Mr Godly Beside Himself

MR GODLY BESIDE HIMSELF

BY

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Part One :

MONDAY

Of Children I have gotten a great and radiant Companie: not after the Mode of mortal Generation, but rather in Default of the same; for the Heart's Passion, being not deliver'd in Utterance, but pent in the quincuncial Tower of the Spirit, spendeth itself without Profit in the solitary Procreation of Images, which quicken the ardent Soul with Terror of their phantastickal and unappeasing Beauties.

ISAAC TOOKE: THE SEVEN-HORN'D BEASTE

CHAPTER I: DOMESTIC INTERIOR

MR JOHN GODLY, though immersed in luxurious dream, heard the knuckles of destiny knock, three times, on the drum of his drugged ear. He responded with a porcine grunt in which weariness and exasperation found full utterance; but, being a man of punctilious habits, he at once began torturing himself into wakefulness, beating down with remorseless will the waves of sleep that threatened again to overwhelm him, striking out with the frenzy of a drowning man for the land he so little desired. He shot up into a sitting posture; he flung back the bedclothes, deliberately inviting the cool morning air to sting his warm, sleep-saturated limbs; then, moving jerkily as on a pivot, he swung round a quarter-circle, dangled his pyjama'd legs over the side of the bed, and fished with

writhing feet for the woolly slippers that he had carefully posed on the floor overnight. Finding them, his feet padded him reluctantly across three yards of cork linoleum to the door, behind which he found and seized the jug of shaving water that destiny, in the person of Milly Reeslip, had placed there. For nearly twenty years of manhood—for he was rapidly approaching forty-two—Mr Godly had performed this daily ritual ; and each morning, so it seemed at this moment, it was more tedious than ever before. Seven thousand times since his premature marriage, to say nothing of the years preceding that fatal event, he had risen, washed, shaved, breakfasted, scanned his paper, and travelled to the office. To what end this methodical activity ? 'Bah !' said Mr Godly, shutting the door. For he could discern no end. The money he earned, tethered to a stout safe post in the city, availed nothing but to keep him alive that he might continue to revolve in his vicious circle of virtue. And even had his income been quadrupled . . . he paused on his way to the washstand, jug in hand, to focus his discontents upon the comfortable, recumbent body of his wife, who had drowsily, since his exodus, invaded his vacated territory and was now lying diagonally across

the bed. She was a woman in whom pathetic traces of comeliness still lingered, but, at the moment, nature conspired with circumstance to deny her charm. She slept, or half-slept, with her mouth open, breathing audibly. Irregular teeth, one of them crowned with gold, called Mr Godly's attention to themselves with dismal insistence. Disenchanted but not yet resigned, he resented this woman and all the tedious complications she had introduced into his life. His resentment was not unbounded, or with one desperate gesture he could have broken prison. His hands were manacled less by legal and moral obligations than by an obstinate affection which, try as he would, he could not deny. He was familiar with every line of her thin body, every wrinkle on her face, every note of her too cheerful voice, every thought her mind had entertained ; and this familiarity was at once the chain that held him and the goad that urged him to escape. He knew that he could not hurt her without himself suffering, and that this fact, and no other, rendered their union indissoluble. His inconvenient affection for her seemed to him a monstrous folly, a tragic weakness of character, which prevented his seeking and finding, in the ardent eyes of some other woman,

that romantic intoxication of the spirit for which he thirsted as parched land thirsts for rain. For Mr Godly, who had been middle-aged at twenty-five and had then contracted a marriage of prudence and warm friendliness, was at forty-two an adolescent, his mind invaded by cruelly tantalizing visions of ideal beauty. From time to time that ideal became flesh, and he beheld its glory : in the street, in underground trains, in all manner of casual encounters. The latest and most miraculous of these incarnations was now employed—not by his contriving—to type the firm's letters in Leadenhall Street ; and she had come, he told himself bitterly, only just in time to save him from the suicide he still contemplated. The frustration of unappeasable desires was driving him, slowly but certainly, to self-destruction. That was a way out which the malign fates had no power to deny him. He had planned the thing in considerable detail : indeed, some of the happiest moments of his life had been occupied in planning it. Nor had he any compunction on Florence's account. Florence would remain reasonably well provided with the means of life, and with a romantic sorrow to boot. She would find consolation in religion, in good works ; she was an adept in the

feminine art of investing grief with a pseudo-spiritual glamour ; she would suffer, but she would imagine herself being made perfect by suffering, and that would be very nice for her. Above all, she would retain her illusion : she would not dream herself to have been unloved. Possibly, after a decent interval, she would marry again. But Mr Godly did not pursue this last line of thought, which called up images both unattractive and fantastic : that sense of identity with his wife, that damnable sense of identity, made him shrink, as from an outrage, from the possibility his mind predicted.

As he stared, with suppressed anger, with exasperated affection, at the face of his sleeping Florence, she stirred, as though stabbed into response, and opened her brown eyes. Instantly he turned away to continue his passage to the washstand. There, he took up his stance, shook powder on to his shaving-brush, and began briskly lathering his stubbly face, bending downward a little in order to see himself in the circular mirror which had been Florence's gift to him on the occasion of his forty-first birthday. What he saw in the mirror did nothing to dissuade him from the dark adventure of which he had again begun to think with quickening pulse. What was

there in life to hold him? Well, there was one thing; but, at sight of his own face, which he seemed to be seeing for the first time in all its exceeding homeliness, the last frail hope, upon which he had been secretly building, snapped like a brittle filament of gold. Round-faced, red-faced, middle-class, middle-aged—what had he of charm that should win romantic response from a young and lovely girl, even were the initial difficulty of his marriage triumphantly solved or tactfully ignored? In his access of self-contempt his trembling blade chipped two minute slices of skin from the offending face. Yet it was not, when it forgot to scowl, an unpleasant face; and even in wrath it possessed a certain boyish quality that Mrs Godly, for one, found irresistible. That devoted woman understood him better than anyone else could hope to do, but even she knew nothing of that dream of strange intimate loveliness which, for its own torment, his desirous heart had conceived. Nor did the neighbours suspect these secret ecstasies and agonies in the mind of a middle-aged, commonplace, sedentary householder: a man whom they so often saw in the train lurking behind a morning paper, or, every Saturday afternoon during the summer, in

his suburban garden, shirt sleeves rolled up, brow perspiring freely, himself clipping the laurel hedge, weeding the gravel path, or with an air of babyish resolution pushing a heavy lawn-mower over a small patch of grass. His diligent ineffectual gardening was a stock joke at which Mrs Godly herself had been known to smile in maternal amusement. When she caught sight of him counting his early snowdrops she struggled between tears and laughter : his pleasure in what he had, tinged with a wistful regret for what he had unaccountably lost, made her long to enfold him in her hungry childless arms, a longing she sometimes indulged, to his unexpressed annoyance. But Mr Godly himself saw neither charm nor interest in the face that mouthed back at him from his shaving-mirror. He saw, on the contrary, something that put the seal on his half-formed resolution to make an end of the whole miserable business of living. He had dallied with the project long enough. It was time to act.

His nerves twitched as he heard the soft thud of Mrs Godly's descent from the bed, and the sound of shuffling feet approaching him.

'Is it very late, dear? Oh, I *did* have a lovely sleep. Did you?'

'Twenty to eight.'

Mr Godly's tone was carefully calculated to discourage any further advances. He knew the woman was standing at his elbow (confound her !), and that she wished him to turn radiantly towards her. His body became rigid with a determination not to turn ; his tongue would have shrivelled in his head rather than have articulated an unnecessary syllable. He could see, without looking, that a hand was tentatively moving towards him, and his soul grew black with the excess of his desire to be left alone, to be spared these sentimental contacts. He felt that if she so much as laid a finger on him he would scream with irritation.

She added plaintively, cajoling, 'Are you cross with me, darling, for being such a lazy thing ?'

'Of course not. Don't be absurd.'

The quality of her voice did nothing to allay his fears. He judged it not improbable that she wanted, or at least expected, to be kissed. It was the kind of insane ambition she would have at twenty to eight on a chilly morning. Good God, couldn't she see he was shaving ? And can a man kiss before breakfast ? Love on an empty stomach was an enterprise that Mr Godly, even in his most

exalted moments, had never been able to contemplate without alarm. He wiped soap from his razor, re-lathered parts of his face, and with passionate earnestness and art began shaving, for the third time, the little valley of stubble between chin and underlip. With unspeakable relief he saw his wife's hand waver and withdraw. She turned to her own toilet.

On Sundays, if on no other day, Mr Godly believed in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting; but in his thoughts of suicide he had always, unconscious of any inconsistency, counted on death to annihilate him, body and soul alike. As he followed his wife downstairs to the breakfast-room (for she somehow contrived to be ready first) he was startled by the bizarre notion that possibly the creed he recited once every dry Sunday in the year might contain vestiges of truth: not religious truth, not a pious abstraction, but the kind of truth that affects practical affairs. What if immortality should turn out to be a fact as solid as the Stock Exchange, and punishment for sin as definite a penalty as income tax? It was a disquieting thought, but he did not take it seriously enough to let it weaken his resolution or spoil his appetite for breakfast. His unabated desire for death

was only equalled by the relish with which he consumed a large rasher of bacon and two fried eggs, done to a turn. The coffee, too, was unusually good this morning ; it was a delight to see it bubbling up in the glass percolator, a sensuous joy to savour its exquisite aroma. The scowl on Mr Godly's face relaxed a little, and by the time he had reached the last course and set his teeth into a well-buttered slice of delicious new brown bread, it had vanished altogether. The butter was firm but not too firm ; in hue a rich golden yellow, like harvested corn. Mr Godly had heard that this pleasing chromatic effect was obtained by artifice, but he did not care : he was content to enjoy, while there was yet time, the vision it induced of placid cows standing by a shaded pool, knee-deep in midsummer grass, enfolding their green food in soft velvet lips, or chewing contemplatively their rotatory cud. Sunlight, percolating through the foliage of his visioned tree, spangled the surface of the pool with a quivering glory. Mr Godly stared thoughtfully, indeed a little wistfully, at the piece of butter on the end of his knife which had been arrested, by his momentary pensiveness, in its transit from butter-dish to plate. Hereafter, when his plan should have been

consummated, there would be no sunlight, no grass, no heartrending elusive beauty of form or colour. There would be only a black void, and a cold wind blowing without sound. 'That's absurd,' said Mr Godly to himself. 'There will be nothing. Nothing is not a cold wind.' Nothing, whatever it was or was not, he had now irrevocably chosen. Nothing he would resolutely seek, in exchange for a life in which boredom alternated with intolerable tantalizing dreams. Exploring in his mind the illusory possibilities of Nothing, he realized, with a distinct pang, that the idea excluded even marmalade, which crowns a man's breakfast as sweetly and goldenly, yet with the same crisp epigrammatic finality, as the rhymed couplet closes and clinches a Shakespearean sonnet. Mr Godly was by way of being a critic of marmalade : if there had been a weekly paper dedicated to the subject, he would probably have contributed to it many a masterly essay in appreciation, essays from which a coherent body of critical doctrine would have ultimately emerged. He would have sought, perhaps, to characterize the several kinds of marmalade : the golden jelly streaked with crimson veins, melting, sugared, deliciously artificial, like a Parisian beauty ;

the still sweet but more substantial kind in which orange-peel shamelessly flaunts itself; and, finally, the bitter-sweet, the subtle, epitome of mortal life. This last—strange as it may seem—was the marmalade of Mr Godly's desire, and by happy chance, or by the intervention of his wife, it was this that was provided him for his last meal on earth. He was forced to admit that there were some positive advantages in being alive, though his stern spirit instantly retorted that the disadvantages outweighed them.

While thoughts such as these rioted in his mind he was pretending to read the newspaper that stood, folded once, against the milk-jug in front of him. This newspaper was his barricade against the fire of remarks that he feared a more mannerly breakfasting would provoke from Mrs Godly. A caption even more ridiculous than usual caught his eye. It was as if everything conspired, on this fresh April morning, to make him think of his end . . . if end it were. He was surprised into breaking silence.

'What next, I wonder? Here's a fellow starting a home for lost spooks.'

'For what, dear?'

'Lost spooks.'

Mrs Godly's face expressed nothing but question.

'Spooks, my dear, spooks,' repeated Mr Godly, with an air of terrible patience. How dull the woman was ! 'Spooks, ghosts, spirits, spectres, phantoms, the dear departed.'

'But how preposterous, John ! Irreverent, too.'

'Not at all. Simple act of kindness. All you have to do is to sit in a dark room and hold hands round a table. The spooks love it !' Abandoning crude irony, he added, as if casually : 'Do *you* believe in personal survival, Florence ?'

'You know I do. Why ?'

'Well, I don't. That's all.'

'Oh John !' Distress and reproach were eloquent in her voice.

'It's no use looking soulful, my dear girl. I don't believe, and I won't . . . Damned if I will !' added Mr Godly, rising angrily and scraping his chair away from the table.

'There's no need to be cross about it,' said Mrs Godly mildly.

'Cross !' said Mr Godly. 'Nothing of the kind. A beautiful day outside, a beautiful breakfast inside, a charming home, an overpaid job in the city, everything that the heart of

man can desire—why should I be cross!' His voice rose to a shout. 'And every day alike. Every blasted day alike. So neat and tidy. So orderly. Such fascinating monotony. No dangerous shocks to the nerves. No unhealthy excitement. What cause have I for complaint? Bah!'

Mrs Godly approached her husband timidly, solicitously, with soothing hands outstretched. But he dodged with astonishing agility. 'John! Tell me, dear! Why are you unhappy?'

Mr Godly fumed. 'First cross, then unhappy. What's come over you, Florence? Let me tell you, once and for all, that I'm neither the one nor the other. I'm perfectly calm and collected. I'm perfectly good-tempered. And I'm bursting, bursting I tell you, with joy! Good morning!'

The next moment the front door slammed, and one of its glass panels fell in fragments on the doormat. Mrs Godly spent a thoughtful ten minutes sweeping the debris into an ashpan, and contriving a plausible story for the sharp red ears of Milly Reeslip.

CHAPTER II: LIFE OR DEATH

GLANCING at his watch as the garden gate clicked behind him, Mr Godly realized with dismay that he could not hope to catch the eight-forty-three, the train that had carried him faithfully to town nearly every week-day for twenty years. He who had the moment before been bitterly despising the routine in which he lived, now as bitterly deplored this slight deviation from routine. He would be late at the office, an event almost without precedent. What would they do in his absence? As head of a department he was an undoubted power in the firm, and he was troubled by a vision of his subordinates weltering in a sea of blunder. His agonizing was interrupted by a memory that trickled like cold water down his shuddering spine, the memory of his resolve to die. He laughed at himself, but without mirth. What did it matter how many trains he missed? Nothing at all. After to-day he would never catch

another train, although the trains would go on running, and men—his neighbours among them—would continue to travel by them. A singularly unwelcome thought. The earth would blossom and bring forth fruit in her season. Florence, sure as fate, would catch influenza each spring, would dose herself with quinine and cinnamon, and would get better. In summer evenings she would take a book into the garden, and, instead of reading it, would stroll in placid content among the flowers he himself had planted. Well, let her. He would see none of these things, thank goodness. This was the last time he would walk to the station. After to-day he would never say 'Season!' again to the red-headed ticket-collector; nor ever meet old Murdoch on the platform and controvert his poisonous nonsense about Poor Law Reform. All that was over; and a good job, too. Yet at this moment he felt within him a surge of irrational tenderness for old Murdoch, with whom he had seldom lost an opportunity of quarrelling.

Indeed, there was a conspiracy this morning against Mr Godly. The world seemed determined to entice him. When he first set out, the sky was overcast, the atmosphere murky; and there was truth in the indictment that Mr

Godly growled at his suburban street. Drab and dull,' he said. 'Glad I'm leaving it all.' It was not a conspicuously ugly street : its author had been moved by neither art nor malice, but only by greed. The hand of an incorrigible stupidity lay heavy upon it. With fatal accuracy it reflected in all its monotonous features the vacuity of the mind that had planned it, the disease of the eye that had seen in conception, and found good, this road that lay, like a great grey slug, between two rows of machine-made villas. But in the mind of Mr Godly, whose sensibilities were strangely heightened by the footfall of approaching death, fluttered unaccustomed iridescent fancies. He felt that this so familiar street of his, which lacked equally both beauty and positive ugliness, possessed, in its very neutrality, the potentiality of either. It was as if somewhere in this inarticulate mass of bricks and mortar stirred the soul of the street, a soul resigned, apathetic, femininely passive ; like a dull, unlovely woman who waits without hope for the impossible lover at whose touch she will put on beauty as a garment. And as Mr Godly stood lost in this dream—for to-day, like a fool, he stopped to stare at what he knew too well—a shower of rain fell, drenching all

the exposed parts of his body. Water from his hat's brim tickled his nose ; his gloves became clammy ; he shivered with cold. Yet he had never, he felt, enjoyed life so much as at this moment. He stood, spiritually a-tiptoe, peering expectantly out upon a new, old world. The rain had come with the swift steps of a herald and had run down the road from end to end in a cleansing fury, leaving on the pavements pools of water, and tinting the slates a richer grey. Perhaps this was indeed the forerunner of that lover whom the street awaited ; for now the sun rose out of a cloud, as from sleep, to make glorious the wet slates, the monotonous chimney-pots, the pools of still water ; and the pavement, where Mr Godly stood, gleamed with the silver cymbals of a singing host, burned with golden shields flung down by indolent angels. He stared, through tears, at the beauty of what he had sworn to leave forever, trembling a little, as if at the caress of an invisible finger. Again the queer fancy visited him that this moment was the eve of apocalypse ; that the physical universe was nothing but a fragile paper shell, chrysalis of a new creation ; and that he himself was within an ace of bursting through it into freedom, release, an infinite enlargement

of consciousness. He could almost hear, in anticipation, the crackle of the breaking paper, could almost see the splendour beyond. It was as if the world trembled with the ecstasy of its own incandescence as the delicately veined leaf may tremble to feel through its satin texture the pulsing radiance that turns young green to luminous verdant gold. Was it possible that death would usher him into the beatific state of being he now dimly surmised? No, it was not possible; and, with the thought, gross images of physical death crowded upon him, and the sunshine vanished from earth and sky. He shivered, and continued his walk to the station at a brisk pace. Yet still, as if by contrast to the dark void he contemplated, the meanest object his glance lighted on was invested with surpassing value. He found romance in the iron railings, evilly designed though they were; and an intimate pathos in the prim little front-gardens they fenced in. Scarcely pausing to wonder whether the domestic lives these villas symbolized were all as dull and dead as his own, he envied his fellows indiscriminately, as a man under sentence of death envies the prisoners who will remain, long after he is dust, to enjoy penal servitude. The sight of the railway station,

when he reached it, afflicted him with a curiously poignant sentiment which resembled homesickness. He was overjoyed when he caught sight of his friend and enemy Murdoch, whom, by a queer inversion of logic, he had been mourning for dead some ten minutes earlier. Murdoch, too, had missed the train. A good-natured fellow, but weak, weak as water ; a man habitually late for everything.

'Why, it's Mr Godly ! *Is* it Mr Godly ? I can hardly believe my eyes.'

'On this occasion,' retorted Mr Godly, 'you can trust them. I wish you always saw as clearly, Mr Murdoch. Ha ! ha !'

'Then it's true ? You *have* missed your train ?'

'A trifling miscalculation.'

The fellow Murdoch raised ironical eyebrows. The train steamed in, and the two men hurried towards it.

'The fact is,' said Mr Godly, 'I was busy planning a little affair, and didn't notice the time passing.'

'A pleasant affair, I hope ?'

'A crime,' replied Mr Godly in cool triumph, sure of his dramatic effect.

'Really ? . . . This is ours, I think.' Murdoch opened a carriage door. They

entered and took corner seats. 'Did you say something about a crime?'

Mr Godly was disappointed, but he stuck to his guns. 'It's reckoned a crime by the law, anyhow.'

'Murder, perhaps,' suggested Mr Murdoch facetiously.

'No. Suicide,' said Mr Godly, with a slight giggle of self-consciousness. He felt like a man who has just admitted that he is engaged to be married.

Mr Murdoch grinned. 'Well, you've got nice weather for it.' And he quashed the conversation abruptly by opening his paper and nestling behind it in his corner. Nor did he notice the sudden malevolence that flashed from his companion's eyes.

The kindliness that had lurked in Mr Godly's heart for this man was now obscured by black rage. 'Thinks it a joke, does he! *I*'ll teach him!' He was provided with a new motive for suicide: to teach Mr Murdoch. 'Sarcastic donkey!' said Mr Godly to himself. He smacked his lips when he imagined Murdoch's horrified astonishment. It would be in all the evening papers; half a column, perhaps; hot and strong. Good. Very good. But there was still that one little difficulty

to be cleared up : the possibility of survival. Turning to his own paper, Mr Godly glanced again at the account of a proposed Home for Earthbound Spirits. He read it through three times, and each time it seemed more grotesque.

'Something in your line here,' he remarked to Mr Murdoch.

'Eh ?'

Mr Godly handed his friend the paper, indicating the paragraph with his thumb. Mr Murdoch read it through, made a non-committal noise, and resumed his communion with *The Times*. But Mr Godly was not to be put off this time. He tapped the other's knee. 'Look here, my dear fellow. Don't take offence. But you *do* believe in a life after death, don't you ?'

'Yes,' said Mr Murdoch, still eyeing his paper.

'Why do you ?' enquired Mr Godly simply.

Whereupon Mr Murdoch removed the screen from his face. 'I *know*,' he said solemnly, with the helpfulness of his kind. 'That's why.'

The man's conviction astounded and alarmed Mr Godly.

'But have you evidence? Have you had some experience or other?'

'No,' admitted Mr Murdoch. 'Not exactly. But my wife . . .'

'Oh, your wife!'

Mr Murdoch glared. 'Sir, have you any criticism to offer of my wife?'

'Good heavens, no! I have the greatest respect for Mrs Murdoch. I have never met her.'

Mr Murdoch appeared to be dissatisfied with this reply, but Mr Godly, retiring into seclusion, took no further notice of him. One suggestion added to another had hypnotized him into a definite belief in that which he was vitally concerned to deny. It was one thing to seek extinction, but quite another to launch oneself out upon the unknown. Mr Godly could not forget that his wife was extravagantly devoted to him, and her devotedness loomed before him as the most important factor in his new problem. What if she, succumbing to the first wave of emotion, were to come pelting after him into the next world? Life everlasting sounded a mighty fine thing—but not with Florence, he could not face it. Knowing in his bones that he was too squeamish to humiliate her by eloping with another, or even

by solitary desertion, he realized, with a stab of unparalleled horror, that he would be as securely tethered in the next world as he was in this, perhaps more securely, perhaps confined in a solitude *à deux*. For the first time he appreciated the seamy side of immortality. 'That's torn it!' muttered Mr Godly. And he reflected, with unspeakable relief, that he need not bother to die just yet.

CHAPTER III: A MORNING'S WORK

RELEASED from his dark resolve, Mr Godly's thoughts of home slipped instantly and easily back into their accustomed groove. He wanted nothing so much as to get away from it, and stay away. He had begun to think with a secret sentimental regret even of Florence, but now the idea of her was once more a burden to him. The burden did not vanish from consciousness until, seated on his high stool at the office, he saw Miss Maia M'Gree flutter towards him, notebook in hand and pencil poised. This was the moment of the day, of every day, the moment he desired and dreaded above all others : desired for its superlative beauty, and dreaded for its intolerable transience. It was his daily draught of opium without which he would have inevitably expired, and it was followed always by the vilest reaction. On this morning, in particular, Mr Godly was aghast with ecstasy, a translated creature, at the incredible loveliness of

sense and spirit crammed into this instant of time. That instant infinitely extended was Mr Godly's conception of Paradise ; it was also his notion of what his whole life would be like could he share it intimately with this enchanting girl. Mr Godly saw her through a mist of emotion. Seen so, her face was small, elfin, olive-tinted, framed in a forest of black hair ; her profoundly dark eyes were bright with innocence and shy humour ; her little mouth was a pouting bud that blossomed, when she spoke, into scarlet and cream-white. The contours of her slim body were lyrical in their soft, rounded perfection. Her voice had a unique inflection, a haunting and tantalizing melody, which Mr Godly supposed to be Irish, though the voice of no other Irish man or woman of his acquaintance resembled it closely or gave him the same subtle delight. Miss M'Gree had been on the staff but a few weeks, and Mr Godly, conscientious marine insurance official though he was, would have cheerfully sunk every ship on the sea if thereby he could have afforded her a moment's pleasure. His conversations with her, though impersonal, had been always enormously protracted : having a private office by virtue of his position in the firm, he could permit him-

self that much indulgence without disaster. To-day he dared more.

'Ah, good morning, Miss M'Gree. I haven't anything to dictate just yet. But please sit down, if you can spare the time, while I glance through this little pile here.'

Miss M'Gree, murmuring a musical response, seated herself at a small side-table in the corner of the room.

'I wonder would you mind sitting here?' said Mr Godly, indicating the swing-chair opposite his own, a chair sacred to the posteriors of important clients. 'Something might occur to me that I wanted a note made of . . . Thank you.'

There was silence for a while. Mr Godly made pretence of studying the correspondence, from time to time stealing glances at the author of his present bliss. With every glance he was beatified anew. But at last an overpowering sadness took hold of him and shook him, until tears started to his eyes. Stricken with the sublime idiocy of first love, he could not bear to remember that he was in his fortieth year. He felt that he was in the presence of a radiant vision of what his youth might have given him and had unaccountably failed to give. At moments, intoxicated by

the girl's proximity, he could scarcely resist the illusion that he had only to stretch out a hand to make the treasure his ; but lucid intervals quickly supervened in which he appreciated only a cruel irony in the situation, saw life mocking him with a lovely gesture. He despised himself for the tame and timid youth he had been, pitied himself for the middle-aged mediocrity that he now was. It was this self-pity, this hunger for sympathy, that stung him finally to a speech bordering on indiscretion.

'I was very late this morning, Miss M'Gree.'

'Am I to take that down ?' she asked.

He looked up from his blotting-pad, slightly startled. 'Ah, you're laughing at me. But, really, I *was* very late this morning.'

'So you were then,' said Miss M'Gree, humouring him.

'It's a thing that hadn't occurred for years,' added Mr Godly.

'Clocks wrong, perhaps ?' suggested Miss M'Gree helpfully.

Mr Godly sighed. 'Maybe. I didn't notice the clocks. No, it was domestic worry.'

'Not illness surely ?' Her tone was gentle with solicitude, but the quality of her glance gave Mr Godly the queer impression that she

had not yet done laughing at him. Was it possible that those innocent orbs masked irony? But he persisted. Nothing could stop him relieving his spirit of at least part of its burden.

'Not illness either, unless *I*'m ill. Sometimes I think I am. Sometimes I wish I were—ill and dying. I'm not happy, Miss M'Gree. Life has become empty for me. Empty, but full of false promises, if you understand me. I appear to have everything that most men want. But I'm different.'

Miss M'Gree leaned towards him, her eyes widening with interest. 'Ah, you're different?'

'Yes, I'm afraid I am,' confessed Mr Godly, with a touch of vanity. 'Because, having everything, I want more. I want the impossible.'

'That's not being different, is it?' she inquired, like a child seeking information. 'Doesn't every one want that?'

Mr Godly reluctantly saw his one distinction wrested from him. 'Perhaps so,' he conceded.

'Or nearly every one.'

The words seemed weighted with secret significance. 'Why do you correct yourself?' he asked quickly. 'Do you know of exceptions to the rule?'

'Perhaps a few.'

'And possibly,' suggested Mr Godly, 'I could guess the name of one?'

She met his glance with serene candour. 'Yes, I'm one.'

'Of course,' said Mr Godly, ecstatically sad, 'you don't crave the impossible, because you possess it. You have youth.' He was fascinated by his own melancholy only one degree less than by her extreme beauty. This moment of pleasure passed, leaving him miserable. But a point of light, a spark of eager hope, flashed in the darkness. 'Yes, you have what I desire—the impossible. Isn't that so?'

'Yes. In a way, you're right.'

'And it suffices you?'

'Not quite. Don't you see, Mr Godly,' —she looked at him intently—'that what I possess I can give?'

'You can give,' he stammered. His heart beat loudly in his ears; his breath came fast. 'You can give it . . . to me?'

'Why not?' she said simply.

Mr Godly rose to his feet, pushed his chair away, and gazed for a mad moment upon the heavens that were opening for him. Then it was as if they crashed about his ears with a noise of thunder. His mind, newly wakened

from dream, began to torment him with arguments, with scruples, with moral admonitions. Life, he knew with a pang of despair, was not so simple as all that. Youth could not be had for the asking. The impossible—whatever that convenient phrase symbolized—could not be won without price, nor held without disaster. Back again in the normal world, released by this uprush of habitual thoughts from the spell of his fond imaginings, he doubted every word of their conversation, wondered whether perhaps he had fancied it all, or, at the least, misinterpreted it fatally. Yet, when he examined himself, he discovered that he had hardly bothered to interpret it at all. He had been content to sun himself in a vague glory, a promise of new life. What, translated into plain speech, did these cryptic intoxicating generalizations amount to? What if he had, as he suspected, been obliquely wooing Miss M'Gree? Had she understood his intention, cloudy and hesitant as it had been to himself; and, if she had understood, what did her own avowals mean? Was she mocking or tender or both? And if she was indeed willing to give him the love he dared not ask for, what would be the motive behind her illogical surrender? He tried, for five seconds,

to look at the girl with the detachment of a critic ; tried to read the enigma of her character. Instinct insisted, while reason doubted, that she was not, could not be, the kind of woman who holds herself cheap, and who, for lust of mere excitement or mere power, will assist any discontented man of forty to make a fool of himself. Mr Godly, during his twenty years with the firm, had seen numerous typists come and go. Many had left to get married ; a few—no more than three in two decades—had left, not to get married ; and at least one had proved to be nothing but a pert little adventuress. Flirtations between cynical age and impudent youth were distasteful to Mr Godly, who had always looked silently askance at those of his colleagues who took part in such episodes, tempering intolerance as best he could with the knowledge that he himself, at heart, was no better than they. Mr Godly, though he boasted himself a philistine, possessed a nice sense of values that was influenced but not determined by the conventional moral code. Abject though he sometimes appeared in his greed for beauty, this plump and preposterous little man had pride enough to make honourable terms for himself when it came to the point. Desiring romantic

love, he would accept no substitute or subterfuge, if he could help it. This girl, perhaps, if (incredible notion !) she happened to be that kind of girl, would tolerate his ardours with a half-contemptuous affection ; but that he would have none of. He desired a mutual ecstasy that should, for both lovers, transfigure the world. Juliet must be as divinely entranced as Romeo. And because poor Mr Godly could not conceive himself inspiring in this miracle of girlhood a tithe of his own emotion, he despaired. Aware, too aware, of his physical insignificance, he was appalled by his spirit's monstrous claims.

'What have I been saying ?' he cried suddenly, in a kind of anguish. 'You realize, Miss M'Gree, that my respect for you is invincible ?'

'Don't be tragic, Mr Godly.' Her slim youth confronted him. She held out her hands with a gesture of intimate friendship. 'Fainthearted little man ! I believe you're afraid.'

He winced at her epithets, although they seemed to imply a tenderness that enchanted him. 'Who wouldn't be afraid of so much loveliness !' But he took her outstretched hands, bracing himself for an adventure whose

import still eluded him. 'I won't be afraid. You'll help me.'

She nodded. 'Come with me to-night and meet . . . my friends at home.'

Mr Godly drew back in bewilderment. 'What . . . what will they think of me . . . And my wife . . . ?'

She smiled inscrutably. 'It's as you wish.'

A tap at the door set Mr Godly's nerves quivering. A clerk entered with documents. Miss M'Gree gathered up her notebook and pencil in some slight confusion.

'That's all for the present,' said Mr Godly primly. 'I shall need you again in half an hour, Miss M'Gree.'

'Very well, Mr Godly.'

CHAPTER IV: MAIA AT HOME

TRAVELLING in the train with her to Wimbledon, where Maia M'Gree lived, Mr Godly was conscious of entertaining sentiments far from Byronic. He felt less like an accepted lover (was he an accepted lover?) than like a convert to a new religion, or like Pygmalion when his visioned loveliness became miraculously flesh. He felt that all the life-giving beauty of the world was at his side, summed up, perfectly uttered, in the face and form of one woman. Wave upon wave of protective tenderness overwhelmed him. In the intervals between one rapture and another he enquired of himself what these friends could be like of whom Maia had spoken. A bohemian set, perhaps, the kind of people he vaguely disapproved of, lax in both manners and morals: the men wearing little golden beards and huge vermilion bows, the women with shingled hair, cigarette-stained fingers, and scanty garments wrought of exotic table-covering material.

The men readily blasphemed, and the women called them surnames. Mr Godly's mind was divided in respect of this semi-mythical tribe and its way of life ; he was both attracted and mistrustful of them ; they shocked him, but to be shocked was an experience that held a subtle pleasure.

But he was to have no such experience to-night. His shocks were to be of another kind. Miss M'Gree, goddess and guide, led him from the station to a wide and highly respectable street of substantial semi-detached houses, the kind of house in which he himself would have lived if he had possessed children, and a slightly larger income. At one such desirable residence, similar in all outward respects to its two neighbours, Maia M'Gree stopped abruptly.

'This is where I live,' she remarked. 'In the basement of this house. We're not very well off, you know.' She and her friends, she explained, occupied four semi-subterranean rooms. Three were quite tiny, but the fourth, where they entertained visitors, was fairly spacious : large enough, indeed, to contain a three-quarter-sized billiard-table without appearing too full of furniture. Those friends again ! Mr Godly was increasingly mystified.

Had the child no parents ; or did she perhaps live with two or three other city girls ? As for billiards, the idea of Maia M'Gree in conjunction with that of billiards was the height of incongruity, though Mr Godly could not for the life of him have said why.

While these and similar thoughts raced to and fro in Mr Godly's mind, his agitated hand was opening the iron gate that admitted to the front yard of the house. Following Maia, he walked up the concreted way, ascended a flight of eight whitewashed steps, and entered the dark hall. Maia at once switched on the electric light ; and, turning to Mr Godly, demanded his hat and coat. He surrendered them without a word, even of thanks. He was by now bereft of speech. Conjectures were invading him thick and fast. This behaviour on the part of a respectable young lady was all so very unusual. Mr Godly had not read the work of Mr William Le Queux for nothing ; and, half stupefied though he was by his admiration and desire, he was beginning to entertain the queerest fancies. But the appearance of this domestic interior, though gloomy, was reassuring. It was bleak enough to be the very temple of puritanical virtue.

'Now for the underworld,' said Maia, with

a light laugh. She led him to the head of the stairs that wound down to the basement, holding his hand, not lover-like, but as though guiding a child. Together they plunged into the dark abyss, their footsteps sounding hollowly on the uncarpeted stairs. After a moment of rapid descent, Maia stopped. He heard her turn a door handle. The wall of blackness that confronted him suddenly fell away.

'Hullo, Dad! I've brought Mr Godly home with me.'

Drawn by her slim fingers, to which he clung desirously as to life itself, he half-stumbled into the room, and stood blinking in the unaccustomed light. Yet the room was not in fact very brilliantly lit. All the illumination came from a cluster of candles, set in an elaborate glass chandelier in the centre of a long table. It was a long and rather low-ceiled room, and had he not heard Maia's bewildering speech Mr Godly would have imagined themselves to be alone. Aware by inference that he was under observation, he felt self-conscious and foolish to be caught holding the hand of a girl half his age. Gently but with decision he disengaged himself, and stepped forward a pace, extending a hand tentatively. Then he became aware of a queer being who appeared

to be crouching at the far end of the table, a huddled figure whose satirical face peered at Mr Godly over the table's edge. He stared, not curiously nor even with interest, but with a glint of malice and mockery in his pale, greenish eyes. Taken aback by the apparition, Mr Godly allowed his hand to waver and drop limply to his side; but instantly, with a movement almost serpentine, the creature unbent itself and rose to greet the visitor. Standing up, he was revealed as a tall, almost athletic, elderly man, wearing loose, oddly shaped flannel trousers, a mustard silk collar and shirt, and a velvet smoking-jacket. A very large green skull-cap, rather similar in shape to a chef's hat, was pressed close down upon his head so that it concealed most of his brow and part of his ears. An eccentric, no doubt, but harmless enough; yet it was barely credible, and exceedingly distasteful, that this was Maia M'Gree's father. Mr Godly, in spite of his infatuation, experienced a sharp pang of vexation. It was too bad of Maia not to have prepared him for this meeting. She had certainly not given him to understand that she lived with her parents. For a moment he was angry with Maia, with her smooth talk of 'friends,' but one glance at her sufficed to

dissipate his anger and make his heart melt within him.

Mr Godly's host extended to him a gaunt, hairy hand. 'I am delighted to meet Mr Godly,' he said, biting his words as if he had difficulty with them. His tone was a model of urbanity, but Mr Godly did not like the way the man's full lips curled back, exposing his discoloured teeth. The face seemed slightly foreign, with its high cheek-bones, mobile nostrils, and pale leathery complexion. Certainly there was no hint of Maia in that face. 'Sit down, Mr Godly,' added M'Gree, 'and have a cigarette.'

'No cigarettes till after dinner,' commanded Maia, maternally severe. 'It will be ready in a minute or two.' She pulled an old-fashioned bell-rope that hung by the door.

'Quite mid-Victorian down here,' said M'Gree. 'Aren't we, Mr Godly? Even to the bowl of goldfish under the window. Notice the cabbage wallpaper and the glass lustres on the mantelpiece. Notice and admire the tasselled bell-rope. The overmantel, too, is worth attention. That mirror is a master of subtle distortion; true enough to deceive a man, and false enough to reflect him with malicious inaccuracy. A salutary medicine

for vanity, Mr Godly. But, of course, you're not vain.' The lips curled back again in a smile that might or might not have been derisive. Mr Godly could find nothing to say, and his host resumed, as if with added relish. 'If you walk in front of this moral mirror, Mr Godly, you will see your face assume in five seconds as many expressions as a cinema actor's will assume in a whole evening's performance. Quite an entertainment. But perhaps you don't care for moving pictures?' Was the fellow sneering, or was he not? 'Sometimes, when I injudiciously glance at myself in this amusing overmantel, Mr Godly, I find I have a harelip. Not a pleasant thing to have, you will agree. After repeated experiments I become quite anxious about the matter, and nothing will then content me but an impartial judgment from outside. Is the fault in me or in my mirror? You, Mr Godly, have never had occasion to ask yourself that question; but I am asking it repeatedly. Now my dear Maia is determined to spare me pain. She is so devoted, dear child! She would not shrink from telling me a lie, if she believed a lie would add to my comfort. For that reason I cannot always trust her to be candid with me. Now, if I may, I will appeal

to you, my dear sir. As one man to another, Mr Godly, and setting aside all polite conventions, *have* I a harelip?'

A harmless lunatic, thought Mr Godly; but he detected a flavour of spite in this mad monologue. 'You have no more a harelip than I have,' he replied, with an affectation of heartiness. Involuntarily he stroked his mouth with a forefinger, as if to reassure himself.

M'Gree, if that was indeed his name, gave vent to a little grating laugh. 'Ah, no more than you have. Thank you, Mr Godly. You comfort me. You comfort me exceedingly.'

This time there was no mistaking the irony. Mr Godly, revising his former judgment, decided, with angry disdain, that he had to deal with a mere conversational trickster, a creature as full of malice as an ape, possessing indeed the instincts of an ape but with a modicum of intellect added. He attempted no reply, but turned to revitalize himself by stealing another glance at Maia. He saw that she pulled the bell-rope a second time, her former summons having been unanswered.

'Why doesn't the woman come?' rasped M'Gree, breaking a tense silence.

Maia M'Gree answered curtly, 'I don't know. Do you?' She stood rigidly still, listening intently, her face pale as if with fright. Mr Godly looked from one to the other, aware of a crisis he did not understand. Maia in this unwonted mood was no less lovely than before; and M'Gree's face no more prepossessing. The look of irony had been replaced by one of amused and mulish cunning. No one spoke again for some while. The silence between these three became positive as a concrete thing: hard, metallic, icy cold. Then, with a suddenness that made Mr Godly wince, the man M'Gree went on talking as though nothing unusual were in the air.

'But though the place may seem mid-Victorian, Mr Godly—and its occupant, too, perhaps, to your fresh young eyes—I fancy this room at any rate is of more ancient origin. The ceiling, as you must have observed, is far too low even for the eighteen-fifties. I think this room must be the one remaining part of a building many hundred years old. It was the scene, by the look of it, of more than one pretty crime. I sometimes imagine it to be haunted still by the spirits of thieves and cut-throats.' The flow of words ceased for a

moment. 'You're not a loquacious man, are you, Mr Godly?'

Maia came to her friend's rescue. 'Dad talks enough for two, Mr Godly, when he's in the mood. A regular chatterbox . . . Ah, here's Mrs Fry at last.'

Timid shuffling steps could be heard approaching, but Mr Godly was surprised to notice that the sound came from the opposite direction. He then observed, for the first time, that there was a second door at the distant end of the room. No sooner had his eyes found it than it began moving slowly on its hinges. In the doorway, framed against a background of gloom, stood a stout, red-faced, comfortable woman of forty-five or less, wiping large red hands on her soiled apron. Mr Godly surmised pleasant homeliness in a face that was, at the moment, dark with trouble, contorted with nervous dread.

'Did you ring, miss?'

'Yes,' said Maia. 'Will you please serve dinner now, Mrs Fry. We're not waiting for our other guests.'

'Yes, miss.' The trembling woman dropped a curtsey to M'Gree, from whom she seemed unable to remove her fear-haunted eyes. 'Yes, sir. At once, miss.' She turned

and was leaving the room, when a word from M'Gree made her halt suddenly. It was as if she had been waiting for the word and dreading it, hoping against hope that she could get herself the other side of that door before it was uttered. Mr Godly, watching the scene closely, could see that M'Gree was savouring every moment of it, guessed that the man knew and exulted in her terrors and was playing with her, cat-and-mouse fashion. Not until the door had nearly closed on her, with her hope and her fear at their height, did he call her.

'Mrs Fry!'

The wretched woman dragged herself back into the room, like a dog. When M'Gree moved a pace towards her, she shrank back in spite of herself.

'*Dear* Mrs Fry!' said M'Gree, with suave cruelty. And he paused a moment, to roll her terror on his tongue.

'Yes, sir.'

'Don't you think we should have champagne to-night, Mrs Fry, in honour of Mr Godly?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Well, in that event, we *will* have champagne, Mrs Fry.'

'Very good, sir.'

And at last he allowed the victim to go

about her business. Mr Godly was so rigid with loathing for the man that he could not even so much as turn his head, again to nourish his eyes on Maia's healing beauty. Yet he half-wondered if his nerves had been playing tricks with him when, a moment after, his host inquired, with the gesture and inflection of an almost royal courtesy, whether he would care for a wash before dinner.

'Thank you,' assented Mr Godly. 'Smoky place, the city. One needs to be constantly washing.'

This was the longest speech Mr Godly had made since he had entered this house, and he despised himself for having made it. The remembered face of poor Mrs Fry was a reproach to him. How could he accept courtesy at the hands of this connoisseur in cruelty? Nevertheless he weakly allowed himself to be guided to the door by which Mrs Fry had entered and escaped. M'Gree pointed him up the dark stairs.

'It's a bit dim, I'm afraid,' apologized M'Gree. 'But we've no electric fittings in our quarters, you see. You have matches? Good. The first door on the left is my bedroom. You'll find everything you want there.'

Mr Godly, increasingly uneasy, climbed into the darkness. On the landing he paused, waiting till his eyes should become used to the darkness. By some freak of memory he forgot that the obvious thing to do was to strike a match. Glancing back over his shoulder he could see nothing at all except the dim outline of the stair-rail. The dining-room door had evidently been shut again, and shut in with it was all the light this infernal region contained. Queer hospitality that allowed the guest to wander blindly about in the dark ! Mr Godly's surroundings, now that he could no longer see them with the eye of sense, became to his mind shadowy, phantasmal. He was visited by the odd fancy that this house, this solid Wimbledon house, existed only in his disordered imagination, and that M'Gree was but a figure in an evil dream. He stood perfectly still and allowed these thoughts to scuttle like rats about the chambers of his mind. Then, with an effort of will, he stretched out his left hand until it made contact with the solid, reassuring wall, and moved forward step by step, feeling for the door to which he had been directed. When he found it he stopped to have another battle with himself as to whether or not he should enter it.

Finally, he opened the door, and struck a match.

The room he stepped into was large but meanly furnished except for its handsome four-poster bed, which was canopied and curtained with tawdry, beflowered, imitation-tapestry. Mr Godly's match burnt down to his fingers and went out, before he had time to take stock of anything else. While he fumbled in the box for another he heard, or fancied that he heard, a sound of tapping, like the tapping of a crutch on some distant pavement. The sound startled him, but he reasoned with himself convincingly. With the aid of his second match he found on the dressing-table a candlestick containing less than half an inch of candle, which he lit. The wick was so short that it afforded only the tiniest circle of flame, which the least breath of air might have blown out. 'It'll brighten up in a bit,' said Mr Godly, to encourage himself. He poured water into the basin on the washstand, found a cake of soap, and began his ablutions.

While he washed, the moment of drama he had witnessed not more than ten minutes ago was re-enacted on the stage of his memory. Disgust and fear began to master him. The evil spirit of M'Gree seemed to pervade the

atmosphere of the very room of which he himself was at this moment the sole occupant. Irrational fears and fancies multiplied ; the serpent became hydra-headed. His mind informed him of a clamminess in the room, a miasma, a kind of spiritual uncleanness, of which his physical senses could afford no evidence. Suddenly, as he stood drying his face with a towel, he found he was afraid to turn round. That queer enclosed bed was just behind him, and he wondered now if it were unoccupied. And if indeed there were anyone or anything in the bed (spying on him perhaps through a slit in the curtains), who or what could it be? Nothing good could make its bed in this contaminated air. At last, however, by an effort of will, he did turn to face his fear, only to find it apparently groundless. But he was not reassured. The bed had been the instrument of his fear but not its source. M'Gree was its source, that prowling poison. Mr Godly's spiritual nausea rose in his throat and threatened to choke him. He rapidly completed his toilet and opened the door. His mind was made up. He could endure this house no longer. He must leave it ; and Maia, by all that was holy, must leave it with him.

He had neglected to put out the candle, and now turned back to do so. Before he could reach the dressing-table, he heard a sound that turned him to a stone of immobility. Footsteps on the lower landing.

Second thoughts suggested that perhaps it was Maia herself. He stepped into the passage once more, and called down the stairs.

'Maia! Is that you?'

'Yes, Mr Godly. Yes, John. Do you want me?'

At the sound of her dear voice the blood flowed freely in Mr Godly's veins once more.

'If you could spare me a moment, Maia. I want a private word with you.'

'All right, John, I'm coming.'

Mr Godly blanched. There was a subtle change in the girl's tone. Footsteps began ascending the stairs; then stopped abruptly, and there followed a long silence.

'Are you coming, Maia?' cried Mr Godly, in perplexed anxiety.

'Yes, I'm coming, dear.' The voice was much nearer now, and its quality had changed perceptibly. There was a hint of irony in it. The footsteps continued. 'I'm coming, my little man!' There was more than a hint of irony. 'I'm coming in a minute, *dear*

Mr Godly !' There was mockery now in the voice. There was cruel gloating. It was the voice of an obscene hag. A strange voice. The voice of no woman.

Mr Godly opened his mouth to shriek, but only a thin reedy sound issued from his dry lips. 'Go back ! Go back !' He rushed into the room he had just left, and cowered by the candle, utterly distraught. The candle sputtered and went out with a hiss.

'I'm coming, Mr Godly,' said a voice at the door. 'What can I do for you ?'

He looked up to see dimly what he now knew he must see, the shadow of M'Gree peering in on him. Wild thoughts, bordering on madness, danced in Mr Godly's mind. Where was Maia ?

'Where is she ?' he stammered. 'What have you done to her, you swine ?'

'Come, Mr Godly, you forget yourself !' M'Gree's tone was impeccable. 'Dinner is waiting.'

He left the room without another word. Mr Godly, hearing him unquestionably descend the stairs, ventured to follow, speechless with fear for Maia and himself. A shaft of light from the dining-room door, which M'Gree had politely left open, illumined the stairway.

For an instant of agony Mr Godly paused on the threshold of the room. Then he entered and looked quickly round. Maia stood behind her chair, serenely awaiting him.

'You . . . you're all right?' cried Mr Godly.

'Why, of course.' She smiled at him affectionately. And at sight of her smile he could no longer control his pent-up emotion. Bending over the nearest chair, he burst into violent sobs.

'Our friend is a little overwrought to-night,' remarked M'Gree pleasantly.

CHAPTER V: FLAME

HAVING eyes for none but Maia, Mr Godly had failed to observe that there was a stranger at table. Shame at being taken unawares did more than anything else to enable him to regain control of himself. The compassion in Maia's demeanour made her more than ever bewitching. M'Gree's saturnine face simulated polite distress. Said Maia: 'Let me introduce my friend Mr Harry Le Poon.' An improbable name, thought Mr Godly, a palpable and clumsy invention. There is certainly a conspiracy against me. But he said aloud, with admirable duplicity, 'Good evening to you, sir. One of the Guernsey Le Poons, no doubt?'

Traces of discomposure were still evident in Mr Godly's face; and the young man called Le Poon could not forbear an oblique reference to it. 'How are you, Mr Godly? Bite on the bullet, as the saying goes, what!' As he spoke, his long fiddle-face wobbled

slightly on the tall stiff collar that apparently supported it. He looked as though a strong wind would decapitate him. But his general appearance was pleasant and reassuring, human enough to counteract the effect of M'Gree; and the grimace that twisted one side of his face, accompanying his gesture of friendliness, was no more than the adjustment of a large monocle demanded. Mr Godly grasped the proffered hand with unusual heartiness, feeling that he was thereby renewing his hold on sanity. He instantly liked the fellow, whom he judged to be an agreeable young ass. But he would have liked very much to know the degree of his friendship with Maia. Mr Godly wished that that young lady, if she must have numerous friends, would confine her attentions to older men.

'And this little chap we call Flame,' remarked M'Gree, in his sneering tone.

Which little chap? Mr Godly looked about him in bewilderment, and his surprised glance came to rest upon the figure of a tiny child, a midget indeed, who was perched in a baby's high chair at table. For an instant he was spellbound by the sight, doubting the evidence of his eyes. The little face that looked elfishly up at him was peaked and

queer but perfect in its exotic fashion : charmingly proportioned, alight with youth, strangely mature. But though the face had none of the displeasing characteristics of dwarfdom, Mr Godly noticed, with acute pain, that the child was slightly hunchbacked. He was dressed, incongruously, in an Eton suit. Mr Godly, troubled in spirit and at a loss what to say, fell back upon a fatuous convention. 'Well, my little man, and how are you?' The child responded with a ripple of laughter.

They all took their places for dinner, and M'Gree began again.

'You may think Flame a somewhat fanciful name,' said M'Gree. 'Now confess, Mr Godly, that you think it a fanciful name.'

'It is a ridiculous name,' grunted Mr Godly.

'But how courageous of you!' piped Le Poon, intoning childishly.

M'Gree grinned. '*Dear* Mr Godly! Full of youthful exuberance. You're not a day over fifty, Mr Godly, I'm sure. The name is fanciful : I admit it. But the creature is fanciful, too. What would you say, gentlemen, if I told you that Flame was a fairy?'

Mr Godly curtly retorted : 'I should say you were a liar.'

'But how old-world of you!' said Le Poon. 'I should never have thought of that quaint phrase.'

'You would be wrong, my courteous friend,' said M'Gree. 'The facts are these. Five weeks ago Maia found, upon her bedroom floor, a chrysalis. Indeed, she was just in time to prevent Mrs Fry sweeping it away with the dust. In shape it resembled the chrysalis of a butterfly, but its colour was cobalt-blue, and it was a shade larger than usual—about an inch and a half long. How it came to be on Maia's bedroom floor we do not know. Maia, taking an interest in it, —as she does in all young things, Mr Godly —picked it up, made for it a nest of cotton-wool, and enclosed it in a cardboard box that had formerly contained shredded wheat. A breakfast food, Mr Godly; but I expect you with your dashing ways prefer French breakfasts. Well, every day Maia used to go and peep at her treasure, like the pretty child she is; and at last, about a week after the chrysalis had been found, the happy event took place. In a word, Flame entered the world.'

'You mean to say . . . ?' cried Le Poon.

'Yes. The chrysalis split open, and lying inside it, as in a tiny coracle, was a little naked

boy, perfect in every detail, and measuring from head to toe rather less than one and a half inches.'

'You surprise me,' said Mr Godly, with studied irony. 'Why, Mr M'Gree, you are quite a poet in your way, aren't you?'

'In only one respect was he different from other children,' went on M'Gree, ignoring the interruption. 'Growing from his shoulders was a pair of wings. You can see them now,' added M'Gree, with a smile of cruel pleasure, 'sticking up under his jacket, poor child.'

Mr Godly rose from the table. 'Allow me to tell you, Mr M'Gree, that you're a cad, sir, to make a joke of the lad's deformity.'

'Oh, sit down, do!' sighed Maia. 'It's only Dad's fun. He's in a nonsensical mood to-night. Haven't you a sense of humour, my dear?'

The astonishing endearment had a devastating effect on Mr Godly's conscience. He looked from one face to the other, caught a kindly flicker of a smile from Maia, and abruptly reversed his decision to be no longer the guest of a man he hated and feared. He turned to M'Gree and bowed. 'I make my apologies, sir. I beg your pardon. I withdraw my remark.'

He shuddered with self-scorn. He felt that he could fall no lower than this shame.

'Not at all,'' said M'Gree. A grin flashed and faded. 'Sit down and have some more champagne.'

'That was a very pretty little tale of yours, Mr M'Gree,' remarked Harry Le Poon. 'Won't you tell us another?'

'Not now. The floor is yours, my friend.'

'How fascinating!' said Le Poon. 'But I'm afraid my repertoire is dull. The only anecdote that occurs to me is one that I feel I hardly ought to tell in the absence of my Uncle Appleyard, whom I think you have met, Miss M'Gree?'

'Yes. But why do you feel that?'

'Because my story concerns him, and he ought to be present to correct me on minor points of detail.'

'Oh, do tell us,' cried Maia, clapping her hands.

Le Poon modestly shrugged his shoulders. 'Really, it will disappoint you. It is only a commonplace ghost story such as you may find paralleled a hundred times in the Proceedings of the Spiritualist Society, where, by the way, my uncle is probably at this moment engaged in invoking the spirit of his deceased

brother, who owed him five pounds. Its one merit is its unimpeachable veracity.'

'Cut the cackle,' said Mr Godly. 'Cut the cackle, my boy!' he repeated genially. Already Mr Godly, fortified by champagne, was beginning to take a more kindly view of his company. 'The jolly old cac-cackle!' he concluded in a tone of triumph.

'But how quaintly colloquial!' responded Le Poon. 'I envy you your command of language, Mr Godly. Well, you must know, first of all, that my dear Uncle Appleyard in his ripe age pledged himself to abstain, by the help of the Solar Logos, from all fish, flesh, and fowl. My uncle kept his vow for many months; but one day, happening to pass a fishmonger's on his way home, he was visited by an irresistible temptation to buy a bloater for to-morrow's breakfast. Dear Uncle is very partial to bloaters. He yielded to the temptation. And next morning he cooked and consumed the bloater. From that moment he knew no peace. All day he wandered disconsolate, mourning the wrong he had done to Brother Bloater. In a gust of remorse he renewed his vows more passionately than ever; and by way of penance he abstained for twelve hours from any food whatsoever. Then,

limp with hunger, he staggered into a cheap restaurant and ordered a Welsh rarebit and a cup of chocolate. While he waited to be served he idly scanned the murders and other sporting news in his evening paper, but his mind was occupied with a vision of golden brown toast crowned with delicious melted cheese. The waitress came, slapped down a plate on the marble-topped table, and said "Thank you," though not as if she meant it. My Uncle Appleyard slowly folded up his paper, without looking at the choice morsel on his plate. A beatific smile spread over his chins. He was deliberately postponing the ecstasy of seeing, broaching, and tasting that Welsh rarebit. When at last he permitted his glance to descend, he started back in horror. What sort of Welsh rarebit was this ! It was the bloater, the bloater to whose murder he had been an accessory after the fact, the bloater he had eaten. The gentle fish lay mutely across the comparatively white plate, reproach staring from its eyes even through the glaze of death. My Uncle yelled for the waitress, and protested bitterly. But by the time she reached him the bloater had vanished from sight, and its place was occupied by the delicacy he had ordered. But, needless to say,

his appetite was gone. He hurried home, a haunted man. He dared not attempt supper lest the same disaster should befall him. Seeking the refuge of his bedroom, he found, lying on his pillow . . . well, you can all guess what he found. In the middle of the night again, when the clock was striking the hour of twelve, that bloater returned to him, ghostly, luminous, poised like a dragon-fly in the darkness.'

There was a long pause. 'Yes?' said Mr Godly. 'And how did it all end?'

'I haven't had time to think of an ending yet,' replied Le Poon.

Everybody laughed, except M'Gree and the child he had called Flame. The little one peered with bright eyes from one face to another, making an occasional puckish grimace. Grapes had been placed on a plate in the tray of his chair, but he did not appear to be touching them. Maia herself ate very little, and Mr Godly, in spite of his elated condition, guessed that Mrs Fry, who appeared at intervals with the fresh courses, was trembling on the verge of protest. Evidently the woman loved Maia as intensely as she feared M'Gree.

Conversation, after Le Poon's nonsense, became desultory, and remained so when dinner

was over. As if to break the silence Maia suggested music. Her guests murmured their pleasure, and Mr Godly glanced round in search of the piano. Maia noticed his look.

'Ah,' she said, rising and crossing the room. 'I didn't show you the spinet, did I? It's the one thing in the room that Dad's really proud of.'

Mr Godly joined the girl, and began admiring the aged and beautiful little instrument.

'No doubt you are a connoisseur, Mr Godly?' said M'Gree.

Mr Godly turned to Maia. 'Won't you play to us?'

'Allow *me*,' said M'Gree. And without waiting for an invitation he sat down at the spinet and began to improvise with great ease and charm. Mr Godly, biting his lip in vexation, returned to his seat, determined to take no pleasure in this man's performance.

But the quality of the music could not be ignored. 'Now where have I heard that before?' asked Mr Godly of himself. He rose unsteadily to his feet to repeat the question aloud, but sank back again at once, enthralled by the liquid melody that filled the room as with golden light. The fire of youth danced in Mr Godly's veins; an intolerable yearning

forced tears to his eyes. The room was transfigured. Mr Godly seemed to himself to be one of a company of angels, the greatest of whom, the king, was he who made music. 'Am I so drunk?' he thought, struggling against his weakness. Everything became enveloped in a luminous mist through which slanted shafts of green and shafts of blue from strange moons that blossomed in a pearly sky. He wanted to dance, but his feet were leaden. Vaguely, through the lovely palpable atmosphere, he could discern the forms of Harry Le Poon and Mrs Fry, both paralysed with rapture. And as he peered he saw the little one, Flame, struggling to get out of his preposterous clothes. The mist thickened, and when Godly looked again, Flame had broken free at last and was fluttering in mid-air. He beat his tiny iridescent wings in an ecstasy of longing, and, gradually gaining strength, finally flew past Mr Godly towards the window. There, in a growing frenzy, he dashed his exquisite little body against the panes, madly, like the imprisoned bird he was. With a mighty effort Mr Godly regained control of his legs; lurched across the room, and thrust an eager fist through the glass.

The music ceased abruptly. The enchant-

ment ended. Mr Godly, spattered with his own blood, walked back into the middle of the room with the air of one dazed with dreaming. M'Gree, still at the instrument, sat watching him with sardonic enjoyment. Mr Godly turned to Le Poon with a helpless, appealing gesture. The young man's face was drawn with emotion ; he was obviously fighting for self-mastery. Stirred by a common instinct, the two men moved towards each other and clasped hands.

'We've had too much champagne, sir,' said Le Poon. 'We're not ourselves.'

'Champagne.' Mr Godly repeated the blessed word. 'Drugged perhaps. Hypnotism.'

He clung desperately to this rational explanation. He luxuriated in the comfort of it. Then his glance fell upon the scraps of torn clothing that scattered the carpet, a tattered and miniature Eton suit. 'What's that ?' he asked.

M'Gree laughed in his dry, metallic fashion.

'Mrs. Fry !'

The woman woke out of her rigid trance.

'Yes, sir.'

'Fetch me that bowl of goldfish.'

Mr Godly stared.

'Another conjuring trick?' sneered Le Poon.

Maia, calmly watching them all, now intervened. 'Behave yourself, Dad.'

But Mrs Fry was already trembling towards her master with the bowl of goldfish in her hands. M'Gree looked round the room, as if to make sure of his audience. Then he plunged his right hand into the water, drew out a writhing fish, and bit its head off with savage relish.

CHAPTER VI: THE ELOPEMENT

EVEN Maia was shaken out of her calm, betrayed into an exclamation of horror. The appalling ugliness of the outrage, the subtle threat it implied, moved Mr Godly profoundly ; but it was the girl's incredulous cry that stung him into decision.

' Maia, I am going to take you away from this evil place."

He spoke sharply. His statement had the quality of a command. Maia M'Gree made a gesture of acquiescence, almost of appeal. M'Gree, still impishly grinning, nodded towards the overmantel mirror. ' Aren't you a little too young for such adventures, Mr Godly ? Look at yourself.' Involuntarily Mr Godly obeyed, caught sight of his own unimpressive figure, and winced. He was discouraged, but still determined. Podgy and middle-aged though he was, a task had been committed to him, a sacred charge. His heart swelled mightily ; he burned with a pure ardour to

defend the beauty that had exalted him. What he was, and what he became, mattered nothing : his personal hopes were sublimated in an heroic impulse. He turned to Le Poon.

'We are allies in this matter, Le Poon,' said Mr Godly, a trifle pompously. 'I shall conduct Miss M'Gree to a place of safety. Can we rely on you to prevent this man following us ?'

'But how medieval of you !' said Le Poon, affecting owlish admiration.

Mr Godly considered this levity to be ill-timed. 'Come ! This is no joking matter. Do you consent ?'

'I require notice of that question,' drawled Le Poon, swaying slightly as if the task of balancing his head on a collar three inches high were a juggling trick demanding the utmost finesse.

'Perhaps,' said Mr Godly, invaded by doubts, 'perhaps I have thoughtlessly chosen the less dangerous part. Yes, I will stay behind. You go, Le Poon.'

Le Poon's contorted face released its monocle with a suddenness that had the effect of an oath. He regarded Mr Godly with a stern, offended gravity. 'Danger does not alarm me,' he said. 'I will do as you suggested. Be off with you, man. She's waiting.'

Mr Godly, though still a trifle unsteady on his feet, was sober in mind. He joined Maia in the open doorway. But lingering compunction moved him to say, over his shoulder: 'It is only fair to tell you, Le Poon, that Miss M'Gree has accepted me as . . .' He felt the girl's grave, watchful eyes upon him, and broke off in embarrassment. What, after all, was his status with her?

'Yes?' replied Le Poon smoothly. 'She has accepted you as . . . as what, Mr Godly?'

'As my escort,' said Maia. 'Come along, John.'

Grateful for that bleak monosyllable, Mr Godly grasped her by the arm and piloted her manfully through the doorway. She preceded him up the dark stairs and into the hall. 'No time to be lost!' muttered Mr Godly. The fear of M'Gree was once more upon him. He snatched a cloak that hung on the hall-stand, and placed it round Maia's slim shoulders. 'You . . . you . . . you're miraculous.' By this lame phrase he sought to pay tribute to the fluid grace of her form whether resting or in motion; the long dark lashes and the deep candid eyes; the stillness of her, and the mysterious tide of life that deliciously stirred her firm, full maiden breasts. Her

lyrical beauty at once cooled his fevers and consumed his heart with fire. By wrapping the cloak about her, he concealed from himself the rippling contours of her body only to find the loveliness of her face enhanced by isolation. Her hand rewarded him with a warm touch.

The street gained, Mr Godly endeavoured to be severely practical. He reminded himself that he had undertaken a grave responsibility. To snatch a young girl from her father's care was no light matter, even such a girl from such a father. And what of the law? What of scandal? Speaking as an insurance official Mr Godly told himself that this was undoubtedly a risk that his company would not have wished him to entertain. But he found no difficulty in brushing these prudent considerations aside. They were less than a feather's weight against the irresistible tide of desire to pour out his life, like sacrificial wine, on the altar of his new religion. What agitated him was the question how, precisely, he should proceed to deal with the immediate situation. He perceived dimly that wits as well as enthusiasm were required for the solution of that problem. The one certainty in his bewildered and delighted mind was that he must put as much space as possible, as speedily as possible,

between Maia and that tainted house in Wimbledon. It was therefore with some surprise and alarm that he found himself, after half an hour's brisk and silent walking, ascending the dark slopes of a hill on Wimbledon Common. And it added to his chagrin to know that Maia, more athletic than he, was several steps ahead of him.

'But where are we going?' he called to her. She paused in her climb. With a mighty effort he overtook her, and repeated, breathing heavily: 'Where are we going?'

'O John!' She was humorously reproachful. 'Are you getting timid again?'

'Of course not. I'm enjoying every moment of this walk.' He sighed profoundly, and mopped his brow with a large silk handkerchief. 'But where is it going to end?'

'End?' she echoed, her eyes alight with mischief. 'Do you want it to end so soon?'

Mr Godly's tone became almost peevish. 'Maia, you're trying to flirt with me. I won't be flirted with. You know I'm desperately in love with you. All I ask is to know where we are going. What, in plain terms, is our destination?'

'Our destination? Do you mean our destiny?'

Mr Godly shuddered. He had lost his taste for post mortem speculations. 'No, it's too dark up here, too immense, for that kind of talk. I mean our destination. I am here to save you, Maia, from that dreadful creature you call your father. But I'm getting confused. Am I saving you, or are you saving me?'

'Neither, perhaps,' answered Maia, with a mysterious little smile. 'Perhaps we're losing ourselves together.'

'Yes,' said Mr Godly, and became very thoughtful. 'My dear,' he pleaded, after a moment's pause, 'tell me plainly. Have I any chance of winning you?'

She turned her face away, so that it was obscured by shadow. 'You have a chance of trying. Do you want to read the future? Must you know the issue before the battle is begun?'

'Yes. Yes.' He was revitalized with eagerness. 'I want to know the future.' He broke off with a laugh. 'How absurd we are! What does a girl like you know about the future, miracle though you are!'

'What indeed!' she said. 'But if I did know? Would you even then ask me to tell you?'

'No. Yes. Yes, I would ask you to tell me everything, but especially one thing.'

She laughed softly, and, as it seemed to him, sadly. 'Little fool!' she murmured. 'You would throw away ignorance, your sole treasure.'

'You are very unlike yourself to-night,' said Mr Godly. 'You are strange, and rather terrible. You make me feel like a child, Maia. The idea of dictating letters to you . . . why, how did I ever dare! Do you know, your voice is incredibly beautiful. If you asked me to die here and now, on this hill, I should be proud and glad to obey you.' Was it the night-air, or the stars, or the lingering effects of wine, that made Mr Godly talk in this unwonted fashion?

The girl frankly laughed at him. 'Die? And spoil the little holiday we planned this morning? That would be inconsiderate, Mr Godly.'

'Ah yes, our holiday together. Let's start at once.'

'We have started,' said Maia.

'But this isn't the way to the station.'

'A holiday spent at the station doesn't attract me,' answered Maia perversely. 'Come along.'

'But where?' insisted Mr Godly.

'Oh, anywhere,' cried the girl lightly.

'Over the hills and far away, to see what we can find.'

They had by now reached the summit of their first gentle hill. Mr Godly encouraged the fancy that they were poised on a flat disk of grass, high above the world. The lights of London formed a ring of fire round them. Richmond Hill and Kingston scintillated in the distance; and the great arching dome of the sky was washed with moonshine and sprinkled with brittle stars.

'We are alone in the universe,' said Mr Godly, in a tone of awe. Maia watched him with intent, interested eyes. On a stage flooded with limelight, and with all the beauty of the world for audience, our little man could not resist a histrionic gesture. He waved a fat hand towards the glittering darkness. 'We are alone,' he cried again.

'But how solitary of you!' replied a childish, singsong voice. A shadow stepped out of the shadows, and was seen next moment to be a tall human figure in a black suit surmounted by a high collar, to which had been attached, not too securely, a long thin face supplied with two conspicuous ears, one thin nose, one mouth, one eye, and a monocle.

'Why, it's Harry Le Poon,' said Maia.

A most uncalled for remark, thought Mr Godly : and his irritation found some vent in the tone of his greeting. 'Why, you've forgotten to put on your overcoat, Le Poon. Hadn't you better run back for it?'

Le Poon eyed him with cool insolence. 'No, I don't think I'll bother. I had thought of asking you to do me that trifling service, my dear Godly.'

Le Poon's change of position had brought his face into strong moonlight. It was not a pleasant sight. On the brow, just above the unmonocled eye, was a large bruise. The cheek was slightly cut. The eyelid, which was closed, sagged ominously.

'Good heavens, man! Your face!'

'I know,' said Le Poon sadly. 'But we all have our trials to bear, haven't we? I try not to brood.'

'Is this a time for fooling!' cried Mr Godly. 'Have you . . . have you *lost* your eye?'

'No,' said Le Poon. 'The little fellow's not lost. He's gone into retirement, that's all. But you asked if this was a time for fooling, a question that interests me far more than these physiological niceties. Yes, my dear Godly, it is a time for fooling. Have you any objection?' In his enthusiasm Le

Poon's head wobbled so alarmingly that Mr Godly could scarcely resist the impulse to put out a steadying hand.

'Of course not,' answered Mr Godly, with genuine cordiality. 'I admire your spirit. It's no good pulling a long face about one's troubles . . .'

'As for pulling a long face,' said Le Poon, 'Nature has kindly saved me that trouble. Perhaps that is why I try to keep cheerful. One must redress the balance somehow. Now if I had had the good fortune to be endowed with a face such as yours, Godly—round, good-natured, chubby and charming—I could have permitted myself to sound a melancholy note from time to time.'

'And what if you had had mine?' inquired Maia, who did not like being left out of the conversation.

Le Poon stiffened. 'I cannot speak of that, Maia.'

'But how ungallant!' she protested, mimicking him. 'Is it so dreadful?'

He trembled with passion as he turned towards her. 'Yes,' he said, with a fierce ardour.

Mr Godly's heart sank as he saw the blush that slowly suffused her cheeks. She had never

blushed for him. He recognized that in love-making he was no match for this long scare-crow, this juvenile appendage to a monocle. But he thanked heaven that his own position was secure. He and no other was the accepted one. She would not break faith.

'But you haven't told us how you came to hurt yourself,' said Maia. 'Were you attacked?'

'Mr M'Gree—whom, by the way, it is a pleasure to know—spoke out of his turn. I ventured to correct him, but he could not bring himself to look at things from my point of view. This trifling abrasion is the brief epitome of his contributions to an agreeable discussion.'

'Oh dear!' cried Maia, in vexation and distress. 'We ought not to have left you alone with Dad. He is such an old tease. It was about me you quarrelled, I'm sure. But Harry, you ought to have something on that eye.'

'That's an idea,' admitted Le Poon. 'Do you happen to have half a pound of raw beef on you, Mr Godly?'

Mr Godly took a step towards the injured young man with the air of one who is determined to stand no more nonsense. 'Look

here, Mr Le Poon, believe me when I say that these tactics won't succeed, sir. You have done Miss M'Gree a great service, and for that I am grateful to you. I hope you will frequently visit us when we are married. Every second Wednesday, shall we say, Maia? Well, well, that can be decided later. But just at present, my dear chap, you'll excuse us, I'm sure. The fact is . . .' Mr Godly, whose mood varied from moment to moment, leaned forward to impart a confidence. But, hesitating at the last, he turned to the girl. 'May I tell him, Maia?' She shrugged her shoulders, but he took her slight smile to signify consent. 'The fact is, Maia and I are just off on a little holiday jaunt. I believe you to be a man of sense and a man of honour, and I needn't say that we tell you this in strict confidence.'

'But how diverting of you!' said Le Poon, adjusting his monocle, and swaying like a sapling in the wind. 'You must have had even more champagne than I, Mr Godly. For the boot, don't you see, is not only on the other foot: it is, so to speak, in another street.'

'I don't follow you,' said Mr Godly.

'Exactly. I hope you will continue not to follow us.'

'I don't understand you.'

'Don't take it to heart,' said Le Poon, with a kindliness that singularly failed to soothe Mr Godly. 'Such a mistake is very pardonable after the hilarious evening we've had.'

'Can't you speak plainly?' grunted Mr Godly.

'Moderately so, in the festive circumstances. My articulation is not at its best, but it will pass muster, I fancy. What I am trying to make clear to you, Mr Godly, is that you are suffering from a momentary confusion of identities. In the higher sense, I concede, you and I are one. It is a theory peculiarly dear to the heart of my Uncle Appleyard. But, for practical purposes, for the ordinary conduct of this mortal life, you and I are two separate persons. In your rapt contemplation of the One, Mr Godly, do not lose sight of the existence, equally indisputable, of the Many. We must try to be logical, don't you think, even in our mysticism. Humiliating as it may seem to your proud and poetical spirit, we do live, for a while anyhow, in a state of individual differentiation, finite beings in a universe of finite things. Nor need we enter here into the perplexing question: how a conglomeration of finities can be assumed to be itself infinite.

Human speech, Mr Godly, is admittedly a hindrance to thought, as well as a help. Our poor blundering words bruise the very truths at which, like eager children, they grasp. At this moment the fact for you to seize, the great practical truth for you to pin your faith to, is that you are yourself, and that I am somebody else.'

'Hell!' shouted Mr Godly, dancing in his exasperation. 'What in thunder are you chattering about?'

'The One and the Many,' replied Le Poon blandly, 'with a passing reference to my Uncle Appleyard. Did I, by the way, ever tell you the story of my Uncle Appleyard and the donkey? It illustrates my point rather brilliantly.'

'Oh, damn your pedantic foolery'! Mr Godly was in a frenzy. 'I've asked you, as politely as I could, to leave us. I've told you that we are on the point of setting out for a holiday together. If you like to betray us, do so. But get away, and be damned to you!'

'And I,' replied Le Poon, still kindly, 'have spent ten minutes explaining to you that it is with me, not you, that Miss M'Gree is spending her holiday.'

'I don't believe you,' said Mr Godly. But his heart misgave him. His appealing eyes sought Maia's. But just as she opened her mouth to break her long silence, she was interrupted by a series of strange half-animal grunts and groans coming from some struggling and as yet invisible creature a few yards distant. All three turned in the direction of the sound, in time to see a prodigiously fat old gentleman moving towards them over the brow of the hill.

'Very opportune!' said Le Poon in a low voice. 'It is my Uncle Appleyard.'

Uncle Appleyard seemed very sure of his welcome. He seemed also very much out of breath. His large, white, moon-face exhibited symptoms of physical distress and emotional delight. He was in evening dress, and carried on his arm a heavy coat the greater part of which was dragging along the ground as though it had been an attenuated corpse. At sight of Maia standing in the foreground he removed an opera hat from his shining white pate, and bowed ceremoniously.

'I was dressed for the opera, my dear, when your note came. Hence this—ah!—costume.' Godly and Le Poon stood rigid as statues, guessing that the old gentleman had not observed them.

'Ah yes,' said Maia. 'My note.'

'I've left my bag at the station,' added Uncle Appleyard, immensely self-satisfied. 'And I've taken our tickets, and made all arrangements.'

'Tickets?' echoed Maia. 'What tickets, Mr Appleyard?'

Uncle Appleyard beamed on her rosily. 'Ah, you little rogue, you may well ask! Two nice little first-class tickets, my dear, for our wonderful holiday together.'

'But how matrimonial of you!' cried the shrill voice of Le Poon.

CHAPTER VII: MOON AT THE FULL

UNCLE APPLEYARD winced, and slowly turned his huge bulk in the direction of Le Poon. His large blue eyes bulged with indignation. 'My dear, who are these gentlemen?'

'Your travelling companions, sir,' said Mr Godly. 'We shall be quite a jolly little party.'

'This,' said Maia, 'is your nephew Harry. Don't you recognize him? And this is Mr Godly. I want you all to be good friends.'

'My bosom is already bursting with goodwill,' remarked Le Poon. 'Never was there such a united gathering. Let us all go to Brighton, uncle, and chant the chant of the Whole.'

'If you will pardon my curiosity, Maia,' said Mr Godly, with studied irony, 'may I ask how Mr Appleyard knew where to find you?' His composure broke down. 'Did you . . . did you *contrive* this meeting?' he spluttered.

Maia replied, with no trace of disquietude in her tone : 'Mr Appleyard and I have met here before.'

'Indeed ! And Mr Le Poon : had he an appointment ?'

'An invitation, shall we say,' broke in Le Poon. 'An invitation general but cordial. I could not bear to lose sight of you, Mr Godly, so I followed with all reasonable speed.'

'And what of your promise ?'

'I fulfilled it. Did you fancy I should settle down to an all-night séance with our friend M'Gree ? No ; the intellectual strain would have been too great. I promised to prevent his following you, and I did so. In the heat of the moment it seemed to me that the quickest and kindest way of effecting my purpose was to tie him up in his own table-cloth, so that was the method I adopted. Now that surprises you, Mr Godly ; I see surprise in your face. Mr Godly, I feel that the wells of your life have been poisoned by a popular fallacy. You imbibed it with your mother's milk. She, worthy soul, instead of hushing you to sleep with a conventional nursery lullaby, bent tenderly over your cradle murmuring, "A man of intellect is never a man of action."

Since then all the world has conspired to confirm you in that dark error, until this moment. For this, Mr Godly, is the moment of apocalypse, the moment to which you will look back in after years, saying, "Then began my new life." I count myself blessed to have been the humble instrument of your enlightenment. No, no! Don't bother to thank me.'

'I had no intention of thanking you.' Mr Godly emphasized his ingratitude by a scowl.

'I know how you feel,' said Le Poon, gently placing a sympathetic hand on Mr Godly's arm. 'When a great truth first dawns in the mind, one is bewildered, awed, as well as overjoyed. So many old landmarks of thought are seen to be gone. So many familiar ideas are uprooted. 'Yes, there is a certain sadness in the experience. The prisoner clings for one mad moment to the broken shackles. He gets his first glimpse of the manifold dangers of freedom. But take courage, Mr Godly: that will all pass, and then . . .'

'Excuse me,' said Uncle Appleyard. He had waddled across ten feet of turf, and now stood menacingly at Le Poon's elbow. 'I don't want to disturb your train of thought,'

he said, with manifest sincerity. 'I'm sure it's all very uplifting. But our situation here is one that needs delicate handling, don't you think? Isn't it time we had a friendly chat about this affair, and came to some understanding?'

'I am all for friendly chats myself,' said Le Poon. 'In fact, uncle, you've just interrupted one. But before we come to an understanding, I want to tell my friend Mr Godly a story I have in mind. I think it might cheer him up. You remember, Godly, I was on the point of telling you about my Uncle Appleyard and the donkey, when you lost your temper about some trifle or other. Always a pity, I think, to lose one's temper: you run the risk of losing so many good things besides. This story, for example. What was the donkey's name, uncle?'

'Which donkey?' asked Uncle Appleyard, pink with innocent surprise.

'My uncle has known so many donkeys, Mr Godly, that he cannot recall the one I mean. But I've just remembered the name. It came to me on the wings of the night-wind: I hear it in the silence. The donkey's name was Ned. Well, this donkey one day . . . Oh, what did the donkey call you, uncle?'

Uncle Appleyard shook his head, vaguely smiling.

'My Uncle Appleyard doesn't remember what the donkey called him. But happily I myself have just remembered. It is written on the vault of heaven in letters of lightning. The donkey used to address my uncle as *Hee-haw*. Well, one day he called to my uncle when I myself happened to be near. Delighted by the donkey's display of affection, uncle began to discourse for my benefit on his favourite theme, which is, as you know, the unity of life. By the way, uncle, you ought to have a talk with Mr Godly. He has ideas about the nature of the Absolute that will interest you extremely.'

'Ah!' Uncle Appleyard smacked his lips in anticipation of a choice morsel. 'A kindred soul!'

'Exactly,' said Le Poon. 'Kindred, and even more than kindred. My Uncle Appleyard, Godly, insisted on that occasion that the affection which drew him to the donkey, and the donkey to him, was the outward and visible sign of a spiritual identity. Just at that moment the donkey kicked my uncle, and not without enthusiasm. Whereupon my uncle, I am sorry to say, flew into a pas-

sion, and was about to kick the donkey in return. But I pointed out to him that his action was unnecessary, proving my contention by a simple syllogism. My uncle had been kicked by the donkey Ned: my uncle and the donkey Ned were one: therefore the donkey Ned had been kicked by the donkey my uncle. Each was at once the kicker and the kicked—a rather beautiful thought, don't you feel, Mr Godly?'

'It is beautiful to think of your uncle being kicked,' agreed Mr Godly. 'It would be still more beautiful to kick him. But he has at least made a sensible and necessary suggestion: which is more than you have done. We can't stand here listening to your nonsense for ever, though I'm sure you'd enjoy it if we did. One of us is to take Miss M'Gree for a holiday. Which is it to be? For my part, I have no doubt in the matter; for only a few minutes before you, Le Poon, interrupted us, she renewed her promise to me.'

'Come now,' said Uncle Appleyard, spreading out his hands in an attitude of benediction. 'Let us be reasonable. Let us be calm. Give and take, give and take. That must be the keynote. We are all notes, as it were,

in the same chord. You see that, don't you, Mr Godly? Now what I mean to say is, you can't hold dear Maia to the promise you speak of, because it was given in a moment of forgetfulness. She already had a prior engagement. Her note to me must have been written some hours before.'

'But her first promise to me was given this morning,' argued Mr Godly, 'in my office.'

'Her promise to me was given yesterday,' said Le Poon. 'You two gentlemen should therefore see each other home without further delay. I'm sure your wives must be getting anxious about you. Cut and run, cut and run. That is the keynote. Shall we be moving now, Maia?'

'I'm glad you've remembered my existence at last,' said Maia. 'I'm getting colder every minute.'

'And in every sense?' inquired Le Poon.

'Yes.'

'Well, good night, you fellows,' said Le Poon cordially. 'Maia and I must be getting along. Thanks for the pleasant evening.'

Uncle Appleyard began to emit a curious gurgling noise that to the lay mind would have suggested approaching apoplexy. But

Mr Godly was too self-occupied to have any attention to spare for him. The old gentleman could have rolled upon the grass and expired in the utmost agony without so much as interesting Mr Godly, who stared at the departing couple with unwavering concentration. His thoughts were all of murder, which now presented itself to him as at once an acute pleasure and a devotional exercise. His intelligence, the slave at this moment of his impulse, worked with unparalleled zeal at the task of inventing ingenious justifications of the violence he so ardently desired to commit. Indeed, so swiftly did his brain serve him, this task of self-justification did not occupy a second of time: Le Poon was so obviously an arch-villain, a serpent of guile, from whom Maia must at all costs be rescued. But between thought and act there is a great gulf fixed; and Mr Godly was at bottom too gentle a little man to leap across it. He lacked, when it came to the point, the capacity for bestial abandonment which hot-blooded slaughter implies; in his inmost being he shrank from the thing as from an obscenity. He lacked also the mere physical power; but that trifling difficulty did not occur to him. The murderous impulse dissipated itself in a

riot of sanguinary thoughts. He spent a lurid five seconds contriving pretty and painful ways of killing Le Poon, who stood between himself and his life's dearest desire ; but even he himself recognized before long that it was all no more than a piece of imaginative self-indulgence that could find no issue in action.

During this crisis in the mind of Mr Godly, Maia and Le Poon had walked no more than five yards together ; and now the girl suddenly stopped, in apparent surprise, and turned as if to await the others. 'But, Harry!' she protested. 'What are those two poor dears doing?'

Le Poon could not bridle his impatience. 'Oh, never mind them. Do come along, Maia!'

'But aren't they coming too?' cried she, innocently astonished.

'Maia!' said Le Poon sternly, his affectations forgotten, 'you promised me.'

'But I promised you all,' objected Maia. 'Didn't you hear them say so?'

Mr Godly felt as a man might feel if, in the middle of a black night of suffering, dawn suddenly burst upon the world with the sound of a brazen gong. New life flowed in his veins. There was yet hope. If he could

not himself possess her, it was something to be able to live in her presence, to feel the warm light of her loveliness pouring in upon his stricken spirit. But Uncle Appleyard seemed less satisfied ; for when the four gathered together again to resume their tedious debate, he surprised them all with a suggestion that amounted to flat blasphemy.

'I appeal to you boys,' he said. And Mr Godly felt that Uncle Appleyard was, after all, not a bad old buffer in his way. 'I appeal to you two boys. Is she worth it? She's making fools of all three of us. We must be firm with her, independent. We must show her that we are not men to be trifled with. Kind but firm : that is the keynote.' He radiated benevolence from whose sphere Maia was pointedly excluded.

'Uncle Appleyard,' said Le Poon. 'You are undoubtedly a tower of wisdom and strength. Perhaps your supernatural lucidity of mind is due to your having seven bodies. Did I mention, Godly, that my Uncle Appleyard believes himself to possess seven bodies, seven bodies in seven interpenetrating planes. He arrived at the number by counting his chins. In his youth, I ought to add, he led the singing in a chapel that was not provided

with a harmonium. Hence his predilection for keynotes. Have mercy, dear uncle, on our dull wits, and explain your intention more precisely. Kind and firm: yes, that will serve admirably as a keynote. Now let us have the full score.'

Mr Godly, unable to contain his rage, shook a plump fist in the face of Le Poon. 'Hold your silly tongue! Now, Mr Appleyard, what do you propose. I am a business man. We will discuss the matter together sensibly and calmly. Pay no heed to this young jackanapes.'

'Let us disperse,' said Uncle Appleyard unctuously, as though he were reading the Lessons, 'each to his own home.'

'And leave Miss M'Gree to take care of herself?' Mr Godly was appalled by the outrageous proposal. But desperation lent him cunning. 'There's something in that,' he conceded. 'It would serve her right.' But he dared not look at Maia.

'I agree,' said Le Poon. It was evident that the drastic resolution sobered him. 'Damnation!' he added, flinging up his arms.

'Hush, my boy,' said Uncle Appleyard. 'You forget yourself. There is a lady present.'

Le Poon's arms dropped suddenly to his side. The languor of despair enfolded him. 'Is there, dear uncle? I cannot see her.'

The others looked about them in dismay.

'She's gone!' sobbed Uncle Appleyard. The mountain of flesh quivered like a jelly. He looked like a greedy child at a party when all the good things have been eaten.

'All the beauty of the world!' The cry came spontaneously from Mr Godly's heart. He was himself surprised by it.

Le Poon stared through his monocle like a sentimental fish. He heaved a great sigh; and then remarked coolly. 'No, my dear fellow. Not all. I have some more here.' He drew a magnum of champagne from his breast pocket, and handed it to Mr Godly. 'Have some, Godly! Bottled beauty. By heaven!' he cried in alarm, 'I believe I am very nearly sober!'

Mr Godly, whom grief had rendered both unfastidious and mannerless, was about to apply his lips to the bottle's neck when Le Poon, swaying towards him, put out a restraining hand. 'Tush, man! We are not yet animals. Here is a glass.' He snatched the bottle from Godly's hand and filled the glass. 'There! There's a mistress who is never

faithless. She is kind as she is fair. She distributes her bounties without favour. Even a plump little fellow such as you are, Godly, even an unsightly mass of senility like my Uncle Appleyard, can embrace her and become a god. She makes the blackest night blossom into a fountain of stars; she fills the heart with fantasy, and the belly with sunlight. Hic, haec, hoc, as the poet sings. But perhaps you do not care for the Silver Latin authors, my poor Godly?' So saying, he emptied the glass into his own twisted mouth, and his lips moved devoutly, as in prayer.

'Well,' said Mr Godly, after a long silence, 'her disappearance does simplify the matter. There's no denying that.' He cunningly concealed his eagerness to be gone in quest of her.

'Yes,' said Uncle Appleyard. 'There is nothing for it but to go home. Good night!' Without another word he turned his back on his companions, and walked away at as brisk a pace as he could manage in the direction from which he had come.

'Who would have thought the old man had so much pep in him?' inquired Le Poon of the starlit sky. 'So long,' he added. But he lingered.

'Before we part,' said Mr Godly, 'promise

that you'll lunch with me to-morrow.' He fished a card-case from his pocket. 'Any time after twelve-thirty. Here's my business address.' He marvelled at his own astuteness.

'Delighted,' said Le Poon. 'Which way are you going now?'

This was a question that Mr Godly found it difficult to answer. 'Not your way, I'm afraid. I branch off here.' He waved his hand vaguely towards an imaginary path down the hill. 'Good-bye, Le Poon. We shall live to laugh at this catastrophe.' He walked away, choosing his direction at random.

But his mind was working as swiftly and as clearly as excitement would let it. 'Over the hills and far away,' he muttered. 'Now where precisely is that?' He recalled Maia's gesture in saying those potent words. She had pointed straight ahead. Smiling to think how he had outwitted his two rivals, he retraced his steps, climbing back towards the brow of the hill.

'Damn!' said Mr Godly.

A few yards ahead of him was a huge lumbering creature that could be no other than Uncle Appleyard, puffing and panting in the wake of a thinner and slighter figure, that of Le Poon. Mr Godly doubled after them.

And so the pursuit of beauty continued in a procession of three : a tall, thin, shockheaded, and inebriated young man with a dislocated head ; an elderly gentleman, also hatless, and quite hairless, carrying an overcoat and an opera hat ; and a shortish, middle-aged, respectable man of the world with no nonsense about him. On all three the full moon shone placidly, without partiality.

CHAPTER VIII: GODLY BREAKS OUT

POUNDING up the hill, Mr Godly became at length exasperated by the conviction that he was making no progress. It was as if the whole world were a colossal treadmill kept in perpetual and futile motion by his feet alone. When finally, after much labour, he did gain the top, he paused, panting heavily, to look about him. Of his two rivals he could see no trace; evidently they had disappeared into the shadows of the valley beyond. He stood on the blunt point of a pyramidal hill, looking down into the dark abyss that surrounded him. When he raised his eyes, it seemed to Mr Godly that by stretching out his hands he could grasp and hold the great moon that hung near him like golden grape-fruit swaying on a laden bough. The star-punctured sky was like a lid moving down upon his eyes. He was moved to struggle against his confinement. He raised his hands like a diver; leaped in

a final frenzy of hope ; and plunged head-foremost into the parchment sky. For an age, as it seemed, he fell dizzily through space. The sky rushed to meet him. He struck out at it furiously with both hands ; heard it crackle under his touch with the sound of a breaking egg-shell ; and emerged into sudden sunlight.

Mr Godly was dazzled with the unaccustomed blaze of colour. He rubbed his eyes, like one awaking from dreams ; but he did not believe that he had been dreaming, and he was sure that he was not dreaming at this moment. This was nothing so dull, nothing so capricious, as a dream : it had followed the earlier events of the day in a natural and logical sequence. He was astonished, as one never is in dreams ; his mind was crystal-clear in its sense of his personal identity, its memory of what had preceded this apocalypse ; his perceptions were unclouded. To joy he was stirred, as well as to wonder, a joy that saturated every part of his bodily consciousness. This was, in part at least, the fulfilment of Maia's promise to him. Herself had for the time being eluded him, and in this first moment of delight he was marvellously content to have it so. In the fullness of time, he knew,

he would find her again, and, even now, the sun that shone upon him from a blue sky, and the tingling green of the grass that gladdened his eyes, afforded evidence of her near presence. Looking about him, he recognized with a pang of pleasure that he was back in the world of his childhood. Everything was at once fresh and familiar. He was a child again, responding eagerly to the sights and sounds and savours of a world dewy with youth ; yet, being still a man, he was able to taste the experience maturely, with full appreciation, as a child cannot do. He began taking stock of the possessions he had re-acquired : a little white country house that quivered like a flame in the strong sunlight, yet looked cool and solid to the touch ; a croquet-lawn surrounded by four green banks and approached by three worn stone steps ; an orchard, beyond which, dividing it from the yellow cornfields, flowed a little limpid brook, itself a world in miniature peopled with queer beautiful creatures. He remembered what a delightful splash one could make by tossing large pebbles into this brook. In the white house, when he chose to enter it, he would find his father and his mother, Dolly the housemaid, Granny who wore elastic-

sided boots, and Waldo the speckled rocking-horse : the thought of this reunion gave him profound satisfaction, but he was in no hurry for it. And in the orchard, quite possibly, Dan Goop the gardener was at this moment leaning on his spade, brooding upon his fabulous past : a very old man with leather-brown, withered-apple cheeks, bright eyes, gaunt hairy hands, who would for hours ruminate at large, like a cow, chewing tobacco and spitting at intervals with a nice precision. He had a fund of incomprehensible tales, this ancient, and a cavernous pocket from which, dipping excitedly, one could extract string, a rusty nail or two, a clasp-knife, solid sticks of black shag, and windfallen apples each one a maggot-hive, a green globe riddled with worming life.

Moved by a whim to seek out Dan Goop, Mr Godly began idly to stroll towards the orchard. At the far edge of the level lawn, where pines cast a sharp square of cool bronze gloom upon the dazzling day, he paused to glance back, with a pleasure untroubled by thought, at the white house of his childhood, which now trembled deliciously under the passionate touch of morning sun. Then, with an abrupt change of intention, a butter-

fly memory, he turned back diagonally across the sleek turf, and entered, by a gate in its ivied flint wall, the kitchen garden, region of rich joys. Long rows of raspberry-bushes invited him, and he plunged eagerly into their tunnels of green light. Here was a little enclosed world, as he well remembered, where one could lie on one's stomach and look intimately into the affairs of insect peoples : spiders, like little golden balls, scampering fantastically on long thin legs ; ants busy with great burdens ; green flies as beautiful and unexpected as fairies ; blades of chance grass, waving like the banners of a minute languid carnival. Leaning on his elbows, chin cupped in his two hands, Mr Godly looked down, as from an Olympian height, upon the hills and valleys, populous with insect life, that stretched beneath him : mountains and precipices, smooth lanes and rutted roads, such as he himself in childhood might have fashioned of plasticine. In imagination he shared the ardours and enterprises of this remote world, crawling with the ungainly spider till his legs were weary, staggering with a grain-loaded ant along deep gorges and up mountain-sides, until beads of sweat be dewed his forehead. Had they indeed been

creatures of his own making he could have done no more.

To roll over on to his back, after such a scrutiny, was to be released into a realm of limitless conjecture. Mr Godly, through whose being the bright day now pulsed unthought, lay back and filled his vision with the puffs and tatters of white cloud, tinged with gold, moving in even flow across the painted blue screen of sky that shut him in. The sound of a girlish voice, calling him by name, jerked him into a sitting posture. A slim shadow of grace stood before his sky-dazzled eyes, and for a moment he could not discern her features, could see only the lithe shape of her, silhouetted against the luminous green foliage.

'Hullo, John! I've been looking for you *everywhere*. What a long time you've been!'

It was Maia indeed, but a Maia so transfigured, so intolerably lovely, that Mr Godly was faint and mute with adoration. He felt that he had never properly seen her before—and all because she had changed her clothes and was standing, bareheaded, in the strong sunlight. She wore now a sleeveless garment, ethereal in substance, of diaphanous undyed

silk. She waited for the response he seemed unable to utter.

'Don't you remember?' She pouted, and gave a little jerk of the head that set the black night of her hair in motion. 'Oh, it doesn't matter.'

Mr Godly was enchanted by her petulance. He sprang to his feet and impulsively seized both her hands. 'But I do remember,' he said. 'How could I forget! It's only that you are so terribly beautiful.'

Conscious that sulkiness became her, she would not relent too soon. 'But you were such a long time coming.'

'That was only because I couldn't find the way at first. Why did you run off?'

She laughed. 'If I hadn't, we should be there still, all four of us. Where have the others got to?'

Even that question failed to disturb Mr Godly's serenity. But he retained enough worldly wisdom to avoid answering it by parrying with a question of his own. 'Are we at the end of our journey, Maia? This is the best place in the world.'

'The end of the journey! Why, John, it's only just beginning.'

'Where are we making for?' asked Mr

Godly, though more from force of habit than because he wanted to know. The present being perfect, he could spare no thought for the future.

'Over the hills,' replied Maia. 'Come along.'

He sought for some hyperbole extravagant enough to express his admiration of her. 'What a marvel you are, Maia! You must be a fairy!'

'Why, of course,' she said, smiling. 'What else should I be?'

He laughed at her little joke, and she with him. Then she turned away, and her bare sun-browned legs twinkled into movement. He followed her out of the tunnel of raspberry-canes, raced after her across the potato patch and through the orchard (no sign of Dan Goop), and came up with her at length, where she smilingly waited for him, on the bank of the brook. She was cool and still; her breath came easily; her eyes were alight with life and the joy of life. An exquisite shyness seized him, to conceal which he said boyishly: 'You're not bad at running.' She smiled again, and without mockery, a wise, maternal smile; and with a gesture indicated that she was ready to continue the journey. Mr

Godly noticed then that in the brook, within stepping distance, floated a small boat, painted a pale blue and carrying for sail a large inverted triangle of brown. Maia leapt lightly into it, and sat down. With immense gravity, yet feeling that he was taking part in some absurd pretty game, Mr Godly followed. Obedient to Maia's hand, the brown sail bellied, and the warm wind caressed the boat into smooth motion. The waters of the brook parted cleanly, with a little ripple of melody, under her cleaving keel. The orchard on one side, the cornfields on the other, glided slowly past ; the flow of the sky above became more swift. Mr Godly, glancing over his shoulder at his vanishing home, saw a little bareheaded boy in a brown holland tunic who stood at the water's edge, eyes full of dreams, gazing into distance. He had begun to formulate a question about this child when a bend in the river intervened between them, and his curiosity faded into oblivion. The brook, he noticed, was rapidly widening. The boat moved more quickly. The wind came in little fierce gusts that made with the sail a liquid bubbling music.

'There's one thing,' remarked Mr Godly, in great high spirits, 'There'd be no

chance for old Appleyard in a boat this size.'

'I wonder where they are, those two,' said Maia.

'In bed and asleep, I hope.' Mr Godly spoke with feeling. 'I say, wouldn't this astonish our friend Datchet!' Our friend Datchet was an office colleague.

Maia's response was an enigmatic smile that disturbed Mr Godly. Was it possible that Datchet . . . he thrust a distasteful thought away, and gave himself up once more to the enjoyment of his surroundings. By now the quality of the light had changed; and Mr Godly could see that they were approaching the open sea. It lay just ahead, smooth, opalescent, blue-green, languid under a milky sky. The wind sank a little; the boat floated lazily on, leaving the land behind.

'Really and truly,' said Mr Godly, in a tone of profound earnestness, 'I'm enjoying this trip more than anything I can remember. I really am. And I'm not a good sailor, as a rule.'

Still and clear as the waters of a lagoon, yet extending to the horizon and divided only by a thread of gold from the bending sky, the

deep sea stirred under them with no more motion than that of a child's breathing. Mr Godly, dipping his hands into the water, crowed baby-like to feel the cool beauty slipping between his fingers, and, withdrawing his hand, chanted as he watched the diamond-drops sparkling back into their element. His performance would certainly have been a revelation to friend Datchet. The sun burst suddenly his prison of grey cloud, shattering the stillness not with sound but with a shock of radiance that was like clashing cymbals. Mr Godly stared into the pale-green gleaming underworld of the now transparent water. Scarlet fishes, and fishes of silver, fins waving and tails twitching, loomed up at him with great circular eyes. He could see, too, the faces of tall sinuous flowers that clung to the sandy floor of the sea, fathoms below ; and starfish ; and a tiny forest of ferns ; and a shell the size and shape of a dinner-plate, like a pale-green moon in a sky of shot-silk colours.

'If all seas were as calm as this one,' remarked Mr Godly chattily, 'our firm would have to close down, eh? Good job, too!' he added, on an afterthought.

'Listen,' said Maia, finger on lip.

A series of sibilant whispers reached their listening ears.

'Oars!' said Mr Godly. 'Coming nearer,' he added, after a pause. 'Who can it be?' The prey of sudden fears, he never for an instant doubted that the sound signified pursuit. 'Maia, can it be . . . your father?'

'I haven't a father,' she answered.

Mr Godly stared at her wildly. 'Then that man. That beast M'Gree. You were in his house.'

Her smile added fuel to the flame that tortured him. 'If he isn't your father, who is he?'

'An experiment,' said Maia. 'Are you getting timid again, John?'

'Timid!' snorted Mr Godly.

Said Maia gently: 'Mind you don't upset the boat, dear.'

The approaching sound was now unmistakably that of oars. 'Give me the sculls,' commanded Mr Godly. 'Where are the damn things, Maia?'

She shook her head amusedly.

'No sculls?' shouted Mr Godly. 'No paddles? No nothing?'

'A beautiful sail,' said Maia.

'But there's no wind!'

Mr Godly gazed wildly round, flinging out his hands as though he expected a pair of sculls to drop from the sky. A few hundred yards away, moving swiftly towards them, was a boat in which sat two men.

CHAPTER IX: A PLAIN MAN'S REFLECTION

THEY made a grotesque pair. Uncle Appleyard lay stretched out in the middle of the boat, his head propped up by cushions (in any other posture he would have capsized the thing); and sitting on Uncle Appleyard's legs, sculling, was the long, spare figure of Le Poon. The moon-faced old gentleman, whose head resembled nothing so much as a bladder of lard, appeared to be spiritually transformed. He still smiled lazily and benevolently upon the world, but there was now an unwonted gleam in his eyes, a slightly puckish twist at the corners of his mouth. His shirt front was soiled and creased; and there was a long gash in the lapel of his dress-jacket. Le Poon, too, was less immaculate than usual, but his one working eye, magnified by the monocle, was as owlish and as unperturbed as ever. As they came level with Maia's craft, Le Poon shipped oars, bowed slightly, nodded several times to recover pos-

session of his head, and remarked : 'But how nautical !'

'Hullo !' said Maia. 'You've found your way at last.'

Said Mr Godly, with immense dignity : 'Pray continue your journey, sir. We are becalmed, but no matter ! To be frank with you, you are interrupting a private conversation. This lady and I have suffered enough already from your intrusions.'

'Which lady ?' inquired Le Poon. 'Do you mean Maia ? But she's no lady, my poor friend. She's a fairy.'

'And I,' said Uncle Appleyard, 'being the only other fairy present, demand her hand in marriage.'

'Ha ha !' laughed Mr Godly. 'Ha ha ha ha !' he added, with deliberation. The idea of Uncle Appleyard as a fairy was sufficiently incongruous, but Mr Godly's mirth was meretricious. He wondered whether, by a swift and skilful manœuvre, he could manage to upset his rivals' boat. He pictured them drowning, with his own willing assistance, and derived much comfort from the picture. To push that fat foolish face under the water would be a pure joy. But before he could say or do anything Uncle Appleyard

burst into rhapsody. 'How beautiful it is to be united once more in harmony. Microcosm of the eternal macrocosm. Aspects of apotheosis. Plums in the cosmic jam. Ah, Brother Godly, we have longed for this moment, Harry and I.' He smiled affectionately.

'Mr Appleyard, I do not wish to know you.' Mr Godly struggled to maintain his dignity. 'Obviously you have been drinking. You are not fit company for a lady.'

Said Maia: 'I believe the wind is rising.'

The languid Le Poon was instantly transformed into a demon of energy. He seized the sculls, and made ready to use them. Maia adjusted the sail of her boat, which immediately began moving on. Le Poon, by prodigious efforts, kept up with it. He also kept up the conversation.

'I think you ought to know, Godly, that you are playing a losing game. I'm a fair man, and I don't like to think of your entertaining false hopes. Has it ever occurred to you that I alone, of the three of us, am an unmarried man: that is, the only man here with strictly honourable intentions?'

'But how suburban of you!' sneered Mr Godly, with a poor imitation of Le Poon's

characteristic tone. 'Do such considerations matter in Fairyland?'

'Ah, we're not in Fairyland yet,' Maia put in.

'Then where . . . where is it?'

'Over the hills,' said Maia.

'And you're taking me there, aren't you?' Mr Godly's tone was desperate, like that of a pleading child.

'As fast as I can,' she answered.

'Me,' insisted Mr Godly. 'Not Le Poon. Not Appleyard. Me alone.'

Maia made no answer.

'Maia! Say yes. Say it's me alone!'

Le Poon, out of breath and speaking with difficulty, said: 'Better give it up, Godly. I'm sorry for you, old man. But you see it's hopeless.'

But Mr Godly was obstinate. 'I disagree with you.' Then, in an altered tone, he suddenly cried out. 'Land!'

They all, except Maia, craned their necks to look.

So sudden was the apparition that Mr Godly half-suspected it of having risen, that very moment, from the depths of the sea. The boats were already gliding with clean swift motion into the blue bay of the island. The

water surrounding it was like molten turquoise. Radiance, like an exhalation, quivered from it into the sky. The air was full, and brimming over, with an enchanting natural music. To the three men it seemed as if all the bright birds of fabulous antiquity were nested in that singing forest, that shining city of trees, and were translating the colours of their as yet unseen plumage into a ravishing pattern of song. And Mr Godly, in particular, felt, as he followed Maia across the smooth beach, that he was stepping into a picture and himself becoming part of a work of art. The scene seemed too beautiful to be real; but Mr Godly knew at once that it was more real than anything he had experienced before, the substance of which all earthlier beauties had been but shadows. Yet there was an element of what, lacking a better word, he might have called unreality, had he stopped to bother himself with such problems. There was something strange, exquisitely and subtly strange, in the quality of the light. It was a light that suggested eternal spring, the first morning of creation.

The four travellers walked towards the wood, which invited them with so much promise of joy: Maia leading, Mr Godly close

at her heels, with Le Poon in the rear gallantly assisting his Uncle Appleyard. They moved forward in a world of serene delight . . . then suddenly the peace was shattered, for Mr Godly, by several curious events. At first he could not understand what was happening. Something seemed to snap in his brain, and he found himself apparently walking towards a full-length mirror. For the space of two seconds Mr Godly and his reflection strode briskly towards each other. But that theory would not work ; for when Mr Godly stopped, this so-called reflection continued to approach him. 'Dear me ! That champagne again !' It approached him, and passed by with a half-furtive, half-friendly nod. Mr Godly turned in not unnatural indignation to stare at this simulacrum, which, stepping lightly across the sand, jumped into the smaller of the two boats, and pushed out to sea, having first taken care to possess itself of Le Poon's sculls. While Mr Godly stood and stared, doubting first his sobriety and then his sanity, his attention was distracted by a sharp cry from Le Poon. Appleyard and Le Poon were now ahead of Mr Godly, and Maia was already at the verge of the forest. What Mr Godly saw set him trembling with fear and anger.

Peering out from the shade of the trees, and leering with pleasure, was M'Gree. He awaited Maia with evident relish. He was undeniably M'Gree, but a slightly different M'Gree from the eccentric elderly householder of Wimbledon. His face was younger ; he was quite nude ; no skull cap remained to conceal his little horns, nor trousers to disguise his goat-legs.

Mr Godly's legs became furiously active. Every one, suddenly, was running. Nymph and satyr had vanished into the brake, pursued and pursuer ; and three inadequate mortals gave chase, puffing and panting, and wasting their little breath in yells of rage. Of these three Le Poon made most headway. Abandoning Uncle Appleyard to his own devices, he ran with long strides. But even Uncle Appleyard displayed amazing agility. He gave the impression of bouncing along, like a huge human balloon : an absurd but an effective method of locomotion. Mr Godly, to his intense disgust and dismay, found it impossible to overtake Uncle Appleyard. Could it be true that the creature was, as he had preposterously claimed, a fairy ? And was he himself a fairy—he, John Godly, of the Mercantile Hope Corporation Limited ? It

was, anyhow, an unprofitable line of thought, but the poor man could not keep away from it. The whole adventure, now that it promised no ultimate success, appeared altogether too fantastic for Mr Godly's sober taste. His dignity was in danger of being damaged. He felt that the universe had been behaving towards him in a capricious and even disrespectful manner. This M'Gree for example. Having eaten the creature's salt, and eloped with the creature's pseudo-daughter, Mr Godly had now to face the humiliating fact that M'Gree was a satyr. In his present state of mortification Mr Godly strongly objected to the idea of his having been introduced to a satyr. He was no more snobbish than most men ; in his way, indeed, he was democratic ; but he drew the line somewhere. And where should the line be drawn if not at satyrs? Even extreme socialism would hardly demand that one should know satyrs. Grocers were God's creatures ; tramps were picturesque ; all men were equal in the sight of heaven. But to satyrs Mr Godly's charity definitely failed to extend. No doubt they were well enough in their place, which was mythology ; but there was equally no doubt that they had no right to come butting into the lives of

respectable citizens. It was really too bad of Maia.

Time seemed to stand still in this enchanted place, but, if in fact time passed, some hours later found Mr Godly wandering, disconsolate and alone, unable to enjoy fully the loveliness of his surroundings. But he could not fail to recognize the loveliness even though the heart was dead in him that should have responded to it. He saw now the dazzling birds whose singing, but a little earlier, had built about him a quivering white wall of music; saw the satin trunks and the fruit-laden branches of the trees that had made the air miraculously fragrant; felt under his bare feet the rich powdering earth; and moved in a clear, cool, motionless aether, shot through with subtle colours, a little enclosed world as of delicious meanings half-apprehended, of exquisitely imperfect rhymes that brush each other—a gossamer caress—and pass by.

CHAPTER X: FLORENCE IN PARENTHESIS

WHEN Mr Godly bounced out of his suburban home, slamming the door behind him, he shattered not only the door-panel but something of more consequence: he shattered the little house of smoked glass in which for many years the soul of Florence Godly had comfortably resided. Until this surprising act of violence, to which the tirade that preceded it gave peculiar significance, Mrs Godly had believed herself contented; or, to be more exact, she had not admitted herself to be actively discontented. Her married life had seemed to be so much fuller and freer than the miserable years of her adult virginity, during which she had drudged and fretted for elder brothers and sisters, at the beck and call of a querulous mother. At twenty-five, already degraded and prematurely aged by a too intense association with coals and carpets and saucepans and gas-stoves, she had been unexpectedly rescued by young

John Godly, the son of a neighbour and a close friend of the family. The engagement, and the marriage that quickly followed, surprised every one, including John himself. For him the long broad winding road of life, hinting in its high distances at marvellous adventure, had suddenly become a cul-de-sac. So, at least, he thought, after many years of married life, and he forgot to thank his stars that it had taken him so long to realize the extent of the disaster. For Florence there was no disaster. She had exchanged one lot of pots and pans, one set of political opinions, one villa-and-garden, for others very similar. She had jumped out of the frying-pan into the frying-pan. Her last state may seem, at first blush, not very different from her first; but, indeed, it was immensely different, for of this nice new frying-pan she was joint-owner. She drudged cheerfully enough in her husband's house, until they were able to afford to keep a servant, because she herself was undisputed mistress of it. And she loved John Godly: that is to say, she loved the paragon of truth, beauty, and goodness whom she had resolutely planted in her husband's shoes. Truth might quibble in argument, beauty might suffer from dyspepsia, and good-

ness grow slightly pallid in life's wear and tear ; these were but spots on a sun of unique effulgence. I do not assert that Florence never wavered in her identification of her husband with this holy trinity : I indicate merely that she was one of those who practise with conspicuous success the art of evading realities. Whether she was wise therein or foolish we need not decide ; sufficient that she was fortunate. She admired her husband, kept his house and cooked his meals and quoted his wisdom to bored but sympathising neighbours ; and, thinking herself a happy woman, necessarily was so. But . . . to her, too, came moments of trembling beauty and vague disquietude, when she paused on the verge of wondering whether this was indeed all, this daily round of work and placid pleasure. She began to ask her husband if he still loved her, and to be troubled by his exasperated affirmatives. She took an extravagant delight in Mrs Harrison's baby, and surprised herself one day, as well as the fond mother, by bursting suddenly into tears at sight of a row of napkins drying on the clothes-line. She wanted something that she could utterly possess, and the more definite that desire became the more clearly she began to know that she did not—and

could not—utterly possess John. He had a life, at the office, into which she could not enter. He had thoughts she had not been asked to share. He took an interest in other things than her. Daily, he sat on the seats of railway-carriages that she seldom entered ; he lunched at restaurants and was served by waitresses (the minxes !) ; he scrutinized insurance policies, weighed risks, and dictated letters. From all this she was shut out, and of all this she was jealous. He left her each morning without a sob—monstrous infidelity !—and returned each night without a rapture of joy. Certainly he did not love her.

But these were moments only ; rare moments and brief, though they increased in number and duration as Florence Godly grew older and John more moody and taciturn. But she did not, for all that, stop talking ; for the doing so would have implied surrender to her fears. When John came home she seldom neglected to give him a long and highly circumstantial account of what she had done during the day, of what Mrs Harrison had done, of what Mrs Murgatroyd had said to the baker, and of what the baker had said to Mrs Murgatroyd. She did not guess that

the febrile superficial activity of her mind filled the poor man's soul with rage and despair, set his lips buzzing (in a curious way they had) in his struggle not to scream and swear, made him yearn to thrust fingers in his ears and run out of the house. She did not guess this ; and had a hint of it entered her mind she would have shoo'd it out again as confidently and carelessly as one drives chickens from the door. Sometimes, to distract her mind, she flirted furtively with fancy religions ; and more than one of these encouraged her in her resolute unrealism. She learned, for example, that happiness consists in pretending that one has no unsatisfied desires, and she derived temporary comfort from the teaching. Yet there were dissatisfactions that would not always be denied utterance ; there were little radiant moments when she stood, still and solitary, looking into the shadowed lake of her soul. The feet of the unborn left fugitive imprints on the grassy bank ; the little fingers of the unborn loosed smooth pebbles to break the still surface of the water. Their mouths sought her motherhood ; their voices cried to her from a twilit world ; they found her in dreams, snuggling into her arms, making the darkness

alive and warm ; and in the dawn they left her, as silently, to the emptiness and desolation of sunlight.

Save in this one respect of childlessness, she would never have admitted her marriage to be anything but a splendid success. But now Mr Godly, by his savagely ironical laudation of his way of life, and by the violent exodus that served to underline his disgust, had forced her to such an admission. Never before had he implied, in so many words, an adverse criticism of his personal life : which says much either for his timidity or for his self-control. He had grumbled before, but never so wholeheartedly, never with such evident and passionate hostility. A week of morose gloom had heralded the outburst. What was to follow it ?

This question loomed upon Mrs Godly as she swept the fragments of glass into the ashpan, having already picked up the larger pieces between finger and thumb. Glass, like romance, is brittle and beautiful ; broken, it possesses a thousand perilous possibilities. Florence, good housewife that she was, spent extravagant pains to discover and seize the least particle of the dangerous dust, and finally, with extreme care, she lifted the door-

mat by its two ends, gingerly as though it had been a venomous animal, and carried it into the back-garden to be shaken and thrashed into a state of health. On the way she had to pass through the kitchen, where Milly Reeslip was still breakfasting. Milly Reeslip, recently imported from a cockneyfied rural district in Essex, was not a person who could be ignored. She was large and plump and wholesome, well featured and fair complexioned; only lack of intelligence prevented her from being very comely. In repose, and especially after meals, her face assumed an expression of bovine lethargy; and it was at such times that one noticed she was too fat. Fortunately for the æsthete, though less so for Milly Reeslip herself, she was subject to severe headaches. A headache worked wonders in her. It silenced her, as nothing else could do, not even sleep; sleep indeed had quite the contrary effect. It silenced her, and thereby it made her less aggressive in her opinion that *The Christian Messenger* was the only fit reading for good girls. And it did more than this. Argument could not move her; to rebuff she was wonderfully insensible; but a headache was like the touch of a magic wand that clothed her in unexpected beauty,

twisted complacency from her lips, and tinged her large cornflower-blue eyes with wistfulness. In a flash, when pain worked in her, she was uplifted from puddingdom to the status of a sylph. But Millireeslip—for so, in deference to her emphatic wish, she was addressed—was no fairy. She weighed eleven stone, and was afraid of growing too thin. She consumed large quantities of food. And she was, it cannot be denied, a friendly girl. She shared the snobbery of her class, it is true. She was haughty with grocers and postmen and similar small fry, her own father being no less than an undertaker (though in a small way of business). But with friends she unbent freely; and, liking Mrs Godly, she generously permitted herself to be regarded as an equal. Mrs Godly, for her part, was glad to suffer interminable monologues in the sacred cause of democracy, but she did at this moment dread the flood of commentary that she feared the broken panel would call forth from Milly Reeslip.

'I want you to shake this mat, Milly Reeslip, when you've finished your breakfast. Shake it well; there's broken glass in it. Mr Godly had to rush off in a hurry for his train, and the door slammed.'

'Yessum. Is the glass broke out of the front door?'

'Yes. We must send round to Cornford's and see when they can come and see about it.'

'Mr Godly done it?' inquired Milly Reeslip.

'Yes. He shut the door harder than he meant to, in his hurry.'

'He mustuv,' remarked the undertaker's daughter, and filled her mouth hastily with bread and beef-dripping. Mrs Godly deposited her burden on the grass patch at the back of the house, paused a few moments in thought, and returned to the kitchen to find the girl still purposefully munching. Milly Reeslip, with a deft but not graceful movement of head and shoulders, swallowed her morsel, poured some thick brown beverage down her throat, and resumed speaking: 'Mr Godly 'asn't seemed 'imself the last day or two. The Reverend Plenty, 'e says, 'appiness begins at 'ome.' The Reverend Plenty was a middle-aged gentleman who had the privilege of being Milly's spiritual pastor. She had recently given signal proof of her devotion to him by allowing herself to be totally immersed in tepid water, and, as she herself was the

first to admit, she had never been the same girl since.

'Now as soon as you've finished your breakfast,' said Mrs Godly. She was interrupted.

'That letterum, it was from Muvverum. She says Gordy-boy's got the frush. All over 'is lil chest 'e 'as.'

'I'm sorry,' said Mrs Godly. 'But tell your mother not to worry. Thrush isn't a serious disease. Lots of babies have it.'

'Yessum. Reverend Plenty, 'e says, troubles are sent to try us. Muvver's been reading a famphlet which the man says unbaptized babies ain't properly saved, not for certain. But Reverend Plenty, 'e says, every one's got to be saved except the Roaming Carflicks, an' they won't because they kiss St. Peter's toe. Kiss it all away they 'ave. I can't abide Roaming Carflicks!' Thus, by the magic of speech, did the members of a not obscure communion become prowling and predatory monsters of antiquity. One sees them plunging through prehistoric jungles in quest of the saint's toe.

'The best bedroom must be thoroughly done out to-day,' said Mrs Godly firmly. 'And the mattress turned. Be as quick as you can.' And, wisely, she went out of the

room, shutting the door behind her. She entered the drawing-room and stared for a long while at one of the photographs which indifferently adorned the cream walls. At each end of the mantelpiece a bronze hero marvellously controlled a gigantic prancing horse, thus saving from disaster the glass lustres that hung within a few inches of its raised feet. Next stood a tall blue vase (from India) containing spills, and in the middle of this rigidly symmetrical pattern was a marble clock which had stopped at ten to one and would never go again. On the upper ledges flanking the overmantel mirror various members of the family, some in duplicate or triplicate, perched among bric-a-brac.

But Florence Godly focused all her attention on a photograph hanging above the piano. It was a cruelly faithful picture of her own wedding group. The fashions in dress of twenty years ago confronted her, and there is nothing so dead as a dead fashion. And it seemed to her that in this photograph the clothes made the men, and, still more evidently, the women. They all had a stiff and stilted air, as though they were self-consciously rehearsing amateur theatricals. But Florence could not help noticing that she herself had

once been a lovely girl. As for John . . . at him she gazed hungrily, the lover she had lost, the ardent young man (for so her memory falsified him) who had died and given place to a disappointed husband who shouted and slammed doors. Her eyes filled with tears.

Milly Reeslip, having been told to ' do out ' the best bedroom, naturally gravitated to the drawing-room, where she found her mistress half-an-hour later and resumed her theological discourse. ' Even the Wesleens got to be saved, 'um, Reverend Plenty says.'

CHAPTER XI: GODELIK BREAKS IN

THE day dragged slowly on ; and, despite merciful moments of anger spent quelling Milly's loquacity, Florence Godly's heart beat an unfaltering crescendo of sadness and despair. Whichever way she turned, from that despair she could see no way of escape. Nor was her sentiment a trivial one such as might have been instantly dispelled by a trip to town and an hour in the Bargain Basement buying ribbons and lace lingerie. Light sorrows she had had in plenty, and for these had found a sovereign remedy in unnecessary (but never reckless) shopping. A well-stocked window touched, as little else could touch, her vein of poetry. She liked to think that this had come from Japan, and that from Birmingham. It filled her with a sense of being herself mistress of life's infinite variety. A pound packet of tea at three and eightpence made her mind's eye bright with pictures of an ideal China, radiant, magical, exotic, where

thousands of gaily clad, slit-eyed Orientals laboured, for her pleasure, in paradisial fields : when she drank their harvesting, lingeringly, savouring its delicate aromatic tang, she received into her physical body a vision, a poem, a perfect microcosm of the alien and enchanting land she longed to visit. Being untravelled (it was a permanent minor grievance of hers), she found delight in the mere names of remote places ; and after shopping at one of the big stores she would go back home carrying Egyptian dates, Turkish delight, and a pair of red French slippers made in Manchester, with all the ardour of one who returns from luxurious exile under a warm dreaming sky. Perhaps in secular moments her picture of heaven included at least one gigantic miscellaneous store where she could wander, in the intervals of domestic bliss, with an equally enraptured John at her side. Being a very woman, she suffered from an incurable constancy that prevented her straying, even in fancy, from the man who had chosen and possessed her. Whatever bright future her imagination limned, dear John was always in the picture, though a John, indeed, vitally transformed, a John ardent in desire and eloquent in adoration. She would not have

altered one line of his face ; she wished him to be neither taller nor less plump. Other men, she may have conceded, were finelier proportioned, more distinguished-looking, more athletic ; but they were not John, poor things, and no amount of earnest endeavour on their part could avail to make them John. Though they spake with the tongues of men and of angels, and were not John, it profited them nothing. All their natural endowments, which made so brave a show, were reduced to dust and ashes by this cruel, logical limitation. No, she did not wish to change John, save in one respect. If only he were not so discontented at times, so taciturn, scowling, moody ! If only he were still in love with her !

Ah, there was the sting, there was the whole disaster confessed. Struggle as she might against it, the conviction that she was unloved invaded and possessed her. Unloved and less than unloved, unnecessary. It would have comforted her to think that his home-life, even though tiresome to him, supplied a want ; but now, in the excess of her pessimism, and beginning to luxuriate in it, she pretended to believe that he would be as well off in an hotel. In her heart she believed no such monstrous thing ; in her heart she

was faithful to the feminine dogma that man, one man at all events, is a child who must be fussed over and mothered world without end. Relax that vigilance for so much as one hour, let him stray out of sight and hearing for a day, and the helpless creature will grow sick and probably die, so easy a prey is he for the lethal adventurer, the wandering germ, which his wife exists to protect him from. But now, perversely, she tried to uproot even that sacred and sturdy growth, in order that the mottled gloom of her meditations might give place to despair richly and satisfyingly black. The recent recurrence of John's Hamlet-moods, and their unwonted issue that morning in bitter speech, had been overpowering in their cumulative effect. Girt about with romantic illusions she had for some years successfully resisted desultory assaults on her peace of mind. But now, after long preliminary cannonading, the fortress was fallen, the enemy had entered. She persuaded herself that she was not only unloved but superfluous, not only superfluous but disliked. She persuaded herself that if she were to die John would not regret her. And, finally, in a frenzy, she declared to herself that her death would bring joy to him. So, by

grotesquely exaggerating her evil plight, she made it monstrous, absurd, incredible ; and, promptly reacting from her folly, swung back to the opposite extreme of believing herself once again to be a happily married woman. Infinitely cunning are the self-protective wiles of the subconsciousness. In this state of nervous oscillation Mrs Godly continued to agonize all day, notwithstanding Milly Reeslip's persistent and unromantic interruptions.

After sitting for ten minutes, dull-eyed, before an untouched tea, Florence rose to prepare her husband's evening meal. A new resolution was born in her. Pride flickered into life ; resentment stirred. If she could not quell her heart's love she could at least conceal it ; if she could not break the invisible emotional bond that made her, for better or worse, irrevocably his, she could at least wear her shackles with an air of disdaining them. She would afford him no excuse for complaint ; she would do no more than put on the armour of an impenetrable politeness and wage silent warfare. Denying him nothing, and offering nothing, she would keep stern watch and ward, even in moments of outward conjugal surrender, over her spirit. She, her inmost self, should remain proudly and scornfully aloof, until such

time—if ever the time came—as he needed her again and became a suppliant for the treasure to whose value he was now blind. But even while she made to herself this declaration of independence, she wondered, bitterly, whether he was not already too little interested in her to detect these subtle differences. That, however, was beside the point: not for his punishment, but for the preservation of her own self-respect, was this spiritual withdrawal necessary

Seven o'clock, the wonted hour of John's return, passed without event. Florence grew irritated at the delay, being anxious to begin practising her new art of independence. Should she greet him with the usual kiss? No, she would leave him to take the initiative, and she must see that her response was polite and perfunctory. Persuaded that she was burning with the ardour of the neophyte, she scowled to see the hands of the clock creep round to eight, to nine, while still there was no sign of John. For a while, to distract her mind, she busied herself writing unnecessary news-filled letters to those of her friends who had nothing better to do than read such things and answer them. 'Dear Lucy, Your last letter was ever so nice and long and I am

quite *ashamed*, my dear, to have kept you waiting so long for an answer, never mind, you must be used to my tiresome ways by now so do forgive me. Mrs Harrison's baby has cut his first eye-tooth, and the garden is beginning to look charming. I had to get rid of my girl as she wasn't too particular about being clean, and a new one came three weeks ago, not satisfactory, such a chatter-box, but one can't have everything, it is such a problem . . .' When she looked up, during these exercises, Florence saw, with alarm, that it was nearly ten o'clock. And no John ! This was unprecedented. Never before, being late at the office, had he failed to warn her either by 'phone or wire. Something had happened. Somewhere at this moment her John was lying, tormented with pain, in a pool of his own blood. Or possibly he had been removed to a hospital. On reflection the second seemed the more likely conjecture. 'That's silly,' Florence admonished herself, and she spoke aloud, thinking to be comforted by the sound of her own voice. The event proved her mistaken ; for the silence that followed was palpable, throbbing, sinister. The illuminated room, with its rich red walls, its mahogany furniture, its blazing electric chandelier, became

a significant silent presence about her; the muffled street-sounds were like the footsteps of premonition; the clock's mechanical commentary seemed a masterstroke of irony. Yet Florence ventured again to tell herself, 'That's silly!' Half-recognizing her fears for the morbidly-induced phantoms that they were, she made a resolute effort to shake them out of existence. She pelted herself with common-sense counsels. John, most probably, was theatre-going with some unexpected friend, and had had no time to let her know, or, maybe, had forgotten to do so. A strange forgetfulness but, in his present angry mood, not incredible. But this rational explanation, which she laboured to accept, did not prevent her pushing the half-finished letter away and jumping up from her seat at the table. She moved nervously about the room, unable to rest, unable to think fruitfully. And the hand of the clock moved on to the eleventh hour, and past it. 'He'll be coming out of the theatre now,' she told her listening heart, 'and home in forty-five minutes.'

But in less than forty-five minutes the worst of the ordeal was over. As the clock struck the half-hour she heard steps on the pavement outside, a confusion of steps that stopped at

the front gate and continued, after a shuffling pause, up the gravel path. Before the echoes of the *rat-tat-tat* had died away in the house Florence had flung open the door and was eagerly confronting the two men who stood on the doorstep. At the moment, independence was at a discount. 'Is it you, John!'

The person so addressed did not move out of the shadow in which he stood, but his companion stepped forward and raised his hat. 'Yes, Mrs Godly—it is Mrs Godly?—here is your husband. He's quite safe. I'm afraid you've been anxious.'

'But something's the matter,' protested Florence, alarmed by the stillness and silence of the other. 'Come in, do.'

At this invitation the two men stepped into the lighted hall. Florence Godly, having shut the door, turned inquiring eyes upon them. The appearance of her husband troubled her. At first, indeed, she did not recognize him. 'John! What *have* you been doing!' It was his eccentric costume that wrung the exclamation from her: a kind of green silken jerkin, long hosen, and an absurd stiff collar. Like a lost child, not speaking a word in reply, the little man stared at her with innocent, bewildered eyes. She was profoundly moved

to see him so helpless, so pathetically young ; for though every familiar mark was visible that time had set on the beloved face, the man himself seemed subtly different. Florence, with a stab of tenderness, saw that he was more beautiful even than the younger, happier John in the first ardour of his wooing. His companion, a man of fifty or so, she recognized as a resident of the neighbourhood whose name was unknown to her. He now made haste to introduce himself.

'My name's Murdoch, Mrs Godly. Your husband may have spoken of me. We often meet on the train. In fact, we met this morning. Now let me ask you not to be alarmed by this . . . this unusual circumstance. Your husband, I'm afraid, is not quite himself to-night. I fancy he must have had some shock that's deprived him of his memory. But only for a while, you may be sure of that.'

Florence beat down the rising tide of fear. 'Are *you* sure ?' she asked, almost accusingly.

'Yes, yes, yes,' said Mr Murdoch briskly. 'A night's rest will put everything right.'

'And you've brought him home to me. How kind of you !'

Mr Murdoch made a gesture of departing.

'Nonsense. Too pleased. By one chance in a million, Mrs Godly, I happened to run across your husband. Strange I didn't see him at the ball. He must have been there and left early.'

'The ball?'

'Yes, the Stevensons' ball. Old friends of mine, the Stevensons. Didn't know you knew them. When I found your husband wandering about the street in fancy dress I guessed at once where he'd been. It was not far from Wimbledon Common. Didn't know me. Didn't seem to remember where he was or who he was. Quite a crowd following him too. Very distressing. But don't worry, my dear lady. He's safe enough in your hands.'

That being precisely Florence's opinion, she renewed her expressions of gratitude and made no attempt to detain Mr Murdoch. She dimly suspected him of thinking her husband intoxicated; and the idea was repugnant. Having shut the door on Mr Murdoch, she ran forward to embrace this pathetic, enchanting, wonder-wounded creature. He was strangely unresponsive, uncomprehending. 'Oh John!' she cried, in a half-sob, 'don't you know me?'

He shook his head—a bright, birdlike movement. His eyes sparkled with a new interest. 'No, my soul; who are you? They call me Godelik.'

Was he indeed bereft of reason? The unearthly bell-voice of him agitated her with its strangeness and its beauty. She sought to veil the pain in her eyes, and to wean him gently from his fancies. 'Godly, darling. Not God*lik*.'

'Not Gŏdelik,' he agreed. 'Gōdelik, my soul. Who are you?' He sighed, and with twitching hands caressed his bewildered head. 'I'm lorn and scattered. Tell me who you are.'

'Florence,' she said. 'Your wife Florence. You *must* know me, John!'

'Ah, yes, I know you now.'

Hope revived in her. 'You know! You know everything? Does it all come back, dear? Do you remember?'

He smiled without understanding. 'What is there to remember?'

Cruelly disappointed, she realized at last the futility of her endeavours. 'Come, I must get you to bed,' she said. 'In the morning, after a good sleep . . .'

Obediently he followed her upstairs. She

left him to undress while she returned to the ground floor to prepare a bread-and-milk supper for him. In ten minutes she came back to the bedroom carrying a bowl of this steaming delicacy. Nude, round-eyed, he sat on the side of the bed, dangling his legs like a child. His eyes, attending her every movement, shone with a kind of shy pleasure. Looking at him, she could not believe that he was in any sense deranged. Evidently he delighted in her presence. As for her, to her age-long love for him was added a trembling joy in this new strange beauty that now transfigured him, making his eyes into lustrous wells of laughter, giving to his voice the blended music of bells, of dewfall, of rustling leaves, so that the sight and sound of him was to her an exquisite epitome of sunshine in humid earth-smelling woods, glowing with fresh flowers, melodious with running water. Thrall to this enchantment, she had no thought to spare for his eccentricity, of which this singular innocence, this grave ardency of regard, would have been, in other circumstances, the most embarrassing example. While he, with odd gestures, ate scantily of his supper, she began disrobing; and, catching sight of her reflection in the long mirror, she was startled to observe in

the contours of her own body a beauty hitherto unguessed. Her warm auburn hair fell in generous masses over white, bare shoulders. Her eyes were large and brown and kindly. When, quietly exultant, she turned her eyes from the mirror, she found Godelik standing at her side, and was startled.

'Will you plight troth with me, Florence?' he said.

'What do you mean?' she began; then, suddenly uplifted, she said softly: 'Yes. If you wish.'

He rested his hands on her shoulders, and kissed her brow, three times, and with ceremony. She looked at him through tears. 'And you, my flower,' he said. She, with equal gravity, returned this triple salutation. As though to crown the ritual with music, the deep-toned clock in the hall below them chimed, slowly, the hour of twelve.

'It's Tuesday morning,' said Florence, nestling into bed. 'A new day. A new life.'

Part Two:

TUESDAY

Et c'était comme une musique qui se fane.

ALBERT SAMAIN

CHAPTER XII: IN THE FOREST

WHILE Florence was entertaining a stranger unawares, the authentic Mr Godly wandered disconsolate through the forest in a quest that seemed to him to grow more hopeless with every step he took. Beautiful though they were, these dim-lit thickets and these sudden glades of green, their beauty, he fancied, could not utterly possess him while Maia remained withdrawn from sight. But in moments of forgetfulness a profound joy invaded his inmost being. To step, from time to time, unexpectedly, out of the green gloom of these high-vaulted cloisters into sunlight and lush grass, a vertical tunnel climbing into the infinite, a fountain of radiance leaping down into time: this was an experience that made him want to shout in exultation, yet reaved him of the power to utter a syllable. The thickets were muted 'cello themes, fragmentary airs winsomely allusive; the open glades were their fulfilment, their resolution

in a blaze of full-toned, orchestrated harmony their homecoming into the heart of that symphony of which they were the strayed phrases. Yet it was good, after lying in the grass and marvelling at the green life and delicate texture of each blade, to move on into the shadow of tall trees, whether they were slim straight birches, lithe, satin-skinned, maidenly, or huge oaks full of character and fragrant with ancientry, like the faces of old men, giant muscular trees thrusting their great branches into shapes that were like an arrested struggle, decaying and blossoming and propagating their kind with a profound alien energy. If the enchantment of the forest did intermittently lift Mr Godly out of his discontent, it was in spite of his determination not to be so lifted. A complete romantic, obsessed by the notion of ideal love, he was obstinate in his fidelity to Maia and in his juvenile conviction that he ought to be actively unhappy in her absence.

He was, none the less, comparatively carefree. As yet no remorseful memory of Florence had come to disturb his preoccupations. His thoughts alternated between the soothing beauty that environed him and the more intimate enthralling beauty that he had lost. He consulted his gold hunter watch, an excellent

timekeeper which had faithfully served one or another Godly for half a century. The hands indicated twelve o'clock, and Mr Godly, deceived by the broad daylight, fancied it to be the hour of noon ; whereas in fact it was at this very moment that his wife, in her bed-room at Brockley, contentedly announced the approach of a new day and the beginning of a new life. But there was a growing element of uncertainty in Mr Godly's mind, a ripening confusion ; and this was not altogether to his taste. He was a man who liked to know where he stood : the phrase was, indeed, too often on his lips. Many times he had said to impatient junior clerks who pressed for a lightning decision, 'Now, my dear boy, not so fast, not so fast ! First of all let us see exactly where we stand in this matter, or we may find ourselves bowled over.' He would point this remark with a chuckle that expressed his appreciation of its delicate humour, and with a quick glance that said, as clearly as speech, 'That's got you, my young friend.' It was known, in the outer office, as the Standing Joke. But for Mr Godly it was more than a joke : it was a philosophy ; and in reviewing the events of the past twenty-four hours he was astonished by his consistent

failure to practise that philosophy. From the first moment of this adventure he had strangely and culpably neglected it. On the heels of an inconclusive conversation about his spiritual hungers had followed his visit, with Maia, to the house of the abominable M'Gree. How thoughtlessly he had drifted along on the tide of events! Had he taken care to know where he stood with M'Gree? Had he, had any of them, taken care to know where they stood with Maia? And he had to confess that at this very moment he did not know where he stood, metaphorically or literally, either in space or in time. Yet, strongly though he disapproved of drift, he was glad that he had drifted in this direction. A serious business man and no believer in anything so capricious as luck, he had nevertheless chanced his luck, and it had held. Then, remembering himself to be an abandoned lover, he disowned this faithless thought and made a mighty resolve to search the island from end to end until he found Maia. 'I'll leave no stone unturned,' he declared to the inattentive woods.

This impulse jerked him into passionate activity. No longer willing to stand and stare, he strode through undergrowth and bracken, leaped over roots, and trotted with

earnest deliberation along any smooth paths he could find. He ran fast and far without greatly fatiguing himself. 'There's something in this air,' he said. 'Something good.' And he ran without premeditation or plan; as though by a tremendous expenditure of energy, and by that alone, he must infallibly find whom he sought. Many hours must have passed during this irrational but exhilarating pursuit of Maia, for his watch, when next he looked at it, indicated a few minutes to five. The first glimmer of dawn was stealing into the room where Florence Godly lay asleep, with Godelik at her side—raised from the pillow on his elbow—watching in adoration her calm face and the gentle rhythm of her breathing. But here, where Mr Godly was, the day visibly mellowed, soon to fall like ripe fruit into the ample lap of darkness. Evening was perhaps an hour distant, but the quality of the light had subtly changed; the full blaze of the sun was veiled, the shadows grew longer, and the atmosphere more cool. Mr Godly, being twelve hours out in his reckoning, found no cause for surprise in these changes; but for renewed pleasure he found good cause. This, to his mind, was of all the day the peerless, the taintless hour: still, luminous, and

cool ; lifted out of time ; a breath of eternity ; a pause in the everlasting flux. He did not, indeed, think in such phrases ; but he stopped in his headlong flight and surrendered his senses to the miracle, seeing and savouring the cool golden glow, listening to the stillness, opening the doors of the spirit, and feeling the quiet tide flow into him. After a while he walked soberly on. A white path invited him. Slim and serpentine at first, it gradually broadened out ; and finally, with an abrupt bend, it brought him to a wide chalky road stretching to his right and left, beyond which the forest resumed its numerous multiform life. Which direction would lead him to Maia ? The question did not hinder him a moment. He stepped into the road and followed it, without thought or afterthought, for a western mile or two, seeming content to walk aimlessly for ever in this glowing sunset world. But, presently, his legs began to weary, his mind moved back into its worn grooves, and the need for a night's lodging suggested itself. He remembered, then, to be hungry ; and by counting the hours he supposed to have passed since his dinner at M'Gree's table he made himself positively ravenous. Food and bed : the two words

now dominated his thought and refused to be dethroned.

And then, in the nick of time, he found an inn. By an entertaining coincidence, which heartened him greatly, that was the very phrase that greeted him on the inn-sign : *The Nick of Time*. 'And what an inn!' said Mr Godly, rubbing his hands in delight. Despite his hunger he had to stand and examine it from three aspects before entering. It was not its strangeness that startled him, but its familiarity, familiarity coupled with something to which he could not give a name. It was so exactly right, and yet, in some absurdly subtle way, it was . . . unusual. Mr Godly paused for a word, and chose 'unusual' diffidently. One might almost have said *queer*, he thought. Yet he had seen, or had hoped to see, just such an inn on many a country road. With its grey stone walls, its tiny dormer windows, the maturity of its red, sagging tiles, it was very and poignantly English. Mr Godly stared at the haphazard cluster of gables, and rejoiced in the fluid harmony of their angles. Never before had he found beauty in a geometrical design : nor, had he not been alone, would he have ventured to find it now. But it was brought home to

him, in a renewed pang, that these satisfying emotions fail to fill the stomach. A less simple-minded man than Mr Godly might have spent himself for half-an-hour in lamenting a fact which is, in its implications, the very core of comedy : and would have become, in the process, less spiritual than ever. Mr Godly's simplicity led him to the more practical course of subduing the animal by indulging it. He walked briskly to the inn-door and knocked. It was opened instantly by a little boy. That, anyhow, was Mr Godly's first and mistaken impression. A closer scrutiny —dusk was now falling—revealed the supposed little boy as a little man, apparently in fancy dress. He wore a tight-fitting green jerkin, a parody of a Gladstone collar, buff silk hosen, and wooden clogs. In person, as well as in costume, he was unusual. His face, which resembled leather in texture and hue, was of so odd a shape as to suggest to the startled Godly all manner of improbable conjectures. His ears were extravagantly large. Happily, the unearthly general effect of him was redeemed by the kindliness and manifest sanity of his twinkling eyes, which shone like small suns, rayed with wrinkles. If Mr Godly had been less hungry, or had he known

of a near and likelier hostelry, he would have made his excuses and resumed his walk. But, being at the end of his physical resources, he was ill disposed to be fastidious. He asked, briefly, for supper and a bed.

The little innkeeper, having blinked and peered and blinked again, opened his eyes prodigiously, flung up his thin arms, and clapped his hands together with evident enthusiasm above his snow-white head. 'Godelik!' he chirrupped. 'The learned Godelik! Come in, my cherry. My eyes are shining for you.'

This, to be frank, was not the greeting Mr Godly had expected. I hardly think we must blame him for that. He did not in the least understand where he was or what had happened to him. Had he stopped to ponder the problem he would perhaps have thought he was dreaming: wherein he would have been quite wrong. Earlier in his adventure—when, to be precise, he had seen the tell-tale legs of M'Gree plunging through the brake in pursuit of Maia—he had decided, provisionally at least, that he was in some sort of Fairyland. But a normal man does not cling to so improbable an hypothesis if circumstances permit him to abandon it; and Mr Godly was above all things a normal man, with all

the normal man's healthy scepticism. For many hours nothing had occurred to force him back into the arms of that wild conjecture, which, accordingly, he had forgotten. Nor did it recur to his mind at this moment. He was puzzled, it is true ; slightly alarmed ; and more than slightly annoyed. Not with this fantastic innkeeper, in particular, was he annoyed : the fellow was the occasion of Mr Godly's anger but not its objective. He was angry with the turn events had taken. He cursed his luck which, having led him right all day, now spoiled a charming effect by leading him grotesquely wrong. His irritation was excessive ; he desired to hit something, to smash windows, to snap a poker across his knee ; he desired the presence of Florence in order that he might explain to her at length how unsatisfactory were the cosmic arrangements that resulted in his being incommoded so wantonly. In a word, he was hungry. Everybody who has ever experienced that sensation will recognize the symptoms. He was hungry ; and the demeanour of this prancing innkeeper did not encourage him to believe that he was within snatching distance of a good meal.

'You've made a mistake.' Mr Godly was

curt. 'Never mind. My name is Godly, not Godelik. And I'm in a hurry for my supper.'

The innkeeper eyed his guest with a new admiration. 'My dear sir, you are magnificent. You play the part to perfection. Your costume is masterly ; positively, it is masterly. But is it correct, my cherry ? You are a scholar and a seer. Tell me, is it correct ?'

Mr Godly, whose self-control I invite you to admire, pushed past without ceremony and entered. 'You seem to be under the delusion that you know me. Similar name, too. Curious coincidence. But let me tell you plainly that I'm damned hungry. Whether we have met before or not I will willingly discuss later —on a full stomach.'

The innkeeper laughed. 'You shall have sup, my love. Thatch will see you fed.'

'Then let Mr Thatch hurry,' said Mr Godly.

An unfortunate remark, because, for some occult reason, it called forth a further pæan of praise from the innkeeper. 'Ah, yes ! *Mister* Thatch. That little touch we forget, we novices.'

'What have you for supper ?' enquired Mr Godly. His accents were piteous.

'Whatever it is, I'll have it,' he added sharply.

'We have all the right things, Godelik. Be sure of that. We have ham. We have buffalo. We have pigs and dragons and mutton-chops. We have the egg of the hen and the egg of the dok. We have also . . .'

'That'll do for a start,' said Mr Godly, too weary to feel surprise. 'Where's the room?' It was perhaps an unusual list of viands, but he felt that he could enjoy every item of it.

The little innkeeper came nearer. He chuckled and nudged and winked. He looked immensely sly and pleased and confidential. 'And, of course,' he wheezed in a stage whisper,' we have something to *eat* as well.'

CHAPTER XIII: MR THATCH

THE sight of the inn-parlour in some degree assuaged Mr Godly's wrath, though it did nothing towards satisfying his hunger. It was just such a room as he had dreamed of when, in wistful mood at home, he had imagined himself setting out from Brockley with a well-filled haversack and an ash stick to seek solace for his disenchanted spirit in the green meadows and little lanes of rural England. In those journeys of the mind he had tramped many solitary golden miles, pausing from time to time to stare at this or that—a lumbering hay-wain, a thatched Tudor cottage, an ancient church set high on a wooded hillside, a duck or two swimming and somersaulting in a shaded pool. And in the evening of such a day he had never failed to arrive, famished and healthily fatigued, at the door of the perfect inn, and to be greeted by the perfect landlord with the heartening chant, 'Col' beef, col'am, col' chicken, eggses an' bacon.' And now,

whatever of tact or discernment this fellow Thatch might lack, his house at least seemed to lack nothing for the fulfilment of Mr Godly's dream of what an inn should be. This particular room was long and low; black oak beams supported the ceiling; the walls were whitewashed; the floor was of red brick and worn into unevenness by the tread of centuries. Mellow and personal, fragrant with its history of good fellowship, sanctified by the strong laughter of vanished men, the room was full of a warm glow besieged in a pageant of warfare by moving shadows on walls and ceiling. A huge log-fire that blazed on the brick hearth was the only illumination. In the corner of the inglenook sat an extremely old, undersized, and wizened man. He stared reflectively into the fire. White beard fringed, like a nimbus, his round, brown, rimpled face, which was otherwise quite hairless except in the region of the nose. That organ, which was the largest of its kind Mr Godly had ever seen, was broad, hirsute, speckled with pores: a nose with so pronounced a character of its own as to make the old gentleman behind it seem, at first sight, rather insignificant, rather pathetic, in his diminutiveness. It seemed impossible that he should

ever be able to live up to so noble a feature. On the end of this nose rested a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles, over which, and under red bushy eyebrows, peered two penetrating beady eyes. As Mr Godly stamped emphatically into the room, advertising his hunger, the ancient raised his head, nodded, and resumed his scrutiny of the fire.

Mr Godly felt a tug at his sleeve, and looked down into the mobile face of Thatch. 'Whok-ki air yoë a-gwahn?' whispered Mr Thatch—or something like it. It was gibberish to Godly, and in the heat of the moment he said as much. 'Dearie me!' sighed Mr Thatch, 'you're very fussical, my cherry. Why not relax a little? You're among friends. Doff your clothes if you like. They breekies must irk you.' This speech was less intelligible than it appears, for Mr Thatch's accent at the best of times was rustic, even outlandish, and his intonation so unexpected that the listener was apt to lose the sense of his speech in listening to its tune. His voice had an extraordinary range and variety. Now it was bird-like; now it rattled like dry peas in a pod; and now it was a distant tinkle of melody, like that of faraway bells. This time, however, Mr Godly sufficiently understood. He gath-

ered that he was being invited to take his trousers off, and he was mildly surprised, this being a country custom he had never heard of. He shook his head vigorously. 'He won't be fretted,' added Mr Thatch, jerking a thumb in the direction of the horn-spectacled nose. 'He's one of the old school.' Mr Godly lost no time in trying to estimate the antiquity of the school referred to, which might very appropriately have dated back to Adam. He sat down at the bare board, and cried in a loud voice, 'Food, man! Food!'

The landlord, with arms akimbo, stood and stared, shaking with merriment. For a few seconds Mr Thatch quivered without sound; but at length the commotion within him demanded utterance. Joy bubbled up and emerged through his lips, whistling and singing like steam from a kettle: at first softly, then with increasing volume, and then in a series of gasps and roars. Finally his mouth opened in a laugh that threatened his face with bisection, and he gave vent to a loud wheezing peal of mirth. Quite abruptly the sound ceased, the laughing face crumpled up into its normal qualified gravity, and Mr Thatch danced solemnly out of the room. The old man in the inglenook appeared quite unmoved by

these antics, and Mr Godly had no thought or attention to spare for anything but food. His absorption in that subject was complete ; in better moments—that is, in better-fed moments—it would have distressed his not insensitive soul. It is terrible to have to admit that if Maia, his heart's delight, had at this moment stepped into the inn-parlour, Mr Godly would not have welcomed her so sincerely as he would have welcomed a plate of cold beef. Fortunately she was not present to witness his degradation of spirit. But he was not alone ; nor was he disregarded. The eyes of the old man who sat by the fire were now scrutinizing him fixedly. Mr Godly met the stare haughtily, but his hauteur was wasted, for those old eyes showed no signs of wavering. 'A pleasant evening,' remarked Mr Godly, to break an uncomfortable silence. But, so soon as the echoes of his voice had died away, silence resumed possession of the room, a silence punctuated only by the occasional crackling of the wood-fire. And the eyes still stared. Opportunely, easing a situation that was beginning to affect Mr Godly's nerves, Mr Thatch returned, staggering under the weight of a splendid joint of beef. Mr Godly did not recognize the joint, but at least it was the

colour of beef and it gleamed greasily in a way only hungry men can tolerate. The dish was set in front of him, and his spirits rose. 'If you want to stare, old man,' he said, 'stare away and be damned to you!' But he did not say it aloud. Mr Godly himself had eyes for nothing but the joint. 'I believe I could eat all that,' he reflected, with relish. 'But if I did,' came the restraining thought, 'I should suffer for it afterwards.'

But he had not yet got his meal, although it was within reach. 'Look lively, my friend!' cried Mr Godly. 'Plate. Knife and fork. And something to carve with.' The dull-witted fellow could only stare and gape. Mr Godly tried pantomime. He began cutting up imaginary meat with a realism that made his own mouth water. This method proved effective. 'Always the artist!' exclaimed Mr Thatch mysteriously, and with surprising promptitude supplied his guest with a plate woven of straw, with an implement that resembled a toasting fork, and with a primitive wooden-handled knife. 'Correct in every detail!' said Mr Thatch, bowing low, and smirking with self-complacency.

'H'm,' mumbled Mr Godly non-committally. He was not in a condition to be fas-

tidious about trifles : with nine pounds of roast beef in front of him he could afford to smile upon this rustic inefficiency. But he could not forbear saying, 'I've never been asked to use a plate like that before. Never mind. I suppose potatoes would be asking too much ?'

Mr Thatch was respectfully attentive. Undoubtedly the fellow's attitude was flattering, however foolish. 'Would they, my dear ?' asked Mr Thatch. 'Now what would potatoes be asking ?'

'Damn your impudence !' said Mr Godly. 'Is this the way to conduct a business—making game of your clients !' But, despite this show of anger, he felt exceedingly happy as he grasped the knife and fork and made ready to help himself to beef. The crowning moment had arrived. In ten minutes he would be re-civilized ; in an hour he would be a new man. He was spared the knowledge that at this moment Florence and Godelik, away in Brockley, were enjoying their first breakfast together.

The knife proved to be absurdly blunt, and the joint incredibly hard. Failing to make any impression upon its gleaming surface, Mr Godly flew into a passion and began

stabbing it daggerwise. Thatch was alarmed by this fury. 'Ah no, my Godelik!' he cried, in accents of distress, 'don't carry the jape too far. You'll mar my pretty meat.'

'Mr Thatch!' said Mr Godly, icy with anger, unnaturally calm. 'This thing is made of wood.'

'Why, of course,' agreed the innkeeper, with a bland smile.

'Of course?' echoed Mr Godly, raising his eyebrows as though in polite surprise. It was a trick that had never failed to terrify the office-boy. 'I fail to see the application of that remark. I confess myself baffled by it. May I inquire, is this tomfoolery intended to be *funny*?' Never before in the history of language had so much scorn been concentrated in a word.

Thatch shook his head sadly. He was at this moment a pathetic figure, a subject for tears. He exhibited the heartrending pathos of a disappointed child. 'Ah, my cherry, you are a hard one to please.'

'Hard to please!' shouted Mr Godly. Then sheer wonder supervened. 'Hard to please!' he repeated, mildly curious. 'I ask for something to eat; you bring me a

lump of wood ; and because I complain, you tell me I am hard to please.'

Thatch's face lit up with a new understanding. 'Something to eat, is it?'

'It is indeed,' said Mr Godly grimly.

'You want something to eat? You are *really* hungry?'

Mr Godly permitted himself faintly to smile. 'Do you know, I rather fancy I am,' he answered. 'By God I am!' his stomach echoed. 'And permit me to add,' resumed Mr Godly, 'that as a business man I fail to see the point of this so-called joke. Its humour eludes me. Perhaps I am dense. Perhaps I am old-fashioned.'

Thatch, waiting to hear no more, leaped at the door and ran out into the road. Mr Godly, after a startled pause, resumed his speech. 'Perhaps I am old-fashioned. Perhaps I am dense, I say . . .'

'Dessay thee be,' chirped the old man in horn-spectacles. 'Little doubt of it,' he added mournfully, 'but don't take on. We can't all be clever.'

If the three-legged stool he had just vacated had suddenly burst into speech, Mr Godly could hardly have been more surprised than he was by this utterance. It was so unex-

pected that it made him jump as though stung. In his astonishment he neglected to pay much heed to the substance of the remark ; and we have this circumstance to thank for the fact that the subject of Mr Godly's denseness was not pursued further.

But the old man, having tasted of the joys of articulation and found them good, was disposed to be loquacious. 'But there's one thing I can say. I *can* say it and I *wull* say it. Thee be a youngster, and thee'll mebbe larn.'

'I'm not so young as I was,' observed Mr Godly.

'And another thing I'll say,' said the old man defiantly, as though the whole world opposed him. 'I *can* say it and I *wull* say it. Thee be of right party. Thee don't hold with newfangled popdoodle the like of that.' He flung a large nasal sneer in the direction of the mock-joint.

'I certainly don't, sir,' agreed Mr Godly heartily. 'You're right there.'

The old gentleman emitted an appreciative snort, and sunned himself for a few moments in the light of Mr Godly's approval. 'And as for being clever,' said he, reverting to an earlier theme, 'did ever thee hear bruit of Old Fairy Fumpum ?'

'Never,' replied Mr Godly.

'Did thee not!' said the ancient, in a tone of great surprise. 'There's a sad thing. Ah, my poppy, for downright cleverness give me Old Fairy Fumpum. He be a dark one. He be a deep one.'

At this point, before Mr Godly had a chance to reply, Thatch returned carrying a sack on his shoulder. The contents of this sack he immediately shook out on to the table. Mr Godly, eyeing the performance with pardonable interest, rejoiced to see the result of his host's forage. It was not, perhaps, the diet he would have chosen, but it was undeniably food, and anything was better than nothing. And even a fastidious man might have found pleasure in such a feast. There were fruits of all climes and seasons: apples, plums, grapes, pears, pomegranates, quinces, lemons, strawberries, blackberries; and numerous lovely things unknown to Mr Godly. There were hazel-nuts and dates and a large twist of bread; there was honeycomb; and there was a yellow cheese the size and shape of a cricket-ball. In addition to these there were sundry things that failed to attract Mr Godly—acorns, pine-cones, a handful of dock-leaves—but he noted with gratitude that this time Thatch had made

the welcome mistake of overestimating his prodigious appetite. He fell to, at once, without waiting for an invitation. While he was at work upon the bread-and-cheese, which was unlike anything he had tasted before, Thatch approached with a flagon in one hand and a pewter mug in the other. 'Ha!' said Mr Godly to himself. 'They understand this kind of thing better.' With eager hand he poured himself out a generous pint of clear golden liquid. 'Good beer this, I should say,' he remarked, admiring the limpid stream as it ran into the tankard. He tasted it. 'Beer!' cried Mr Godly aloud. 'This is no beer! This is . . .' He sought for a word that should adequately express his joy in the divine beverage, and finding none made haste, like a wise man, to renew that joy at its source. He felt that it was a subtle perfume, a poem, the very soul of radiance, that he was receiving into himself; but it was undeniably a drink, cool and golden, rich with the treasures of a fabulous age, potent with the power of eternal youth. It was at once satisfying and stimulating and urbane. An immortal drink.

'Mr Thatch,' he cried, 'I congratulate you. This is superb stuff. I don't know

what it is, but I have never tasted anything that could touch it for quality.'

'Yes,' said the old man by the fire. 'He be a good drop of liquor, that one.'

'A local brew?' inquired Mr Godly, radiating benevolence. 'Tell me how it's made.' He took another draught, savouring it slowly and delicately. 'I wish my wife were here to try it,' he added—and wondered, the next instant, whether he had heard himself aright.

'It's nothing,' said Thatch modestly. And Mr Godly noticed that he seemed to choose his words with extreme care. 'You'll laugh when you hear. It's so simple. A little discovery of mine.'

'Tell me about it,' Mr Godly urged.

Thatch looked almost shy. 'The difference between the golden and the red is just this, my Godelik. The red is gathered at noon, the golden is gathered by starlight.'

'Gathered?' echoed Mr Godly. 'I don't understand you.'

'The dragon-flies' tears,' said Thatch, as if that explained everything. He tried politely but vainly to conceal his surprise of Mr Godly's ignorance.

'Oh, the dragon-flies' tears,' murmured Mr

Godly. 'Yes, of course.' He wondered if he were already inebriated.

'At noon, you see, they weep crimson tears. But in the starshine they are moved to an ecstasy, and their tears are golden.'

'Very lucid, I'm sure,' said Mr Godly, with an ironical wink. 'And how are these tears collected?' Mr Godly was no spoil-sport. He refused to stand between a man and his joke. He resolved to humour the fellow's fancy, and let him tire himself of it. 'In sieves perhaps,' he suggested brightly.

'Oh no, not in sieves,' said Thatch, with unmoved gravity. 'Sieves would never do. The wine would run out, don't you see? No, we use beetleskin bottles. The ordinary beetleskin bottles.'

'Indeed! And in these ordinary beetle-skin bottles, no doubt, you catch the tears as they fall?'

'Yes,' said Thatch. He seemed rather bored with the subject. 'Now tell us, Godelik, of your recent researches.'

But now, his hunger satisfied, Mr Godly felt an overpowering desire for sleep. Without bothering to disclaim these mythical researches, he asked to be excused further talk, and spoke of bed. Thatch, without a word,

at once walked into another room, from which he presently returned bearing a lighted candle. In Mr Godly's mind an old nursery jingle began running :

Here comes a Candle to light you to bed,
Here comes a Chopper to chop off your head,

and for a moment an unpleasant premonition assailed him. The oddness of his adventure suddenly became an oppression. Who were these eccentric, these impishly humorous creatures ? And what was he, John Godly of the Mercantile Hope Corporation, doing in their company ? But the puzzle could wait : to get sleep was the important thing.

'Good night, friend !' cried Mr Godly to the old man, with avuncular heartiness. There was no reply. 'Off to bed now,' said Mr Godly, but with considerably less conviction. 'Good night to you.' The ancient owner of the nose neither stirred nor spoke. Was he suddenly stricken deaf and dumb, or was he profoundly offended, or was this churlish behaviour no more than a symptom of petulant dotage ? Mr Godly himself could be stubborn when he chose, and to have his greeting so completely ignored roused the mule in him. Only half an hour ago he had been engaged

in amicable conversation with the old man, and he refused to be treated now as though he did not exist. Determined to extort an acknowledgment of his civility, at whatever cost, he strode back to the inglenook and repeated, in a raised voice and very pointedly, his good night. At that the ancient slowly lifted his gaze from the fire. Mr Godly shuddered slightly to find himself looking into eyes preternaturally wise, cunning, and —as it seemed to Mr Godly—satirical. Mr Godly, inwardly writhing under that steady and searching regard, felt his own importance rapidly diminishing, felt like a little boy detected in a piece of impudent silliness. With no more words he jerked himself away, as a floundering fish might jerk itself off a hook, and rejoined Thatch, who stood awaiting him before an open cupboard-door. It appeared to be a cupboard door, but it opened, in fact, on to a dark steep flight of narrow stairs. In single file, Thatch with the candle leading, they mounted the stairs, which echoed their steps hollowly. When they came to a standstill on the upper landing, the silence in the house was terrible, ghostly, a personal presence. Outside, not a breath of wind stirred. And, within, nothing was audible

to Mr Godly but his own heart-beats. Thatch, whose outline alone he could distinguish, stood rigidly still. The inadequate candle suddenly sputtered like an angry imp.

'Well,' said Mr Godly sharply, 'where's the bedroom?'

Thatch chuckled. 'Ah, then you're set on having one?'

What did the donkey mean by that? Never mind; for the next moment Mr Godly was following his host into a room similar in size and shape to the one they had just come from. It evidently pretended to be a dormitory, for along one side, where beds should have been, was a row of large round cushions shaped like the lower half of a cottage-loaf. There were perhaps a score of these unsatisfying objects, upon one of which Mr Godly gathered, with difficulty, that he was expected to sleep, if he were so eccentric as to wish to sleep at all. The poor man was acutely unhappy. A bed such as this, if bed it could be called, might have accommodated a fair-sized dog; but he could not see himself spending the night on it. While he inwardly agonized, too disappointed for speech, Thatch was preening himself in triumph. 'I see you are impressed, my dear Godelik. Here's

careful work, as you see. Great study I have given to it. There be naught wrong, I think? No little touch lacking?'

Mr Godly groaned. 'Nothing wrong. Nothing at all,' he said, in crude irony. 'You've surpassed yourself, Mr Thatch.' In his despair he sank down on to one of the cushions. Its softness pleasantly surprised him. 'Ah, that's a bit better. Feathers!' he said to himself. 'Perhaps if I curl up . . .' Anyhow, there was no alternative.

Thatch showed no signs of going. He seemed amply content to stare his admiration. Mr Godly began to think that the fellow would need to be forcibly ejected, and so, meditating violence, he rose again to his feet and stepped forward. 'Off with you!' he said.

'And you are really going to sleep?' asked Thatch, with a sly wink.

'I'm going to try,' said Mr Godly, with extreme bitterness. 'What else should I come to bed for?'

Thatch shrugged his shoulders and grinned. 'You're a marvel. You keep it up wondrously. I've been watching you, Godelik. How do you manage never to forget yourself? I do my best, but I be no match for you, my quince.'

'Oh, I don't know what you're chattering about,' cried Mr Godly. 'Good night.'

'As you please,' said Thatch, a trifle out of temper. 'But I *must* tell you this. A rare thing. A high honour. Not that I take sides in the affair—I've no head for politics . . . But do you know who that fairyman downstairs is?'

'Was he a ferryman, that old gentleman?'

Thatch's eyes opened wide with the wonder of his communication. By standing on his toes he strove, unsuccessfully, to reach Mr Godly's ear. Mr Godly, heartily wishing him gone, bent down to him.

'That,' said Thatch, in a high reedy whisper, 'that is the king of the conspirators, Old Fairy Fumpum.' And he skipped out of the room, a tiptoeing fantastick, leaving Mr Godly alone with the moonlight.

CHAPTER XIV: THE GOLDEN BOWMEN

MR GODLY stood winding his watch with the key attached to the other end of its heavy gold chain. Armageddon itself could not have persuaded him to neglect that duty; nor, once it was done, could all the conspiracies in the world have kept him awake at this moment. He lay down with a grunt. Scarcely had the sound of Thatch's footsteps died away than he fell asleep, with his head and shoulders supported by a circular cushion. In his dreams he sat in the office before an immense pile of documents, dictating letters to a middle-aged female typist, who paused in her work from time to time and coyly promised to renew his youth on condition that her typewriter was provided with a fresh ribbon. How his youth's renewal was to be effected was not clear, but Mr Godly, believing it to involve tedious actuarial calculations, was determined to have none of it. 'Dear Sir,' said Mr Godly firmly, 'we are

in receipt of your letter of yesterday's date, and in reply have the pleasure to inform you . . .' '. . . . pleasure to inform you,' echoed the stenographer tenderly, and interrupted the dictation by stopping to moisten the sharp point of her pencil with the blunt point of her tongue. As she did so, her little pinched nose expanded suddenly, her spectacles developed horn rims, and a fringe of white beard sprouted round her sallow face. 'Old Fairy Fumpum!' exclaimed Mr Godly; and was wakened suddenly by the sound of multitudinous feet in the road below.

Rising, with a yawn, he stepped to the window and peered out. Along the moonlit road passed a numerous company of warriors, about twenty abreast. The tallest among them was perhaps two and a half feet high. They carried bows slung at their backs and a quiverful of arrows at their sides. They were all quite naked, and their bodies shone in the moonlight like burnished gold. So metallic, indeed, was their lustre that Mr Godly would have dismissed them at once as figments of his imagination had he not been able to detect the ripple of muscles under the gleaming skin. Even in his astonishment Mr Godly was able to delight in the sight of

these little gilded men. They were splay-footed and splay-eared; but, granted their type, they all enjoyed a marvellous bodily perfection. Facially, so far as Mr Godly could make out, they exhibited great variety. There were slit eyes and round eyes; moon-faces, fiddle-faces, and faces like blunted triangles; chins with little goatee grey beards and chins hairless as an egg. There were noses, too, of all shapes and sizes, from the grotesquely ugly to the classically beautiful, noses porcine, equine, ratlike, long, short, snub, straight, crooked, hooked, aquiline. Mr Godly, as he watched the procession, shuddered with repulsion at one moment, as from something too hideous to be seen, and caught his breath the next, in a rapture of delight. Once or twice he laughed and clapped his hands, feeling like a little boy again.

The progress of this strange company was rapid and irregular. The bowmen kept no sort of marching order. They danced, skipped, pirouetted, hopped, ran, jumped, and even somersaulted; carried each other shoulder-high; played leapfrog; dodged and ducked and spun round like teetotums. But after watching for a long time, during which thousands of the bright creatures must have passed

his window and vanished into distance, Mr Godly began to fancy that he could detect a kind of organic unity, a pattern, in their seeming disorder, as though they were figures in an elaborate charade, or marionettes set moving by an invisible hand. Who then was the master of this absurd yet admirable ballet? Mr Godly, as was inevitable, could not help suspecting himself of being that creative intelligence. He did not believe that he was dreaming, for he was aware of having just awakened from dreams; but he did, as a rational man, try to persuade himself that this was all but a trick of the imagination, a self-induced fantasy, a singularly clear dramatization of the thoughts set stirring in his mind, or in his subconsciousness, by Thatch's preposterous nonsense about Old Fairy Fumpum. But this endeavour was not successful, and could not be so, while the evidence of his senses was so strong and clear. He believed, against the dictates of his reason, that what he saw and heard was objectively real. To have believed otherwise would have been to declare himself mad. He did not feel mad; he felt, on the contrary, wonderfully clearheaded and refreshed after his brief sleep. Wisely, he turned his back upon a scepticism that did

violence to his most intimate conviction, and surrendered himself wholeheartedly to the enjoyment of what he saw and heard. Quite suddenly the procession stopped. The silence that followed the sound of their flapping feet was like a blast of cold air. They stood now in an almost solid phalanx of gold, and for a while nothing stirred. Then, from their midst, there slowly emerged a slim hunchbacked figure hidden in a wide-brimmed black hat and a large emerald-green cloak. The golden soldiers immediately began buzzing about him, like a hive of bees round their queen, with excited gestures and little shrill cries that reached the ears of Mr Godly like music from a great distance. At first he could not make out what was happening. The great moon hung so near in the sky that he fancied he might, by leaning out of the window, see intimately its remote mountains and trace with his eye the courses of its frozen rivers. It shone now with renewed white effulgence upon the coloured pageantry below. The golden bodies moved round and round the figure in the green cloak, now slowly and haphazard, now spinning with such speed as to seem motionless, like the cocoon of a silkworm. The bright emerald flashed and van-

ished and flashed again. 'Well I never!' exclaimed Mr Godly appreciatively. 'It's as good as a play . . . Now whatever can that be? A fire escape?' A long ladder was being hoisted up into the sky by a group of the bowmen. It quivered and swayed for a second or two before it became rigid and firm, propped against invisible aerial supports. The Green Cloak began climbing up it carefully, testing each rung with a lithe silver-shod foot before trusting his weight upon it. Even when he turned his head, no feature of his face was visible; only his legs, thin as sticks, could be seen moving in a treadmill motion, and one thin long arm that clung with bony fingers to the higher rungs. Slowly he ascended, watched by the shining host in the road and by Mr Godly at the inn-window, until at last he stood on the topmost rung, balancing himself with ease. He turned back and waved his left hand, in a greeting to the golden multitude below; and then stood for a moment quite motionless, the round moon at his back. Her light behind him darkened his face and his cloak, so that his figure formed a black silhouette with a luminous pale yellow disk for background. Then, turning again, he extended his arms, his cloak opened about

him like the wings of a great green moth, and he plunged, even as Mr Godly himself had once plunged, up into the sky. He travelled through the sky in a series of giant curves and at incredible speed. He was the size of a bird, of a leaf, of a speck of dust. He vanished, and it was as if everything awaited, with held breath, the issue of this mysterious enterprise. The golden bowmen were still and silent as though they had indeed been figures cast in a mould. Mr Godly found his mouth empty of words and his mind of phrases. Then came a faint stirring in the ranks of that expectant host, like the rustling of autumn leaves under a tatter of wind. The quality of the light changed strangely, gradually. The volume of sound increased ; arms began waving, feet pattering ; voices shrilled and jangled in an absurd and pretty pandemonium. Mr Godly had been distracted by this chattering excitement from his wondering scrutiny of the sky ; and now, when he looked up again, he saw that the moon, veiled but not visibly dimmed, shone a bright emerald-green.

'No,' protested Mr Godly, 'I can't have that!' He rubbed his eyes vigorously, and looked again. 'That really won't do. There's something wrong with me. Why,

if this sort of thing goes on, *anything* may happen!' He breathed on the window-pane and rubbed it clean with his handkerchief; but no further change in the moon's colour was perceptible. 'Very well!' muttered Mr Godly, 'I'll settle this once and for all.' With more violence than the occasion demanded he flung open the window and thrust his head out. 'Hi, you there!' he called. But he called to an empty roadway. The golden bowmen were no longer to be seen. And yet, straining his ears, the bewildered man was conscious that the air was sibilant with whispers and tinkling with the tiny clangour of faraway bells. Here and there a point of light, like a golden star, twinkled for a moment, growing ever more small, in the darkness of the forest beyond. And the moon, outfacing his incredulity, remained obstinately green. Its unnatural light shed colour on the chalky road. All the world, indeed, was a symphony in green, from the profound green-tinged nigritude of the forest-trees to the region of sky, hued like an unripe lemon, that lay beyond the moon's outer nimbus. Mr Godly, catching sight of his own hands, was frightened by them. He was impressed by the beauty of this enchantment

—he conceded the word reluctantly—but it destroyed his peace of mind, and it made him tremble to find himself in a capricious universe. It was pleasant enough, in the security of his office in Leadenhall Street, to be promised the impossible by a charming young lady ; but a green moon was more than he had reckoned on. Nor did he see what conceivable bearing such a phenomenon could have on the renewal of his youth, which now, prompted by his dream, he tried to connect in logical sequence with this queer dance that Maia had led him. For Maia, though she could hardly be held responsible for these later developments, had certainly been the decisive factor in his setting out. He felt she was to blame for having left him to wander alone in the forest, while she herself played hide-and-seek with a satyr. That, anyhow, was no proper pastime for a respectable young girl.

He waited at the window, peering and listening. After a while all sounds died away, and he could see no sign, however enigmatic, of life at all. He turned back into the room and lay down again. But sleep was now impossible. His thoughts troubled him. He had never in his life felt more wide awake.

Again and again he asked himself what was happening to the world, and what had already happened. Whenever he opened his eyes the green moonlight that filled the room forced him back upon the problem. He decided that he had had all the enchantment he wanted. It had evidently been a mistake to ask for the impossible of Maia ; for, although the expression had been to him merely hyperbolical, she appeared to have taken it seriously. A disconcerting thing to have happened. He had not wanted the impossible. His demands of life were far more modest. All he had wanted, and wanted still, was Maia, eternal youth, immortality, truth, beauty, goodness, and perpetual ecstasy. With these trifles he would have been perfectly content ; for he was not a grasping man. Given these, he would never have bothered to compete with those of his neighbours who scrambled after green moons and magic. The more he thought of that lunar verdancy, the more indignant he grew. Finally, despairing of sleep, he made a mighty vow. He would get up at once, rout that fellow Thatch out of his bed, and demand a full explanation of everything.

CHAPTER XV: OLD FAIRY FUMPUM

HAVING lit the candle that Thatch had left with him, Mr Godly stepped out of his bedroom. Finding no other door he was driven to conclude that this was the only sleeping apartment in the house, or at least the only one approached by this particular stairway. He made his way, therefore, down to the parlour or kitchen in which he had tardily but not inadequately supped a few hours earlier. He found the room just as he had left it, still lit only by firelight, still filled with a silence that was decorated by the crackle of wood. There was no sign of Thatch, but as he approached the inglenook he saw, to his astonishment and somewhat to his discomfort, that Old Fairy Fumpum was still there. He was still there, and he was in precisely the same posture as before. Had he remained all these hours without moving a muscle? It was a disquieting thought. But the grip of Mr Godly's irrational alarm

relaxed the next moment ; for the old man stirred in his seat, vexedly as though something had bitten him. He fixed Mr Godly with his customary stare, and, after a long inquisitorial pause, he spoke.

'Ah, thee be back, be thee !' said Old Fairy Fumpum.

It was less a greeting than an accusation. Mr Godly had to plead guilty ; and the curious senile titter that rewarded his plea seemed to touch the very summit of satire. It impressed Mr Godly with a sense of his own exceeding insignificance. It made him out, indeed, to be an altogether preposterous little fellow. It inquired why the universe had brought him into being, and expressed mild surprise that so singular an error of judgment, not to say taste, had been allowed to remain uncorrected. It made Mr Godly feel that he was one of Nature's less successful jokes, a freak of puerile fancy : a theological flea, let us say, or an articulate beetle.

Mr Godly made a valiant effort to bounce back into a state of self-respect. 'Yes, Mr Fumpum, I am back, after a brief but satisfying sleep. The air about here suits me. I have never felt better in my life. At the moment, however, I am rather troubled, and

I am looking for our worthy host in order to demand of him an explanation of certain events. Events distinctly unexpected, not to say irregular.' The poor man did not wish to talk in this unreal fashion, but having begun he was afraid to stop lest he should be utterly annihilated by a second titter. 'But it occurs to me, Mr Fumpum, that perhaps you can help me. Now, to begin with . . .'

'Dun thee come a-mistering me,' interrupted the old gentleman, with minatory emphasis. 'Old Fairy Fumpum I be, and Old Fairy Fumpum I be called. And *wull* be called, me young popinjay! I been sassed once before to-day. Little Thatch, he sassed me.' The Old Fairy laughed with exceeding relish, and nodded his head cunningly. His next remark derived special significance from a raised forefinger. 'I larned' im. Believe me.'

'No offence, I hope.' Mr Godly endeavoured to maintain a semblance of unconcern by noisily clearing his throat. 'This little incident only shows how widely customs vary in different counties. Now if in my part of the world I had ventured to address a stranger as Old Fairy So-and-so . . .'

'Old Fairy Fumpum,' interrupted the an-

cient. 'Sakes alive, lad! Be thee daft or deaf?'

'Neither, I trust,' said Mr Godly. And he hoped against hope that his tone was felt to be a rebuke. 'As I was saying, if in my part of the world I had addressed a stranger as Old Fairy Fumpum, he would have been offended. He would wish to be called Mr Fumpum, that being the polite usage.'

'Fiddle-faddle!' retorted Old Fairy Fumpum. 'Dun thee do it again, or I'll larn thee. Thatch was a sassy one, but he knows better now. Sass I *can't* abide.'

'Quite so,' said Mr Godly. The old fellow being evidently in his dotage, one could afford to excuse his whimsies. 'Let me see,' added Mr Godly, making small talk, 'how far are we from London down here?'

This simple question so astonished Old Fairy Fumpum as to make him remove his horn-rimmed spectacles, and dilate his nostrils like a mettlesome horse. As if to quell his rising excitement he began rubbing the lenses with a large purple handkerchief; but this operation did not cause him to waver in his stare. 'Be thy name Godelik, after all? Little Thatch said thy name were Godelik. Sassed me, he did.'

'Ah,' said Mr Godly, 'that poor fellow's got a bee in his bonnet about me.'

'He be a rare doit,' agreed Old Fairy Fumpum. 'Not that thee be much better,' he added, judicially impartial. 'So Godelik . . .'

'Is not my name,' said Mr Godly. 'My name is Godly. A short vowel, you will notice, and no final K. How the misunderstanding arose I don't know. Some slight personal resemblance, perhaps.'

'If I thought thee wert Godelik,' said Old Fairy Fumpum, 'I'd mebbe . . .'

'Yes, yes,' interposed Mr Godly. 'I'm sure you would, my dear sir. But as I am not the person you name, we need not spend time discussing the matter.'

'Little Thatch said thee wert, and I said thee wert not. Sassed me, he did; so what was to do but larn 'im?' inquired Old Fairy Fumpum. '*I* larned 'im,' he added. And chuckled, turning over on his tongue the beatific memory of that lesson. 'Now, that Godelik, I been wanting a word or two with that one,' confided Old Fairy Fumpum, having spat pensively into the fire. 'Him and me don't agree, my thistle. Not by a long deal we don't. He be of the Noo Party.'

'Ah, yes,' said Mr Godly. 'And you, I

understand, are of the Old School. So our friend Thatch informed me.'

'Dun talk about little Thatch to me,' snapped Old Fairy Fumpum. 'Sassed me, he did. And I be King of the Ancients, let me tell thee. Now that Godelik, he belongs to the Noo Party, the Yewman Party, as 'tis called.'

'The Yeoman Party?' said Mr Godly. He was beginning to be interested, as well as puzzled, by this glimpse of local politics. 'Peasant proprietorship, perhaps, or something of that kind. Forgive me, Old Fairy Fumpum, if I seem dense. But this is all new to me. I begin to suspect that I am further from London than I at first thought possible. I am holiday-making, you see; and, walking all day, out in the fresh air, one loses a sense of time and distance. At least that is my experience. Mr Godly had never been so loquacious. He felt that he could go on for ever talking in this strain, and that by doing so he might have persuaded himself that he was not intellectually inferior to this half-witted yokel. 'I live in Brockley, you know, no great distance from the city where my office is. These rural politics have a fresh charm for me, after the storm and stress of city life.' Really, Mr Godly did not know he could talk

so well. He felt that he had never done justice to himself in the past. When he returned to normal life he would exercise this new-found talent. A little after-dinner speechifying or a few remarks at a church meeting. What a pleasant surprise for them all at home !

But Old Fairy Fumpum, it appeared, was less easy to impress. He showed no sign of having heard Mr Godly's remarks, and offered him no encouragement when he moved in to the inglenook and took possession of the opposite seat. 'I wish,' said Mr Godly, intimidated by the silence, 'I wish you would explain the whole situation to me. I am a complete stranger, remember.'

'A furriner ?' inquired Old Fairy Fumpum. He wrinkled his nose in scorn : which is to say that he wrinkled nine-tenths of his face. 'One of they Irish leprechauns, I dessay. Well, it be not thy fault, poor buttie.' For the space of some few minutes he shook with silent mirth, the occasion of which was not clear to Mr Godly. Then he returned to his theme. He talked, in snatches, for a great while, with many sly and savage references to Thatch, many unveiled insults to Mr Godly, many powerful generalizations about the Perils of Sass. Mr Godly, whose interest

was now excited, experienced the greatest difficulty in getting his questions answered, and, having the answers, to separate the relevant from the repetitive and the merely malicious. Old Fairy Fumpum began with a wealth of incomprehensible allusion, and ended by believing Mr Godly to be the most ignorant creature in the world. Had he set out with that assumption his recital would have been less than a tithe as long. As it was, it occupied an hour or more ; for he was stopped at every second sentence and forced to explain this or that ; and as often as not the explanations required to be themselves explained before Mr Godly could make head or tail of them. Mr Godly was as obstinate, as pertinacious, as Old Fairy Fumpum was perverse and cantankerous ; and it is greatly to the credit of his inordinate curiosity that he did by degrees extract from the dotard a quantity of solid (albeit improbable) information. At first his own obstinacy stood in the way of comprehension : in particular, his reluctance to accept the supposition that he had strayed into a land of elves. It was a supposition absurd enough, but it was manifestly the key to everything that was said, and he was forced finally to admit it, though

purely provisionally and for the purposes of conversation.

From what Old Fairy Fumpum said, it was evident that Mr Godly had arrived at a moment of grave national crisis. In his own country they were now having national crises at the rate of about one a week, but this was an altogether more serious affair, if Old Fairy Fumpum was to be believed. Mr Godly had had the fortune, or the misfortune, to step right into the middle of the drama. The country, it appeared, was divided into two rival factions. The larger and more powerful was known to Old Fairy Fumpum as the Noo Party; the other was that glorious company of Ancients of which he himself was the king. And the King of the Ancients, he made it clear, was *ex officio* the Chief Conspirator. The Noo Party, though of comparatively recent growth, was now the most formidable power for evil in the world, said Old Fairy Fumpum. Or, to be more precise, that was what he meant: what he said is unprintable. These god-abandoned and unprofitable persons had succeeded in setting themselves up in authority in a land where authority had never before been known. They established an absolute autocracy, and ruled

the country, through their Dictator, with an iron hand. They uprooted ancient and venerable customs, and imposed new ones that had been copied, as we shall see, from an inferior and probably mythical order of creatures the very mention of which obliged Old Fairy Fumpum to spit with ceremonial emphasis. They were known, these creatures, as Yewman Beans (I quote Fairy Fumpum again), and they were the evident source of all the political evils of the day. For this pestilential Noo Party was only the extreme logical development of what had seemed, in its remote beginnings, to be no more than a ridiculous but innocent craze. Old Fairy Fumpum flattered himself that he had been the first to detect its true character and to denounce it. But he had not been listened to. The playful and pretty fashion of apeing Yewman Beans had at first attracted only the more flippant and sentimental among the fairies. They invented marriage ceremonies and made mock-laws of astonishing ferocity. They pretended to eat strange prehistoric beasts, such as the pig, the cow, the mutton-chop. They held festivals in which, as they claimed, the life of Yewman Beans was faithfully represented in a mimic-show. The thing became a season's

craze, but, to all observers save Old Fairy Fumpum, it seemed unlikely to go further. The cult gained new adherents every day, however ; and evidence of its increasing importance was not wanting. There was, for example, the extraordinary vogue of a pantomime piece, invented by a certain Berry, about a fairy who grew up and died—manifest absurdity. There was a scene in which the fairy walks down the street to business wearing a bowler hat and carrying an umbrella, and this, by Berry's admirers, was always quoted as the crowning example of his characteristic quaint charm : his gossamer fancy, his delicate touch, his tender and whimsical humour. 'Berry at his best,' said one dramatic critic. 'It is pure Berry,' said another. In the last act the hero is seized with a curious affliction of the throat, and, although visited by a creature called the Doctor, and forced to swallow a large dose of Scotch Emotion, he dies in great agony. This death-scene, Mr Godly was assured, was considered to be a triumph of comic acting. Immature fairies were very entertained by tales of death, though what interest they could find in such silliness Old Fairy Fumpum could not imagine, for, said he, to lie down and pretend to be asleep

for ever was a fool's game that could only amuse simpletons. It was an acrobatic trick that no fairy had ever seriously attempted. This kind of thing, this imitation of a race of beings who had probably never existed at all outside the fairy imagination, went on for some time without causing any general alarm. But the craze gradually crystallized into a cult; the cult became a creed, the creed a rigid law. Broadly speaking, the history of the movement could be divided into these three phases. Charlatans rose up (Old Fairy Fumpum called them by a harsher name) who claimed to possess special powers of vision and audition whereby they had been able to communicate with Yewman Beans, so gaining new knowledge of their customs and behaviour and confirming or correcting old conjectures. The imaginings of the old poets and fantastic writers were now to be tested by this pseudo-science. Yewman Beans, those fabulous monsters who had delighted the juvenile mind for many centuries, were now boldly declared real, capable of being interviewed and reported on by fairy scribes and portrayed by fairy picture-makers. At this, the Ancients began to stir themselves. They realized, too late, that Old Fairy Fumpum's jeremiads had been

inspired by the spirit of prophecy. They began disseminating propaganda against the Yewman cult, which they denounced as morbid, feminine, hysterical, and subversive of public decency. In this last particular, though at the time it seemed an extravagance, subsequent events proved them to be right. For the Yewman cult, brooking no opposition, promptly formed itself into a disciplined order and assumed the name by which it was hence-forward to be known. The Noo Party, as these degenerates were now called, went from bad to worse. The habit of wearing clothes, that insidious vice, spread fast and far among them. Did this practice begin in a compara-tively innocent, an almost accidental way? Or was it simply the imitation of Yewmans carried to its revolting extreme? Social his-torians were divided on the question. Old Fairy Fumpum, the most uncompromising of diehards, naturally believed the latter explana-tion to be the true one. But he was not, on this point, a bigot, and he stated, for what it was worth, the alternative theory, which pointed to the Portable Pocket as the origin of the sin. All clothing, contended this school of thought, was but an elaboration, and a per-version to base uses, of the portable pocket,

or satchel, which in the old days had been carried, slung round the neck, by the more sophisticated fairies when they were engaged on long journeys. It was thought that one day some female fairy discovered, quite by accident, that by allowing this satchel to fall over her breasts she could contrive to enhance her sexual attractiveness, adding to it an element of specious excitement and meretricious mystery. From that day, large satchels were the fashion. And from that day dated the process known technically, in academic circles, as the Fairy Fall. Whether or not this was the most probable theory, Mr Godly did not have to decide ; but it was made clear to him that the Noo Party, though they may not have invented the vice of clothing, encouraged it with a cynicism that staggered belief. At their instance, fairies who had formerly walked naked and unashamed and sinless now began to deck themselves out in wantonness of heart. Those of the Noo Party not only encouraged this : they began to command it. For some while their organization and their policy had been becoming more and more political in character ; and suddenly, by a cleverly contrived *coup d'état*, they set themselves up as rulers and forced the whole population to

acknowledge their rule. They invented crimes of all kinds ; they made rules against stealing, which was unknown in a land where no one lacked for anything, against murder, which was impossible, and against magic. They were never so happy as when they could pretend to have detected some breach of these laws. There was more joy in Police Courts over one sinner detected than over ninety and nine just persons. And, finally, they had an entertaining arrangement, called punishment, by which every misdemeanour was duplicated with great pomp and ceremony. All this they did in slavish imitation of the old fantastic fables.

'Yewman Beans !' said Old Fairy Fumpum, with a truculent snort. 'Never were sech things, nor never will be. I'll believe in 'em when I see 'em.'

'I wonder,' murmured Mr Godly.

CHAPTER XVI: A BIT OF MAGIC

THE Noo Party, so soon as they became a government, swelled visibly in arrogance and wickedness. They set out to make systematic war upon the old constitutional anarchy which, as Old Fairy Fumpum believed, had been from time immemorial his country's peculiar glory, the rock foundation of all her greatness. They penalized love, hedging it about with prohibitions and restrictions whose foolishness could not be matched except in the comic literature of the nursery; and with great pains and ingenuity they invented and codified indecency. One of their chief joys was to seize upon the ecstatic language of lovers and use it as a weapon against them. Ardent young fairies were in the habit of saying to their mistresses: 'I would leap the moon for you!' It was a commonplace poetical hyperbole in everyday use; for leaping the moon, Mr Godly was led to surmise, was a feat very rarely accomplished, like swimming the

channel. But the Government, by means of an elaborate system of espionage, contrived to overhear many of such vows, and to demand their literal fulfilment. If the lover succeeded in leaping the moon he was convicted of practising magic; if he failed he was confined, with his mistress, in a small cage; in either event his life was made a misery to him. Clothes, as we have seen, were particularly dear to the diseased minds of the Noo Party; and they had not long held power before they startled the fairy world by making it a crime to go unclad. This, in the opinion of Old Fairy Fumpum and his like, was to penalize virtue; needless to say, he was the most conspicuous and the most stubborn among the numerous conscientious objectors to this law. The great majority of the population, unfortunately, were too indolent, too morally lax, to resist. Moreover, the Government proceeded warily in this matter. They began by enacting that for a fairy of either sex to appear in the open forest with bare hands and feet was an offence against decency and law; the rest of the body could still be exposed with impunity. This, which the citizens considered rather fun, was the thin end of the wedge that was finally to split the country in twain. The principle of cover-

ing the body having been established by law and accepted by the people, it was simple enough thereafter to extend its application, limb by limb, until, after much so-called reform, the law had been brought cunningly into conformity with the infamous customs attributed to Yewman Beans.

Mr Godly leaned forward on his knees, chin in hand. 'I'm extremely interested,' he said, 'especially in what you say about death. Am I to understand that you people never die? Will you yourself, for example, never die?'

The nose of Old Fairy Fumpum wrinkled in disdain. 'I've gotten no time for sech fiddle-faddle.'

'But you grow old,' objected Mr Godly. 'What happens then?'

'Ay,' said Old Fairy Fumpum. 'I be growing oldish. Ten thousand moons or more. But I've given over counting. Time to grow young again soon.'

Mr Godly sparkled with excitement. 'Ah, so you can grow young again whenever you wish. Is that it?'

'Any loon knows that.' Old Fairy Fumpum spoke curtly, and suspicion gleamed again in his penetrating eyes. 'If thee be a-sassing me, my young peanut . . .' His brow was

furrowed with indignation; his thick fiery eyebrows moved rapidly up and down in menace. 'Little Thatch, he sassed me,' he added; and brightened at once in relish of the mysterious sequel to that celebrated crime.

Mr Godly earnestly disavowed any ironical intention. 'I assure you, Old Fairy Fumpum, my question was quite serious. You must remember I'm a new-comer here, from foreign parts, as you might say. Where I come from, don't you see, people die in thousands every day.'

'He he!' tittered Old Fairy Fumpum. 'What a set of dafties!'

It was evident to Mr Godly that Old Fairy Fumpum had not the least idea of what death signified. It was to him a word that meant lying rigid and motionless on one's back in stupid imitation of inanimate things, or, perhaps, in a fit of everlasting sulks. But without death, thought Mr Godly, the fairy life of the forest would multiply infinitely. Perhaps birth, too, was unknown here, and so the population remained numerically constant: it seemed a necessary inference, but it did not greatly interest him.

'I wish you would tell me more,' said Mr Godly. 'I wish you would tell me how this

change, this growing young again, can be effected.'

'Bit of magic,' said Old Fairy Fumpum.

'But I thought you said magic was forbidden by law?'

Old Fairy Fumpum agreed. 'They dratted Noo Party. Howsumdever, *I*'ll larn 'em!'

'And you mean to say,' cried Mr. Godly, 'they dare to deny you the right to renew your youth! Why, it's blasphemy!'

Mr Godly was genuinely indignant and alarmed. All the spirit in him woke to the defence of life and freedom. He began to think that Old Fairy Fumpum could not have been far wrong when he implied that this Noo Party was the very embodiment of all things evil. And he seriously contemplated joining the Ancients in their attempt to overthrow this tyranny. But he was held back by the thought of Maia. He must be on Maia's side, whichever that might be. She constituted a problem, which he could not solve. On the one hand she had carried the imitation of humans as far as it could possibly be carried: therein she seemed to favour the Noo Party. On the other hand she had definitely promised to renew his youth, a process that involved, apparently, the forbidden magical practices of

the Ancients. A third possibility recurred to his mind, and instantly he hailed it as the evident truth. How could he have been so gullible? For was it not as clear as the moon in heaven that this Old Fairy Fumpum had been steadily and maliciously lying to him the whole night? Yes, it was as clear as the moon. 'The green moon,' retorted a voice in his mind; and again he was floundering in doubts.

At sight of Mr Godly's fervour and fear, Old Fairy Fumpum, who was nothing if not perverse, became exuberantly cheerful. 'Never thee mind, winkle!' he said, chuckling. 'Eh, but I'm wealful. This be a great night, this one. Did thee see the moon tonight, my pretty?'

'I did,' said Mr Godly.

'Sharp eyes thee've gotten,' said Old Fairy Fumpum, shaking with appreciation of his own satire. 'He! he! he!' His mirth subsided slowly, and he added, in a tone immensely cunning: 'And what colour might she have been?'

'Green,' said Mr Godly. 'Bright green.' It annoyed him to have to recall the fact, and it annoyed him still more to be the butt of this senile wit. 'Was that some of your doing?'

'Bit of magic,' said Old Fairy Fumpum. 'That were a sign, that were,' he added, winking rapidly with alternate eyes.

'A sign of what?' inquired Mr Godly, interested in spite of himself. Then a pleasant idea visited him. 'Do you mean . . . the sign of rebellion, the call to arms?'

'P'raps I do,' answered Old Fairy Fumpum. 'P'raps I don't.' Such directness of speech did not please him.

'You do! You do!' cried Mr Godly, jumping up in boyish excitement. 'Those were the conspirators I saw in the road, the whole dam' lot of them. And you, sitting here in a false beard, engineered the whole thing. There's a great battle being fought at this moment, perhaps . . .'

'Hey?' said Old Fairy Fumpum. He was exceedingly annoyed at having the story taken out of his mouth; but that was a trifle compared with the insult to his beard. 'That be sass. That be sass right enough. False beard, hey!' He seized his whiskers in his two hands, and tugged with terrible ferocity, screwing up his face with the pain it caused him. His eyes watered prodigiously. 'I'll give thee false beard, my pimple! I larned little Thatch for sass, and I'll larn thee!'

'You misunderstood me,' said Mr Godly, with great presence of mind. 'I did not mean literally a false beard, a wig. And certainly I never dreamed of suggesting that your own magnificent growth was false. I was using a picturesque Brockley idiom. Just as you might speak of "a brown study," meaning a state of pensiveness, so, in my home county, the phrase "in a false beard" means simply "in a state of conspiracy." Please don't take offence at a perfectly innocent remark.' Undoubtedly the forest air had done Mr Godly good.

Old Fairy Fumpum calmed down, though he continued to emit threatening noises at intervals. Mr Godly was too exhilarated to be easily alarmed: exhilarated by the notion that his luck had again led him right. This inn upon which he had chanced was apparently the secret headquarters of a great plot against the state which had now become declared rebellion. He himself had witnessed that dramatic development, had watched from his bedroom window the bud of conspiracy burst into the flower of fairy warfare. And here, sitting at ease by a log-fire (in strict accordance with military tradition), was he whose mind had planned it all. Here was the master of the ballet. Would there be shedding of real

blood—or only of sawdust? What substance could it be that moved in the veins of this immortal race? Mr Godly's imagination was awhirl. A new thought startled him. Old Fairy Fumpum, whether immortal or not, was English to the core, and proud of his Englishry. This, then, was still England. What if this Revolt of the Ancients should prove to have a profounder significance than he had guessed? What if it had been brewing for a million years, and was now projecting all the forces of magic against the established human order? What if this so-called Noo Party was none other than humanity itself, to which he, Godly, owed loyalty? Only for a moment did he surrender himself to these fancies. A blast of common-sense came to disperse them. He returned to the arms of his customary scepticism.

'What nonsense it all is,' said Mr Godly. But his tone was wistful. 'If only I could bring myself to believe your tales!'

Old Fairy Fumpum paid no heed to this reflection on his veracity; perhaps he failed to understand it. His face was wreathed in smiles and ruddy with fireglow. 'She do shine green to-night,' he remarked in a loud voice, and broke into a peal of laughter. 'That'll show 'em up.'

'As for showing them up,' said Mr Godly. 'Well, I hardly know. The effect of green moonlight is curious. It certainly makes a vast difference.'

'It doose,' agreed Fumpum. 'But I'll tell thee a better one than that, my dear.'

'Please do.' Mr Godly resumed his seat opposite.

'A much better one.' The Old Fairy became confidential again.

'Splendid!' said Mr Godly. 'What is it?'

'Where's the hurry?'" inquired Old Fairy Fumpum. He remained obstinately silent for the space of a few minutes. Mr Godly concealed his impatience. 'What if she took it into her head to shine blue,' said Old Fairy Fumpum. 'That'd be a prime one, hey?'

Mr Godly agreed that a blue moon was a very rare and prime fruit indeed.

'Ay, a real booty she'd be then. That's my belief. . . . But, of course,' added Old Fairy Fumpum cunningly, 'mebbe thee knows better?'

Mr Godly hastily disclaimed any such superior knowledge. 'And if the moon did shine blue?' he inquired. 'That would be another sign perhaps. A sign of victory, eh?'

'Mebbe it would,' said Old Fairy Fumpum. 'Mebbe it wouldn't,' he added. 'And then comes *my* bit of fun.'

There was no mistaking his meaning. His eyes sparkled with vindictive joy. 'But,' protested Mr Godly, 'you'll be generous surely. You won't persecute a defeated enemy. You'll be gentle with them.'

'Persecoot 'em?' said the ancient, in a tone of innocent inquiry. 'Who said aught of persecooting 'em? No, I won't persecoot 'em. I'll skin 'em alive, that's all I'll do. Gently skin 'em alive, I will. Gently and slowly. But I won't persecoot 'em.' He gave himself up to mirth for a while; then added thoughtfully: 'I'll mebbe use a bit of magic on 'em, too.'

Mr Godly could not repress a shudder. 'Black magic?'

'Black or white, it's all one. Turn 'em into pigses I will. Turn 'em into caterpillars I will. How will they like that, my peanut?'

Mr Godly could not believe that they would find much pleasure in the joke, and he ventured to say so.

'Half of 'em into spiders and the other half into flies. How'd that do? Set 'em spinning

cobwebs and eating each other up, hey? Not a meal I'd fancy.' The old man made a wry face; but he smiled the next moment. 'Treat 'em as I treated little Thatch. He sassed me, that one.'

Mr Godly coughed. 'Forgive me if I seem inquisitive,' he said. 'But what *did* you do to our friend Thatch? And where is he now?'

'Little Thatch?' The fiery eyebrows rose high, and the bright eyes opened wide in simulated wonder. 'Why, my buttie, he be sitting at thy side, where else?'

Mr Godly felt his flesh wrinkle. He tried to comfort himself with irony. 'He's very quiet, surely. And very inconspicuous.'

'As quiet as a little mouse, he be,' said Old Fairy Fumpum.

Against his will Mr Godly glanced round in search of Thatch. 'Why, look at that!' he exclaimed, jumping up. Thatch was forgotten now. 'That mouse there, sitting beside me as cool as you please! Give me something to hit it with, quick!' He was not naturally murderous, but he had his domesticated moments and this was one of them.

He had made enough noise and fuss to frighten away fifty mice, but this poor little

specimen, evidently a young one, did not move an inch. It seemed paralysed with fear ; its eyes were unbearably wistful. As Mr Godly stared, meeting that gaze, he felt as though he were looking through iron bars into the tortured eyes of a prisoner.

'Quiet as a little mouse, he be,' said Old Fairy Fumpum. 'Sassed me he did.'

'Do you mean . . .' cried Mr Godly. 'No, it can't be. That's too tall a story.' But in his heart he was half convinced. Was he losing his wits? The thought made him shudder. 'If this is your doing,' he entreated the chuckling old man, 'for God's sake put it right.'

'Time enough,' said Old Fairy Fumpum. 'Bit of magic, that's all. Hit him with thikky poker, I will.'

'No!' protested Mr Godly.

But the poker was red-hot, and he was afraid of it. Before he could interpose, the thing was done. The mouse had vanished. He hoped that it had found its wits in time to dodge that lethal blow and get clear away. 'What's that?' said Mr Godly, his nerves quivering at the least sound. He thought he heard footsteps outside.

'Who but little Thatch?' said Old Fairy

Fumpum, poker in hand. 'I've larned him his lesson. Enough's enough.'

The next moment Thatch, pale and trembling, staggered into the room.

CHAPTER XVII: THE KISS

THE sight of Thatch induced in Mr Godly a reaction that was too much for his self-control. Tears stood in his eyes ; his limbs trembled. With averted head he moved limply to the door. The fresh cool air of night stung new life into him, and with a convulsive shiver he shook off the horror that rode upon his shoulders. The road into which he stepped still glowed a pale green ; the tall forest on each side stretched so high above him that he felt dwarfed to insignificance ; he felt, too, a twinge of returning fear to find himself, a minute human insect, in a tunnel so strait and lofty. It seemed to his fancy that the world was alive, and hostile, and might at any moment fling him out into vast, verdant space. To escape from this sensation he plunged, eagerly, into the comforting gloom of the trees.

Here was a new adventure. It seemed to Mr Godly that he must have stepped into the midst of an unseen multitude. The dark

forest, which had seemed so dead and still, was alive with the sounds of fairy warfare. He stood, limp with surprise and delight; and, to steady himself, clutched with his right hand at the solid security of a slim tree. He heard the absurd mimic thunder of a hundred delicate and tiny drums, the crisp sharp music of breaking twigs, and the rhythm of distant feet. Little bell-voices, coming and going in the wood, mingled with shrill bird-like cries and with laughter that was like the sound of bursting pods. All these sounds together scarcely exceeded in loudness the natural susurration of a midsummer meadow populous with insect-life and visited by birds. A little later, his eyes becoming accustomed to the gloom, Mr Godly began to discern green-plashed golden bodies moving, singly or in tumbling groups, among the dark trees. Suddenly the noise increased. It became louder than a concert of ten million grasshoppers. The golden figures multiplied, falling from trees, darting from behind bushes, whirling and rolling and flying into formation with such speed and enthusiasm that they resembled a fountain of coins. Silver arrows sang and scintillated in the heart of the forest. Sword splintered on toy sword. Whoops of triumph and yells of

rage increased the uproar. Mr Godly, listening intently, and interpreting as best he could the strange panorama of shadow and colour, was afraid even to clear his throat lest by so doing he should drown the sound of this Armageddon.

'Isn't it lovely!' exclaimed a boyish voice at Mr Godly's elbow.

He turned in surprise. 'Hullo! Where did you spring from?'

Standing by his side, gravely regarding the pageant of warfare, was a small boy. In size he was about equal to Thatch, but there was no question of his youth and his kind. Here was a perfectly normal and very lovely human child, dark-haired, blue-eyed, about six years old, serenely master of himself and of the situation. Mr Goldly's heart warmed at the sight. 'Where did you spring from?' he repeated.

'I didn't spring: I just came,' replied the little boy. 'Just came I did. Don't you think it is rather a nice battle, this battle?'

'I certainly do,' said Mr Godly. 'But isn't it rather late for you to be out?'

The child, absorbed in the spectacle before him, made no answer. But presently he said

anxiously : 'I say, do you think this is a *very* nice battle ?'

'Yes,' said Mr Godly judicially. 'I think, on the whole, it is very nice.'

'So do I,' agreed the child. He slipped his right hand into Mr Godly's left. 'It's so important to agree, isn't it ?'

Mr Godly, pleased and flattered by the child's friendliness, was content to stand so, with linked hands, and to watch, not the moving polychrome of the forest, but its effect upon the intent expressive face of this new companion.

'And presently,' said the child, 'there'll be a blue moon. The old hairy gentleman told me.'

'What !' exclaimed Mr Godly, 'Old Fairy Fumpum !' The conjunction of ideas was incredible.

'Yes. He's the king of the conspirators. Did you know ? He tells every one everything. Oh, I say, have you got a name yet ?'

'Why yes. Everybody's got a name. Mine is John Godly.'

'*I* haven't,' said the child wistfully. 'Not yet, I haven't.'

It was absurd, no doubt, but it was also moving. Mr Godly found that he could not

see without emotion that shadowy appeal in the child's eyes. 'Never mind,' he said. 'We must find you one. I think I shall call you Marius.'

The name slipped out before he understood whence it came and why only tenderness could wring it from him. He felt that he would give anything to be able to recall it and shut it away once more, with other buried stuff, in the tomb from which it had emerged. For it was a name that mocked him with the memory of a dead sentiment. In the early years of his marriage it had been much on his lips, and much more on the lips of his wife. The child she had hoped for had been Marius; though never in fact more than a name, he became in the household a radiant spirit in whose imaginary future his parents took great delight.

'No,' said Mr Godly sharply. 'That won't do. I'll think of another.'

'Oh, why?' cried the little boy. 'Let me be Marius. I would like to be Marius.'

'I'm sorry,' said Mr Godly, 'but it's impossible. Once and for all, my boy, it's not to be thought of.'

'I must be Marius. I've just got to be.'

'You shan't!' said Mr Godly.

'I shall.'

'Shan't!'

'Shall!'

'I say you shall not.'

'And I say I shall.' The child stamped his foot.

'Now that's enough,' said Mr Godly, suddenly remembering his dignity. 'It's time you were in bed, anyhow.' He pulled out his watch. 'Bless me, it's past midnight.'

'What makes you so flustery to-night, John?' asked Marius. His voice trembled. 'I do want to be that name,' he added. 'You can be it next time if you like.'

One quiver of the childish lips broke down Mr Godly's defences. 'Oh, very well,' he said sulkily. 'Have it your own way.'

To the traditional tune of 'Cowardy, cowardy custard!' the boy began chanting, 'My name is Marius! My name is Marius!'

'Now stop that din, for pity's sake!'

The din stopped. 'Poor John!' said Marius. His sympathy was genuine but fleeting. 'I say, where is Florence?'

'Florence!' echoed Mr Godly. 'What do you know about Florence, you little devil?'

But Marius, having forgotten his question,

was now staring spellbound at the moon. 'Look, John!' he cried. 'It's blue.' He changed suddenly from his still poise into a wriggling symbol of joy. He ran into the road, chanting as he ran: 'Old Fairy Fumpum! Old Fairy Fumpum!'

Open-mouthed in astonishment, Mr Godly watched him disappear into Thatch's inn; then, with a sigh, moved on his way. Complete silence now filled the forest, which seemed to be emptied of all life save his own. A great loneliness settled on the wanderer's heart. He was hungry again for the touch of a human hand, and for a friendly voice speaking of familiar and comfortable things. The colour-tones of the forest had now changed; it was rich with a new beauty. But Mr Godly, dazed and sorrowful, had no eyes for it. He stumbled forward, without definite purpose; and desolation, like a ghost, strode beside him.

So he came, unprepared, into a little glowing glade, and to the consummation of his heart's dream. Maia, standing knee-deep in bracken, held out her bare arms to the sky in an attitude of exultant surrender. Her undraped limbs, bathed in the strange new moonlight, were a cold pale blue: she stood motionless, perfectly

poised, like a figure in a Wedgwood medallion. Instinctively, and with an inarticulate cry, Mr Godly prostrated himself in adoration.

But when at length he looked up, it was a cry of another kind that broke from him. His joy was poisoned ; his heart was turned to gall. For now there were two figures, locked in a close embrace. Mr Godly turned his face away, and black night engulfed him. Never before had he been so shamed and tortured. His trembling hands pressed on his eyes as if to shut out a vision of outrage. He was, in every sense, profoundly shocked. For the kiss, as a spectacle, is intolerable. To every man, but to the lover especially, every other man seems a satyr : in himself alone burns the sacred flame that purges flesh of all offence. The black moments throbbed by, and unexpectedly, in the midst of his torment, Mr Godly heard a voice calling him.

'Hullo, John ! What's the matter ?'

He reluctantly unlocked the fingers that screened his eyes. Yes, it was Maia, and she was now alone. 'What's the matter, my dear ?' she repeated. 'Where have you been wandering all this time ?'

'I hate you,' said Mr Godly hoarsely. 'Go away from me.' But he dared not leave it at

that. Her charm was subduing the rebellion of his spirit. 'No, don't go.'

'Won't you tell me what's the matter?' Maia's voice was very gentle. Its gentleness lacerated him.

'I saw you just now with Le Poon.'

'Yes?'

He was angered anew by her air of innocence. 'Yes. You were kissing him,' he accused her, weighing his words with all the brutality he could muster.

'And if I was?' she said. 'Why should that distress you?'

'I love you,' said Mr Godly. 'You know that.'

'Yes. I know that. But what has that to do with it?'

'Everything. I want you. I can't *share* you. Good God, Maia, you must see that without being told. You're playing with me.'

'You silly little man!' He winced. Why must she choose that epithet? 'So you don't love me after all. If you did, you would be only too glad of the chance of sharing me, as you call it. For you can't have me on any other terms.'

Mr Godly groaned, staggered to his feet,

and faced her in a frenzy. 'Are you quite shameless?'

'What have I to be ashamed of. Ought the sun to be ashamed of shining so promiscuously? Are you ashamed to be sharing warmth and daylight with the rest of the world? Would you like a sun and a moon to yourself, and flowers that blossom only when you look at them?'

'That's different,' said Mr Godly. 'Where is Le Poon now? Eavesdropping, I suppose.'

'He's gone home. So has Mr Appleyard.'

'And you . . .' Mr Godly's face was dark with jealous anger.

'Yes, I kissed them both good-bye.'

'Oh, I hate you,' cried Mr Godly. He looked into her disappointed eyes, and his heart melted. 'No, I love you. I don't care what you have done.'

She smiled radiantly. 'I'm so glad. Then we shall part friends?'

'Part! No, we must never part.'

Her eyes brimmed with compassion for him. 'Yes. It's time for you to go back now.'

'Back? I'll never go back, except to take you with me.'

'No. My home is here,' she answered. 'Good-bye, John.'

'But I can't leave you, Maia. It's preposterous. It's unfair. I have your promise.'

She shook her head. 'I'm sorry, but you really must. You won't be quite alone. Go back to your home and your old life.'

'And you?' he asked.

'No, I shall stay. But, my dear, I shall contrive a thousand ways to touch you.'

'To touch me?' said Mr Godly bitterly. 'To taunt me. To torment me with longing. It's not a sentimental memory I want. You know that. Why do you put me off with this poetical stuff?' He brooded for a moment. 'Did you say the same to those others?'

She shook her head. 'Poor John! What is it you would have of me then?'

Mr Godly grew fierce with love. 'What would I have of you? All of you—no more than that. What else does a man desire of the woman he adores? . . . You are playing with me, Maia,' he said again.

Maia sighed. 'Don't you like being played with?'

'No,' said Mr Godly.

'Don't you?' Maia repeated softly. 'Are you sure?'

'I'll say I do if it will flatter you.'

'I know what you want, John. You want to possess me, and die possessing.'

'Yes,' said Mr Godly. He held out his arms in eagerness. 'To die possessing you. That would be immortal life.'

He looked into her eyes, which now, to his amazed joy, burned with love and pity for him. With a lovely gesture of self-abandonment she surrendered her slim perfection to his arms. Her cheeks were rosy with delight in him. 'You are really mine?' he said, unable to believe his senses. And so at last, in the light of a blue moon, he kissed her.

CHAPTER XVIII: GODELIK IN LONDON

TO Mrs Godly, in moments of ease, the Mercantile Hope Corporation was nothing but a poor silly monster inflated with a sense of its own importance. She laughed at its pretensions ; dismissed with a shrug of her not uncomely shoulders its claim to be considered a solid and imposing fact of existence, a prop of national stability. Yet it could not be gainsaid—as in anxious intervals she realized —that this monster, however ridiculous, was something that had to be propitiated. It was, after all, the ultimate source of food and frocks, of the gas-stove and the electric light, of the lovely diaphanous wrap that protected her arms and neck from the gnats that swarmed in the garden on summer evenings, and of the elegant striped trousering that decorated the brief beloved legs of her husband. The list might be extended ; but these things alone sufficed to justify the existence of the Mercantile Hope Corporation. Admittedly

its demands, in return for these favours, were as extravagant as they were ineludible. Brer Bruin, at the Zoological Gardens, can be cajoled with lumps of sugar ; but this other creature, whose lair was in Leadenhall Street, demanded a more protracted sweetness—no less than John himself, with one brief luncheon interval, for eight consecutive hours a day. Denied any fraction of this diurnal tribute, it was apt to grow fractious and vindictive ; and, should that mood persist, it would withhold those extra emoluments—increases in salary, bonuses, the ultimate pension—that were the rewards of ungrudging thraldom. With this sinister possibility in mind, Florence was slow to suggest the smallest dereliction from duty. Consequently, when she and Godelik, still radiant with their delight in each other, rose this Tuesday morning, she hastened to find for him a suit of clothes more in keeping with his status as a respectable citizen of Brockley, and a power in the city, than was the gaudy and even giddy costume of the night before. Seeing a shadow of perplexity in his face, she helped him, with considerable maternal fuss, to don these sober garments. While her hands were thus engaged, her mind was preoccupied, intermittently, with

the problem of what must be done to tide over this difficult crisis. For that she was faced with a crisis she could no longer even pretend to deny. Godelik's demeanour radiated sanity and health, to say nothing of his vital and vitalizing happiness. His quaint foreign courtesy and his childlike gaiety of humour were irresistible. He was the perfect lover, helpless as a babe, ardent as a god, protective yet needing protection, the incarnation of the desirable paradox that had always been Florence's dream. But all this, delightful as it was, did not alter the fact that he seemed incapable of conducting his worldly affairs. Here was a dilemma from which only a certain desperate courage could provide an escape. If John stayed at home to-day, his official superiors would expect and demand a medical certificate to the effect that he was unfit for duty. To obtain such a certificate involved consulting a doctor, and to consult the doctor involved exposing poor John, in his present abnormal condition, to the dispassionate scrutiny of a third person. This latter was an alternative not to be seriously thought of. Florence had a rooted belief that medical men —poor things at best—were both erratic and dangerous where any degree of mental derange-

ment was in question. To the office, therefore, John must infallibly go ; and, ten to one, no great harm could come of it. With Florence, as with some others, wishing was believing ; and something that she was pleased to call her intuition told her that so soon as John could be persuaded back into his normal routine his memory would return to him. Moreover, even if it did not, it could not greatly matter whether he did his work accurately or not : a person in his exalted position could not be expected to burden his mind with petty details of business, and for that reason it was probable that he was never entrusted with them. And, if the worst came to the worst, he could feign a severe headache : she would see to it that he was coached in his part. Fortunately, as she had already noticed, he was quick to learn, and apt, like a child, to imitate.

'Do you feel well enough to go to the office, darling ?'

'The office !' cried Godelik. 'The business, is it ? The city affairs ?' He was like a child exulting in the prospect of its first pantomime. 'Yes, my flower. The real thing at last. We shall go together, yes ?'

'If you like,' said Florence, concealing her

surprise, 'I will take you.' She had thought to meet with opposition, having already determined not to let him travel to town alone. This anticipation of her wish was more than she had dared to hope for.

After a belated breakfast, which chanced to synchronize with Mr Godly's assault upon Thatch's mock-joint, they set out. Godelik's behaviour on the way to the station was charming in its juvenile way ; but it caused Florence some little embarrassment. His walk was peculiarly eager and artless ; once or twice he seized her by the hand and suggested that they should break into a run. The spectacle of a short business man in correct morning clothes running up the street hand-in-hand with his middle-aged wife would, she felt sure, have given rise to local comment ; she therefore, much against her inclination, discouraged this playfulness and begged her lover to be sensible. He instantly became exceedingly grave, assumed the slightly worried look of the typical man of affairs, and strode along by her side with an air of profound resolution. From time to time he would relax, for a second, and look to her slyly for commendation ; and she, reading his mind, never failed to supply a word of praise.

By taking first-class tickets she managed to secure an empty compartment in the train to town; and during the journey she set herself, in spite of her companion's enormous perturbation and delight, to teach him those duties at the office of which she knew less than nothing.

'And if you get into difficulties, John, just say you've got a bad headache.'

He nodded; he stroked her hand with caressing delicate fingers; but his fascinated eyes stared away from her at the flying landscape. Florence was frightened by this inattention. She began to waver in her resolution. But when she urged him to repeat what she had told him, she was reassured to find that he had memorized every detail. From that moment she felt confident that everything would go well. There might be little setbacks on the way, but ultimately all things would work together for good to them that loved John.

In this irrational belief Florence was obstinate. She arrived at many of such beliefs in a way of her own. She would suggest something to herself, and herself would repeat the suggestion: this she called intuition. Florence was a great believer in intuition,

and her faith was strengthened every day by the fact that she remembered, after the events, a great number of true intuitions she had never had, and forgot nearly always the false ones she had had. This morning, after Godelik's mnemonic display, she was filled with radiant certitude ; and so, with a comparatively light heart, she left him at the imposing portals of the Mercantile Hope Corporation. From a distance she watched him enter. His deportment was exemplary.

Left to himself, Godelik, once his entry had been effected in accordance with a preconceived plan, was rather at a loss. He stood staring vaguely about him, his glance coming to rest first on the broad winding stairway of stone, and then on the lift in which sat a young man in uniform reading a novelette. It was this young man who extricated him from his first difficulty.

'Lift, sir ?'

Eager to improve the acquaintance, Godelik darted forward. Before he could utter a syllable, the cage was shut upon him and the lift began its ascent. At the first movement Godelik became alarmed. He clutched, in fear, the arms of his companion.

'What's up ?' said the lift-boy.

'Why do you cage me?' cried Godelik piteously. 'What crime have I done that you should cage me?'

'Come orf it!' the lift-boy admonished him.

'But why . . .'

'Un'and me, as the sayin' is!' requested the lift-boy. He shook his hands free of Godelik's grasp, and having brought his lift to a standstill, opened the gate.

One wild leap took Godelik into safety. The lift-boy regarded him in mild surprise, half-amused, half-disapproving. 'Well, sir, it ain't my business. But if I might advise . . .'

Godelik was eager for advice, and his sudden release from confinement had encouraged him. 'Yes, yes. Advise me, my parsley.'

The lift-boy grinned. 'Same to you, me old nutmeg. Wiv knobs on.'

He made as if to shut himself in the lift and return, but Godelik made a gesture of appeal. 'Where must I go now?' he asked.

The boy stepped out of his lift. His air was paternal. 'Never thought to see *you* like this, Mr Godly. Such a pompous old cockolorum. Mean to tell me you don't know your own office?' Godelik's face ex-

pressed nothing but question. 'No need to ask.' He took Godelik by the arm and piloted him down a corridor. 'You've 'ad a night out, that's what you've done, sir ; and it's been a bit too much for you. That's the worst of you quiet ones : when you do break out you beat the bloody band. Now if it 'ad been *me*. You young 'uns, if you so much as smell a cork it's *Won't be 'Ome till Morning* wiv you, and can't find the key'ole. *I* knows. And you've been mixin' 'em : it don't take a sharp pair of eyes to see that. Mixin' 'em, and on an empty stomick, I shouldn't wonder.' He halted his prisoner at a door on which was incribed in prim black lettering : *Mr J. Godly*. 'This is where you belong, sir. In you go !'

And so Godelik found himself propelled, gently, into yet another strange room. The sight of it did nothing to enlighten his ignorance, but he had already regained something of his former composure, and as a professional investigator of the unknown, a renowned student of human customs, he was full of curiosity. Whatever the dangers, here, evidently, was a unique opportunity. He was the first of his kind in all history to penetrate the veil that had obscured, even from his fel-

low-students, this mortal and human society. Glimpses they had caught, illuminating but fleeting glimpses ; echoes from ancient tradition they had zealously collected ; but none before had trodden the soil of earth, none had been privileged to see with his own eyes the pretty habits, the innocent gaiety, and the august imaginative ritual of the Business Man.

The first thing that attracted Godelik's fancy was Miss M'Gree's typewriter. With tentative fingers he removed its cover ; and the sight of so dainty an instrument filled him with joy. The hieroglyphics on its round white keys were altogether foreign to him. Its shape was like nothing he had seen before. But he resolved, in the interests of science, to master it. Lifting the instrument in his two hands, he blew vigorously upon it. The result did not please him. Abandoning that method, he replaced the queer thing on the table and began vigorously poking at the keys with his alternate forefingers. He cocked his head on one side, judicially. 'No,' he had to confess, 'that is not good music, say what you will. They are marvellous creatures, but they have at least something to learn from us.' He was a little disheartened by this evidence of human undevelopment : the more

so because, in his own country, Business Life was the symbol of the ideal æstheticism, the celestial substance, so to speak, of which all that was best in fairy art was but a faint shadow. His reflections were interrupted by the entry of a clerk.

'The letters, sir,' said the clerk. He deposited a bundle of opened letters on Mr Godly's desk, and withdrew.

To these letters Godelik turned his attention. The sound of the word recalled to his mind the fact that Florence had used it, and used it with a certain emphasis; but her other words it did not recall. All Godelik knew was that he was expected to do something with these letters: that was part of his duty. Well, he would do his best; and if he fell short of perfection it would surely be forgiven him, seeing that he was a visitor, and but lately arrived. He fingered, idly for awhile, the prettily marked sheets of paper. Then he handled them to more purpose. The artist in him stirred and woke. His hands became busy; his brow was furrowed with the ardour of creation; his heart burned with excited joy. An hour or more flashed by unnoticed, so absorbed was he in his congenial task; and underlying his artistic emotion was the pride

of one who is at last realizing a great ambition. At last he was living the Business Life ; even to him, unworthy though he was, had been granted a humble part in the stern and beautiful adventure of commerce. At length he rose to his feet, and looked with pleasure upon the pile of paper blossoms that lay on Mr Godly's blotter. Fifty letters or more he had received, and that same number of flowers, each solitary of its species, he would render back. He asked for no applause : the pleasure of creation was sufficient. Yet in his heart he could not but hope and believe that some business man, some high-priest of the mysteries, would presently appear to say that this was well done.

At this moment the clerk reappeared.

'Mr Datchet, sir, would be glad if you could step up to see him. He has been ringing you, but the telephone seems to be out of order.'

CHAPTER XIX: THE BOUQUET

MR DATCHET, consciously a person of immense importance in the firm, had no little affection for Mr Godly, who, during their twenty years' business association, had flattered his vanity by always keeping a pace or two behind him in the race for promotion. Recently he had added to the obligation, lagging so far in the rear that Mr Datchet was now able, even in his dealings with this fellow-veteran, to assume the nod of Zeus without impropriety or afterthought. The sight of Mr Godly, coming at his call and going at his nod, was therefore balm to a spirit often wounded by the tedious misadventures of official life and the disenchantment of domestic anxieties. But this morning he had a particular reason for wishing to see Mr Godly. He was both angry and inquisitive. What he had been told gave him matter for thought; and what he suspected shocked and disturbed him. He knew that he was about to enjoy

the peculiar pleasure of minding some one else's business. His heart warmed to the prospect ; moral indignation, the pet indulgence of tired men, pervaded his being with a genial glow like that of old wine. The best of his typists, and certainly the prettiest, had failed to present herself this morning ; inquiry had elicited the information that she had not yet arrived, and he had had to accept the services of an inferior substitute. And now, after severely cross-examining this and certain other female members of his staff, he was in possession of incriminating facts. Miss M'Gree had been wired for, but no reply had been received. Last night she had been seen walking to the station in the company of Mr Godly. Furthermore, the friend of somebody's friend had observed her in the homeward train, still with Mr Godly. Finally, the telegram was returned to the senders, the addressee being not at home. Things looked very black for Mr Godly, and not least among them was Mr Datchet's clouded countenance. 'Now if it had been you,' thought Mr Datchet, silently apostrophizing the less attractive young woman who stood before him. Well, that, of course, would have been no better in principle ; but it would have interfered less disas-

trously with the smooth running of the office. It happened, too, that this Miss M'Gree was an exceptionally good-looking girl. Not that that made any difference. Not at all.

By the time Godelik had been manœuvred, with infinite care, into the presence of Mr Datchet, the lift-boy was not the only person in the building who rejoiced in the belief that he had at last seen Mr Godly in a state of intoxication. In a few minutes the place was buzzing with the sensational news, and bets were freely made as to the probable issue of events. Of all this Godelik was blissfully unaware. Happy in the knowledge of work well done, he advanced reverently towards the great Datchet, whom he regarded as the presiding genius of the whole dazzling performance, the *maître de ballet*. He grasped in both outstretched hands, as though it were a votive offering, a bunch of paper flowers exquisitely wrought. Mr Datchet did not immediately perceive him. His hand continued to make hieroglyphics on a sheet of paper, and his first remark had every appearance of being addressed to the inkpot.

'Ah, Mr Godly! Good morning. I've been glancing through my letters . . .'

'I, too,' responded Godelik gaily. 'Isn't it splendid fun!'

'There are one or two I'd like you to deal with,' said Mr Datchet. 'And, by the way, what's happened to that girl M'Gree?'

This was Mr Datchet's notion of finesse. This was the sharp shrewd method of inquiry employed by the detectives in Mr Datchet's favourite novels. He accompanied the question with a piercing glance, borrowed for the occasion from the same source. Such cleverness was wasted on Godelik. 'The girl M'Gree' was a phrase that held no meaning for him. He supposed it to be purely liturgical, and it distressed him a little that his researches into the natural and social history of Man had left him ignorant of the appropriate response. He was eager to play the game, and to play it correctly; but his complete ignorance bereft him of speech. In vain he searched his mind for inspiration. After a second or two of anguish and confusion he decided that a genuflexion, though not perhaps according to the book, could hardly be altogether out of place.

Mr Datchet was unused to being answered by silence, and he had no taste for innovation.

'What's the matter with you, Godly?

Are you feeling ill?' Mr Datchet wavered between sympathy and anger. 'Pain in the stomach, my dear fellow? Pain in the face too, judging by the grimace you're pulling.' Godelik continued to bend and bow. 'Dammit, sir, this is not the place for physical exercises. Really, Mr Godly, this is very *unusual*.' To Mr Datchet's way of thinking there could have been no more crushing indictment.

Godelik, with elaborate ceremony, advanced a further three paces. 'Here are the letters, dear heart.'

Mr Datchet jumped to his feet with an inarticulate noise that suggested to Godelik that the great master had suddenly been stung on the buttock. His chair, pushed violently back, scraped on the floor with menacing emphasis.

'What was that you said, sir!' cried Mr Datchet. With an effort he calmed himself. 'There must be some mistake,' he added. 'Have the goodness to repeat your remark, Mr Godly. It is not, if I may say so, the kind of remark one expects to hear from one's subordinate: even, Mr Godly, from a man of your seniority. Such witticisms may be well enough on more private and personal occasions; but here, in this office, I must ask you not to

presume on our friendship.' Godelik gazed at him through tears. 'Moreover, Mr Godly, I have asked you a question. You may find the question an awkward one, but it has to be answered. These antics will do you no good.'

Godelik's face clouded. He answered, with trembling lips: 'You are angry, my pretty one. I have done wrong. In some little detail, perhaps, my performance is lacking. But you must remember, good Datchet, that I am but newly come into your country, the least worthy but not the least zealous of disciples. Among my own kind I am not without honour, but here, in the presence of the mighty ones, I am but a babe. Yet I have done my poor best. You have still more letters to give me? That is good. See, here, what I have made for you of the other letters.'

Mr Datchet could do nothing but stare. His mouth opened and remained open, but no sound issued from that codfish cavity. His mien, however, was sufficiently eloquent. With sorrow, not untainted by anger, Godelik understood that his offering was unacceptable. His art was scorned; his labour had been all for nothing. And now he was assailed by an insidious temptation such as he had never in all his adult life experienced before.

Only in one way could he sting this human into appreciation, and that way involved a practice forbidden by his own national laws : laws that Godelik himself had been zealous to champion against the attacks of the revolutionaries.

But so great was his distress that the voice of conscience was at this moment the merest whisper. Whatever the risk, he must vindicate his art in the eyes of Datchet.

'Do you not like my work, O Datchet ! Come, they are beauteous blossoms : smell them, sweet soul ! '

A bunch of exotic and bewilderingly beautiful flowers was thrust under Mr Datchet's sceptical nose. Their fragrance was a breath from fairyland ; their colours epitomized all the vital ecstasies of nature ; moonlight and apple-blossom, the smell of wet woods, the ripple of clear water over living light.

The proximity of the miracle had a curious effect on Mr Datchet. From his mouth issued a gasp of wonder and of fear, a gasp that only sheer physical incapacity, momentary lack of breath, prevented from being a scream. His eyes could do nothing but stare at what he supposed to be a demented colleague ; his right hand fumbled blindly, pitifully, for the

bell-push on his desk. Godelik, interpreting these signs correctly, took care to lay his nosegay within reach of those groping fingers, and then tripped lightly from the room. Without great difficulty he found his way back to Mr Godly's office, where he resumed at once his examination of that inadequate musical instrument, the typewriter.

While so engaged, the typewriter still withholding its secret, he was once more interrupted by the entry of the attentive clerk. Mr Horace Mott, familiarly known as Young Motto, was sleek and serious in demeanour, but the events of the morning had worn thin his qualified respect for Mr Godly. He permitted himself to grin.

'A Mr Le Poon, sir. Can you see him?'

Godelik, after a quick birdlike glance round the room, went on his knees and peeped under the table. From this position he looked over his shoulder at Young Motto. 'No, my love, I do not see him. Where is he?'

The clerk, tittering maliciously, replied that Mr Le Poon was in the waiting-room.

'Ah,' Godelik reproached him, 'you know I must not see him if he is in another room. That would be magic, which is forbidden.'

Having recently transgressed the law, Godelik was naturally the more ardent in its defence. He turned, with no more words, to the typewriter. Mr Mott, having stared awhile in astonishment at what he believed to be Mr Godly's bent back, shrugged his shoulders, whistled two expressive notes, and sauntered from the room. Next moment he could be overheard in colloquy with the waiting visitor :

'Mr Godly doesn't seem to recall your name. Did you say you had an appointment?'

'I did, and I have,' said Le Poon.

'Funny. He doesn't recall your name.'

'So you said,' replied Le Poon. 'Don't brood on it, my friend. If he doesn't recall my name he will certainly recall my face, which is nothing if not memorable.'

'Perhaps,' said Young Motto, 'if you were to call another time.'

'Many times, I hope,' responded Le Poon cheerfully. 'But I'd better step in now. It's a shame to keep him in suspense.'

'I rather think, if you don't mind . . .' Young Motto, for almost the first time in his life, was nervous. 'You see, Mr Le Poon, he's not quite himself this morning.'

'I can well believe it,' said Le Poon. 'I

know the feeling, sonny. A good lunch 'll put that right.'

The clerk tried another tack. 'Excuse me, but are you sure you haven't made a mistake? You do know Mr Godly? Our Mr Godly? You have met him?'

'And did I once see Godly plain?' said Le Poon, raising his voice. 'I did indeed. And now I am going to repeat the rapture. Hi, Godly, where the devil are you?'

The next moment Godelik observed, with some alarm, a long, monocled face, attached to a high collar, peering in round the edge of the door. Le Poon, at sight of the familiar face, stepped into the room and extended his hand in greeting. Godelik, not to be outdone in courtesy, seized the hand in both his own, and executed a rotary movement with his arms.

'My dear Godly,' said Le Poon, when he was released, 'I am relieved to see you alive and well. Indeed, you look unusually well. The outing must have done you good. Queer experience, wasn't it! Now I wonder if you know what I am talking about?'

Godelik shook his head. 'Not yet.'

'I feel I ought to tell you here and now,' resumed Le Poon, 'that during our brief

association yesterday I conceived a warm affection for you. You know, you're such a funny little fellow. Perhaps you'll hardly believe me when I say that last night I could not sleep, I was so agitated by the fear of never seeing you again.'

Godelik smiled brightly, quite void of understanding. 'But have you ever seen me before?' he asked. 'I do not call you to mind, my cherry.'

'But how horticultural!' exclaimed Le Poon. 'Now where did you pick up that charming idiom? I see what it is, Godly. You think I am still elevated, still within the sphere of that champagne's benevolence. You are trying to make game of me, you old rascal. Now that, if I may say so, reveals an altogether new aspect of your personality. It makes me dimly suspect you of being more than seven years old. Last night, dear old bean, your every word and deed exhibited the perfect grace, the artless charm, and the delicious incongruous dignity that one sees, as a rule, only in very young children. The Godly of last night would never, I am sure, have ventured to pull my leg.'

Godelik's face repeated its non-committal smirk. 'Yes?' he said. 'And now what

shall we play at? Teach me my part. At first, you will understand, it is a little difficult for me. Your ways, though I have studied them long, are not easy to understand. Yet in my own country I am not without some little renown as an authority on your fascinating Yewman customs, so dainty and artificial, so elegant and gay, so taintless in their sweet unreason.' His eyes shone with the vanity of the specialist. He emitted a modest cough.

Le Poon adjusted his monocle anew, in order to stare with more effect at the face of his surprising friend. 'Godly,' he said, after a pause, 'either you are drunk, or you are putting up a very creditable imitation of drunkenness. Now last night I myself was a trifle elated. The events of last night, to be quite frank, have not that pristine clarity in my memory that your sour moralist would desiderate. But I do remember one thing. I do remember consuming a glass or two of very excellent wine. And it may be that under the liberating warmth of that liquid loveliness the hitherto unheard harmonies of my soul were released for your benefit. But don't build on that, my good Godly. At this moment I am unusually sober ; and if I seem at a loss

for words it is to that desolating sobriety that you must attribute the fact. I may, perhaps, have moistened my lips this morning, once, twice, even three times—I'm no mathematician, thank God !—but I'm ready enough for another whenever you like to say the word.'

'What is the word that I must say ?' asked Godelik pleasantly.

'We'll decide that later, shall we ?'

'As you please, my gooseberry.'

'Where are you taking me ?' asked Le Poon.

Godelik extended his hands in a kind of appeal. 'I do not understand,' he confessed ruefully. 'Who are you ? What is your name ? My Florence told me nothing of this. My poor head !'

'Ah, yes,' said Le Poon. 'Bad head, eh ? I thought you'd caught the sun a bit. But surely you remember me, Harry Le Poon. And surely you remember . . . but evidently you don't, poor fellow.'

'What is it that I do not remember ?' asked Godelik. 'She told me so many things. What have I lost of them ?'

Said Le Poon : 'Well, to begin with, do you remember Maia M'Gree ?'

'Yes,' cried Godelik eagerly. 'That word

I have heard before. The good Datchet, he spake it.'

'Do you remember my Uncle Appleyard?'

'What is that?' asked Godelik.

'Do you remember,' said Le Poon, 'sailing in a small blue boat across a great lake?'

'Ah, that,' replied Godelik, 'I do remember. There was the blue barque awaiting me. As in a dream I saw it. On my way to the shore I passed a grotesque creature oddly clad. Into the barque I stepped; the wind filled her sails. We sped on, my barque and I, like a bridegroom and his bride cleaving together the deep waters of love. Ah, my quince, that was a wonderful voyage! The sky was blue and gold and the sea was blue and green and the sail of my barque was a fluttering autumn leaf.' Godelik's eyes sparkled with joy in his memory; and his voice rose and fell in a childish chant. 'Then dusk came to fling a veil of gauze over these bright colours, and all I knew was the gliding ship I rode in and the beating heart in my breast. Dusk came, and darkness came, and night rose in a shower of tall stars. I stepped out of my ship on to turf whose green spears pierced my feet with sweetness. I stood on a great hill, and a thousand eyes of light sang in chorus

about me. Down, down I plunged, towards the new dark world of my quest, into the arms of the adventure that beckoned. And so I came. . . . But, my cherry, you have not yet told me what I must do for you.'

'Well, my dear chap,' answered Le Poon slowly. 'You have succeeded in astonishing me. I'd give five pounds to know the name of the stuff that's got you going like this. It must have the kick of an elephant. Still, there's some sense in what you've said. I remember something of the sort myself. I shall probably remember more later on, but the fact is I can't think lucidly on an empty stomach. Now take yourself in hand, Godly. I've got to ask you a rather delicate question. Do you remember yesterday inviting me to lunch? Here's the card you gave me.'

Godelik took a step forward; he eyed the card with interest, fingered it, smelt it. 'Lunch?' he said. 'Forgive me if I seem too stupid. Now what *is* lunch, my honeycomb? It is a word I do not feel to have heard before.'

CHAPTER XX: THE HORNS OF FAERY

MR LE POON generously undertook to instruct Godelik in the esoteric rites of lunch. To that end he conducted him to Paterson's, a place that looks like, but is not, an old London chop-house. The room was furnished with a series of high settles in black oak. At a little desk at the far end the head waiter, an aged and venerable figure, sat in state, watching with the eye of a god the swift ministrations of his menials, who, all too conscious of the scrutiny, sped on their errands with the silent gliding motion of well-bred wraiths. Godelik, deceived by those inadequate researches of his, and by the general solemnity of the scene, began by dancing up the length of the room and prostrating himself before the head waiter. Even that dignitary permitted himself to show surprise at this token of respect, though at heart he may have considered it his due. Le Poon hastened to smooth over a difficult situation.

'Good man!' said Le Poon, assisting Godelik to his feet. 'You've won your bet. You've got more pluck than I credited you with. Now don't insult this gentleman by borrowing a clothes-brush. The floor your body has embraced is clean enough to dine off. Isn't it, Alfred? In fact, as Alfred will tell you, I generally take my meals that way when I come here, just as a little tribute to the management. To-day, however, we'll occupy one of the cubicles. Come along.'

He led the gratified, puzzled, and unresisting Godelik to a table; and there, in the comparative privacy of the double settle, he gave his admiration fuller vent:

'I begin to venerate you more, my dear Godly, in proportion as I understand you less. But you must not suppose that my new reverence is based on mere ignorance. The unknown, admittedly, is often attractive; but that is because it presents itself to the deceived imagination as a plastic substance ready to be moulded by our groping fingers into the form of our heart's desire. I need not weary you at the moment with the arguments by which Edward Scrutton Goope, the great Victorian humanist and man of letters, conducts his famous attack upon the

Muswell Hill Mystagogues, an attack which, as you are doubtless aware, conferred immortality upon the memory of a long-extinct sect. The sum of his contention, you will remember, is that the Unknown, being a negative concept, cannot exercise a positive attraction, for the very simple reason that, by hypothesis, it possesses no cognized qualities. It is not, therefore, the Unknown that we find so enticing: it is rather the riot of pleasing colours with which, self-deluded, we invest that unsatisfying vacuum. Speaking of vacuum reminds me of another matter . . . What! Alfred in person! This is indeed an honour. Here we sit, Mr Godly and I, like a pair of mutes at a funeral, and all for lack of what you, Alfred, can supply. We will have clear soup, filleted plaice, kidneys and sauté, one of your admirable sundaes, and gorgonzola cheese. We will have also a bottle, a bottle *each*, of number nineteen. . . . What I want to make clear to you, Godly, is that my respect for you, which grows warmer every moment, is based not on ignorance but on vision. Mystical vision, remarked Goope in his dour fashion, is imagination in its Sunday clothes; but Goope was a teetotaller and so not to be

relied upon in any refined consideration of the more vital problems of philosophy. What fascinates me about you, Godly, is not your outward appearance—though that is not without a certain plump charm—but your strong and shining soul. It is most apparent in moments, like the present moment, of inebriation. How lovely are the feet of the bottle-laden ! Did you notice Alfred's feet, old bean ?'

Alfred, without a smile, was pouring out the wine.

'No, my gage,' replied Godelik with a polite, uninterested smile. He was filling his eyes with the unfamiliar wonders that surrounded him, childishly content to accept it all, for the time being, without comprehension.

'On second thoughts,' said Le Poon, 'I will skip the soup, Alfred.'

'Very good, sir.'

'I too,' pleaded Godelik. 'Let us skip together, my Poon.'

'No,' said Le Poon sternly. 'In the presence of full bottles it would be unseemly, my friend, to spend time skipping. There is a time to skip and a time to refrain from skipping. There is a time for everything.

And a place for everything,' he added, raising his glass.

Godelik's eyes glistened with contrition. 'Forgive me. I am confused. I did not understand. Let me make amends.'

'You shall make amends,' said Le Poon, 'in the only possible way . . . Drink!' he commanded.

Godelik drank, allowed his glass to be refilled, and drank again. He experienced all the ardours of a full repentance. His offence, judging by Le Poon's magisterial demeanour, had been no light one: equally impressive must be his ceremonial recantation of the sin. He thirsted after righteousness and could not be filled, though the failure was not for want of trying. The generous endeavour to make full amends did, however, fill him with fiery satisfaction.

Le Poon watched his friend's exploits with qualified admiration. 'These devotional exercises are usually performed with less speed, with more restraint, Godly. Lingeringly, as it were. Forgive me if I remind you that you are not drinking a mineral water. Never mind. The intention is good, and it confirms me in my belief that you are a man of soul. It is evident to me now that

yesterday I saw my Godly in the bud : to-day he is in full flower. By the way, what happened to you yesterday? And how did you get back?'

Godelik shook his head. 'Back? I do not know.'

'Same here,' said Le Poon, with feeling. 'I chased after M'Gree, but the bounder was too sly for me. I longed for nothing except that it might be granted me to cut that fellow's body, slowly and with a blunt instrument, into a hundred symmetrical pieces. I express myself in hyperbole, but I trust the general meaning is clear. What I am trying to convey to you is that I felt unkindly towards M'Gree. And then I somehow lost myself in that forest. In fact, I should be there now if it hadn't been that by a stroke of good fortune I ran across Maia again, and she . . . But I'm interrupting you, old bean. You were telling me about how you met Maia in the forest.'

Le Poon did not blush as he uttered this extremely impudent falsehood. His air of innocence was an admirable performance. His alert interest, on the other hand, was not by any means falsely assumed. His first sensation, when he found himself finally

shut out of the paradise that held Maia, had been one of acute pain ; his second, a bitter resentment of the fact that, as Maia had confessed to him, John Godly was still wandering the woods in search of her. The thought that those two had been alone in that enchanted place was still gall to Le Poon, and he was determined now to indulge his jealousy, even at risk of inflaming it, by angling for the triumphant tale that he dreaded to hear.

But these tactics were lost on Godelik. He clasped hands to his distracted head. 'I was telling you . . . What was I telling you, my Poon ?'

'About Maia M'Gree ?' prompted Le Poon. 'You *did* see her again, didn't you ? In the woods, I mean. Paid your respects before you left, and so on. Thanked her very much for a pleasant afternoon, no doubt.' In his anxiety Le Poon permitted himself the unwonted luxury of brief speech. Not without reason he suspected Godelik of having muddled his wits with too much wine.

'That girl M'Gree,' said Godelik. 'The Datchet is vexed with her. He spoke of her to me, but . . . it is all so perplexing to a stranger.'

'Never mind the Datchet, whatever that may be. What did she say to you, old bean? Did your suit prosper? Come, we are men of the world. It may have pleased me yesterday to chaff you a bit about the girl, but as a matter of fact . . .' Le Poon paused to refresh himself, a process that involved emptying the bottle. 'As a matter of fact . . .' His voice faded away; his misty eyes became fixed on those of his companion in an unwavering stare. 'As a matter of fact,' said Le Poon, for the third time, his voice enriched but not clarified by a sudden spasm of vigour, 'it is like this, my dear fellow. I am not your rival in this affair. The dear girl—take her and God bless you, good Godly: she's nothing to me. That was only my fun and her fun and our fun. She's nothing to me. The fact is, I'm her sister. Yes, her sister. And she's my brother. Twins we are, Godly; and when we were babies we couldn't tell one from the other. So don't bother to be shy about it, old bean. This is a family affair, don't you see, and I'm in the family. Now, one, two, three—go! Did you see her again?'

'Is it the girl M'Gree?' asked Godelik.

'It is,' Le Poon gravely assured him.

'I have never seen her,' said Godelik. 'Never have I seen her. But the good Datchet, he said . . .'

'Forget it!' urged Le Poon. 'It's an obsession : fight against it.

'There was an old person called Datchet
Who cut off his nose with a hatchet,
When they showed him the organ,
The following morgan,
He said he would never be able to match it.

Let that be his epitaph,' concluded Le Poon mournfully. 'Now tell me about Maia M'Gree.'

Godelik shook his head. 'I will tell you what my Datchet said.'

Le Poon groaned. 'Must you?' he pleaded.

'It is all I can say of the girl M'Gree,' said Godelik, with tears in his eyes. One glistening pearl fell on the tablecloth.

'Weep you no more, sad fountains!' said Le Poon. 'Godly, you've drunk so much that it's oozing out of your eyes. Shall we have another bottle?"

Even as Le Poon spoke, a significant change occurred in the face of Godelik. His lips parted slightly, his eyes were focussed

on a picture of the mind, his head was poised tensely with the air of one who listens for a far distant sound. A new bloom was on his cheeks, a new lustre crowned him. Yet there was a note of pain in the voice that cried, so loud that several waiters turned to stare : 'I must go back. I heard before, but I did not heed. Three times, O Poon, have I heard the horns blowing and seen the beckoning eyes. The adventure is over. I must go back to my own land and people.'

'Not until you've had some black coffee,' said Le Poon severely. 'Never did a man need it more.' A public scene in a restaurant was not to the young man's taste, and the prospect of it helped to sober him. 'Alfred, coffee. Yes, black. Black as sin.' Le Poon was on the verge of genuine annoyance. He hated to lose in any degree the mastery of his senses ; and at this moment there appeared to be a haze of light enveloping the figure of Godelik. Le Poon's eyes reported this astonishing phenomenon, but Le Poon's mind contemptuously rejected the report as being manifest and alcoholic nonsense : it was this conflict of opinion that gave rise to a pang of unwonted irritation. 'Anything wrong, Godly ?' he inquired mildly.

'I must go back,' repeated Godelik. He spoke sadly, but the light in his eyes was unquenched. 'It is a marvellous experience among you that I have had. But it must end now. The sun rises above the rim of the sea. The great green hill moves to meet me, and the brown sail is impatient to be filled with the wind that shall blow us back. Ah, my Poon, my Datchet, my Florence—you above all, O flower of my night!—I grieve but I go. I go with my harvest of new knowledge to gather the apples of an old delight. For in the midst of your wonders my heart has cried out for my own land and people, my feet have yearned for the solid streets of home, my hands have hungered to break through the web of fantasy in which you live, so prettily, so gay. And your food! After my long experience of your queer, delightful, but thin and unsatisfying meats, what joy it will be to set my teeth into something solid again, a cake of moonshine, perhaps, or a butterfly's frozen breath, or a handful of ripe pollen!'

'I say,' said Le Poon. 'If you insist on going mad in public, would you mind lowering your voice? You are conspicuous.'

But by now Godelik was out of his seat.

'Farewell, my Poon!' he chanted, and with a brisk light step he passed down the room. At the swing doors he paused in order to allow another person to enter. Godelik and this new-comer faced each other for one mad moment. Le Poon, who watched them intently, was astounded to find himself seeing double. He cursed his bibulous indiscretions. He rubbed his eyes angrily. And when he looked again they appeared to serve him better. Yet there remained matter for astonishment. There was now only one Godly in sight, but he, instead of being in the street, was walking slowly up the room towards Le Poon. 'Out at the door and in again,' said Le Poon to himself. 'He must be very far gone.' He caught the wanderer's eye and hailed him.

'Can't you tear yourself away?' inquired Le Poon. 'But how brotherly! Come and sit down. You'll feel better soon.'

CHAPTER XXI: DISENCHANTMENT

IT was at the moment when Godelik, sitting in Paterson's Restaurant, first heard the repealing horns of Faery, that Mr Godly found himself standing on the summit of a grassy slope of Wimbledon Common. He was conscious of no interval between his delight and his forlornness. His arms did not release Maia's warm and yielding loveliness; nor did her life-giving lips withdraw from his. The enchanted woods did not dislimn under his eyes; the face of the world's desire did not fade. There was no instant of transition; the flash of the cleaving sword was both invisible and timeless. At one moment he stood with Maia, heart to heart, in a forest of blue moonlight; and then . . . he was alone on Wimbledon Common and the day was bright about him. Between his first state and his last not so much as a tick of the clock could have intervened.

It took the stricken man some little while

to become aware of his loss and of its magnitude. He was still exalted, freed from the limits of space and time, tingling under the touch of eternity. Maia's kiss, cool yet ardent, quenching the soul's thirst yet burning the shrivelled world away, had filled him with a fiery essence, a radiant potency, that now transmuted everything entering the five doors of his spirit into fuel for its own delight. The cloud-flecked sky was azure energy over him ; the little clouds were riant tatters of innocence ; a group of tall trees in the valley marched like an army with banners towards the distant fringes of the city ; the grasses at his feet were a million green themes in an august natural symphony. He filled his lungs with the electric air. He flung up his arms, and the world spinning under him was a ship on which he rode, in which he soared, the unbounded ocean of light.

But this exaltation passed, leaving him drained of joy. A disenchanted man, he stumbled down the hill-side, following without intention the path that led to the world of ordinary affairs. He was guided by a dumb instinct, like that of home-going cows. His body, seizing its opportunity, took charge of

him. And gradually his numbed intelligence awoke. He consulted that faithful chronometer of his : 'One o'clock,' it warned him. Here, in Wimbledon, it was evidently Tuesday afternoon : there, in Maia's forest, the day was but an hour old. Mundane memories, ceaselessly battering on his mind, at last effected an entry. He remembered Florence and his villa at Brockley ; he remembered the office in Leadenhall Street ; and, in a sudden rush, the old anxieties and preoccupations assaulted him. Policies to be revised, letters to be answered, underwriters, the garden lawn, a new carpet for the dining-room : these claimed Mr Godly's attention. A moment before he had been a god : now, dispossessed, he was merely a season-ticket-holder who, at the appropriate seasons, shaved and toiled and paid income tax. Alarming questions agitated him. How would he explain his lateness at the office ? What would Florence think, and what was he to say to Florence ? How had the Mercantile Hope Corporation contrived, all morning, to exist without his aid ? He foresaw that he would have to pitch a tale to the authorities, that mighty board of directors of which, for him at least, Mr Datchet was the vicar and

the voice. These thoughts spurred Mr Godly into feverish activity. He broke into a run and did not cease running until he had gained the road and found an empty taxicab.

'Station—quick!' said Mr Godly.

The taxi moved forward, and the cool air from the window fanned Mr Godly's heated brow. He stroked his chin. 'I need a shave, by Jove!' He was conscious of an inward sensation that made him add: 'And a meal wouldn't come amiss.' A third reflection caused a wave of heat to break over his body. What if he had no money? Disturbed out of all proportion by the fear, he sat quite still for some minutes before he could summon up enough courage to search his pockets. How could he settle with the driver? Could he say: 'Sorry, old man. But I lost all my money in fairyland'? It seemed improbable that the man would take more than a momentary pleasure in the explanation. And to ride through the streets all the way to the city, and there borrow a gigantic fare, would be an ignominious way of returning to duty. However, when he thrust a trembling hand into his breast pocket and drew out his note-case, it was found to contain seven pounds ten in Treasury

notes. 'Now why didn't I do that before?' asked Mr Godly of himself. 'It's hunger, that's what it is.' And he remembered that he had had no breakfast. He remembered, also, that he had left Mr Thatch's inn without paying for his supper and his night's lodging. An unprecedented accident, but it did not distress him.

In the underground train his spirit stirred in its sleep, moving him to a momentary astonishment in the things around him. Here were men and women continuing, with the utmost gravity and boredom, to do just what they had been doing before he went away: travelling in trains, reading papers, strap-hanging, scowling in self-absorption or exchanging casual remarks and perfunctory smiles. What did they think they were doing; what master-purpose ruled their activities? Did *they* wish to overthrow the constitution and revive an ancient anarchy? They did not. What, if it came to that, was he himself doing? What demon possessed him that he suffered himself to slip back into the grinding unnecessary mechanism of everyday existence? Yet after all, replied the plain man, one has got to go on. Money must be made. Mouths must be fed. The

mighty ones of the earth must be placated. And it was at least reassuring to know that every one of his fellow-travellers was master of the powerful magic by which one remains resolutely oneself in a world full of extravagant possibilities. That middle-aged spinster reading *Purl and Plain*, for example: there was little likelihood, Mr Godly felt, of her suddenly becoming a mouse, like Thatch, or pale blue, like the moon. Yet the bare and improbable possibility remained, tinging the old life with a new colour.

If it was strange to see people behaving normally, quaint in their unconsciousness of what he had experienced, it was still more strange to reflect that this kind of thing, this riding to and fro, this absorption in the commonplace, had been going on during his absence. Mr Godly had no more than his fair share of egoism, nor did he dabble in philosophic idealism; yet more than once in his life he had been startled to find that events could and did happen outside the sphere of his consciousness. But never had he been so surprised by the discovery, so nearly incredulous, as he was this morning, because never before had he been so far away and so oblivious of all he had left behind,

and never before, as it seemed to him, had he been so long away. By the clock, as he was able pretty accurately to calculate, he had been absent from London little more than half a day ; but in sensation that handful of hours had been a lifetime, and it would not have surprised him had he found himself bowed down with the weight of a Rip Van Winkle beard, returning to a changed city.

The tide of the old existence swept in again, subduing him to acquiescence in the turn of events, and even to co-operation with them. Anxiety flickered into new flame. After leaving the train, and being collected in a box with the other human parcels, hoisted up three hundred feet, and shot out upon the pavement above, he made haste to secure another taxi. He hailed it with the intention of driving straight to the office in Leadenhall Street, and he did indeed express this intention to the driver. But, as they were nearing that destination, man's sovereign part asserted its undeniable claim : the familiar sight of Paterson's Restaurant, where in the past Mr Godly had lunched so often and so well, constituted a temptation not to be withstood. 'Anyhow,' said Mr Godly to him-

self, as he stepped out, 'I can't possibly face Datchet till I've had something to eat.'

Stepping up to the door of Paterson's he saw, or thought he saw, that the plate-glass panel had been replaced by a mirror. 'What an absurd idea!' said Mr Godly. The sight of what he supposed to be his reflection made him think that he did not need a shave after all. His right hand grasping the handle of the push-door, he stroked with the left his stubbly chin. But the image of himself that looked out at him from the glass of the pull-door failed, surprisingly, to reflect the action. 'More magic?' said Mr Godly wearily. Briskly, and in some anger, he entered the restaurant.

Just inside, politely waiting for him to pass, stood Godelik. Mr Godly stared and turned faint. 'Are you me, or am I you?' he murmured. 'You were dressed in green last time.' Mr Godly shaded his eyes from the incredible sight, fearing that his reason was unseated. 'Do you mind going away?' he added. The door squeaked slightly as it swung to and fro. When Mr Godly removed the shield from his eyes, that strange shadow of him was gone. Still trembling, but enormously relieved, Mr Godly continued

on his way, instinct leading him towards his accustomed seat. He felt some one pluck at his sleeve, and, turning dazedly, found himself looking into an anxious monocled eye.

'Come and sit down. You'll feel better soon,' said the eye's owner.

CHAPTER XXII: LE POON MORALIZES

INSTANTLY Mr Godly was on his guard. He liked Le Poon, but he forced himself to remember that the fellow was his rival in love. He was subject, he felt, to the tedious necessity of hating him, or at the least of tempering his regard with suspicion. Nor, with the best will in the world, was it possible for Mr Godly to forget very quickly the agony and fury that the sight of Le Poon's farewells to Maia had evoked in him. But, though he could not forget the scene, he had to admit to himself that it now seemed very remote. Since that cruel moment he had seen, as it were, the world shattered to dust and re-fashioned in fire; had possessed the naked flame of beauty; had lost himself in Maia's eyes, dying exultantly, to be recreated in her kiss. How far away, how long ago, was Le Poon's insolent offence compared with this still shining glory! Nevertheless the young man was dangerous and must be handled with care.

'Hullo, Le Poon!' exclaimed Mr Godly. 'What a piece of luck seeing you!'

Said Le Poon: 'The rapture is reciprocal. But why have you come back? Sooner or later you will have to face the ordeal of walking through the streets to that office of yours. Of course I'll give you an arm if you feel too top-heavy, but when you walked to the door just now you looked as right as ninepence. Now how it happens that ninepence has more rectitude than other sums of money is a mystery that I cannot undertake to explain to you at this moment. You must take my word for it. There are some things in life that we were never meant to understand, and I suspect this of being one of them. To your mind, Godly, with its powerful rationalistic bias, it probably seems that tenpence goes one better. Arithmetic would appear to corroborate you. But, believe me, that is a shallow view to take. Let us glance, for a moment, at collateral evidence that points to ninepence as possessing a special and mystical significance. Fat and foolish old gentlemen, like my Uncle Appleyard, are fond of asserting that seven is the perfect number. They claim to possess seven bodies, as you know; but that is only to excuse their gluttony. The claims of number nine

rest on a more substantial basis. There are nine Muses. There is Nine Men's Morris. The conjunction of two nines is a doubly potent symbol much in favour among doctors. How many a saint has been urged to say, almost with his dying breath, "Ninety-nine!" Then there is the game of ninepins, or skittles, with its long and honourable association with beer. And, finally, you will remember the adage of our childhood to the effect that three three's are nine. They are nine, not seven. Let's have another bottle, Godly, and drink confusion to Uncle Appleyard. But first tell me why you have come back.'

'What else should I do?' asked Mr Godly. 'It's twenty-four hours since I saw you last,' he added, lying brazenly, 'and I don't suppose you've stopped talking all the time.'

'But why have you come back?' Le Poon insisted. 'And what's all this about twenty-four hours? You mean, no doubt, twenty-four seconds. Try not to talk extravagantly, Godly, even in your cups. It is a vice I've noticed in you before, and it grieves me.'

Mr Godly grinned. Then he affected sternness. 'By the way, Le Poon, didn't I ask you to lunch with me to-day?'

'Ah, fond memory returns, does it? Well, to be strictly accurate, the invitation was for yesterday. But I have a suspicion that yesterday is to-day, or even to-morrow. I haven't quite sorted it out yet. So here I am.'

Mr Godly could not remember having mentioned a time and place in his invitation, but he was content to assume that he had done so. It was the simplest explanation of this unexpected meeting in Paterson's, and for that reason commended itself to his tired intelligence. He refused to burden his mind with any additional puzzles.

'Well,' said he, 'I'm sure it's very nice to see you again. Now what are you going to have?'

A young waiter had approached to clear the table. Ignoring him, Le Poon leaned forward. 'I don't think I quite understand you, Godly. Are you asking me to have a drink?'

'I'm asking you what you'll have for lunch,' replied Mr Godly with a smile. 'God forbid that I should appear inhospitable, but a drink would appear to be superfluous at the moment. At least let me persuade you to eat something first.'

Le Poon was baffled : a comparatively new experience for him. 'I beg your pardon ?'

'In plain English, my dear fellow, I think another drink on an empty stomach would knock you over.' Mr Godly's face was rosy with smiles. 'Now what is it to be ? Our friend is waiting. Shall we say turtle soup ?'

Said Le Poon : 'I begin to discern a luminous body hiding coyly in your mist of words. You are offering me a drink of turtle soup. That would prove to me, Godly, if any proof were needed, that your condition is unseemly. You have broken bounds ; you have exceeded the Golden Mean ; the magnitude of your folly is inartistic. Even in extravagance there should be, don't you think, a certain due proportion kept ? Delicate nonsense may be well enough, though for my part I have no use for such frippery. But a mere riot of the mind is tedious, and even boorish. And one should not jest on sacred subjects.' Le Poon's solitary sound eye, magnified by its monocle, loomed large in rebuke.

Mr Godly's patient smile would have been considered insulting by a sober man. But

the only other sober man present was the waiter, who stood enjoying, at a discreet distance, the prospect of an altercation between his two customers.

'You're quite wrong,' said Mr Godly. 'As a matter of fact I haven't had a sip or a morsel of anything since last night.'

'That remark,' said Le Poon primly, 'coming from a man who has just consumed, at my expense, a bottle of excellent wine, not to mention a lunch, is not in the best of taste.'

Mr Godly began to be troubled, and a little irritated. He called the waiter.

'Yes, sir?'

'Why don't you come to take our order?' inquired Mr Godly severely.

'Sorry, sir. What may I get you?'

'We'll take the table d'hôte.'

The waiter, well trained though he was, failed to conceal his surprise. 'You require lunch, sir?'

'Exactly,' said Mr Godly.

'For yourself and this gentleman, sir?' He was a very young waiter.

Mr Godly stared in vexation. 'Why not? Is the request so unusual in this restaurant? Are we not permitted to lunch? Perhaps,'

added Mr Godly, blushing with the ardour of his sarcasm, 'perhaps you would like me to pay in advance?' It infuriated him to remember that he was unshaven.

'Not at all, sir. Will you take the soup, sir?'

'Thick,' said Mr Godly.

'Both, sir?'

'Both, sir!' commanded Mr Godly. 'And look sharp about it, sir!'

'Is it possible,' said Le Poon, when the waiter was gone, 'that you don't know why the poor chap is bewildered?'

'I certainly don't.' Mr Godly was snappy. Even by Le Poon his sincerity could not be doubted.

'I'll tell you why,' said Le Poon. 'He is young, and you have provided him with a new experience. It's not every day that a man comes into Paterson's and gobbles up two lunches in quick succession.'

Mr Godly did not conceal the fact that he was offended. 'If you've already lunched you might have had the decency to say so. I don't enjoy being made a fool of. As for me, I've had neither lunch nor breakfast.'

'In the matter of your breakfast,' said Le Poon, 'I am content to remain reverently

agnostic. But you have certainly lunched. That I must insist upon. What these eyes have seen must be believed. I am familiar with the many arguments against that assumption, but empirically it is justified. I take my stand on experience, Godly. Your refined and subtle scepticism is well enough, no doubt, as an intellectual exercise ; but beware, my friend, of giving it practical effect in your daily life, and particularly in your daily meals. The whole outward show of material existence may be, as you imply, nothing but a vivid dream, an illusion. But at least it is a powerful and persistent illusion. And it can be proved, inductively, that the illusion of over-eating gives rise to the illusion of dyspepsia, the notion of nausea, and the mortal error of obesity. This dream-life, if not conducted with a wise restraint, becomes a nightmare.'

'What the devil are you talking about?' asked Mr Godly.

'I am only telling you,' said Le Poon, 'in my plain blunt way that just before your little trip to and from the door you consumed, in my presence, a four-course lunch which included filleted plaice and grilled kidneys.'

Mr Godly, fortifying himself with a mouthful of turtle soup, considered this communica-

tion in profound silence. Recalling what he had wished to forget, his encounter with Godelik ten minutes earlier, he was visited by an idea. It was an idea so odd as to be almost incredible, but he recognized it at once as the only key to this puzzle.

'Le Poon,' he said earnestly, 'we've been at cross-purposes. I've done you an injustice. And you've done me an injustice. We're quits. The fellow you lunched with just now was an impostor. I passed him as I came in. Face, clothes, everything—we were as like as two peas. It was a most uncanny experience, I can tell you. It shook my nerve. I only hope he hasn't screwed any money out of you.'

Le Poon said nothing. He was busy thinking.

'Where did you pick him up?' asked Godly.

'In your office.'

Mr Godly slowly digested this information. He supposed that Le Poon did not believe his tale, but he took no steps to convince him. Le Poon's scepticism did not interest him. What did both interest and disturb him was the fear, which now amounted almost to a certainty, that a stranger had been maliciously

impersonating him at the office. It suggested a host of perilous possibilities. He resolved to hurry through his lunch and then put matters right without further delay.

CHAPTER XXIII: EXPLANATIONS

MR DATCHET'S first sensation, when the door closed behind Godelik, was one of relief in his escape from a dangerous lunatic. His mind, released by degrees from the stupefaction that had paralysed it, began to indulge in thoughts of an unwonted kind. Mr Datchet had always prided himself on being a man of action. He despised the dreamer; he distrusted the imaginative; and for that reason there had always been a tinge of kindly contempt in his genuine regard for Mr Godly, in whose eyes he had sometimes detected a wistful gleam, an absent look. It may stagger belief that Mr Godly, that very ordinary little man, should have been regarded by anyone as imaginative; but all things are relative, and compared with Mr Datchet he was a starry-eyed visionary. Mr Datchet, in his heart, suspected him of secretly reading poetry, though being a man of some tact and discrimination he knew better than to endanger

an old friendship by voicing the suspicion. He himself, one surmises, experienced more emotion than he confessed to, but by resolutely merging his identity in that of his ideal Man of Affairs he succeeded in hiding it from himself as well as from the world. He was not aware, for example, of the depth and power of his attachment to his wife : the show of sentiment that she regarded as her due he lavished on his fox-terrier, Spike, a maudlin and sycophantic creature and the only one in the world who paid him adequate veneration. But now, relieved, as he thought, of Godly's presence, Mr Datchet was able to relax his exemplary sternness of mind. He allowed himself to recognize that Godly after all was a fellow mortal, and his mental derangement a human as well as a business disaster. In fine, the offended pontiff gave place to a friend not incapable of sympathy. He took in his hand the flowers that Godelik had laid on the desk, and the beauty of their form, fragrance, and colour filled his senses. It induced in him a poignant delight, an ecstatic sorrow, recalling to his mind all manner of irrelevant and tender memories. He felt absurdly young, yet could not forget that he was in fact well past middle age. Visions of his childhood

invaded him with a beautiful but desolating insistence ; and, more subtle, more intimate than any vision, came the very flavours of that buried life, the state of the soul, the time-sensation stripped bare of circumstances. He trembled, preposterously, on the verge of tears. 'What lovely things!' He laid the flowers down some distance away, half-resenting the beauty that had wounded him.

There remained the practical question : what was to be done about Godly? Mr Datchet's humane instincts would not allow him to invoke the aid of the civil or medical authorities until every other expedient had been tried and found wanting. Nor could he bring himself, at the moment, to telegraph for the afflicted man's wife. It was still barely possible that Mr Godly's aberration was but momentary, induced, perhaps, by some personal shock or by accidental indulgence in a drug. Something, anything, might have happened to Mr Godly to distort his judgment of what was proper and expand his idea of what was humorous. One thing was certain : this was no case of mere drunkenness.

Beset by a riot of conflicting impulses, our man of action did nothing except continue to

consider the problem without getting any nearer a solution. When, finally, ashamed of his indecision, he summoned a clerk to his room and asked that Mr Godly should be reconducted into his presence, Godelik and Le Poon were already on their way to Paterson's. Shortly afterwards Mr Datchet himself went out to lunch. Returning at half-past two, he marched boldly into Mr Godly's room.

Mr Godly rose to his feet, a prepared speech simmering in his head. He had resolved on a desperate course : that of telling the truth in all respects that did not concern Maia. How to deal with her name, should it unfortunately be mentioned, was a question that he trusted to the inspiration of the moment to decide. When he said to himself that he would tell the truth he meant only that he would, so far as possible, refrain from falsehood. Herein he was actuated less by ethical scruples than by considerations of expediency. By elaborately casual inquiries among the junior staff he had confirmed two important conjectures : first, that Miss M'Gree was still absent and that the endeavour to communicate with her had failed ; second, that that walking image of himself had indeed been masquerad-

ing as Mr John Godly of the Mercantile Hope Corporation. If he, the real Godly, were to acquiesce in this deception he might, for all he knew, be gravely compromising himself. There was no knowing what damage the eccentricity, the ignorance, or the malice of this stranger might have done, both from a business and a personal point of view. Honesty, then, in reason, was on this occasion the best policy.

'Good morning, Mr Datchet. I owe you an apology.'

'I am glad,' said Mr Datchet, with manifest relief, 'that you at last recognize your debt. Say no more about it. You were not yourself this morning. Something had occurred to unbalance you. I only hope that you will take steps to safeguard yourself against any repetition of the affair, whatever it was. I'm not asking questions. But things of this kind not only disturb one personally; they interfere with the routine of the office.' Softly intoning the last four words, Mr Datchet bowed his head in reverence.

'I fancy there's some mistake,' said Mr Godly. 'I only reached the office half-an-hour or so ago. I was absent all morning: that is why I am apologizing.'

'Indeed?' Mr Datchet raised his eyebrows in polite irony. 'You were absent all morning? You did not come until half-an-hour ago?'

'That is so,' assented Mr Godly.

'You did not come,' repeated Datchet, in a queer tone. 'You did not, for example, enter my room and offer me a bunch of flowers? You did not talk a powerful lot of nonsense to me?'

'How could I have done so?' gently enquired Mr Godly, as though of a child. 'I was not here, my dear sir. The fact is, I had to leave town suddenly last night. And this morning, to my great annoyance, I found it impossible to get back until late. I hope my absence has not caused too much inconvenience.'

'You can rest easy on that score.' Mr Datchet smiled grimly, at some private joke of his own. 'I think I may say that your absence was quite unnoticed.' This was in some sense a challenge to Mr Godly, although not so intended. Mr Godly chose to ignore it. He had become shy of introducing the subject of imposture, fearing lest by so doing he should incriminate himself. He might even, if he betrayed any knowledge of it, be

suspected of complicity. He resolved to hold his tongue, pending a lead from Datchet.

But Mr Datchet gave him no lead in that direction. The next question was a surprise. 'And might one enquire,' said Mr Datchet, 'where you spent your little—ah !—holiday?'

'Now that, do you know, is a little difficult to answer,' said Mr Godly, with a charming ingenuous smile.

'I fancied it might prove so,' said Mr Datchet.

'Yes, a little difficult. It was a place I'd never visited before. How can I describe it? It was amazingly lovely ; it had an air of unreality ; and yet I believed in it more firmly than I believe in this ridiculous City of London. Do I make my meaning clear?'

'Clear as crystal,' said Mr Datchet.

'Ah, you're laughing at me. But I wish I could make you understand. It would make such an immense difference to you. Enlarge your outlook. Give you a marvellous sense of space and freedom and power.'

'North, south, east or west?' enquired Mr Datchet.

'As to its direction I know nothing, except that I reached it by way of Wimbledon.

All I can tell you is that it must be thousands of miles away, for over there they are twelve hours in advance of our time. That suggests the Antipodes, I suppose.'

'Australia, possibly,' sneered Mr Datchet.

'And yet,' continued Mr Godly, 'the place is inhabited by fairies. The few Australians I've met haven't been quite like fairies. I admit that it wasn't exactly what we usually understand by fairyland. But a fairyland of some sort it certainly was.'

'Quite so,' said Mr Datchet, all his alarm returning. 'Think no more about it, old chap. Now tell me about Miss M'Gree.'

Mr Godly tried to appear astonished. 'Miss M'Gree?'

'Exactly. She lives at Wimbledon, I believe, the port from which you set sail for the Antipodes. And you were seen with her last night.'

'That may be,' admitted Mr Godly, blushing furiously. 'I was her father's guest at dinner.'

'Where is she now, do you suppose? Now keep calm and try to think clearly. We want her here, Mr Godly, and she shows no signs of coming. The only intelligent typist we've got. If she doesn't turn up

to-morrow I shall dismiss her and get somebody else.'

Mr Godly could not repress a smile; but the smile passed in a flash and a sense of bitter bereavement brought tears to his eyes. The full tide of realization swept over him. Maia, whom he now knew to be no mortal woman, would never return to him: of that he was mournfully certain.

'Dismiss her or not,' he said sadly, 'she will never come back.'

Mr Datchet looked profoundly shocked. 'Do you mean she's . . . dead?'

'Dead!' cried Mr Godly scornfully, 'they know nothing of death over there. Don't you understand, Datchet? She is a fairy.'

'Yes, yes, my poor fellow! I understand.' Mr Datchet's tone was kindly and soothing. 'Now take my advice, Godly, and go home to your wife. She'll be anxious about you. I'll send Mott along with you.'

Mr Godly at last realized that his story was not believed, and that he himself was suspected of insanity. But he was too tired, too heavily laden with sorrow, to argue the matter. 'As you please,' he said listlessly. 'But I don't want Mott. And I won't have him.'

Mr Datchet went back to his own room, deep in thought. His glance fell on Godelik's flowers, which were still blooming and fresh in spite of their neglect. A minute later he intercepted Mr Godly at the lift.

'Take these to your wife, old man. She'll like them.'

Mr Godly, flowers in hand, took train to Brockley.

CHAPTER XXIV: ODYSSEUS AT BROCKLEY

FLORENCE GODLY sat in the front room knitting a woolly coat for Mrs Harrison's baby. Hearing the garden gate click, and a familiar step on the gravel path, she looked up from her work in excitement and alarm. A hundred times during the day had she repented her rashness in allowing poor John to be at large in his present abnormal state of mind. Ever since leaving him at the door of his office in Leadenhall Street she had been hovering maternally over the idea of his helplessness; and her spinning thought, if it chanced to flag, was lashed into renewed activity by the persistent questions of Milly Reeslip. The curiosity of the undertaker's daughter had been greatly exercised by the finding, at the foot of the conjugal bed, of a heap of flimsy and gaudy masculine garments. Told that this was the fancy dress worn by Mr Godly at last night's ball, she expressed hurt surprise at not having

been forewarned of the event. She went on to give a droning account of other balls, fancy and plain, that had danced into her ken, including one magnificent affair in which a rich second cousin of her father's first corpse—'im what giv Gordy-boy the silver rattle mum—had figured as a Bewcaneer. In Milly Reeslip's opinion it was all worldly and wicked, for reasons that she was about to enumerate when the fishmonger called. But the fishmonger's visit, though it cut short a monologue that threatened to develop into an academic treatise, did not distract her from Mr Godly. To Mr Godly her discourse was embarrassingly faithful. Not for the first time Florence decided that the house would be happier without Milly. 'Now as soon as the afternoon's work is done,' promised Florence, 'you shall pay a visit to your Aunt Aggie in Lancaster Road. You may stay the night if she invites you.' And now, at ten to four, Milly was still not ready to depart; and John was inserting his latchkey in the front door. Florence grieved to see that he looked sad and worn. This premature return from the city meant, no doubt, that he was unfit for work.

Husband and wife met in the hall. The

reunion was robbed of its first dramatic possibilities by the fact that all sounds of Milly in the kitchen had abruptly ceased : a sign, Florence feared, that Milly's eye was peering through the keyhole. For the kitchen keyhole, the length of a short corridor distant, was known to be a commanding position from which all incomings and outgoings could be stealthily observed.

Florence, without a word, relieved Mr Godly of his hat, of his light raincoat, and of a prematurely born five o'clock newspaper which he had bought on the way home. 'Come into the sitting-room,' she then whispered to him. He followed her lead guiltily. His wife's tone, almost conspiratorial, agitated Mr Godly anew. For the past hour he had been endeavouring, with but little success, to brace himself for this critical interview. He still felt woefully unprepared for it. Where had he been, and why had he not telegraphed ? For these inevitable questions, which suddenly seemed to him to touch the very pinnacle of vulgarity, he had no answer ready. Faced by the ordeal of a scene that was certain to be emotional, and likely to end in grief and anger, he assumed in self-defence an expression superlatively matter-of-fact. If

he lied he would despise himself for ever, and join the ignominious regiment of men who deceive their wives. If he told the truth, a heart would be broken in the telling. Yes, it was this weakness in her, this pitiful and infantile dependence, that bound him with iron bonds. When it comes to the test one cannot rob a child of its only toy.

Yet when, stepping from the dim hall into the sunlit room, she at last faced him and held out her arms in invitation, he surprised himself by the eagerness with which he moved forward to embrace her. With his lips on hers he experienced a profound emotion. She was, after all, his wife ; she was his home, the living book of his memories ; in her, as in him, had grown during twenty years' intimacy something that was a kind of third entity binding them together. This moment held, not ecstasy, but the flavour and fragrance of old love. In this kiss of custom, enriched by the very familiarity that diminished its power to excite, all the other kisses that had passed between them were gratefully summed up. Releasing her, and holding her face at arm's length in his cupped hands, he noted with quick interest the new, the almost virginal bloom of her cheeks,

the girlish exultation of her posture. What had happened to effect this miraculous transformation?

'You look very well to-day, my dear.'

She smiled. 'Do I? How did you get on at the office, John?'

Mr Godly turned away with a shrug of the shoulders. 'Oh, much as usual. Business isn't very brisk just now.'

'Is that why you've come home so early?'

Mr Godly concealed his surprise. He had not expected, after an unexplained absence of two days, to be asked to account for his early return. 'Old Datchet insisted. Seemed to fancy I was a bit out of sorts. Funny fellow he is.'

'I'm sure,' said Florence, 'it's very nice of Mr Datchet to take such an interest. You *don't* look so well as you did, darling.'

'So well as I did?' echoed Mr Godly.

'At breakfast,' said Florence rather shyly, 'you were glowing with health. But I'm glad to see you're remembering things better now.'

Mr Godly was faced by a dilemma. Here was some mystery. Could he get to the root of it without leading the conversation into dangerous directions? Amazed by Florence's

tact and generosity in making no allusion to his neglect of her, he had been wondering how long the delicate question could be postponed. But this new puzzle piqued him.

'At breakfast?' he said, again echoing her. 'It seems to me I must be remembering things worse instead of better, my dear. I can't recollect eating any breakfast at all this morning.'

'You didn't eat much,' admitted Florence. 'But you must remember coming down late, and having to hurry to catch the train with me?'

'Are you speaking of this morning?'

'This very morning.'

'Strange!' said Mr Godly. 'I remember nothing of all this.'

'Oh John!' Florence was distressed by this symptom of the returning malady. 'And have you forgotten how we went to the station together, and you wanted to skip and I wouldn't let you, and we travelled up first class in a carriage to ourselves, and I jogged your poor memory about the sort of things you'd have to do at the office, and . . .'

'Stop!' cried Mr Godly, poking fingers in his ears. 'I've forgotten every word of it.'

'Think, John, do! At least you *must* remember last night: how you were brought home—from Wimbledon, I think he said—by Mr Murdoch dressed in a green silk tunic and long skin-tight hosen.'

'What on earth was Murdoch doing in a get-up like that?'

'It was you, not Mr Murdoch, who wore the fancy dress.'

'It was certainly not,' said Mr Godly. 'You're talking in a crazy fashion, Florence.' But suddenly a devastating suspicion assailed him. It chilled his heart and set upon his face a sickly ironical grin. 'A green silk tunic, did you say, and long hosen?'

'Yes, yes. That's right. I've got them upstairs. You can see for yourself.'

'That will be a great comfort,' said Mr Godly, with a savagery that she failed to notice. 'Pray continue your very interesting narrative.'

'There's nothing much more to tell,' Florence answered. 'When Mr Murdoch . . .'

'Kindly skip Mr Murdoch!'

'. . . had brought you home, I helped you to bed and prepared some bread and milk for you.'

'Did you indeed?' said Mr Godly. 'Now

that is very nice to know. You helped me to bed, and you prepared me some bread and milk. And then?'

Florence regarded him in pained surprise. 'What makes you so queer about it, darling? It'll all come back to you presently. I'll get you some tea. Milly's gone to see her aunt; she tired me out with her everlasting chatter, so I packed her off.'

'Before you get tea,' said Mr Godly, who was now pacing the room in a frenzy, 'tell me this: what time was it when you so considerately supplied me with bread-and-milk?'

'It must have been close on midnight. For, don't you remember, just as I got into bed the grandfather clock struck twelve.'

'Woman!' cried Mr Godly. 'It wasn't me. It was a damned impostor.' The sight of her blanched face sobered him. He clutched at his throbbing temples. 'Forgive me, my dear. I'm a little upset. Nothing to worry about.' Why, after all, should he bring trouble on his wife and again provoke suspicions of his own sanity by telling an incredible story? Things were best left as they were. 'Don't be anxious,' he said, taking one of her hands in his own and caressing it. 'I

remember everything now. It came back suddenly, and the pain it caused in my head made me cry out. Run along and get me some tea, like a good girl.'

In the kitchen, while she busied herself in preparations for tea, Florence struggled to outface her disappointment. When, a few minutes later, she opened the door and called to him, she had some difficulty in infusing cheerfulness into her tones. 'Ready, John!'

Mr Godly sauntered out of the dining-room.

'You don't mind having tea in the kitchen, do you?' called Florence. 'It's not so far to carry the things.'

Mr Godly paused, at the hallstand, to extract something from his overcoat pocket. Entering the kitchen, 'Here are some flowers for you,' he said, with an effort at gaiety. 'Datchet gave them to me, and I'm afraid I stuffed them into my pocket. Got sick of carrying 'em. Besides,' added he viciously, 'Datchet irritated me.' He flung the flowers down on the table.

'Oh, what loveliness!' cried Florence, in rapture. She buried her face in the flame and fragrance of them. In spite of their

crumpled confinement in Mr Godly's pocket they bloomed with an undimmed lustre, and breathed, no less than before, the subtle spices of Faery. Had they been newly picked, or rooted in rich moist earth, they could not have possessed a dewier freshness. They filled this commonplace and stuffy little kitchen with the very spirit of vital joy; and they stirred Florence's heart to a re-creation of her vanished delight. Looking up at Mr Godly through the flames of this new-kindled ecstasy, she saw him again as the fairy creature she had so long loved and all too briefly possessed. Speechless in her joy, she could only gaze and gaze at him.

In Mr Godly there was no response to her mute and joyous appeal. For him this invasion of beauty was like a phrase of melancholy autumnal music, flooding the heart with unutterable sadness, eloquent of irreparable loss. With cruel sweetness it stripped him of his armour; with the swift sword of its passion it pierced his spirit. The kiss of Maia touched his lips with a ghostly, a maddening tenderness; the slim vision of her brimmed his heart with tears. When his wounded eyes met those of Florence, and read their message of adoration, he divined

that not he, but another, was indeed the object of it. But this knowledge was no longer a bitterness to him, cleansed as he was by a consuming pity for all created things, made one with his kind in a tragic community of desire for such unattainable and cosmic rapture as beacons the sky and spangles earth with colours. In that community even Florence had her place ; she, too, perhaps—in the eyes of this mysterious stranger—had for the first and last time seen beauty face to face. He and she were comrades in bereavement. He moved towards her, and struggled to express himself :

'Well, well!' He sighed. 'We can't have everything, can we, Flo? But we've got each other.'

'For me,' said Florence, 'that *is* everything.'

'No, my dear,' said Mr Godly firmly. 'Not everything. Let us face life together, honestly. There's something else, something lacking. If only we could get it—whatever it is—life would be perfect.'

He looked to her for some response. 'Yes, dear,' she gently replied. 'I have felt what you mean.'

'You have?' he cried eagerly. It was

an unbreakable bond between them. 'It's —how can I describe it?—a kind of finishing touch. A fullness of joy. A sort of . . . beauty.' Mr Godly was shy of his words. 'Life makes a tremendous promise to us, but never, you know, quite fulfils it.' He broke off lamely. 'There was something else I was going to confide in you, Flo; but it's not as clear as it was . . .'

Florence gave a sudden little cry and ran from the room. Mr Godly followed her into the scullery, fearing that emotion had overcome her, and eager to plight with her a new and a profounder troth. 'What is it, darling?'

'It's all right,' said Florence, 'I just remembered I'd left the milk on the stove. . . . You were saying, John——?'