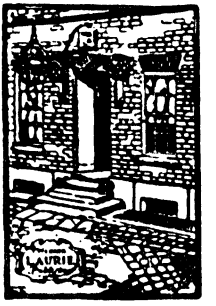
A Curate in Bohemia



A CURATE IN BOHEMIA

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IN DEFERENCE TO FRIENDS

A TRIFLING story of this description does not deserve the dignity of a preface, but in my more uneasy moments it seems to demand some sort of sneaking apology.

It is an apology of quite a personal nature, and has nothing to do with the customary air of modest disavowal with which your author should present his little effort to his readers. It is not, in fact, to the reader that I address myself here, but to certain friends. I wish to deprecate any unpleasantness from these friends. They may, of course, not read this story; but there is always a danger that, in an unguarded moment, they may, and I should be sorry if they were annoyed at finding themselves included in it. For, if the confession must be made, some of the story has the disadvantage of being true, and some of the characters have the disadvantage of being friends. So on the verge of publication I am led to assume hastily a smirk of con-

scious deprecation and disarm unkindness by dedicating this story to the friends included in it.

It is a mean way of dodging the consequence of tampering with the sacred name of friendship; but I do it on the assumption that the friends in question are still, as they used to be, such awfully decent chaps.

NORMAN LINDSAY.

1912

PS.

This story is dated, not so much by the above date, as by the innocence of a pre-war earth. It was possible in those days to have a lark with an exercise of scribbling. Possibly it may seem an experiment in optimism to reproduce the performance at this date.

N. L. 1936

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CHAPTER I

ENTER THE CURATE

A VERY young curate had been wandering up and down Collins Street, from the corner of Swanston to the corner of Elizabeth Street, as though he were under penalty to go so far and no farther. At length he made a desperate effort, and asked an old gentleman, in a nervous undertone, if he could direct him to Clinks's Chambers.

Clinks's Chambers, singularly enough, with the name in two-foot letters, was directly across the road, and the curate, apologizing profusely to the old gentleman for his information, fled into Clinks's Chambers and stumbled into the lift.

"Wot floor?" demanded a peremptory lad of ten, who seemed to own the lift.

The curate referred anxiously to a piece of crumpled paper.

"I wish to see Mr Cripps," he said deferentially. "That is—Mr—er—Cripps."

"Second floor round the corner," announced the peremptory lad, stopping so suddenly that the curate felt as if his bowels were jerked up permanently to his neck and his spine dissolved into his boots.

Before he had recovered from the shock of this unpleasant sensation, the autocrat of the lift had bundled him out, slammed several doors, and disappeared like a pantomime demon into the bowels of the earth.

The curate, with that apprehensive feeling that possesses nervous people in a strange building, tiptoed his way round the corner. There were five doors round the corner, but which might be the second the curate could not for the life of him imagine. The end door, which bore the legend, "Bins—Wine Merchant," he disqualified at once. The second door to the right had a Yale lock and a brass letter-box. This looked promising, so he knocked. While he was knocking at that, a junior clerk, with ink on his face, came out of the first door, and embarrassed the curate by looking at him.

"Come in," roared a voice, in response to the curate's knock.

The curate obediently went in as far as his neck,

and saw a ferocious old gentleman scowling over the top of a desk at him.

"I—I was looking for Mr Cripps," he said humbly.

"Don't know him," roared the old gentleman. "Shut the door!"

The curate shut the door so hurriedly that he narrowly escaped shutting it on his neck. If it had not been for the presence of the junior clerk he would have fled the scene, but he had an uneasy suspicion that if he betrayed any such sign of weakness the junior clerk would instantly burst into derision.

With a vague idea of propitiating this devilish person, he took out the crumpled piece of paper and examined it with a show of urgent business. Then he turned and sternly confronted the second door on the left. It had a rather battered appearance, and owned a stump of lead pencil dangling by a string, with a legend attached, "Please leave note"—an invitation to which most of the visitors had cordially responded by leaving notes upon the panels.

Every degree of disappointed expectation appeared to have found its way up those stairs, and left the mark of its displeasure on that door. Some

were querulous, some openly indignant—"Waited two hours—ain't you ever in? What's the good of making appointments with you?" And then, "Where's my boots? I know you've got them." "This is my third visit to-day. How the Hell do you manage to be always out? PS.—Jerry has the bailiffs in—wants to see you." One sorely tried person had left this cryptic statement, "Liar and slave, strikes him!" and fled in anger. Others were content with such simple epithets as, "Mongrel," "Procrastinator," "Hound of Crete!" and many merely informative, such as, "J.B.C. called," "Blobbs called," "Called, McC," and then, in soft and alluring femininity, the simple statement, "Flo called."

It gave the curate quite a thrill, and he was still searching about for more souvenirs of Flo, when it occurred to him that there were voices in No. 2.

Then the sound of a crash, as of a smashed bottle, and a voice remonstrating. The curate settled his collar, coughed, and, making an effort, knocked.

The voices ceased instantly, and, after a considerable interval, just as the curate was about to repeat the knock, the door opened about an inch,

admitting an eye to appear. This was hardly encouraging, but the curate determined to chance it.

"Could you tell me," he began, with a propitiatory smile—but before he could get any further, the door was flung open, disclosing a young gentleman in dishabille, who first stared incredulously, and then ejaculated "Spuds!" in a tone of profound conviction.

"I was wondering whether you would know me again," said the curate, blushing.

"Knew you in a second," said the young gentleman. "I thought you were after the rent at first. What the deuce are you doing in that rig-out?"

"I—I have taken orders," said the curate hurriedly. "Of course, you'd heard I'd taken orders?"

"Never heard of it till this moment," said Mr Cripps.

He stared at the curate's hat, and the cut of his clerical coat, and then at his trousers, as though at a loss to adjust such garments to the ordinary affairs of life. He stared so hard that the curate felt inclined to apologize for wearing them.

"I—I happened to be in town for a few days, and I thought I would just look in and see you," he said.

"Oh, yes," said Mr Cripps, suddenly recalled to

a vague sense of the duties of hospitality. "You'd better come in, I suppose."

The curate came in. Being a trifle precipitate in his entry, he trod on a bottle, and was instantly extinguished by a Japanese screen, which appeared to collapse on him out of pure decrepitude.

Mr Cripps, as though there were nothing at all unusual in the incident, cheerfully erected the Japanese screen and the curate erected himself, expressing a fervent hope that he had broken nothing. He had nearly broken his nose against the bottle, but he let that trifling circumstance pass, and came out from behind the screen.

The first object that met his gaze as he did so was a young gentleman with lank black hair and an enormous tie, who was performing the rather difficult operation of sitting on three chairs at once.

The curate eyed him nervously, pending the ceremony of introduction, and to do him no more than justice, the young gentleman seemed too petrified with amazement at the sight of the curate to perform the customary politeness of rising to greet the visitor. Mr Cripps, who seemed to feel that the curate's presence required a trifle in the way of explanation, made haste to set his friend's mind at rest.

"It's all right, Jerry," he said, "it's a friend of mine—at least, I went to school with him, didn't I, Spuds? As a matter of fact," he added to his friend, "I haven't set eyes on him since I *was* at school."

The young gentleman on the chairs looked suspiciously at the curate, as though he suspected some treachery in the form of a tract, or an invitation to attend a prayer meeting, and the curate, who found the young gentleman's scrutiny extremely trying, looked nervously about for an excuse for not looking at him.

Mr Cripps, who had been mechanically putting a bottle on the table, seemed suddenly to recollect another duty as host.

"My friend, Limpet, Spuds," he said, indicating the young gentleman on the chairs. "Spuds—Jim—Jimmy——?" he ran his fingers reflectively through his hair, and frowned. "Bowles," he added triumphantly. "Damned if I hadn't almost forgotten your name, Spuds."

This necessary ceremony over, he looked round presumedly for a chair, but as Mr Limpet seemed to have used up all the available chairs Mr Cripps suggested that the curate might find a more comfortable seat on the bed.

"No! no!" said Mr Limpet, suddenly awakening from his trance. "Give him the rocking chair."

"Not at all," said the curate; "the bed will do—I prefer the bed—really."

"Nonsense!" announced Mr Limpet. "He must have the rocking chair. Get the rocking chair."

The rocking chair, in some unaccountable manner, had got under the table. While Cripps was getting it out, the curate protested that he couldn't think of taking it, but Mr Limpet and his host insisted so strongly, indeed, seemed so determined, that the curate, and nobody else, should occupy the rocking chair, that the curate gave in and took it.

This act of politeness having in some mysterious way set Mr Limpet's mind at rest, he produced an immense pipe, which he had apparently been smoking prior to the curate's entrance, and relit it, while the curate, seated gingerly on the edge of the rocking chair, surreptitiously inspected the room, which was so close to the roof as to make the December heat uncomfortably apparent. It was lighted by a couple of windows, one of which favoured an intimate inspection of two chimney pots, and a diagonal section of the Town Hall clock.

The chief furniture appeared to be the bed, the

Japanese screen, and the rocking chair aforesaid, but there was a table littered with all manner of things—pipes, bottles, papers, sketches, and the remains of what appeared to have been a saveloy. There was a bookshelf with a number of tattered volumes, and a few conveniences in the way of cupboards, which appeared to have been contrived out of a packing case by a hasty man, with a blunt axe.

The bed, which a stately but insufficient coverlet failed to disguise as a luxurious couch, betrayed a pair of burnt umber blankets, but no trace of sheets, and was supported at one end by a candle box, where the legs had given way. There was a human shin-bone among the muddled assets of Cripps's trade, and the walls, where they were not hung with every description of the conscientious nude, were decorated with charcoal caricatures, many of which had clearly been inspired by Mr Limpet's countenance, for though base in intention, they were all singularly like him, the curate could not help admitting.

Mr Cripps, who had meanwhile been submitting certain bottles to a close scrutiny against the light, at length uttered an exclamation of triumph and put a bottle on the table.

"Where'd you get it?" demanded Limpet, perceptibly livening up for the first time since the curate's entrance.

"Behind the cupboard," said Cripps, producing a pannikin, a cracked cup, and a tumbler, "though how the deuce we overlooked it last night beats me."

Limpet watched the decanting of the wine with profound attention, and when it was finished, hastily preferred a request for the cracked cup.

"Peculiar thing," he remarked incidentally, "but I always like drinking out of that cup, somehow."

Mr Cripps robbed the instance of some of its peculiarity by remarking that the cracked cup held a lot, but in his position as host he graciously allowed Limpet to indulge his fancy for the cracked cup, merely going through the slight formality of pouring a little out of it back into the other cup, which he took himself, while the curate, to his vast perturbation, found himself confronted with the tumbler.

"But really, you know," he said nervously, "I—I don't drink, you know."

To say that Cripps and Limpet were astounded

at this statement is to express but feebly the nature of their emotions.

"Don't drink?" said Cripps at length, staring at the curate entranced. "Don't drink? What! Don't you like it?"

"I—I—not as a rule," said the curate, dreadfully embarrassed. "The fact is—I—I—don't drink, you know."

"What! not even claret?" persisted Cripps, still regarding the curate in a fascinated manner. "Not even good claret? It's good claret, you know!" he added, foreseeing the curate's astounding prejudice as perhaps due to a certain suspicion. "Why, I paid eighteenpence for that claret, didn't I, Jerry?"

Mr Limpet came out of his trance, and gave a short contemptuous laugh. "If he don't drink, he don't," he remarked. "But it's no use wasting it," he added, carelessly; "*I'll* drink it."

Mr Cripps settled that question at least by pouring half of the curate's share into his own cup, and the other half into Limpet's, a dispensation of justice that Mr Limpet favoured with a slight frown.

However, both gentlemen were clearly of one mind over the quality of the wine, for they each took a prolonged pull, smacked their lips, and

looked hard at each other, as though in silent communion over the excellence of the vintage.

The curate had an uneasy sensation that his scruples had lowered him considerably in the opinion of the company. He regretted now that he had been betrayed into such an evidence of weakness, especially in the presence of Limpet, who he felt vaguely must be a man of particularly dissolute and abandoned life, and consequently to be respected.

He thought over a few possible methods of regaining that gentleman's favour, or at least of attracting his attention.

It might be done by a slighting reference to God, he thought, or by introducing the subject of woman with a jaunty reference to the nude studies, or at least he might sound a faint note of self-respect by letting slip an oath.

Limpet caught the curate's eye upon him, and frowned abstractedly. He took a pull at the wine, and appeared to put the vintage through a severe mental cross-examination, shutting one eye, and fixing the other on the ceiling.

"I thought so," he said at length, fixing a rather peremptory eye upon his host. "There's water in it."

Cripps denied the allegation.

"There's water in it!" repeated the guest calmly. "You can't deceive me. I knew you'd been watering it the moment I tasted it last night."

"Well, how d'you expect I was going to make four bottles go round without it?" said Mr Cripps reasonably. "I only squeezed one extra bottle out of it as it was."

"I don't object to that," said Limpet. "There wasn't enough to go round as it was; all I say is," he added, letting his eye wander slightly in the curate's direction, "that you can't deceive me about it."

Cripps ignored this evidence of Mr Limpet's highly trained palate, and lit a small clay pipe, which instantly tainted the atmosphere with its personality.

He threw the match carelessly on the floor, where it started to burn a towel, till the curate extinguished the conflagration with his foot, despite Cripps's hearty assurance that the towel was of no value—which was perfectly true.

"Whereabouts are you putting up, Spuds?" asked Mr Cripps, when the curate was again seated on the edge of the rocking chair.

"The Victoria Coffee Palace," said the curate, grateful for this mark of condescension from his

host. "I'm only staying a week, you know. I shall be going on Saturday next to take——," he glanced hurriedly at Limpet, "to take my first curacy at Murumberee."

"Murumberee?" said Mr Cripps, with a courteous show of interest. "Where the hell's Murumberee?"

"It's only a small place," said the curate, blushing for the insignificance of Murumberee. "It's somewhere in the Western District, I believe. Of course, in our profession a chap has to work up by degrees, though Murumberee is a fairly good start for a chap."

Mr Cripps tried hard to appear interested in the curate's prospects at Murumberee, but the small clay pipe distracted him.

He gazed fondly at it, and polished it on his sleeve.

"Colourin' beautiful, ain't he?" he said, showing the pipe to Limpet.

Limpet took the pipe and examined it with the air of a connoisseur.

"It'll never colour black," he said at length, pronouncing judgment.

Cripps was on fire at once. "Why not?" he demanded.

"Too hard," said Limpet firmly, "and too hot."

If Limpet had passed a carefully chosen insult on his mother, Cripps could not have been more enraged.

"Cool a smoking pipe as ever I had," he shouted. "Man I bought it off reckoned he's never had a better pipe in the shop. Why, it's a cutty—an Irish cutty!" shouted Cripps. "Besides, what do you know about clay pipes?"

Silently and slowly Limpet took from his pocket a pipe case, from which with an extravagant display of caution, as though it were liable to explode, he produced a filthy-looking clay pipe, which he handed across the table, regarding his friend fixedly the while.

Cripps refused to look at it.

"I've seen it before," he said ill-naturedly. "It's well enough coloured, but it's soft clay, and it sweats. Anybody can colour a soft clay. I call that a dirty-looking pipe," he added, blowing a contemptuous whiff in the direction of Limpet's pipe.

Limpet ejaculated "Pah!" like a man bitterly tired of life. Then he put the insulted pipe in his pocket, corked himself up with the immense briar, and sneered at Cripps over the top of it.

"Of course," said Cripps, who seemed to feel

that he had gone a little too far, "I don't say that your clay ain't a success—I admit it is—but you smoke such infernally damp tobacco that it hasn't a chance to colour evenly."

"What the devil's damp tobacco got to do with colouring clay?" demanded Limpet, coming out from behind his pipe.

"Damp tobacco," said Cripps, eyeing Limpet offensively as he threw down the challenge, "smokes unevenly. You'll admit that to start with."

Limpet peremptorily refused to admit anything of the sort. Nor would he admit that damp tobacco caused pipes to sweat, or that the dampness spoilt the flavour of the tobacco.

Nor would he, which seemed to incense Cripps remarkably, admit that damp tobacco smoked hotter than dry tobacco.

"Dry tobacco," he said, "burns hot, burns the tongue, and tastes rotten," and he poured forth such a torrent of eloquence in favour of damp tobacco that Cripps could hardly bear to listen to such blasphemy.

"Upon my soul," he said, throwing himself back on the bed, "you make me tired. Look here," he cast himself with renewed energy into the debate;

"suppose you put a damp log on the fire—what happens?"

"You get plenty of smoke, but no heat," shouted Limpet. "Exactly what I've been trying to hammer into your head——"

"The damn thing won't burn," roared Cripps, hammering the table for a substitute for Limpet's skull; "too much moisture. But a dry log——"

"Burns hot——"

"Burns even——"

"Burns the tongue——"

"In all my days I never struck such an infernal idiot!" shouted Cripps, appealing to Heaven. "I tell you an even smoke means a cool smoke. Dry tobacco burns even, and therefore smokes cool. Can't you understand a simple fact without having it shoved half-way down your neck, you bally ass!"

Whatever Limpet had to say to this piece of logic—and it was clear he had a good deal to say, and was bursting to say it—was indefinitely postponed by a trampling of feet in the passage, and a bumping and pounding on the walls, as though a small and angry mob were approaching as loudly as possible.

CHAPTER II

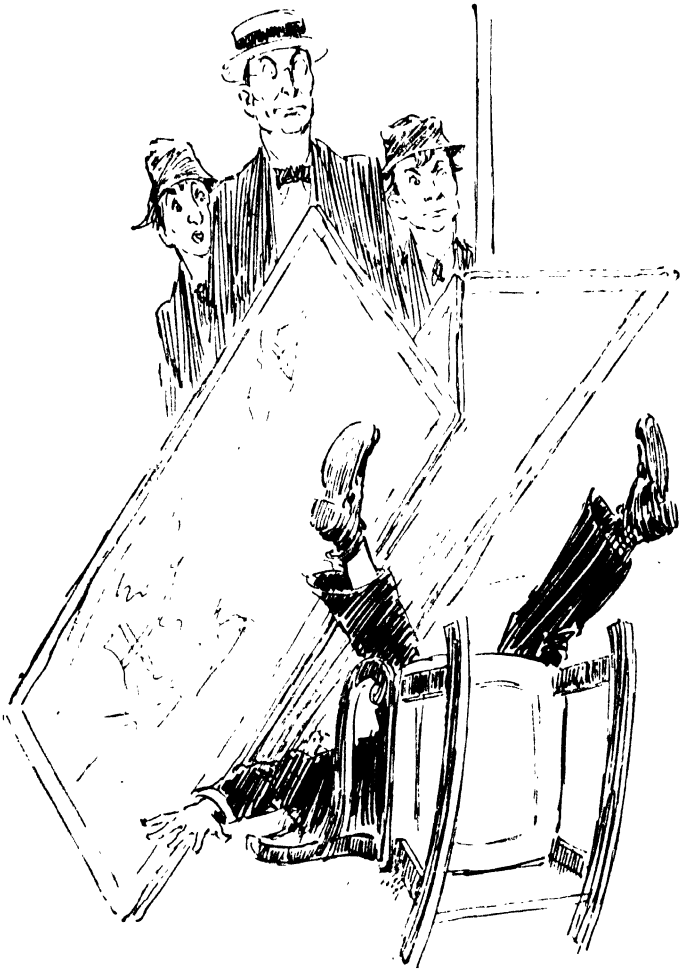
BEHIND THE BOHEMIAN CURTAIN

"HERE comes some of the crowd," said Cripps, breaking off hurriedly; and the curate, turning towards the door, had just time to observe an immensely tall man, and two immensely short men, in collision with the Japanese screen, when the treacherous rocking chair sailed over backwards and hurled him under the screen, which instantly extinguished him, as though by a skilfully adjusted piece of mechanism.

There was pandemonium for half a minute, and it seemed to the curate that a vast number of feet trod on him before somebody lifted the screen, and let a little daylight into his scattered faculties.

"By Jove, old boy," said Cripps, assisting the curate up, "should have warned you about that chair—the infernal rockers are sawn off short, you know."

It occurred to the curate that the persistence



with which the chair had been forced upon him was a trifle significant in the face of this explanation, but he assured Cripps that it was entirely his own fault, and glanced nervously at the visitors, who were regarding with unaffected interest the removal of the screen—an interest which promptly gave way to offensive amazement on discovering that there was a curate under it.

Cripps performed a perfunctory ceremony of introduction, in which the curate got a vague impression that the tall man's name was Quin, and that one of the short men was named Partridge, and the other Mac Something, but which was which the curate could not discover.

Quin, who wore spectacles, and had an angular jaw, and a trap of a mouth which did not open when he grinned, but spread automatically across his face, and whose normal condition appeared to be a state of silent ecstasy, sat down close to the curate, and softly stroking his jaw, subjected him to a prolonged scrutiny, very much with the appearance of an exulting collector over a new and unheard-of specimen of beetle.

Fortunately, a passage between Limpet and the shorter of the two short youths distracted the general attention from the curate for the moment.

The short youth, it appeared, whose hair was too long and stuck out in an irascible manner from under his hat, had just discovered Limpet in the act of drinking. He darted at the cupboard, ransacked it hurriedly, examined the bottle on the table, and seemed to turn pale.

"Where'd you get this?" he demanded.

"Behind the cupboard," said Limpet.

The short youth flung down the bottle, tore a chair from Limpet, dashed himself into it, and, without a word, commenced to load up a large pipe, and with an air of deadly purpose, as if it were a pistol and he intended blowing Limpet's brains out with it.

"What's the matter with the MacQuibble?" inquired Cripps.

The MacQuibble merely transferred his look of hatred to Cripps for a moment, and went on loading his pipe. When he had finished he lit it, thrust his hands into his pockets, and gave vent to a short and pungent opinion of Cripps and Limpet.

"You're a pair of dirty dogs!"

"Oh, you put it there, did you?" said Cripps, enlightened.

"The MacQuibble," said Limpet, looking round on the company as though to warn them

that something good was coming, "put half a bottle of claret away behind the cupboard last night. And the joke," he added ecstatically, "is that Cripps an' me have just drunk it."

Curiously enough, none of the company, except Cripps and Limpet, appeared to appreciate the exquisite nature of this jest. The lank Partridge at once joined with MacQuibble in describing it as a contemptible act. The saturnine Quin, rising and rapping sharply on the table, called on Cripps, as host, to replace the wine, or compensate for the injury with beer enough to allay the aggravated thirst of the company.

"All right," said Cripps, after a considerable amount of personal insult had been showered upon him. "It appears to be the general opinion that it's my business to always shout—I will shout."

He took up a hat and defiantly cast twopence into it.

"There you are," he said, passing it round. "Cover that and show what you're made of. Be men if you can't be artists!"

Limpet, with the air of a man to whom money was utterly valueless, flung a penny into the hat, and passed it carelessly to the MacQuibble, who at

once confiscated the whole amount, basely remarking that it would mean a beer at any rate.

The combined indignation of the company at once turned on the MacQuibble, commanding him to disgorge—a command which the MacQuibble treated with contempt.

The more insulting became the nature of the demands, the better pleased the MacQuibble appeared to be with his own powers of diplomacy, and when Cripps and Limpet humorously sought to make him part by pounding him with the shinbone, he became remarkably active, and spoilt the humour of the affair by throwing Limpet across a chair.

"Very well," said Cripps, reseating himself at the table a trifle out of breath, "if this is the way my generous offer to shout is received, I withdraw the offer. I refuse to risk any more wealth within reach of the clutches of this low Scotchman. A man," added Cripps, pointing at the MacQuibble, who took no manner of notice, but smoked impassively, "who comes to my hospitable board meanly disguised as an artist, and filches the table wine."

"All the same," said Limpet, rubbing his back, and scowling at the MacQuibble, "Cripps is the

only man who earns a regular salary, so it's up to him to shout."

"I view that statement with contempt," said Cripps. "Everybody here knows that my salary has been overdrawn for the last three months. When in luck," said Cripps, looking contemptuously at Limpet, "I draw half-a-crown."

All this time the curate had been struggling with an idea. Would Cripps be offended if he offered to lend him some money?

He waited some time in a state of great indecision, and at length seized an opportunity of drawing his host aside, and humbly and urgently, as though asking Cripps to do him a favour, pressed him to accept a trifling loan.

The spirit in which Cripps received this offer was certainly handsome.

"My dear old chap," he said, and grasped the curate's hand. "But, of course," he added, recovering from his emotions, "I'll let you have it back on Saturday."

The effect on the company of this wholly unexpected act of grace—largesse of beer from a curate—was electrifying. The tall man rose instantly in his place and called for cheers. The MacQuibble, seizing the shin-bone, beat upon the table with it

in a demented manner. Even the impassive Limpet was so moved as to leave his chair and shake the curate warmly by the hand.

Never in his life had the curate experienced such a thrill of grandeur as at that supreme moment when Limpet shook him by the hand.

He produced three half-crowns, at the sight of which the cheering, led by the tall man, and MacQuibble's efforts with the shin-bone, were so loud and so prolonged as to call forth a maddened hammering on the next wall, in a paradoxical endeavour to request a little less noise.

There seemed to be something ritualistic in that display of emotion in the name of drink. But the grand passion of emancipated youth is not Woman —it is Beer.

"Now the question is," said Cripps, when the general enthusiasm had subsided sufficiently to admit of discussion. "What shall we have? Who says beer?"

Everybody promptly and cordially said beer, except the MacQuibble, and he said rum.

It was cheap, and a spirit, he protested fervently, but despite such cogent argument as the MacQuibble saw fit to indulge in, the mighty thirst of the company ruled him out of the debate.

"Very well, then," said Cripps, "we'll have beer. Spuds, old boy. The pub's just round the corner —Jerry will show you the way. If you buy it yourself, you see," he added with simple diplomacy, "you'll know exactly how much you feel inclined to spend."

The curate seized his hat and hurried off with Limpet, vastly elated at his sudden popularity. The junior clerk looked at them as they passed, but in the society of the august Limpet the curate felt the utmost contempt for him. At Limpet's suggestion they went down the back stairs, and upon the second-floor, where the lavatories and the rubbish tins were, they came upon a small man with a bucket, a broom, and an immense beard, who seemed to fall into a passion the moment he caught sight of Limpet.

"Don't you come down these back stairs, makin' a pigsty of the place," he roared, menacing Limpet with the bucket.

"What's the matter with you?" demanded Limpet, pausing austerely on the stair.

"What's the matter with these 'ere basins?" shouted the small man. "All choked up with rubbage? Wot's your rubbage tin for, that you want to put your rubbage in the basins?"

"What's it got to do with me?" said Limpet contemptuously.

"What's the taps got to do with you, that you can't learn to turn them off?" shouted the small man, with a fresh access of rage. "Look wot you've done to these stairs in not turnin' orf of taps!"

He pointed to a small stream that still dribbled down the stairs, and formed a series of miniature ponds on each landing. Mr Limpet passed a look of contemptuous indifference over the banisters, and addressing the small man by the title of "Melons," desired again to know what it had to do with him.

"You'd think I lived here, by the way you talk," he said. "Go and find out who did it, before you come blaming me for it."

"It's only youse crowd wot comes makin' a pig-sty of the place," said Melons conclusively. "It ain't the second nor third floors wot comes makin' all manner o' mess in these basins. It's them top floors wot does it. Them top floors is more work than all the rest put together. Them top floors," said Melons, raising the bucket in an attitude of impassioned denunciation, "flings their rubbage down the lift well."

He lowered the bucket, and fixing Limpet with

his eye, seemed to mature a deadly purpose in his breast.

"And one o' youse crowd," he said at length, with hatred in his voice, "slep' in the lavatory all night." At the remembrance of this dastardly act Melons quivered with passion to his very beard.

"Slep' in the lavatory!" he roared. "Kep' me awake all night groanin' in his sleep."

Limpet, with an intimation in his manner of having already wasted too much valuable time in this unprofitable discourse, suddenly detached himself from the stair rail, and pursued his way, followed by the curate, who cast a nervous propitiatory glance at Melons, as to one vested with sufficient authority to rush him off the premises, or at least commit a lawful assault on an intruder with the bucket.

Melons, who was engaged in breathing hard after Limpet, got such a shock as the curate drifted coyly before his beard, that for the moment he ceased to breathe at all.

He opened his mouth, and made a helpless gesture with the bucket, as though to ask, "What have we here?" or, "Are we mad?" or, "Is it but a vision?"

There were two flights more before they reached

the ground floor, and the curate, glancing up as they passed out at a small postern door, saw that Melons had protruded his head over the banisters, and was still staring so hard that his eyes in perspective seemed to protrude beyond his whiskers.

"What?" demanded Limpet, in reply to an apprehensive suggestion of the curate's that the small man might be appeased by gifts. "Give him a bob? Give a blooming caretaker a bob? Why," said Limpet, who seemed to find the idea absolutely abhorrent, "I wouldn't give a caretaker a bob if it was the last I had in the world."

The curate forbore to suggest that such a resolution was hardly remarkable, mentally noting at the same time that there must be something evil in the race of caretakers when the impassive Limpet condescended to denounce them.

They passed into a narrow lane, the back premises of Swanston Street, upon one of which—a yard packed with fruit cases and piles of bananas basking in the sun—Limpet bestowed a trifling piece of information.

"That's old Antonio's," he said. "He keeps a fruit shop. You'd better not collar anything now, because it's a moral that old Antonio would nip out behind one of those cases."

The curate assured Limpet that his intentions regarding the bananas were honourable, little reckoning, as he followed Limpet into a courtyard with pot plants and cactus plants in tubs, what dramatic parts those same bananas were yet to play in the stage of his existence. Limpet, who seemed quite at home in the strange courtyard, led the way up a stone-flagged passage, where there were more pot plants, through a swing door at the end, and with a suddenness that took the curate's breath away, plump into a glittering bar that hummed like an angry beehive with the noise of drinking.

Partially stunned, but keeping desperately close to Limpet, the curate, arousing a gratifying amount of interest, found himself at length breasting a gilded bar, and helplessly confronting a bald-headed barman, who, in two words, and without the slightest apparent effort, managed to propound the problem of the curate's life.

"What's yours?" said the barman.

"Two beers," said Limpet, with remarkable presence of mind.

"That'll get us in one ahead of the other chaps," he remarked aside to the curate, as though the policy of the move was now apparent.

The curate, too confounded in his mind to ask if this was friendship or mere treachery, watched the barman in a fascinated manner as he wiped a couple of glasses off the bar with one hand, juggled them into the sink, juggled them out again, whisked them under the tap, and slapped them down again on the counter, fearfully large and dreadfully full of beer.

"Sixpence," prompted Limpet; and the curate, staring hopelessly at that enormous beer, found sixpence and paid for it.

Limpet, with the air of a man who had unexpectedly realized on a hitherto profitless investment, hastily pledged the curate, and buried a considerable portion of his pale countenance in the glass.

The curate, face to face at last with the demon Drink, glanced fearfully round and put out a tremulous hand. What would happen if he refused to drink that enormous beer?

He appeared to be attracting a good deal of attention as it was.

Wherever he looked, all eyes seemed to be upon him. One man, with a face that looked much more like boiled beef and carrots than human flesh and blood, came close up and munched a stick of celery

in what the curate felt was meant for an offensive manner.

Another gentleman, who had been slumbering against the counter lunch-table, woke up and fixed a petrified-codfish glare on what he doubtless regarded as a new species of jim-jam.

The curate felt like a nervous amateur about to perform to an audience of highly critical professionals.

With the eye of the boiled-beef-and-carrots gentleman fixed on him, he felt that it would be simply madness to refuse to drink. He had ordered the beer—paid for it, at least—it was evidently the custom here, and he would have to drink it. At that moment he caught the barman's eye, and hastily gulped down a mouthful, expecting little better than to fall intoxicated in the very act.

"How do you find it?" inquired Limpet, smacking his lips.

"Beautiful!" gasped the curate, gazing at Limpet with watering eyes; and Limpet, who seemed to find the curate's definition perfectly correct, put away the rest of his beer with professional skill, and waited for the curate to finish—a business which the curate, driven to desperation, accomplished in three frantic gulps that bereft him wholly

of breath, and caused his eyes to water more than ever.

"Now, let us see," said Limpet, interpreting the curate's gaze as an invitation to get to business.

"We'd better get four bottles, or five, there's five of us—no six! We'd better get six—that'll be a bottle apiece. Do you think you could run to six?"

The curate thought six would just meet the case. He was anxious to get out of the bar, for fear that Limpet or the barman, or somebody else, might insist on his having another glass of beer.

Besides, he was not at all easy in his mind about what effect that first was going to have. Up to the present, the only symptoms of intoxication that he could discover were a rather genial warmth in the bowels and an inclination to look boldly at the boiled-beef-and-carrots gentleman.

The barman, graciously responding to Mr Limpet's advances, produced six bottles, and the curate, feeling this to be his cue, and having absolutely no knowledge of the price of beer, kept half a sovereign ready, in case of accidents, and put down three half-crowns on the counter. He was so agreeably surprised at getting four and sixpence change, that he felt inclined to protest against the

barman's generosity, and in a loud aside to Limpet, remarked that the beer was very cheap here.

Limpet stowed away a bottle apiece in his coat pockets, and taking one in each hand, consigned the remaining two to the curate, and in this wise they made a small procession out of the bar, accompanied by the boiled-beef-and-carrots gentleman, who followed them as far as the courtyard, and stood staring after them, apparently obsessed by this new species of proselyte to the gaiety of drink.

CHAPTER III

ART—AND OTHER THINGS

THE return of the envoy to Cripps's studio was triumphant. The MacQuibble at once resumed his labours with the shin-bone, and there was some singing of what appeared to be the National Anthem, entitled, "Beer, Beer, Glorious Beer," while the bottles were being displayed on the table.

Limpet now began to be very officious with a corkscrew, while Cripps, counting the guests, found his resources considerably strained to procure sufficient vessels to drink out of. When ranged up, these were discovered to be the tumbler, the pannikin, and the cracked cup aforesaid, a pickle jar, a jam pot, and a battered pewter marked "Britannia Hotel," a diversity of receptacles that called for the highest mathematical skill in measuring out an exact quantity to each guest.

This delicate operation at length accomplished to Limpet's satisfaction, he gave the tumbler to the

curate, let the others take what they pleased, and took the jam pot himself—a choice which might have been due to a gentle spirit of self-abnegation, or to the capacity of the vessel, which baffled an exact computation from without of the amount it held.

The vigorous bustle of finding comfortable seats and filling pipes that ensued on the first drinking seemed to suggest that the business of the day had now begun.

Never in his life had the curate enjoyed such unhallowed bliss, as when he put down his glass and found himself intimately acknowledging Limpet's courteous wish that he might never be without a barrel of it. The saturnine Quin reached over at intervals and patted the curate on the back, relapsing invariably into a state of silent and unholy joy that caused his spectacles to glitter like the eye of an intellectual raven.

Intimacy was established as though there was no such thing as a clerical hat in the universe.

Even the MacQuibble found it compatible with his dignity as an artist and an atheist to unbend sufficiently to inquire what tobacco the curate smoked, and was not particularly insulted on learning that as yet the curate did not smoke at all.

But as everybody seemed anxious that the curate should prove himself a thoroughly decent sort of chap, and as the curate was equally anxious to earn that distinction, Cripps selected from his store a battered pipe that looked as if it had been dug up with a corpse, and smelt worse than it looked, which he handed tenderly to the curate, with an air of conferring on him a sacred trust.

"It's a beautiful smoker," he assured the curate, but the curate had still a saving remnant of caution left him.

"I'd—I'd sooner have a cigarette," he said, and though the MacQuibble seemed inclined to make a Star Chamber matter of it, Cripps managed to find half a packet of scented cigarettes, and the curate was accommodated. The glasses were refilled, and the business of the day was about to be resumed, when there was a slight interruption from Limpet and MacQuibble.

"I hold," the latter gentleman was heard to announce fiercely, "that Ar-rt in general is a matter of relative values."

"Form!" said Limpet austerely.

"Are there such things as lines in Nature?" demanded the MacQuibble.

"The line——" began Limpet sententiously.

"Is there a line round my nose?" shouted the MacQuibble, thrusting that organ prominently into the discussion. "Does it not tell against the rest of the face solely by reason that the tone is deeper, and the high light stronger?"

"The line——" said Limpet, evidently about to propound a crushing rejoinder, but he was not allowed to finish.

"How are you going to differentiate your half-tones, if you whack a line round everything?" roared the MacQuibble, thrusting the point home on Limpet's stomach with the shin-bone.

"The line represents the form, dam' it!" shouted Limpet, upset by the thrust. "Don't you do that again. The most important thing is to get the form correct!"

"Tone!" roared the MacQuibble.

"Colour!" said Cripps, joining the discussion.

"We are talking about black and white," said Limpet, scowling.

The MacQuibble corrected him. "We're talking of Ar-rt," he announced.

"Hear! hear!" said Quin, with relish.

"A question of general principles," continued the MacQuibble.

"Talk sense!" said Limpet shortly.

"I say," said the MacQuibble loudly, "that a man who draws by line is no better than a primitive savage!"

"That's because all your own stuff is smudged in with a stump!" said Limpet, condescending to the personal. "You can't draw form, so you reckon there's nothing in it!"

The MacQuibble took out a plug of tobacco and commenced malevolently cutting it up.

"There's one thing," he remarked at length, with an air of pronouncing a general principle. "I'm not a miserable and contemptible copy of Phil May, whatever I am!"

"Hear! hear!" said Quin exultantly.

"That's all right," said Cripps, cutting in hurriedly, to avert something drastic that was clearly coming from Limpet. "It's about time we filled up again—drink up, and don't argue in the presence of the beer."

He passed round with the bottle, and before Limpet and the MacQuibble, who were scowling at each other, could resume the discussion, plunged hastily into the National Anthem.

The curate, who had been all at sea during the discussion on Art, now made the rather startling discovery that his legs had elongated themselves so

enormously that his feet seemed to have completely disappeared in the distance. Convinced that there was something wrong here, he fixed them intently with his eye, and after a great mental effort, caused them to come telescoping slowly back to normal length again.

While engaged in this very necessary operation, he became aware that the table was sliding away into the opposite wall, and when he had brought it back and set it firmly on its legs by another powerful mental effort, he found that his own legs had taken advantage of his momentary distraction to telescope out again. At this stage his perception of things in general underwent a swift and sudden change. It was no gradual transition, as of one yielding to the influence of the demon Drink, but an uproarious going forth to greet the enemy and make a bosom friend of him on the spot. It dated from his third glass, upon the top of which he instantly had two more, and burst into the National Anthem, of which exhilarating ditty he had only managed to grasp the title, so he sang that over and over again, till the treacherous rocking chair nipped his enthusiasm in the bud by sailing over backwards and extinguishing him under the table, as a slight change from the screen.

Limpet, who, despite the masquerade he made of being an artist, was really one of those faithful beings created by a beneficent Providence to be the drunkard's friend, set the curate on his feet again, dusted him down, up-ended the rocking chair, and placed him in it, to all of which attentions the curate submitted himself with his eye wandering vacantly about the room till it lit on a bottle, upon which he rose instantly, filled his glass, and emptied it at a gulp.

"Here, I say, go steady, Spuds!" said Cripps, now fully apprised of the state of affairs. "You'll be tight in a minute if you ain't careful."

"Lookeer," said the curate, sitting down and rising instantly, "you thinkim a ninkumpoop!" He regarded Cripps with sudden indignation. "Ami right?"

"Nonsense!" said Cripps hastily, "I don't think anything of the sort. I'm only warning you——!"

"Ami right?" demanded the curate, with increasing ferocity.

Limpet put him carefully back into his chair, from which he instantly rose, as if moved by automatic springs.

"Ninkumpoop?" he demanded, still regarding Cripps ferociously, "Ami right?"

"You're all right, Spuds, old boy," said Cripps soothingly. "You sit down and go a bit slow, that's all. Here, have a smoke?"

He handed a cigarette to the curate, who, after scrutinizing it intently, as if not quite certain whether it was a snake or a centipede, suddenly took it and put it in his mouth, passively allowing Limpet to light it for him, and push him into his chair again.

"Now, we'll have another song," said Cripps, when this little affair was thus comfortably settled. The suggestion was promptly taken up by the MacQuibble, who burst at once into a very long song that seemed to have nothing in it but

> Whack fal lolder tooral addity,
> Whack fal lolder tooral lay.
> Whack fal lolder tooral addity,
> Billie get outer the Bo'sun's way.

Everybody, except the curate, who seemed to have fallen into a trance, joining in with terrific effect.

The order of singing appeared to be that whoever advanced a song, the whole company should join him in singing it, no such thing as a solo apparently being admitted, but all songs constituted choruses, to be sung as loudly as possible.

The thin youth, Partridge, came out particularly strong in this business, having a tremendous voice, without any tune whatever, and which, without being a bass voice, or a deep voice, was simply a terrifically loud voice, which invariably dominated the rest of the voices, and led them all wrong.

This method of singing, doubtless compatible with the business of life as conceived in Cripps's studio, seemed to be singularly misunderstood by the rest of the inhabitants of Clinks's Chambers, who now began to accompany each melody by hammering on the adjacent walls, and coming out and hammering in the passage, which attentions the company of singers seemed to regard as a trifling disturbance, to be borne with in a spirit of good-humoured tolerance, as to a community of dull knaves who could not be expected to know better.

But the community of dull knaves, immersed in their dullness and knavery, appearing to find the hectic gaiety of midnight intolerable at twelve o'clock noon, and having vainly tried to hammer down its sounds of harmony, resorted at length to the invariable refuge of dullness and knavery, and called in the Law.

The company in No. 2 were all at work on the business of life, at that moment comprised in a rollicking bellow of

Jane—a—Harriet, Sukey Matilda Popkins is me name,
To marry a duck of a duke across the Herring Pond I came.

when a terrific outbreak of hammering at Cripps's door itself caused the melody to thin out suddenly, till only Partridge was left singing, and he—possibly deafened by the loudness of his own voice—carried the song on for half a verse, till he discovered himself to be indulging in a solo, and shut off suddenly. Cripps, with a frown enjoining silence, cautiously opened the door, and Law and Order, in the persons of Melons and his beard, burst into the room as though they had both been propelled from the end of the passage by a powerful catapult.

"Wot's all this?" roared Melons, in a voice previously pitched to compete with Partridge at his loudest.

Cripps assumed a propitiatory and semi-official tone.

"It's all right," he said; "we're only having a little singing." He said it as though the explanation were calculated to restore peace at once.

"Singin'!" shouted Melons. "D'yer call all this here roarin' an' bellerin' singin'? Wot's all this roarin' an' bellerin' disturbin' of the tenants for?"

"I tell you we're only having a song or two," said Cripps, annoyed at Melons's refusal to see the affair in its proper light. "There's no great harm in that, I suppose!"

"No great 'arm in roarin' an' bellerin'?" shouted Melons, whose simple method was to find subject for retort in anything addressed to him. "Ain't the other tenants to hearn their livin' with all this 'ere bellerin' an' roarin'?"

"Give your own roarin' an' bellerin' a rest, can't you?" said Cripps, resorting to the offensive. "If a man can't have a few friends in to a quiet chat in his own room I'd like to know what the deuce he can't do next?"

"Hear! hear!" remarked the friends in question, smoking their pipes and seated at their ease, and apparently regarding the intrusion of Melons as an impromptu entertainment got up on the spur of the moment for their especial benefit.

"So you can hook it," concluded Cripps, waving Melons away as though he might consider the affair now settled entirely to his satisfaction.

"An' you can pay yer rent," retorted Melons, bringing in an unexpected side issue with crushing effect.

"Pay your rent!" he shouted, with a fresh access of rage, "before your friends come makin' a public 'ouse on the premises! Before you comes sleepin' in the lavatory!" said Melons to the room in general, "an' throwin' your rubbage down the lift well! Pay your rent, or give room to them wot do, an' can be'ave themselves!"

At this very critical point of the affair Cripps received unexpected allegiance from the curate, who rose up from behind the rocking chair, and, fixing Melons with a dreadful glare, delivered this brief address:

"Gerrout!"

Melons breathed deeply, and took stock of this entirely new form of objectionable tenant, with a darkening brow.

"You're a nice specimen for a clergyman," he said at length, "with your preachin' an' your psalm-singin', an' your Sunday coat on. Ain't you ashamed of yourself for a specimen of a clergyman, roarin' an' bellerin' with the worst of them? With your Sunday coat on!" added Melons, as though the curate's depravity might have been at least

pardonable if he had taken that garment off and roared and bellowed in his shirt-sleeves.

The curate, in the most impressive manner, and without saying a word, made a series of circular gesticulations at Melons with his arms, as though winding himself up for a particularly powerful effort.

When he appeared to think the performance had lasted long enough, he calmly removed the rocking chair, buttoned up his coat, and briefly announced to Melons the fell nature of his purpose.

"Fight yer!" he said, and without further warning, and before anybody could stop him, he cast himself at Melons, seized him by the neck, and fell with him through the doorway in a flash.

Cripps and Limpet rushed out into the passage, whence, after a brief interval of plunging and tramping, Limpet reappeared staggering with the curate in his arms.

"Fought him!" announced the curate to the company in general, as though he had merely left them for a moment to perform a trifling duty, and was now prepared to resume the business of the day. He was assisted to the rocking chair by the gloating Quin, where he instantly grasped a bottle,

and poured a pint of beer over his face before Limpet could rescue the bottle.

Meanwhile, there was a terrific hubbub in the passage, where it was understood that Cripps was soothing down the enraged Melons—which was apparently a business of some difficulty, to judge by Melons's repeated references to the "Police."

At length Cripps reappeared, wearing a rather ruffled appearance, and hurriedly closed the door.

"By Ginger!" he said to the curate, who was having his countenance wiped by the faithful Limpet; "you're a nice peaceful sort of cove, you are, Spuds, to go rushing a caretaker out in that fashion!"

The curate rose instantly, and took a commanding position at the table.

"Lookeer!" he said loudly, with a hiccup, "'S'caretaker—givem a bob—cer'enly not.—Ami right?"

"Quite right," said Quin with gusto.

"Limpet, ami right?" demanded the curate, peremptorily.

"You're all right," said Limpet, removing the bottles out of danger.

"Cer'enly I'm right," continued the curate. "S'there you are—s'taker—call mea parshon—

show yer warri am. Fought 'im!" added the curate conclusively, and sat down suddenly on the floor, in mistake for the rocking chair.

"It's all very well," said Cripps to Quin. "You find it very funny, of course, but you ain't two months behind with your rent. And, anyway," he added, "if there's no more beer it's about time we went to dinner."

There was just enough beer for half a glass all round, so it was finished, and the curate's hat having been found under the bed by Limpet, it was put on his head, all covered with dust, and he was taken out to dinner.

CHAPTER IV

ALL MEALS SIXPENCE

THE curate's impressions of that dinner and what followed were vague, but highly coloured, like posters in a dream.

The prevailing sensation in his mind was one of immense speed. He remembered being hurried in the midst of his friends, through a vast number of totally strange streets that he could never satisfactorily locate afterwards, through a hurrying population that seemed to find incredible difficulty in keeping out of his road, across streets of bolting trams and cab-horses, and at length into a restaurant that carried a warning note of warm pea-soup for half a block away, and blazoned forth the financial condition of its patrons by an enormous sixpence painted on the window. Here, the curate remembered, he was crowded up at a long table between Limpet and a hard-faced man with a hoarse voice, whose mastery over the art of din-

ing was such that he managed to eat a dish of stewed rabbit solely by the aid of his knife, merely using his fork to spear the bread with, or to extract an occasional bone from the region of his epiglottis. At Limpet's suggestion, the curate ordered a steak-and-kidney pudding and a boiled jam roll without sauce, because, as Limpet informed him out of the vast storehouse of his mind, you get one slice of pudding with the sauce, and two without. He remembered that the waitress who served them was perhaps one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen, and that Cripps and Limpet and the others called her by her Christian name, and complained about the food and generally comported themselves as if they owned the place, and that when he had eaten all the steak-and-kidney pudding, and the boiled jam roll without, and poured an immense cup of hot tea on top of both, he could only follow Limpet out of the place in a partially stunned condition, and stand feebly panting for air on the kerbstone. He heard Cripps tell the old lady at the door to put the curate down to him, and he heard Limpet tell her that it would be all right on Saturday, but how the others got out without paying he was too overpowered by the steak-and-kidney pudding to try and find out.

After that he recollected an aimless drifting from street to street, and pausing in front of all the tobacconists and print-shop windows, varied by occasional passages of temper between Limpet and MacQuibble, who disagreed violently as to whether the flesh of the hand was deeper in tone than the cool grey of the pavement, and at length became violently personal over the best method of treating the high shine on belltoppers.

This was followed by a period of gravitating from the corner of Bourke Street to the Treasury Buildings, where Cripps seemed to think they would be sure to meet a certain awfully decent chap, who was always good enough for half a crown. But this device at length proving hopeless —or perhaps the awfully decent chap saw them first and managed to escape—they migrated to a lane off Little Collins Street, where Partridge, after a mysterious absence down a basement, came bursting out as though he had stolen something, and fled round the corner where he exhibited half a crown. Upon this, they all went jubilantly to a wine-shop in Exhibition Street, where there was a stout foreign lady who called Cripps "Creeps" and the others "boyce," and who, so Limpet informed the curate, kept a magnificent old ver-


BOURKE ST

mouth, which the curate mistily conceived as referring to an aged foreign gentleman of title, till the arrival of a certain bottle, with a glaring label, dispelled the illusion.

The curate also remembered the appearance of a certain rich-complexioned young lady in a pink blouse, perhaps one of the most beautiful women the curate had ever seen, who came out of the back parlour wiping her mouth, and sat on Cripps's lap, and subsequently played rollicking tunes on the piano in the parlour.

He remembered Cripps and Limpet performing a complicated dance, and Partridge drawing caricatures on the wall-paper with a piece of charcoal. He remembered joining loudly in all the choruses. He remembered Quin exultantly patting him on the back and he remembered trying to climb on the piano, and falling behind it, a circumstance that struck him at the time as a superb piece of humour. He remembered Limpet informing him, out of the vast storehouse of his mind aforesaid, that Chinamen invariably shaved the head with cold water, but apropos of this vitally interesting piece of information was evolved, the curate could not imagine. He remembered, in fact, everything up to that second glass of vermouth, and then, with in-

tervals of great swiftness, there were streets again, and people running, and people falling down, and people being carried up vast flights of stairs, and people singing, and people falling down in the passage, and the very last emotion that strayed into the curate's consciousness was a feeble hatred for somebody who was taking his boots off.

CHAPTER V

LOFTY IDEALS

WHEN he awoke it was evening, and he was in Cripps's room. He was lying in Cripps's bed, feeling singularly contented in his mind, and contemplating the spectacle of his friend Cripps, who was seated in the rocking chair with his arms round the waist of a girl in a red Tam o' Shanter, who was seated in Cripps's lap.

The curate noted all this in an impassive and disinterested manner, as though the circumstance had drifted casually upon his comprehension without his feeling inclined to attach any particular significance to it.

It struck him vaguely that Cripps had a rather singular propensity for having girls on his lap.

Besides the Tam o' Shanter this one wore a quantity of fluffy black hair, as a decoration to a rather nice small round face. Her eyes had that slightly vacant expression which kindly sentiment

describes as dreamy. Her complexion was a little disturbed by violet powder. She wore a lot of one-and-elevenpenny bangles, and a three-and-elevenpenny blouse. Her boots might have cost four and elevenpence, and if intelligent shopkeepers dealt in such things, her little soul would have been marked down in the window at something and elevenpence, too.

The curate, without otherwise agitating the placid nature of his contemplation, arrived at the conclusion that she was certainly one of the most beautiful girls he had ever seen.

At the same time he became aware that she was giggling, and that Cripps was saying something.

"If you are awake, Jimmy," said Cripps, "it's about up to you to say so."

The curate rolled frantically off the bed, found his feet, stood up and sat down again.

"Have I been asleep?" he asked, blinking feebly at Cripps.

"Since three o'clock," said Cripps heartily. "Florrie's been tickling your feet with a feather for the last half-hour, ain't you, Flo?"

"Don't you believe him," said Florrie indignantly, "I never did."

The curate hastily renounced any belief in such

a vile calumny, and when Cripps, in great delight over his own fancy, recounted certain tender passages in which the curate, in his sleep, was supposed to have clasped Florrie in his arms, and murmured, "Kiss me, mother," he became wellnigh frantic in his efforts to convince Florrie that he was incapable of such shocking disrespect, even in the baseless fabric of a dream.

"Well, well," said Cripps, having laughed himself helpless over the curate's frenzied protestations, "there's no getting away from the fact that you're a devil of a chap to let loose in the church, Jimmy—Mr Jimmy Bowles," he added, with a wave of his hand, "Miss Florrie Gimblet."

Miss Gimblet nodded, and the curate, desperately conscious of his stockinged feet, advanced and shook hands awkwardly. At the same time he felt a glow of gratitude to Cripps for not introducing him as "Spuds."

"You feel a bit rocky?" asked Cripps, as the curate sat down again, and passed a hand wanly across his head.

"You need a cup of tea. Florrie," he added, "get him a good strong cup of tea."

"No, No!" protested the curate; but he was overruled by Cripps.

"I need a strong cup of tea myself," said that gentleman.

"There's no milk," said Florrie.

"You can get milk at old Antonio's," said Cripps, as though conferring on Miss Gimblet an invaluable piece of knowledge. "And at the ham and beef shop next door to the Bull and Mouth you get sausages. You get tomatoes anywhere, and bread for tuppence."

"And butter fourpence," added Miss Gimblet, doing the sum, "comes to one and sixpence."

The curate, asked casually by Cripps if he thought he could manage it till to-morrow, at once produced two shillings, requesting Cripps not to mention it, and Miss Gimblet departed, followed by the admiring eyes of the curate. In such scanty biographical details as he managed to squeeze out of Cripps during her absence, he learned that Miss Gimblet sometimes sat for him as a model, that she was all right from the chest up, but a trifle too short in the legs, that when she could get the job she danced in the ballet, that her dancing on the whole was rather "umpty doodle," that she lived with her old woman somewhere in Hoddle Street, and that, altogether, she was not a bad little tart, though a trifle slow on the uptake, which the

curate, conceiving to refer disparagingly to Miss Gimblet's intelligence, mentally renounced as basely untrue.

He was still meditating on Cripps's incredible indifference to Miss Gimblet's charms, when that maligned young person arrived with several small parcels, and the milk in a ginger-beer bottle, and captivated the curate's interest by taking off her cap and setting the table for tea.

The parcel containing the sausages at once engrossed Cripps's attention and he became very busy with a small frying-pan and an explosive-looking kerosene stove, of the sort that frequently gets mentioned in the newspapers connected with the hasty demise of servant girls.

"When frying sausages," remarked Cripps, who seemed to regard that occupation as a cult, "it is advisable to perforate the outer skin with a fork. This," said Cripps, poising the fork, "prevents the sausage from bursting."

He stabbed the sausage, which burst derisively in his face, and writhed itself actively out of the pan into one of the curate's boots, whence it was partially recovered by Cripps with the aid of a fork, and served up along with the rest, in company with some fried tomatoes on slices of scorched bread,

described by Cripps as "*toast à la kerosene*," and the tea being brewed by Florrie in an elegant Japanese teapot without a spout, they fell to lustily.

"There is nothing like home cooking," said Cripps, doling out the sausages, "because you get it good, and know what you are getting."

The meal was succeeded by a peaceful interval, in which Cripps wore a Turkish fez and smoked an immense German pipe, greatly to his own gratification.

The curate and Miss Gimblet sat on the bed and smoked the last of the scented cigarettes. Miss Gimblet, in an attitude that ensured the company getting the most of her profile, and her bangles, and her ring, and her ankles, and the rest of her charms, smoked her cigarette in a fragile dreamy way, which was singularly effective as a means of stimulating the curate's admiration.

He felt that the presence of this exquisite creature should dominate the conversation, but Cripps, when he had at length got the German pipe properly alight—a process which involved a series of the most complicated attitudes on account of the stem, which was fully a yard long—became extremely garrulous on the subject of his work, which was his pleasing euphemism for a certain magnifi-

cent picture to be executed as soon as Cripps could get the necessary time.

This picture, the curate was given to understand, was practically as good as done. Cripps had got his idea and roughed out the composition, really the hardest part of the work, said Cripps, so that all that now remained to be done was to set up your canvas, pose your model, and whack the thing in.

The idea, of course, was the main thing. Cripps spoke of the idea as if it had cost him sleepless nights and weeks of arduous toil. He would just give the curate a brief description of it.

The curate, conceiving this to be a singular mark of Cripps's esteem, prepared to listen intently.

A beautiful woman, dark, with a note of red in the hair, in a rich and sombre dress—black, with a note of cadmium yellow—was to be the central motive of the picture. She would be represented as glancing backwards over a naked shoulder, as she disappeared through the curtains—dull red with a note of green—a luxurious couch—grey with a note of vermilion. In the foreground, an overturned wine jar, a snake, some roses, a smouldering torch, and the supine figure of a man clasping the

woman's feet. "The wine," said Cripps, half-closing his eyes and bringing the tips of his thumb and forefinger delicately together, to suggest the exquisite refinement of this effect, "is pouring from the jar, and is extinguishing the torch."

The curate looked as profound as he could, and nodded, which seemed to please Cripps, so he did it again whenever the occasion seemed favourable.

The chief effort of the picture, it appeared, was to be centred in the woman's eyes, which were to be of that pale opalescent blue, suggesting slumberous passion. "The eyes," said Cripps, darkly, "of a Sphinx."

Then, in the background—half seen, half suggested in the shadow of the curtain—a demoniacal face.

"And the title," said Cripps, throwing himself back in his chair to observe the staggering effect of this announcement on the curate, "'Woman!' What d'yer think of it?"

"Magnificent!" said the curate, whose mind by this time was in a complete muddle. "The idea of the snake and the wine and all that—and the curtains," added the curate, trying to think of some more details, "will it take you long to paint?"

"Well, of course, that all depends," said Cripps,

losing interest and reaching out for the matches. "A man might be any time over a picture like that.

By the way," he added, "don't mention the idea of it to any of the chaps. They might sneak it."

The curate, having solemnly intimated that he would regard the confidence as sacred, Cripps per-

formed acrobatically with the German pipe, which had gone out, and resumed the discussion.

He had another rather fine idea, it appeared, which the curate would perhaps find interesting. The curate expressed a sycophantic conviction that he would, and was at once taken at his word.

"It's an entirely different scheme, this one," said Cripps, "in three tones of blue. A beautiful girl, draped in white, suggesting innocence, standing on the verge of a starlit pool. In the background cypresses and stars. In the foreground lilies, and a snake. Immediately behind the girl, a demoniacal face. Title, 'The Young Girl!' "

Cripps seemed to have some doubt as to whether this was not, if anything, a finer idea than the first. They were both such infernally good ideas, in fact, that it was difficult for a man to know which to choose. He rather thought, on the whole, that he would paint them both, and settle the difficulty that way. He waxed extremely enthusiastic over the suggestion, and said he would paint them as companion pictures, and frame them both together in dark oak, with a gold slip.

On second thoughts, he would paint them in two separate panels, and make a counterpiece of a rather fine idea he'd had in his head for some time.

A beautiful woman, with that deep note of red gold in the hair suggesting slumberous passion, with her body half thrown across a couch, is clasping in her bare arms the neck of a man, who is turning towards an easel, on which is an unfinished picture. At his feet, a broken laurel wreath. In the foreground, a wine jar, some roses, and the usual snake. In the background, behind the easel, a human skull.

The curate had expected a demoniacal face, and was rather startled at this innovation. Title, "The Choice."

Now, if Cripps could only paint that picture as he saw it in his mind's eye, it would be absolutely his greatest effort. It would be a devilish difficult bit of painting, he admitted, but somehow, he seemed to feel that he could do it. In fact, he seemed to feel that subject as personal to himself.

"A man's best work," said Cripps, "should be personal. Some chaps, like MacQuibble, for instance, will paint anything—as long as it strikes them as being a good bit of colour, or so on. But with me, I have to *feel* the subject. Practically," said Cripps, dropping his voice, "I have to have lived it."

He proceeded to refill the German pipe, and, catching sight of Florrie, became abstracted for the moment in noting the effect of her head against the background.

"Just fling that coverlet round your head a minute, will you?" he said, and when it was done, he went through a performance of blocking out portions of the background with his hands, and screwing up his eyes and trying the effect sideways, and making the while such mental notes as "hair and drape one tone—face a shade lighter than background—shadow under chin—yellow reflections—no high lights—eyes one tone."

"Yes," he said at length, having evidently settled the matter to his satisfaction, "it will paint fine—with the hair red. It will need a note of blue, though, to get the colour out of the face. That'll do, thanks," he added to Florrie, who obediently took off the coverlet and resumed her favourite pose.

"Yes," said Cripps, decisively, "I'll get a few yards of art muslin to-morrow, and paint Florrie as the 'Woman.' "

These important details settled, and "The Choice" definitely decided on as Cripps's greatest effort, he began to be assailed by certain doubts

as to whether the composition entitled "Woman" would not, after all, be the best one to start first.

From that he drifted back to a consideration of number two, as perhaps his finest conception, and at length got himself into such a state of uncertainty that he evolved three entirely new and original subjects, all more or less embodying the consideration of slumberously passionate women in intimate conjunction with demoniacal faces, over each of which he became tremendously enthusiastic, and then doubtful, and then worked back over the whole lot again, till he not only got profoundly muddled himself, but reduced the curate to a state bordering on imbecility.

"Ah, well," said Cripps, when the visitors were departing, after being regaled on a light supper of bread and jam and tea, "we've had a thunderin' good evening. It does a man good to talk over his work with a sympathetic chap who understands his point of view. I must get a fresh canvas and buck into that idea first thing to-morrow. The light's out below," he added, seeing them off as far as the stairs, "but Florrie knows the way down. Well, good night."

Tremendous and eventful as that day had been to the curate, it was not yet over. There yet re-

mained the tremendous, if not eventful, duty of escorting Miss Gimblet home—up Collins Street, singularly silent and mysterious now that the trams had ceased—across the Fitzroy Gardens, more silent and mysterious still, to the very gate of the house somewhere in Hoddle Street, where she lived with her lady mother—whom the curate at least expected to find lying in ambush behind the fence, ready to demand the nature of his intentions towards her daughter on the spot.

But the only hint of Miss Gimblet's parent was a querulous suggestion from the interior of the house that it was time Florrie was in bed, to which Miss Gimblet appended the trifling information that it was "only Ma," and took no further notice.

Miss Gimblet also, in addition to the rest of her charms, developed a remarkable gift of conversation, talking uninterruptedly for the space of an hour and a half entirely about herself, while the curate stood on the footpath, listening enchanted, though fit to drop in his tracks with fatigue. A distant clock was striking one before he stood once more alone, and pondered on the many perfections of Miss Gimblet. He was quite uncertain of the way back, and too tired to care, so he drifted vacantly about till a friendly policeman put him on

the track for the Gardens, where he went to sleep on the first seat he came to. But he got through them at length, after incalculable periods of wandering from seat to seat, and staggering and dozing, and spiking himself on the iron railings, back into Collins Street again, which at the meanest computation he discovered to be forty miles long. The boots at the Coffee Palace let him in, and got his key for him, and rectified a trifling mistake about the direction of his bedroom, which the curate seemed to consider must be situated in the basement.

He found his room after traversing an inferno of dimly lit corridors, and sat on the bed, groaning feebly in the exertion of taking his boots off. His new clothes he cast on the floor, and recked nothing of sitting on his brand new hat. His watch, a gift from his Aunt Selina, fell under the washing stand. and there he let it remain. In the very act of wrestling with his shirt, he collapsed on the bed, and slept instantly, dreaming, among other things, that he was reposing on a luxurious red couch with a note of green, while Miss Gimblet fried sausages, only his mother persisted in looking in all the while through the curtains, so he ran for miles and miles through Hoddle Street, pursued by a demoniacal

face, remarkably like Limpet's, that tried to drag him into all the public houses, but he fell over a precipice and floated softly away into nothingness to the tune of distant bands.

CHAPTER VI

FALLING FROM GRACE

IF Mr Jimmy Bowles had any vocation, it was a tendency to always take the soft side of the road, whether he took it of his own volition or was pushed into it by the press of circumstances.

It was this unfortunate tendency that had brought him into the Church, the press of circumstances taking the form of a maternal parent whose ambition it was to have a curate in the family. It was also her dream that James should grow up a noble-minded man, and it was entirely due to the involved nature of this good lady's spiritual curriculum that James grew up with the notion that a noble-minded man was one who brushed his hair well off his forehead, and always turned his toes out when walking.

To this exalted ideal James had his course shaped perforce, and offering no particular resistance—beyond a certain bashfulness at taking the oath in

public—had sworn to abstain from the use of strong drink before he was seven. With this mighty resolution framed and glassed, and hung over his bed, along with a pleasing representation of a gleaming eye, bearing the legend, "Thou, God, seest me," he managed by bearing himself humbly among his fellows, or rather, by having humility thrust upon him, to avert for a period such calamity as doth befall the Sunday swimmer, the fruit stealer, the school wagger, the root smoker, the Chinaman pelter, and the window smasher.

However, the depression of youth must have its hour of brief rebellion, and certain symptoms of vainglory were apparent in the conduct of James at that time.

It began with walking out on Sunday afternoon with a camellia in his buttonhole, and coming home late for tea with mud on his trousers.

These evidences of depravity were accompanied by intense gloom when in the bosom of his home, and a tendency to mutter when reproved at the meal table. He was then seen frequently in the society of the boy Cripps and other notorious characters, and, as a culmination, was discovered one day by his mother smoking a cigarette in the shameful seclusion of the cowshed. In the dreadful

scene of inquisition that followed, there came to light a pack of cards and the photograph of a lady in tights, and that night James experienced the anguish of remorse in the front drawing-room, where the large illustrated Family Bible and the photo albums were kept. He rose from his knees at length on the understanding that henceforth he was to be a changed boy. He was a changed boy for some weeks henceforth, suffering, with the able assistance of his mother, from a conviction that he had lost his soul. In this pleasing frame of mind he was taken to a revival meeting, and so wrought on by the example of the local milkman —who wept aloud over the hopeless nature of his sins all the way up the aisle to the mourners' bench —that he joined the band of repentant sinners in the vestry and enjoyed that peculiar privilege which is known to the elect as being "washed in the Blood of the Lamb."

He became so vastly uplifted in consequence of this process and a certain yeasty conception of himself as an earnest young worker of the Lord's vineyard that, in his zeal, he tried to induce Cripps and Company to come into the fold, and was so basely received with jeers and insults, and recommendations to come out from under his hat, that he went

home greatly agitated, and was attacked by "doubts" of such a poignant nature that he hardly expected to live through the night without a thunderbolt.

From poignant doubts it was but a step to camellias in the buttonhole, and James relapsed. But he relapsed with caution, wearing the camellias of a sinful life in secret, and keeping up a fictitious show of being earnest at the meal table.

But deception is not a fixed quantity, and may be practised with safety only in its degree.

A lad, for instance, may wear camellias in secret with comparative security, but he may not meddle with the kitchen sherry and still present with any show of success the demeanour of an earnest young Christian.

It was a pint bottle of sherry, and James drank it all, standing silently in the dark beside the kitchen dresser. So far his method was strictly politic, but the prime error occurred in his subsequently falling down in the passage, and being utterly unable to get up again.

They had to carry him to bed, amidst circumstances too painful to dwell upon, and James's remorse next day was more than he could bear. Henceforward he was to lead a new life, and for a

month his conception of a new life was to pray fervently, loud enough for his mother to hear, and speak at meal times with gloomy relish of his probable doom as a missionary in China. Unfortunately, his enthusiasm was not given time to cool. With the connivance of the local parson, who called regularly and had heart to heart talks with the repentant James, he was sent off to pursue a course of education that would eventually disqualify him for a life of such pomps and vanities as camellias and kitchen sherry.

Here he found a number of young men all plodding along the line of least resistance, where it was only too easy to follow the course of virtue, and James, with a natural facility in following where others led, acquired virtue as a habit, and wore it with resignation.

In fact, he had come to regard it as his normal condition, so that when he awoke in the Victoria Coffee Palace the morning after seeing Miss Gimblet home, and reflected on his astounding behaviour of yesterday, it was some time before he could disentangle his normal identity from the abandoned personality reflected in his memory.

His chief sensation as he pondered on the affair was one of extreme amazement. He had an un-

questionable thirst, too, which required repeated applications of the water jug, and certain qualms of the stomach, which at first he was inclined to regard as the voice of conscience. A painful interval assured him that this emotion was purely physical, and feeling a trifle relieved, he climbed back into bed to reflect in comfort.

CHAPTER VII

THE PATRIARCHS UP-TO-DATE

BOWLES'S travelling bag, a present from his mother, was inscribed "Rev. James Bowles." He was not quite used to the title as yet, but he had seen it in perspective, and even mildly exulted in it. How then, had he, the Rev. James Bowles, after an entirely uneventful past, and on the verge of an equally uneventful future, assumed on a sudden such desperation of character as to get drunk, fight a caretaker, roar music-hall songs in a wine-shop, and see a ballet girl home in the dead of night? He, who had long ago marked himself down irrecoverable, as little better than one of the virtuous?

All the same, he must not do it again. It was a good thing to have seen life, necessary, in fact, to one whose business was to morally dilate upon its sinfulness. Well, he could now honestly say that he had seen life.

He had seen it through the bottom of a tumbler,

vastly magnified and most prismatically coloured. He had seen it in the company of men to whom seeing life was a mere everyday affair, and his own efforts as an amateur of life he could not but regard with secret approval. He had shouted—that was the correct expression—for these men, and earned their applause.

He had been drunk—not in a contemptible kitchen-sherry fashion, but in all the grandeur of magnificently old vermouth. He had talked for hours with an exquisitely beautiful ballet girl, an actress, in fact, with as much ease as if she had been a mere choir girl. He was now suffering what he understood to be a recovery, and there was something so eminently soothing to his vanity in this occupation, that he could have wished Alf Wilkins present in the capacity of audience, to see him doing it so unsuccessfully.

However, he was quite determined to limit his vision of life for the future to Murumberee. He shuddered to think that in the very process of stimulating his eyesight with beer, he might have met his Uncle Tinfish, or Egbert Tinfish, or some other member of the Tinfish family. He made another mental note that he must call on Uncle Tinfish, and gratify the Tinfish family, including

Euphemia Tinfish, with the spectacle of his clerical appearance. Uncle Tinfish was an upright and God-fearing printer, who gained some pecuniary assistance from the Almighty by publishing the *Christian Banner*, and it was Uncle Tinfish, disguised as destiny, who had been largely instrumental in pushing James into the Church.

It was necessary, therefore, to call on Uncle Tinfish without delay. He arose, and counting over his wealth, discovered it to be less by fifteen shillings since yesterday, a discovery which cemented his determination to see no more life at such an exorbitant rate.

He had arrived in Melbourne with a total capital of five pounds four and sixpence. This large sum, after being depleted to the extent of two shirts, a walking-stick, and a pair of boots, was to pay his fare to Murumberee and see him started in life as the Rev. James Bowles. Ample as it was, it had not been calculated to meet such an expensive item as the thirst of Cripps and Co. As it was he would have to forgo the walking-stick, and perhaps one of the shirts. With a view to making certain of the boots and the other shirt, he put only four shillings in his pocket, and descended for breakfast. Breakfast that morning was an empty formality, for,

after a feeble battle with an appetite which for the first time in his recollection rebelled at bacon and eggs, he breakfasted on half a slice of toast and four cups of tea, and slunk out hurriedly, hoping that the waitress would not be offended because he left the bacon and eggs.

He told himself as he descended into Collins Street that he would just take a stroll round before calling on Uncle Tinfish.

So he strolled round as far as The Block, and by that time, having reduced himself from a state of unalterable firmness to one of comfortable indecision, it was a simple matter to stifle the voice of conscience and drift across once more to the soft side of the road.

He found Cripps working at the table, surrounded by the remains of last night's supper. He had the fez cap on, and was wearing a pair of pink pyjama trousers tucked into his socks. He also appeared to have risen without the formality of washing his face or brushing his hair, his whole appearance being extremely dissolute.

He put down his pen at once, and welcomed the curate with unaffected heartiness.

He was desperately busy, he said, and working against time to finish a job, but he took the rocking

chair and filled up the small clay pipe with alacrity, as though satisfied that the curate's presence was a reasonable excuse for working no longer.

"That's the worst of working for a printer's," he said; "they expect a man to keep pace with a blanky printing machine."

The curate hinted a desire to inspect the work.

"What! this?" said Cripps, carelessly picking up the work in question and wiping some butter off it with his sleeve. "This is only a trade job. The sort of thing a man has to do to earn a crust," he added, with an air of disclaiming any personal responsibility in the thing whatever. The curate, remembering certain predilections of Cripps in favour of the Demoniacal and Languorously Feminine in art, was astonished to discover that the work was of a distinctly biblical nature, being a number of small pen-and-ink drawings in line that wore a strangely familiar air.

"But these," he said, after vainly striving to recollect where he had seen them before; "what are these for?"

"Oh, those," said Cripps, glancing sideways at the drawings as though to stimulate his memory, "those are for a printer." He shifted about un-

easily and blew noisily through his pipe, with a slight frown.

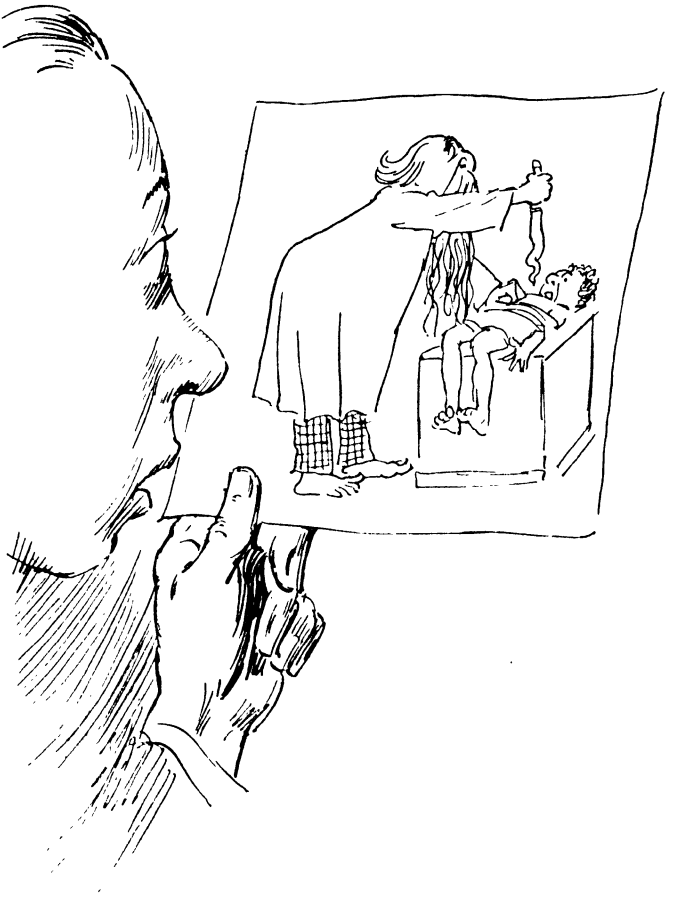
"As a matter of fact," he said at length, making the confession with an effort, "I do those dam' things for a Sunday School."

"For the lessons?" inquired the curate, with interest.

"I'm dashed if I know," said Cripps. "They print them on pink paper with a tract, or a text or something, and one of those in the corner."

"Fancy you doing the picture texts for the lessons," said the curate, amazed at the mysterious workings of Fate.

"A man has to make a living," said Cripps, as though urging an extenuation. "And would you believe it," he added, with a sudden change of attitude, "I've done fifty-two of those dam' little tracts, and what d'you reckon I get for them? Half a crown apiece—a miserable half-bull," he said, thrusting the insignificance of that sum upon the curate's attention with the stem of his pipe. "And some of them chock-full of figures—look at this one, for instance. Moses building the tower of Bethlehem, isn't it? Yes. Well, look at the deuce of a crowd of Israelites I've shoved into that. And this one too—Abraham offering up his son, Ab-



salom. By the way," added Cripps, "d'yer notice anything peculiar about that drawing?"

The curate, forbearing to obtrude a professional knowledge, made a complimentary reference to the expression of Abraham's face.

"No, no!" said Cripps. "I mean—do you notice anything peculiar in the composition—something really remarkable, I mean?"

The curate, after a close scrutiny of the design, hinted that the mystery lay in Abraham's beard, which was remarkably long.

"No," said Cripps. "Wrong again. I thought you'd have seen it like a shot. Why," he said, exultantly, "Abraham's got a pair of check trousers on!"

"So he has," said the curate, staring transfixed at this singular adjunct to the patriarch's costume. "I see that now. Why have you put check trousers on him?"

"Only for a lark," said Cripps in great delight. "And I've put a bowler hat on this Israelite with the hod, you see—and this cove's got a pair of bowyangs on. And in this one, of the Israelites crossing the Red Sea, I've made Moses carrying a carpet bag."

"It's a wonder they don't object," said the

curate, having an uneasy feeling that personally it was his duty to protest against Moses being made to carry a carpet bag.

"How d'you expect a seventh-rate Baptist to know anything about costume or anything else?" said Cripps contemptuously.

The curate blushed frantically at this pleasant allusion to his calling, but Cripps appeared so completely unconscious of any personality in his remark, that the curate merely feigned to deeply study the Israelites crossing the Red Sea.

"It's all very well," he said to himself, "but he goes too far, putting belltoppers on Isaiah. I believe it's my duty to speak to him about it." He pondered the situation uncomfortably, while Cripps, quite unaware that his guest meditated treachery in secret, put the drawings away, and said he supposed he had better get dressed.

With this he disappeared for five minutes, accompanied by a monochrome towel. He came back presently, puffing, and delivered certain fictional statements on the refreshing effects of a cold shower.

While he finished dressing, the curate sat on the bed and was attacked with acute depression. It was purely physical, but he concluded it was due to

a sudden comprehension of the utter worthlessness of life—a curate's life, anyway. Cripps at least had vital interests to give a zest to the business of living—the care with which he combed his hair well down over his ears and forehead for instance —and the way he tweaked out the edges of his tie, proved it. Besides, he had not got an impending curacy at Murumberee, or an Uncle Tinfish, or a stomach with a predilection for turning internal somersaults.

"And now!" said Cripps, having exchanged the fez for a felt hat, and put the small clay pipe in his pocket. "What do you say if we go and have some dinner?"

The curate looked as cheerful as his stomach would permit, and said he thought dinner would do him good.

"Do you the world of good," said Cripps heartily. "You look a bit off colour, and it'll pick you up. What you need," added Cripps, clapping the curate on the back, "is a good go in at steak-and-kidney pudding."

The curate shuddered.

"And boiled jam roll," added Cripps with gusto, as he led the way out of Clinks's Chambers, and up Swanston Street, and every time the curate thought

of the steak-and-kidney pudding, and the boiled jam roll, he felt faint. In Bourke Street they met Limpet, who made the curate feel worse by asking Cripps what was the matter with him.

"He's only a bit off after last night," said Cripps reassuringly. "What he needs is a good solid meal —he'll be all right then."

"I—I don't feel much inclined; I don't seem to have an appetite," said the curate apologetically.

"Then you need a pick-me-up," said Limpet promptly.

"Do I?" asked the curate anxiously.

Both Cripps and Limpet assured him that a pick-me-up was the very thing he required. "You'll feel as good as gold after you've had it," they said; and, having diagnosed his symptoms with professional skill, declared for rum and milk.

They had the rum and milk at a small pub in Little Bourke Street, where the beverage was threepence a glass, and the curate, assuring his benefactors that he felt vastly better for it, carried the rum and milk as far as Russell Street and emptied it precipitately into the gutter.

"I thought the rum would be a bit too strong for him," said Limpet, supporting the curate on one side. "He should have had beer."

Cripps, helping to hold the sufferer on the other side, said that what he really should have had was a good stiff nobbler of whisky; but they were both unanimous in assuring the curate that he would be better when he got it all up.

The curate, between gasps, said he thought so, too, but if they had no objection, he would not have anything to drink just then, as, somehow, he didn't feel inclined for it.

"Never mind," said Cripps, "the dinner will set you right."

The curate, foreboding the worst, followed them to the Sign of the Sixpence, where he had sufficient presence of mind to negative Cripps's order of steak-and-kidney pudding for three, and substitute a humble request for roast mutton. Cripps was optimistic of the roast mutton, and he induced the curate to take Worcester sauce with it, as having certain soothing qualities to an afflicted stomach.

They went and lay in the Fitzroy Gardens after dinner, and the curate eventually began to feel a trifle better. As his qualms decreased, and the roast mutton showed a reasonable possibility of staying where it was, he livened up sufficiently to jest with Cripps over the restorative effects of rum and milk. On the way back to the studio he bought a packet

of cigarettes, and when Miss Gimblet, in a large picture hat, was discovered waiting for them on the stairs, his voice was loudest in acclaiming the occasion festive. They went, the four of them, led by Limpet, to a small cavernous wine-shop in an arcade, sempiternally lit by gas, where there were dingy mirrors all round, and the curate saw himself entering with Miss Gimblet from four different directions at once.

Here Limpet advised the claret, which was brought by a stout German, paid for by the curate, and pronounced excellent by the company. Limpet, who had discovered the wine-shop, was as industrious in setting forth its praises as if he owned it, and the curate, who was squeezed up in a corner close to Miss Gimblet, was willing to compare it with Paradise, to the disadvantage of Paradise.

If you are seeing life, a mirror is a vastly exhilarating accessory, especially if you are squeezed up close to a charming young girl and are gifted with sufficient courage to squeeze her hand beneath the table.

They stayed in that dingy little saloon all the afternoon, and filled the place with smoke and conversation, and after the third round of glasses, singing was introduced by Cripps and Limpet, with

considerable effect, till the stout German put his head round the door and was understood to ask for "Nod zo much shouden."

"He's a very decent chap," said Cripps. "We won't have any more singing, but I'll give you a character impersonation entitled, 'The Drunk, the Lobster, and the Last Tram.' "

The curate, squeezing Miss Gimblet's hand exultantly, thought he had never seen a more superb piece of humour. Then Cripps and Limpet proceeded to act an entire melodrama introducing fifteen different characters and the British Army; but in the fourth act, when the heroine, Limpet, was being drowned in the old mill-pond, the stout German again registered an objection to the "shouden," so they had one more glass all round, for the good of the house, Cripps said, because the stout German was really such a decent chap.

It was dusk when they emerged from the sempiternal wine-shop, and at Cripps's suggestion they went to dinner to a dingy little tea-and-toast restaurant in Elizabeth Street, where Cripps said you got a first-rate grill for sixpence.

The establishment appeared to be run entirely by a morose wench in blue apron, but, when you had leisure to examine the place, you discovered a

stout but silent man secreted behind a little red curtain, whose sole employment appeared to be the passing out of small brown teapots from some secret store when such were required of him by the morose wench, who might have been his daughter, or who might have only been engaged that day, her manner of demanding the teapots affording no clue whatever in either case.

The party ordered grilled steak for four, with an extra egg for Miss Gimblet, who received the delicate tribute condescendingly, while Cripps and Limpet were very particular in having theirs underdone, with potatoes, if possible, and toast to follow.

They both appeared considerably at home in the establishment, Cripps wearing a variegated paper fly-catcher on his head during the meal, and Limpet complaining bitterly about the meagre allowance of butter, a circumstance which caused the curate to blush for him. But it was a delightful meal, and the curate developed a most uproarious laugh, a latent accomplishment which had hitherto suffered from repression.

He was now calling Miss Gimblet "Florrie," and had just made himself extremely popular by ordering pastry all round, to finish off with, when a

sudden and awful suspicion caused him almost to turn pale.

He searched himself through all his pockets and turned a frantic eye on Cripps.

"What's the matter?" inquired that gentleman, suspecting a return of the rum and milk symptoms.

"Have you any money?" inquired the curate in a horror-stricken voice.

"Not a cent," said Cripps promptly.

The curate looked round on the company, and gulped a couple of times feverishly.

"I—I spent my last shilling at the wine-shop," he said.

"Sure you haven't anything else left?" asked Cripps.

"Not here," said the curate hopelessly. "I've got more at the Coffee Palace, of course——"

"Then that's all right," said Cripps cheerfully. "Just run back and get enough to pay for dinner. We'll wait here for you."

The curate seized his hat, and with an incoherent apology to the gentleman behind the red curtain, fled into the night. He ran all the way to the Coffee Palace, took a sovereign from his store, and ran all the way back.

He arrived, fearfully out of breath, and was

hailed enthusiastically by the company, who were leisurely finishing up the pastry, and in no wise disconcerted at their position.

"We could have strapped it up, anyhow," said Cripps optimistically; "but it's just as well to pay, if you have the money; it makes your name good for another time."

Without disputing this profound reflection, the curate paid, and was so vastly relieved at getting the difficulty over, that on Limpet's advice, he purchased a half-gallon jar of chablis, at two and twopence, which they carried exultantly back to Cripps's rooms.

It was half-past two in the morning before the curate reached his bed in the Coffee Palace, but then he sat for two hours in the Gardens with Florrie, and what is time to a man engaged in the grand passion of his existence. He gave the boots at the Coffee Palace a shilling when that official found his key for him, and having put his boots carefully in the bag with his shirts, and placed his socks outside to be cleaned for the morning, he went to bed in a state of great mental exultation, and slept soundly.

CHAPTER VIII

OUT-DOOR SKETCHING

NEXT morning there was a trifling fall in the barometer of his enthusiasm. His total wealth in hand was exactly three pounds sixteen shillings and tenpence, and out of that he had to pay his board bill and his fare to Murumberee. The boots and one of the shirts would have to go for the present, but with strict economy he might manage the walking-stick. One thing was clear. He must go no more to Cripps's studio, except perhaps once to say good-bye, and perhaps have a parting drink. It would be his last chance of a drink, he thought gloomily, so he might as well have it. Full of this resolution and a firm determination to visit Uncle Tinfish without delay, he smoked a secret cigarette and went down to breakfast.

The boots winked at him on the stairs, in a manner that suggested a secret understanding. It was very gratifying, of course, but he had a twinge of

uneasiness when he thought of the possibility of Uncle Tinfish making inquiries after him and learning, perchance, that half-past two was his nephew's usual hour for retiring.

However, he would negative any possibility of such inquiries by calling on Uncle Tinfish immediately after breakfast. Immediately after breakfast, therefore, he sallied out into Collins Street, and as the main sewer was up, and a number of workmen were busy with it, he stopped to watch them. Half an hour later he was still watching them, and when at length he did tear himself away, the first person he met was Quin. That saturnine person at once went into a state of silent ecstasy, and having gloated down on the curate for a considerable time, shook him warmly by the hand, and expressed a hope that he was well. The curate politely reassured the tall man on this point, and they walked as far as Flinders Street together.

In the cold light of day, the curate did not feel entirely at his ease in the presence of Quin. There was something altogether too saturnine in the gleam of his spectacles, and he had a disconcerting habit of playing upon the curate's name, as on a pipe, and squeezing it into all manner of peculiar shapes. In the space of some ten minutes or so, he

evolved no less than six distinct variations—from Bools, Bowels, Bowley, Bowling, Dowling, to Bunion, but how he managed to reconcile "Bunion" with his conscience the curate could not conceive.

He informed the curate that he had been destined for the Church himself, but that he had never been able to afford the clothes. "The hat," he said, "might have been managed, and the trousers could have been lent, but the coat, Mr Bunion, was beyond our means." Which piece of information being delivered in a very grave voice, and a confidential manner, the curate had, perforce, to accept; but inwardly he had a profound suspicion that the tall man was paltering with the truth.

Quin then took him by the arm, and without a word, hurried into a hotel, where they had two beers, which the curate paid for before he quite knew what he was doing. The tall man then led him out again, made him a present of two soda biscuits, which he had taken from the bar, shook him warmly by the hand, and left him standing on the corner in a state of blank amazement over the nature of the gift and wondering whether he ought to eat it, or drop it in the gutter. He compromised at length by putting the biscuits in his pocket, and

finding himself close to Clinks's Chambers, he decided to drop in on Cripps for five minutes or so before calling on Uncle Tinfish.

But here there was a slight hitch in this arrangement. Cripps was out, and there was nothing on the door to indicate when he would be back. The curate felt suddenly disconsolate as he found himself in the street again, and determined to try and find Limpet's room. He remembered Limpet saying that it was in William Street, so he went to William Street, and walked up and down for an hour, without seeing any signs of Limpet.

A second journey to Clinks's Chambers, with the same result, left him more depressed than ever, so he went and watched sewerage operations. It was not particularly interesting, but there seemed absolutely nothing else to do. It served also as an excuse for not going to see Uncle Tinfish, whom he made a mental resolution to look up during the afternoon.

As the dinner hour approached, he livened up a little, and made for the sixpenny hash house in Bourke Street, where he felt sure he would discover either Cripps or Limpet, but he had reached the end of the steak-and-kidney pudding, and was feeling forlorn and ill at ease among the other diners,

who struck him as being of a very ferocious class of feeders in general, without any signs of either gentleman. He was just gloomily starting on the boiled jam roll when Partridge appeared, like a blessed vision. The curate hailed him with unaffected delight, advised the steak-and-kidney pudding as being particularly good that day, and asked after Cripps and Limpet.

"Oh, they've gone out sketching to Alphington, with the MacQuibble," said Partridge. "I couldn't go myself, as I happened to have some work to do. We might go out later, if you feel inclined."

The curate cordially expressed his willingness to go, and when they had finished dinner, which was rather prolonged because Partridge insisted on interrupting himself at intervals, to rough out little compositions on the tablecloth with a pencil, in explanation of certain pictures, for the curate's benefit. A pencil, in fact, was an inevitable adjunct to conversation with Partridge, for, when words failed him, which they frequently did, and gesticulations were powerless to express the nature of his thought, out came a pencil, or a piece of charcoal, and he drew it hurriedly on whatever available surface came handiest, usually the wall-paper, or the top of a table. On the way down to the

station, in fact, he left no less than five of these little mementoes on the walls of houses, and once he was constrained to illustrate an explanation on the pavement. It was an interesting peculiarity, but aroused a trifle too much popular curiosity for the curate's peace of mind. Otherwise, Partridge discovered himself to be an amiable creature, with a disconcerting habit of occasionally muddling himself up with ethical questions of extreme profundity, sandwiched in between technicalities of Art, and the ordinary affairs of life, a process which was inclined to be a trifle confusing to the lay mind. His particular brand of Art, it appeared, was the Decorative Symbolical, or Grandly Moral, a singularly fitting conjunction with his manner of earning a living, which was the illustrating of a pornographic sporting paper, just as Cripps, who yearned to paint the luxuriously sinful, was constrained to design Sunday school tracts, to earn his daily feed at the hash foundry.

Partridge's mind, in fact, appeared to be in a state of eruption, in which all sorts of half-baked ideas were constantly coming to the surface, and disappearing again before he, or anybody else, had time to grasp their significance.

As soon as they were seated in the second-class

smoking compartment of the train for Alphington, he opened out on the curate on the subject of a picture entitled the "Tree of Knowledge."

"The idea, an apple tree, you know," he said, "with a crowd of chaps eating the windfalls, some others have climbed the tree, you know; and I put some with harps, and palettes, and all that. I made them decorative. I had some of these little what-d'yer-call-'em men—gnomes, yes, gnomes—eating away at the roots. Astrology, and all that. There is a decorative border all round, with a monk burning books, and some blindfolded figures struggling with brambles, and a figure of a chap reading, with Death holding the book. Symbolic, you know," he added apologetically.

"On the other side," went on Partridge, after a pause, "there were some reclining figures, asleep—some playing on pipes, and a chap walking, with women dancing about with bottles"—he mechanically took out a stump of pencil, and finding no available space whatever in the carriage to draw on, roughed out a hasty sketch in the atmosphere. "Like that," he said, when it was finished. "Then there was a bishop with a mitre keeping back the people from the Well of Truth—d'you know what?" he added, breaking off suddenly and

assuming a ferocious expression. "If I had my way I'd hang every dam' parson in the universe!"

The curate was so upset at this drastic statement that he could only blink feebly at Partridge, who, to do him justice, was quite oblivious to the curate's agitation.

"What do they do in the South Seas?" he went on, clapping the curate on the knee. "They make the natives wear clothes! It's enough to drive a man mad," added Partridge, puffing fiercely at his pipe, as though a hasty consumption of tobacco was the only possibility of keeping a man sane.

"They say the nude's immoral," he went on presently, in connection with some process of thought to which he failed to supply the missing links. "You put stockings in it, and you'll see the difference. But these parsons would like to criminalize all the natural subjects."

He smoked a moment over this remark with a pleased expression, as though he were rather surprised at his own cleverness in evolving it. Then he said with great gravity:

"The book for you to read"—here he tapped the curate on the knee, to impress him with the importance of what was coming—"is *Mademoiselle de Maupin*."

The curate blinked afresh over this title, which he had entirely failed to catch.

"Absolutely," said Partridge emphatically, "the finest—book—ever—written. There isn't a finer book," went on Partridge, "in the universe. You read it,"—his enthusiasm was now tremendous—"you read it, and it'll knock you absolutely balmy."

Under the severe mental effort of trying to absorb this conversation, the curate looked as if he had already been knocked into that enviable frame of mind, and he was considerably relieved when Partridge said suddenly, "We get out here," and so found himself standing in a pleasant wayside station, with the summer smell of yellow gorse in the air.

Partridge led the way across the fields in the direction of the river. Here there was an old overgrown garden, a favourite resort of the Art Students, and here they found Cripps, Limpet, and the MacQuibble, in the heat of a vociferously technical argument. The subject of discussion, it appeared, was the atmospheric colouring of the far distance, which Cripps said was hot, and which the MacQuibble said was cold, and which Limpet had painted in what appeared to the curate's untrained eyesight as alternate streaks of red and purple.

Limpet said the effect of this method was to give "Vibration," an explanation which left the curate hopelessly befogged. Partridge, without joining in the discussion, sat down by a small shrub and commenced to make a pencil study of it with extreme accuracy. He informed the curate that he preferred to treat nature decoratively, a statement that at once called down on him the contempt of the MacQuibble.

"There are no lines in Natur—r—re," was his war cry, and certainly, there were no such defects in the MacQuibble method of treating the subject, as the curate modestly noted after contemplating that gentleman's efforts, and with the utmost confusion of mind trying to locate a large red smudge in the foreground, which the MacQuibble said was the hot note that gave the blues a chance.

The curate, on receiving this piece of information, retired to the rear of the party, and lay down in the shade. He had a fear that if he stayed too near the party he might be led to hopelessly betray his utter incomprehensibility as to what they were doing.

But it was pleasant in the shade, and for the first time in his life he had discovered perfect peace of mind. Though he knew it not, the subtle spirit of

vagabondage had taken possession of his soul, and even of his hat, which seemed suddenly to have lost its original respectability, and acquired an air of dissoluteness.

He watched the art students work, and listened to them wrangle, and thought how pleasant was their lot. Partridge had got as far as one small twig with eight leaves on it, and he seemed extremely pleased with this result of his labours.

"There's a pub up the road," he said, looking at the curate, "where the beer's grand."

The curate took the hint at once, and Limpet volunteering to show him the way, they went down the road to the pub where the beer was grand, and bought four bottles of it.

This effectually finished work for the afternoon, though Partridge insisted on drawing three more leaves and half a stem before putting up his sketch book.

The return to town, dinner at the restaurant, and the retirement for the evening to the wine-shop in the Arcade, where by turns conversational, argumentative, and occasionally musical, they spent an evening which, to the curate's mind, at least, was altogether pleasant. There was no suggestion in that organ of the necessity of visiting Uncle Tin-

fish. Nor did that depressing relative figure at all prominently during the next day, most of which the curate spent in the Fitzroy Gardens with Miss Gimblet, nor the next, which he spent in exactly the same way, save that in the evening he yielded to Miss Gimblet's entreaties and had tea in the small back parlour of Miss Gimblet's home, in company with Miss Gimblet's mother, to whom the curate was deferential to the last degree. In fact, the soft side of the road, it appeared, led through the Fitzroy Gardens to Miss Gimblet's home, and if Uncle Tinfish had been Wisdom crying aloud in the streets, no man could have regarded him less than his nephew, the Rev. James Bowles.

For Wisdom, like Uncle Tinfish, could hardly be expected to countenance such idle loitering on the road that should have led to duty and Murumberee. That Goddess does not hover about the neophyte engaged in discovering the undeniable facts of life—her business is to attend the heart-ache and the stomach-ache that follow in the morning.

And a lifetime of twenty-two years, packed like an overloaded hawker's cart, with the second-hand goods of other people's mental back-yards, may be expected to react in the presence of those undeni-

able facts of life. For bare arms and bosoms are undeniable facts, even to people who have lost in seeing them too often the charm of surprise. There had been an interlude that had brought the curate into the presence of those specified facts with something of a shock, for, thumping confidently on Cripps's door he had been, contrary to custom, detained for a brief moment on the threshold.

"Just half a shake," Cripps had said, and after a brief remark, unintelligible to the curate, to somebody within, had added, "all right, you can come in now."

The curate, a trifle mystified, had entered. He had expected to find Limpet, but Limpet was not there. Nor was anybody else, for that matter. It was an impulse that caused him, hat in hand, to peer for a solution behind the screen.

"I—I—beg your pardon," was the remark that had been jerked out of him as he retreated in confusion.

A giggle from behind the screen acknowledged that there was some necessity for the curate's apology. Cripps, with a piece of charcoal stuck behind his ear, was making that periodical search for tobacco that marked the occasion one for relaxation.

"It's all right," he remarked. "Florrie's been sitting for that study. I've been having a go at it in charcoal."

He indicated the usual result of the art student at war with the conscientious nude. The languorously feminine was not so apparent as one might have desired. The bold attack of Cripps's had not conquered so much as inflicted the indignity of punishment.

But the curate's mind was not occupied with imperfections it may have exposed—the thing that demanded his attention was the fact that Miss Gimblet had just been posing like that in the presence of Cripps.

The fact fascinated, perturbed, and at the same time irritated him. His emotion was a more potent one than those days of Wesleyan training could account for as a Christian sense of shame.

It stung him to have thrust before him this statement in charcoal that Miss Gimblet's charms were on the market at the commercial value of one shilling an hour. And besides that, he was suddenly jealous, if not of Cripps, at least of the privileges that permitted him to buy those hidden charms for the base excuse of his calling.

"I'm—I'm afraid I'm interrupting you," he said, backing suddenly for the door.

"Not at all," said Cripps heartily. "We were due for a rest, anyway. Florrie's just going to make some tea."

Florrie came out from behind the screen, smiling on the curate. She wore the remains of one of those cheap kimonos, secured casually with a hairpin. Her bare feet were thrust into an old pair of straw sandals—the property of Cripps.

The curate, vacillating at the door, began some sort of an apology, and sat down in the middle of it. Cripps lit his pipe and Miss Gimblet began to make tea.

In that apology for a civilized garment, her youthful humanity was frankly confessed. It estranged her to the curate. He pretended not to see her bare arms and neck, or to be aware that she had white ankles. Cripps's conception of the languorously sinful had demanded the removal of hairpins, and her hair kept getting in the way of her ministrations at the kerosene stove. The jingle of her bangles, and the gesture of her plump shoulder as she tossed it back, kept demanding the attention of the curate's mind. He paid but a distracted civility to the story that Cripps was

telling of his last interview with the printer of tracts.

"Brushed my hair up—told him my grandfather was the Reverend Ezekial Cripps, the celebrated preacher of the Gospel to the natives of the Limpopo River," said the owner of that name with gusto. The curate lost the immediate financial result of that piece of humour because Miss Gimblet was pouring out the tea with singularly effective round arms.

Then she handed round cups and sat down by the curate. And as she supped her tea she smiled discreetly at him over the brim.

And then she said, "Don't forget, Ma expects you to come to tea to-morrow," and her humanity was suddenly restored. There was clearly a place somewhere in the amenities of life for bare arms and necks and bosoms.

CHAPTER IX

RAISING THE WIND

MEANWHILE, Cripps and Limpet sat in the little sempiternally gas-lit wine-shop, and held an important conversation.

"He's a really decent chap," said Cripps, "and it's only a fair thing to give him a bit of a send-off —just the usual crowd, you know," he added airily; "a dozen or so wine, and a bit of supper, and a few girls."

"What girls?" demanded the practical Limpet.

"Well, there's Florrie, for one," said Cripps.

Limpet dismissed Florrie contemptuously.

"I know we can get her," he said. "What other ones can we get?"

Cripps closed one eye and appeared to run over in his mind a list of available ladies.

"Oh, well," he said at length, "we can let them stand over for the present. We'll tell Florrie to

fetch a couple of friends, and I fancy I can rake up a couple at a pinch."

Limpet was clearly going to air certain doubts over this arrangement, but Cripps turned the tide of his reflections by producing a pencil and a piece of paper with a business-like air, and jotting down an item at the top of it.

"Now, as to the wine," he said, fixing Limpet with a steady eye as though challenging the vast resources of his mind.

Limpet returned his friend's gaze, and a slight frown contracted his brow.

"Claret," he said at length, "one dozen."

"At——" said Cripps, poising the pencil.

"A shilling," said Limpet, frowning.

"Twelve bob," said Cripps, jotting down the item under the general heading of "Drinks."

"Hock," went on Limpet, with the voice of a seer, "half a dozen.

"At ninepence," he added.

"Is four and sixpence," said Cripps, with gusto.

"Port," began Limpet.

"For the ladies," interposed Cripps.

"At one and three," said Limpet austerely. "Four bottles——"

Cripps objected. "There's no sense in giving women good wine," he said. "They can't appreciate it. What do you say to getting a half-gallon jar of that cheap muscat, and putting it into port bottles—they'll never know the difference?"

Limpet pondered this proposition a moment, and appeared to find it reasonable.

"And we'll need a bottle of rum to finish off with," he added. "Put that down, will you?"

Cripps put it down at three and nine.

"Now," he said, "for the supper."

On this subject the vast resources of Limpet's mind were a trifle at fault, for all they evolved after a period of prolonged thought was "Sardines."

"Sardines!" said Cripps contemptuously. "We can't make a supper entirely off sardines. Think of something else."

Limpet, again bringing the powerful engine of his mind to bear on the subject, evolved "Prawns."

Cripps dismissed prawns with equal contempt, and, challenged at length by Limpet, dashed off a few suggestions of his own under the general head of "Supper."

"Fowls," he said, reading with gusto, as he wrote. "Two, seven bob—ham, four pounds, four

and six—beef and tongue, three and six—pickled onions, sixpence—salad, a bob—and black coffee, say a quid altogether. How's that?"

Limpet made a determined effort to rule out "Fowls," and substitute "Lobsters," but Cripps would not hear of it.

"Must have fowls," he said firmly. "It's *the* thing; but you can have a lobster," he added, "as an extra, if you're so struck on it."

So one lobster, as an extra, at one and sixpence, was added to the menu, and Limpet gave his august approval to the rest of the items.

"There!" said Cripps, going over the list again to make sure that nothing had been omitted. "Three ten, or four quid will about cover it—say four ten—I think we can leave it at four ten, to be exact."

To be strictly exact, they left it at that till four o'clock on the day of the great event, and then, seated in Cripps's studio, they awoke in a panic to the urgency of the situation.

"This'll never do," ejaculated Cripps, helplessly regarding the total capital in hand, which amounted to one and ninepence. "Something must be done at once."

'Immediately," said Limpet, hastily lighting

his pipe, as though that were obviously one of the first things to be done.

"How much did we say we needed?" asked Cripps anxiously.

"Four pounds ten," said Limpet, regarding his friend fixedly.

Cripps sprang up, and made a hasty tour of the room, looking anxiously about, as though it were barely possible he had mislaid four pounds ten in a tobacco tin, and hoped to find it.

"Look here," he said firmly—"it's no use paltering with the question any longer—that money *must* be found, and at once!"

"I know that, dammit," shouted Limpet in a sudden burst of passion. "You don't expect to find it on me, do you?"

Cripps's air of resolution melted, and he became desperate again. He went feverishly through all his pockets, with the persistency of despair, but all he managed to produce was his pipe, which he put in his mouth.

"Lend me some tobacco, will you?" he said gloomily, "I haven't a fill left."

Limpet handed out a very small plug with a very ill grace, and Cripps cut it in a sort of desperation.

The process seemed to relieve the tension of his mind, and he became a trifle brisker.

"Now," he said, handing Limpet back the plug considerably reduced, "let us consider the thing fairly. The money, as I said, must be raised"—he arrested another burst of passion from Limpet with an impressive gesture, and added—"or borrowed."

"Who off?" demanded Limpet.

"That's the question," said Cripps.

Limpet looked sourly about him, and his eye rested on the illustrated texts, which were littered about the table, exactly as Cripps had left them when he went out to dine with the curate a week ago.

"What about them?" he asked.

"They aren't finished," said Cripps. "There's four more to do, and I've already drawn something on account for those."

"Four," said Limpet. "It won't take you long to knock off four—go on, get to work and finish them."

Cripps scowled at the drawings as though he hated them bitterly. Then he scowled at Limpet.

"What are *you* going to do?" he demanded at length.

"Oh, I'll go round and see if I can borrow a few bob off Partridge," said Limpet encouragingly. "You can be finishing them off while I'm away."

Cripps went on scowling for a while, and then said resentfully, "All right, but it'll spoil my evening, having to work like this."

He seized a pen, dashed himself into his chair, and upset the ink bottle all in one act. The ink spread out over the work, and completely obliterated Isaiah in his top-hat, besides hopelessly ruining the Tower of Babel, and Moses in the check trousers.

In his first frenzy of rage over this misfortune, Cripps cast the drawings and the ink bottle, and several other articles generously about the room, and dashed the pen after them.

Some of the ink went on the wall, and some on a conscientious nude, and some of it went on Limpet's countenance.

The burst of profanity from Limpet that greeted this exploit was something more than merely formal, and arrested Cripps in the act of stamping on the drawings.

"What the deuce are you roaring about?" he shouted. "A bit of ink on your face won't hurt you."

"It ain't me face," shouted Limpet, "it's me shirt—I had it clean on to-day—look at it!"

Cripps refused to look at Limpet's shirt. "Look at that!" he shouted, snatching up the drawing and thrusting it vigorously under Limpet's nose. There was still a considerable residue of wet ink on that drawing, and the immediate result of Cripps's action was two fresh blobs on Limpet's shirt-front.

Cripps's studio was not large enough to contain the bursting nature of Limpet's rage at this apparently wanton act. He went quite demented, dashing here and there, and throwing Cripps's furniture about in impotent vengeance for his ruined shirt.

Then in the midst of his fury he suddenly struck an appearance of appalling calm, renounced any intention of being present at the night's festivities, and fled from the room.

Cripps, bewildered at his friend's Bedlamite departure, stood staring helplessly after him with the ruined picture of Isaiah in his hand.

This, when he discovered it, he cast pettishly away and sank gloomily into a chair. He wasted some valuable time cursing Limpet, and the occasion, and looking for a fill of tobacco.

Then he took his hat, and started out to look for four pounds ten.

In the street he was struck with a lyrical conviction that if he walked straight up Collins Street, without removing his eyes from the gutter, he would find a sovereign.

He found eight match-box heads that looked like sovereigns, and three tobacco tags that looked like sixpences. Then, being at the top of Collins Street, he went to the Treasury Hotel, in the hope of meeting a friend who worked in the Treasury Buildings.

The friend, it appeared, had just that minute gone out. Cripps ran all the way down Little Collins Street in the hope of catching him coming down. This brought him back to the Treasury Hotel again, but he passed on, and inquired at the "White Hart."

There he received the pleasing information that his friend, the civil servant, had just that moment departed. Cripps ran down Bourke Street this time and up Little Collins Street, and arrived breathless at the Treasury Hotel.

"Why, he was here just after you left!" said the barman. "He can't be five minutes gone."

It was six o'clock, and Cripps fled from the Treasury Hotel like a man bereft of hope. He did Bourke Street in record time and tore up six flights

of stairs in search of Partridge, but Partridge was out. Cripps left a frenzied appeal on the door for help, and ran to a printer's in Lonsdale Street, but the printer with devilish cunning had gone for the night. Cripps drifted back into Bourke Street, and gave up hope. He stood for a long time in front of a wine and spirit shop window, and stared long and desperately at the array of bottles, as a soul on the outer darkness might stare in at the barred gates of Paradise.

The spectacle seemed to revive him a little, and presently he set off briskly down Bourke Street. His destination this time was a small tobacconist's shop, sandwiched in between a Chinese laundry on one side and a tea and toast establishment on the other. A little farther down was a fur shop, and then a public house. On the pavement in front of the tobacconist's stood a little group, consisting of Partridge, two girls without hats, and a barber's lad with a stately coiffure of ginger hair. He, however, stood slightly apart from the others, and appeared to bend upon them an expression of gloomy hatred.

One of the girls hinted at a connection with the fur establishment lower down by a fur necklet which she was sewing as she stood, and the other—

who was a frowsy little girl with frizzy fair hair and china-blue eyes—seemed to hint at a considerable intimacy with Partridge, about whom she skirmished with frequent plunges and playful pushings into the gutter.

Cripps, now great with hope, abstracted Partridge hurriedly from the group, and passionately adjured him to produce a pound, or at least ten shillings, without delay.

Partridge went through the formality of searching his pockets, but he shook his head, and informed Cripps that it was Friday—Saturday, of course, was a different thing, but Friday——

"But I *must* have it," said Cripps, seizing hold of Partridge by the hand in his desperation. "I *must* have it at once. Don't you think you could manage to raise it somewhere—anywhere?" he added, gazing desperately about, as though in search of a convenient place for Partridge to begin operating on without delay. So anguished was his appearance, and so desperate his clutch, that the impressionable Partridge began to get agitated.

"I don't know, of course," he said, taking off his hat and agitating his lank hair with his fingers, "I might, if there's anything in it, she would—

considering it's me she ought to. Wait here while I ask her."

Leaving Cripps mystified but hopeful, he took the frizzy-haired little girl aside and whispered in her ear, making repeated and urgent motions in Cripps's direction with his thumb. The frizzy-haired girl appeared doubtful, and took counsel with the other girl, while the hirsute barber's lad hovered suspiciously in the rear. His proximity inviting criticism from the small girl, she at once called attention to the colour of his hair. The barber's lad, it appeared, was about to pass a professional judgment on her own, when he was dictatorially ordered by the fur-shop girl to hold what she called his "mug." The barber's lad, who in his unprofessional capacity was the slave of love, showed gloomy allegiance by returning to the shop, where he could be seen peering over the blind with every appearance of contemplating doing something unprofessional with a razor on his own windpipe.

Meanwhile, the financial negotiations on the pavement had resulted in the small girl's disappearance into the shop, followed by Partridge, who seemed suspiciously familiar with the interior of the establishment.

Without casting any particular aspersions on the honourable nature of Partridge's character, it occurred to Cripps that Partridge was always extremely well supplied with tobacco, but Partridge's reappearance, non-committal under the eye of the barber's lad, put an end to further speculations on the subject.

"Five bob," said Partridge, leading Cripps hurriedly round the corner. "It's all she could get out of the till."

Cripps, in a fervour of gratitude, wrung Partridge's hand.

"Fetch her along with you to-night," he said, and fled up Bourke Street.

With the two half-crowns making music with the original one and ninepence in his pocket, Cripps made straight for the nearest wine-shop. On the way he bethought himself of something, and called at Limpet's studio. Limpet was out, but with a deal of struggling he managed to screw himself through the fanlight, removing in that process the dust of many ages. Raking about in the dust he unearthed a large brass plaque, Limpet's most cherished possession, an immense Japanese umbrella, two cups, a glass, and a Japanese jar.

With these valuables he managed at length to

get safely through the fanlight, minus a trifling misfortune with the Japanese jar, which fell from on high and was smashed to atoms. Muttering breathless curses, Cripps collected as much of the Japanese jar as he could find, and hid the pieces in somebody else's dust box, and, with Limpet's belongings in an untidy bundle, departed hurriedly, like a burglar who had gone mad and stolen all the wrong things.

At the wine-shop, after a period of intense inward calculation, he purchased two half-gallon jars of claret, and one half-gallon of chablis, and with the unwieldy articles clutched in desperation on top of Limpet's belongings, he staggered at length into Clinks's Chambers, and, all unaided, set about the final preparations. It was a hot night, and the dust of Limpet's fanlight covered him like a garment, and streaked his countenance like a coal-heaver's. The philosophy of another age would have called peremptorily for a shower bath; not so Cripps's. His first thought was to get the wine bottled. He even sang a little as he worked, for his mind was at ease—the chief issue of the evening's enjoyment was safe. And if his guests drank not well or wisely, at least they would drink something.

CHAPTER X

A BOHEMIAN SUPPER

AS the hour of eight drew near, Cripps's activity became feverish. By means of a subtle alchemy, frequently employed by himself on such occasions, the three half-gallons of claret and chablis disappeared into a motley collection of bottles, also kept for such occasions, which now presented themselves in stately array on the table. A little sugar mixed with claret stood boldly forth as port, a little more sugar and claret brazened it out as burgundy, claret in its native bottle, chablis in its native jar, a little water mixed with chablis defying the experienced stomach as hock, a little claret mixed with chablis modestly announcing sherry. Cripps grew quite exultant as he surveyed the result of his labours. At least there was an air of reckless prodigality in their appearance, and the most fastidious guest would surely find the wine his soul craved for, at all events, in the label.

A hasty rinse out under the tap was all the attention he bestowed on the crockery; and five minutes' desperate energy with the broom resulted in most of the rubbish being deposited under the bed. The chairs were then hastily set forth, the bed disguised as a luxurious couch, the contents of the table temporarily deposited under the bed along with the rubbish, and Limpet's brass plaque arranged behind the bottles to show them off to better advantage. The Japanese umbrella baffled him considerably till he decided to suspend it from the gasalier, where it hung majestically, top downwards, within easy bumping distance of a moderately short man's head.

In his soul, Cripps yearned for red lamp-shades, dispersed about the room, but he had perforce to be contented with a cover of the *Bulletin* twisted into a cone, which made but a meagre display and commenced to curl up at once with the heat.

He had just completed these preparations with a perfunctory toilet at the tap, a clean shirt, and a hasty pull at the claret bottle, when the first guest arrived.

The guest was MacQuibble, accompanied by a tall, pale youth, who subsequently turned out to

be the MacQuibble's brother. The MacQuibble's excuse for bringing this relative was that he played upon the bassoon, but as he had forgotten to bring his instrument, he was dispatched at once to get it.

The MacQuibble, who seemed to regard his own appearance as the signal for the opening of the festivities, wished to begin at once with the claret, but Cripps firmly refused the claret.

"You can have a little hock," he said, and measured him out half a cupful.

The next to arrive was Quin. He insisted for some time on peering in at the door, and ejaculating—"Beautiful! Beautiful!" in evident admiration of the effect of the Japanese umbrella.

He then scrutinized the other evidences of preparation with relish, and fixed Cripps with his gleaming spectacles.

"What have you done with that poor dam' curate?" he inquired exultantly.

Cripps put the assumption implied in this question aside by remarking that the curate was all right, and requested Quin to come inside.

The saturnine one thereupon came in, and having softly filled himself a glass of claret, took a sip, and gently stroked his chin. "That poor dam'

curate!" he repeated benignly to himself, seeming to fall into an ecstasy of reflection on the phrase, an ecstasy which was certainly not lessened when the curate, in his position of guest of the evening, arrived, smoking a cigarette, and escorting Miss Gimblet and a female friend of hers, who seemed to entertain a strong suspicion that she was being lured into a trap.

"I shan't be able to stay very long," she said, evidently prepared for the worst by Cripps's fez.

"Take your hat off, child, and make yourself at home," said Miss Gimblet, with the gracious patronage of the initiated.

The friend, with her worst suspicions confirmed by the conscientious nude, thanked Miss Gimblet haughtily for nothing, and firmly refused to remove her hat.

She also refused to take a chair, or a glass of wine, and indulged in certain gloomy reflections, for Miss Gimblet's benefit, on the general character of artists' studios, as typified in the conscientious nude.

"I dunno what Alf would say if he on'y knew I come here," she said, giving Miss Gimblet to understand that she would hold her directly respon-

sible for the poignant nature of Alf's emotions, if he ever got to hear of it.

She at length allowed herself to be persuaded into taking the edge of a chair, where she sat in frigid defiance of the conscientious nude the entire evening.

Miss Gimblet, who seemed to feel that the presence of her friend called for something extra professional in the way of attitude, reclined on the bed and languidly smoked a cigarette. For the occasion she had done her frizzy hair *à la Merode*, and though graciously familiar to Cripps as host, to the MacQuibble, as a base and ordinary art student, she was merely distant.

The MacQuibble, had he been anything else but a base and ordinary art student, might have shown himself amenable to the nice distinction of Miss Gimblet's manner. As it was, he merely went on filling his pipe without taking the slightest notice of her. The presence of the curate he acknowledged by a slight frown. As a conscientious atheist, the MacQuibble could *not* reconcile it with his conscience to be polite to a curate, even though he happened to be the guest of the evening.

The curate, despite the brave show he made with the cigarette, was inwardly in a state of nervous

apprehension, partly due to the hopeless nature of his finances, and partly to an awful suspicion that, as guest of the evening, he would be called upon to make a speech.

He was glad to slink hurriedly into a back seat, where he presently found himself involved in a solemn and stately conversation with Quin on the weather.

Cripps, baffled by the uncompromising attitude of Miss Gimblet's friend, retired to the passage to wait for more guests. Miss Gimblet, reclining on the bed, smoked her cigarette.

Her friend, conceiving this act more or less in the light of a personal insult, closed her eyes at intervals, and gave a short bitter laugh. The MacQuibble, without taking the company into his confidence, filled a glass from the nearest bottle, which happened to be burgundy, and drank it off with relish. Quin and the curate talked gravely on. The subject was now the peculiar shape of curates' hats.

At this point the gravity of the proceedings was disturbed by the sounds of people coming upstairs, and Cripps's voice raised effusively in welcome. The curate, looking up nervously over Quin's head, was aware of a vision in a pale blue frock and an opera cloak, fervently escorted by Cripps and

partially obscured by a corpulent young man in a broad-brimmed felt hat.

While Cripps was assisting the vision to materialize by taking off the opera cloak, the corpulent young man advanced and shook hands with Quin. Besides the broad-brimmed hat, he was distinguished by a spotted tie, a pair of seedy check trousers rather baggy in the seat, and a cut-away coat, much too tight for him. He was smoking a cherry-wood pipe, and looked on the whole as if he had borrowed his outfit from the wardrobe of a third-rate dramatic company.

His conversation, which was a trifle inflated, hinted at the poetic. There was about him a certain bar-room grandiloquence that fitted easily with the shabby Bohemia of Cripps's studio, but which the curate, unused to the literary vocabulary, found exceedingly impressive.

"Why, Cuthbert," said Quin, shaking the corpulent young man by the hand, "you're getting fatter than ever."

The corpulent Cuthbert started dramatically and raked his fingers through his hair, which was a trifle too long.

"An insult!" he ejaculated; and then, catching sight of the curate, stopped short and stared fixedly,

"Well," he remarked, and appeared to resume a normal tone of voice with something of an effort, "Who've we got here, Quin?"

"The Rev. Bowles," said Quin, benignly regarding the abashed curate. "The Rev. Bowles," he added, "Mr Cuthbert Bunson, the celebrated poet."

The Celebrated Poet, after a brief struggle with his dignity, extended a hand.

"Well," he remarked, "you're the first parson I ever struck in Bohemia."

He subjected the curate to a searching scrutiny, intended to make him understand the incorrectness of his appearance in the charmed circle which he, Bunson, graced with his presence, and asked,

"Do you *do* anything?"

The curate, rightly conceiving this momentous inquiry to refer to a Practice of the Arts, was beginning a humble negative when Quin interrupted him.

"He preaches," said that gentleman with gravity.

Bunson's general attitude to life was above the normal, and he now betrayed an appearance of exaggerated horror.

"Not here!" he ejaculated.

"Anywhere," said the relentless Quin. He leaned across, and taking Bunson by the arm, added impressively:

"His mission here to-night, Bunson, is to save your soul."

For a moment the intolerable effrontery of such a base intention towards his soul almost reduced Bunson to a state of common indignation.

"Yes," went on Quin, "and if I know anything about the Reverend Bowles's determination of character, Bunson, *he'll have it!*"

The curate made a frantic exclamation of disavowal. He wished at all costs to assure Bunson that his presence there meant no such treacherous ambition, but in the face of Bunson's indignation, his explanation became incoherent. When he recovered sufficiently to articulate, Bunson had stalked away, and Quin was regarding him benignly, like an adjutant bird who had just concluded an interesting experiment on a worm.

Meanwhile, Cripps was hovering in a state of acute hospitality about Bunson's fair companion. He assisted her to a chair, hung her cloak and hat reverently on the screen, kicked the monochrome towel under the bed, and seated himself beside her. It was quite clear now from his attitude that he had

revised the occasion, and ruled out the Rev. Bowles as the guest of the evening.

Furthermore, his manner of introducing the rest of the company was so perfunctory as to suggest that he merely invited attention to their insignificance; and as he had forgotten Miss Gimblet's friend's name, and introduced Miss Gimblet merely as "Florrie," the ceremony was hardly a success as a means of exhilarating the general gaiety.

Bunson's girl was dressed with taste, her bangles were real gold. The way her hair was done was in itself a class distinction. So was the glance of innocent inquiry she cast at Miss Gimblet and her friend, a glance that priced with deadly accuracy their three-and-sixpenny shoes and their two-and-elevenpenny blouses.

It aroused Miss Gimblet and her friend to a state of burning hostility, which betrayed itself in a studied unconsciousness that such articles as silk blouses and sixteen-shilling kid shoes existed, though Miss Gimblet's friend, incapable of sustaining a complete rigidity of feature, pursed up her lips and glanced significantly at Miss Gimblet.

Cripps, quite unconscious that the social line was being drawn to strangulation point, rendered Miss

Gimblet speechless by taking the only cushion, on which she was reclining, and putting it in the rocking chair for Bunson's fair companion. That Bunson should have secured such a companion at all was certainly incompatible with Bunson's wardrobe, though Cripps was aware that Bunson, when casual invitations permitted, was addicted to playing the dissolute Bohemian in suburban drawing-rooms.

Bunson's companion, who appeared to have sat at Bunson's feet unbeknown to her mother, and absorbed some of Bunson's notions about Bohemia, sat on the rocking chair, and gazed delightedly about her.

"D'you know, Mr Cripps," she said, "I've always longed to see an artist's studio."

"No! no!" said Cripps, highly flattered.

"It must be so lovely to be an artist," went on Bunson's companion.

"Well," said Cripps, with an airy gesture at the stately apartment, "our philosophy here is red lamp-shades and cigarettes." This was one of Cripps's stock remarks for such occasions, and might be understood to hint at the almost Persian luxury that reigns in studios.

"How nice," said Bunson's companion, glanc-

ing involuntarily at the present emblem of Cripps's philosophy, which was steadily going black with the heat.

"In Bohemia," began Cripps hurriedly.

"The land of song," remarked Bunson, busy with a corkscrew.

"And unpaid bills," continued Cripps, ready with another of his threadbare remarks. "We live for the moment. Outside, people may make a problem of life. Here——"

"Here," said Bunson, taking the remark out of Cripps's mouth, "the only problem is art. We gild the lily," went on Bunson, waving the bottle. "We tint the rose. Nature may condescend to grow cabbages, we," said Bunson, pausing impressively.

"Eat them," suggested Quin from his corner.

"I speak of the figurative cabbages," said Bunson. "Figuratively, we *never* eat cabbages."

"We drink wine—when we can get it," remarked the MacQuibble irritably.

Bunson surrendered the bottle, and Cripps, to cover the hiatus caused by the MacQuibble's thirst, introduced him to Bunson's companion.

"And are *you* an artist, too?" inquired Bunson's companion, prepared to let a little surplus enthusiasm loose on the MacQuibble.

"MacQuibble's an impressionist," remarked Cripps a trifle apocryphally.

"I'm nothing of the sort," exclaimed the MacQuibble, hurling down the gage of battle at once.

"I paint what I see—I paint in tone. I see that hand," he thrust a hand against the wall, "darker in tone than the wall. I paint it so. That's not impressionism—that's realism. What's realism? Truth to nature. What's truth to nature? A—r—r—t!" announced the MacQuibble triumphantly.

"But the hand in shadow——" began Cripps incautiously.

The MacQuibble was down on him like a shot.

"The shadow is no deeper in tone than the hand," he vociferated. "Look at it. I defy you—regarding the hand as tone—to say the shadow is any deeper in tone than the hand!"

Cripps was about to contest this vital problem with a piece of charcoal, when he recollected himself in time, and turned to Bunson's companion.

"What wine do you prefer," he said, with a careless gesture at the array of bottles, "chablis—port—muscat? Muscat is the ladies' wine, I believe," he added.

Miss Muriel Swift, that was the name of Bunson's companion, admitting a feminine taste for

muscat, was graciously introduced to that label; Cripps favouring the claret himself; and Bunson, after a suspicious testing of the burgundy, decided for hock.

It was at this auspicious moment that Limpet made his appearance, followed by a degraded-looking lad without a collar, who had a fat pale face, and a fringe of damp hair that came over his eyebrows, and who, entering the room in a state of somnambulism, announced his presence to the company by a loud hiccup. Cripps, after a peremptory inspection of this youth, put down his glass and took Limpet hurriedly aside.

"What the devil did you want to bring the Oyster here for!" he demanded.

"I met him on the road up," answered Limpet, evidently considering that circumstance a sufficient explanation of the Oyster's presence.

"Very well, then," said Cripps, "you'll have to see that he keeps off the drink."

"Look after him yourself!" said Limpet, incensed. "You've been and taken my Japanese umbrella."

"I won't have him making an exhibition of himself," said Cripps, ignoring the irrelevancy. "It won't do."

"Why won't it do?" demanded Limpet.

"Because," said Cripps, lowering his voice, "Bunson's brought his girl here."

Limpet looked round cautiously and inspected Bunson's girl.

"Where'd Bunson get *her* from?" he inquired.

"How should I know?" said Cripps. "But you see what she is. It won't do for the Oyster to make a beast of himself. She couldn't bear it."

Limpet looked round again and made another important discovery.

"You've got my plaque," he said.

"Well, I had to get a few things," said Cripps indignantly. "You ought to be thankful I didn't have to pawn it."

Limpet held a brief consultation with his dignity, and gloomily regarded the array of bottles.

"Are they full?" he inquired at length.

"A gallon and a half," said Cripps, with dignity.

Limpet's eye wandered from the bottles to the company, in the throes of mental calculation.

"Have they all had a go yet?" he asked at length.

"No," said Cripps. "I haven't had time to serve them all. There is only Partridge to come now, so we may as well make a start."

"Oh, well," said Limpet, livening up, "I suppose I may as well begin serving them out."

He took off his coat, and moved briskly to the table. Cripps, joining the group round Bunson's companion, discovered the Oyster in the midst of a modest address to the company.

"Stonish!" he said, waving a flabby hand at them. "Whersh Crippsh?"

"Sit down, Oyster," said Cripps irritably.

"Crippsh," said the Oyster, betraying certain rudimentary signs of amazement in the direction of Cripps's fez, "Ladish preshen'."

"Yes, yes!" said Cripps. "Of course. Go and sit down."

"Crippsh," said the Oyster, still admonishing his host for having neglected to warn him of this momentous innovation, "shamed yer. Ladish preshen'!" Sadly shaking his head, the Oyster proceeded to make several aimless dives in the direction of his trouser pocket, from which he produced, like a feat of legerdemain, a very crumpled collar. Giving the company to understand by this that he would now make a fitting appearance in deference to the presence of Miss Swift, he made three abortive efforts to button the degraded object to his ear, but becoming somnambulistic in the process,

was led to a chair by Cripps, where he at once fell fast asleep.

"Just keep an eye on him, will you?" said Cripps to the curate, and went back to attend to Miss Swift.

The curate, having kept an eye on the slumbering Oyster long enough to discover that he wore no socks, was streaked all down one side of his face with some reddish paint, and had a half-smoked cigarette behind his ear, was attacked with a species of discontent. In fact, the more he thought about it, the more discontented he became. It was not so much the indignity of being asked to take charge of an intoxicated lad who smelt as if he had been slumbering some weeks in a brewery that annoyed him, it was the consciousness that he was being left out of it by the treacherous Cripps. Already his fancy was busy about the alluring Miss Swift, and his fancy, alas! was forming invidious comparisons with Miss Gimblet.

Meanwhile, the impassive Limpet was serving out the wine, giving to each guest his just measure, despite the disparity in shape and size of the drinking utensils.

Under ordinary circumstances, this would have been the signal for the beginning of festivities, but

Miss Swift's presence exercised a chastening influence on the company's habits.

Cripps, as a means of introducing a note of local colour, produced the long German pipe and commenced to fill it.

He was in the throes of lighting it, when there was a disturbance without in the passage, and a voice raised in argument.

"That's Partridge," said Cripps in explanation. "And he's got somebody with him, too."

From the tones of honourable expostulation in Partridge's voice, it was clear that somebody in the passage had expressed a suspicion regarding his intentions.

"I tell you you aren't asked to make a show of yourself in front of a lot of blokes," said the voice of Partridge.

Somebody in the passage laughed scornfully. A hurried conversation in an undertone followed, and the words—"Ketch me—lot o' wasters," hinted that somebody was casting aspersions on the characters of Partridge's friends.

Then said the voice of Partridge, raised in reason:

"Well, you needn't talk to them. Just come in an' have a glass of wine."

"You want to make me drunk," announced somebody fiercely.

Partridge was then understood to lose patience.

"Have some sense," he vociferated. "D'yer want to keep me messing about all night out here? Come in."

If the amount of scuffling and bumping that ensued on this burst of emotion meant anything, Partridge was trying to drag somebody out of the passage into the room. His appearance argued this suggestion to be reasonably correct, for he came in with a plunge, as though somebody who had been clinging to the doorway, had suddenly let go.

At the first glance, Cripps recognized the frizzy fair hair and the china-blue eyes, and a slight frown gathered on his brow. The bare thought that crossed his mind was that Partridge ought to have had more sense than to bring her.

Partridge, all unaware that the social status of Cripps's studio had been suddenly raised, propelled the unwilling Mag further into the room.

"There," he said, giving her a pat on the back. "Now you're all right. She thinks," he added genially to the company, "she thinks you're a lot of sharks up here, you know."

At that word his eye fell on Bunson's girl, and he became instantly abashed.

He made a feint of greeting the MacQuibble, and retired in disorder to the table, where he hurriedly filled a glass of wine.

The situation might have been awkward but for Cripps's masterly handling of it.

"Just look after her, will you?" he said to Limpet, and sat down again.

Limpet, in his character of the de-personalized butler, dispassionate of such conventions as gold bangles and opera cloaks, at once poured out and presented Mag with a jam-jar of wine.

Mag instantly fell into a paroxysm of defiance.

"You mind who yer arskin' to have a glass of wine," she said, backing hurriedly to the door, where she dared Limpet with her eye. As Limpet made no further overtures of a suspicious nature, beyond tossing off the contents of the jam-jar with relish, as a hint that she had missed something really good by refusing it, she became a trifle more composed, and even edged a little into the room with covert curiosity.

CHAPTER XI

STOLEN FRUITS ARE SWEETEST

MEANWHILE Cripps, in sycophantic attendance on Bunson's girl, let the party take care of itself. Round her he drew a conversational ring, from which, in the fervour of his adoration, he would have even excluded Bunson himself. In fact, his efforts in this direction became so apparent, that the airy and outward semblance of Bunson the Bohemian began to peel off, betraying a less gracious but more human Bunson underneath.

Jibes now insinuated themselves into the conversation thinly disguised as jests. Personalities of a pressing nature began to obscure the gracious badinage of wit, till presently the atmosphere about the sacred presence of Bunson's girl was electric with the baser passions.

Miss Swift, by no means unaware of the effect of her distracting presence, smiled serenely on Cripps and on Bunson alike, but withal a trifle more often

and serenely on Cripps than the bursting Bunson could bear.

Cripps, bereft at length by these siren smiles of

all decency as Bunson's friend and host, became hectic in his gaiety at Bunson's expense. He certainly made himself very entertaining to Bunson's

girl; but he went too far in telling the story of Bunson's pink pyjamas, and how he was discovered in those degraded garments by a lady visitor in the act of washing his only shirt.

Bunson rose, and his demeanour was such that, for the moment, the company had an impression that he was going to hurl himself at Cripps, but with a mighty effort he sat down again, and began to reef in his anger. In the process of doing this he sneered, openly and offensively, a sneer that took in Cripps, and Miss Swift, and leaked a little over on to the company as well. Miss Swift being then in the act of complacently sipping her wine, Bunson took the company a little more into his confidence regarding the state of his emotions.

"I wouldn't advise you to drink too much of that muck," he said to Miss Swift.

"It's—it's very nice," said the lady hardily, to cover Cripps's confusion, which was apparent.

Bunson laughed scornfully.

"You won't think so to-morrow," he said. "The usual old one and three a gallon, I suppose?" he added to Cripps.

"Liar!" said Cripps, with desperate gaiety. "I never pay less than two and threepence, never!"

Fortunately, at this moment the Oyster made an

astounding discovery. He had been awake for some time, mistily regarding the curate. Now he rose suddenly to his feet, burning with anxiety to impart his discovery to the company.

"What's the matter?" demanded Cripps, in reference to the Oyster's exhibition of mental agitation.

The Oyster gesticulated frantically at Cripps, at the curate, and at the company. Then articulation returned to him with a rush.

"A parson!" he ejaculated.

"Yes, yes!" said Cripps, after a hasty glance at the curate. "That's all right—sit down, Oyster."

"A parson!" vociferated the Oyster, amazed at the company's apathy to this astounding presence.

Cripps rose and put the Oyster back into his chair in an untidy heap.

"It's all right, Oyster," he said reassuringly, "it's a friend of mine."

The Oyster stared frenziedly at Cripps, then at the curate. He made an effort to speak, to demand further light on this mystery, but the situation was clearly too much for him. His eye wandered—it became vacant—then it closed. He collapsed into his chair, and appeared to slumber suddenly.

Released from further responsibility on his be-

half, Cripps went back to his chair, and the curate, who had retired as far as possible behind Miss Gimblet during the Oyster's demonstration, came feebly into view again. The Oyster still remaining in a state of torpor, he became a little more composed, and resumed his mood of discontent. Cripps still showed no signs of including him in the charmed circle graced by himself and Bunson's girl. There was some form of gaiety going on at the far end of the room, between the MacQuibble, Limpet, and Partridge, in which the MacQuibble would be seen occasionally brandishing the shinbone of the skeleton in argument; but they were too far off for the curate's benefit, and veiled in the smoke of their own pipes.

Miss Gimblet and her friend, despite a brave show of aloofness, were clearly depressed, and received what efforts the curate made at conversation with disdain.

The curate ruminated on this darkly, and presently his depression took a more tangible form. He was a ruined man. This sudden conviction grew abnormally. He was lost; financially and spiritually he was a broken creature. In some inexplicable way Cripps's present perfidy seemed to make this belated fact clear. Had it been in his mind to rely

on the treacherous Cripps for a solution of the future? Had he even considered the possibility of deserting the profession chosen for him by Fate and Uncle Tinfish? Adrift on his thoughts, he gazed helplessly about him. Limpet, in the act of uncorking a fresh bottle, caught his eye. He rose hurriedly, and had his glass filled. Then, in defiance of Cripps, he took a bottle from the table, and retired with it to his chair.

Bunson, for other motives, had also been assiduously at the bottle, a process that considerably assisted in removing the outer shell of Bunson the Bohemian.

The curate, even in his own despondency, had been aware of Bunson tossing off his wine with deadly precision. He had dimly noted the drama of Bunson's gesture in handing his glass to Limpet to be refilled. Then, out of a burst of chatter, he had heard Bunson making some offensively personal inquiries about a pair of boots, which he did not scruple to openly hint that Cripps had stolen. Cripps, as far as the curate could see, was not overwhelmed by this disclosure. He even made these boots the subject of a species of humour that clearly amused Miss Swift. It was to save Bunson, it appeared, from a fatal mesalliance that he had

taken the boots, which he described as a cast-off pair of Bunson's landlady, an aged lady who had given them to Bunson as a love gift.

This injurious explanation dethroned the remainder of Bunson's dignity entirely. It extracted from him the unwisdom of a furious denial of the story. In his frantic anxiety to convince Miss Swift that he was incapable of wearing the cast-off boots of an aged landlady, he commenced to shout, and in the act of shouting, he was so misguided as to attempt to drink, the total result of his effort being a paroxysm of coughing, from which he emerged in an abnormal state of the sulks, and refused to have anything more to say about the question. So Cripps had it all his own way for a while, and at once keyed the conversation with Miss Swift down to such a low tone as to effectively exclude anybody else participating in it.

Meanwhile, the curate was steadily working his way through the contents of the bottle, a process from which he began to emerge in a distinctly social frame of mind. He found himself presently at the table, warmly clinking glasses with Limpet. The immediate presence of Miss Swift did not embarrass him. He even glanced at her occasionally, coat unbuttoned, glass in hand, catching a mental pic-

ture of himself in an extremely gallant attitude. He felt that Miss Gimblet's eye was on him, too, but he avoided looking in her direction. Even the proximity of Cuthbert Bunson, the celebrated poet, scowling at his very elbow, did not disconcert him. The celebrated poet, in fact, finding his view of the perfidious pair cut off by the curate's elbow, not only scowled *at* it, but in order to further observe their perfidy, was forced to scowl *round* it, a species of peep show that further stimulated Cripps's fatal sense of humour.

"When you've finished making a damned ass of yourself," said the enraged Bunson, coming out, at Cripps's request, from behind his face, "I'd like to know when we're going to have supper."

It was a poignant thrust, and it hit Cripps in the region of his vanity.

"We expect this sort of thing from Bunson," he said hurriedly. "It's owing to his inordinate craving for food."

"If it's the usual old saveloy and hot potato from the coffee stall," went on the relentless Bunson, "we don't want it."

"Oh, no!" said Cripps, with desperate humour, "I've arranged to have it sent in from the Vienna Café."

At the first mention of supper there was some stamping from the lower end of the room, and an energetic display of the shin-bone by the MacQuibble, who now brought it forward on a plate.

"Yes! I suppose that's about all Cripps's notion of a supper amounts to," said Bunson, throwing himself back contemptuously in his chair. "You may as well own up," he added to the nonplussed Cripps, "you haven't got a blooming thing to eat in the place."

Cripps bit his finger-nails and scowled covertly at Bunson. Without even the prospect of a saveloy supper to finish up with, his confident assumption of the gay host was a hollow mockery. Even Miss Swift's assurance that she seldom ate supper could not be accepted with dignity. Not to produce supper, he felt, would be a disaster. He rose, stung by a desperate resolve.

"All right," he said, "you wait. I'm going out to get it."

With that, he dashed forth, wearing his fez, leaving the company to draw what conclusions it liked from his hurried departure.

He was gone some considerable time, long enough for the company to become extremely unsettled by his absence. Bunson had at once seized

the opportunity to have it out with Miss Swift in a furious undertone. From the disdainful manner in which Miss Swift managed her bangles and arranged her hair, she appeared to be assisting Bunson to have it out as far as possible. Miss Gimblet and her friend spoke audibly of going home. The curate, at Quin's request, had another glass of wine. Limpet, pursuing the functions of his high office, took stock of the contents of the bottles, a fortunate circumstance that led to the discovery of one claret missing, behind the MacQuibble's chair. The disturbance ensuing on its recovery having subsided, Partridge was heard to say that to his certain knowledge, Cripps had no money to buy supper with.

"Then he's gone to borrow it," said Limpet, with conviction. "An' he'll probably be all night before he gets it."

As if to belie this prognostication, a sound was heard without on the stairs, and Cripps appeared.

To speak correctly, an enormous bunch of bananas—such as are seen slowly ripening in the interior of fruit shops—appeared, supported underneath by Cripps's legs. With considerable effort Cripps lowered his burden on the table,

along with three or four pineapples, and in an exhausted manner commenced to pull oranges out of his pockets.

"There!" he said, clearly staggered himself at the opulent appearance of this mound of fruit. "There's your supper."

Gaiety was restored at once, except to Bunson, albeit he assisted gloomily at the cutting up of the pineapples.

Cripps supplied Miss Swift with a plate and a knife, and seated himself beside her, mopping his brow.

"We usually have fruit suppers," he remarked to her, motioning Limpet to hand the pineapple.

Miss Swift said that fruit suppers were delightful, but Cripps depreciated the mound of fruit with an airy gesture. Fruit was the best after all, he admitted, though he had thought of cold chicken and salad.

This attitude of dispensing quantities of food suited the large nature of Cripps's mind. He was quite at ease as to the issue of the evening now, and he even unbent sufficiently to confer the momentary favour of his society on the curate, to borrow three shillings from him, with which he dispatched Limpet for more wine.

With its arrival, certain evidences of an uproarious nature were manifest in the MacQuibble's corner of the room. There was more than a tentative effort at a chorus or two, and the MacQuibble's brother, who had been totally obscured from observation behind the screen up to this point, suddenly became an identity attached to his bassoon.

Cripps, seated a little apart with Miss Swift, smiled indulgently on these antics of the baser crowd. If there was any trace of a cloud on his horizon, it appeared to be connected with banana skins.

"Don't throw them about," he said more than once to Limpet. "Get the chaps to sling them under the bed, will you?"

Unfortunately, he was too obsessed to see that Limpet enforced this injunction. Banana skins began to infest the very atmosphere. The MacQuibble wore a garland of them; there was one sticking to the conscientious nude; Partridge, reaching for his wine, had slipped on one and made an exhibition of himself, by falling prostrate before everybody.

The curate now found himself, for no particular reason, full of admiration for the MacQuibble. Whenever he got a chance, he clinked glasses with

him. The performance of this ceremony gave the curate immense satisfaction. True, this constant clinking of glasses caused the proceedings to become kaleidoscopic at intervals, and the curate was forced to perform a species of mental gymnastics to reduce them to order. It was due to the dancing, he thought. Cripps had instituted the dancing because Miss Swift said it would be fun, and the MacQuibble's brother said he could play a waltz. At this, Bunson had gone out into the passage disgusted with life, and Cripps had danced with Miss Swift. The curate had danced with the MacQuibble, and Partridge had danced sometimes by himself, and sometimes with the others, and sometimes he had fallen down.

After the dance, the curate had joined Cripps and Miss Swift. Cripps was fanning Miss Swift in the darkest corner, and the curate wandered about them, glass in hand. He remembered afterwards assuring Miss Swift that he believed in wine, taken in moderation. It was a pity, on the whole, that he should then have put rather a too fervid point on this belief by pouring a glassful over himself. All the same, it was ill-advised of Cripps to call Limpet's attention to the mess the curate had made of his countenance. It was offensive, too, of Limpet,

to publicly insist on wiping the curate's face with a towel. He was too officious, this Limpet. The curate was conscious of him actively doing things in the background of affairs. Once he was aware of him staggering from the room supporting the apparently inanimate form of Partridge. Later on, the curate had seen him, as in a mist, carrying out chairs. More than once the curate had caught him in the act of swiftly removing glasses from his vicinity.

Partridge, after a prolonged absence apparently in the basement, for he was extremely dusty and very pale, now appeared in the curate's vision as drinking from a bottle. The officious Limpet took the bottle away, and thereupon there was a great uproar, and it was understood that Partridge wished to fight Limpet in the passage.

About this time, the curate had a moment of great illumination. Cripps was deliberately keeping him out of the society of Bunson's girl; he had been doing it the entire evening. This discovery made the curate frightfully indignant. He glared horribly at Cripps from behind a glass of claret. He was aware of Florrie, seated in gloomy seclusion on the couch, but he refused to regard her. In his mind he harboured treachery towards Miss Gimb-

let. He had asked her to join the dance, and she had pushed him in the face. Very good, it was not to be borne, and, besides, Bunson's girl was very, very beautiful.

He had another illuminating thought. He would take Bunson's girl home in a cab. How much did cabs cost? Five or six shillings, perhaps.

At this stage he bore unsteadily down on Cripps and Bunson's girl. Incoherency had overtaken his speech, but he was unaware of it. Nor did he connect the smashing of a bottle with the generous curve of his transit. As it was, he fetched up against the opposite side of the room with a crash, and knocked a picture off the wall. Using the momentum of his recoil, he slanted off in the direction of Miss Swift, clutched a chair-back, and came at once to the point.

"Caller cab!" he said, regarding her fixedly.

The company, being notably ignorant of his recent train of thought, received this communication with some amazement.

"Now you *have* done it, Spuds," said Cripps at length. "You'll have an awful head on you tomorrow."

The curate's frown became Homeric. So dreadful was the concentration of his glare that it seemed

as if it must become chronic and stay like that for ever.

"Caller cab!" he said ferociously.

"Good old Spuds!" said Cripps, with offensive jocularity.

The curate, turning slowly round to annihilate Cripps with a look of contempt, lost his treacherous centre of gravity, and became mysteriously recumbent with great suddenness. When he had erected himself with the aid of a chair, his eye fell on Bunson's girl, and instantly his frown was replaced by a weakling smile.

"Miss Bunshon," he said, "if you'll 'scuse me calling you Mish Bunshon," he added, tenderly smiling.

Miss Swift, being incapacitated with suppressed hilarity, the curate took it upon himself to say:

"Cer'nly, I have n'objecshun," and proceeded with great apparent satisfaction. "Cer'nly not, Mister Bowles. Great's admirashun—norra slish objecshun."

At this point, his centre of gravity again exercising a mysterious influence, he inclined himself backwards at such an acute angle that it seemed inevitable that he must fall with a crash. His recovery with equal suddenness to an upright posi-

tion, accompanied by an appearance of tremendous dignity, was so unexpected as to almost partake of the miraculous.

Without looking round, he then called peremptorily for Limpet.

"What's the matter?" inquired Limpet.

"Caller cab, Limpet," said the curate.

"He wants a cab for some unknown reason," said Cripps to Limpet. "You'd better take him out in the passage."

At these words the curate's whole demeanour assumed an appearance of great ferocity in Cripps's direction. His eye became glazed, his utterance became suddenly thick, and he commenced to take off his coat.

"Calls me 'Spuds,' " he said, in explanation of these preparations.

Fortunately, at that moment, Limpet clutched him, and his arms being involved, he was forced to dance madly to maintain his equilibrium. In this manner he was taken out with a rush into the passage; and his emotions there undergoing a sudden change, he collapsed, with Limpet's assistance, down the back stairs. And there, after a dreadful period of anguish and hopelessness, he suddenly found peace and an exquisite sensation of

resting on dusty boards. The remainder of that evening, as far as he was concerned, was a series of blank spaces with intervals of faint lucidity. In one of these he was walking in a dimly lit passage, with weak knees. It required a profound mental effort to establish his own identity with these knees, and when they concluded to lower him suddenly on the floor, he made no effort to resist their authority.

Later on somebody trod on him, but he didn't care. He knew that the receding silhouette against the faint light at the end of the passage was due to the departure of Cripps and Bunson's girl, because he heard them laughing as they ran down stairs, but he did not attempt to draw any conclusions from their departure.

Then he had quite a lucid moment while somebody was putting on his hat, then they were in the street, and people were going off rapidly in all directions, and lo! he was supporting Miss Gimblet with both hands, and steering her with indefinite intention across the tramline. There were times when it seemed that he had great difficulty in keeping Miss Gimblet upright, because the streets kept curving and bending and altering their perspective so persistently. But they reached the Fitz-

roy Gardens at length, and Miss Gimblet then appearing to give way utterly in the knees, they sat on a seat.

And there, when all the trams had ceased, and there was nobody alive on earth save one policeman pacing slowly up a distant avenue, the curate awoke a second time to the consciousness of his ruined life. And it was a limp, incoherent ruin that Miss Gimblet supported, and it is due to the tender nature of Miss Gimblet's mind to say that she was deeply affected by the spectacle.

Something of the curate's aptitude for abasement came to him at that moment, and he wept, yea, holding with both hands to Miss Gimblet, in his grief he wept aloud, while Miss Gimblet wiped his countenance with her handkerchief and wept a little, too.

CHAPTER XII

AT LOGGERHEADS WITH THE LAW

THE morning that was to usher in the sequel to Cripps's little fruit supper was fittingly wet and dismal, and an excessively wet and dismal curate stood in Collins Street, holding in his hands two bags, as though all hope had fled and left the bags for him to mind eternally.

He had faced the box-office clerk of the Coffee Palace that morning like a condemned soul before the last tribunal, and in the momentary relief of finding he had still enough cash left to settle his account, had petered out in the west.

Now with two and sevenpence in his pocket, he stood before the problem of his ruined future, and as the Town Hall clock above his head struck ten, submitted feebly to the hand of Fate and drifted into Clinks's Chambers.

As he turned into the passage, his feverish despondency was arrested by a terrific clamour that

appeared to come from Cripps's room. He paused to listen, and out of the hubbub recognized the voice of Melons, speaking as one who offers counsel in the face of opposition.

"If you 'ave your reasons," said the voice of Melons, "send for the police."

"I make the char-r-ge," said another voice, a foreign and an angry voice. "I make the char-r-ge to the pleeca court. You hear-r it!" shouted the foreign voice apparently through a keyhole. "Every time you come out I giva you in char-r-ge. Yes! sacremento! Steala the banarn!" and then a great deal of hammering on the door, and the voice of Melons fraught with deep reason.

"If you har in, why don't yer come hout and answer up like a man?"

Neither the voice of anger nor the voice of reason having any effect, there was a further impassioned appeal from the foreign gentleman, offering as an inducement to have the person in request arrested "every time he came out," and a reasonable suggestion from Melons that if he did steal the man's fruit, let him come out and say so like a man. To all of which there coming forth no answer whatever, Melons was led into airing a little general information on his favourite subject of "top flats."

"They ain't wot you might call regular in their 'abits, these 'ere top flats," said Melons. "They comes in at all hours, and they goes out at all hours. They makes all manner of noise at all hours, and their 'abits is dirty. As fer 'im!" concluded Melons with contempt, " 'e might be in any time between now and to-morrer, so where are yer?"

"Verra goot," said the foreign gentleman, with a suggestion of awful finality about his voice, "verra goot, alla right! Every time I catch heem I give heem in char-r-ge!"

The curate, frantic lest he should be involved in the dreadful nature of the foreign gentleman's threats, fled for the back stairs and hid in the lavatory. It was some time before he could summon courage to venture forth, and, when he did, it was in momentary expectation of seeing the dread majesty of the law taking its course up Cripps's staircase.

He would have fled downstairs but for fear of meeting Melons and the foreign gentleman, so he made a bolt for Cripps's door.

"Are you in? It's me—the Reverend Bowles," he hissed, giving himself that title in the agitation of his mind.

There was a pause, and the door opened sud-

denly, so suddenly that the curate, who was leaning against it, fell in, bags and all.

As he scrambled up, Cripps, pale and agitated, closed it hurriedly and softly.

"Have they gone?" he whispered feebly.

"They've just gone," said the curate agitatedly. "At least, they're on the stairs—and I couldn't get down."

"They've gone for a copper," said the pallid Cripps. He sank weakly on the bed and mopped his brow. He was in his shirt, but he still wore his fez, as though he had gone to bed in it, which was probably the case.

"Here's a pretty go," he said at length, gazing desperately round. "All these damn banana skins everywhere! You—you couldn't cram them into your bags and take them away before the cops come, could you?"

The curate glanced helplessly about the room. It was a mere charnel house of dead bananas. The very atmosphere was laden with condemnatory evidence of Cripps's guilt.

"Here's a pretty go," repeated Cripps hopelessly. He got up and made a hurried tour of the room, mechanically looking for a piece of tobacco. When he did find it, he was too agitated to cut it

up, but sank on the bed again, gazing at the curate.

"Why don't you get dressed!" said that gentleman, finding the situation a little beyond his nerves, "be—be—before the police come?"

At that word Cripps sprang up and commenced to tear himself into his trousers. He was too agitated to find buttons, and he cursed them frenziedly. Suddenly his transport ceased, and he was seized by an idea. He ran to the door, listened, and then, apparently reassured, seized the curate's coat, and, without stopping to explain, commenced to drag it from his back.

"What—what—what's the matter?" gasped the curate, struggling to retain his garment.

"Quick!" hissed Cripps, "take it off! Don't you see?"

"But—but what for?" stammered the curate, now possessed with doubts of Cripps's sanity.

"To change coats," hissed Cripps. "You take mine—they can't touch you. I'll put on yours an' sneak out before they come. Dammit, what the hell are you holding on for? Let go!"

The curate, dazed with the desperation of Cripps's attack, allowed himself to be divested of his hat and coat. These Cripps without a word put

on, tore on his boots, and with the curate's hat pulled well down over his ears to hide his guilty face, made resolutely for the door.

"Stop! stop!" ejaculated the now frantic curate. "What am I—— They—they'll find me here!"

"Don't waste time, dammit!" said Cripps fiercely. "There's my hat and coat. Put them on—here, gimme those bags—meet you at Limpet's."

He rushed from the room, leaving the curate wellnigh demented at his situation in that banana-laden atmosphere of guilt. With trembling haste he got into Cripps's coat and hat; in his desperation he was almost coming away in the fez; and without even waiting to close the door, he incontinently bolted.

He took the back way out, and it was very nearly his undoing, for as he passed into the lane the voice of Antonio was raised on high in his own backyard, and it seemed to the curate's frantic eye that he caught the glitter of a policeman's helmet through the palings. He let himself out in a burst to Flinder's Lane, and fled to William Street, pursued by the phantom of Cripps's guilt.

Arrived at Limpet's studio, he found the criminal already there, still breathing heavily from the

exertion of his flight with the curate's bags up six flights of stairs, while Limpet, who had climbed out of bed to let the curate in, climbed back again at once, and being now more or less awake, became extremely pessimistic on the nature of Cripps's outlook. He was gloomily informative on points of law, of which the storehouse of his mind appeared to be well supplied.

Before the tribunal of Limpet's informative mind, Cripps became extremely restless and then abusive. What was more, he peremptorily refused to give up the curate's coat and hat, upon which the curate, who had his own misfortunes on his mind, retired into Limpet's only easy chair and gave way to a fit of silent despair.

It was to this pleasant little gathering that Quin presently appeared, and the ceremony of his entrance, dictated by Cripps's elaborate fears, would have done credit to a meeting of anarchists.

Quin, it appeared, was already appraised of the secret source of Cripps's little fruit supper, but his surprise and pleasure at the spectacle of Cripps in the curate's garments was almost more than the sensitive Cripps could bear.

"Laugh away," said the victim of his misplaced exultatton, grinding his teeth, "you'll think it a

damn sight funnier when I'm arrested by an infernal copper in this rig-out, won't you?"

It was the sage Limpet, at that point feeling his

way gingerly into a pair of dank socks, who let light into the evil working of Quin's mind.

"Old Antonio," he said, "followed the bananas

up to Cripps's door. He's going," added that cheering soul, getting one sock safely on, "he's going to have him gaoled for it."

"Ah!" said Quin, becoming instantly and portentously grave. "Then that accounts for it!"

"Accounts for what?" demanded Cripps.

"Accounts for the two detectives I found outside your door this morning," said Quin, with a suspicion of relish in his manner.

Cripps started up, and then sank back with a groan.

"I might have expected it," he said gloomily. "What were they doing?"

"They had some samples of banana skins in a paper bag," said Quin impressively, "and a sketch book of yours full of nudes."

"What the devil did they want with his sketch book?" demanded the staring Limpet.

"Why, to produce in court," said Quin, "as evidence."

"As evidence of what?" inquired Limpet.

"As evidence of the degraded nature of the prisoner's mind," said Quin. "That's what they call working up a case."

Cripps's emotions over this pleasing explanation of official ingenuity was in the nature of a minor

explosion. He cursed the police, the company, and Bunson, and Bunson's girl. He cursed the whole train of circumstances which led to his undoing. His exhibition, coming from under the curate's hat, was singularly effective. Collarless, pale, with a fringe of lank black hair, and his own brown tweed trousers betraying his laity in opposition to the curate's hat and coat, he made such a spectacle of clerical dissoluteness, that Quin was moved to explore the prophetic.

"What an appearance he'll make in the dock," he said, gloating on the disordered Cripps.

Cripps, who was recuperating from his recent effort on the edge of Limpet's bed, scowled at this ill-timed humour. The lack of breakfast and the exertion of the flight made him feel weak. If he'd only had the sense to eat a banana or two. Suddenly a suspicion electrified him into action.

"Melons!" he ejaculated.

"Melons?" repeated Quin expectantly.

"Melons knows where Limpet lives," said Cripps excitedly. "He'll send them after me!"

"So he will," said Quin enthusiastically.

"We'll go to Partridge's," announced Cripps. "Quick, in case Partridge is out."

The departure was hurried, but secret, taking

with it the curate's bags, which Cripps insisted on carrying himself, as though they constituted his only hope of proving an alibi.

They found Partridge at home in a small room at the top of a dingy building in Little Bourke Street. This apartment, which contained a table, untidily littered with the materials of Partridge's craft, a broken stretcher with a sinister-looking pair of blankets, from which it was evident that Partridge had not long arisen, and some decrepit furniture piled up in one corner, amongst which was a comparatively good spring mattress. The curate, taking a hurried inventory of these arrangements, found himself wondering why on earth Partridge should prefer sleeping on the broken stretcher instead of the comparatively good spring mattress. It did not occur to him that very probably Partridge did *not* prefer sleeping on the stretcher—he merely objected to the trouble of shifting the spring mattress.

There were a number of pen-and-ink drawings on the table, at which Partridge had been working on their arrival, and at these the curate cast an inquisitorial eye.

Recollecting that Partridge's brand of art was the Grandly Symbolic, the curate found himself inspecting, with considerable confusion of mind, a picture apparently representing a scene in high life, in which a lady in evening dress was portrayed

in the act of kicking a gentleman's hat off, while another eminently aristocratic creature climbed on the piano brandishing a glass of sparkling wine. The legend attached to this effort was, "Society sinners sock the champagne, or what goes on in gay Suburbia." Greatly mystified, the curate turned to examine another picture, the cryptic title of which was, "The superintendent and the soubrette—our reporter puts a pornographic parson's pot on." In this the superintendent, distinguished by a clerical coat and a Methodistical brand of whisker, was delineated in the act of riotously drinking from a bottle labelled "champagne," having evidently accommodated the soubrette—a lady in extremely abbreviated skirts—with his only glass. A sectional diagram, showing the other side of the door, betrayed a gentleman with a note-book in the degrading act of peering through the key-hole.

Champagne, the curate could not help noting, appeared to flow abundantly in the creations of Partridge's art. In one picture a Chinaman was offering it to two elegantly attired females in an opium den, and in another, a gentleman in a gilded bar was hitting another gentleman on the head with a bottle of it. There were other pictures with-

out champagne in them, merely illustrative of such titles as "Gored by a Mad Bull," "Bumped from a Buggy," "Chased by a Chow," which the curate was deeply immersed in contemplating, when Partridge observed his obsession, and hastily shuffled the drawings away from him in evident confusion.

"Not worth looking at," he said in explanation to nobody in particular. "Rotten stuff, you know —do it for a living."

Cripps's position had been explained to Partridge by Quin, and it is due to the credit of Partridge's simplicity that he failed to see the exquisite humour of Cripps's possible arrest. He was, in fact, deeply perturbed on Cripps's behalf, and willingly offered his room as a sanctuary to the criminal.

"I've got to take these things to the *Bird* office," he said, gathering the drawings up in an untidy bundle, "but I'll be back soon. There's no key, so you'd better put a chair against the door."

He waved a general adieu, and departed in a hurry, Limpet going out with him, in case there should be such a perquisite as breakfast attending business at the office of the *Bird of Freedom.*

"And now," said Quin, taking up his hat, "I'll just run round and see what's happening at your

room. And don't on any account leave here till I come back," he added to Cripps.

Cripps sourly renounced any intention of moving from the sanctuary, and, left alone with the curate, fell back on a generally abusive monologue on the subject of his misfortunes. The curate said nothing, but he listened rebelliously. It was the rebellion of a sheep, but it was none the less poignant. He was in a nice pickle himself, and he felt he owed a lot of his misfortune to this peevish railer who was wearing his clothes. It was all very well, this Bohemianism of red lamp-shades and cigarettes, but in the cold grey light that filtered through Partridge's grimy windows it did not show to any great advantage. And, certainly, the gay, the entertaining Cripps, masquerading in the curate's garments, was a depressing spectacle. Had it not been for his own misfortunes, the curate might have felt that he was assisting at the funeral of a ruined reputation. Under the circumstances, Cripps's undignified wailing angered him to the heart.

But the tide of misfortune must change at length, if not in effect at least in appearance, and on the arrival of Partridge and Limpet with two bottles of beer, followed shortly by Quin and Miss Gimb-

let, whom Quin had found waiting at Cripps's studio, there was a perceptible brightening up of the sufferers' countenances. In fact, in the temporary note of optimism ensuing on the opening of the beer, the curate plucked up sufficient courage to introduce the situation from his point of view.

"The point is, you see," he said, looking round with a glass of beer in his hand, "that I'm due at Murumberee to-night, and the fare is eighteen and sixpence."

"You mean you've spent the fare," said Limpet, putting a more acute point to the curate's statement.

"That is—yes," said the curate. "And I haven't been near my relations, you know, and I had several things to do which somehow I haven't been able to do, and if I turn up now, you see, like this, and my clothes, you see——"

He modestly drew attention to those garments, as subjects of the result of a week's gaiety. They still bore the imprint of the various places where the curate had lain in them in his pilgrimage through Bohemia, and there lingered about them a pungent memory of the libations the curate had poured over himself. But in that community, the curate's objections to the disrespectability of his

garments was regarded as fastidious. The clothes were all right, said Limpet. The difficulty lay in the money, which, of course, might be raised. Cripps objected peevishly to this prolonged discussion on the curate's affairs. What was to be done about his situation?

It was then that Quin, adjusting his spectacles and beaming benevolently upon Cripps's misfortunes, began to lay bare the machinations of his evil mind.

The Reverend Bowles—Quin used the title with unctuous gravity—the Reverend Bowles, it was clear, could not go to his beloved parish at Jerumberee, if he had the name right (he hadn't, but the curate let it pass). Cripps, at all costs must go away somewhere till the rage of Antonio was appeased. Well, the solution was simple. There was Jerumberee waiting for its curate, and here was Cripps—here he arrested a frantic negative that was coming from Cripps—here was Cripps ready to go off at once to be Jerumberee's curate.

"Why, the situation is absolutely made for Cripps's benefit," said Quin. "Of course, if Cripps likes to stay here and do a stretch for burglary, well and good. Now if you'll only listen to me a moment!" They listened to him, Cripps under

strong protest, and the curate like a man in a dream. Quin, with skilful oratory, drew a delightful picture of the gaiety that would be Cripps's portion on his arrival at Murumberee. For the curate's benefit, he enlarged on the utter hopelessness of his even attempting to go back to his beloved parish after his recent behaviour. For Cripps, it wouldn't matter, he pointed out. Cripps would only stay long enough for his trouble to blow over, but it would be impossible for the curate to live down the reputation he had now acquired.

Withal, he failed to carry sufficient conviction. The curate, though reduced to a state of extreme mental decrepitude, still feebly insisted that it would never do. Cripps, without wasting any words in courtesy, denounced the whole suggestion as an insult to his intelligence.

"Very well, then," said Quin, with an air of finality. "Very well, we shall see." He became extremely impressive, and tapped Cripps on the knee to emphasize his information.

"I didn't like to tell you before," he said, "but since you won't listen to reason, I will. There was a copper waiting at your door this morning, and he had a warrant for your arrest."

Cripps, as the only possible relief to his feelings,

got up and cursed frenziedly. Then he turned on Partridge, with the air of one who would stand no further nonsense, and demanded to know if he intended to shout for dinner or not.

Partridge, with obliging haste, at once led the way into the street, Cripps walking in the midst of them like a man who knew he was going to his doom, but was determined to have his rights for all that.

He was very exacting on the choice of a restaurant, and insisted on walking half-way to North Melbourne before he could decide on one that was sufficiently dark and unwholesome-looking as to evade a possible pursuit.

In Miss Gimblet, walking a little behind with the curate, Quin's scheme found unexpected support. Miss Gimblet, without consulting the curate's prospects in the slightest, produced a line of argument that was purely feminine.

"Don't you go," she said, squeezing the curate's hand. "I'd sooner you stayed here."

"But—but what am I to do?" said the curate feebly.

"You'll find something to do," said Miss Gimblet, with the confidence of one who had to find such a thing herself occasionally.

The curate shook his head dismally.

"No, no," he said. "It would never do," but he squeezed Miss Gimblet's hand to assure her that his heart would remain with her, wherever destiny might take the rest of his anatomy.

However, when they were all squeezed into a little steaming restaurant, known to Limpet as the "Dog Shop," and a universal order for steak and onions taken by a bald-headed waiter with large moist hands, the curate felt a sudden revival of cheerfulness. This was due partly to the appearance of the steak and onions, and partly to the meagre seating accommodation of the Dog Shop, which squeezed him up so close to Miss Gimblet that he could hardly use his knife and fork. Another trifle that exercised an extremely stimulating effect on his emotions was certain conversational items that drifted over to him from Quin.

Quin was seated opposite him, engaged in talking what he called "common sense" to Cripps.

"As a man of the world, the Reverend Bowles wouldn't do it. You may think the Reverend Bowles is a fool—I don't. The Reverend Bowles is quite capable of looking after himself."

The fact that Cripps chafed openly at these references to the Reverend Bowles as further insults to

his intelligence did not deceive the curate. He knew the envious nature of Cripps's character by this time, he hoped.

Cripps, it appeared, wished to put the whole question from him, but it was not permitted. The effect of Quin's persistence on his disordered mind, addled by a heavy meal and the merely conversational efforts of Partridge and Limpet, was of such a nature that he beat upon the table with his fists in a perfectly demented manner.

The bald-headed waiter mistaking this display for a request for his hurried appearance, Partridge paid the score, and a storm of argument drifted out into the street, where the drizzle and the mud effectually put an end to it.

Immediately at hand was a small, mean public-house—one of those dingy establishments that seem to express, by their morbid and retiring appearance, a certain anxiety to escape the eye of the police—and into the parlour of this hostel Quin promptly led the way.

This sanctum, with its one small, hard sofa, its one beer-stained table, its picture of the Sayers-Heenan fight, with all the spectators looking at the artist, and its one little gaol-like window through which one peered into the bar and discovered the

awful mystery of the sink, and the astonishing fact that the barmaid wore a pair of carpet slippers, for some inexplicable reason, struck the curate as conveying a sense of peace and comfort to the mind.

It was in this spirit that he ordered a long beer, seated with Miss Gimblet on the sofa, and though the presence of ladies was clearly no novelty in that secluded spot, it was refreshing to observe the dignity of demeanour that Miss Gimblet saw fit to display in the presence of the barmaid.

Limpet, who seemed to discover certain attractions in this presence, stationed himself at the small window, where he made himself assiduous in handing out the glasses.

Quin sat apart with Cripps. To him he spoke in a low voice that the others might not hear, and the effect of his discourse was to sink Cripps in an apathy of gloom. It was noticeable, however, that on his second glass of beer he seemed to revive a little, and listen with more attention. He even, at that stage, called on the curate for a little information. He wished to know, it appeared, the nature of the curate's duties at Murumberee, and the character of the reverend gentleman to whom the curate's services were dedicated.

In Cripps's own words, "what sort of a cove was he?"

The curate was a trifle vague on this point, but Cripps elicited the fact that the cove was a very earnest man, with red whiskers. Stimulated by Quin, the curate produced another fact. The cove had a daughter.

"Good-looking?" suggested Cripps.

The curate had heard she was. Quin, with the wisdom of the serpent, called for more drinks. Limpet, who had livened up immensely, owing to the presence of the barmaid, was heard arguing loudly with Partridge. He said he could jump through the bar window easily. Put to the proof, he measured the window carefully with his eye, and ordered Partridge to stand aside. It was certainly a miscalculation to have removed his hat prior to taking the leap, otherwise he might have saved his head a little. As it was, he hit the top of the window with his unprotected skull, and very nearly succeeded in stunning himself.

This exploit put Cripps into an immensely good humour. He roared with laughter. Everybody, including the barmaid, was happier and better for Limpet's misfortune. It was singular, too, that the feelings of the company should not be those of

gratitude to him for so successfully promoting the general harmony, but rather manifesting an appearance of intolerance for his incapacity to jump through bar-room windows.

Even the curate was so affected by a sense of superiority in this respect that his attitude to Limpet was distinctly patronizing.

Limpet merely crawled to the sofa and lay down. He had, it appeared, lost all interest in barmaids; in fact, beyond making a feeble effort to hit Cripps, he betrayed no further interest in life.

To further stimulate the general gaiety, Quin passed round the beer. This was the curate's fourth glass since dinner, and certain unmistakable symptoms were manifesting themselves in his behaviour.

He suddenly became extremely dictatorial with Partridge on the subject of the intoxicating qualities of beer. As far as *he* was concerned, he said, beer had absolutely no effect on him.

Partridge admitted that a man was certainly safe as long as he stuck to beer. Cripps differed from Partridge there, and proceeded to prove, by personal instances, that the safest thing for a man to drink was benedictine.

This heresy jerked the beginning of a statement

out of Limpet. "The coat of the stomach," he said, and relapsed into misanthropy.

Florrie, who had been supplied with claret and lemonade at each round of drinks, wore her Tam o' Shanter with an air of extreme hauteur a little over one eye. The curate's attentions—occasionally of a tender nature—she acknowledged with dignity, as though he were a person she had just met for the first time, and whose acquaintance she was doubtful about encouraging.

The group, with their chairs all drawn up as close as possible, continued to discuss the question of drinks with animation. They were in that preliminary stage of intoxication in which conversation is a species of ecstasy, and there was a settled air about them as though they contemplated spending a week or so in that parlour.

Quin's conduct at that time became a trifle mysterious. He borrowed a railway guide from the barmaid, and, after perusing it with evident satisfaction, told Cripps that he would be back presently, and set off down Elizabeth Street. His destination was the office of one J. G. Grimes, architectural draughtsman, a gentleman for whom Fate had merely reserved the business of supplying the motive power of Quin's machinations. This done,

with the needful amount of confidential whispering, and leaving J. G. Grimes to sink into obscurity

again, Quin set off briskly for Elizabeth Street, with the motive power jingling in his pocket.

In the doorway of a disreputable-looking print-

ing establishment, being the office of the *Bird of Freedom*, he came upon Bunson, with the remains of last night's gloom still adhering to his countenance, and a bundle of manuscript under his arm.

On Saturdays, it was the custom of the celebrated poet to draw three shillings and ninepence from the office of the *Bird of Freedom*, that being the "*Bird's*" valuation of the poet's weekly services, and it was a standing grievance with that gentleman that nothing would induce the firm to do the thing handsomely by raising him the extra threepence.

To him Quin unfolded the secret of Cripps's fruit supper, and Bunson, being in his less ordinary character as a human being, expressed a hope that Antonio would prosecute him with the utmost rigour of the law. Finding the poet in this auspicious frame of mind, Quin led him to the nearest public-house, and pressed the friendly token of a long beer on his acceptance. The result of a conference that ensued on this gracious act was their departure together for the public-house in Elizabeth Street, outside which Bunson took his stand, while Quin entered, and at once called for the glasses to be filled. While this was being done, he took Cripps aside and gave that gentleman to

understand that he would shortly expect some display of gratitude from him.

"I've just been out," he said, "to raise that money for your fare."

The display of gratitude was not forthcoming.

"Oh, damn that foolery," said Cripps peevishly, "I've told you already I——"

Quin stopped him with a gesture of dignity.

"Very well," he said, "you can go your own way—you *won't* take advice!"

He turned away, and asked the barmaid to pass him a water biscuit. His manner as he munched this was resigned, as one who had done his best, and could now see a friend taken to gaol with equanimity. This behaviour had its effect on Cripps, and he showed it by falling into a passion because his pipe refused to draw.

"It's all very well," he began, and broke off to blow noisily into his pipe.

Quin munched steadily on. He clearly refused to discuss such a hopeless outlook as Cripps's future.

"It's all very well," said Cripps, and again fell back in helpless fashion on his pipe.

It was at this moment that Bunson chose to make his entry. At the sight of Cripps he staggered dramatically, clutching at his hair.

"You here?" he ejaculated.

It was overdone, but Cripps failed to note the mechanism of art. In the present state of his mind, he would have been surprised if Bunson's behaviour had been merely normal.

Bunson advanced, staring fixedly at Cripps.

"Well," he said at length, "you've done it properly this time."

"I know that!" snapped Cripps.

Bunson shook his head gloomily, but the sight of Quin's glass made him lose his cue for the moment.

"I suppose I come in here?" he suggested.

Quin ordered, and, the beer being produced, Bunson was again overwhelmed with gloom.

"Yes," he said to Cripps, "you've done it."

The unnecessary insistence on this unpleasant fact caused Cripps's nerves to go back on him.

"Don't make a song about it, dammit!" he yelled in Bunson's face. "You make me tired!"

This ungentlemanly explosion annoyed Bunson, and he backed a little away from Cripps.

"Oh, well," he said, "if that's the way you take a well-meant effort to do you a kindness——"

He took a drink, and appeared to honourably stifle his feelings.

"I only wanted to warn you," he added, "that Antonio's taken out a warrant."

Cripps made a frenzied effort of renunciation of Bunson's news. He knew all about it, dammit! It was no pleasure for him to have the thing shoved down his neck by every dunder-headed pumpkin-faced noodle in the universe!

Bunson put down his glass, and swelled with indignation. He became so fat with suppressed rage that Cripps began to hurriedly retract his misguided expressions. He didn't exactly mean to say that Bunson was particularly dunder-headed or pumpkin-faced. What he meant was——

"Only put yourself in my place," said Cripps mournfully, "then you'll understand how it feels to have every fat-headed——"

Bunson, who had been staring at Cripps during these excuses in a state of bottled fury, now took out his pipe, and, without removing the awful glare of his eye from Cripps's countenance, filled it, lit it, and proceeded to smoke it. This process being entirely inadequate to express the nature of his emotions he ejaculated "Bah!" and so gave Cripps to understand that he was now removed from consideration as a human being.

Cripps, now thoroughly depressed, was mak-

ing helpless dives at the rear of the curate's garments.

"Damn these parson's coats," he said peevishly. "Why the deuce don't they make them so a chap can find the pockets?"

He fished a small piece of damp tobacco at length from the tail of the curate's coat and borrowed a knife from Quin.

Here Partridge suddenly attracted conversational interest in his direction. It appeared that the curate was being enlightened on some matter of theological import.

"Abraham was an Arab," said Partridge. "It's commonly known that Abraham was an Arab. Read Winwood Read."

The curate, with his eye a little glazed, leaned heavily on the table, focusing Partridge with evident difficulty.

"Don' b'lieve it," he said, with drunken persistence.

"Scientists prove it," said Limpet.

"Read Winwood Read," remarked Partridge, as one who adduced a final authority.

The curate fell back in his chair and eyed Partridge in consternation. Then he took a drink, and brought his fist down emphatically on the table.

"Tha'sh er mosh 'stonishing thing s'ever heard," he said.

Without attempting to disturb the harmony of this profitable discussion, Quin, by a masonic gesture to the barmaid, had had three glasses filled up again, and Cripps, Bunson and himself were busy emptying them when Limpet awoke to the fact that treachery was being done. There was a prompt rearrangement at the bar window, and three more empty glasses were pressed on the attention of the barmaid, Miss Gimblet, from the sofa, being decidedly negative on the subject of more claret and lemonade.

There is always a period in this species of social function when a disposition to quarrel begins to have a disorganizing effect. It appeared that that period had now arrived.

Cripps, who seemed to think that his misfortunes gave him a divine right to the rest of the company's goods, made a claim on Partridge's tobacco.

"Give us a fill, can't yer?" he said offensively.

Limpet, who had not forgiven Fate for that bump on the head, saw fit to acquaint the company with an apparently irrelevant piece of information.

"I've heard," he said lugubriously, "that what prisoners in gaol crave for most is tobacco."

"You needn't rub it in," said Bunson, bringing this remark to its proper bearings. "I don't suppose they'll give him more than a couple of months."

"It's not the time that matters," said the dolorous Limpet. "It's the disgrace."

Cripps, who had just had his glass filled, drank the contents hurriedly, and banged it back on the table.

"Here," he said fiercely to the barmaid, "fill that up again."

The glass was filled, and Cripps, with an air of deadly purpose, emptied it at once.

"What," said Cripps, when he had got his breath back after this feat, "what do I care for 'er law?" He leaned forward impressively, and snapped his fingers in Limpet's face. "I don't care *that* mush for 'er law," he said, and with a sudden change to ferocity ordered the barmaid to "fillit uppergen."

The effect of this potation was to make Cripps pot valiant to the last degree. Not only did he express contempt for the law, but he betrayed a decided inclination to the same state of mind regarding Limpet, giving the company repeatedly to understand, in direct reference to that gentleman, that

if there was one thing more objectionable to him than another, it was the presence of a fool.

Perhaps that blow on the head had something to do with Limpet's change of attitude, or perhaps the disorganizing influence aforesaid was at work upon him, but he certainly demonstrated that on this occasion he was *not* the drunkard's friend. He did this by putting down his glass and hitting Cripps suddenly in the ribs with his fist.

It was smartly and scientifically done, and Cripps fell under the table. When he was assisted up—a matter of some difficulty—he ran straight at Limpet, and fell over a chair. This second fall effectually scattered whatever remained of sobriety about him. To employ a vigorous metaphor culled from the music-hall, he displayed a frenzied desire to tear the town open.

Quin, who at any other time would have relished the situation as a gift of pleasure, seized the vociferating Cripps in his arms and, with the professional assistance of the barman, who suddenly appeared, fell with him into the street. It took Quin some time to get any headway on, owing to Cripps's demented struggles, but by taking advantage of an injudicious plunge on the part of that gentleman, he steered him off suddenly due west.

The rest of the party came out of the place in an untidy bunch, Partridge, Bunson, and Limpet in advance, and then Florrie supporting the curate, whose hat rolled into the gutter. Quin, linked affectionately to Cripps, was still steadily going west, in the direction of Spencer Street Station, and the rest followed in a straggling procession.

At Queen Street Quin leaned Cripps against a lamp-post, wiped his spectacles, and beckoned Partridge to approach.

"Go and get one of those bags," he said in Partridge's ear, "the one with the Reverend Bowles on the outside."

He waved Partridge off on this mission, and seizing Cripps, who was making futile efforts to light an empty pipe with a wet match, proceeded steadily on his way, the rest of the party still following behind, as people who were there merely in the capacity of spectators.

At Spencer Street, Quin, leading the procession, steered his burden into the station, and bought a ticket. With this in his hand, and Cripps on his arm, and Partridge, who had arrived breathless with the bag, following at his heels, he ran for the platform of the South Eastern Mail. The rest of the party, in their capacity of interested spec-

tators, ran too, and the curate fell down in the crowd.

Quin, without delay, bundled Cripps into a second-class carriage, which was already full, and shut the door, and a porter, as though he knew his part and was only waiting for his cue, instantly locked it. The bag was put in through the window, and the ticket thrust into Cripps's hand.

Then a bell rang.

"Washer for?" demanded Cripps, regarding the ticket fixedly.

"That's all right," said Quin. "Put it in your pocket."

Cripps, still holding the ticket, stared owlishly at Quin. Then his eye fell on the curate, who had just arrived, and an awful suspicion convulsed his countenance. He raised his fist, and was clearly about to give utterance in passionate protest, when the train started. It started so suddenly that he fell down, and it must have been with some difficulty that the other passengers got him on his feet again, for when his head reappeared, the train was clearing the station. He remained regarding the little group on the platform fixedly till the train turned a bend and seemed to finally disappear with one gesture of frenzied protest.

Then the curate suddenly woke up from a species of trance.

"Whe'sh gone?" he demanded of Florrie.

Quin turned at once and shook the curate warmly by the hand.

"He's just gone to fix things up for you, Mr. Bunion," he said. Then he beamed on the curate through his spectacles, patted him on the head, shook hands again, and walked off suddenly into the crowd.

The rest formed a futile little tableau on the platform, gazing after him.

CHAPTER XIII

A CURATE IN SPITE OF HIMSELF

AND now a period of mystery descends on the affairs of Clinks's Chambers.

A furtive figure, slinking in late at night, and slinking out again early in the morning, in dreadful fear of encountering a small man with an immense beard, a bucket and a broom, is too furtive and slinking to carry the thread of an eventful narrative.

What becomes of this furtive figure by day, and where it spends its evenings, the policeman in Hoddle Street alone might be aware, pausing perchance, on his beat, to peer into the Gimblet household, and note it seated in deferential converse in the parlour with Mrs Gimblet, or assisting Miss Gimblet herself to lay the cloth for tea. Of the furtive figure's inward state of mind as it drifted through the Fitzroy Gardens late at night, and of the anguish of remorse that would then visit it for

a ruined life, the policeman in Hoddle Street would be notably ignorant.

The train that departed with the inebriated Cripps for Murumberee might just as well have departed for eternity, for all the effect it had on his immediate community. That such a one as the MacQuibble, for instance, should lavish the profundity of his thought, not upon Cripps in awful difficulties, but upon the best method of treating the human nose, not as a nose, but as a piece of tone, was base.

That Limpet, hibernating in his blankets in William Street, should find a problem in the high shine of belltoppers, and not in Cripps's dilemma, was ignoble to a degree.

That Partridge should employ his time in a state of great mental obfuscation over the necessity of applying the Grandly Decorative to the Grandly Moral, and making a drawing of the result, was more or less consistent, for Partridge's mind was not calculated to obey the dictates of common reason.

Bunson, sinking his character of the celebrated poet in the base necessity of earning a crust, would not be required to pay any further attention to Cripps's affairs.

As for Quin, that minion of Fate, he might have got a job from J. G. Grimes, being in his less saturnine moments an architectural draughtsman, or he might have retired in the direction of Elsternwick, where he was understood to have a home. In either case, he was apparently satisfied that Cripps's departure for Murumberee was a suitable ending to his little fruit supper.

Sunday passed, and Monday came, with it the postman bearing a letter, which he thrust under Limpet's door. Limpet, arising some time later to look for tobacco, found it there, and surmising the worst, opened and read it.

The first sentence was a demand, instant and imperative, for sixteen and sixpence, the price of a ticket from Murumberee to Melbourne. It then touched hurriedly on the successful nature of Cripps's arrival at Murumberee.

"*If I'd had any sense*," wrote Cripps, "*I would have got out at the next station to town, but I went to sleep, and Bowles's parson was waiting for me on the station.*"

It appeared that, being in his own words still considerably "oiled" on his arrival, Bowles's parson had received him into his house with strong disfavour, and, what was worse, put him through a

species of inquisition regarding the condition of his soul that had, to again quote Cripps, "nearly sent him mad." From other statements Limpet gathered that some effort had been made to get Cripps into the pulpit on Sunday evening, which intention he had frustrated by lurking on the outskirts of Murumberee, and coming home late in the evening. It appeared that he was now under close supervision by Bowles's parson's family, and that his state of mind was bordering on frenzy.

A passionate postscript adjured Limpet without delay to wire the money before five o'clock to the Rev. Bowles, care of the Rev. Brindle, Murumberee, till the arrival of which Cripps intended to retire again to the outskirts of the township.

Limpet, under the pressing necessity of immediate action, was struck comatose. He collected what crumbs of tobacco he could find in his pockets, and climbed feebly back to bed to ponder over the matter. Two hours' deep cogitation resulted in his going to the hash house, and putting one more dinner down to his account. This done, he drifted into the street, and looked at the tobacconists' windows. There was nothing else to do, and he was doing it to the best of his ability—having, in fact, fallen into a trance of admiration before a large

meerschaum—when MacQuibble hove in sight on his way to the Life Class at the Gallery. Upon seeing him, Limpet livened up into some show of zeal. He borrowed a fill of tobacco from the MacQuibble. Then he showed him Cripps's letter. MacQuibble read it, handed it back, and would have passed on, but Limpet stopped him.

"You couldn't manage the money, I suppose?" he suggested.

On the minor affairs of life MacQuibble seldom wasted words. He merely favoured Limpet with a look of contempt, and walked off smoking.

Limpet put the letter in his pocket, and, with the consciousness of having at least done his duty, resumed his contemplation of the meerschaum pipe.

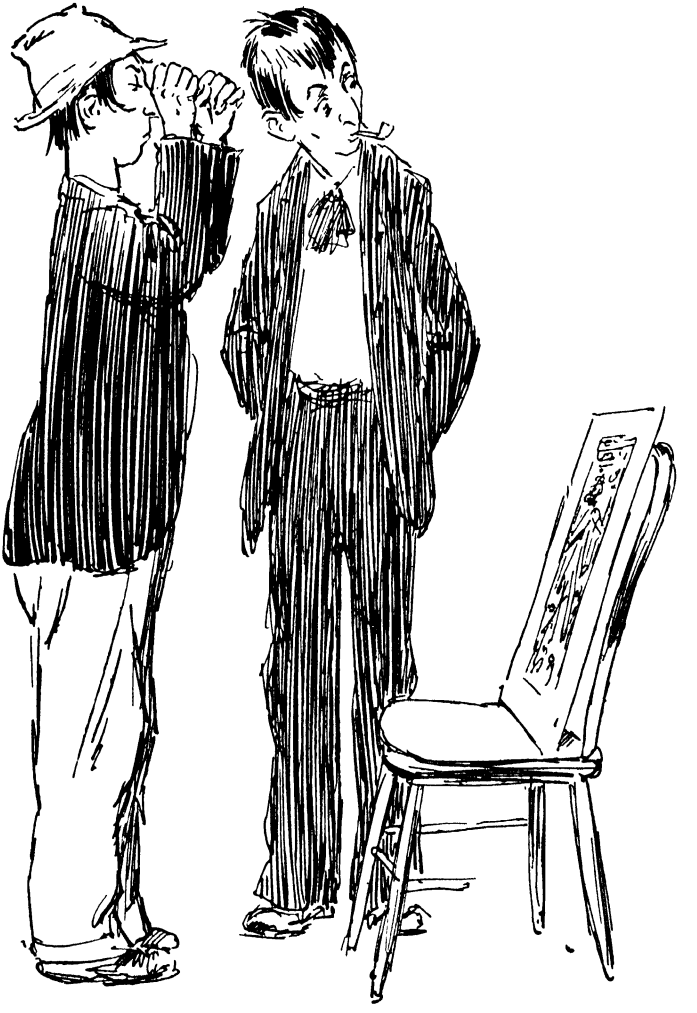
An hour later—it having taken him that time to reach the other end of Bourke Street, owing to the number of tobacconists' windows—he decided to call on Partridge.

Partridge was at home, deeply involved with the Grandly Symbolic, in this case a gigantic figure, with a calm majestic face, treading on a number of smaller figures, some of whom were grasping bags of money, while others were grasping hammers, and one was grasping a palette. Another figure, which had apparently escaped being trodden on,

was being led off by a skeleton, and another, dressed in armour, was looking scornfully at a corpse. The title of the work was "The Struggle," but what it all meant was only known to Partridge. When pressed for an explanation, he was inclined to use the word "Symbolic" in a manner extremely confusing to the inquiring lay mind.

He said that he was glad that Limpet had called, because he wanted his opinion of the work. This was clearly an agreeable request to Limpet, and he at once forgot all about Cripps's letter. He stood the picture upright upon a chair, and immediately found fault with the gigantic figure, which he said was all out. He said the distance was all wrong, which it certainly was, and he was very severe about the composition, which, he said, failed to balance. But he picked out one small figure in the background, and gave Partridge great praise for it. He said that figure was one of the best things Partridge had ever done. Partridge explained that this figure was the only thing he had really finished—all the rest of the picture was only laid in.

On this understanding they lit up, and on the subject of (*a*) Art, (*b*) Limpet's ideas on same, (*c*) Partridge's ideas on same, (*d*) Limpet's



objections to Partridge's ideas, passed the time profitably till six o'clock.

As there was a small establishment that vended tea and toast just across the road, it was reasonable that Partridge should officiate therein as Limpet's host, and so easily adjusted to necessity are the economics of a simple life, that two pots of tea, two plates of toast, tobacco, and one subject of conversation, kept them occupied contentedly till ten o'clock.

In fact, so removed was Limpet from mundane affairs by the enthusiasm of conversation, that he forgot completely about Cripps's letter, though he went to bed with a vague conviction that he had omitted to do something of importance, but what it was he could not call to mind.

He was unpleasantly reminded of the omission next morning by another missive from the exiled Cripps, couched in such choleric terms that it seemed to explode in Limpet's face as he read it.

Dispensing with the usual formalities of greeting, it burst at once into frenzied objurgation.

"Damn you, where's that money! I've been hanging about the post-office waiting for it all day!" and went off explosively to denounce the man who would not help a friend in distress as un-

worthy of the name of man. In fact, the term he applied to this species of human being was "skunk," and he used it freely.

It appeared that the Reverend Brindle had convened a meeting of the church elders, and, having cornered the desperate Cripps in the vestry, had sat upon him for the space of two hours. Though Cripps's description of these proceedings was mere disjointed passion, Limpet gathered that the meeting required the Reverend Bowles to explain severally his peculiar appearance, his spiritual convictions, his recent behaviour, and the strong smell of spirituous liquors that had attended his arrival at Murumberee.

What the Reverend Bowles's answers to these momentous charges had been, Cripps did not stop to explain, but merely called on Limpet, by the name of "skunk," to instantly wire sixteen and sixpence for Cripps's return, an event to be signalized by the punching of Limpet's head, which assurance Cripps seemed to offer as a stimulus to the prompt sending of the money.

To do Limpet justice, he was upset by the ungentlemanly tone of this letter. It not only spoiled the smoking of three cigarette butts, but completely disorganized the system of economy that

kept him in bed till dinner-time, by forcing him to arise and wander about the streets, a process abnormally sharpening to the appetite.

The truth was, Limpet had no prospects of raising sixteen and sixpence. If he had he would have raised it on his own account without requiring any stimulus from the desperate Cripps. Of all that impecunious community, Limpet's impecuniosity had almost reached the dignity of being proverbial. His only pretensions to solvency were an occasional drawing, allegedly humorous, in the weekly papers, the same being reduced by dastardly editors extremely small, and paid for on the same principle.

Meals he procured at the sixpenny restaurant on the time-payment system, the consumption of meals being invariably in advance of the ratio paid for the allegedly humorous drawings.

How, then, could such an involved state of finances be expected to meet a sudden demand for sixteen and sixpence?

However, having first obeyed the dictates of his abnormal hunger, Limpet went to see Partridge again. He had reason to regret his intemperate indulgence in conversation of yesterday, for Partridge was out, and the best of Limpet's endeavours failed to discover his whereabouts.

There was nothing for it, then, but the tobacconists' windows, tea and toast—on the time-payment system—and some futile efforts in the direction of the allegedly humorous. But there was a fatality about even this last resource to procure sixteen and sixpence. The lamp went out and he had no more kerosene. Limpet, feeling that Cripps should owe him deep gratitude for all this expenditure of energy on his behalf, drifted down into Bourke Street, and became merely nomadic till bed-time.

To his immense relief, there was no letter from Cripps under the door next morning, a circumstance which gave Limpet a hopeful sense of his having become suddenly resigned to an existence with the Reverend Brindle.

Limpet tried to foster this optimistic belief as an excuse for remaining comfortably in bed, but despite his best efforts to convince himself, a mental picture of the demented Cripps trying to explain to the Reverend Brindle why he happened to be so unlike a curate persisted in rising before him. It drove him at length from his blankets fully an hour before dinner, and pursued him into the street, where, to his immense surprise, he immediately procured half a crown. He did this by borrowing

that sum off the first man he met who happened to be an acquaintance. Greatly invigorated by this happy chance, he walked to the top of Bourke Street, keeping a sharp look-out for anyone else unfortunate enough to have the honour of knowing him. This quest being unsuccessful, he walked down again with the same result. He then did Swanston Street, Collins Street, and a portion of Elizabeth Street, and here he got ninepence. He did not meet this sum in the street. He went into a barber's shop and borrowed it from a barber, who had a weakness for the arts.

The smallness of this sum, instead of inspiring Limpet to the necessity for fresh efforts, left him deeply discouraged.

He had walked for three hours, the pangs of hunger were unbearable, and he had three and threepence in his pocket. With this money—let it be broken gently to the reader—Limpet went and had dinner at an oyster shop. To be precise, he had an immense plate of steak and oysters, and a bottle of stout. Then, in a state of recklessness, engendered by such luxurious living, he bought another of stout and retired to William Street with it secreted under his coat.

Again the truth about Limpet cannot be dis-

guised. He intended to drink the stout by himself in the guilty seclusion of his own room.

But Fate, it appeared, had arranged beforehand to frustrate this sybaritic dream. In fact, so nicely was this managed for Limpet's benefit, that he very nearly got the shock of his life on opening the door. For, as he entered, a figure, like Fate disguised in the cast-off garments of a disreputable clergyman, rose from the bed, and confronted him.

It was Cripps!

Limpet, with tremendous presence of mind, put the bottle of stout hurriedly on the bed and sat on it.

"You!" he said feebly, and went on staring at Cripps.

Cripps did not attempt to complicate the situation by words. He simply looked at Limpet with hatred and contempt.

"How," said Limpet uneasily, "how did you get here?"

At this question Cripps found it necessary to put his emotions suddenly into words.

"I walked here!" he shouted. Then he added, as though it were an ordinary appendage to speech with Limpet, "skunk!"

"Well, I did my best," said Limpet. "I couldn't raise it."

Cripps had another attack of speech.

"You damn well never tried," he shouted, casting his hat, the curate's, on the floor, and then kicking it. Certainly, his appearance justified any such trifling exhibition of discontent. He was dust from top to toe. His boots, as though they had been wet, and dried in the sun, were cracked in several places. His trousers were caked with mud and his coat, the curate's coat, was as disreputable as if he had rolled all the way from Murumberee in it.

Limpet, in the guilty consciousness of his late feasting, was smitten with a species of remorse. He avoided Cripps's eye, and shifted uneasily on the bed. This action was unwise, for it betrayed the bottle, and Cripps saw it.

For a moment his attitude was heroically tragic. Then he threw himself back in Limpet's chair, and, with a bitter laugh, gave Limpet to understand that nothing more was needed to betray the baseness of his soul.

It being the only thing left for him to do, Limpet made a futile parade of suddenly finding the bottle.

"Er—have a drink?" he said. The miserable subterfuge of this attitude tore the mask of cynicism from Cripps's face. He dashed at Limpet,

and snatched the bottle from him. For a man who had just walked all the way from Murumberee, his energy was astounding.

Limpet's penknife was on the table, and he snatched that up and commenced stabbing it into the cork, whether as a means of getting it out, or merely as a relief to his passion, it is difficult to say.

"Couldn't raise it," he kept repeating, glaring horribly at Limpet, and stabbing the cork as though it were that gentleman's gizzard. "Couldn't raise it! Oh, no! Oh, dear, no!"

Here he inadvertently substituted his thumb for the cork and stabbed that, and in the explosion of his fury at this miscalculation, he narrowly escaped smashing the bottle. This sobered him up a little, but he still had a residue of passion left, which he freely bestowed on Limpet.

When a man has been described repeatedly as a "skunk," and in equally pungent metaphor, as a "dirty dog," by way of variation, he may be excused for becoming a trifle restive under the process.

Limpet, on about the ninth repetition of the word "skunk," appended to a demand for a cup, got up rebelliously and threw one on the table.

Cripps, disdaining to thank him, filled it up and tossed off the contents recklessly. He tossed off another cupful immediately on top of that, and was about to toss off a third when Limpet's emotions proved too much for him.

"That's right!" he said bitterly, "drink it all!"

As Cripps showed every intention of complying with this request, Limpet put his emotions into more definite shape. He rose, and, taking the bottle forcibly from Cripps, examined it anxiously. There was still a little left in it, and lest a worse thing might befall, he put it hurriedly to his mouth and drank it.

The stout, combined with his walk from Murumberee, seemed to exercise a suddenly enervating effect on Cripps. He sat down weakly in Limpet's chair, and in a moment appeared to snore gently.

Limpet, in the act of removing the bottle from his face, found him in this recumbent attitude, and was considerably amazed.

In deference to the causes of his recent activity, Limpet concluded to let him slumber, and, having nothing better to do, made several studies of him. It was late in the afternoon when Cripps, signalizing his return to consciousness at the cramping

nature of Limpet's chair, gradually got himself awake.

"Wha's matter?" he said, glaring at Limpet.

"Nothin'," said Limpet promptly.

Cripps went on glaring a little longer, and then suddenly resumed command of his faculties.

"I've had an awful time lately," he said, feebly agitating one leg to induce it to resume its functions. "You can't imagine," he went on, "what an awful time I've had. When you never sent that money"—Cripps had a momentary relapse here, as if he were going to add "skunk," but seemed to think better of it—"I determined to walk back. I couldn't stand it any longer. That cursed old Brindle was after me with the ferocity of a—boiled egg," added Cripps, becoming mentally inert for the moment. He looked mournfully at Limpet, and shook his head. "You can't imagine," he said, "what an awful time I've had lately."

Limpet, for fear of committing himself to any responsibility for the awful time Cripps had been having, merely scratched his head.

In the midst of another attack of temporary inertia, Cripps was suddenly smitten with a thought.

"What about my arrest?" he demanded.

"What about it?" inquired Limpet.

"What's been happening about it?" demanded Cripps. "What's old Antonio been doing?"

Limpet shook his head.

"I haven't heard anything about it," he said. "I met Melons in the street yesterday, and he never said anything about it. I don't believe," added Limpet after a pause, "that there was any arrest. As like as not, it was all a yarn of Quin's."

"A what?" ejaculated Cripps.

"A yarn," said Limpet. "You know what Quin is! It's no use getting on to me," he added, as Cripps betrayed symptoms of an alarming nature, "I never had anything to do with the business."

Whatever remained of Cripps's inertia disappeared with astonishing rapidity. He sprang up, and struck an attitude of passion that his clerical dissoluteness rendered impressive to a degree.

"If Quin——!" he said, and paused with his fist raised aloft. The pause and the attitude were terrific in intention. Then he lowered the fist till it was within an inch of Limpet's nose.

"If Quin——!" he said again, and there was another terrific interval, with some grinding of teeth.

"Well," said Limpet peevishly, refusing to

accept the dreadful menace of Cripps's fist, "don't get on to me about it. I'm not responsible for Quin's damn nonsense!"

Cripps removed his fist suddenly, and drew in his breath as though there were not enough air in the universe to feed his mighty rage. Clearly there was not enough in Limpet's room for that purpose, for, relinquishing his attitude and letting the awful thing that was going to happen to Quin remain unuttered, he suddenly snatched up the curate's hat and dashed from the room, and, like a homing dove, made straight for Clinks's Chambers, closely followed by Limpet.

Arrived there, he abated a little of the dignity of his demeanour, and sneaked in at the back way, followed by Limpet. The ascent of the back stairs was a stealthy performance, but they reached the top floor at length without encountering anything in the nature of a small man with a beard, a bucket, and a broom.

Even then it was some time before Cripps could make up his mind that all was well, and he was still lurking and dodging about in his own passage, when a tall figure, emerging from the obscurity of the stairs, caused him to retreat precipitately, via Limpet's toes, into an empty room.

"Shut up!" he hissed at Limpet, who was frenziedly supporting himself upright on his least injured toe.

Limpet had only caught a fleeting glimpse of an apparently total stranger, with long, dank whiskers, and he failed to see that the mere appearance of such an individual was any excuse for having his feet trodden on.

"I tell you he's after me," hissed Cripps.

"For nipping Antonio's fruit?" demanded Limpet, astonished into a normal attitude on both feet.

"No, no!" said Cripps impatiently. "He's a printer—he's after those tracts. Wait till he goes." He motioned Limpet to silence, and listened with his ear close to the door. The visitor could be heard knocking at Cripps's door, and then, much to Cripps's own amazement, a voice from the interior of the room gave permission to enter.

The visitor clearly took advantage of this permission, for they heard the handle turn, and they heard his footsteps enter the room.

Then there was a pause; a pause such as a God-fearing printer struck dumb and breathless with amazement, might employ in getting his articulation and his breath into working order; a pause that strung the listeners on and on in desperation

till it was at length broken by a voice, a feeble and faltering voice that pronounced these words:

"Uncle Tinfish!"

Both Cripps and Limpet were struck statuesque with a sudden apprehension of what was happening in Cripps's room, and Cripps, with a professional knowledge of the gloomy nature of Uncle Tinfish's eye, could feel it taking in the situation, including the conscientious nude, with dreadful intensity.

When Uncle Tinfish did at length break the awful spell of silence, it was to confirm the apprehensions of Cripps and Limpet.

"So this is where you are hiding, James Bowles?" he said.

The curate seemed to admit the truth of this deduction by a feeble sound. Whatever inferences Uncle Tinfish managed to draw from Cripps's apartment appeared suddenly to stir him to majestic anger.

"Explain yourself, sir!" he thundered. "How come you to be hiding here in lay garments?"

Doubtless with the best of intentions, the curate seemed to find the mandate utterly impossible to comply with. Cripps and Limpet could hear him making futile sounds, but nothing sufficiently articulate to be called an explanation was forth-

coming. In fact, the curate's incoherency merely served to confirm Uncle Tinfish's worst suspicions.

"You are a disgraceful fellow, sir," he said in hollow tones. "You have deceived your mother, sir —you have deceived ME!"

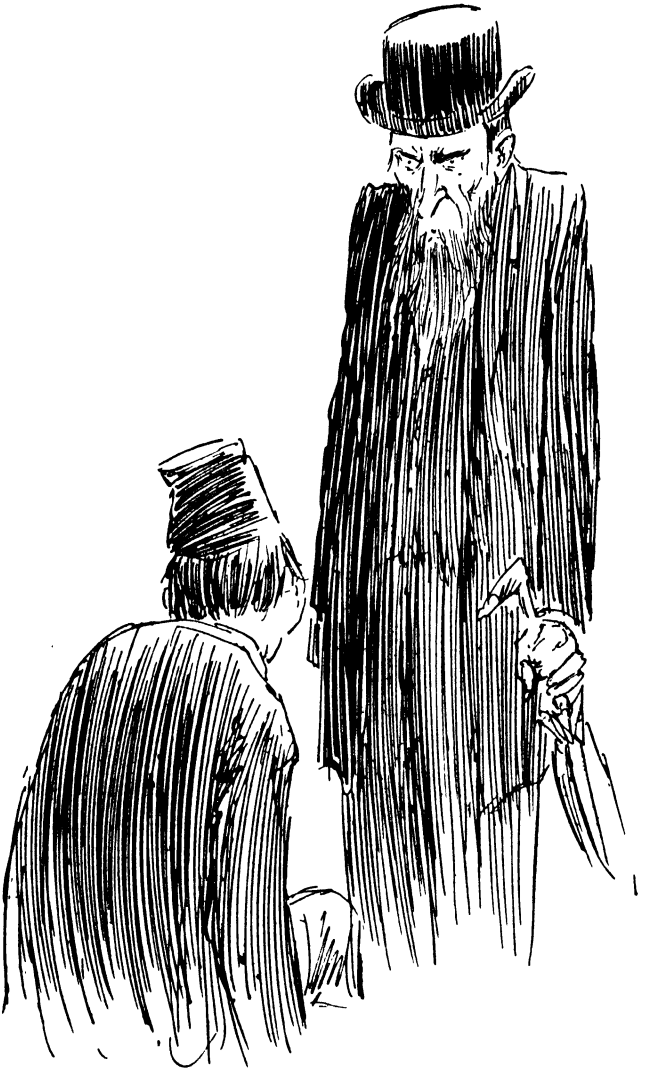
For a moment Uncle Tinfish appeared almost overpowered by such a stupendous piece of deception. His emotion under it must have been singularly impressive, for the listeners could only conjecture that a loud groan from the curate at this stage was a tribute to the drama expressed in Uncle Tinfish's countenance.

"You are," said Uncle Tinfish, when he recovered the power of speech, "a disgrace, sir, A DIS—GRACE!"

The curate merely confirmed Uncle Tinfish's power of divination by a groan.

"It was understood," went on Uncle Tinfish, "that, having failed to call on me, you had gone to your curacy at Murumberee. Instead of which," proceeded Uncle Tinfish, with rising passion, "I find you—in lay garments—sunk in surroundings of profligacy and debauchery!"

It must have been the conscientious nude that inspired this lyrical description of Cripps's apartment.



"I find you," went on Uncle Tinfish, "wallowing in an atmosphere of drink and tobacco, and wearing on your head a filthy and degrading cap, in my presence!" thundered Uncle Tinfish. "Take off that degrading cap, sir!"

The curate having removed the offending article, Uncle Tinfish went on:

"To your mother, who has not heard from you for over a week, I will at once write, informing her of the circumstances in which I find you. She will then," said Uncle Tinfish, with gloomy satisfaction, "know what to think of your conduct. As for your treatment of ME," concluded Uncle Tinfish, almost having another disaster to his vocal chords at the thought of it, "I wash my hands of you, sir—I renounce you—I——" Uncle Tinfish's voice was suddenly lowered to a tone of sepulchral hollowness. "I will pray for you," he said, and so stalked from the contaminating presence of the curate and the conscientious nude for ever.

Cripps and Limpet gave him ample time to get clear of the building before gingerly approaching Cripps's room. Their manner was distinctly apprehensive, as though prepared to find the curate in an attitude of grand abasement.

He was seated on the bed at the far end of the room, holding Cripps's fez, the object of Uncle Tinfish's just resentment, helplessly in his hand, and staring dismally at the conscientious nude, as though it were the evil deity that had brought him to this. The fading daylight from the window behind him embellished his untidy mop of hair with a bedraggled halo, which seemed materially to assist the hopeless misery of his expression, and though he turned a fixed eye on the appearance of Cripps in his own garments, so distraught was his mind that he failed to grasp the significance of that gentleman's return.

It was Cripps who at length broke the awkward pause, engendered by the petrified anguish of the curate's eye.

"Hello," he said rather weakly, "what's up?"

The curate made a futile gesture with the fez, and gulped a couple of times, as if Uncle Tinfish's renunciation was still sticking in his throat, and he found it hard to swallow.

"My uncle——" he said at length, and gulped again. Then he added, "—found me here," and seemed to think nothing more was needed to explain the awful degradation of his position.

In fact, there was such an obvious inclination

to wateriness about his eye, and instability about his underlip, that Cripps found it necessary to put the conversation on a less emotional basis.

"Er—yes," he said, "Jerry and I saw him. We just dodged him in time. Greatest bit of luck I ever had," added Cripps. "Five minutes earlier, and he would have caught *me* here."

"But—he's not going to have anything more to do with me," said the curate.

It was the sage Limpet who made a pertinent remark here.

"From what I saw of him," he said, "you ought to be damn glad he isn't."

The astounding originality of this attitude towards Uncle Tinfish threw the curate into a fresh attitude of mental helplessness. He was in this posture when the sound of footsteps in the passage caused Cripps to become suddenly active.

He sprang swiftly to the door and closed it just in time to catch Miss Gimblet on the point of entering, and squeezed an anguished scream out of her.

"Oh, it's you," said Cripps, recognizing the scream. "I thought it might have been old Tinfish coming back."

On this honourable understanding, he let Miss

Gimblet in and closed the door. Miss Gimblet, a little ruffled by the squeezing, put down a parcel she was carrying, and stared at Cripps.

"Oh, yes," said that gentleman, in answer to Miss Gimblet's stare, "I'm back again! I walked back—I've walked!" said Cripps impressively, "considerably over fifty miles since yesterday morning."

Limpet was relieved to note that Cripps now showed a decided tendency to the vainglorious over this feat. He noted, also, but forbore to comment on it, that the distance to Murumberee had grown a little longer with Cripps's change of attitude.

"By Jove!" continued that gentleman, throwing the curate's hat on the floor, and commencing to take off the curate's coat, "I've had a nice time of it up at that blooming old dog shop of yours, Jimmy! I've had an insight into the workings of the Wesleyan mind that I wouldn't have again for a salary. You may think," he added to the curate, "that your Uncle Tinfish is a fairly refined specimen in his own class, but I can assure you that he's not a patch on the Reverend Brindle as a religious maniac. You ought to be damn glad," said Cripps, emphasizing the sage Limpet's dic-

tum, "that I saved you from the awful destiny of living in the same town with him."

Miss Gimblet's feminine sympathy had by this time discovered that there was something distinctly suggestive of a recent bereavement in the curate's attitude.

"What's the matter?" she inquired.

"Oh, Jimmy's all right," said Cripps, extending a little gratuitous optimism in the curate's direction, "he's just had a bit of an interview with his Uncle Tinfish!"

"He came up," said the curate to Florrie, as if the situation had settled in that formula on his mind, "and found me here."

"It would have been rather a joke," said Cripps, "if he'd come up and found Florrie here too."

Neither Florrie nor the curate seemed to see the humour of this possibility, though Cripps laughed heartily at it.

"I can't think," said the curate, shaking his head, "how on earth he came to know I was here."

"He didn't know you were here," said Cripps, humorously, "that's the point. He came up to see me. The fact is," added Cripps, in answer to the curate's staring amazement, "your old Uncle Tinfish is the miserly hound, disguised as a printer,

who pays me half a crown a time for illustrating tracts, and he came up for some I haven't finished. He must have got a bit of a shock himself," added Cripps, rubbing his hands, "when he found you sitting up here with my fez on."

This evidence of the mysterious workings of Fate set the curate staring at Cripps more helplessly than ever. He seemed overpowered by the malignancy of circumstances that had made Cripps acquainted with Uncle Tinfish.

But Cripps, in an unofficial investigation of Miss Gimblet's parcel, requested the company's attention to a more urgent matter than the curate's ruined future.

"Hallo!" he said, "sausages, by Jove! I could just do with a sausage!"

"There's not enough to go around," said Florrie hastily. "I only bought enough for me and Jimmy."

"Then we must buy more," said the optimistic Cripps. "Who of those present has sufficient coin to buy more sausages?"

Limpet shook his head. Florrie shook her head. The curate, still seated dismally on the bed, shook his head too—not so much at the futility of expecting him to take an interest in sausages, as at the

futiltiy of expecting him to take any further in life.

"This will never do," said Cripps. "It's absolutely necessary to get more sausages. The question is, how are more sausages to be got?"

Limpet, much to his own amazement, suddenly solved this problem by putting his hand in his pocket and bringing out ninepence. It was the remainder of his morning's efforts on behalf of Cripps, and he had forgotten it, having, after years of practice, acquired the habit of seldom having ninepence in his possession.

The presence of this wealth at once restored Cripps's optimism. He dispatched Florrie for more sausages, tomatoes, milk, and butter. Limpet was ordered, in defiance of Melons, to fill the kettle, and Cripps himself set about preparing the explosive kerosene stove for action. He had resumed his fez, and had become at once the entertaining Cripps—the exponent of the Languorously Sinful in Art.

Meanwhile, the curate sat upon the bed, and having absorbed into his system all the misery capable of being extracted from his position, found himself taking a feeble interest in the frying of the sausages. The presence of Miss Gimblet with her hat off and her sleeves rolled up, laying the table

and making tea in the cracked teapot, had a remarkably soothing effect on him. He even got up to help Limpet move the table nearer to the bed, to admit of that article being used in the capacity of a chair, and when all was ready, and the sausages steaming on his plate, it was suddenly borne upon the curate's mind that if he had lost the approbation of Uncle Tinfish, at least he had acquired a place in the fraternity of Cripps's studio.

It was Limpet who seemed to imply as much, by remarking casually.

"I wondered where the devil you'd got to. You were up here all the time, I suppose?"

"Most of the time," said the curate, nodding. "I was up at Florrie's a good deal. I don't know whatever would have happened to me," he added, attacking a sausage hurriedly, "if it hadn't been for Florrie fetching me down something to eat."

The mental picture evoked in Cripps's mind of the curate lurking in his apartment, and having food brought to him by Miss Gimblet, seemed to strike him as highly diverting.

He laughed heartily, and slapped the curate on the back.

"Well, there's no mistake," he said at length, "you're a character, Jimmy."

"Yes, but——" said the curate, a little in doubt as to the humour of the situation. "It's all very well—but what am I to do now?"

"Oh, *that's* all right," said Cripps. "You can doss on the floor. I'll fix up a bed for you."

"I wasn't so much thinking of that, you know," said the curate, though obviously grateful for Cripps's hospitable attitude. "What am I to do to —to earn a living?"

"Do!" said Cripps, summing up the business of life in a sentence, "what's the good of trying to earn a living! You'll be all right. Go in for Art."

FINIS