As the whole pavilion seemed to be full of people putting on their pads in order to go in first, I wandered outside. There I met Myra.

"Hallo, we're in," I said. "Come and sit on the roller with me, and I'll tell you all about Jayes."

"Can't for a moment. Do go and make yourself pleasant to Dahlia Blair. She's just come."

"Do you think she'd be interested in Jayes? I mean the Leicestershire cricketer, not the disinfectant. Oh, all right, then, I won't."

I wandered over to the deck-chairs, and exchanged greetings with Miss Blair.

"I have been asked to make myself pleasant," I said. "I suppose that means telling you all about everybody, doesn't it?"

"Yes, please."

"Well, we're in, as you see. That's the Vicar leading his team out. He's no player really—one of the 'among others we noticed.' But he's a good father, and we've borrowed two offsprings from him. Here comes Archie and Wilks. Wilks drove you from the station, I expect?"

"He did. And very furiously."

"Well, he hardly drives at all, when he's in. He's terribly slow—what they call Nature's reaction. Archie, you will be sorry to hear, has just distinguished himself by putting me in last. He called it ninth wicket down, but I worked it out, and there doesn't seem to be anybody after me. It's simply spite."

"I hope Mr. Archie makes some runs," said Dahlia. "I don't mind so much about Wilks, you know."

"I'm afraid he is only going to make fourteen to-day. That's the postman going to bowl to him. He has two deliveries, one at 8 a.m. and one at 12.30 p.m.—the second one is rather doubtful. Archie always takes guard with the bail, you observe, and then looks round to see if we're all watching."

"Don't be so unkind."

"I'm annoyed," I said, "and I intensely dislike the name Archibald. Ninth wicket down!"

The umpire having called "Play," Joe, the postman, bounded up to the wicket and delivered the ball. Archie played forward with the easy confidence of a school
professional when nobody is bowling to him. And then the leg-bail disappeared.

"Oh!" cried Dahlia. "He's out!"

I looked at her, and I looked at Archie's disconsolate back as he made for the pavilion; and I knew what he would want. I got up.

"I must go now," I said. "I've promised to sit on the heavy roller for a bit. Archie will be here in a moment. Will you tell him from me that we both thought he wasn't quite ready for that one, and that it never rose an inch? Thank you very much."

I discovered Myra, and we sat on the roller together.

"Well, I've been making myself pleasant," I said. "And then when Archie got out I knew he'd want to sit next to her, so I came away. That is what they call tact in The Lady."

"Archie is rather fond of her," said Myra. "I don't know if—"

"Yes, yes, I understand. Years ago—"

"Let's see. Are you ninety or ninety-one? I always forget."

"Ninety-one next St. Crispin's Day. I'm sorry Archie's out. The popular cricketer was unfortunate enough to meet a trimmer first ball, and the silent sympathy of the Bank Holiday crowd went out to him as he wended his way to the Pavilion. Extract from 'Pavilions I have wended to, by Percy Benskin.' Help! There goes Blair!"

After this the situation became very serious. In an hour seven of us had got what I might call the postman's knock. Wilks was still in, but he had only made nine. The score was fifty-two, thanks entirely to Simpson, who had got thirty-five between first and second slip in twenty minutes. This stroke of his is known as the Simpson upper cut, and is delivered straight from the shoulder and off the edge of the bat.

"This is awful," said Myra. "You'll simply have to make some now."

"I think it's time Wilks got on to his second speed. Why doesn't somebody tell him? Hallo, there goes John. I knew there wasn't a run there. Where are my gloves?"

"You mustn't be nervous. Oh, do make some."

"The condemned man walked firmly to the wickets.
'What is that, umpire?' he asked in his usual cool voice. 'Houtside the leg stump, sir,' said the man in white. 'Good,' he replied. . . . What an ass your second gardener is. Fancy being potted out like that, just as if he were a geranium. I ought to wear a cap, oughn't I, in case I want to bow when I come in. Good-bye; I shall be back for lunch, I expect.'

I passed Joe on my way to the wickets, and asked pleasantly after his wife and family. He was rather brusque about it, and sent down a very fast half-volley which kept low. Then Wilks and I returned to the pavilion together amid cheers. On the whole, the Rabbits had lived up to their reputation.

"Well, we are a lot of bunnies," said Archie at lunch. "Joe simply stands there looking like a lettuce and out we all trot. We shall have to take to halma or something. Simpson, you swim, don't you?"

"You don't have to swim at halma," said Simpson.

"Anyhow," said Blair, "we can't blame the Selection Committee."

"I blame Thomas," I said. "He would have eight, and he wouldn't wait. I don't blame myself, because my average is now three spot five, and yesterday it was only three spot one."

"That is impossible, if you made nought to-day," said Simpson eagerly.

"Not if I divided it wrong yesterday."

"Averages," said the Major to the Vicar, catching the last sentence but two, "are the curse of modern cricket. When I was a boy—"

"This," Archie explained to us, "takes us back to the thirties, when Felix Mynn bowled Ensign Mannering with a full pitch."

"Dear old Fuller Pitch. Ah! what do they know of England, who only King and Jayes?" I declaimed. "Libretto by Simpson."

"Who's finished?" said Archie, getting up. "Come out and smoke. Now, we simply must buck up and out the opposition. Simpson ought to bump them at Joe's end, and Thomas—"

"I always swerve after lunch," said Thomas.

"I don't wonder. What I was going to say was that you
would box them in the slips. You know, if we all buck up——"

We bucked up and outed them at the end of the day for two hundred and fifty.

III

"Will somebody give me a cigarette," said Myra, stretching out a hand.
"I fancy not," I said. "Thomas and I both feel that you are too young."
"I don't really want one, but when I'm locked up in the billiard-room with two dumb men——"
"We were reflecting on our blessed victory."
"Were you thinking of Archie's century or John's bowling?"

"Neither, oddly enough. I was recalling my own catch which won the match. Poetry; let's go and tell Simpson."
"It was a skier," said Myra. "I thought it was never coming down. What did you think of all the time?"

"Everything. All my past life flashed before my eyes. I saw again my happy childhood's days, when I played innocently in the——er——pantry. I saw myself at school, sl-working. I saw——"

"Did you happen," interrupted Thomas, when we both thought he was fast asleep, "to see yourself being badly taken on by me at billiards?"

"Thomas, you're not properly awake, old friend. I know that feeling. Turn over on the other side and take a deep breath."

Thomas rose and stretched himself, and went over to the cue rack. "You should have heard him siding about his blessed billiards this morning," he told Myra.

"I didn't side. I simply said that anybody could beat Thomas. Do they play billiards much at the Admiralty? I should have thought the motion——"

"Take a cue. Myra will mark."
"Rather; I can mark like anything."

"Once upon a time," I said, "there was a lady who wanted to get into the Admiralty. But his mother said, 'Not until you have learnt to swim, Thomas.' So he had a set of six private lessons for one guinea before he went in for the
examination. He came out thirty-eighth, and was offered a
lucrative appointment in the post office. . . . Hence his
enormous skill at billiards. Thick or clear?"
"I will adventure half a crown upon the game," said
Thomas, giving a miss.
"Right O, Rothschild. Now, are you ready, marker?
I'm spot. Hadn't you better oil the board a bit? Well, as
long as you can work it quickly enough."
I took careful aim, and my ball went up the table and
back again, with the idea, I imagine, of inspecting the wicket.
It seemed quite fast.
"One all," said Myra, and Thomas kindly brought his
ball and mine to the top of the table.
"I fancy I shall be able to swerve from this end," I said.
I tried a delicate cannon, and just missed the object ball.
"I shall find a spot directly—there's one under the red ball,
I believe."
"Do try and hit something," said Myra.
"The marker is not allowed to give advice," I said sternly.
"What's the matter, Thomas?"
"I'm not quite sure what to do."
"I think you ought to chalk your cue here," I said, after
examining the position.
"I've done that."
"Then ram the red."
Thomas rammed and all but sank it in the left-hand
pocket.
"I am now," I said, "going to do a cannon off the cushion.
Marker, what is my score?"
"One, sir."
"Then kindly get ready to put it up to three. . . .
Rotten luck."
"Wrong side," said Myra judicially.
"No, I meant to hit it that side."
"I mean it wanted a little running side."
"This isn't Queen's Club. Go on, Thomas."
Thomas, who had been chalking his cue, advanced to the
table. "Hallo," he said, "where's the other ball?"
I looked at the table, and there were only two balls on it!
"That's an extraordinary thing," I said in amazement.
"I'm almost certain we started with three."
"Did you put me down?"
“Certainly not; I shouldn’t dream of doing such a thing. I don’t say I mayn’t have slipped down myself when nobody was looking. Myra, did you notice which pocket I was trying for that time?”

We felt in all of them, and at last found my ball in one of the bottom ones. It must have gone there very quietly.

“Score, marker?” I asked confidently, as I prepared to continue my break.

“Oh, you’re going over the crease,” cried Myra.

I took my ball back an inch. “Will you tell me the score?” I said.

“Stevenson (in play) three; Inman, two. Inman’s two were both wides.”

Barely were the words out of her mouth when Inman’s score was increased by a no-ball. A miss-cue they call it technically.

“Three all,” said Myra. “This is awfully exciting. First one is ahead, and then the other.”

“By the way, how many up are we playing?”

“Five, aren’t you?” said Myra.

This roused Thomas. He had played himself in, and now proceeded to make a pretty break of seventeen. I followed. There was a collision off the middle pocket between spot and red, and both went down. Then plain was unintentionally sunk as the result of a cannon shot, and spot and red sailed into harbour. With Thomas’s miss I scored eleven. Unfortunately, off my next stroke, Thomas again went down.

“Billiards,” he said.

“You don’t think I want to put the rotten thing down, do you? It’s such a blessed rabbit. Directly it sees a hole anywhere it makes for it. Hallo, six more. I shall now give what they call a miss in baulk.”

“Oh, good miss,” cried Myra, as spot rested over the middle pocket.

“That was a googly. You both thought it would break the other way.”

The game went on slowly. When Thomas was ninety and I was ninety-nine, there was a confused noise without, and Archie and Miss Blair burst into the room. At least only Archie actually burst; Miss Blair entered sedately.

“Who’s winning?” cried Archie.
"What an absurd question," I said. "As if we should tell you."

"All right. Dahl—Miss Blair, have you ever seen billiards played really well?"

"Never."

"Then now's your chance. Ninety-nine—nine—they've only just begun. This is Thomas's first break, I expect. There—he's got a clear board. You get five extra for that, and the other man is rubiconed. Ninety-nine all. Now, it is only a question of who misses first."

I put down my cue.

"Thomas," I began, "we have said some hard things about each other to-night, but when I listen to Archie I feel very friendly towards you."

"Archibald," said Thomas, "is a beastly name."

"So I told Miss Blair. For a man who was, so to speak, born with a silver billiard-table in his mouth to come here and make fun of two persevering and, in my case, promising players is——"

"You'll never finish that sentence," said Myra. "Try some more billiards."

"It was almost impossible to say what I wanted to say grammatically," I answered, and I hit my ball very hard up the table at the white.

"It's working across," said Archie, after the second bounce; "it must hit the red soon. I give it three more laps."

"It's going much more slowly now," said Miss Blair.

" Probably it's keeping a bit of a sprint for the finish. Wait till it gets its second wind. No, I'm afraid it's no good; it ought to have started sooner. Hallo, yes, it's—got him!"

"It hasn't finished yet," I said calmly. "Look—there!"

"Jove!" said Archie, shaking my hand, "that's the longest loser I've ever seen. My dear old man, what a performer. The practice you must have had. The years you must have devoted to the game. I wonder—could you possibly spare an hour or two to-morrow to play cricket for us?"
IV

A hundred and eighty for none. The umpire waved his lily hand, and the scorer entered one more “four” in his book. Seeing that the ball had gone right through a bicycle which was leaning up against the pavilion, many people (the owner of the bicycle, anyhow) must have felt that the actual signalling of a boundary was unnecessary; but our umpire is a stickler for the etiquette of the game. Once when—But no, on second thoughts, I shan’t tell you that story. You would say it was a lie—as indeed it is.

“Rotten,” said Archie to me, as we crossed over. (A good captain always confides in his wicket-keeper.)

“Don’t take Simpson off,” I said. “I like watching him.”

“I shall go on again myself soon.”

“Oh, it’s not so bad as that. Don’t lose heart.”

The score was two hundred when we met again.

“I once read a book by a lady,” I said, “in which the hero started the over with his right hand and finished it with his left. I suppose Simpson couldn’t do that?”

“He’s a darned rotten bowler, anyway.”

“His direction is all right, but his metre is so irregular.

At the end of the next over, “What shall I do?” asked Archie in despair.

“Put the wicket-keeper on,” I said at once.

The idea was quite a new one to him. He considered it for a moment.

“Can you bowl?” he said at last.

“No.”

“Then what on earth——?”

“Look here; you’ve tried ’em with people who can bowl, and they’ve made two hundred and twenty in an hour and a half; somebody who can’t bowl will be a little change for them. That’s one reason. The second is that we shall all have a bit of a rest while I’m taking my things off. The third is that I bet Myra a shilling——”

Archie knelt down, and began to unbuckle my pads.

“I’ll ‘keep’ myself,” he said. “Are you fast or slow?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea. Just as it occurs to me at the moment, I expect.”
"Well, you're quite right; you can't be worse than some of us. Will you have a few balls down first?"

"No, thanks; I should like to come as a surprise to them."

"Well, pitch 'em up anyhow."

"I shall probably vary my length—if possible without any alteration of action."

I am now approaching the incredible. The gentle reader, however, must not be nasty about it; he should at least pretend to believe, and his best way of doing this is to listen very silently to what follows. When he has heard my explanation I shall assume that he understands.

Bowling is entirely a question of when you let go of the ball. If you let go too soon the result is a wide over the batsman's head; if too late, a nasty crack on your own foot. Obviously there are spaces in between. By the law of averages one must let go at the right moment at least once. Why not then at the first ball? And in the case of a person like myself, who has a very high action and a good mouth—I mean who has a very high delivery, such a ball (after a week of Simpsons and Archies) would be almost unplayable.

Very well, then; I did let go at the right moment, but, unfortunately, I took off from the wrong crease. Then umpire’s cry of "No-ball" and the shattering of the Quidnunc’s wicket occurred simultaneously.

"Good ball," said Archie. "Oh, bad luck!"

I tried to look as though, on the whole, I preferred it that way—as being ultimately more likely to inspire terror in the batsman at my end. Certainly, it gave me confidence; made me over-confident in fact, so that I held on to the next ball much too long, and it started bouncing almost at once.

The Quidnunc, who was convinced by this that he had been merely having a go at the previous ball, shouldered his bat and sneered at it. He was still sneering when it came in very quickly, and took the bottom of the leg stump. (Finger spin, chiefly.)

Archie walked up slowly, and gazed at me.

"Well?" I said jauntily.

"No, don't speak. I just want to look, and look, and look. It's wonderful. No elastic up the sleeve, or anything."

"This is where it first pitched," said the Major, as he examined the ground.
“Did you think of letting in a brass tablet?” I inquired shortly.

“He is quite a young man,” went on Archie dreamily, “and does not care to speak about his plans for the future. But he is of opinion that——”


“Look here, is there anybody else who wants to say anything? No? Then I’ll go on with my over.”

Archie, who had begun to walk back to his place, returned thoughtfully to me.

“I just wanted to say, old chap, that if you’re writing home to-night about it, you might remember me to your people.”

Blair was about the only person who didn’t insult me. This was because he had been fielding long-on; and as soon as the wicket fell he moved round about fifty yards to talk to Miss Fortescue. What people can see in her—Well, directly my next ball was bowled he started running as hard as he could to square leg, and brought off one of the finest catches I’ve ever seen.

“The old square-leg trap,” said Archie. “But you cut it rather fine, didn’t you? I suppose you knew he was a sprinter?”

“I didn’t cut it at all—I was bowling. Go away.”

Yes, I confess it. I did the hat trick. It was a good length half-volley, and the batsman, who had watched my first three balls, was palpably nervous. Archie walked round and round me in silence for some time, and then went over to Thomas.

“He’s playing tennis with me this evening,” he began.

“I was beaten at billiards by him last night,” said Thomas proudly.

“He’s going to let me call him by his Christian name.”

“They say he’s an awfully good chap when you know him,” replied Thomas.

I got another wicket with the last ball of the over, and then we had lunch. Myra was smiling all over her face when we came in, but beyond a “Well bowled, Walter” (which I believe to be Brearley’s name), would have nothing to do with me. Instead she seized Archie, and talked long and eagerly to him. And they both laughed a good deal.
"Arkwright," I heard Archie say at the end. "He's sure to be there, and would do it like a shot."

Like a wise captain Archie did not put me on after lunch, and Simpson soon began to have the tail in difficulties. Just after the eighth wicket fell a telegram came out. Archie took it and handed it to me. "From Maclaren, I expect," he said with a grin.

"You funny ass; I happen to know it's from Dick. I asked him for a wire about the Kent match."

"Oh, did Kent win?" said Archie, looking over my shoulder. As I opened it, the other came up, and I read—

"Please be in attendance for next Test Match. "Hawke."

I got three more that afternoon. One from Fry, one from Leveson-Gower, and one from Maclaren. They all came from Lord's, and I've half a mind to take my telegrams with me, and go. Then Myra would probably get six months in the second division.

"But I shouldn't mind that," said Myra. "You could easily bowl—I mean bail—me out."

A silly joke, I call it.

V

I selected a handkerchief, gave a last look at the weather, which was beastly, and went down (very late) to breakfast. As I opened the door there was a sudden hush. Everybody looked eagerly at me. Then Miss Fortescue tittered.

Well, you know how one feels when that happens. I put my hand quickly to my tie—it was still there. I squinted down my nose, but there was no smut. To make quite sure I went over to the glass. Then Simpson exploded.

Yet nobody spoke. They all sat there watching me, and at last I began to get nervous. I opened my mouth to say "Good morning," but before I got it out Miss Blair gave a little shriek of excitement. That upset me altogether. I walked up to the teapot, and pouring myself out a cup said, with exaggerated carelessness, "Rotten day, isn't it?"

And then came the laughter—shout after shout.

I held out my hand to Myra. "Good-bye," I said, "I'm
going home. Thank you for a very jolly time, but I’m not going to be bullied.”

“Oh, you dear,” she gurgled.

“I am rather sweet before breakfast,” I admitted, “but how—”

“It was too heavenly of you. I never thought you would.”

“I think I shall go back to bed.”

“It was rather rough luck,” said Archie, “but of course the later you are, the worse it is for you.”

“And the higher the fewer. Quite so. If this is from Breakfast Table Topics in the Daily Mirror, I haven’t seen them to-day; but I’ll do my best.”

“Archie, explain.”

Archie took up a piece of paper from the table, and explained. “It’s like this,” he said. “I came down first and looked at the weather, and said—”

“Any one would,” I put in quickly.

“Well, then, Blair came in and said, “Beastly day,” and then Simpson— Well, I thought I’d write down everybody’s first remark, to see if anybody let the weather alone. Here they are.”

“It’s awful,” put in Myra, “to have one’s remarks taken down straight off. I’ve quite forgotten what I said.”

This was the list:

Archie: “Bother.” (So he says.)
Blair: “What a beastly day!”
Simpson: “What a jolly day!”
The Major: “Well, not much cricket to-day, hey?”
Myra: “Oh dear, what a day!”
Miss Blair: “What a terrible day!”
Miss Fortescue: “Oh, you poor men—what a day!”
Thomas: “Rotten day, isn’t it?”
Me: “Rotten day, isn’t it?”

“I don’t think much of Thomas’s remark,” I said.

Later on in the morning we met (all except the Major, that is) in the room which Myra calls hers and Archie calls the nursery, and tried to think of something to do.

“I’m not going to play bridge all day for anyone,” said Archie.

“The host should lay himself out to amuse his guests,” said Myra.
"Otherwise, his guests will lay him out," I warned him, "to amuse themselves."
"Well, what do you all want to do?"
"I should like to look at a photograph album," said Thomas.
"Stump cricket."
"What about hide-and-seek?"
"No, I've got it," cried Archie; "we'll be boy scouts."
"Hooray!" cried everybody else.
Archie was already on his hands and knees. "Hail!" he said, "is that the spoor of the white ant that I see before me? Spoorly not. I have but been winded by the water-beetle.

"Sound, sound the trumpet; beat the drum,
   To all the scouting world proclaim
   One crowded stalk upon the tum
   Is worth an age without a name."

"Archie!" shrieked Myra in horror. "It is too late," she added, "all the ladies have swooned."
We arranged sides. Myra and I and Simpson and Thomas against the others. They were to start first.
"This isn't simply hide-and-seek," said Archie, as they went off. "You've got to track us fairly. We shall probably "blaze" door-posts. When you hear the bleat of a tinned sardine that means we're ready. Keep your eyes skinned, my hearties, and heaven defend the right."
"We ought to have bare knees really," said Myra, when they'd gone. "Boy scouts always do. So that when they go through a bed of nettles they know they've been."
"I shall stalk the stairs to begin with," I said. "Simpson, you go down the back way and look as much like a vacuum-cleaner as possible. Then they won't notice you. Thomas and Myra— Hush! Listen! Was that the bleat of a fresh sardine or the tinned variety?"
"Tinned," said Myra. "Let's go."
We went. I took the Queen Anne staircase on my—in the proper stalking position. I moved very slowly, searching for spoor. Half-way down the stairs my back fin slipped and I shot over the old oak at a tremendous pace, landing in the hall like a Channel swimmer. Looking up, I saw Thomas in front of me. He was examining the door for "blazes."
Myra was next to him, her ear to the ground, listening for the gallop of horses’ hoofs. I got up and went over to them.

"Hast seen aught of a comely wench in parlous case, hight Miss Dahlia?" I asked Thomas.

"Boy scouts don’t talk like that," he said gruffly.

"I beg your pardon. I was thinking that I was a Cavalier and you were a Roundhead. Now I perceive that you are just an ordinary fathead."

"Why," said Myra at the foot of the stairs, "what does this button mean? Have I found a clue?"

I examined it, and then I looked at my own coat.

"You have," I said. "Somebody has been down those stairs quite recently, for the button is still warm."

"Where is Scout Simpson?"

At that moment he appeared breathless with excitement.

"I have had an adventure," he said hurriedly, without saluting. "I was on the back stairs looking like a vacuum-cleaner when suddenly Archie and Miss Blair appeared. They looked right at me, but didn’t seem to penetrate my disguise. Archie, in fact, leant against me, and said to Miss Blair: "I will now tell you of my secret mission. I carry caviare—I mean despatches—to the general. Breathe but a word of this to the enemy, and I miss the half-holiday on Saturday. Come, let us be going, but first to burn the secret code."

And—and then he struck a match on me, and burned it."

Myra gurgled and hastily looked solemn again. "Proceed, Scout Simpson," she said, "for the night approaches apace."

"Well, then they started down the stairs, and I went after them on my—scouting, you know. I made rather a noise at one corner, and Archie looked round at me, and said to Miss Blair: "The tadpoles are out full early. See yonder where one lies basking." And he came back, and put his foot on me and said, "Nay, ’tis but a shadow. Let us return right hastily. Yet tarry a moment, what time I lay a false trail." So they tarried and he wrote a note and dropped it on me. And, afterward, I got up and here it is."

"The secret despatch," cried Myra.

"It’s addressed to the Scoutmistriss, and it says outside: ‘Private, not to be opened till Christmas Day.’"

Myra opened it and read: "Your blessed scouts are
everywhere. Let me have five minutes with her in the nursery, there’s a dear. I’d do as much for you.”

But she didn’t read it aloud, and I didn’t see it till some time afterwards. She simply put it away, and smiled, and announced that the scouts would now adjourn to the billiard-room for pemmican and other refreshments; which they did. The engagement was announced that evening.

VI

“Well,” said Thomas, “how are we going to celebrate the joyful event?”

We were sitting on the lawn, watching Blair and Miss Fortescue play croquet. Archie and Dahlia were not with us; they had (I suppose) private matters to discuss. Our match did not begin for another hour, happily for the lovers; happily also for the croquet-players, who had about fifty-six hoops, posts, flags and what not to negotiate.

“It’s awfully difficult to realize it,” said Myra. “My own brother! Just fancy—I can hardly believe it.”

“I don’t think there can be any doubt,” I said. “Something’s happened to him, anyhow—he’s promised to put me in first to-day.”

“Let’s have a dance to-morrow night,” continued Thomas, relentlessly pursuing his original idea. “And we’ll all dance with Miss Blair.”

“Yes. Archie would like that.”

“I remember, some years ago, when I was in Spain,” said Simpson—

“This,” I murmured appreciatively, “is how all the best stories begin.” And I settled myself more comfortably in my chair.

“No,” said Simpson, “I’m wrong there. It was in Hampstead.” And he returned to his meditations.

“Tell you what,” said Thomas, “you ought to write ’em an ode, Simpson.”

“There’s nothing that rhymes with the lady.”

“There’s hair.” I said quite unintentionally.

“I meant with Dahlia.”

“My dear man, there are heaps. Why, there’s azalea.”

“That’s only one.”
"Well, there are lots of different kinds of azalea."
"Any rhymes for Archie and Mannering?" said Simpson scornfully.
"Certainly. And Simpson. You might end with him—

'Forgive the way the metre limps on,
It's always like that with Samuel Simpson.'

You get the idea?"

"Hush," said Myra, "Miss Fortescue has passed under a hoop."

But it is time that we got on to my innings. Archie managed to win the toss, and, as he had promised, took me in with him. It was the proudest and most nervous moment of my life.

"I've never been in first before," I said, as we walked to the wickets. "Is there any little etiquette to observe?"

"Oh, rather. Especially if you're going to take first ball."

"Oh, there's no doubt about my taking the first ball."

"In that case the thing to remember is, that when the umpire calls 'play,' the side refusing to play loses the match."

"Then it all rests on me? Your confidence in me must be immense. I think I shall probably consent to play."

I obtained guard and took my stand at the wicket. Most cricketers nowadays, I am told, adopt the "two-eyed stance," but for myself I still stick to the good old two-legged one. It seems to be to be less wearing. My style, I should observe, blends happily the dash of a Joseph Vine with the patience of a Kenneth Hutchings; and after a long innings I find a glass of— I've forgotten the name of it now, but I know I find it very refreshing.

Being the hero (you will admit that—after my hat trick) of this true story, I feel I must describe my innings carefully. Though it only totalled seventeen, there was this to be said for it: it is the only innings of less than a hundred ever made by a hero.

It began with a cut to square leg, for which we ran a forced single, and followed on with a brace of ones in the direction of fine slip. After that, I stopped the bowler in the middle of his run-up, and signalled to a spectator to move away from the screen. This was a put-up job with
Myra, and I rather hoped they would give me something for it, but apparently they didn’t. At the end of the over, I went up and talked to Archie. In first-class cricket, the batsmen often do this, and it impresses the spectators immensely.

I said, “I bet you a shilling I’m out next over.”
He said, “I won’t take you.”
I said, “Then I huff you,” and went back to my crease.
My next scoring stroke was a two-eyed hook over point’s head, and then Archie hit three fours running. I had another short conversation with him, in the course of which I recited two lines from Shakespeare and asked him a small but pointed conundrum, and afterwards I placed the ball cleverly to mid-off, the agility of the fieldsman, however, preventing any increment, unearned or otherwise. Finally, I gave my cap to the umpire, made some more ones, changed my bat, and was caught at the wicket.

“I hit it,” I said, as I walked away. I said it to nobody in particular, but the umpire refused to alter his decision.

“I congratulate you,” said Miss Blair, when I was sitting down again.
“I was just going to do that to you,” I said.
“Oh, but you were kind enough to do that last night.”
“Ah, this is extra. I’ve just been batting out there with your young man. Perhaps you noticed?”
“Well, I think I must have.”
“Yes. Well, I wanted to tell you that I think he has quite an idea of the game, and that with more experience he would probably be good enough to play for—for Surrey. Second eleven. Yes. At hockey.”

“Thank you so much. You’ve known him a long time, haven’t you?”
“We were babes together, Madam. At least, simultaneously. We actually met at school. He had blue eyes and curly hair, and fought the captain on the very first day. On the second day his hair was still curly, but he had black eyes. On the third day he got into the cricket eleven, and on the fourth he was given his footer cap. Afterwards he sang in the choir, and won the competition for graceful diving. It was not until his second term that the headmaster really began to confide in him. By the way, is this the sort of thing you want?”
"Yes," smiled Dahlia. "Something like that."

"Well, then we went to Cambridge together. He never did much work, but his algebra paper in the Little Go was so brilliant that they offered him the Senior Wranglership. He refused on the ground that it might interfere with his training for the tug-of-war, for which he had just obtained his blue—and— It's a great strain making all this up. Do you mind if I stop now?"

"Of course I know that isn't all true, but he is like that, isn't he?"

"He is. He put me in first to-day."

"I know you really are fond of him."

"Lorblessyou—yes."

"That makes you my friend, too."

"Of course." I patted her hand. "That reminds me—no as a friend I feel bound to warn you that there is a person about in the neighbourhood called Samuel Simpson who meditates an evil design upon you and yours. In short, a poem. In this he will liken you to the azalea, which I take to be a kind of shrubby plant."

"Yes?"

"Yes, well, all I want to say is, if he comes round with the hat afterwards, don't put anything in."

"Poor man," smiled Dahlia. "That's his living, isn't it?"

"Yes. That's why I say don't put anything in."

"I see. Oh, there—he's out. Poor Archie."

"Are you very sorry?" I said, smiling at her. "I'm just going, you know."

"Between ourselves," I said later to Myra, "that isn't at all a bad girl."

"Oh, fancy!"

"But I didn't come to talk about her—I came to talk about my seventeen."

"Yes, do let's."

"Yes. Er—you begin."

VII

"May I have a dance?" I asked Miss Blair. She put her head on one side and considered. "One, two, three—the next but five," she said.
"Thank you. That sounds a lot; is it only one?"
"You may have two running then, if you like."
"What about two running, and one hopping, and one really gliding? Four altogether."
"We'll see," said Miss Blair gravely.
Myra, who was being very busy, came up and dragged me away.
"I want to introduce you to somebody. I say, have you seen Thomas?"
"It's no earthly good introducing me to Thomas again."
"He's so important because he thinks the dance was his idea; of course I'd meant to have it all along. There she is—her name's Dora Dalton. I think it's Dora.
"I shall call her Dora, anyhow."
I was introduced, and we had a very jolly waltz together. She danced delightfully; and when we had found a comfortable corner she began to talk.
She said, "Do you play cricket?"
I was rather surprised, but I kept quite cool, and said, "Yes."
"My brother's very fond of it. He is very good too. He was playing here yesterday against Mr. Mannering's team, and made six, and then the umpire gave him out; but he wasn't out really, and he was very angry. I don't wonder, do you?"
I had a sudden horrible suspicion.
"Did you say your name was Dora—I mean his name was Dalton?"
"Yes. And just because he was angry, which anybody would be, the wicket-keeper was very rude, and told him to go home and—and bake his head."
"Not bake," I said gently, my suspicion having now become almost a certainty. "Boil."
"Go home, and boil his head," she repeated indignantly.
"And did he?"
"Did he what?"
"Er—did he understand—I mean, don't you think your brother may have misunderstood? I can't believe that a wicket-keeper would ever demean himself by using the word 'boil.' Not as you might say boil. 'Cool his head' was probably the expression—it was a very hot day, I remember."
And... ah, there's the music beginning again. Shall we go back?"

I am afraid Miss Dalton's version of the incident was not quite accurate.

What had happened was this: I had stumped the fellow, when he was nearly a mile and a-half outside his crease; and when he got back to it some minutes later, and found the umpire's hand up, he was extremely indignant and dramatic about it. Quite to myself, _sotto voce_ as it were, I murmured, "Oh, go home!" and I may have called attention in some way to the "bails." But as to passing any remarks about boiling heads—well, it simply never occurred to me.

I had a dance with Myra shortly after this. She had been so busy and important that I felt quite a stranger. I adapted my conversation accordingly.

"It's a very jolly floor, isn't it?" I said, as I brought her an ice.

"Oh yes!" said Myra in the same spirit.

"Have you been to many floors—I mean dances, lately?"

"Oh yes!"

"So have I. I think dances have been very late lately. I think when the floor's nice it doesn't matter about the ices. Don't you think the band is rather too elastic—I mean keeps very good time? I think so long as the time is good, it doesn't matter about the floor."

"Oh, isn't it?" said Myra enthusiastically.

There was a pleasant pause while we both thought of something else to say.

"Have you?" we began.

"I beg your pardon," we said at once.

"I was going to say," Myra went on, "have you read any nice books lately, or are you fonder of tennis?"

"I like reading nice books about tennis," I said. "If they are nice books, and are really about tennis. Er—do you live in London?"

"Yes. It is so handy for the theatres, isn't it? There is no place exactly like London, is there? I mean it's so different."

"Well, of course, up in Liverpool we do get the trams, you know, now... I say, I'm tired of pretending I've only just met you. Let's talk properly."
At this moment we heard a voice say, "Let's try in here," and Archie and Dahlia appeared.

"Hallo! here's the happy pair," said Myra.
They came in and looked at us diffidently. I leant back and gazed at the ceiling.
"Were you just going?" said Archie.
"We were not," I said.
"Then we'll stay and talk to you."
"We were in the middle of an important conversation."
"Oh, don't mind us."
"Thank you. It's really for your benefit, so you'd better listen. Let me see, where were we? Oh yes, 'One pound of beef, ninepence; three pounds of potatoes, fourpence; one piece of emery paper for the blanc-mange, tuppence; one pound of india-rubber—'")
"'Dahlia darling,'" interrupted Myra, in a fair imitation of Archie's voice, "'how often have I told you that we can't afford india-rubber in the cake? Just a few raisins and a cherry is really all you want. You mustn't be so extravagant.'"
"'Dearest, I do try; and after all, love, it wasn't I who fell into the cocoa last night.'"
"'I didn't fall in, I simply dropped my pipe in, and it was you insisted on pouring it away afterwards. And then, look at this—One yard of lace, 4s. 6d. That's for the cutlets, I suppose. For people in our circumstances paper frillings are quite sufficient.'"

Archie and Dahlia listened to us with open mouths. Then they looked at each other, and then at us again.
"Is there any more?" asked Archie.
"There's lots more, but we've forgotten it."
"You aren't ill or anything?"
"We are both perfectly well."
"How's Miss Dalton?"
"Dora," I said, "is also well. So is Miss Fortescue and so is Thomas. We are all well."
"I thought, perhaps—"
"No, there you are wrong."
"I expect it's just the heat and the excitement," said Dahlia, with a smile. "It takes some people like that."
"I'm afraid you miss our little parable," said Myra.
"We do. Come on, Dahlia."
“You’ll pardon me, Archibald, but Miss Blair is dancing this with me.”

Archie strongly objected, but I left him with Myra, and took Miss Blair away. We sat on the stairs and thought.

“It has been a lovely week,” said Dahlia.

“It has,” I agreed.

“Perhaps more lovely for me than for you.”

“That’s just where I don’t agree with you. You know, we think it’s greatly over-rated. Falling in love, I mean.”

“Who’s ‘we’?”

“Myra and I. We’ve been talking it over. That’s why we rather dwelt upon the sordid side of it just now. I suppose we didn’t move you at all?”

“No,” said Dahlia, “we’re settled.”

“That’s exactly it,” I said. “I should hate to be settled. It’s so much more fun like this. Myra quite agrees with me.”

Dahlia smiled to herself. “But perhaps some day,” she began.

“I don’t know. I never look more than a week ahead. ‘It has been great fun this week, and it will probably be great fun next week.’ That’s my motto.”

“Well, ye—es,” said Miss Blair doubtfully.

VIII

“Do I know everybody?” I asked Myra towards the end of the dinner, looking round the table.

“I think so,” said Myra. “If there’s anybody you don’t see in the window, ask for him.”

“I can see most of them. Who’s that tall handsome fellow grinning at me now?”

“Me,” said Archie, smiling across at us.

“Go away,” said Myra. “Gentlemen shouldn’t eaves-drop. This is a perfectly private conversation.”

“You’ve got a lady on each side of you,” I said heatedly, “why don’t you talk to them? It’s simply scandalous that Myra and I can’t get a moment to ourselves.”

“They’re both busy; they won’t have anything to say to me.”
“Then pull a cracker with yourself. Surely you can think of something, my lad.”

“He has a very jealous disposition,” said Myra, “and whenever Dahlia—Bother, he’s not listening.”

I looked round the table again to see if I could spy a stranger.

“There’s a man over there—who’s he? Where this orange is pointing.”

“Oranges don’t point. Waggle your knife round. Oh, him? Yes, he’s a friend of Archie’s—Mr. Derry.”

“Who is he? Does he do anything exciting?”

“He does, rather. You know those little riddles in the Christmas crackers?”

“Yes?”

“Yes. Well, he couldn’t very well do those, because he’s an electrical engineer.”

“But why—”

“No, I didn’t. I simply asked you if you knew them. And he plays the piano beautifully, and he’s rather a good actor, and he never gets up till about ten. Because his room is next to mine, and you can hear everything, and I can hear him not getting up.”

“That doesn’t sound much like an electrical engineer. You ask him suddenly what amperes are a penny, and see if he turns pale. I expect he makes up the riddles, after all. Simpson only does the mottoes, I know. Now talk to Thomas for a bit while I drink my orange.”

Five minutes elapsed, or transpired (whichever it is), before I was ready to talk again. Generally, after an orange, I want to have a bath and go straight off to bed, but this particular one had not been so all-overish as usual.

“Now then,” I said, as I examined the crystallized fruit, “I’m with you in one minute.”

Myra turned round and looked absently at me.

“I don’t know how to begin,” she said to herself.

“The beginning’s easy enough,” I explained, as I took a dish of green sweets under my charge, “it’s the knowing when to stop.”

“Can you eat those and listen to something serious?”

“I’ll try. . . . Yes, I can eat them all right. Now, let’s see if I can listen. . . . Yes, I can listen all right.”

“Then it’s this. I’ve been putting it off as long as I
can, but you’ve got to be told to-night. It’s—well—do you know why you’re here?"

"Of course I do. Haven’t I just been showing you?"

"Well, why are you here?"

"Well, frankly, because I’m hungry, I suppose. Of course, I know that if I hadn’t been I should have come in to dinner just the same, but— Hang it, I mean that’s the root idea of a dining-room, isn’t it? And I am hungry. At least I was."

"Stave it off again with an almond," said Myra, pushing them along to me. "What I really meant was why you’re here in the house."

This was much more difficult. I began to consider possible reasons.

"Because you all love me," I started; "because you put the wrong address on the envelope; because the regular boot-boy’s ill; because you’ve never heard me sing in church; because—stop me when I’m getting warm—because Miss Fortescue refused to come unless I was invited; because—"

"Stop," said Myra. "That was it. And, of course, you know I didn’t mean that at all."

"What an awful lot of things you don’t mean to-night. Be brave, and have it right out this time."

"All right, then, I will. One, two, three—we’re going to act a play on Saturday."

She leant forward and regarded me with apprehension.

"But why not? I’ll promise to clap."

"You can’t, because, you see, you’re going to act too. Isn’t it jolly?" said Myra breathlessly.

I gave what, if I hadn’t just begun the last sweet, would have been a scornful laugh.

"Me act? Why, I’ve never—I don’t do it—it isn’t done—I don’t act—not on Saturdays. How absurd!"

"Have you told him, Myra?" Dahlia called out suddenly.

"I’m telling him now. I think he’s taking it all right."

"Don’t talk about me as ‘him’!" I said angrily. "And I’m not taking it all right. I’m not taking it at all."

"It’s only such a very small part—we’re all doing something, you know. And your costume’s ordered and everything. But how awfully sporting of you."

After that, what could I say?
'Er—what am I?" I asked modestly.
"You're a—a small rat-catcher," said Myra cheerfully.
"I beg your pardon?"
"A rat-catcher."
"You said a small one. Does that mean that I'm of diminutive size, or that I'm in a small way of business, or that my special line is young ones?"
"It means that you haven't much to say."
"I see. And would you call it a tragic or a pathetic part?"
"It's a comic part, rather. You're Hereditary Rat-Catcher to the Emperor Bong. Bong the Second. Not the first Bong, the Dinner Bong."
"Look here. I suppose you know that I've never acted in my life, and never been or seen a rat-catcher in my life. It is therefore useless for you to tell me to be perfectly natural."
"You have so little to do; it will be quite easy. Your great scene is where you approach the Emperor very nervously——"
"I shall do the nervous part all right."
"And beg him to spare the life of his mother-in-law."
"Why? I mean, who is she?"
"Miss Fortescue."
"Yes, I doubt if I can make that bit seem quite so natural. Still, I'll try."
"Hooray. How splendid!"
"A rat-catcher," I murmured to myself. "Where is the rat? The rat is on the mat. The cat is on the rat. The bat is on the cat. The——"
"Mr. Derry will go through your part with you to-morrow. Some of it is funnier than that."
"The electrical engineer? What do they know about rat-catching?"
"Nothing, only——"
"Aha! Now I see who your mysterious Mr. Derry is. He is going to coach us."
"He is. You've found it out at last. How bright green sweets make you."
"They have to be really bright green sweets. Poor man! What a job he'll have with us all."
"Yes," said Myra, as she prepared to leave me. "Now you know why he doesn't get up till ten."
“In the rat-catching business,” I said thoughtfully, as I opened the door, “the real rush comes in the afternoon. Rat-catchers, in consequence, never get up till ten-thirty. Do you know,” I decided, “I am quite beginning to like my little part.”

IX

I was, I confess, very late the next morning, even for a rat-catcher. Mr. Derry was in the middle of his breakfast; all the others had finished. We saluted, and I settled down to work.

“There is going to be a rehearsal at eleven o’clock, I believe,” said Derry. “It must be nearly that now.”

“I shall be there,” I said, “if I have to bring the marmalade with me. You’re going to coach us?”

“Well, I believe I said I would.”

“Though I have never assumed the buskin myself,” I went on, “I have, of course, heard of you as an amateur actor.” (Liar.) “And if you could tell me how to act, while I am finishing my bacon, I should be most awfully obliged.”

“Haven’t you really done any?”

“Only once, when I was very small. I was the heroine. I had an offer, but I had to refuse it. I said, “Alath, dear heart, I may not, I am married already.’”

“Very right and proper,” murmured Derry.

“Well, as it turned out, I had made a mistake. It was my first who had been married already. The little play was full of surprises like.”

Derry coughed, and took out his pipe. “Let me see,” he began, “what’s your part?”

“I am—er—a rodent-collector.”

“Oh yes—the Emperor’s rat-catcher.”

“Grand hereditary,” I said stiffly. “It had been in the family for years.”

“Quite so.”

I was about to enlarge upon the advantages of the hereditary principle when the door opened suddenly to admit Myra and Archie.

“You don’t say you’re down at last!” said Myra, in surprise. “I hardly say anything at breakfast, as a rule,” I pointed out.
"What an enormous one you're having. And only last night—"

"On the contrary, I'm eating practically nothing—a nut and one piece of parsley off the butter. The fact is, I glanced at my part before I went to bed, and there seemed such a lot of it I hardly slept at all."

"Why, you don't come on very much," said Archie. "Neither do I. I'm a conjuror. Can any gentleman here oblige me with a rabbit? ... No, sir, I said a rabbit. Oh, I beg your pardon, I thought you were coming up on to the stage. ... Any gentleman—"

"Have some jam instead. What do you mean by saying I don't come on very much?" I took the book out of my pocket, and began to turn the leaves. "Here you are, nearly every page—'Enter R., 'Exit R.,' 'Enter L.'—I don't know who he is—'Exeunt R.,' why, the rat-catcher's always doing something. Ah, here they're more explicit—'Enter R. C.' Hallo, that's funny, because I'd just— Oh, I see."

"One of our oldest and most experienced mimes," said Archie to Derry. "You must get him to talk to you."

"No secret of the boards is hid from him," added Myra.

"Tell us again, sir, about your early struggles," begged Archie.

"He means your early performances on the stage," explained Myra.

"There's one very jolly story about Ellen Terry and the fireproof curtain. Let me see, were you Macbeth then, or Noise of Trumpets? I always forget."

I drank my last cup of tea, and rose with dignity.

"It is a humorous family," I apologized to Derry. "Their grandfather was just the same. He would have his little joke about the first steam-engine."

Outside in the hall, there was a large crowd of unemployed, all talking at once. I caught the words "ridiculous" and "rehearsal," and the connection between the two seemed obvious and frequent. I singled out Thomas, abstracted his pouch, and began to fill up.

"What is all this acting business?" I asked. "Some idea about a little play, what? Let's toddle off, and have a game of billiards."

"They've let me in for a bally part," said Thomas, "and
you needn’t think you’re going to get out of it. They’ve got you down, all right.”

“Thomas, I will be frank with you. I am no less a person than the Emperor Bong’s Hereditary (it had been in the family for years) Grand Rat-catcher. The real rush, however, comes in the afternoon. My speciality is young ones.”

“I’m his executioner.”

“And he has a conjuror too. What a staff! Hallo, good morning, Simpson. Are you anything lofty?”

“Oh, I am the Emperor Bong,” said Simpson gaily;

“I am beautiful, clever and strong—”

“Question,” said Thomas.

“Tis my daily delight to carouse and to fight, and at moments I burst into song.”

I looked at him in amazement.

“Well, just at present,” I said, “all I want is a match. . . . A lucifer, Emp. A pine vesta, Maj. Thanks. . . . Now tell me—does anybody beside yourself burst into song during the play? Any bursting by Thomas or myself, for instance?”

“Nobody sings at all. My little poem is recitative.”

“If you mean it’s very bad, I agree with you,” said Thomas.

“I made it up myself. It was thought that my part should be livened up a little.”

“Well, why hasn’t it been?”

“If you will give me two minutes, Simpson,” I said, “I will liven up my own part better than that. What rhymes with rat-catcher?”

“Cat-catcher.”

“Wait a bit. . . . Yes, that’s got it:

‘Oh, I’m on the Emperor’s staff,
I’m a rodent-collector (don’t laugh)—
    My record (in braces)
    Of rats and their races
    Is a thousand and eight and a half.’”

“May we have that again?” said Myra, appearing suddenly.

“Oh, I’m on——”
“No,” said Thomas.
“‘Oh, I’m on——’”
“No,” said Simpson.
“There is no real demand, I’m afraid.”
“Well, I did just hear it before,” said Myra. “I wish you’d make up one for me. I think we might all announce ourselves like that, and then the audience will have no difficulty in recognizing us.”
“They’ll recognize Thomas if he comes on with an axe. They won’t think he’s just trotted round with the milk. But what are you, Myra?”
“The Emperor’s wife’s maid.”
“Another member of the highly trained staff. Well, go on, Simpson.”
“Oh, I am her Majesty’s maid,” declared Simpson. “We all begin with ‘Oh,’ to express surprise at finding ourselves on the stage at all. ‘Oh, I am her Majesty’s maid, I’m a sad little flirt, I’m afraid.’”
“I’m respectable, steady and staid,” corrected Myra.
“No,” I said; “I have it——

‘Oh, I am her Majesty’s maid!
And her charms are beginning to fade,
I can sit in the sun
And look just twenty-one,
While she’s thirty-six in the shade.’”

Myra made a graceful curtsey.
“Thank you, sir. You’ll have to pay me a lot more of those before the play is over.”
“Will I really?”
“Well, seeing as the Grand Hereditary One is supposed to be making up to her Majesty’s confidential attendant——”
Miss Fortescue came pushing up to us.
“It is too ridiculous,” she complained; “none of us know our parts yet, and if we have a rehearsal now—what do you think about it?”
I looked at Myra and smiled to myself. “I’m all for a rehearsal at once,” I said.
“Now this is a very simple trick,” said Archie from the centre of the stage. “For this little trick all I want is a hippopotamus and a couple of rubies. I take the hippopotamus in one hand—so—and cover it with the handkerchief. Then, having carefully peeled the rubies——”

Thomas put the last strip of silver paper on to his axe, and surveyed the result proudly.

“But how splendid!” said Myra as she hurried past. “Only you want some blood.” And she jumped over the footlights and disappeared.

“Good idea. Archie, where do you keep the blood?”

“Hey, presto! it’s gone. And now, sir, if you will feel in your waistcoat pockets you will find the hippopotamus in the right-hand side and the red ink in the left. No? Dear, dear, the hippopotamus must have been a bad one.”

“Be an artist, Thomas,” I said, “and open a vein or two. Do the thing properly, Beerbohm. But soft, a winsome maid, in sooth; I will approach her. I always forget that sooth bit. But soft, a win——”

“Why don’t we begin?” asked Simpson; “I can’t remember my part much longer. Oh, by the way, when you come up to me and say, ‘Your Majesty e’en forgets the story of the bull’s-eye and the revolving book-case——’”

“Go away; I don’t say anything so silly.”

“Oh, of course it’s Blair. Blair, when you come up to me and say——” They retired to the back of the stage to arrange a very effective piece of business.

“Any card you like, madam, so long as it is in the pack. The Queen of Hearts? Certainly. Now I take the others and tear them up—so. The card remaining will be yours. Ah, as I thought—it is the Queen of Hearts.”

“Archie, you’re talking too much,” said Dahlia, “and none of it comes into your part really.”

“I’m getting the atmosphere. Have you an old top hat on you, dear, because if so we’ll make a pudding. No top hat? Then pudding is horf.”

“But stay, who is this approaching? Can it be—I say, mind the footlights. When are we going to begin?”

“There!” said Thomas proudly. “Anybody would know that was blood.”
"But how perfectly lovely," said Myra. "Only you want some notches."
"What for?"
"To show where you executed the other men, of course. You always get a bit off your axe when you execute anybody."
"Yes, I've noticed that too," I agreed. "Notches, Thomas, notches."
"Why don't you do something for a change? What about the trap or whatever it is you catch your bally rats with? Why don't you make that?"
"It isn't done with a trap, Thomas dear. It's partly the power of the human eye and partly kindness. I sit upon a sunny bank and sing to them."
"Which is that?"
"If we don't begin soon," began Simpson——
"Hallo, Emperor, what's that you're saying? Quite so, I agree with you. I wonder if your High Fatness can lend me such a thing as a hard-boiled egg. Simpson, when this rehearsal is over—that is to say, to-morrow—I'll take you on at juggling; I'm the best——"
Derry finished his conversation with Miss Fortescue and turned to the stage.
"Now then, please, please," he said. "We'll just take the First Act. Scene, The Emperor's Palace. Enter Ratcatcher. You come on from the left."
I coughed and came on.
My part was not a long one, but it was a very important one. I was the connecting link between the different episodes of the play, and they wanted some connecting. Whenever anybody came on to the stage, I said (supposing I was there, and I generally was—the rat-catcher of those days corresponding to the modern plumber)—I said, "But who is this?" or "Hush, here comes somebody." In this way, the attention of the wakeful part of the audience was switched on to the new character, and continuity of action was preserved.
I coughed and came on.
"No," said Derry, "you must come on much more briskly."
"I can't. I've been bitten by a rat."
"It doesn't say so anywhere."
"Well, that’s how I read the part. Hang it, I ought to know if I’ve been bitten or not. But I won’t show it if you like; I’ll come on briskly."
I went out, and came on very briskly.
"That’s better," said Derry.
"‘His Majesty ordered me to be here at the stroke of noon,’" I said. "‘Belike he has some secret commands to lay upon me, or perchance it is naught but a plague of rats. But who is this?’"
"‘Oh,’" said Myra, coming in suddenly, "‘I had thought to be alone.’"
"‘Nay, do not flee from me, pretty one. It is thus that——’ I say, Myra, it’s no good my saying do not flee if you don’t flee.”
"I was just going to. You didn’t give me a chance. There, now I’m fleeing.”
"Oh, all right. ‘It is thus that the rats flee when they see me approaching. Am I so very fearsome.’”
"‘Orrid,” said Archie to himself from the wings.
"One moment,” said Derry, and he turned round to speak to somebody.
"Puffickly ‘orrid,” said Archie again.
"Nay, do not frown,” Myra went on, ’tis only my little brother, who is like unto a codfish himself, and jealous withal.”
"Ay, ay, and I thought it was a codfish. So that I had e’en brought the egg-sauce with me.”
"Trouble not thyself for that,” said Archie. “For verily the audience will supply thee with all the eggs thou wantest. I say, we are being funny.”
"I’m not, I’m quite serious, I really did think it was a co— ‘But tell me, fair one,’" I said hurriedly, “‘for what dost the Emperor want me?’”
"Yes, yes,” said Derry, “I’m sorry I had to interrupt you. I think perhaps we had better begin again. Yes, from the beginning.”
The rehearsal rolled on.

“I think it went splendidly,” said Myra. “If only we had known our parts and come in at the right moments and been more serious over it.”
"If there's any laughing to be done it will have to be done by us. The audience won't laugh."

"Mr. Derry having explained that the author was not in the house, the audience collected their cauliflowers and left quietly. I think it's a rotten play."

"Well, it isn't frightfully funny," said Myra, "but we can put that in ourselves."

"It's so jolly hard to say the lines properly—they're so unnatural," complained Thomas. "Truly thou hast created a favourable impression with the damsel,—well, I mean, it's absurd. Any ordinary person would say 'Truly thou art amongst them, old sport,' or something of that kind."

"Well, you say, Thomas; you'll be all right."

"We might put a few songs in," said Dahlia, "and a dance or two."

"I think you've forgotten that we've done only Act I," remarked Archie. "His Majesty's conjuror doesn't really let himself go till Act II. Still, I'm all for a song and a dance. Simpson, come and Apache with me."

They dashed at each other fiercely.

"Oh, we'll make it go all right," said Myra.

"Has anybody here seen Kelly?" asked Dahlia, putting her head in at the billiard-room door. "I mean Archie."

"I'm waiting here for Kate," I said. "I mean Myra."

"Oughtn't you to be dressing? It doesn't matter about me—I'm not on for a long time."

"A rat-catcher's best suit is not an elaborate one; I can put it on in about five minutes. It is now seven-thirty, we begin at eight-thirty—hence the billiard cue. More chalk."

"Oh, why aren't you nervous? How you can stand calmly there——"

"I am nervous. Look," I aimed carefully and put the red into a pocket some miles away. "There you are. Have you ever seen me do that in real life? Of course not. If my hand had been steady, I should have been a foot to the right. Still more chalk."
"Well, I want Archie, and I shall cry if I don’t find him. That’s how I feel.” She sat down and got up again.

“My dear Dahlia,” I said solemnly, “now you can understand a father’s feelings—I mean, now, you see what you women have brought on yourselves. Who suggested a play? The women. Who dragged me into it? The women. Who said rat-catchers always wore whiskers? The women. Who is designing me a pair of whiskers at this moment? The wom—Simpson. Who but for whom (this is going to be a very difficult sentence) who but for whom, would be just thinking of dressing leisurely for dinner, instead of which we had a hasty snack, and have now got to put on heaven knows what? The women. Well, it serves you right.”

“Don’t be horrid. I want Archie.” She got up for the third time and drifted out of the room.

I chalked my cue and went into a pocket without touching anything. When I say I went in I mean that the ball I was playing with went in. You do see that? Very well, then. I took it out and began to squint along my cue again, when two hands came suddenly over my eyes and a voice said: “Guess who it is.”

“The Queen of Sheba,” I tried.

“Right,” said Myra.

I turned and looked at her.

“Golly, you do, you really do!” I said at last. “Did they always dress like that in the Bong era? Short skirts, long pigtail, bare arms,—lovely!”

“I can sit in the sun and look just twenty-one,”’” sang Myra as she dropped into the sofa.

“Well, just at present you’re sitting in the billiard-room and looking about fifteen. . . . How are you getting on with your French this term? I had a very bad report in the holidays from your governess. The extra ninepence a week seems to have been simply thrown away.”

“ Aren’t you excited?” said Myra, looking at me with sparkling eyes.

“As for calisthenics, well, what I say is, My daughter is Church of England, and if you don’t like it, she can come away. I’m not going to have her stuffed up with all that nonsense.”

Myra jumped up. “ Aren’t you excited?” she insisted.
"Feel my tongue—I mean my pulse, it's quite normal. And why? Because I've forgotten my part, and I'm going to bed."

"It's a great responsibility our beginning the play."

"It is. Have you ever thought that, if we refused to begin, the play couldn't continue, and then the audience would be able to go home? My idea was to tackle the people as they arrive, and come to terms with them. I'm sure there's money in it."

"You aren't bothering, are you?"

"Of course I am. I'd give a hundred pounds to be out of it. No, I wouldn't—I'd give a hundred pounds if you'd always wear that frock and do your hair like that. Will you? And you shall go on with your French, child."

Myra curtsied prettily.

"And I'll go on with my whiskers. You haven't seen me in those yet, have you?" There was a loud noise without. "Here they are, coming in."

It was not the whiskers, however, but Archie and Thomas in full costume; Archie in green and Thomas in black.

"Hallo," said Archie, "I feel just like a conjuror."

"You look just like a grasshopper," said Thomas.

"My dear friend," said Archie, patting him kindly on his shoulder, "is that you? But you oughtn't to be here, you know. You came up the hot-water pipe, I suppose? Yes, yes, but they misdirected you—the blackbeetle department is in the basement. Well, well, it will be easier going down."

"Archie, Dahlia's looking for you."

"It's all right, she found me. She was nearly in tears. She said, 'Is that my Archibald or an onion?' I said, 'Fear not, fair one, 'tis but the early crocus.' Myra, don't you think they've overdone the green rather? To be quite frank, I don't see why a conjuror should be dressed in green at all."

"To distinguish him from the rat-catcher in brown, the executioner in black, and the Master of the Gold Fish in red."

"I had thought that perhaps a certain aptitude for legerdemain might so distinguish him. But I perceive that I am wrong. Hallo, why aren't you in brown, then?"

"I am coming on like this," I explained. "I was going
to have changed, but now I’ve seen you two, I don’t think I will. With my ordinary clothes, one whisker—probably the starboard one—and a little insouciance, I shall be a great success.”

“What annoys me,” said Thomas, “is that in the early Bong age they had no bally pockets. I’ve simply got nowhere to keep a handkerchief.”

“Keep it behind the scenes; and then, if you blow your nose immediately before the execution, and again immediately after it, you ought to be all right.”

“It isn’t for that. It’s in case I want to cry.”

“It’s all right for me,” said Archie. “I’ve simply got to say, ‘Now can anybody in the audience oblige me with a handkerchief?’ and I shall get dozens.”

“Then I shall probably touch you for one. Great Irving! Is this really Simpson?”

The Emperor Bong was making a splendid entry, looking (except for his spectacles) exactly like an emperor.

“Rise, rise,” he said. “Stop grovelling. Oh, look here, you fellows, when I say ‘On the stomach!’ then you must—Oh, I beg your pardon, Miss Mannering, I didn’t see you were there.”

“Where are my whiskers?” I asked sternly.

“My dear old chap, I couldn’t do them; there wasn’t enough to go round. I made two nice little eyebrows instead—you’ll find them on your dressing-table. ‘Oh, I am the Emperor Bong, I am beautiful, clever and strong. I am beauti—’” Do you think I ought to wear my spectacles or not?”

There was a loud shout of “No!”

“Oh, all right. But I shall probably fall over the sunset or something. Thomas, if you see me wandering into a new moon, tap me on the head with your axe. Why isn’t my rat-catcher dressed?”

“He was waiting for his whiskers.”

“That’s perfectly absurd. You could have grown a pair in the time. Go and dress at once.”

“I refuse to do anything till a quarter-past eight,” I said. “If I get into my things now, all the atmosphere will have worn off by the time we begin.”

“It’s worn off me a long time ago,” said Thomas dismally.

“And me,” said Myra, with a shiver.
"Well, we're all very miserable," said Archie; "let's have a bottle of something. What? Oh, hush! Simpson, just ring the bell, and I'll show you a little conjuring trick. There's nothing on the table at present, is there? No. Well, now, you watch."

The play was a great success; I know, because many of the audience told me so afterwards. Had they but guessed what was going on behind the scenes, the congratulations would have been even more enthusiastic. For as near as a touch we had to drop the eggproof curtain and hand the money back.

I am going to give you the opening scene as it was actually said—not as it was heard across the footlights—and then you will understand. As you may remember, the Rat-catcher (Me) and the Maid (Myra) take the stage first, and they introduce themselves in the usual way to the audience and each other. The scene is the palace of the Emperor Bong (Simpson). Very well then.

Maid (sweetly). Truly his Majesty is a handsome man, and I wonder not that his people love him.

Rat-catcher (rather nervous). Thou surprisest me. I saw him in the wings—in the winter garden just now—that is to say, anon—and thought him plain. But hush, here he comes.

(They salaam, or whatever you call it, and stay there.)

Rat-catcher (still salaaming). What's the silly ass waiting for? I can't stick this much longer; the blood's all going to my head like anything.

Maid (in a similar position). He must have forgotten his cue. Can't you say, "Hush, here he comes," again?

Rat-catcher. I can't say anything out loud in this position. Do you think I might come up for a breath?

Maid (loudly). His Majesty tarries.

Rat-catcher (sotto voce). He does. You've got it.

Maid. Whatever shall we do? Do think of something.

Rat-catcher. Well, I'm going to rise to the surface. I'm tired of being a submarine. (They both stand up.)

Maid (brilliantly). Perchance it was a rat we heard and not his Majesty.
Rat-catcher (with equal brilliance). Fear not, fair damsel. Behold, I will investigate. (Proceeds to back of stage.)

Archie (from wings). Come off, you idiot.

Rat-catcher (always the gentleman—to Maid). Tarry a while, my heart, what time I seek assistance. (Exit.)

Maid (confidentially to audience—to keep the thing going). Truly he is a noble youth, though he follows a lowly profession. 'Tis not the apparel that proclaims the man. Methinks. . . .

Me (annoyed). Who’s an idiot?

Archie. Didn’t you see me wink? That ass Simpson’s banged his nose against a door-post and is bleeding like a pig. Says it’s because he hadn’t got his spectacles.

Me (still annoyed). More likely the champagne.

Archie. They’re dropping keys down his back as hard as they can. Will you and Myra gag a bit, till he’s ready?

Me (excitedly). My good fool, how on earth—

Myra (coming to back of stage). But behold he returns. (Frowns imperiously.)

Rat-catcher (coming on again very unwillingly). Ah, fair maid, ‘tis thee. I bring thee good tidings. I met one in the anteroom, a long-legged, scurvy fellow, who did tell me that his Majesty was delayed on some business.

Maid. That must have been his Conjurer—I know him well. (Aside.) What’s happened?

Rat-catcher. Let us then rest a while, an it please thee. (Seizing her by the arm.) Over here. That ass Simpson’s hurt himself. We’ve got to amuse the audience till he’s finished bleeding.

Maid (sitting down with her back to audience). I say, is it really serious?

Rat-catcher. Not for him; it is for us. Now then, talk away.

Maid. Er—h’m. (Coyly). Wilt not tell me of thy early life, noble sir, how thou didst become a catcher of rats?


Maid. That’s not fair. I asked you first. (Modestly.) But I am such a little thing, and you are so noble a youth.

Rat-catcher. True. (Having a dash at it.) 'Twas thus.
My father, when I was yet a child, didst—did—no, didst—apprentice me to a salad binger——

Maid (with interest). How dost one bing salads?
Rat-catcher (curtly). Ballad singer. And I would frequent the market place at noon, singing catches and glees, and receiving from the entranced populace divers coins, curses, bricks and other ornaments. One morn, as I was embarked upon a lovely ballad, "Place me amidst the young gazelles," I was seized right suddenly from behind. (Bored to death.) I'm sick of this. We're supposed to be amusing the audience.

Maid. Oh, go on. I'm getting awfully amused.

Emperor (audibly from green-room). Confound it, it's begun again.

Executioner (bitterly). And to think that I spent hours putting red ink on my axe!

Maid (with great presence of mind). What's that? Surely that was a rat.

Rat-catcher (greatly relieved). It was. (Getting up.) Let's have Archie on, and see if he can amuse them a bit more. (Aloud.) I must finish my tale anon. Stay here, sweet child, what time I fetch my trusty terrier. (Exit.)

Maid. 'Tis a strange story he tells. How different from my own simple life. Born of proud but morbid parents. . . .

Archie. What's up? Stick to it.

Me. Have you got such a thing as a trusty terrier on you?

Archie (feeling up his sleeve). No.

Me. Well, the audience will be extremely disappointed if I don't bring one back. I practically promised them I would. Look here, why don't you come on and help? Everybody is getting horribly bored with us.

Archie (delightedly). Oh, all right.

Enter Rat-catcher and Conjurer.

Maid. But behold, he returns again!
Rat-catcher (excitedly). Great news, fair lady, which this long-legged, scurvy fellow I told you of will impart to us.

Maid. Why, 'tis the Conjurer. Have you news for us, sir?

Conjurer (with no illusions about the Oriental style). Absolutely
stop press. What is it you want to know? Racing?
The Bong Selling Plate was won by Proboscis, McSimp up.
Immense enthusiasm. Bank rate unchanged—quite right
this cold weather. Excuse me a moment, sir, your mous-
tache is coming off. No, the left wing—allow me to lend
you a postage stamp. Do you prefer red or green?

Maid (biting her lip). Will you not give us news of the
Emperor?

Conjuror. I will. His Majesty has met with a severe
accident whilst out hunting this morning, being bitten by
a buffalo.

Maid. Alas, what will my mistress say?

Conjuror. She has already said everything that was
necessary. Her actual words were: “Just like Bong.”

Rat-catcher (seizing the opportunity). His Majesty ordered
me to meet him here at noon. Methinks I had better with-
draw and return anon. (Makes off hurriedly.)

Conjuror (seizing him). Not so. He bade me command
you to stay and sing to us. (Sensation.)

Rat-catcher (busily). Alas, I have forgotten my voice
—that is, I have left my music at home. I will go and fetch
it. (Has another dash.)

Conjuror. Stay! Listen! (They all listen.)

Simpson (in wings). Thanks, thanks, that will be all
right now. Oh no, quite, thanks. Oh, is this your key?
Thanks, thanks. No, it doesn’t matter about the other
ones, they don’t feel at all uncomfortable, thanks. Yes,
I think it really did stop it, thanks.

Conjuror. I’m off! (Aloud.) His Majesty has regained
consciousness. (Exit.)

Simpson (apologetically). Oh, Archie, I’ve got the billiard-
room key in my——

Rat-catcher (very loudly to Maid). Hush, here he comes!
(They salaam.)

(Enter the Emperor Bong.)

XIII

“Ladies and gentlemen,” said Simpson at the supper-
table, glass in hand, “it is my pleasant duty——”

“Bother!” murmured Myra. “Drinking healths always
makes me feel funny.”
“Silence for McSimp,” shouted Archie. “Now then, pass along there, please. There’s no need to push, you’ll all be able to hear. Gentleman, the O’Sumph is addressing us impromptu, not to say unasked.”

“It is my pleasant duty,” continued Simpson, “as your late Emperor (Half-an-hour-late. How’s the probosc?), to propose the health of the Rabbits Dramatic Company. (Hooray!) Great as we are on the cricket-field (Wide!)—great, I say, as we are on the cricket-field (Pitch ’em up, Simpson), we are, I think, still greater in the halls of Thespis. (Don’t know the lady.) Gentlemen, I knew Irving. (Liar!) I have heard tell of Garrick (Good! Ever heard of Shakespeare?), but to-night has been a new experience for me. (I will—give you—the kee—ys of—.) Ladies and gentlemen, I propose our very good healths, coupled with the name of our hostess Miss Mannerings.” (Loud cheers.)

“That’s me,” said Myra.

“I single out Miss Mannerings,” added Simpson, “because I’m sure we should all like to hear her make a speech.”

“Oh, Samuel,” said Myra, shaking her head at him, “and I thought it was because you loved me.”

“The Rabbits! Myra!” we cried.

“Miss Mannerings will now address you,” announced Archie. “She will be glad to answer any questions afterwards; but any one who interrupts will be hurled out. I appeal to you, as Englishmen, to give her a fair hearing.”

Myra stood on a chair, looking lovely, but very lonely, and waited till we were silent.

“My dear good friends,” she began, and then she caught Thomas’s eye. “Hallo, Tommy,” she said wistfully. . . . “My dear good friends, but why should you say I’m a jolly good fellow, when it isn’t my birthday or anything? But how silly of you! Why, of course, we’re all jolly good fellows—and jolly good actors too. It has been fun, hasn’t it? . . . Oh, Archie, dear. . . . I hope we shall all be here in the summer, don’t you? Well, you can’t very well say you don’t, now I’ve asked you, can you? You’ll have to pretend your uncles are very ill, and then you needn’t come. . . . Oh, please—don’t look at me like that, make me want to cry, and I only want to laugh to-night. . . . Archie, may I get down?”
“She is a dear,” Dahlia whispered to me. “How you can go on——”

It was Simpson who saved the situation and made us merry and bright again. He hastily trotted out the suggestion that we should tour the country in the summer, playing cricket in the day and Bong the Second at night. Archie backed him up at once.

“Only I’m off Bong Two altogether,” he said. “Of course, what we want is a cricket play. We shall have to write one ourselves, I expect; there aren’t any really good ones about. Act I, Rupert Vavasour, a dashing bat and the last descendant of an ancient but impoverished house, is in love with the beautiful but equally impoverished Millicent. Milly is being pursued by a rich villain of the name of Jasper Fordyce, the said Jasper being a bowler of extreme swiftness, with a qualification for Essex. . . . Go on, Simpson.”

“In order to restore the fallen fortunes of the house, Rupert plays for Kent as a professional—Binks (R.)—and secures talent money in six successive matches. Jasper hears of it, and (Act II) assassinated the scorer, bribing a hireling of his own to take the deceased’s place. In the next match Rupert only scores forty-nine.”

“Rupert,” continued Thomas, “who had been counting his own jolly score, and made it eighty-seven, was furious, and determined at all costs to foil the villain. Accordingly he went on to bowl in the next innings and took five wickets for two hundred and thirty-nine, thus obtaining talent money.”

“A little love interest, please, Dahlia,” said Archie.

“Now the captain, who was in the secret,” said Dahlia, “was in love with Rupert’s sister, which was why he put Binks (R.) on to bowl. As soon as Binks had collected his five wickets, Blythe went on, and took the other five for three runs. In this way Kent just managed to win, and so Rupert got more talent money.”

“The next match was against Essex—Act III the great act of the play—and Jasper Fordyce was playing for the Leyton brigade. As he put on his spurs before taking the field, and brushed his sleek black hair, he smiled sardonically to himself. Had he not overnight dug holes in the pitch at the pavilion end, and was not the wicket fiery, and he notoriously an erratic bowler?”
“Everything points to Simpson playing Jasper,” I said, and continued:

“‘Heads,’ cried Jasper. It was heads. ‘I put you in,’ he remarked calmly. ‘What!’ said the other in amazement. Ten minutes later Binks (R.) and Humphreys were at the wicket. Binks took first ball with a touch of nervousness at his heart. All depended on this match. If only he could make four hundred and fifty to-day, he would be able to pay off the mortgage and marry his Millicent. . . . ‘Play.’ Jasper rushed up to the wicket and delivered the ball. Then before anybody could see how it happened, Rupert was stretched full-length upon the sward!”

“I had rather thought of playing Rupert myself,” said Archie. “But I’m not so sure now.”

“Five for two hundred and thirty-nine,” I reminded him. “The part was written for you.”

“But what of Millicent?” said Myra. “Fearing lest some evil should overtake her lover she had attended the match clad in a long ulster, and now she flung this off, revealing the fact that she was in flannels. With her hair tucked up beneath her county cap she looked a slim and handsome boy. To rush on to the field and take the injured one’s place was the work of a moment. ‘Who is this?’ said the umpires in amazement. ‘Fear not,’ whispered Millicent to Humphreys, ‘I have a birth qualification for the county, and the gardener coached me for an hour last night.’”

“Once more Jasper rushed up to the crease, and the spectators held their breath.”

“I’m going to be a spectator,” I said, “with a breath-holding part. Sorry—go on, Blair.”

“Then Millicent’s bat flashed, and, behold! the ball was on the boundary! A torrent of cheers rent the air. Again he bowled, again the bat flashed. Jasper ground his teeth.

“The curtain goes down here to represent the passing of an hour. When it rises again, Millicent’s score is four hundred and twenty-three. There was dead silence for a moment. Then Millicent swung her bat. And at that the cheers broke out, such cheering as had never been heard before. MacLaren’s record score was beaten at last! ‘Now surely he will knock his wickets down,’ said the spectators. Little did they know that until four hundred and fifty was upon the tins the mortgage could not be paid off! Four hundred
and thirty—four hundred and forty—four hundred and forty-nine—a sharply run single—four hundred and fifty! From the pavilion Rupert heard the cheers and fainted again.

"It was 'over,' and Millicent had the bowling. Jasper delivered the ball, a fast half-volley—"

("Oh, Simpson simply must play Jasper.'")

"—and Millicent drove it back hard and true. Jasper tried to duck, but it was too late. He was dead.

"Act IV. All his money went to Rupert, who was a distant cousin. He married Millicent, and they lived happily ever after. But, though they are always to be seen at the Tonbridge and Canterbury weeks, they have never played cricket again. Curtain."

"And bedtime," said Myra suddenly. "Good night, everybody."
TREAD ON IT

LOUIS GOLDFING
Louis Golding, novelist, essayist, and lecturer, spends most of his time tramping along the remoter shores of the Mediterranean, and seems able to write brilliantly under conditions of discomfort that few authors would endure. Of his many novels Magnolia Street, a powerful study of Jewish life, is the most remarkable.
TREAD ON IT

HETTIE TEMPLETON and Frank Stamper were engaged to be married. The marriage was fixed for a year come next April, which meant not too long and not too short an engagement. It would give Hettie time to get her bottom drawer ready and Frank time to put a decent penny away towards buying a small modern home and the furniture that goes with it. They didn’t believe in doing things either too slowly or too soon in the small town of Weaving, in Oxfordshire. The town of Weaving was neither too small nor too large. In fact, everything was just comfortable in Weaving in general, and in the affairs of Frank and Hettie in particular. So they were going to be married a year come next April.

And then Claude Pettifer appeared on the scene. That was in February. Three months later, in May, the engagement between Frank Stamper and Hettie Templeton was broken off. A month after that, in June, it was announced that a marriage would take place between Claude Pettifer and Hettie Templeton. Claude and Hettie wanted it to take place in four weeks. Hettie’s mother managed to persuade them to wait for four months. That was quite quick enough work for the small town of Weaving in Oxfordshire.

And this is how it happened. It first must be stated quite bluntly that Hettie Templeton was not a flibbertigibbet, a fly-by-night, as you might call it. She was a nice steady girl who worked at Tomkins’s, the milliner, and would have stood a good chance of becoming a manageress, too, if she hadn’t made up her mind to go in for marriage as a career instead, now with one young man, now with another. Frank Stamper was a nice steady chap, too. Perhaps, on the whole, he was just a little too nice and steady. He was a leading light in the local Rationalist Society and went in for wrought iron as a hobby. By profession he was a bank clerk. In fact, during the evolution of the events which are about to be described,
he became head cashier. That appointment did not itself modify the course of events, but does at least show that it was not because he was an unstable young man, with anything but the most rosy prospects before him, that Hettie Templeton broke off her engagement with him and announced her determination to marry Claude Pettifer.

No, the reason for that was neither Frank Stamper nor Hettie Templeton. It was Claude Pettifer himself, nothing but Claude Pettifer, his liquid brown eyes, his curly brown hair, his beautiful brown hands, his exquisite finger-nails.

Claude Pettifer was no yokel from Weaving. And for that matter, neither was Frank Stamper either. His father had been an insurance canvasser and his mother the daughter of a lay preacher. His antecedents were unimpeachable on both sides.

But the fact is Claude Pettifer made every native in the place look completely bucolic, he had such a cultured voice and such polished manners. Claude came from the suburb of Chiswick in the West of London, a region with lots of artistic people in it, as well as lots of the best London families. He was a photographer. He had what he called an atelier on the Chiswick High Road. But he didn’t feel that he got his chance there, in Chiswick. There were too many competitors there, who did a very second-rate line of business, from passports to enlargements. That wasn’t what he was after at all. He liked taking photographs of people at odd angles, in funny chalky lights and pitchy blacknesses. Or he would just photograph people’s shoulder-blades made all shiny with vaseline, or the tips of their fingers holding eggs delicately balanced on plain wooden bones. He was really more an artist than a mere photographer, and he should have had an atelier in Berkeley Square, or in Sloane Street, at least, rather than in Chiswick High Road.

That was his ambition, of course. But he hadn’t the money to gratify it for the time being. So he looked round for a small provincial town which was not so go-ahead that it was already stocked up with modernist photographers, nor, so to speak, so stick-in-the-mud that it would laugh a modernist photographer out of the town. And that was how he hit upon Weaving, in Oxfordshire, a town which is neither too outré nor too old-world. And that was how he came to meet Frank Stamper and Hettie Templeton. With the one he
became very friendly, for Frank was intelligent and sympa-
thetic, and really had an idea what Claude was about with
his angles and shadows and eggs balanced on bones. With
the other he fell in love, for Hettie was a good-looking girl,
quite one of the best-looking girls in the place, and she had the
sort of shoulder-blades which, when rubbed over with vaseline,
photographed extremely well. Really, a girl like Hettie was
wasted on a place like Weaving. She was more than good
enough to preside over an atelier flat in Sloane Street, or even
in Berkeley Square for that matter. You could do quite a
lot with her shoulder-blades besides photograph them.

And in the course of a couple of months he not only
convinced Hettie Templeton that it would be a crying shame
if she buried herself in Weaving for the rest of her life, but
he managed to convince Frank Stamper too. Frank was not
only a rationalist, he was rational, as well; and when Claude
put the case to him with a lucidity and a cogency which would
have won over a superstitious peasant, he could bring up no
counterarguments against his friend’s case.

Of course, Claude made no bones about it. He admitted
he was in love with Hettie. He wanted to marry her for his
own sake just as much as for Hettie’s. But taking it by and
large, seeing that they both loved Hettie, what was the right
thing for Hettie to do? There was clearly only one answer
to the question.

So Hettie announced that her engagement to Frank was
broken off. A month later Hettie announced her engagement
to Claude. And then a month or so later, a certain Schevering,
a visitor from the Hague, in Holland, appeared on the scene,
and he had quite a lot to do with the subsequent histories
of Hettie Templeton and her two young men.

Schevering was too grand a person to have a first name
or be called “Monsieur” or “Herr” or anything. He was just
“Schevering, Telepaath”. He always used the Dutch word
with simple dignity to describe who he was and what he did,
as a Henry Tudor might say of himself, he was “Henry, King”.
He was tall and lean and sallow and looked a little like Savon-
arola the Florentine. He was making a round of the smaller
suburban and provincial music-halls, until such time as the
stellar music-halls of London, Paris, and New York recognized
his powers. Until which time this extraordinary man had to
content himself with appearing on the same bills as comic
cyclists in bloomers, simpering sopranos, and performing seals.

Schevering was a "Telepaath", a thought-reader. He got up on the stage with the air of a Jeremiah lamenting, and his manager announced that any member of the audience could make any mental request whatsoever from Schevering, and he would fulfil it, so long as it was within the bounds of propriety and the physical possibilities of the hall. Members could come up from their seats or stay in their seats; they could confide their requests to their friends or the manager, or they could keep them entirely to themselves. The only thing that was stipulated was this: in the act of conveying their requests across the ether to the sensitive reception-plate of Schevering's mind, the public must split up their requests, however complicated, into their elements—to render them in a strict time-series. It was not enough to will Schevering to come up to you where you sat and request him to take the tram-ticket out of your left-hand upper waistcoat pocket and light a cigarette with it taken out of the case in the trouser-pocket of the gentleman sitting two seats away. You had first to will him to take the tram-ticket out of your left-hand upper waistcoat pocket. Then, that safely achieved, you had to will him to turn his attention to the gentleman two seats away. Then he had to take the cigarette-case out of his trouser pocket. Then remove the cigarette. And so on and so on from stage to stage till the culminating act of clairperciption was achieved.

And the fact was that success invariably crowned Schevering's experiments if his one proviso was respected. And success was invariably greeted with a roar of acclamation which was only equalled by the storm of boooing which accompanied it. For Weaving was split from top to bottom by the Schevering question. Half Weaving was convinced of the genuineness of Schevering's powers, even though there was considerable discussion among the believers as to their actual nature. The other half was convinced that the experiments were carried on through the agency of some ingenious code, and when they booed Schevering night after night in the theatre, it was not because the experiments did not come off, for they patently did come off, but because they resented the foreigner's insolence in attempting to hoodwink a body of decent straightforward Englishmen.

It is not to be wondered at that Frank Stamper was the
leader of the faction that repudiated Schevering and all his works. He did not join in the booing himself, but he gave the booers their principal arguments. Frank Stamper did not accept the possibility of extra-human powers. He did not believe in them when Buddhas or Mohommads claimed them and made religions out of them, and he did not accept them when cheap-jack foreigners claimed them and made money out of them.

The leader of the opposite faction was Claude Pettifer, and that was not to be wondered at either. In a sense he was as modernist as anyone in Weaving, or in Bloomsbury, for that matter, as witness his balanced eggs, his greased shoulder-blades, the chromium-plate fittings in his shop-window. But he was a mystic, too; he had read popular summaries of the works of Eddington and Jeans, and he was convinced matter wasn’t everything. Some of his supporters said it wasn’t necessary to go any further than Schevering himself went—namely, to admit the proven validity of telepathic powers and Schevering’s possession of them. But that wasn’t enough for Claude. He maintained that Schevering was a scientific mystic; he existed on more than one time-plane simultaneously; he was, in fact, in tune with the infinite.

Feeling ran high in Weaving and the two factions came to blows once or twice in the theatre itself, as well as in the public-house. But the two leaders, Claude Pettifer and Frank Stamper, treated each other with the most scrupulous politeness. You might even say, so far as Claude was concerned, he treated Frank not only with politeness but with heartiness. After all, Frank had behaved like a white man in the matter of Hettie Templeton. Claude was thoroughly grateful to him.

Frank himself did not feel so amiable about the affair. In fact, as the weeks went on, he began to feel more and more furious. He wasn’t at all certain that people weren’t beginning to say of him that he was, in their blunt way of putting it, “a mug”. There were occasions when Claude talked to him so smoothly with that cultured voice, and rolled his brown liquid eyes at him so winningly, that it was all he could do not to smash Claude’s face in there and then. He did not do so, however, not merely because Claude was several inches bigger than he was, but because he thought that was no way for a rationalist to behave.

No, Claude and Frank were on the best of terms, so far
as anyone could judge. So much so, that on a certain Saturday morning, Claude sent Frank round a nice present. You could almost say of it, it was really a big-minded present. It was a photograph of Claude himself, with Hettie at his side. In setting and conception it was a return to earlier photographic traditions. The furniture in the background consisted of an Italian temple, a console-table, and an aspidistra on a bamboo table. The picture itself depicted Hettie with one hand on Claude’s further shoulder and Claude with one hand on Hettie’s. Their shoulders faced the camera but their heads were turned. They were looking into each other’s eyes like a pair of courting lovers who had gone up to Blackpool for the day.

Claude was so pleased with the picture, slightly reactionary though it was, that he not only sent a copy to Frank, but he put up another copy in the very centre of his shop-window. It was obviously much more to the taste of the Weaving people than all those eggs and cogwheels and knee-caps, for it attracted a great deal of attention. As the day went on, the crowd got bigger and bigger. When Frank went by on his way home from the bank, he did not need to ask why that big crowd was gathered in front of Claude Pettifer’s shop-window. He knew. He blushed to the roots of his hair, and crept round a corner like a pickpocket who is not at all certain that someone hasn’t seen him filch a watch from somebody’s waistcoat.

The narrow passage he had crept into led him round by the back of the Weaving Hippodrome. There was a big bill pasted up on a space of wall beside the stage-door. The bill was a picture of “Schevering, Telepaath”, in a tail-suit. The eyes were piercing, the brow was lofty. A smaller bill was pasted obliquely across Schevering’s legs. “Last Performance To-night”, said the bill.

“Last Performance To-night?” murmured Frank to himself, out of the depths of his musing. “Last Performance To-night? Oh, Mr. Dirty Pettifer, there may be a chance of getting my own back, after all. I may make a fool of myself, Mr. Stinking Pettifer, but not half such a fool as I’ll make you. Do what you can, Schevering, do all you can!”

Frank Stamper managed to get a seat in the front row of the stalls that night, for Schevering’s last performance. It was a distinguished place, but only half as distinguished as Claude Pettifer’s. Claude had a box, the bottom stage-box
on the right-hand side. He had Hettie Templeton beside him. They looked very smart in their evening-dress and a large box of chocolates on the ledge in front of them. He caught sight of Frank in his stall. "Hello, Frank. Is that you?" he called out over the intervening heads, as if he had for a moment thought that Frank might be President Roosevelt.

"Yes," said Frank between his teeth. "It's me right enough!"

"Oh, that's odd!" cried Claude. "I thought you'd had enough on Monday!"

"Yes, Frank," exclaimed Claude's supporters. "Have you come round?"

"I thought I'd give him another chance," said Frank.

The comedians and the acrobats got through their turns somehow. Nobody in Weaving that week was interested in comedians or acrobats. At last the turn of "Schevering, Telepaath", came round. He was greeted with the accustomed uproar of cheers and boos. He looked more like Savonarola than ever. The manager made his usual little speech. Three or four experiments were carried out with the usual success.

"Any other lady or gentleman, please?" asked the manager, wiping his hands. A little globule of sweat ran down each cheek. "How about it, ladies and gentlemen?"

"Yes, if you don't mind," a voice came a little fearfully, a little shrilly, from a seat in the front row of the stalls. "I'd like to have a try, please."

"By all means!" said the manager. "Would you like to come up on the stage? Or would you like Schevering to come down to you?"

"I'd like him to come down to me, thank you," replied Frank Stamper. He seemed to have taken command of himself again. There was a note of grim resolution in his voice not habitual in it.

Schevering stepped over the footlights and down into the stalls. As he descended his coat-tails flapped up behind and around him like the wings of a vulture. He looked not unlike a bird of prey with that blue jowl and great beak. His manager led him by the hand and stationed him in front of Frank Stamper. The whole house was as hushed as a cathedral. They were aware of the drama of this confrontation—Schevering, Telepaath, and Frank Stamper, Infidel. Claude Pettifer
looked down indulgently from his box and smiled. Hettie Templeton looked a little as if she were going to cry. It wasn't a bit like Frank to show himself up in this way, she thought.

"Would you like to tell me or anyone else in the house what it is you want Schevering to do?" asked the manager.

"I would not," said Frank.

"Then you promise to admit it, if he does exactly what you want him to do?"

"I do."

"You know that you must convey your commands to Schevering in simple stages, item by item?"

"Yes, I do."

It sounded a little like a catechism in a court of law. There was a tittering here and there, followed by angry cries of, "Hush! Hush!"

The manager turned to the telepathist. "Los, Schevering!" he bade. Schevering raised himself to his full height, thrust his head backwards, and stood there sniffing, almost as if it was through his nostrils rather than his brain he received his orders. His eyes were closed. His closed fists were held out horizontally before him.

_Bend down towards my seat,_ commanded the brain of Frank Stamper. Schevering stood there swaying a little, uncertain. The order had not got across to him.

_Bend down towards my seat,_ commanded Frank again. Slowly, a little dubiously, Schevering bent down towards Frank's seat.

_Let me get out of the way,_ he bade. Schevering turned his head towards him like a blind man turning to a voice that has addressed him.

_That's right. You've been right all the time. I've been a fool. What are you shaking your head like that for? What are you screwing our eyes up like that for?_

_Oh, I think I see. I mustn't muddle up the issue with extraneous ideas. I must get straight on with it. Very well, then._

_There is something thin and flat under my seat._ _Pick it up._ _No, not that tram-ticket. Much bigger than that. It is wrapped up in brown paper and string._ _That's right._ _Pick it up._

Schevering duly picked the thing up. It might have been a poster wrapped up in paper, or a photograph, or a piece of three-ply wood. He held it up and showed it to the audience. His eyes were still closed.
No, said the brain of Frank Stamper. That's not all I want from you. Get back to the stage at once. Do you hear? Get back to the stage at once.

Holding the thing in brown paper still before him, and with his eyes half opened now, Schevering walked to the small staircase and climbed up to the stage again. He stood there near the wings, as if waiting to find out if anything more were wanted from him or no.

"Has the gentleman finished the experiment?" asked the manager.

"No," said Frank.

"The gentleman isn't easily pleased. That's all right to us. Would the gentleman like to go on to the stage?"

"No. I'll stay here."

"All the better. Will you continue, please?"

Get to the middle of the stage. Schevering went obediently over to the middle of the stage. Take the string and brown paper off the parcel. Schevering fumbled about a little awkwardly, then waited, doing nothing.

Very well then. One thing at a time. Take the string off the parcel. Schevering took the string off the parcel. Take the brown paper off now. He took the brown paper off.

The thing that had been wrapped up was an oblong piece of cardboard, a panel of blackness mounted on cream cardboard. It looked very much like a photograph. The photograph almost slipped from Schevering's hand, or he almost let it fall.

No, you fool. Don't anticipate. One thing at a time. Let everybody in Weaving see who it is. Lift it up high. Schevering lifted the photograph high.

Turn round with it from left to right. He turned round with it from left to right. And from right to left.

All Weaving could see who it was. It was Hettie Templeton and Claude Pettifer, with their hands on each other's shoulders. They looked tenderly into each other's eyes. But the real Hettie and the real Claude, where they sat in their box, were not looking tenderly into each other's eyes. Claude was looking straight before him, his cheeks pale as chalk, his eyes almost glassy with horror. Hettie had her hands before her eyes. Tears were trickling down her cheeks.

Now throw the photograph on to the floor. Schevering duly threw the photograph down. You could have heard a fly
buzzing against a mirror, so intense was the quiet in the little music-hall.

Now, now, tread on it! Do you bear? Tread on it! Tread on it! Wipe it out! Like a door-mat! Harder! Faster! Harder! Faster! Faster!

Schevering danced like a negro in Harlem, like a dervish in the desert. The sweat poured from his brow in streams, and in streams from the brow of Frank Stamper. Claude Pettifer in his box had not moved one fraction of an inch. He still held the ledge of the box before him with fingers pale as celery. His eyes were still filmy as glass balls. Hettie Templeton was blubbering like a whipped schoolgirl.

The thunders of applause that greeted the apocalyptic success of the experiment brought the plaster down in flakes from the gilt cherubs above the proscenium arch. There was not a squeak of opposition. "Well done, mister!" they roared, for they could not bring themselves to pronounce the outlandish name. "Well done, mister!" And, "Well done, Frank!" they added. "That was a right one!" they cried. "Well done, Frank!"

And indeed it was a right one. It was quite impossible for Claude Pettifer to stay on in Weaving after this dreadful humiliation, and quite impossible for Hettie Templeton to consider with anything but distaste the prospect of marrying him. So Claude Pettifer returned to photograph shoulder-blades in the Chiswick High Road, till such time as he could establish his atelier in a region worthy of his talents. And Hettie Templeton and Frank Stamper got married in Weaving the following April, on the very date that had been originally arranged between them. Schevering, Telepaath, and his manager were in Bradford on the day of the marriage, but they did not forget to send the happy pair a telegram, in addition to the nice little beaten-pewter coffee-set they had sent on earlier.
NO THOROUGHFARE

ROLAND PERTWEE

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ROLAND PERTWEE began his career as a painter, but abandoned this later in favour of the stage. Towards the end of his stage career, however, he developed a pronounced liking for writing, and this has been his métier ever since. He has written chiefly for the stage, but has also published several novels and that excellent collection of short stories *Fish are such Liars*. 
NO THOROUGHFARE

There are some persons who take no pleasure in approaching an object by a direct route. Muriel Drayle was like that. She gloriéd and she revelled in intrigue. Not vulgar intrigue, it should be stated, for Lady Drayle was a good and a loyal wife, devoted to her husband whom she never tired of deceiving in a multitude of ways. Like her late father, General Sir Branksome Cloud, K.C.M.G., C.B., D.S.O., she had no faith in the principle of frontal attack. This characteristic had earned for him the sobriquets “Round-The-Corner Cloud” and “Smoke-Screen Cloud.”

Muriel had admired the General immensely and strove to pattern her ways on his. And well it was for her that she did so, for Sir Maurice Drayle, her husband, had the firmly established and infuriating habit of standing in the path of everything that he saw coming.

Sir Maurice was a born obstructionist. The mere suggestion that it would be a good idea to do so and so on the estate was quite enough to make him stop it.

Muriel was full of such ideas. Plots, plans and schemes gathered round her like a swarm of bees. But would Sir Maurice lift a finger to help her mature them? Not he. He thwarted them. He pulled them up by the roots. He stamped them flat.

Muriel had a perfectly clear conception of how best to deal with a financial depression. You must expand. Sir Maurice had an equally clear conception. You must contract. The result was a house divided. His policy of retrenchment was opposed by a strong but unrevealed policy of Spend More.

Her chief difficulty, and as some people believed, delight, lay in concealing from Sir Maurice the nature of her operations until it was too late for him to frustrate them. Sir Maurice was no fool and his suspicions were easily aroused. To keep
him in the dark, the number of deceptions that she was com-
pelled to practice would have driven a less determined woman
into an insane asylum.

Muriel Drayle did not believe in facing trouble before it
was unavoidable. Until such a time she carried on a cam-
paign of lies, distortions and evasions, secure in the knowledge
the end justified the means. Her conscience never disturbed
her, for she told herself that it was Maurice’s fault that things
must be done that way.

The habit of detaching blame from herself was inherited.
Her father owed his military successes to an astonishing gift
for shifting responsibility for the follies he had committed
from the higher to the lower ranks of his command. He
perished with a spotless record and provided an example to
all men to go and do likewise.

It was the custom of the Drayles to breakfast early. Thus
was Sir Maurice enabled to put in an hour’s exercise before
confronting the sterner duties of the day. Recently he had
sold his hunters and taken to golf largely and scientifically.
One of the most impressive sights in the neighbourhood was
to behold the baronet, equipped with a driver and a captive
ball, standing beneath a cedar tree, some three hundred years
of age, grooving his swing.

Beside his plate at the breakfast table was a copy of
Morrison’s New Way to Better Golf, and as Sir Maurice masti-
cated toast and marmalade he committed to memory passages
from that work such as should ensure for him the winning
of many half-crowns upon the links.

“I’ve got this driving business taped,” he announced and
frowned at Muriel as though daring her to deny it. “There
are only two things—wrists and pointing your chin at the
ball.”

Muriel had no sympathy with golf. It was not, in her
opinion, a game in which large landowners should display
themselves. How much better if he would develop the
estate and buy hunters rather than sell them and point his
chin at a ball!  

Sir Maurice closed the book with the air of a man to
whom the problems of the future have been made clear and
moved towards the door.

“What are you going to do this morning?” asked Muriel.
She knew that he objected to interrogations, but it was
vital to the success of her plans that she should have a clear idea of his movements.

His eyebrows rose.

"Does it matter, my dear?"

It might matter very much, but she did not tell him so.

"I just like to know," she said.

"I have some letters to write. After that I may run over and see Spender—explain to him this business about the chin."

He could not be expected to understand what provoked the gasp of horror that greeted his words. The shortest way to Colonel Spender's lay through Mindle Lane, and in Mindle Lane was the old Tithe barn that Muriel was having converted into a modern residence. In another week or two the building operations would be too far advanced for Sir Maurice to put a stop to them. But now—at this moment—well!

If Muriel had not been so startled she would never have committed the folly of trying to dissuade him.

"Oh, I wouldn't do that, Maurie."

"I have every intention."

"But the Parminters are coming to lunch. Don't you want to be here to meet them?"

"No."

Muriel Drayle pressed fingertips to the corners of her eyes.

"Sometimes I think," she said, "you don't want to please me."

Sir Maurice assumed the manner that he adopted on the bench. Practical argument tinged with pity.

"Why it should please you to keep Spender in the dark as to the proper position to put his chin while make a golf stroke is a problem I fail to understand. 'Pon my soul, Muriel, anybody would think you were touched."

"Then you mean to go?"

"Certainly," and he went from the room to where a captive ball waited to prove to him that there were still mysteries in the game of which he was not master.

Muriel did not despair. The situation was critical, but she faced it. As yet she had no idea what to do, but by hook or by crook he must be prevented from going down Mindle Lane.

From a peg in the hall she took a leather motoring-coat
and put it on over her peignoir. There was no time to change. The mules she was wearing, with their ostrich feather fringes, looked out of place and incongruous beneath the coat, but that couldn’t be helped.

In the courtyard she met the gardener carrying punnets of raspberries. She told him to put them in the car. They might come in useful as bribes.

It was not until she was half-way down the drive that she thought of the Rector. The Rev. James Speed was not a man to accept bribes, but she felt that his cloth would banish suspicion if he would consent to become her accomplice. After all, he owed the Drayles a great deal for giving him the living and as a man of religion devoted to truth, he ought to be able, by the exercise of opposites, to invent a plausible lie to deal with the emergency. All that mattered was to keep Sir Maurice out of Mindle Lane.

The boy, Flick Saunders, had devoured two helpings of honey and would have grabbed a third had not the Rev. James Speed impounded the pot to rest his copy of The Times against. The Rector was a timid man, a thought lacking in moral courage. It was easier to use the honey pot as a prop than to tell the boy that he had had enough. He soothed his conscience for this weakness with the reflection that Flick was, in a sense, a guest. It was the Rector’s practice during vacations, to take one or two backward boys and instruct them in those articles of learning which compose the Common Entrance.

At the other end of the table his sister, Esme, was turning the pages of the Daily Sketch and eating toast. For an otherwise quiet woman she had rather a noisy and appreciative way of eating toast.

“Crunch, crunch, crunch—good, good, good!” it went.

As she crunched she read aloud disconnected fragments of news.

The Rector wished she would eat less noisily and not read loud. But he kept the wishes to himself. He envied her the Daily Sketch and would have preferred it to The Times. His eyesight was not as good as it used to be and it would
have been pleasanter to see the news than read it. However, he did not tell her so.

All roads to the honey pot being jammed, Flick Saunders allowed his attention to focus upon the girl, Pam Speed, niece of the Rev. James and Esme. She had arrived overnight and he hoped she would soon go. She looked too clean. Her frock had a laundered crispness about it, abhorrent to the eye. He did not take into consideration the fact, since this was her first morning away, that her parents were probably to blame for this spotlessness. She had been defined before arrival as "a nice friend for him to take round and show everything."

At all costs that must be avoided. He did not regard her as a nice friend, but as an obstacle to joy. There was no place for Pam in his formula of happiness, which, at present, was centred upon a pair of drop handlebars whereby to convert his push-bike into a racer. The handlebars were on view in the village cycle shop, price fifteen and six. Flick desired them, but lacked the fifteen and six. For the last three days he had spent most of his time with his nose glued to the shop window and he was planning to spend the fourth day in the same way.

Without any hope of success he addressed his host:

"I suppose I couldn't have fifteen and six, sir, and you get it from my father?"

It was a troublesome question, for the Rector liked to appear the soul of generosity. He hedged.

"I cannot believe your father would wish you to have such a large sum. And now, unless you want some more honey, why not run out and enjoy the sunlight?"

As Flick went into the garden he wondered why people always wanted you to enjoy yourself in their way rather than your own. If the Rector had said "Run out and enjoy your handlebars" it would have been different. Or wouldn't it? Perhaps he would have resented the disclosure of his intimate and personal sources of joy.

On the path to the stables he was overtaken by Pam.

"Look here! I'm going out on my bike," he said.

Breakfast had been rather dull and Pam welcomed the discovery of someone to fight with.

"You're one of Uncle Jim's backward boys, aren't you?" she inquired, innocently.
Flick Saunders launched a yell as he rushed at her. Pam squealed as she fled. Their cries rose to heaven and filtered through the window of Caroline Daren's bedroom.

Caroline pressed the palms of her hands against her ears to shut out the sound. She thought:

"My nerves! Oh, to be out East and away from it all!"

How wrong she had been ever to leave the East. Her soul belonged there, beneath a river of stars flowing across a sapphire sky, where the tom-toms beat and one could hear the plaint of native songs and rain, warm as tears, falling—falling.

What if there had been yellow fever in the district? Death was nothing—the spirit everything.

"Oh, to be a martyr for one's soul's sake!" she thought.

A breeze stirred the sheets of her bed. It was a draught. Perhaps she would catch cold. She would catch cold if she got out of a warm bed to shut the window.

Then, from below:

"Beast, take that!"

And a muddy splash.

Caroline Daren risked everything—life itself. Before shutting the window she called down:

"Go away, you dreadful children!"

Back in bed she reflected upon how much she loved little ones. But the children you met weren't children—they were noises. Those she loved were different. They curled up on one's knee; they had warm arms for putting round one's neck; they cuddled, they whispered, they were infinitely dependent. And nearly all the time they were asleep.

She sighed. What a pity it was there were no children like that and never would be. How she would love them if there were.

"If only I could do something in life to prove how little I care for myself!" she said aloud.

She sipped the tea on her breakfast tray and found it cold. She rang the bell. Florrie answered it and seemed put out and disagreeable. She left the room muttering. Yet surely it was not much trouble to make a fresh pot of tea? How unwilling were people to serve!

Selfish, selfish, selfish!

Downstairs James Speed was saying:

"Your cousin Caroline having her breakfast in bed?
She'll make herself really ill if she doesn't buck up and do something.”

Esme saw no sense in endorsing what was obvious to everybody. She commented on a paragraph in the newspaper.

“So the Mayor of Dudley has given Dorothy Round a civic welcome and a diamond wrist-watch. Fancy!”

But the Rector was only listening with half his intelligence.

“Whether girls are wise in accepting presents from men,” he mused.

“I suppose you know,” said Esme, “that Muriel Drayle has started another of her building pranks?”

The Rector held up a hand.

“I wish to hear nothing about it,” he said. “I know it will lead to a lot of lies and deceptions with which I refuse to be mixed up. Where is this going on?”

“Mindle Lane.”

“I think it is very inconsiderate of you to have mentioned it.” He sighed and added, more hopefully: “Thank goodness Mindle Lane is off the track so far as Sir Maurice is concerned.”

And that was the moment Muriel Drayle was shown into the room. Following her usual practice she approached the subject of her visit through a maze of parenthesis.

“I have brought you some raspberries—I'm in great trouble—but they got rather squashed in the car. I gave a lift to Mr. Franklin who didn't notice them and I couldn't tell him because he was wearing white flannels. You see, Sir Maurice is certain to stop it if he finds out.”

“Stop the raspberries?” the Rector inquired, and wondered why she wore a leather coat in midsummer.

But Esme understood and urged her to go on.

So Muriel went on.

It appeared that the old barn was no use as it was, but would be charming. Four bedrooms and two sitting-rooms. There was some doubt as to whether there would be any water, but they would be sure to find some if they dug deep enough.

“At a time like this it would be criminal to allow such a chance to slip through one's fingers. You do see that, don't you, Rector?”

“But if Sir Maurice objects . . .” he began, and stopped
in astonishment on beholding a nightdress beneath the leather coat.

"I don’t mind him objecting one bit as long as he is too late to prevent me. Besides, I know I am doing right. Only this morning I had clear proof that Providence was on my side."

It was an astonishing assertion, and the Rector asked what made her believe that.

"Sir Maurice actually told me that he was going down Mindle Lane." She nodded triumphantly and added: "That was why I came straight to you."

The Rector groaned inwardly. It was not politic to throw up his hands at the actions of a leading parishioner, so he buried them in the pockets of his alpaca coat for safety.

Muriel went on:

"I said to myself if there is one man who can lead him away from discovering the truth it is you."

"I must really protest against that, Lady Drayle."

"Nonsense," said Esme. "You being a clergyman, he is more or less bound to believe anything you tell him."

"But it is no part of a clergyman’s duties to circulate falsehoods, Esme. Besides, how can I prevent Sir Maurice from going where he likes?"

"I had thought," said Muriel, "that it would be quite a good idea if you were to ring him up and challenge him to play golf this morning for ten shillings. You could say that you had found out a new grip and were sure you could beat him."

"But Sir Maurice is perfectly aware that I do not play golf. Furthermore, I have not found out a new grip, neither am I in a position to sacrifice ten shillings."

Muriel Drayle smiled beatifically.

"As it happens, Rector, this time I shall not have to call on you. Twice this morning Providence has worked on my side. Right in the middle of the main road I found one of those 'Caution. Road Repairs. No Thoroughfare' boards. It was a gift from Heaven."

It was no use trying to stop them. The Rector’s hands were thrown up.

"But surely you did not remove the board?"

Muriel Drayle frowned. Timidity she could forgive, but not stupidity.
"Of course I did. What else was it there for?"
"To indicate some excavations, perhaps."
"My dear man, you will never get anywhere unless you are prepared to take a few risks. The finger of fate was in it. Nobody saw me put it in my car."
"Well, I think it was very clever of you," said Esme.
"Have you put it up in Mindle Lane?"

Muriel Drayle loved appreciation and she leaned across the table to pat Esme's hand.

"I am on my way to do so now."
The Rev. James turned quite white.
"And in the meantime the board is in your car—outside my Rectory?"

Muriel was not a woman who readily condemned other people, but she could not fail to see that the Rector was not acting towards her in a spirit of true friendship. It was, after all, the duty of a clergyman to help those in trouble, and he was not doing it.

There was something quite chilly in her manner as she rose to take her departure.

"Sometimes," she said, "I am glad to feel that I have a head on my shoulders and do not have to rely solely upon my friends. Good morning, and I hope you will enjoy the raspberries."

Flick Saunders and Pam Speed were playing with the mascot on the radiator of her car as she walked into the drive. Because she was feeling rather hurt she did not reply to Flick's inquiry:

"How fast will she go?"
"Stand away, there's good children," she said, and let in the gears to an accompaniment of grinding and protesting cogs.

When she was gone, Flick said:
"What had she got that board in the back of the car for?"

But Pam had seen something stranger than that.
"She had on bedroom slippers."

At the entrance to Mindle Lane Muriel Drayle erected the 'No Thoroughfare' board, propping it up from behind with a piece of stick. Like an artist, she fell back to admire in a good light.
She thought it looked very imposing. Maurice would have no choice but to turn back when he beheld it.
As it was unlikely he would be along for another twenty minutes, she drove down the lane as far as the barn to interview the builder. She told him that the workmen could have five pounds between them if they didn’t breathe a word to anybody for a fortnight. As an afterthought, she asked what the work of reconstruction was going to cost, to which the builder replied that it would be hard to say. He volunteered the information that plumbing would probably be the heaviest item.

So Muriel Drayle decided to put in a second bathroom, and then walked through the fields, under cover of the hedge, to mark Maurice’s reaction on beholding the board.

One might have supposed that a man, by nature an obstructionist, would have turned aside from the presence of an obstacle in a spirit of sympathy and understanding. Not so Sir Maurice. As he backed his car out of the lane on to the main road he swore fulminiously. He had no idea, of course, that his oaths reached the ears of his hidden wife. Had he known he would have denied her the satisfaction of hearing them.

Through a gap in the hedgerow Muriel watched him drive away with just that extra turn of speed which anger provokes a man to communicate to a machine.

“That’s all right!” said she.

The delight she felt in the success of her manoeuvre prompted her to celebrate it in some practical and permanent way. So she returned to the barn and gave instructions for yet another bathroom to be installed.

“The Americans are right. You can’t have too many,” she said.

There was some difficulty to find anywhere to put it, but that was overcome by knocking down a recently erected partition and stealing three feet from one of the smaller bedrooms, which thereby became so small that no wall in it was long enough to stand a bed against.

These dispositions occupied time, and the morning had nearly sped when Muriel faced the responsibility of returning the board to its original standing-place.

As her car rounded the bend on the main road behind which the board had been erected, a crowd of onlookers, motor-cycles and motor-cars, impeded its progress. Above the screen they formed Muriel beheld Sir Maurice’s car
with its nose apparently buried in a hole in the roadway.

If there was one thing that Muriel Drayle possessed in excelsis it was presence of mind. The rapidity with which she lowered the blinds at the back of her car so as to conceal what was within, was remarkable. It was not the moment to inquire whether anybody had been hurt. The one thing to be done, and done at once, was to bury the body—destroy the evidence.

It was not that Muriel Drayle was in the least bit heartless. On the contrary. She was devoted to her husband, but what would it profit him to learn that it was through her agency that calamity had overtaken him? Nothing. From the viewpoint of their marital happiness it was better far that he should suspect anybody but herself. What had her own father done at Villers Brettoneux? He had denied that he gave the order—he had destroyed the chit on which he had written it—and he had died respected.

A wreath of smoke rising from the Rectory garden pointed a line of action. The clock on the dashboard of her car told Muriel that the Rector and his family would be at lunch. In the circumstances what had to be done could be done—and privily.

As Muriel Drayle, in peignoir and ostrich feather slippers, for she was using her leather coat as a wrapper for the board, crept into the Rectory garden and approached the incinerator she perceived, in what was happening, a poetic justice. For had not the Rector shown marked unwillingness to help? He had. It was a judgment, surely, that into his incinerator the board should go and the evidence of her guilt be consumed.

The board was crackling merrily as Muriel Drayle returned to her car. It was not until the homeward drive that she allowed herself to be really worried about what might have befallen Sir Maurice. As she went up the drive she looked in vain to find him beneath the cedar. Naught save the captive ball was there, disconsolate and yearning for the hand that should be smiting it upon its restricted travels.

Her footsteps faltered as she entered the house, and the relief she felt on beholding Maurice in the library, that faced the front door, was too great for words.

There was a large bump on his forehead, emphasised by iodine. His brows were down and the expression of his mouth was inimical.
“Had a nice game of golf, Maurie?” Muriel asked.

“Yes, with me as the ball,” he retorted. Then, striking a more human note: “I suppose it isn’t apparent to you that I have had an accident.”

“Oh!” she exclaimed, “your forehead!” and ran to him.

But though he loved her deeply, he fended her off; being a man whose habit it was to postpone endearments indefinitely.

“Go away. I don’t want to be messed about. I’ve been messed about enough and somebody is going to pay for it, I can tell you that.”

A feeling that the hand had not been played out attacked Muriel with a sudden chill.

Sir Maurice went on:

“One isn’t a J.P. for nothing, and when the police find out who moved that board there’s going to be hell to pay. I don’t care who did it, I’ll have him jugged. Into the jug whoever he is. Why I wasn’t killed, I don’t know! It’s a miracle!”

It was not a happy inspiration that led Muriel to suggest:

“But don’t you think, Maurie, as you weren’t killed, it would be best to let the whole thing slip and just be thankful. After all, it may have been a blessing in disguise.”

Sir Maurice looked at her in pity.

“If you think being tipped head first into a hole in the road is a blessing, disguised or otherwise, it is obvious to me that the state of your mind needs looking into. And now, for goodness’ sake, go and get out of those infernal night clothes.”

As Muriel went from the room she told herself that it was going to be all right—that it must be.

Providence was still on the side of Muriel Drayle in that she was in the room when the Chief Constable rang up Sir Maurice.

“Chief Constable? Yes,” he said.

It was the work of a few seconds for Muriel to run out and pick up the telephone in her boudoir. The Chief Constable was a slow starter so she missed nothing of importance.

“A most hawkward situation, your Worship. Never would’ve come to light for for a coin-side-ance. The Urban dustmen, Your Worship. Seems that the Rector arranged with him to cart off the ash from the sinerator as well as the
other muck. An’ this ’e does, scraping it hout an’ findin’ among the hash the ’arf burned board. If it hadn’t so ’appened has ’e was passin’ when the haccident hoccurred it’s odds he wouldn’t ’ve noticed nothin’. Not knowin’ ’ow best to hact he brings the board to me. Hit’s a mos’ delicate situation, as you’ll be firs’ to admit.”

“Why?” That was Sir Maurice.

“Well, the Rector is the Rector, whatever may be said to the contrary.”

“Meet me at the Rectory in quarter of an hour. I’ll have him in the jug.”

Muriel Drayle waited to hear no more. Her car was fleeting down the drive five minutes before Sir Maurice started.

Her mind was in a chaos. Somehow the Rector must be prevailed upon to take the blame. “Times were bad,” he must say. “He needed a little firing.” He had found the board lying flat in the road. He had not turned it over to read its warning message. He would have done so but he was thinking of his sermon. He burnt it because it was rubbish. No, he burnt it as an example to Wolf Cubs to pick up sandwich wrappers and other litter. There were dozens of plausible excuses that he could make. The police would never prosecute a Rector. It would be such a bad example to his flock. His dog, a retriever, had brought it back.

Thoughts swirled as in a maelstrom.

Her car stopped in the Rectory drive and, suddenly, she lacked the strength to get out. Behind a fringe of rhododendrons children’s voices were raised in altercation.

Flick’s voice:

“You won’t lend it because you haven’t got it. Never had as much as fifteen and six in the whole of your life.”

And Pam’s:

“Bet I have then. Got four pounds thirteen in the Post Office savings.”

“Bet you haven’t got the book, though.”

“Wouldn’t tell you if I had.”

Through her own mental disturbances Muriel realized that, in the near neighbourhood, there was someone who greatly desired fifteen shillings and sixpence. Was it possible that once again, and in a supreme emergency, Providence was acting on her behalf?
She put her head out of the car and called:
"Little boy, little boy!"

Pam made a face at Flick. Muriel’s appellation was a nasty jar to one who had been trying to put over big stuff all the morning.

"Ta-ta, little boy, little boy," she mimicked, and made off.

Flick pushed through the bushes and approached the car morosely.

"Well? I wasn’t doing any harm," he said.

Muriel spoke rapidly. Would he like to earn a pound? He certainly would. He must understand that he might get into trouble. When was he ever out of trouble? Serious trouble! He would be ready to take six of the best for a pound.

"Very well, then, listen."

Flick did not listen very hard. He was thinking of the drop handlebars. Already they were declining brilliantly before his famished eyes.

Yes, of course he’d do it. A telling off from a beak wouldn’t be any worse than a telling off from the Head at Bankside. He’d think up some yarn to explain why he had taken the thing. Where would he touch the money?

She would have given it to him then and there had not the Rector made an untimely appearance. He had seen her talking to Flick from the window of his study and was disturbed. Why should she? The answer to his question arrived in two motor cars—a two-seater with the Chief Constable and a sergeant aboard, and Sir Maurice in the Rolls.

Then Esme came from the house.

As the local dignitaries approached, the Rev. James Speed was painfully aware that his knees were knocking together. The Chief Constable opened the proceedings with a breezy comment on weather conditions. But Sir Maurice came straight to the point.

Did the Rector see this bruise? Would he like to know how it was come by? He should know. Some congenital idiot had removed a warning board from the King’s Highway. Result, smashed car and contused frontal bone. Did the Rector know anything about that board? He didn’t. Then how the devil did the board in question come to be found in the rectorial incinerator?
In the pause that followed these staggering questions the Rev. James turned beseeching eyes upon Muriel Drayle. But her expression was adamant. She looked very much as her father must have looked at Neuve Chapel when the Corps Commander asked him why a certain section of the line had not been held.

"It is no good looking at me, Mr. Speed," she said. "My husband was nearly killed and we want to know why."

"But . . . but . . . but . . ." he stammered.

"But be damned!" roared Sir Maurice. "I'm here to get at the truth, and somebody is going through the hoops when I do. Now then!"

It was the habit of Caroline Daren during the afternoon to walk once round the garden, pausing here and there to inhale the subtle fragrance of such flowers as possessed any. For the fulfilment of this aesthetic pastime quiet and tranquility were essentials. Voices raised in anger and dispute rob the world of its beauty. On this particular afternoon Caroline particularly desired peace. Her mind was troubled by thoughts of the harsh words she had uttered from her bedroom window earlier in the day. True she had been provoked, but the words would not adjust themselves to the character of martyrdom she had assumed for herself. She felt that she would do anything—anything to wipe them out. And now the course of her reflections was being disturbed by rude argument and recrimination. Only vaguely she apprehended what it was all about. Someone had removed a notice board and the Rector was suspected.

Conquering her natural reticence, she drew a little nearer. As she did so, yet another arrival joined the throng. The Doctor. He had called to see her, for she was under his treatment, but he did not regard the case as so urgent that he could not spare a minute or two to find out what the row was about.

Dr. Smale had no need to take the contestants back to the starting post, for it was he who had applied the iodine to Sir Maurice's brow. He was therefore aware how the accident had happened and was immensely diverted to discover that the Rector was suspected as an active agent in the affair. This fact was evident from the vehemence with which the Rev. James was protesting his innocence.

"I give you my word as a member of the Church. . . ."
Sir Maurice waved him down and spun round on Esme.
"Did you see him bring anything back?"
Esme shook her head.
"Not actually."
"There you are!" said the Rector.
But Esme had not finished. She thought: It is no good quarrelling with Muriel Drayle. She is a sweet and generous creature, but she is apt to turn a little nasty if she thinks she has been let down. It might be more sensible to suffer some unpleasantness than get on the wrong side of her.

So Esme added:
"But you know how absent-minded you are, James. And you often do bring very funny things home. Like mushrooms—and there was that whiting that you had in your pocket for nearly a week when we had the drains up."
"I deny it all," he wailed.
"No one will convince me," said Sir Maurice, "that the most absent-minded lunatic in the land is going to remove a notice board from a main road and remember nothing about it. Whoever did it had better own up, because if I don't get at the truth the insurance company who cover my car, jolly soon will."

Until then Muriel Drayle had stood apart from it all—an onlooker—much as her father stood on Hill 60 watching the battle waging below. She realized, even as he had, that casualties are inevitable in a major operation.

But she had forgotten that there might be trouble with the insurance company. She made a mental note to drop them a line telling them to see her before they did anything drastic. It would be rather bad luck on Flick's father if he got landed with the price of a new car. It would be nobody's fault if he did, of course, but it would be nice to prevent it if possible.

It seemed to her that the time was now ripe for Flick's confession. She had not hurried the boy because she felt that it was only just that the Rector should suffer a little as a penalty for unwillingness to help. It would be good discipline for him and should make him more ready in the future. She was very pleased with the way Esme Speed had acted. Most sensibly. A reliable, understanding sort of woman. Esme should have some of the William pears when they were ripe.
The boy, Flick Saunders, was entangling his fingers with a piece of string when Muriel's eyes caught his and her lips framed a silent "now." He supposed it was all right—he hoped so—but he couldn't help wondering, and he couldn't help wishing he had that quid in his pocket to strengthen the determination to go through with it.

"Now!" the silent lips repeated.

But still he hesitated.

Then Muriel Drayle, as it were, seized him by the collar and chucked him in. For she said:

"I wonder what this little boy looks so guilty about!"

All eyes were turned upon Flick. His own he closed, and, in a vision, beheld chromium-plated drop handle-bars with the road beneath them streaming past at an unimaginable speed. His mind was made up. He stepped forward. He struck an attitude.

"I did it," he said.

Surely the spirit of George Washington must have put the words into his mouth, eliminating the corollary "with my little hatchet."

The silence that followed this noble confession was broken by three distinct sounds. A staggering intake of breath from Caroline Daren—the name "Lady Drayle!" from the Rector, and a crisp "What a lie!" from Pam Speed.

Then came a babel of tongues all speaking at once. But for that Flick would never have had the chance to scrag Pam's arm and hiss the warning:

"Shut up, you fool, shut up!"

"You can't have. We were together all the morning," she cried.

In the second at his disposal Flick achieved the swiftest piece of mathematical reckoning in his career.

"Four and six if you shut up."

Then the Chief Constable took the stage.

"'Old your noise, the both of you." And out came his notebook. "Now, young man, what did you think you was doing of in doing it?"

"But he didn't," insisted Pam, and there were tears in her eyes, for adversity had made her feel that Flick Saunders was the best proposition she had met to date.

The Chief Constable threatened her with his pencil.

"Silence all!" he said.
But Sir Maurice had taken a fancy to Pam Speed. She was a good kid. Stood up for her pals. Provided 'em with alibis. Dammit, he liked her and he said so.

Muriel, too, admired her. It was a pity that a certain senior member of her family did not take a leaf out of the child's book and show a like disposition to rally round a friend.

Then the Chief Constable got down to it in a big way. Nothing was to be gained by hiding the truth. What made Flick do it?

Flick's confident avowal that he would be able to put up a story proved to be unfounded. The theory, common among actors imperfectly acquainted with their lines, that it will be all right on the night, was exploded. In vain he searched his imagination for a single reason why a boy should remove a notice board from the King's highway.

"I... I... don't know!"

Muriel Drayle fanned herself with a pound note to give him courage and resource. It was no good. Flick looked despairingly to right and left. All the brightness had gone out of life. Even plated handle-bars were dull.

And witnessing his despair, Caroline Daren came to a sudden resolve. With uplifted hands, like Niobe, she thrust herself between the law and its victim.

"It was I!" she declared.

Her grammar was flawless—her martyrdom supreme. Departed was the stigma of harshness. She stood alone, bearing another's burden.

Dr. Smale spoke. The Rector couldn't have spoken if he had tried. Even Muriel was dumb, for she barely knew Caroline Daren by sight. She had never even worked on her. It couldn't be the raspberries.

The doctor said:

"But weren't you in bed all the morning?"

"No. I rose from my bed. They know." She turned the eyes of a wounded fawn upon the children.

But there was no gratitude in Flick's expression.

"She's trying to get that quid for herself," he muttered. But Flick was no longer the centre of notice.

"Hush!" said Muriel, and thrust the crumpled note into his moist palm.

The Chief Constable scratched his head with the pencil.
“When everything’s done and said all, it don’t make sense,” he announced.

Then Caroline:

“I can explain. The boy knew I was ill. He had seen what I did and tried to save me.”

“Bunk!” said Pam, under her breath.

“My dear Caroline, you don’t know what you are saying,” protested the Rector.

“Yes, yes, I do. Where I came from—the East—there are no restrictions. Life flows on. To see an obstacle—to read ‘So far you shall go and no further’ to me is like being bound with cords. I feel I have to open up all the ways. That was why, when I saw that board...”

“I think,” said Dr. Smale, “you had better go back to bed, Miss Daren. You are evidently not yourself this afternoon.”

Caroline nodded, fatalistically.

“Yes, very well. You will find me there—if I’m wanted—to pay the price.”

She turned and was gone.

Sir Maurice tapped his forehead.

“Cracked—obviously!” he said.

The Chief Constable sighed heavily.

“Puts me in a very hawkward predic-ay-ment. Are we to charge the lady, Sir Maurice?”

A protesting cry sprang from the lips of the Rector, but Sir Maurice’s attention seemed to have wandered. He was looking at his wife, who was wearing an expression of absolute triumph. Yet nothing had happened that would seem to account for it. Was it possible, that all this embroglio was another of those smoke screens discharged by Muriel for his confusion? Was she up to something?

Swiftly and narrowly he ran his mind over the events of the day. Breakfast: her horror at the idea of his visit to Colonel Spender. The drive and a “No Thoroughfare” board in Mindle Lane. That board! Could it be that...

Sir Maurice crooked a finger at the Chief Constable and drew him aside from the rest.

“Look here! I want to know something. Is the road up in Mindle Lane?”

“No, sir.”

“Sure of that?”
"I come through the lane on my way here."
"Any obstructions?"
"Well, there was a builder's lorry held us up for a minute, but you couldn't call that properly an obstruction."
Sir Maurice smiled. The builder's lorry had told him what he wanted to know.
"I shan't prosecute, Chief. We'll forget the whole thing."
It was the Chief Constable who made public Sir Maurice's magnanimity. He added a rider to the effect that people might not get off so lightly another time.
"So all's well that ends well," said Muriel.
Then Sir Maurice spoke.
"Who said anything about ending? I'd like you to come with me in the Rolls, my dear."
"But I have my own car, Maurie."
"The chauffeur can bring that back. Come along. I've a little surprise for you."
His manner seemed all right and Muriel decided that it would be folly to cross him. He handed her into the car and then remembered something that sent him back to the porch, where the Speeds had gathered. Upon the Rector Sir Maurice directed a glare at once hostile and corrective.
"It's my opinion," he said, "if you do a thing you should do it thoroughly. You haven't. The kids were all right; so was your sister and that cracked cousin of yours. But you didn't appear to know which way you were facing."
"But, Sir Maurice, don't you realize..."
"I realize that if my wife wants a friend she is entitled to have one. Good Lord, you don't imagine, with the whole neighbourhood on her side, she'd ever succeed in fooling me? Better for everyone if you were to mix a bit of loyalty with your religion. Where are those kids? There you are! Spend that among yourselves."

About two minutes later Muriel asked nervously:
"Aren't you going the wrong way, Maurie?"
"I never go the wrong way," and he turned the car off the main road.
She thought: "It's just possible he may not take Mindle Lane. If he does I'll point at a covey of partridges on the
other side of the road. I’ll say ‘Just look at that lark!’ as we pass the barn. Providence can’t—can’t be so cruel as to spoil everything after being so splendid.”

Aloud, and rather plaintively, she said:
“I suppose you have got rid of something else, and that is your surprise.”

“No.” He sounded very cheerful about it.
“If it is seeing you point your chin at a golf ball I shan’t enjoy it much.”
“It isn’t,” said he.

There: the car had entered Mindle Lane. He stole a glance at her. The added colour on her cheeks made her look almost a girl. He thought: She’s a damned attractive woman and I’m very fond of her. He thought: It’ll hurt her like blazes to have her secret exploded. He thought: Why shouldn’t she enjoy her little deceptions? We are all made different.

He put his foot on the brake and the car came to a standstill just before the bend behind which the barn would be in view.

“Why are you stopping here?” she faltered, for she had steeled herself to face the worst.
“Wrong road,” he replied.
Hope revived.
“Why, so it is.”
He put the car into reverse.

Only by the exercise of magnificent self-control was Muriel able to preserve an air of indifference. By the same agency she went on talking.

“But what is your surprise, Maurie?”
“That was!” said he, as the Rolls backed into the main road.

She did not understand him. She did not even try, but later, when delivering some honey and eggs and a bowl of goldfish at Caroline Daren’s bedside, she remarked:
“If that wasn’t the hand of Providence, what was?”