shoulders. With much grunting and groaning, and occasional interjections such as "Golly, he weighs a ton!" "Look out, Cecily, you're treading on my heels!" and "Crumbs, I wouldn't be an undertaker for a thousand pounds!" they carted their prisoner up the hill to the road, and thrust him back into the road service outfit.

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"I think we ought to gag him, don't you?" said Irene dispassionately. "If he starts kicking up a shindy while you're passing through a town, the bobbies may ask awkward questions. You can't very well say you're taking a pig to market; they wouldn't believe you if you did."

"Just as you think best, miss," said Albert Whelk. "I leave it all to you."

Humphrey Chard was accordingly gagged with Irene's scarf, the lid was shut down, and Mr. Whelk turned the key in the lock.

"He won't get out of that in a hurry," he said. "Well, kiddies, I must be moving along."

But Irene ffosbery and her companions were unwilling to let him go until they had learned what all the trouble was about. They insisted that he should accompany them to the camp and have some hot cocoa, which Patricia Winterbotham was at once instructed to prepare.

"And if you don't make it properly, you little tick," added Connie Matheson, "we'll stuff you into the box as well!"

Mr. Whelk found the cocoa grateful and comforting, and expanding under its influence he related, so far as he was able to do so, the events leading up to his present situation. The Kinkajous heard him out in silence, save for an occasional squeak of delight, and then leaped to their feet and danced excitedly round their leader.

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"How perfectly thrilling!" they cried. "Oh, Irene, do let's wash out to-morrow's hike and go down to Doom straight away. It's only about two miles if we go across country, and we might be able to help this Mr. Elliott and his friends. Oh, Irene, do let's!"

"What do you think, Mr. Whelk?" asked the patrol leader. "Would we be any use?"

"Judging by the way you've helped me to-night, miss," replied Albert, "I should say you'd come as a boon and a blessing to Mr. Elliott, as the saying is. But it's all over now. There won't be no more fuss, now I've got this little swine under lock and key."

"Then you don't think it's any good our going to Doom?"

"I wouldn't go so far as to say that, miss. You never know what may not 'appen. The villagers were getting ready for some kind of a *tamasha* just as I left, and they was in a ugly mood."

"Right," said Irene, "we'll go. Leave the camp just as it is, and young Winterbotham can stay behind and tidy up. She's no use in a scrap, so she might just as well stay here on guard."

Patricia Winterbotham uttered no protest against this seemingly harsh instruction. Hers not to reason why. Besides, she was a pacifist by nature, Connie Matheson's plum cake was a good one, and she preferred to keep the camp fires burning till the girls came home. In the camp all was now turmoil and excitement as the Kinkajous girded themselves

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for battle, and Mr. Albert Whelk, after a mutual exchange of compliments, slipped unobtrusively away and mounted his motor-cycle. Two minutes later he was speeding along the ribbon of road that wound milky-white in the moonlight over the downs to Newbury. Beside him in the yellow van, gagged, bound and half suffocated, bumped and jolted the ill-starred Mr. Humphrey Chard.

The unforeseen contretemps at the Girl Guide encampment had of course wasted much valuable time, and although Mr. Whelk was able to sustain a fairly high average speed along the deserted roads he did not reach Sevenoaks until close upon five in the morning. He was ravenously hungry and his head ached abominably, but he consoled himself with the reflection that his captive, if he were still alive, was probably in much more evil case, and he whistled a lively air as he cruised along the streets of Sevenoaks looking for the red-brick villa which housed the only active partner in the firm of Fidoe, Chitterling and Fidoe. He found it at last, being directed to its portals by a friendly milkman, and turning into the drive he dismounted from his motor-cycle, stretched his cramped limbs, rapped several times on the lid of the yellow van to reassure his passenger, and advancing to the front door rang the bell. He rang it several times at three-minute intervals, but there was no response from within, and at length, growing weary of his fruitless pealing,

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he stepped out into the drive, picked up a handful of gravel, and hurled it against the windows of a room on the first floor. Almost immediately the window shot up, and the head of an elderly lady wearing a boudoir cap was poked out, to be drawn in again on the instant.

Mrs. Fidoe—for it was her head that had emerged—tottered across to the bed, took her husband by the shoulders, and shook him violently. She was white and trembling, and her teeth chattered in her head, though the morning was warm.

"Eh, what's that?" inquired Mr. Fidoe sleepily. "Put it down outside."

"Wake up, Edwin. The worst has happened. It is just as I feared; the Germans have landed, and there is a Nazi storm-trooper with a motor-bicycle outside on the gravel!"

"God bless my soul!" said Mr. Fidoe, sitting up in bed and rubbing the sleep from his eyes. "You can't be serious, my dear. What possible reason could a Nazi storm-trooper have for visiting Seven-oaks at this hour of the morning?"

"I have no idea, Edwin. Perhaps he thinks we are Jews. Your nose, dear, is the reverse of Aryan; people have often mentioned the matter in my hearing."

"Oh, they have, have they?" said Mr. Fidoe, getting out of bed and padding over to the window. "Then all I can say is, they must have confoundedly

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bad manners. Now then, Henrietta, where's this storm-trooper of yours?"

He looked out of the window and beheld Mr. Albert Whelk, who was sitting on top of his yellow van patiently smoking a cigarette.

"Why, God bless my soul, Henrietta, you really are becoming terribly short-sighted," he said. "That's no Nazi storm-trooper; it is an official of the Automobile Association. I wonder very much what he wants."

Mrs. Fidoe gave a little shriek of terror.

"Oh, Edwin," she wailed. "It's me he's after! Don't let him come in; tell him to go away!"

"Really, Henrietta, you must pull yourself together. What do you mean by saying it's you he's after?"

"I never told you, dear; I was afraid you'd be angry. You remember I had the car out yesterday afternoon, when you were up in town? Well, I ran over one of those A.A. people, and the man was quite angry and took my name and address, though he wasn't hurt at all really, except that his nose was bleeding, and I had to lend him a duster out of the pocket in the car. Now I suppose he's come to take me to prison."

And the unhappy Mrs. Fidoe threw herself down on the bed and burst into a paroxysm of weeping.

Mr. Fidoe took no notice of his wife's tears. Twenty-three years of married life had accustomed

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him to scenes of this description. He dressed hurriedly, ran downstairs, and unbolted the front door. Mr. Albert Whelk rose from his seat, and saluted.

"If you've come to see me about yesterday's unfortunate accident," said the lawyer, "I'm sure we can easily arrive at a satisfactory settlement. My wife gave me to understand that you had not been hurt, but I see you have quite a nasty bruise on the forehead. I hope you are feeling better."

Mr. Whelk was a little puzzled. He could not see the connection between Mr. Fido's wife and the wound inflicted by Humphrey Chard's spanner.

"I think there must be some mistake, sir," he said. "Are you Mr. Fido?"

The lawyer inclined his head.

"Well, I've got an urgent message for you from Mr. Simon Elliott, of Doom Manor. I've come all the way from Doom on my motor-bike, and a nice job I had getting here."

Mr. Whelk produced Simon's letter and handed it over. The lawyer ripped open the envelope and rapidly perused the contents, his face as he read assuming an expression of bewilderment and consternation.

"God bless my soul!" he said at last. "This is the most amazing story. I take it you have not breakfasted? You must come into the house and tell me all about this extraordinary affair, and I will tell the servants to bring you some breakfast. It all

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sounds like a fairy-tale; I can scarcely believe it; and yet here is the cheque for half a million pounds. If I catch the early train, I shall be at the bank as soon as it opens. I only hope this fellow Chard will not attempt to stop the cheque."

"Don't you worry about that, sir," said Mr. Whelk. "He won't have the chance."

"How do you mean? I understand from Mr. Elliott's letter that the scoundrel is still at liberty."

"So he was, sir, when Mr. Elliott wrote that letter. He isn't now. I've got him in my van, all tied up and shipshape, but if I don't let him have a little air, I reckon he'll pass out altogether. Would you mind waiting a moment, sir, while I open the lid?"

"God bless my soul!" said Mr. Fido.

Mr. Whelk went over to his motor-cycle, inserted a key in the lock of his road service outfit, and raised the lid. Mr. Fido approached rather timorously, and peered in. The unfortunate Humphrey Chard, securely gagged and bound, was curled up in the box. His head was thrown back, and he was snoring stertorously.

"I'll be blowed if the little blighter isn't fast asleep!" exclaimed Albert Whelk. "I was going to suggest, begging your pardon, sir, that you might give him a bite to eat, but it seems a pity to wake him. Better let sleeping dogs lie, as the saying is."

And he very gently replaced the lid and turned the key in the lock. An hour later, having eaten a

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hearty breakfast and answered all the questions put to him by the insatiable Mr. Fido, he was speeding along the road by which he had come. Beside him in the yellow van, trussed like a fowl and with Irene Fosbery's scarf tied firmly across his mouth, Mr. Humphrey Chard, the bald archæologist, continued to snore stertorously.

"This is all very well," said Albert Wheelk to himself, "but I can't cart the old boy round with me for ever. I wonder what I'd better do with him."

XI.—*"Whom the Gods wish to
destroy . . ."*

IN the coffee-room of "The Merry Mug" the Doom Manor faction held a hurried council of war. Outside could be heard the howling of the mob, there was a thunderous hammering on the front door, and Miss Hannah Gudgeon, realizing at last that this was no time to be pernicky about dress, abandoned the search for her clothes and joined her companions.

"This is a pretty kettle of fish," she said, glaring at the Vicar. "What do you propose to do now, Anthony? It's all your fault."

"Really, Hannah," stammered the Vicar, "I fail to see why I should be blamed. I have done nothing——"

"Precisely, Anthony. You have done nothing. The whole parish of Doom, for whose spiritual well-being you are responsible, has jettisoned Christianity and embraced paganism, and you have done nothing. Look at me. Do you suppose I enjoy going about in nothing but my hat and the innkeeper's pyjamas? If you had taken a firm line from the start, and kept your flock under proper control, this would

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never have happened. Now, I suppose, we are all to be burnt at the stake as a result of your idleness and stupidity."

"*Mea culpa*," groaned the Vicar. "*Mea maxima culpa!* You are right, Hannah; I, and I alone, am to blame. I should have foreseen this trouble from the beginning, and referred the whole matter to the Bishop. But it is not too late. I still have some influence with the villagers, and I shall go out now and reason with them. They will scarcely dare to show violence to me, their Vicar, and the foreigners are safely under lock and key."

Outside the inn the frenzy of the mob had reached fever-pitch. The Doom Women's Sewing Guild band had launched itself with verve and abandon into the inspiring strains of Suppé's *Light Cavalry*, and vigorous attempts were now being made to batter the door down.

"You can't go out, Daddy, it would be madness," protested Imogen. "Mrs. Bugbird and the rest of them have got Jupiter on the brain, and the sight of a Church of England clergyman would arouse their worst passions. They would tear you to pieces."

"Miss Grayling's right, I guess," said Otis McGuffin. "Religious fanaticism's a mighty queer thing. There was a guy way back at Rattlesnake Gulch ate a mutton chop at a vegetarian get-together. He done it for a bet, but he never collected

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his stake money, no sirs. They ran him out of town on a rail."

"That's right, Brother," put in Sadie. "You gotta be kinda careful over theological subjects. Folks is inclined to get restive if you tamper with their religious convictions. You stay right here, Vicar, and let Otis and me go out and do the reasoning. We'll keep it secular."

But the Reverend Anthony Grayling was not to be diverted from his purpose by warnings or entreaties. He had taken the reproaches of his sister-in-law very much to heart, and he was resolved to make amends for what he considered shameful neglect of duty in the past.

"No, no," he said. "You are tempting me to be weak when I should be strong. I must go out to my people, but I do not think they will harm me."

"Well, anyway, take a chair-leg with you," suggested Jukes. "Forewarned is forearmed, and it's just as well to be prepared for accidents."

"No, Mr. Jukes," replied the Vicar sternly. "It has never been my way to ram Christianity down the throats of my parishioners with a chair-leg or anything else. I shall go unarmed."

Cyril Jukes shrugged his shoulders.

"Have it your own way," he sighed, "but I think you're asking for trouble. A chair-leg is one of the most effective arguments I know."

Pale and determined, the Reverend Anthony

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Grayling unbolted the front door of the inn and stepped out to confront his flock. His lean, ascetic countenance shone in the light of the torches with an ethereal beauty, and an awed hush fell upon the assembly.

"Ah, my dear friends," he began. "My poor, misguided friends! What evil demon has possessed you that you behave like ravening wolves outside the portals of a public-house?"

There was an eerie silence. The Doom Women's Sewing Guild band had stopped playing, and old Mother Wetherbee sat heavily down upon her big drum.

"Is there anyone here," continued the Vicar, "who has a personal grievance against me? If there is, let him speak now, or for ever after hold his peace."

There was a commotion in the crowd, and Mrs. Bugbird's aged parent elbowed his way through the throng and hobbled forward, leaning upon his knotted stick.

"Speak up, Vicar," he croaked. "Us caan't hear what 'ee do say."

"Is there anyone here who has a personal grievance against me?" repeated the Vicar.

"Oo ah, us be going to give 'ee to Maas'r Jupiter," said the old man. "That doan't want to rain, by reason of Maas'r Jupiter being proper awkward."

"But this is blasphemy!" cried the Vicar. "There

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is no such person as Jupiter, as you know very well."

Mrs. Bugbird's father hobbled forward several paces and dropped his voice to a confidential whisper.

"Where be your daarter, Vicar?" he asked. "Us be going to give she to Maas'r Jupiter; ay, and young Squire, too. Where be Squire?"

"Here I am," said Simon, stepping forward into the torchlight. "What do you want with me?"

The crowd had been silent in the presence of their Vicar, an old friend to whom for many years they had been accustomed to take their joys and sorrows. But Simon was a stranger, a youthful newcomer who might introduce all manner of unwelcome innovations into the life of their old-world village, and the sight of him recalled to them the purpose for which they were gathered together. With a roar like the bursting of the Assouan Dam they surged forward, and just as the surf upon the seashore picks up pebbles and drags them back into the foaming depths, so did this tide of frenzied humanity engulf both Squire and Vicar and drag them back into its midst. The rest of the Doom Manor faction, headed by Hannah Gudgeon and the McGuffin twins, made a desperate sortie, but they in their turn were swallowed up, and though they fought like tigers they were quickly overpowered. Bound hand and foot they were robed in damask tablecloths at the

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instance of Mrs. Bugbird, who had once again assumed control of the mob, and bundled uncere-
moniously into a decorated farm-cart drawn by six
heavy shire horses. Then, cheering lustily, the crowd
formed up behind the wagon, the band stationed
itself in front, and the procession moved off in
triumph and the direction of the Stone Circle.

"Let us be thankful for small mercies," said Aunt
Hannah. "This tablecloth is an inadequate protec-
tion against extremes of climate, but at all events it
serves to conceal the hideous pattern of Mungo
Sneyd's pyjamas."

Mrs. Bugbird, marching at the head of the pro-
cession, ran her eye over the passengers in the
farm-cart.

"We have eight victims," she said, addressing
Miss Hopkins the postmistress, who marched by her
side. "That should surely be enough to satisfy the
most exacting of deities. I confess I feel a shade
diffident about sacrificing the Vicar and Miss
Grayling; they were both extremely kind and
helpful when young Willie was down with the
measles; but one cannot allow one's personal feelings
to stand in the way of one's religious duties, and it
is always best to be thorough. I do hope young Willie
hasn't drunk all the ginger-pop; he'll make himself
ill, and I shan't be able to get any more chicken
broth from the Vicarage after this."

"Oh, I don't know, Agnes," said the postmistress.

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"After all, they're bound to instal a new Vicar; the Bishop'll see to that. And even if the new man doesn't do his duty over the chicken broth, we can always sacrifice another of old Mucklow's white cockerels."

"That's true," admitted Mrs. Bugbird. "I hadn't thought of that."

Seated upon the floor of the jolting farm-wagon the Reverend Anthony Grayling apologized profusely to his companions.

"I am more sorry than I can say," he stammered. "If I had not been so foolhardy as to attempt to address the people, this would never have happened, but I was vain enough to believe that I could influence them."

"Exactly, Anthony," said Aunt Hannah crossly. "Once again you are entirely to blame for our awkward predicament. If anyone deserves to be sacrificed to Jupiter, you do."

The Vicar looked anxiously at the sky.

"The clouds are banking up in the south-west," he said. "If only it would rain really hard, the people would abandon their superstitious practices and return to the Christian faith."

"It's going to rain, I think," said Simon. "I shouldn't be in the least surprised if there was a terrific thunderstorm before the night's out, but I'm afraid so far as we're concerned it will be too late. And if it doesn't rain until *after* we've been sacrificed,

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the villagers will naturally suppose that Jupiter has answered their prayers, and it'll be good-bye to Christianity in this village for many years to come."

"Strange how history repeats itself," mused Cyril Jukes. "The eight of us might quite well be a party of aristocrats riding in a tumbril to the guillotine in the worst days of the Terror. It is a far, far better thing that we do than we have ever done."

"I'd sure like to know what's happened to Chard," said Sadie McGuffin. "Guess I could die happy if I knew that little runt had got his."

"Aw, hell, Sister, can that kinda talk!" put in Otis angrily. "We ain't none of us gonna die yet awhile! I gotta hunch somep'n'll happen before then, and if it don't, well, just you wait while I bite through the string that's tying my puppies together. Once I get the use of my feet, I'll kick that Bugbird dame right over the roof of the church."

"I will beat them with my pipe, yes," announced Batz laconically, regardless of the fact that his rubber truncheon had been confiscated by his captors and was now in the possession of young Porkiss the stonemason. "Sacred name of a little yellow monkey, but they shall cry aloud in their agony!"

Meanwhile, at one end of the wagon Simon and Imogen were sitting very close together and gazing into each other's eyes.

"I'm terribly sorry, darling," said Simon. "If I

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had never come into your life, this wouldn't have happened, and you would have been safe at home at the Vicarage, helping your father over the arrangements for the annual jumble sale, or practising the hymns for Sunday on the harmonium."

"But Simon, dearest, you don't understand," answered the girl. "This is the most glorious thing that has ever happened to me. Ever since I was tiny I've led a sheltered life in this quiet backwater, helping Daddy to run the parish, and protecting him from Aunt Hannah, who's always nagging at him, and oh, it's been so deadly dull! I've never had a chance to do anything exciting or meet anyone interesting until now. Don't you see, Simon, we'll go to Jupiter together, you and I, and there'll be a most terrible row afterwards, and our names will be in all the papers, with a big photograph of the Doom Stone Circle—inset, Mrs. Bugbird. It'll be perfectly splendid."

"That's all very well, pet," objected Simon, "but we shan't be able to get married. I was rather looking forward to that."

"I know, you poor darling, so was I, but this is going to be much more thrilling. After all, you must admit that the marriage ceremony is a bit hackneyed nowadays. Anybody can go and get married in a church, but it isn't every day that you find a young couple being sacrificed to Jupiter in an ancient British temple with several hundred people looking

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on. I don't suppose it'll hurt much; it all depends who does the job. I hope it won't be young Porkiss; Dad always says he's terribly clumsy over his work."

"What's worrying me," said Simon, "is the thought of that half million pounds. I haven't made a will, and so far as I know I have no relatives living, so it'll all go to the Crown."

"Well, anyway, that horrible little beast Chard won't get it. I wish I could see his face when he finds out that spurium is worthless."

"Imogen darling, you're becoming vindictive. Give me a kiss."

The procession had now reached the Stone Circle, and the wagon was rumbling over the crisp turf towards the altar-stone, behind which had been kindled a gigantic bonfire. The villagers spread out fanwise, as they had done on the previous evening, and the band, taking up its position in the centre, facing the altar-stone, embarked with great courage but little skill upon Rimsky-Korsakov's *Hymn to the Sun*.

"Look, Simon," whispered Imogen excitedly, "it's quite all right about the sacrificing; young Porkiss isn't going to do the job. That's old Jebber the cobbler carrying the butcher's cleaver, and Dad says he's a very neat worker, though inclined to be slow."

The farm wagon came to a standstill directly opposite the altar-stone in the centre of the half-circle

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formed by the watching villagers, and it at once became apparent to the eight intended victims that all was not harmony and concord among the leaders of pagan thought. Not five yards away Mrs. Bugbird was involved in a heated altercation with several of the other villagers.

"It's just what I said would 'appen, Agnes Bugbird," screamed a florid female, whom Imogen at once identified as Mrs. Ghoul the washerwoman, "and don't you go for to say hanythink different. Your Willie 'as drunk all the ginger-beer!"

"A very good thing too," replied Mrs. Bugbird acidly. "The trouble with you, Mrs. Ghoul, is that you're too fat, and if you blow yourself up with aerated waters you won't be able to *waddle* home, much less walk!"

"All right, skinny Liz," said another voice. "You go back to the store and get your old man to give you some of that mouldy cow-cake of 'is. That'll put some flesh on your bones, if it don't poison you first. *And* that wouldn't be any loss, either!"

Miss Hopkins the postmistress intervened.

"Look here, Agnes," she whispered, "I've just been round trying to make a collection, and the men say they won't subscribe a penny unless you send the wagon back to the inn to fetch a couple of barrels of beer. I don't know what's happened to Mr. Sneyd, but the driver can get the barrels out of the tap-room, and we can square up afterwards.

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I really think it's the wisest plan, Agnes. We don't want the whole evening spoilt."

Rather grudgingly Mrs. Bugbird capitulated.

"All right," she said, "have it your own way. And while you're about it you might send for some more ginger-beer from my husband's store. It may keep some of these dipsomaniacs quiet. Get the prisoners out of the wagon—you'll have to cut the cords binding their feet together—and I'll tell the band to play some Gilbert and Sullivan till the cart comes back."

"I hate to see signs of discord among the members of my flock," said the Vicar, as he climbed down from the wagon on to the turf, "and it distresses me to think that the men of Doom village are incapable of conducting the simplest ceremony without the adventitious aid of alcoholic liquor, but I'm bound to admit that this disagreement among our captors gives us a bit of breathing space. The sky looks very menacing over there. If only we could contrive to delay matters until the storm broke, I fancy we should be saved."

"There's hope yet," said Jukes. "A deep depression is advancing rapidly from the south-west, and it'll take them some time to load the barrels on to the wagon. Actually, after being jolted about like that, the stuff won't be drinkable for another twenty-four hours at least, but I don't suppose we can persuade the troops to wait as long as that. Listen!"

"Whom the Gods wish to destroy . . ."

From away in the south-west came a sullen peal of thunder.

* * * * *

"The essence of successful attack," said Irene ffosbery, as she supervised the preparations for the night march of the Kinkajou Patrol, "is surprise. At all costs we mustn't be seen advancing on Doom village if we want to do any good."

"What do you think is likely to happen?" asked Marjorie Piggott, wriggling with excitement. "I do hope there'll be a rough house."

"From what Mr. Whelk said," answered Irene sagely, "I imagine the villagers will try to sacrifice this Mr. Elliott and his friends on the altar-stone in the Doom Stone Circle."

"Crums, what a gaudy rag!" exclaimed Marjorie. "I say, do let's get a move on; we don't want to miss anything."

"I vote we black our faces, Irene," suggested Connie Matheson, the second-in-command. "The Winterbotham kid can burn some corks for us over a candle, and we shan't show up nearly so much in the moonlight."

"That's a brain-wave," agreed the leader. "Jump to it, young Winterbotham. You heard what Connie said."

Patricia Winterbotham was willing but puzzled.

"Where'll I get the corks from?" she asked.

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"One will be enough. Take it out of your water-bottle," snapped Irene. "Only hurry."

"B—But what'll I do when I'm thirsty?" stammered the unfortunate Winterbotham. "I don't see why I should spoil my water-bottle; it cost three-and-six."

"You little drunkard, Winterbotham! Do you want a lamming with a tent-pole?"

"N—no, Irene."

"Well, then, step on it!"

Ten minutes later the Kinkajou Patrol, minus the dipsomaniacal Winterbotham, who remained behind on guard, were moving swiftly and silently across the moonlit downs in the direction of Doom village. They carried their staves at the ready and flitted along like so many bats, scaring the wits out of yet another poacher who was taking advantage of the brightness of the moon to examine his snares on the outskirts of a copse. This wretched fellow ran screaming home, and told a hair-raising story of an encounter on the downs with an army of murdering blackamoors—"thousands and thousands of 'em." His wife, who suspected him quite unjustly of having spent his evening at the local pub, dealt him a shrewd welt over the head with an ironing-board, and the result was an unseemly fracas which had its sequel in the police court, but with that we are not here concerned.

Irene ffosbery halted her troop on the outskirts

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of the village of Doom, and lying flat on their stomachs they looked down upon the Stone Circle from a piece of rising ground not three hundred yards away. The bonfire was blazing merrily, the wagonload of beer had just arrived and was being distributed to the thirsty congregation, and Miss Hopkins the postmistress was once again taking round the hat. Immediately in front of the altar-stone stood a little group of figures clad in white robes—the eight sacrificial victims; their hands were tied behind their backs, and they were closely guarded by old Jebber the cobbler, young Porkiss the stonemason, and the redoubtable Mrs. Bugbird.

The leader of the Kinkajous took in the situation at a glance. Mr. Albert Whelk had told her enough for her to realize what was afoot, and she made her plans accordingly. There was no time to be lost if the Squire of Doom and his companions were to be saved from the altar, though it was clear that nothing would be done until the villagers had finished the beer. After a few whispered instructions from Irene the Kinkajou Patrol dispersed, and melted silently away into the shadows.

All good things must have an end, and the worshippers finished the beer at last. Their religious zeal had now increased a thousandfold, and they were eager to get on with the real business of the evening. Mrs. Bugbird, who throughout the proceedings had kept her finger on the pulse of the

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congregation, judged that the time was ripe for action. She skipped nimbly on to the altar-stone and stood erect, an imposing though skinny figure silhouetted against the blazing bonfire, and held up a hand for silence.

"My friends," she shouted, and her gaunt features shone with a strange spirituality, "I think you will agree that we have already wasted too much time on preliminaries. As we have already sung the hymn to Jupiter on the village green we will not now repeat it, but will proceed at once to the most important item on the agenda—the human sacrifice."

There was a burst of applause, and Mrs. Bugbird, taking a deep draught of lemonade from a bottle in her hand, continued.

"The duty of carrying out the—er—executions has been deputed to our worthy friend Mr. Jebber, who, as you all know, has for many years held a cure of soles in this village."

Loud and prolonged laughter, which enabled the speaker to finish the bottle of lemonade.

"Mr. Jebber has the reputation of being a painstaking and efficient workman, and I feel sure you will agree that this honourable and onerous task could not be in better hands."

Loud cheers, and old Jebber the cobbler, who was purple in the face with embarrassment, waved his butcher's cleaver aloft in acknowledgment.

"We have eight victims," continued Mrs. Bugbird,

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"which should be enough to purchase us immunity from drought for a good many years to come. I propose, with your permission, to take each victim separately, beginning with Miss Grayling, the Vicar's daughter, who needs no introduction to any of you. Mr. Porkiss, will you kindly place the girl on the altar-stone?"

Young Porkiss the stonemason, blushing furiously, advanced upon the captives.

"Beg pardon, miss," he said. "Would you mind stepping this way?"

"Half a jiff," said Imogen. "I must just say good-bye to Dad and the others."

She went over to her father and kissed him lightly on the cheek.

"So long, Dad," she said. "I was afraid the rain wouldn't come in time to save us. Don't worry about me; it'll be all over in no time, and I'll see you later wherever it is we fetch up." She turned to Simon and kissed him on the lips. "Sorry we couldn't get married, old man," she whispered, "but I dare say we'll be able to fix things up later on, and anyway Mr. Jukes is right."

"Darling!" breathed Simon fervently.

Imogen looked round upon the rest of the group.

"Bung-oh," she said. "I'll be seeing you."

And she accompanied young Porkiss to the altar-stone, where old Jebber awaited her with upraised meat chopper.

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Mrs. Bugbird jumped lightly down from the stone, but before doing so she made one final appeal to the congregation.

"I must ask you all," she said, "to maintain absolute silence throughout the ceremony. Remember this is a religious service, not an entertainment."

A deep hush fell upon the assembly, broken only by the sound of old Jebber sharpening his cleaver on a corner of the altar-stone, and the choking sobs of old Mother Wetherbee, who, overcome by emotion, was seated upon her big drum unashamedly weeping.

All at once, from somewhere very near at hand, there came a sound which froze the marrow in the bones of everybody present in the Stone Circle. An awesome, wailing sound, pregnant with mystery and horror, and with a haunting cadence suggestive of infinite sadness. None knew whence it came, but it went echoing across the downland and died away in the distance. Old Jebber the cobbler dropped his cleaver and stood as if carved in marble, and Mrs. Bugbird with difficulty suppressed a scream.

A few seconds passed, and the sound was repeated, but this time it was answered by another even more horrible sound from a little further away. Then from all round the Stone Circle came a chorus of wailing shrieks, and Mrs. Bugbird, old Jebber and young Porkiss, stricken with panic terror, fled from the altar-stone to join the villagers, who had bunched

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together in the middle of the Circle like a herd of frightened cattle. Even Imogen, who had been prepared to meet a dreadful death with a smile on her lips, was badly scared, and ran back to rejoin her equally scared companions. How were they to guess that this horrific howling, which echoed through the woods and copses of the village of Doom, was nothing more deadly than the war-whoop of the Kinkajou Patrol of Girl Guides?

Even as they stood there, uncertain what to do, dark shadowy figures flitted into the Circle from all sides—strange, uncouth figures, carrying staves, and with faces as black as pitch. Mrs. Bugbird gave an unearthly yell, and sinking down upon her knees buried her face in old Mother Wetherbee's lap, while the newcomers, forming a ring round the eight captives, joined hands facing outwards and began to dance solemnly round in a counter-clockwise direction, chanting as they did so the old-world refrain of *Here we go round the mulberry bush*.

The effect of this manoeuvre on the congregation was immediate and sensational. With one accord they prostrated themselves upon their faces, like Mohammedans at prayer, and a moan of terror arose from scores of parched lips. And then, heralded by a vivid lightning flash and a terrific peal of thunder, the storm broke overhead and the long-wished-for rain came down in torrents!

"The Lord be thanked!" murmured the Vicar

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ferverently. "The rain has come in the nick of time. We shall have no further trouble now."

"Sure," agreed Sadie McGuffin. "I reckon this fixes Jupiter."

Irene ffosbery and the Kinkajous, their purpose accomplished, desisted from their weird dance, and drawing their sheath-knives severed the cords which bound the captives' wrists.

"Mr. Whelk told us all about this business," Irene explained rather breathlessly, "so we came along as quick as we could. I'm so glad we were in time. Young Winterbotham'll be as wild as a ferret at missing the fun, especially as we didn't have to do any fighting, but it serves her right for being such a drunken little swab. You wouldn't believe what a fuss she made about the cork of her water-bottle."

"I say, Irene," shouted Connie Matheson, who had been exploring the Stone Circle. "There's a whole crate of ginger-pop here. I vote we dig in."

"Just a moment, Miss—er—I didn't catch your name," interrupted Cyril Jukes. "Don't let me keep you and your friends from the refreshment which is undoubtedly your due, but before you begin perhaps you wouldn't mind telling us to whom we are indebted for this timely rescue, and how you came to fall in with my very good friend Mr. Albert Whelk."

Irene brushed the hair back out of her eyes and looked up at him.

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"Oh, that?" she said. "My name's Irene ffosbery, leader of the Kinkajou Troop of Girl Guides from St. Ethelburga's School at Hurstbourne. We were camping up on the downs when Mr. Whelk came past on his motor-bike. There was a horrid little man with a bald head hiding in his side-car—that little fool Winterbotham said it was an elemental, but it wasn't—and he slogged Mr. Whelk over the head with a spanner and knocked him out, so we patched Mr. Whelk up, caught the little man and stuffed him back into the side-car, and Mr. Whelk's taken him to Sevenoaks. That's all; it was quite easy."

"It sounds absolute child's play," said Jukes. "Simon, I think we ought to ask these young ladies to have supper with us and stay the night at the Manor. I should like to hear an unabridged version of their story, and we certainly owe them some hospitality."

"Rather," agreed Simon. "I hope you'll stay, Miss ffosbery."

"Thanks awfully, we'd love to," said Irene. "It's rather a long way back to the camp, and the girls are pretty tired. The only thing I'm worried about is young Winterbotham. We left her on guard over the camp, and if we don't get back to-night she's sure to start seeing elementals, and goodness knows what doltish thing she won't go and do."

"My man Batz," announced Aunt Hannah, "shall

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take my car up to the camp and fetch your young friend. He can bring all the camp equipment with him as well; it would be most unsafe to leave it there unguarded, with so many dishonest people about."

"I don't want to be difficult," said Imogen, "but I suppose human sacrificing is now definitely off? The villagers look pretty scared, but can we be certain it will last?"

"Of course, child," replied Aunt Hannah. "In this torrential downpour they can scarcely have the effrontery to pray to Jupiter for rain. Your father will climb on to the altar-stone and send them about their business. Go on, Anthony, speak to them straight from the shoulder; it is your duty as Vicar of the parish."

"I wish, Miss ffosbery," said Cyril Jukes, "before the Vicar begins his exhortation you and your troop would oblige me by repeating that nerve-shattering yell with which you shook Doom to its foundations. It fascinated me, and I should very much like to see how it's done."

"Oh, that's easy," said Irene. "Come on, girls, once again. The Kinkajou war-whoop. Are you ready? One, two, three . . ."

Once more the fearsome sound went rolling and echoing over the downland, and Imogen instinctively nestled up to Simon for protection.

"Great snakes!" exclaimed Cyril, as the echoes

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died away. "What a barbarous weapon! You ought to have a record made of it for the B.B.C. They could use it as an interval signal instead of Bow Bells."

But this final war-cry had done more than attract the admiration of Cyril Jukes. Its effect upon the terrified villagers was devastating. Struggling to their feet they took to their heels and ran, through the streaming rain, back to their cottages, where they bolted and locked the doors and fell upon their knees. The spell was broken, and Jupiter Pluvius would never again lord it over the village of Doom!

"They've left the band instruments behind, to say nothing of the wagon and horses," said Aunt Hannah gloomily. "I really begin to despair of the intelligence of the peasantry!"

"Imogen, my pet," said Simon, taking the girl in his arms, "do you realize that we'll be able to get married after all?"

"How dreadfully dull," said Imogen, but she was smiling.

XII.—*The Vicar holds his Jumble Sale*

AT about eleven o'clock on the morning after the religious demonstration in the Stone Circle Mr. Albert Whelk rode into the village of Doom. He had accomplished the journey from Sevenoaks in under five hours, stopping only once on the road to take in petrol; and since, in common with all the officials of the Automobile Association, he was a careful driver, and paid scrupulous attention to the thirty-miles-an-hour limit signs in built-up areas, his performance may be said to have been very creditable. The rain was coming down steadily as he rode into the village, and although he was not superstitious by nature he caught himself wondering whether Jupiter could by any chance be responsible for the sudden change in the weather, and, if so, whether any of his friends had been sacrificed in the Stone Circle. But there was no sign of life in the village—the peasants, as we know, were within doors at their prayers—and he met nobody he could ask for information.

He pulled up outside "The Merry Mug," dismounted, and walked rather stiffly up to the front

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door. It flew open at his touch, and entering the inn he made a rapid search of the premises. There was nobody there, though in a wastepaper basket pushed away behind the writing-desk in the lounge he found several articles of feminine attire, the property of Miss Hannah Gudgeon. He went into the deserted tap-room, poured himself out a stiff tot of Jamaica rum, and, as he swallowed it, considered carefully what he had better do. By rights he should have gone on duty at the crossroads at 9 a.m., but the circumstances were exceptional, and in any case before doing anything else he must first dispose of his captive, Humphrey Chard.

Mr. Whelk was not vindictive by nature, and had no desire to inflict unnecessary suffering even upon his worst enemy. He filled a tumbler with rum, carried it out to the motor-cycle, and opened the lid of his road service outfit. Mr. Chard was now awake—he had been awake for some considerable time—but he was in a state bordering on collapse, due no doubt to his long imprisonment in a confined space. Mr. Whelk removed Irene ffosbery's scarf from the archæologist's mouth, and emptied the rum down his throat. Mr. Humphrey Chard spluttered, coughed, and sat up.

"Where am I?" he asked.

"You'll be all right in a minute," said Mr. Whelk. "You just sit still where you are, while I run you up to the Manor. If you try any funny business,

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yelling out or trying to get away, I'll gag you again and shut the lid."

"I'm dying," moaned the archæologist.

"We're all doing that," replied Mr. Whelk shortly, "but some of us take longer than others."

And mounting his motor-cycle he started up the engine. There were still no signs of life in the village, and as he reached the outskirts of the green his eye fell upon the ancient stocks, relic of a more barbarous age. He stopped his machine with a jerk. Here was an excellent means of disposing of his unwanted passenger without running the risks attendant upon setting him at liberty. Lifting the archæologist out of the van, he carried him bodily across to the stocks, dumped him down upon the rotten wooden seat, and removed the leather belts which bound his limbs. In his wallet was a padlock, purchased by Mr. Whelk a couple of days before for the door of a chicken-run in his back-garden at home, and it was the work of a moment to instal Humphrey Chard in the stocks, with his feet protruding through the appropriate holes.

"Here you are and here you stay," said Mr. Whelk. "I'm sorry I can't lend you an umbrella, but it's a nice fresh morning, and a drop of rain'll wash some of the cobwebs away."

"I'll prosecute you for assault," muttered Chard, for though the rum had revived him it had not improved his temper.

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"I don't think you will, little man," answered Albert Whelk. "You hit me over the head with a spanner first, and I've got witnesses to prove it. If I can find Mr. Elliott or Mr. Jukes, I'll see if I can get some food sent down to you; but of course if I can't find them, you'll starve. In the meantime you can just stay where you are and meditate on your 'orrible misdeeds. I hope no one won't throw anything at you."

Three minutes later Mr. Albert Whelk, soaked to the skin but triumphant, dismounted from his motor-cycle outside the front door of Doom Manor and rang the bell. Cyril Jukes came out to welcome him.

"Lord save us, it's Citizen Whelk!" he exclaimed. "Come on in; we're all having breakfast, and you're just in time to join us. You look wet; let me take your cap. A young Amazon named ffosbery has told us all about your encounter on the downs with the ubiquitous Chard. What have you done with him? And did you hand the cheque over to the pettifogging attorney in Sevenoaks, or have you cashed it and spent the money on drink?"

"I had some breakfast at Mr. Fido's place at Sevenoaks," said Mr. Whelk, "but I'm not saying I couldn't do with another bite; I'm that sharp set. I'd like to dry me clothes, too; I 'adn't time to stop and put me overalls on this morning when I got into the rain. Mr. Elliott's cheque is O.K. so far

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as I know; the lawyer gent said as he'd take it to the bank first thing this morning, and phone Mr. Elliott later on."

"But what have you done with Chard? Don't say you've murdered him and left him in a station cloakroom. The police and the railway officials are so absurdly fussy about that sort of thing nowadays."

"Mr. Chard," replied the A.A. Scout, "is quite comfortable, though moist. I left him in the stocks down on the village green; it seemed the most sensible place to put him. I 'ope I've done right, sir."

Cyril Jukes slapped him affectionately on the back.

"Of course you've done right, old friend of my youth," he said. "You couldn't have done better. Come on into the dining-room and get your trotters into the trough; you'll find quite a gathering of friends and acquaintances."

The Doom Manor faction, augmented by Irene ffosbery and the Kinkajou Patrol, were seated round the long table in the dining-room doing full justice to a vast dish of bacon prepared by Batz and Otis McGuffin. They had all camped out at the Manor for what remained of the night, and most of them, worn out and weary, had lain long abed. The Kinkajous were overjoyed to see their ally once more; they made him sit amongst them, and plied him with coffee and bacon while Simon Elliott and the others plied him with questions.

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"Are you aware, Simon," put in Jukes during a lull in the conversation, "that while you and your companions are feasting and making merry in the Manor House, its real owner languishes in the stocks on the village green? It doesn't seem right to me; after all, you sold him the place."

Simon rose to his feet.

"That depends on whether his cheque was a good one or not," he said. "I'll go and put a trunk call through to old man Fidoe."

"Do you think I could have my scarf back now, Mr. Whelk?" asked Irene Fosbery. "I don't much fancy the idea of wearing it after it's been in that little brute's mouth, but I don't suppose he's got rabies."

"Here you are, miss," said the A.A. Scout. "And while I think of it, I've got several belts belonging to you young ladies. They're outside on the motor-bike."

"I say, Irene," squeaked Patricia Winterbotham, who had been brought as promised to the Manor in Miss Gudgeon's car, "how am I to do about my water-bottle? The cork's absolutely ruined, and I can't afford to buy a new one. You snatched all my pocket-money last week to pay for a Morse signalling outfit."

The patrol leader was on the point of making an ironical reply when Mr. Whelk intervened.

"Don't you worry, kiddie," he said. "Soon as ever

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I get back to Reading I'll send you a new water-bottle. You saved my life, I reckon. If you 'adn't 'appened to see that little blighter hit me with the spanner I'd 'ave been done in."

"Oo, Mr. Whelk, you're an angel!" exclaimed Patricia. "Thank you ever so much."

"Winterbotham," put in Irene sharply, "give Mr. Whelk some more coffee, and don't talk with your mouth full, you little stinker!"

Shortly afterwards Simon Elliott returned from the telephone.

"I've just got on to Fido," he announced, "and it's quite all right about Chard's cheque. The bank paid up like lambs. Now that it's all settled, and I've got the half million, I feel a bit dazed. It's a great responsibility."

"A trouble shared is a trouble halved, old boy," said Cyril Jukes. "It may be that as you go through life you will be approached by dishonest citizens who will try to make you believe they are your best friends. But you will not listen to them. 'No,' you will reply, brushing them aside. 'No doubt you wish me well, but my oldest and best friend is, always was, and ever will be, Cyril Jukes. You don't know Jukes? A deserving fellow if ever there was one. He and I played together as children, he fished me out of the mill dam when I was but three years old, and since then he has always been at my side, ready to offer wise counsel or render sorely needed assis-

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tance. I owe Jukes'—and here your voice will break and you will wipe away a tear with the corner of your sleeve—'more than I can ever repay.' ”

“If you've all finished breakfast,” said Simon, “I think we might go down to the village. Something will have to be done about Mungo Sneyd and the dagoes we left tied up in the cellars of ‘The Merry Mug,’ and I have a proposal to put to Humphrey Chard. When Imogen and I are married we would like to go on living in Doom, so I'm going to offer to buy back the estate from him at half the price he paid for it. He won't want it when he finds out that spurious isn't worth anything, and he'll be only too thankful to get a quarter of a million back.”

“It's my opinion, young man,” said Miss Hannah Gudgeon, “that that blow on the chin has affected your brain in some way. Or is it possible that you have been drinking?”

“Rubbish, my dear Hannah,” snapped the Vicar. “Mr. Elliott shows a very proper spirit of Christian forbearance. Chard has wronged him; he has deeply wronged us all; and he deserves to suffer, but I can quite see that for Mr. Elliott to take advantage of the rascal's temporary ignorance of the state of the market would not pave the way to a happy married life. Simon, my boy, I should like to shake you by the hand.”

“Back of my dome's the hunch,” observed Otis

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McGuffin in a mournful undertone, "that this guy's scatty and his dope's the bunk."

"Aw hell," said Sadie. "Can't you see he's nuts on the jane? That's what makes him act like he was unconscious."

When the party from Doom Manor arrived on the village green they found a curious entertainment in progress. The villagers, who from their cottage windows had witnessed the operation of putting Humphrey Chard in the stocks, had waited until Mr. Whelk had taken his departure, and then, plucking up courage, had stolen out one by one to gloat over the misfortunes of the man who had hoodwinked them into believing in Jupiter. There was now quite a crowd of them on the green, and to the accompaniment of cruel taunts and cynical reproaches they bombarded the unhappy wretch with mangold-wurzels, rotten eggs, and over-ripe tomatoes at a range of about fifteen yards. Rivalry was keen among the throwers, and a closely fought contest was in progress between old Mother Wetherbee and Mrs. Bugbird's aged parent, who had already scored a three-point lead from his opponent by registering a direct hit with a tomato on Humphrey Chard's right eye. Among the other throwers perhaps the most persistent and determined was Mrs. Bugbird herself. Since the fiasco of the previous night reaction had set in, and she was filled with a blind, unreasoning hatred of Chard and all his

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works. Fortunately for the object of her detestation, her frenzy impaired her aim, and very few of her shots found their mark.

"Oh, Simon, what a shame!" exclaimed Imogen. "How *can* they be such cruel beasts as to torture that poor, defenceless little wretch? After all, they were just as bad themselves, every one of them!"

And before anyone could stop her she had run forward and snatched the mangold-wurzel out of Mrs. Bugbird's hands.

"Stop it at once, you filthy sadists!" she cried. "Haven't you done enough harm in this village already, burning down people's houses and threatening people with meat-choppers? Put those vegetables and things back where you got them from, and go and start in on your day's work, all of you; heaven knows, you've neglected it long enough! And just listen to me for a minute, especially you, Agnes Bugbird. The annual jumble sale will take place in the Parish Hall next Thursday, and the Vicar expects every one of you to be there. I'm going to marry the Squire very soon, and I give you my word that anybody who fails to turn up at the jumble sale, or who makes any more trouble in the village, will be thrown out of the place neck and crop! Is that clear?"

"I'm very sorry, miss," stammered Mrs. Bugbird. "We thought we were acting in the best interests of the parish. That man over there is a heathen; he

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has been trying to convert the villagers to paganism; and we felt that if we could really teach him a sharp lesson he might go away and not trouble us any more."

"I'm not going to argue with you," said Imogen. "Go back to your husband's shop and get on with your work, and if I catch you sanding the sugar again there'll be bad trouble. What's young Willie doing over there? Why isn't he at school?"

"He's not feeling very well this morning, Miss Grayling. I kept him away from school because I thought he might be sickening for something."

"That's the ginger-beer he had last night. Pack him off to school at once, and the rest of you do as I tell you. Scat!"

The crowd of villagers melted away, its tail between its legs, and the party from Doom Manor approached the prisoner in the stocks. He was indeed a miserable object; he was drenched to the skin, his face was smeared with yoke of egg and tomato-pulp, and his bald head was crowned with half a mangold-wurzel, placed there by way of a joke by young Porkiss the stonemason.

"Batz," commanded Simon Elliott, "take the little horror up to the Manor and give him a change of clothes and some food. I'll come and talk to him later on."

Upon reaching "The Merry Mug" the party at once went down to the cellars to see how Mungo

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Sneyd and the foreigners had fared among the black beetles and the excisemen's bones. To their astonishment, however, they found the cellar doors wide open and the prisoners flown.

"Well, this beats all!" exclaimed Cyril Jukes. "Have we been harbouring a bunch of Houdinis unawares? How in thunder did they get out?"

"I think I know," said Simon. "You remember that little weasel of a chap who trailed me all the way from Capetown? Well, when Imogen and I were shut in the cellar he brought us some food, and I scragged him while Imogen made a dash for it. I thought I'd half killed him, because he wasn't taking much interest in life when I bolted into the skittle alley, but he must have recovered later. I suppose he was lurking somewhere near when we shut Sneyd and the dagoes in the cellar, and watched his chance to let them out after we'd gone. The whole pack of them will be miles away by now."

"Shall I take the Kinkajous and round them up, Mr. Elliott?" suggested Irene ffosbery. "We're absolute bloodhounds at tracking—especially Connie Matheson, she's a nailer at footprints—and we'd jolly soon catch them, wherever they are."

"God forbid," answered Simon. "It's a case of good riddance of bad rubbish. They won't worry us any more, and if we had them here we'd have to hand them over to the police. It's awkward about

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Sneyd, though. There's nobody to run the inn until a new landlord's installed."

"That's all right, old boy," said Cyril Jukes. "I'll take on the job myself until you're suited. I've had a good deal of practical experience in licensed houses in my time, and although I've never actually served behind the bar I've kept my eyes open, and the looker-on sees most of the game."

Simon was delighted. He had been wondering how he could arrange to keep Cyril as a neighbour in the village after he himself was married.

"I don't see why you shouldn't take over the place permanently, old man," he said. "I believe the living, so to speak, is in the gift of the Squire, and you're the very man for the job."

But the journalist shook his head.

"Nothing doing, old boy," he said. "I don't mind dishing out ale to the rustics for a day or two, just to oblige, but I can't stay long in this village. Life here is far too hectic, and I'm beginning to hanker after the old-world peace of Fleet Street, where I can get my feet up on a desk and smoke a quiet pipe, untroubled by thoughts of battle, murder, and sudden death."

"You'll stay for the wedding?" pleaded Imogen. "I don't know exactly when it's going to be, but Simon and I thought of having it fairly soon after the jumble sale."

Cyril Jukes grinned.

The Vicar holds his Jumble Sale

"Of course I'll stay for the wedding," he said. "I'm going to be best man. As a matter of fact I've got several things to fix up before I leave. I've promised the Vicar to take charge of a stall at the jumble sale and adjudicate in the hat-trimming competition—I happen to know Mrs. Bugbird is hot favourite for that—and I'm going to help Miss Gudgeon to wrangle with the insurance company over the matter of her house. She wants to rebuild it on the same site. Then I've promised Miss Hopkins the postmistress that I'll give a lantern lecture to the Women's Institute on the religious beliefs of the ancients. She asked me just now, when Imogen was arguing with Mrs. Bugbird on the village green, and I can't let her down. But as soon as I've done all I have to do I'm going to beat it out of the danger zone. I'll come and stay with you sometimes, Simon, old boy, when you can assure me things are really quiet."

* * * * *

The annual jumble sale, which took place, as Imogen had announced, on the following Thursday, was attended by a record crowd which overflowed from the Parish Hall on to the village green. It was opened by Simon Elliott, now once more Squire of Doom, for Humphrey Chard had eagerly accepted the offer of a quarter of a million for the estate; and the Vicar took advantage of this public occasion

The Merry Mug

to announce officially to his parishioners the engagement of his daughter Imogen to the youthful lord of the manor. The announcement was received with tumultuous applause, and old Mother Wetherbee and Mrs. Bugbird's aged father, who by some mysterious means had contrived to get hold of a half-bottle of gin apiece, were with difficulty prevented from making a joint speech of congratulation.

There was a noble array of stalls, those presided over by Cyril Jukes and Miss Hannah Gudgeon attracting more than their fair share of attention; but the sensation of the sale was provided by the Kinkajous' Old Junk Stall, where a number of interesting exhibits were on view, including among other objects of virtu a butcher's cleaver, eight soiled damask tablecloths, a short length of rubber hose-pipe, and a girl guide's water-bottle minus its stopper. There was one fly in the ointment so far as the Kinkajous were concerned, and this is best described by quoting a conversation which took place towards the end of the day between Irene ffosbery and Connie Matheson, her second-in-command.

"I say, Connie, what's happened to young Winterbotham? She was supposed to be selling tickets in a raffle for a jar of liquorice, but I haven't seen her for hours."

"I have, Irene, I saw her just now. She's out on the village green being sick. There's the jar at the

The Vicar holds his Fumble Sale

end of the stall, and it's empty. She must have won the raffle herself, the little swab!"

The hat-trimming competition was won, as Cyril Jukes had foretold, by Mrs. Bugbird, with old Jebber the cobbler a close runner-up, and the proceedings were rounded off with a dance, which lasted until midnight, the Doom Women's Sewing Guild band providing the music. Otis and Sadie McGuffin danced ponderously together, until the Vicar politely asked them to desist. Owing to the ravages of the death-watch beetle, he explained, the floor of the Parish Hall was not in a condition to withstand an exceptional strain, and the McGuffins were heavyweights. Nothing daunted, the two grenadiers retired into a corner of the dance hall and set up a crown and anchor board, which attracted a large crowd of adherents, and brought in quite a tidy sum of money for church funds.

Mr. Albert Whelk was present at the sale, accompanied by his wife Lizzie and the child Cuthbert, but he was not wearing his A.A. uniform. On the advice of Simon he had tendered his resignation to the Automobile Association, and the Squire had taken him into his service as chauffeur and general factotum, providing him with a cottage in the village not far from the Manor gates.

"I've an idea," Simon had said, "that the A.A. may be inclined to be a bit fussy over your prolonged absences from your post at the crossroads and the

The Merry Mug

damage to your motor-bike. If we told them the whole story you would be cleared, of course, and I dare say they would award you a putty medal or some such decoration, but it would be certain to get into the papers, and that's the very last thing we want to happen. You'd much better resign right away, and come and help me run the village. We need someone like you to hammer a little straightforward Christianity into the minds of the doubters."

Mr. Whelk had agreed, and as a proof of his good faith he purchased at the Kinkajous' stall the rubber hose-pipe which had at one time been the property of Aunt Hannah's manservant, Batz.

"This goes with me everywhere," he said. "And the first man or woman who starts a fancy religion in this village will have me to reckon with."

Before the dance ended and the villagers dispersed to their homes the Vicar made a short speech, in which he thanked all those who had helped to make the function a success. There was a rather sensational peroration.

"Lastly, my dear friends," he said, "I think you ought to know that I have to-day received from Mr. Humphrey Chard, the celebrated archæologist who until recently was tenant of the Moat Farm and was highly respected in the neighbourhood, a cheque for one hundred pounds in aid of church funds. I am sure we are all very grateful to Mr. Chard, and I propose to write to him on your behalf

The Vicar holds his Jumble Sale

assuring him of the undying gratitude of Doom village. His religious views, as no doubt you are aware, are rather unorthodox, and I confess there were certain points of disagreement between him and myself on questions of doctrine which we found it impossible to overcome. But this munificent gift is sufficient of itself to show that, however unusual Mr. Chard's religious beliefs may have been, his heart was in the right place. He is now on his way to Buenos Aires, where I understand he intends to interest himself in missionary work, and I am sure that the good wishes of all at Doom will accompany him to this new field of endeavour."

"Poor old Chard," murmured Simon to Imogen, when the cheers had subsided. "I suppose his conscience pricked him at the last."

"Darling," said Imogen, "I never told you. He's sent us a wedding present."

"The devil he has! What is it; a pair of candlesticks or a mustard-pot?"

"It's nothing so basely material. It's a leather-bound edition of the Mormon bible, and in a note written on the fly-leaf he suggests we might try it on the villagers. He says that where the ancient world has failed the new world may succeed. What do you think, Simon? Would Mormonism go down in the village?"

Simon tilted up her chin and kissed her on the lips.

The Merry Mug

"For the present," he said, "I'm a staunch monogamist. But I'm not saying I shan't change my mind when the Kinkajous are a little older."

"Pig!" said Imogen, and signalled to the band to strike up the National Anthem.

* * * * *

Simon Elliott and Imogen Grayling were married in the ancient church of Doom on a glorious July day. The ceremony was performed by the bride's father in the presence of all the villagers and a number of visitors, friends of the bride and bridegroom. Cyril Jukes was best man, and the bride was attended by Irene ffosbery and the entire troop of Kinkajous, who had obtained special leave for the occasion from the headmistress of St. Ethelburga's, Hurstbourne. Patricia Winterbotham disgraced herself by tripping over the heating apparatus and falling flat on her face in the aisle, but then, as Irene subsequently remarked, "it was a safe bet that young Winterbotham couldn't get through the day without doing something absolutely doltish."

The wedding reception was held in the Stone Circle, and among those present were Miss Hannah Gudgeon (aunt of the bride), Mr. Otis McGuffin, Miss Sadie McGuffin, Mr. Edwin Fidoe (of the London firm of Messrs. Fidoe, Chitterling and Fidoe), who gave the bride away, Mr. Albert Whelk, late of the Automobile Association, and Professor

The Vicar holds his Jumble Sale

Raymond Higginbotham, the celebrated geologist. Most of the refreshments were supplied by Mrs. Bugbird from her husband's store in the village, and Miss Gudgeon's Breton manservant Batz officiated at the lemonade table. Speeches were made by the best man, Mr. Fidoe, Miss Gudgeon, the Vicar, and Mrs. Bugbird's aged father, who, having been filled up with champagne, spoke for twenty minutes without drawing breath. The revels continued long after the bride and bridegroom had left by car for their honeymoon, and there were fireworks and a bonfire in the evening. But no mention was made of Jupiter or any of the ancient pagan gods; the subject was studiously avoided.

Simon and Imogen spent their honeymoon motoring in the south of France, and were deliriously happy. The grimmer episodes of Simon's brief sojourn at Doom had almost faded from their memory, and the occasion when Imogen had been within an ace of having her throat cut with a butcher's cleaver by old Jebber the cobbler was as if it had never been. One evening, however, when they found themselves in a small village not fifty miles from Avignon, something happened which brought it all flooding back.

They had had a long day, and resolved to stay the night in the village if they could find a suitable inn. A friendly peasant directed them to a hostelry at the top of the street, and arriving there they were

The Merry Mug

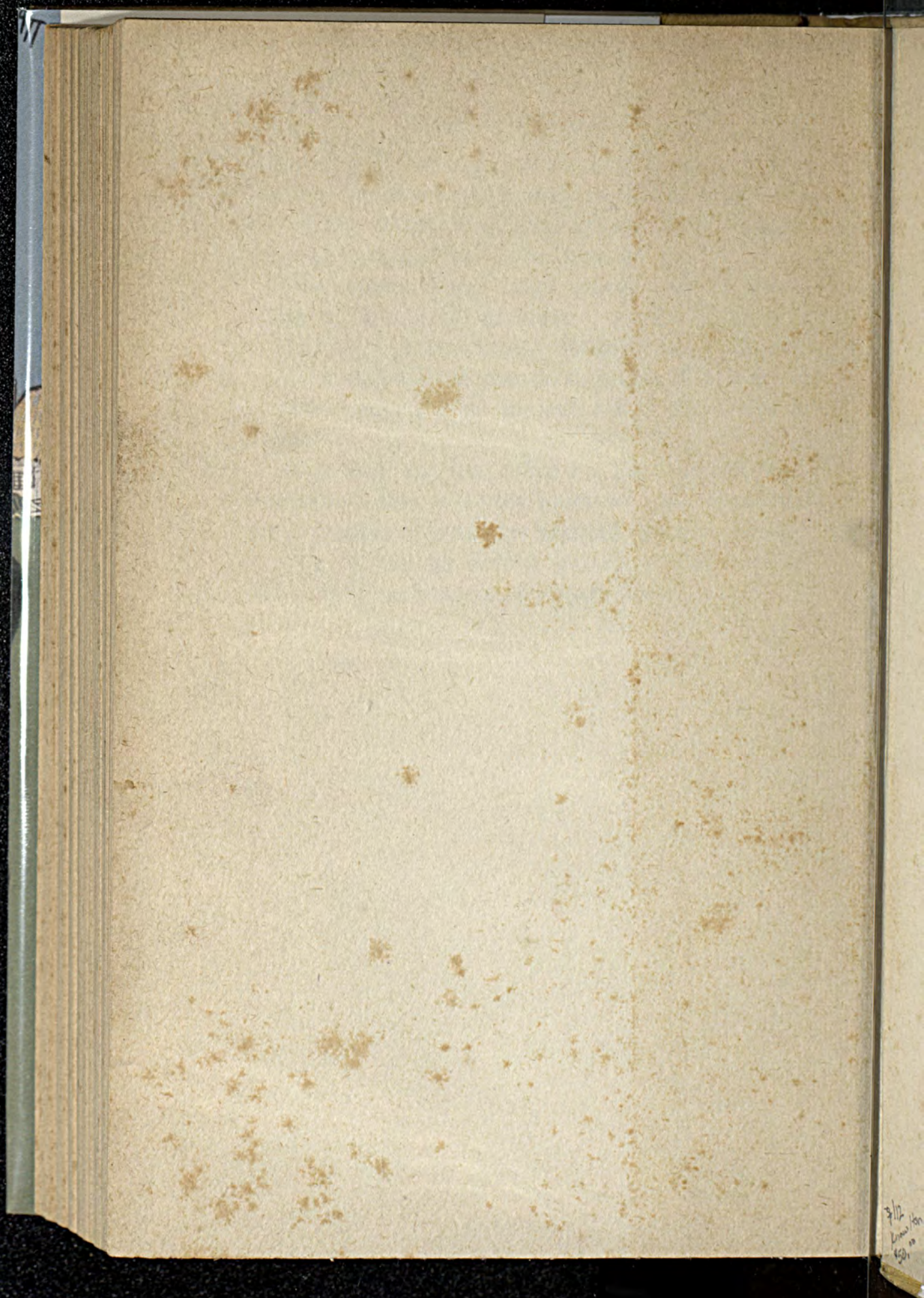
at once impressed by its atmosphere of warmth and comfort. But there was something strangely reminiscent about its name painted in large letters above a swinging sign—"La Tasse Joyeuse."

"The Merry Mug," said Imogen in an awed whisper. "Simon, it's an omen!"

"Purely a coincidence, darling," said Simon, jumping down from the driving seat. "It looks a pleasant spot; I'll go in and ask if they have a room."

He entered the inn, asked for the landlord, and was shown into a sitting-room to wait. Presently the door opened, and the landlord came in. Simon, looking up, found himself gazing at the familiar but forbidding features of Mungo Sneyd. . . .





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