

XIII. THE GARDEN OF PEACE

Up to this instant Evan MacIlan had really understood nothing; but when he saw the policeman he saw everything. He saw his enemies, all the powers and princes of the earth. He suddenly altered from a staring statue to a leaping man of the mountains.

"We must break away from him here," he cried, briefly, and went like a whirlwind over the sand ridge in a straight line and at a particular angle. When the policeman had finished his admirable railway curve, he found a wall of failing sand between him and the pursued. By the time he had scaled it thrice, slid down twice, and crested it in the third effort, the two flying figures were far in front. They found the sand harder farther on; it began to be crusted with scraps of turf and in a few moments they were flying easily over an open common of rank sea-grass. They had no easy business, however; for the bottle which they had so innocently sent into the chief gate of Thanet had called to life the police of half a county on their trail. From every side across the grey-green common figures could be seen running and closing in; and it was only when MacIlan with his big body broke down the tangled barrier of a little wood, as men break down a door with the shoulder; it was only when they vanished crashing into the underworld of the black wood, that their hunters were even instantaneously thrown off the scent.

At the risk of struggling a little longer like flies in that black web of twigs and trunks, Evan (who had an instinct of the hunter or the hunted) took an incalculable course through the forest, which let them out at last by a forest opening--quite forgotten by the leaders of the chase. They ran a mile or two farther along the edge of the wood until they reached another and somewhat similar opening. Then MacIlan stood utterly still and listened, as animals listen, for every sound in the universe. Then he said: "We are quit of them." And Turnbull said: "Where shall we go now?"

MacIlan looked at the silver sunset that was closing in, barred by plummy lines of purple cloud; he looked at the high tree-tops that caught the last light and at the birds going heavily homeward, just as if all these things were bits of written advice that he could read.

Then he said: "The best place we can go to is to bed. If we can get some sleep in this wood, now everyone has cleared out of it, it will be worth a handicap of two hundred yards tomorrow."

Turnbull, who was exceptionally lively and laughing in his demeanour, kicked his

legs about like a schoolboy and said he did not want to go to sleep. He walked incessantly and talked very brilliantly. And when at last he lay down on the hard earth, sleep struck him senseless like a hammer.

Indeed, he needed the strongest sleep he could get; for the earth was still full of darkness and a kind of morning fog when his fellow-fugitive shook him awake.

"No more sleep, I'm afraid," said Evan, in a heavy, almost submissive, voice of apology. "They've gone on past us right enough for a good thirty miles; but now they've found out their mistake, and they're coming back."

"Are you sure?" said Turnbull, sitting up and rubbing his red eyebrows with his hand.

The next moment, however, he had jumped up alive and leaping like a man struck with a shock of cold water, and he was plunging after MacIan along the woodland path. The shape of their old friend the constable had appeared against the pearl and pink of the sunrise. Somehow, it always looked a very funny shape when seen against the sunrise.

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A wash of weary daylight was breaking over the country-side, and the fields and roads were full of white mist--the kind of white mist that clings in corners like cotton wool. The empty road, along which the chase had taken its turn, was overshadowed on one side by a very high discoloured wall, stained, and streaked green, as with seaweed--evidently the high-shouldered sentinel of some great gentleman's estate. A yard or two from the wall ran parallel to it a linked and tangled line of lime-trees, forming a kind of cloister along the side of the road. It was under this branching colonnade that the two fugitives fled, almost concealed from their pursuers by the twilight, the mist and the leaping zoetrope of shadows. Their feet, though beating the ground furiously, made but a faint noise; for they had kicked away their boots in the wood; their long, antiquated weapons made no jingle or clatter, for they had strapped them across their backs like guitars. They had all the advantages that invisibility and silence can add to speed.

A hundred and fifty yards behind them down the centre of the empty road the first of their pursuers came pounding and panting--a fat but powerful policeman who had distanced all the rest. He came on at a splendid pace for so portly a figure; but, like all heavy bodies in motion, he gave the impression that it would be easier for him to increase his pace than to slacken it suddenly. Nothing short of a brick wall could have abruptly brought him up. Turnbull turned his head slightly and found breath to say something to MacIan. MacIan nodded.

Pursuer and pursued were fixed in their distance as they fled, for some quarter of a mile, when they came to a place where two or three of the trees grew twistedly together, making a special obscurity. Past this place the pursuing policeman went thundering without thought or hesitation. But he was pursuing his shadow or the wind; for Turnbull had put one foot in a crack of the tree and gone up it as quickly and softly as a cat. Somewhat more laboriously but in equal silence the long legs of the Highlander had followed; and crouching in crucial silence in the cloud of leaves, they saw the whole posse of their pursuers go by and die into the dust and mists of the distance.

The white vapour lay, as it often does, in lean and palpable layers; and even the head of the tree was above it in the half-daylight, like a green ship swinging on a sea of foam. But higher yet behind them, and readier to catch the first coming of the sun, ran the rampart of the top of the wall, which in their excitement of escape looked at once indispensable and unattainable, like the wall of heaven. Here, however, it was MacIan's turn to have the advantage; for, though less light-limbed and feline, he was longer and stronger in the arms. In two seconds he had tugged up his chin over the wall like a horizontal bar; the next he sat astride of it, like a horse of stone. With his assistance Turnbull vaulted to the same perch, and the two began cautiously to shift along the wall in the direction by which they had come, doubling on their tracks to throw off the last pursuit. MacIan could not rid himself of the fancy of bestriding a steed; the long, grey coping of the wall shot out in front of him, like the long, grey neck of some nightmare Rosinante. He had the quaint thought that he and Turnbull were two knights on one steed on the old shield of the Templars.

The nightmare of the stone horse was increased by the white fog, which seemed thicker inside the wall than outside. They could make nothing of the enclosure upon which they were partial trespassers, except that the green and crooked branches of a big apple-tree came crawling at them out of the mist, like the tentacles of some green cuttlefish. Anything would serve, however, that was likely to confuse their trail, so they both decided without need of words to use this tree also as a ladder--a ladder of descent. When they dropped from the lowest branch to the ground their stockinged feet felt hard gravel beneath them.

They had alighted in the middle of a very broad garden path, and the clearing mist permitted them to see the edge of a well-clipped lawn. Though the white vapour was still a veil, it was like the gauzy veil of a transformation scene in a pantomime; for through it there glowed shapeless masses of colour, masses which might be clouds of sunrise or mosaics of gold and crimson, or ladies robed in ruby and emerald draperies. As it thinned yet farther they saw that it was only flowers; but flowers in such insolent mass and magnificence as can seldom be

seen out of the tropics. Purple and crimson rhododendrons rose arrogantly, like rampant heraldic animals against their burning background of laburnum gold. The roses were red hot; the clematis was, so to speak, blue hot. And yet the mere whiteness of the syringa seemed the most violent colour of all. As the golden sunlight gradually conquered the mists, it had really something of the sensational sweetness of the slow opening of the gates of Eden. MacIan, whose mind was always haunted with such seraphic or titanic parallels, made some such remark to his companion. But Turnbull only cursed and said that it was the back garden of some damnable rich man.

When the last haze had faded from the ordered paths, the open lawns, and the flaming flower-beds, the two realized, not without an abrupt re-examination of their position, that they were not alone in the garden.

Down the centre of the central garden path, preceded by a blue cloud from a cigarette, was walking a gentleman who evidently understood all the relish of a garden in the very early morning. He was a slim yet satisfied figure, clad in a suit of pale-grey tweed, so subdued that the pattern was imperceptible--a costume that was casual but not by any means careless. His face, which was reflective and somewhat over-refined, was the face of a quite elderly man, though his stringy hair and moustache were still quite yellow. A double eye-glass, with a broad, black ribbon, drooped from his aquiline nose, and he smiled, as he communed with himself, with a self-content which was rare and almost irritating. The straw panama on his head was many shades shabbier than his clothes, as if he had caught it up by accident.

It needed the full shock of the huge shadow of MacIan, falling across his sunlit path, to rouse him from his smiling reverie. When this had fallen on him he lifted his head a little and blinked at the intruders with short-sighted benevolence, but with far less surprise than might have been expected. He was a gentleman; that is, he had social presence of mind, whether for kindness or for insolence.

"Can I do anything for you?" he said, at last.

MacIan bowed. "You can extend to us your pardon," he said, for he also came of a whole race of gentlemen--of gentlemen without shirts to their backs. "I am afraid we are trespassing. We have just come over the wall."

"Over the wall?" repeated the smiling old gentleman, still without letting his surprise come uppermost.

"I suppose I am not wrong, sir," continued MacIan, "in supposing that these grounds inside the wall belong to you?"

The man in the panama looked at the ground and smoked thoughtfully for a few moments, after which he said, with a sort of matured conviction:

"Yes, certainly; the grounds inside the wall really belong to me, and the grounds outside the wall, too."

"A large proprietor, I imagine," said Turnbull, with a truculent eye.

"Yes," answered the old gentleman, looking at him with a steady smile. "A large proprietor."

Turnbull's eye grew even more offensive, and he began biting his red beard; but MacIan seemed to recognize a type with which he could deal and continued quite easily:

"I am sure that a man like you will not need to be told that one sees and does a good many things that do not get into the newspapers. Things which, on the whole, had better not get into the newspapers."

The smile of the large proprietor broadened for a moment under his loose, light moustache, and the other continued with increased confidence:

"One sometimes wants to have it out with another man. The police won't allow it in the streets--and then there's the County Council--and in the fields even nothing's allowed but posters of pills. But in a gentleman's garden, now----"

The strange gentleman smiled again and said, easily enough: "Do you want to fight? What do you want to fight about?"

MacIan had understood his man pretty well up to that point; an instinct common to all men with the aristocratic tradition of Europe had guided him. He knew that the kind of man who in his own back garden wears good clothes and spoils them with a bad hat is not the kind of man who has an abstract horror of illegal actions of violence or the evasion of the police. But a man may understand ragging and yet be very far from understanding religious ragging. This seeming host of theirs might comprehend a quarrel of husband and lover or a difficulty at cards or even escape from a pursuing tailor; but it still remained doubtful whether he would feel the earth fail under him in that earthquake instant when the Virgin is compared to a goddess of Mesopotamia. Even MacIan, therefore (whose tact was far from being his strong point), felt the necessity for some compromise in the mode of approach. At last he said, and even then with hesitation:

"We are fighting about God; there can be nothing so important as that."

The tilted eye-glasses of the old gentleman fell abruptly from his nose, and he thrust his aristocratic chin so far forward that his lean neck seemed to shoot out longer like a telescope.

"About God?" he queried, in a key completely new.

"Look here!" cried Turnbull, taking his turn roughly, "I'll tell you what it's all about. I think that there's no God. I take it that it's nobody's business but mine-- or God's, if there is one. This young gentleman from the Highlands happens to think that it's his business. In consequence, he first takes a walking-stick and smashes my shop; then he takes the same walking-stick and tries to smash me. To this I naturally object. I suggest that if it comes to that we should both have sticks. He improves on the suggestion and proposes that we should both have steel-pointed sticks. The police (with characteristic unreasonableness) will not accept either of our proposals; the result is that we run about dodging the police and have jumped over our garden wall into your magnificent garden to throw ourselves on your magnificent hospitality."

The face of the old gentleman had grown redder and redder during this address, but it was still smiling; and when he broke out it was with a kind of guffaw.

"So you really want to fight with drawn swords in my garden," he asked, "about whether there is really a God?"

"Why not?" said MacIan, with his simple monstrosity of speech; "all man's worship began when the Garden of Eden was founded."

"Yes, by----!" said Turnbull, with an oath, "and ended when the Zoological Gardens were founded."

"In this garden! In my presence!" cried the stranger, stamping up and down the gravel and choking with laughter, "whether there is a God!" And he went stamping up and down the garden, making it echo with his unintelligible laughter. Then he came back to them more composed and wiping his eyes.

"Why, how small the world is!" he cried at last. "I can settle the whole matter. Why, I am God!"

And he suddenly began to kick and wave his well-clad legs about the lawn.

"You are what?" repeated Turnbull, in a tone which is beyond description.

"Why, God, of course!" answered the other, thoroughly amused. "How funny it is to think that you have tumbled over a garden wall and fallen exactly on the right person! You might have gone floundering about in all sorts of churches and chapels and colleges and schools of philosophy looking for some evidence of the existence of God. Why, there is no evidence, except seeing him. And now you've seen him. You've seen him dance!"

And the obliging old gentleman instantly stood on one leg without relaxing at all the grave and cultured benignity of his expression.

"I understood that this garden----" began the bewildered MacIan.

"Quite so! Quite so!" said the man on one leg, nodding gravely. "I said this garden belonged to me and the land outside it. So they do. So does the country beyond that and the sea beyond that and all the rest of the earth. So does the moon. So do the sun and stars." And he added, with a smile of apology: "You see, I'm God."

Turnbull and MacIan looked at him for one moment with a sort of notion that perhaps he was not too old to be merely playing the fool. But after staring steadily for an instant Turnbull saw the hard and horrible earnestness in the man's eyes behind all his empty animation. Then Turnbull looked very gravely at the strict gravel walls and the gay flower-beds and the long rectangular red-brick building, which the mist had left evident beyond them. Then he looked at MacIan.

Almost at the same moment another man came walking quickly round the regal clump of rhododendrons. He had the look of a prosperous banker, wore a good tall silk hat, was almost stout enough to burst the buttons of a fine frock-coat; but he was talking to himself, and one of his elbows had a singular outward jerk as he went by.