

Chapter VII. THE TEMPLE OF SILENCE

Harold March and the few who cultivated the friendship of Horne Fisher, especially if they saw something of him in his own social setting, were conscious of a certain solitude in his very sociability. They seemed to be always meeting his relations and never meeting his family. Perhaps it would be truer to say that they saw much of his family and nothing of his home. His cousins and connections ramified like a labyrinth all over the governing class of Great Britain, and he seemed to be on good, or at least on good-humored, terms with most of them. For Horne Fisher was remarkable for a curious impersonal information and interest touching all sorts of topics, so that one could sometimes fancy that his culture, like his colorless, fair mustache and pale, drooping features, had the neutral nature of a chameleon. Anyhow, he could always get on with viceroys and Cabinet Ministers and all the great men responsible for great departments, and talk to each of them on his own subject, on the branch of study with which he was most seriously concerned. Thus he could converse with the Minister for War about silkworms, with the Minister of Education about detective stories, with the Minister of Labor about Limoges enamel, and with the Minister of Missions and Moral Progress (if that be his correct title) about the pantomime boys of the last four decades. And as the first was his first cousin, the second his second cousin, the third his brother-in-law, and the fourth his uncle by marriage, this conversational versatility certainly served in one sense to create a happy family. But March never seemed to get a glimpse of that domestic interior to which men of the middle classes are accustomed in their friendships, and which is indeed the foundation of friendship and love and everything else in any sane and stable society. He wondered whether Horne Fisher was both an orphan and an only child.

It was, therefore, with something like a start that he found that Fisher had a brother, much more prosperous and powerful than himself, though hardly, March thought, so entertaining. Sir Henry Harland Fisher, with half the alphabet after his name, was something at the Foreign Office far more tremendous than the Foreign Secretary. Apparently, it ran in the family, after all; for it seemed there was another brother, Ashton Fisher, in India, rather more tremendous than the Viceroy. Sir Henry Fisher was a heavier, but handsomer edition of his brother, with a brow equally bald, but much more smooth. He was very courteous, but a shade patronizing, not only to March, but even, as March fancied, to Horne Fisher as well. The latter gentleman, who had many intuitions about the half-formed thoughts of others, glanced at the topic himself as they came away from the great house in Berkeley Square.

"Why, don't you know," he observed quietly, "that I am the fool of the family?"

"It must be a clever family," said Harold March, with a smile.

"Very gracefully expressed," replied Fisher; "that is the best of having a literary training. Well, perhaps it is an exaggeration to say I am the fool of the family. It's enough to say I am the failure of the family."

"It seems queer to me that you should fail especially," remarked the journalist. "As they say in the examinations, what did you fail in?"

"Politics," replied his friend. "I stood for Parliament when I was quite a young man and got in by an enormous majority, with loud cheers and charring round the town. Since then, of course, I've been rather under a cloud."

"I'm afraid I don't quite understand the 'of course,'" answered March, laughing.

"That part of it isn't worth understanding," said Fisher. "But as a matter of fact, old chap, the other part of it was rather odd and interesting. Quite a detective story in its way, as well as the first lesson I had in what modern politics are made of. If you like, I'll tell you all about it." And the following, recast in a less allusive and conversational manner, is the story that he told.

Nobody privileged of late years to meet Sir Henry Harland Fisher would believe that he had ever been called Harry. But, indeed, he had been boyish enough when a boy, and that serenity which shone on him through life, and which now took the form of gravity, had once taken the form of gayety. His friends would have said that he was all the more ripe in his maturity for having been young in his youth. His enemies would have said that he was still light minded, but no longer light hearted. But in any case, the whole of the story Horne Fisher had to tell arose out of the accident which had made young Harry Fisher private secretary to Lord Saltoun. Hence his later connection with the Foreign Office, which had, indeed, come to him as a sort of legacy from his lordship when that great man was the power behind the throne. This is not the place to say much about Saltoun, little as was known of him and much as there was worth knowing. England has had at least three or four such secret statesmen. An aristocratic polity produces every now and then an aristocrat who is also an accident, a man of intellectual independence and insight, a Napoleon born in the purple. His vast work was mostly invisible, and very little could be got out of him in private life except a crusty and rather cynical sense of humor. But it was certainly the accident of his presence at a family dinner of the Fishers, and the unexpected opinion he expressed, which turned what might have been a dinner-table joke into a sort of small sensational novel.

Save for Lord Saltoun, it was a family party of Fishers, for the only other distinguished stranger had just departed after dinner, leaving the rest to their coffee and cigars. This had been a figure of some interest--a young Cambridge man named Eric Hughes who was the rising hope of the party of Reform, to which the Fisher family, along with their friend Saltoun, had long been at least formally attached. The personality of Hughes was substantially summed up in the fact that he talked eloquently and earnestly through the whole dinner, but left immediately after to be in time for an appointment. All his actions had something at once ambitious and conscientious; he drank no wine, but was slightly intoxicated with words. And his face and phrases were on the front page of all the newspapers just then, because he was contesting the safe seat of Sir Francis Verner in the great by-election in the west. Everybody was talking about the powerful speech against squirarchy which he had just delivered; even in the Fisher circle everybody talked about it except Horne Fisher himself who sat in a corner, lowering over the fire.

"We jolly well have to thank him for putting some new life into the old party," Ashton Fisher was saying. "This campaign against the old squires just hits the degree of democracy there is in this county. This act for extending county council control is practically his bill; so you may say he's in the government even before he's in the House."

"One's easier than the other," said Harry, carelessly. "I bet the squire's a bigger pot than the county council in that county. Verner is pretty well rooted; all these rural places are what you call reactionary. Damning aristocrats won't alter it."

"He damns them rather well," observed Ashton. "We never had a better meeting than the one in Barkington, which generally goes Constitutional. And when he said, 'Sir Francis may boast of blue blood; let us show we have red blood,' and went on to talk about manhood and liberty, the room simply rose at him."

"Speaks very well," said Lord Saltoun, gruffly, making his only contribution to the conversation so far.

Then the almost equally silent Horne Fisher suddenly spoke, without taking his brooding eyes off the fire.

"What I can't understand," he said, "is why nobody is ever slanged for the real reason."

"Hullo!" remarked Harry, humorously, "you beginning to take notice?"

"Well, take Verner," continued Horne Fisher. "If we want to attack Verner, why not attack him? Why compliment him on being a romantic reactionary aristocrat? Who is Verner? Where does he come from? His name sounds old, but I never heard of it before, as the man said of the Crucifixion. Why talk about his blue blood? His blood may be gamboge yellow with green spots, for all anybody knows. All we know is that the old squire, Hawker, somehow ran through his money (and his second wife's, I suppose, for she was rich enough), and sold the estate to a man named Verner. What did he make his money in? Oil? Army contracts?"

"I don't know," said Saltoun, looking at him thoughtfully.

"First thing I ever knew you didn't know," cried the exuberant Harry.

"And there's more, besides," went on Horne Fisher, who seemed to have suddenly found his tongue. "If we want country people to vote for us, why don't we get somebody with some notion about the country? We don't talk to people in Threadneedle Street about nothing but turnips and pigsties. Why do we talk to people in Somerset about nothing but slums and socialism? Why don't we give the squire's land to the squire's tenants, instead of dragging in the county council?"

"Three acres and a cow," cried Harry, emitting what the Parliamentary reports call an ironical cheer.

"Yes," replied his brother, stubbornly. "Don't you think agricultural laborers would rather have three acres and a cow than three acres of printed forms and a committee? Why doesn't somebody start a yeoman party in politics, appealing to the old traditions of the small landowner? And why don't they attack men like Verner for what they are, which is something about as old and traditional as an American oil trust?"

"You'd better lead the yeoman party yourself," laughed Harry. "Don't you think it would be a joke, Lord Saltoun, to see my brother and his merry men, with their bows and bills, marching down to Somerset all in Lincoln green instead of Lincoln and Bennet hats?"

"No," answered Old Saltoun, "I don't think it would be a joke. I think it would be an exceedingly serious and sensible idea."

"Well, I'm jiggered!" cried Harry Fisher, staring at him. "I said just now it was the first fact you didn't know, and I should say this is the first joke you didn't see."

"I've seen a good many things in my time," said the old man, in his rather sour

fashion. "I've told a good many lies in my time, too, and perhaps I've got rather sick of them. But there are lies and lies, for all that. Gentlemen used to lie just as schoolboys lie, because they hung together and partly to help one another out. But I'm damned if I can see why we should lie for these cosmopolitan cads who only help themselves. They're not backing us up any more; they're simply crowding us out. If a man like your brother likes to go into Parliament as a yeoman or a gentleman or a Jacobite or an Ancient Briton, I should say it would be a jolly good thing."

In the rather startled silence that followed Horne Fisher sprang to his feet and all his dreary manner dropped off him.

"I'm ready to do it to-morrow," he cried. "I suppose none of you fellows would back me up."

Then Harry Fisher showed the finer side of his impetuosity. He made a sudden movement as if to shake hands.

"You're a sport," he said, "and I'll back you up, if nobody else will. But we can all back you up, can't we? I see what Lord Saltoun means, and, of course, he's right. He's always right."

"So I will go down to Somerset," said Horne Fisher.

"Yes, it is on the way to Westminster," said Lord Saltoun, with a smile.

And so it happened that Horne Fisher arrived some days later at the little station of a rather remote market town in the west, accompanied by a light suitcase and a lively brother. It must not be supposed, however, that the brother's cheerful tone consisted entirely of chaff. He supported the new candidate with hope as well as hilarity; and at the back of his boisterous partnership there was an increasing sympathy and encouragement. Harry Fisher had always had an affection for his more quiet and eccentric brother, and was now coming more and more to have a respect for him. As the campaign proceeded the respect increased to ardent admiration. For Harry was still young, and could feel the sort of enthusiasm for his captain in electioneering that a schoolboy can feel for his captain in cricket.

Nor was the admiration undeserved. As the new three-cornered contest developed it became apparent to others besides his devoted kinsman that there was more in Horne Fisher than had ever met the eye. It was clear that his outbreak by the family fireside had been but the culmination of a long course of brooding and studying on the question. The talent he retained through life for studying his

subject, and even somebody else's subject, had long been concentrated on this idea of championing a new peasantry against a new plutocracy. He spoke to a crowd with eloquence and replied to an individual with humor, two political arts that seemed to come to him naturally. He certainly knew much more about rural problems than either Hughes, the Reform candidate, or Verner, the Constitutional candidate. And he probed those problems with a human curiosity, and went below the surface in a way that neither of them dreamed of doing. He soon became the voice of popular feelings that are never found in the popular press. New angles of criticism, arguments that had never before been uttered by an educated voice, tests and comparisons that had been made only in dialect by men drinking in the little local public houses, crafts half forgotten that had come down by sign of hand and tongue from remote ages when their fathers were free--all this created a curious and double excitement. It startled the well informed by being a new and fantastic idea they had never encountered. It startled the ignorant by being an old and familiar idea they never thought to have seen revived. Men saw things in a new light, and knew not even whether it was the sunset or the dawn.

Practical grievances were there to make the movement formidable. As Fisher went to and fro among the cottages and country inns, it was borne in on him without difficulty that Sir Francis Verner was a very bad landlord. Nor was the story of his acquisition of the land any more ancient and dignified than he had supposed; the story was well known in the county and in most respects was obvious enough. Hawker, the old squire, had been a loose, unsatisfactory sort of person, had been on bad terms with his first wife (who died, as some said, of neglect), and had then married a flashy South American Jewess with a fortune. But he must have worked his way through this fortune also with marvelous rapidity, for he had been compelled to sell the estate to Verner and had gone to live in South America, possibly on his wife's estates. But Fisher noticed that the laxity of the old squire was far less hated than the efficiency of the new squire. Verner's history seemed to be full of smart bargains and financial flutters that left other people short of money and temper. But though he heard a great deal about Verner, there was one thing that continually eluded him; something that nobody knew, that even Saltoun had not known. He could not find out how Verner had originally made his money.

"He must have kept it specially dark," said Horne Fisher to himself. "It must be something he's really ashamed of. Hang it all! what is a man ashamed of nowadays?"

And as he pondered on the possibilities they grew darker and more distorted in his mind; he thought vaguely of things remote and repulsive, strange forms of slavery or sorcery, and then of ugly things yet more unnatural but nearer home.

The figure of Verner seemed to be blackened and transfigured in his imagination, and to stand against varied backgrounds and strange skies.

As he strode up a village street, brooding thus, his eyes encountered a complete contrast in the face of his other rival, the Reform candidate. Eric Hughes, with his blown blond hair and eager undergraduate face, was just getting into his motor car and saying a few final words to his agent, a sturdy, grizzled man named Gryce. Eric Hughes waved his hand in a friendly fashion; but Gryce eyed him with some hostility. Eric Hughes was a young man with genuine political enthusiasms, but he knew that political opponents are people with whom one may have to dine any day. But Mr. Gryce was a grim little local Radical, a champion of the chapel, and one of those happy people whose work is also their hobby. He turned his back as the motor car drove away, and walked briskly up the sunlit high street of the little town, whistling, with political papers sticking out of his pocket.

Fisher looked pensively after the resolute figure for a moment, and then, as if by an impulse, began to follow it. Through the busy market place, amid the baskets and barrows of market day, under the painted wooden sign of the Green Dragon, up a dark side entry, under an arch, and through a tangle of crooked cobbled streets the two threaded their way, the square, strutting figure in front and the lean, lounging figure behind him, like his shadow in the sunshine. At length they came to a brown brick house with a brass plate, on which was Mr. Gryce's name, and that individual turned and beheld his pursuer with a stare.

"Could I have a word with you, sir?" asked Horne Fisher, politely. The agent stared still more, but assented civilly, and led the other into an office littered with leaflets and hung all round with highly colored posters which linked the name of Hughes with all the higher interests of humanity.

"Mr. Horne Fisher, I believe," said Mr. Gryce. "Much honored by the call, of course. Can't pretend to congratulate you on entering the contest, I'm afraid; you won't expect that. Here we've been keeping the old flag flying for freedom and reform, and you come in and break the battle line."

For Mr. Elijah Gryce abounded in military metaphors and in denunciations of militarism. He was a square-jawed, blunt-featured man with a pugnacious cock of the eyebrow. He had been pickled in the politics of that countryside from boyhood, he knew everybody's secrets, and electioneering was the romance of his life.

"I suppose you think I'm devoured with ambition," said Horne Fisher, in his rather listless voice, "aiming at a dictatorship and all that. Well, I think I can

clear myself of the charge of mere selfish ambition. I only want certain things done. I don't want to do them. I very seldom want to do anything. And I've come here to say that I'm quite willing to retire from the contest if you can convince me that we really want to do the same thing."

The agent of the Reform party looked at him with an odd and slightly puzzled expression, and before he could reply, Fisher went on in the same level tones:

"You'd hardly believe it, but I keep a conscience concealed about me; and I am in doubt about several things. For instance, we both want to turn Verner out of Parliament, but what weapon are we to use? I've heard a lot of gossip against him, but is it right to act on mere gossip? Just as I want to be fair to you, so I want to be fair to him. If some of the things I've heard are true he ought to be turned out of Parliament and every other club in London. But I don't want to turn him out of Parliament if they aren't true."

At this point the light of battle sprang into Mr. Gryce's eyes and he became voluble, not to say violent. He, at any rate, had no doubt that the stories were true; he could testify, to his own knowledge, that they were true. Verner was not only a hard landlord, but a mean landlord, a robber as well as a rackrenter; any gentleman would be justified in hounding him out. He had cheated old Wilkins out of his freehold by a trick fit for a pickpocket; he had driven old Mother Biddle to the workhouse; he had stretched the law against Long Adam, the poacher, till all the magistrates were ashamed of him.

"So if you'll serve under the old banner," concluded Mr. Gryce, more genially, "and turn out a swindling tyrant like that, I'm sure you'll never regret it."

"And if that is the truth," said Horne Fisher, "are you going to tell it?"

"What do you mean? Tell the truth?" demanded Gryce.

"I mean you are going to tell the truth as you have just told it," replied Fisher. "You are going to placard this town with the wickedness done to old Wilkins. You are going to fill the newspapers with the infamous story of Mrs. Biddle. You are going to denounce Verner from a public platform, naming him for what he did and naming the poacher he did it to. And you're going to find out by what trade this man made the money with which he bought the estate; and when you know the truth, as I said before, of course you are going to tell it. Upon those terms I come under the old flag, as you call it, and haul down my little pennon."

The agent was eying him with a curious expression, surly but not entirely unsympathetic. "Well," he said, slowly, "you have to do these things in a regular

way, you know, or people don't understand. I've had a lot of experience, and I'm afraid what you say wouldn't do. People understand slanging squires in a general way, but those personalities aren't considered fair play. Looks like hitting below the belt."

"Old Wilkins hasn't got a belt, I suppose," replied Horne Fisher. "Verner can hit him anyhow, and nobody must say a word. It's evidently very important to have a belt. But apparently you have to be rather high up in society to have one. Possibly," he added, thoughtfully--"possibly the explanation of the phrase 'a belted earl,' the meaning of which has always escaped me."

"I mean those personalities won't do," returned Gryce, frowning at the table.

"And Mother Biddle and Long Adam, the poacher, are not personalities," said Fisher, "and suppose we mustn't ask how Verner made all the money that enabled him to become--a personality."

Gryce was still looking at him under lowering brows, but the singular light in his eyes had brightened. At last he said, in another and much quieter voice:

"Look here, sir. I like you, if you don't mind my saying so. I think you are really on the side of the people and I'm sure you're a brave man. A lot braver than you know, perhaps. We daren't touch what you propose with a barge pole; and so far from wanting you in the old party, we'd rather you ran your own risk by yourself. But because I like you and respect your pluck, I'll do you a good turn before we part. I don't want you to waste time barking up the wrong tree. You talk about how the new squire got the money to buy, and the ruin of the old squire, and all the rest of it. Well, I'll give you a hint about that, a hint about something precious few people know."

"I am very grateful," said Fisher, gravely. "What is it?"

"It's in two words," said the other. "The new squire was quite poor when he bought. The old squire was quite rich when he sold."

Horne Fisher looked at him thoughtfully as he turned away abruptly and busied himself with the papers on his desk. Then Fisher uttered a short phrase of thanks and farewell, and went out into the street, still very thoughtful.

His reflection seemed to end in resolution, and, falling into a more rapid stride, he passed out of the little town along a road leading toward the gate of the great park, the country seat of Sir Francis Verner. A glitter of sunlight made the early winter more like a late autumn, and the dark woods were touched here and there

with red and golden leaves, like the last rays of a lost sunset. From a higher part of the road he had seen the long, classical facade of the great house with its many windows, almost immediately beneath him, but when the road ran down under the wall of the estate, topped with towering trees behind, he realized that it was half a mile round to the lodge gates. After walking for a few minutes along the lane, however, he came to a place where the wall had cracked and was in process of repair. As it was, there was a great gap in the gray masonry that looked at first as black as a cavern and only showed at a second glance the twilight of the twinkling trees. There was something fascinating about that unexpected gate, like the opening of a fairy tale.

Horne Fisher had in him something of the aristocrat, which is very near to the anarchist. It was characteristic of him that he turned into this dark and irregular entry as casually as into his own front door, merely thinking that it would be a short cut to the house. He made his way through the dim wood for some distance and with some difficulty, until there began to shine through the trees a level light, in lines of silver, which he did not at first understand. The next moment he had come out into the daylight at the top of a steep bank, at the bottom of which a path ran round the rim of a large ornamental lake. The sheet of water which he had seen shimmering through the trees was of considerable extent, but was walled in on every side with woods which were not only dark, but decidedly dismal. At one end of the path was a classical statue of some nameless nymph, and at the other end it was flanked by two classical urns; but the marble was weather-stained and streaked with green and gray. A hundred other signs, smaller but more significant, told him that he had come on some outlying corner of the grounds neglected and seldom visited. In the middle of the lake was what appeared to be an island, and on the island what appeared to be meant for a classical temple, not open like a temple of the winds, but with a blank wall between its Doric pillars. We may say it only seemed like an island, because a second glance revealed a low causeway of flat stones running up to it from the shore and turning it into a peninsula. And certainly it only seemed like a temple, for nobody knew better than Horne Fisher that no god had ever dwelt in that shrine.

"That's what makes all this classical landscape gardening so desolate," he said to himself. "More desolate than Stonehenge or the Pyramids. We don't believe in Egyptian mythology, but the Egyptians did; and I suppose even the Druids believed in Druidism. But the eighteenth-century gentleman who built these temples didn't believe in Venus or Mercury any more than we do; that's why the reflection of those pale pillars in the lake is truly only the shadow of a shade. They were men of the age of Reason; they, who filled their gardens with these stone nymphs, had less hope than any men in all history of really meeting a nymph in the forest."

His monologue stopped abruptly with a sharp noise like a thundercrack that rolled in dreary echoes round the dismal mere. He knew at once what it was-- somebody had fired off a gun. But as to the meaning of it he was momentarily staggered, and strange thoughts thronged into his mind. The next moment he laughed; for he saw lying a little way along the path below him the dead bird that the shot had brought down.

At the same moment, however, he saw something else, which interested him more. A ring of dense trees ran round the back of the island temple, framing the facade of it in dark foliage, and he could have sworn he saw a stir as of something moving among the leaves. The next moment his suspicion was confirmed, for a rather ragged figure came from under the shadow of the temple and began to move along the causeway that led to the bank. Even at that distance the figure was conspicuous by its great height and Fisher could see that the man carried a gun under his arm. There came back into his memory at once the name Long Adam, the poacher.

With a rapid sense of strategy he sometimes showed, Fisher sprang from the bank and raced round the lake to the head of the little pier of stones. If once a man reached the mainland he could easily vanish into the woods. But when Fisher began to advance along the stones toward the island, the man was cornered in a blind alley and could only back toward the temple. Putting his broad shoulders against it, he stood as if at bay; he was a comparatively young man, with fine lines in his lean face and figure and a mop of ragged red hair. The look in his eyes might well have been disquieting to anyone left alone with him on an island in the middle of a lake.

"Good morning," said Horne Fisher, pleasantly. "I thought at first you were a murderer. But it seems unlikely, somehow, that the partridge rushed between us and died for love of me, like the heroines in the romances; so I suppose you are a poacher."

"I suppose you would call me a poacher," answered the man; and his voice was something of a surprise coming from such a scarecrow; it had that hard fastidiousness to be found in those who have made a fight for their own refinement among rough surroundings. "I consider I have a perfect right to shoot game in this place. But I am well aware that people of your sort take me for a thief, and I suppose you will try to land me in jail."

"There are preliminary difficulties," replied Fisher. "To begin with, the mistake is flattering, but I am not a gamekeeper. Still less am I three gamekeepers, who would be, I imagine, about your fighting weight. But I confess I have another

reason for not wanting to jail you."

"And what is that?" asked the other.

"Only that I quite agree with you," answered Fisher. "I don't exactly say you have a right to poach, but I never could see that it was as wrong as being a thief. It seems to me against the whole normal notion of property that a man should own something because it flies across his garden. He might as well own the wind, or think he could write his name on a morning cloud. Besides, if we want poor people to respect property we must give them some property to respect. You ought to have land of your own; and I'm going to give you some if I can."

"Going to give me some land!" repeated Long Adam.

"I apologize for addressing you as if you were a public meeting," said Fisher, "but I am an entirely new kind of public man who says the same thing in public and in private. I've said this to a hundred huge meetings throughout the country, and I say it to you on this queer little island in this dismal pond. I would cut up a big estate like this into small estates for everybody, even for poachers. I would do in England as they did in Ireland--buy the big men out, if possible; get them out, anyhow. A man like you ought to have a little place of his own. I don't say you could keep pheasants, but you might keep chickens."

The man stiffened suddenly and he seemed at once to blanch and flame at the promise as if it were a threat.

"Chickens!" he repeated, with a passion of contempt.

"Why do you object?" asked the placid candidate. "Because keeping hens is rather a mild amusement for a poacher? What about poaching eggs?"

"Because I am not a poacher," cried Adam, in a rending voice that rang round the hollow shrines and urns like the echoes of his gun. "Because the partridge lying dead over there is my partridge. Because the land you are standing on is my land. Because my own land was only taken from me by a crime, and a worse crime than poaching. This has been a single estate for hundreds and hundreds of years, and if you or any meddlesome mountebank comes here and talks of cutting it up like a cake, if I ever hear a word more of you and your leveling lies--"

"You seem to be a rather turbulent public," observed Horne Fisher, "but do go on. What will happen if I try to divide this estate decently among decent people?"

The poacher had recovered a grim composure as he replied. "There will be no

partridge to rush in between."

With that he turned his back, evidently resolved to say no more, and walked past the temple to the extreme end of the islet, where he stood staring into the water. Fisher followed him, but, when his repeated questions evoked no answer, turned back toward the shore. In doing so he took a second and closer look at the artificial temple, and noted some curious things about it. Most of these theatrical things were as thin as theatrical scenery, and he expected the classic shrine to be a shallow thing, a mere shell or mask. But there was some substantial bulk of it behind, buried in the trees, which had a gray, labyrinthian look, like serpents of stone, and lifted a load of leafy towers to the sky. But what arrested Fisher's eye was that in this bulk of gray-white stone behind there was a single door with great, rusty bolts outside; the bolts, however, were not shot across so as to secure it. Then he walked round the small building, and found no other opening except one small grating like a ventilator, high up in the wall. He retraced his steps thoughtfully along the causeway to the banks of the lake, and sat down on the stone steps between the two sculptured funeral urns. Then he lit a cigarette and smoked it in ruminant manner; eventually he took out a notebook and wrote down various phrases, numbering and renumbering them till they stood in the following order: "(1) Squire Hawker disliked his first wife. (2) He married his second wife for her money. (3) Long Adam says the estate is really his. (4) Long Adam hangs round the island temple, which looks like a prison. (5) Squire Hawker was not poor when he gave up the estate. (6) Verner was poor when he got the estate."

He gazed at these notes with a gravity which gradually turned to a hard smile, threw away his cigarette, and resumed his search for a short cut to the great house. He soon picked up the path which, winding among clipped hedges and flower beds, brought him in front of its long Palladian facade. It had the usual appearance of being, not a private house, but a sort of public building sent into exile in the provinces.

He first found himself in the presence of the butler, who really looked much older than the building, for the architecture was dated as Georgian; but the man's face, under a highly unnatural brown wig, was wrinkled with what might have been centuries. Only his prominent eyes were alive and alert, as if with protest. Fisher glanced at him, and then stopped and said:

"Excuse me. Weren't you with the late squire, Mr. Hawker?"

"Yes, sir," said the man, gravely. "Usher is my name. What can I do for you?"

"Only take me into Sir Francis Verner," replied the visitor.

Sir Francis Verner was sitting in an easy chair beside a small table in a large room hung with tapestries. On the table were a small flask and glass, with the green glimmer of a liqueur and a cup of black coffee. He was clad in a quiet gray suit with a moderately harmonious purple tie; but Fisher saw something about the turn of his fair mustache and the lie of his flat hair--it suddenly revealed that his name was Franz Werner.

"You are Mr. Horne Fisher," he said. "Won't you sit down?"

"No, thank you," replied Fisher. "I fear this is not a friendly occasion, and I shall remain standing. Possibly you know that I am already standing--standing for Parliament, in fact--"

"I am aware we are political opponents," replied Verner, raising his eyebrows. "But I think it would be better if we fought in a sporting spirit; in a spirit of English fair play."

"Much better," assented Fisher. "It would be much better if you were English and very much better if you had ever played fair. But what I've come to say can be said very shortly. I don't quite know how we stand with the law about that old Hawker story, but my chief object is to prevent England being entirely ruled by people like you. So whatever the law would say, I will say no more if you will retire from the election at once."

"You are evidently a lunatic," said Verner.

"My psychology may be a little abnormal," replied Horne Fisher, in a rather hazy manner. "I am subject to dreams, especially day-dreams. Sometimes what is happening to me grows vivid in a curious double way, as if it had happened before. Have you ever had that mystical feeling that things have happened before?"

"I hope you are a harmless lunatic," said Verner.

But Fisher was still staring in an absent fashion at the golden gigantic figures and traceries of brown and red in the tapestries on the walls; then he looked again at Verner and resumed: "I have a feeling that this interview has happened before, here in this tapestried room, and we are two ghosts revisiting a haunted chamber. But it was Squire Hawker who sat where you sit and it was you who stood where I stand." He paused a moment and then added, with simplicity, "I suppose I am a blackmailer, too."

"If you are," said Sir Francis, "I promise you you shall go to jail." But his face had a shade on it that looked like the reflection of the green wine gleaming on the table. Horne Fisher regarded him steadily and answered, quietly enough:

"Blackmailers do not always go to jail. Sometimes they go to Parliament. But, though Parliament is rotten enough already, you shall not go there if I can help it. I am not so criminal as you were in bargaining with crime. You made a squire give up his country seat. I only ask you to give up your Parliamentary seat."

Sir Francis Verner sprang to his feet and looked about for one of the bell ropes of the old-fashioned, curtained room.

"Where is Usher?" he cried, with a livid face.

"And who is Usher?" said Fisher, softly. "I wonder how much Usher knows of the truth."

Verner's hand fell from the bell rope and, after standing for a moment with rolling eyes, he strode abruptly from the room. Fisher went but by the other door, by which he had entered, and, seeing no sign of Usher, let himself out and betook himself again toward the town.

That night he put an electric torch in his pocket and set out alone in the darkness to add the last links to his argument. There was much that he did not know yet; but he thought he knew where he could find the knowledge. The night closed dark and stormy and the black gap in the wall looked blacker than ever; the wood seemed to have grown thicker and darker in a day. If the deserted lake with its black woods and gray urns and images looked desolate even by daylight, under the night and the growing storm it seemed still more like the pool of Acheron in the land of lost souls. As he stepped carefully along the jetty stones he seemed to be traveling farther and farther into the abyss of night, and to have left behind him the last points from which it would be possible to signal to the land of the living. The lake seemed to have grown larger than a sea, but a sea of black and slimy waters that slept with abominable serenity, as if they had washed out the world. There was so much of this nightmare sense of extension and expansion that he was strangely surprised to come to his desert island so soon. But he knew it for a place of inhuman silence and solitude; and he felt as if he had been walking for years.

Nerving himself to a more normal mood, he paused under one of the dark dragon trees that branched out above him, and, taking out his torch, turned in the direction of the door at the back of the temple. It was unbolted as before, and the thought stirred faintly in him that it was slightly open, though only by a crack.

The more he thought of it, however, the more certain he grew that this was but one of the common illusions of light coming from a different angle. He studied in a more scientific spirit the details of the door, with its rusty bolts and hinges, when he became conscious of something very near him--indeed, nearly above his head. Something was dangling from the tree that was not a broken branch. For some seconds he stood as still as a stone, and as cold. What he saw above him were the legs of a man hanging, presumably a dead man hanged. But the next moment he knew better. The man was literally alive and kicking; and an instant after he had dropped to the ground and turned on the intruder. Simultaneously three or four other trees seemed to come to life in the same fashion. Five or six other figures had fallen on their feet from these unnatural nests. It was as if the place were an island of monkeys. But a moment after they had made a stampede toward him, and when they laid their hands on him he knew that they were men.

With the electric torch in his hand he struck the foremost of them so furiously in the face that the man stumbled and rolled over on the slimy grass; but the torch was broken and extinguished, leaving everything in a denser obscurity. He flung another man flat against the temple wall, so that he slid to the ground; but a third and fourth carried Fisher off his feet and began to bear him, struggling, toward the doorway. Even in the bewilderment of the battle he was conscious that the door was standing open. Somebody was summoning the roughs from inside.

The moment they were within they hurled him upon a sort of bench or bed with violence, but no damage; for the settee, or whatever it was, seemed to be comfortably cushioned for his reception. Their violence had in it a great element of haste, and before he could rise they had all rushed for the door to escape. Whatever bandits they were that infested this desert island, they were obviously uneasy about their job and very anxious to be quit of it. He had the flying fancy that regular criminals would hardly be in such a panic. The next moment the great door crashed to and he could hear the bolts shriek as they shot into their place, and the feet of the retreating men scampering and stumbling along the causeway. But rapidly as it happened, it did not happen before Fisher had done something that he wanted to do. Unable to rise from his sprawling attitude in that flash of time, he had shot out one of his long legs and hooked it round the ankle of the last man disappearing through the door. The man swayed and toppled over inside the prison chamber, and the door closed between him and his fleeing companions. Clearly they were in too much haste to realize that they had left one of their company behind.

The man sprang to his feet again and hammered and kicked furiously at the door. Fisher's sense of humor began to recover from the struggle and he sat up on his sofa with something of his native nonchalance. But as he listened to the captive captor beating on the door of the prison, a new and curious reflection came to

him.

The natural course for a man thus wishing to attract his friends' attention would be to call out, to shout as well as kick. This man was making as much noise as he could with his feet and hands, but not a sound came from his throat. Why couldn't he speak? At first he thought the man might be gagged, which was manifestly absurd. Then his fancy fell back on the ugly idea that the man was dumb. He hardly knew why it was so ugly an idea, but it affected his imagination in a dark and disproportionate fashion. There seemed to be something creepy about the idea of being left in a dark room with a deaf mute. It was almost as if such a defect were a deformity. It was almost as if it went with other and worse deformities. It was as if the shape he could not trace in the darkness were some shape that should not see the sun.

Then he had a flash of sanity and also of insight. The explanation was very simple, but rather interesting. Obviously the man did not use his voice because he did not wish his voice to be recognized. He hoped to escape from that dark place before Fisher found out who he was. And who was he? One thing at least was clear. He was one or other of the four or five men with whom Fisher had already talked in these parts, and in the development of that strange story.

"Now I wonder who you are," he said, aloud, with all his old lazy urbanity. "I suppose it's no use trying to throttle you in order to find out; it would be displeasing to pass the night with a corpse. Besides I might be the corpse. I've got no matches and I've smashed my torch, so I can only speculate. Who could you be, now? Let us think."

The man thus genially addressed had desisted from drumming on the door and retreated sullenly into a corner as Fisher continued to address him in a flowing monologue.

"Probably you are the poacher who says he isn't a poacher. He says he's a landed proprietor; but he will permit me to inform him that, whatever he is, he's a fool. What hope can there ever be of a free peasantry in England if the peasants themselves are such snobs as to want to be gentlemen? How can we make a democracy with no democrats? As it is, you want to be a landlord and so you consent to be a criminal. And in that, you know, you are rather like somebody else. And, now I think of it, perhaps you are somebody else."

There was a silence broken by breathing from the corner and the murmur of the rising storm, that came in through the small grating above the man's head. Horne Fisher continued:

"Are you only a servant, perhaps, that rather sinister old servant who was butler to Hawker and Verner? If so, you are certainly the only link between the two periods. But if so, why do you degrade yourself to serve this dirty foreigner, when you at least saw the last of a genuine national gentry? People like you are generally at least patriotic. Doesn't England mean anything to you, Mr. Usher? All of which eloquence is possibly wasted, as perhaps you are not Mr. Usher.

"More likely you are Verner himself; and it's no good wasting eloquence to make you ashamed of yourself. Nor is it any good to curse you for corrupting England; nor are you the right person to curse. It is the English who deserve to be cursed, and are cursed, because they allowed such vermin to crawl into the high places of their heroes and their kings. I won't dwell on the idea that you're Verner, or the throttling might begin, after all. Is there anyone else you could be? Surely you're not some servant of the other rival organization. I can't believe you're Gryce, the agent; and yet Gryce had a spark of the fanatic in his eye, too; and men will do extraordinary things in these paltry feuds of politics. Or if not the servant, is it the . . . No, I can't believe it . . . not the red blood of manhood and liberty . . . not the democratic ideal . . ."

He sprang up in excitement, and at the same moment a growl of thunder came through the grating beyond. The storm had broken, and with it a new light broke on his mind. There was something else that might happen in a moment.

"Do you know what that means?" he cried. "It means that God himself may hold a candle to show me your infernal face."

Then next moment came a crash of thunder; but before the thunder a white light had filled the whole room for a single split second.

Fisher had seen two things in front of him. One was the black-and-white pattern of the iron grating against the sky; the other was the face in the corner. It was the face of his brother.

Nothing came from Horne Fisher's lips except a Christian name, which was followed by a silence more dreadful than the dark. At last the other figure stirred and sprang up, and the voice of Harry Fisher was heard for the first time in that horrible room.

"You've seen me, I suppose," he said, "and we may as well have a light now. You could have turned it on at any time, if you'd found the switch."

He pressed a button in the wall and all the details of that room sprang into something stronger than daylight. Indeed, the details were so unexpected that for

a moment they turned the captive's rocking mind from the last personal revelation. The room, so far from being a dungeon cell, was more like a drawing-room, even a lady's drawing-room, except for some boxes of cigars and bottles of wine that were stacked with books and magazines on a side table. A second glance showed him that the more masculine fittings were quite recent, and that the more feminine background was quite old. His eye caught a strip of faded tapestry, which startled him into speech, to the momentary oblivion of bigger matters.

"This place was furnished from the great house," he said.

"Yes," replied the other, "and I think you know why."

"I think I do," said Horne Fisher, "and before I go on to more extraordinary things I will, say what I think. Squire Hawker played both the bigamist and the bandit. His first wife was not dead when he married the Jewess; she was imprisoned on this island. She bore him a child here, who now haunts his birthplace under the name of Long Adam. A bankruptcy company promoter named Werner discovered the secret and blackmailed the squire into surrendering the estate. That's all quite clear and very easy. And now let me go on to something more difficult. And that is for you to explain what the devil you are doing kidnaping your born brother."

After a pause Henry Fisher answered:

"I suppose you didn't expect to see me," he said. "But, after all, what could you expect?"

"I'm afraid I don't follow," said Horne Fisher.

"I mean what else could you expect, after making such a muck of it?" said his brother, sulkily. "We all thought you were so clever. How could we know you were going to be--well, really, such a rotten failure?"

"This is rather curious," said the candidate, frowning. "Without vanity, I was not under the impression that my candidature was a failure. All the big meetings were successful and crowds of people have promised me votes."

"I should jolly well think they had," said Henry, grimly. "You've made a landslide with your confounded acres and a cow, and Verner can hardly get a vote anywhere. Oh, it's too rotten for anything!"

"What on earth do you mean?"

"Why, you lunatic," cried Henry, in tones of ringing sincerity, "you don't suppose you were meant to win the seat, did you? Oh, it's too childish! I tell you Verner's got to get in. Of course he's got to get in. He's to have the Exchequer next session, and there's the Egyptian loan and Lord knows what else. We only wanted you to split the Reform vote because accidents might happen after Hughes had made a score at Barkington."

"I see," said Fisher, "and you, I think, are a pillar and ornament of the Reform party. As you say, I am not clever."

The appeal to party loyalty fell on deaf ears; for the pillar of Reform was brooding on other things. At last he said, in a more troubled voice:

"I didn't want you to catch me; I knew it would be a shock. But I tell you what, you never would have caught me if I hadn't come here myself, to see they didn't ill treat you and to make sure everything was as comfortable as it could be." There was even a sort of break in his voice as he added, "I got those cigars because I knew you liked them."

Emotions are queer things, and the idiocy of this concession suddenly softened Horne Fisher like an unfathomable pathos.

"Never mind, old chap," he said; "we'll say no more about it. I'll admit that you're really as kind-hearted and affectionate a scoundrel and hypocrite as ever sold himself to ruin his country. There, I can't say handsomer than that. Thank you for the cigars, old man. I'll have one if you don't mind."

By the time that Horne Fisher had ended his telling of this story to Harold March they had come out into one of the public parks and taken a seat on a rise of ground overlooking wide green spaces under a blue and empty sky; and there was something incongruous in the words with which the narration ended.

"I have been in that room ever since," said Horne Fisher. "I am in it now. I won the election, but I never went to the House. My life has been a life in that little room on that lonely island. Plenty of books and cigars and luxuries, plenty of knowledge and interest and information, but never a voice out of that tomb to reach the world outside. I shall probably die there." And he smiled as he looked across the vast green park to the gray horizon.

VIII. THE VENGEANCE OF THE STATUE

It was on the sunny veranda of a seaside hotel, overlooking a pattern of flower beds and a strip of blue sea, that Horne Fisher and Harold March had their final explanation, which might be called an explosion.

Harold March had come to the little table and sat down at it with a subdued excitement smoldering in his somewhat cloudy and dreamy blue eyes. In the newspapers which he tossed from him on to the table there was enough to explain some if not all of his emotion. Public affairs in every department had reached a crisis. The government which had stood so long that men were used to it, as they are used to a hereditary despotism, had begun to be accused of blunders and even of financial abuses. Some said that the experiment of attempting to establish a peasantry in the west of England, on the lines of an early fancy of Horne Fisher's, had resulted in nothing but dangerous quarrels with more industrial neighbors. There had been particular complaints of the ill treatment of harmless foreigners, chiefly Asiatics, who happened to be employed in the new scientific works constructed on the coast. Indeed, the new Power which had arisen in Siberia, backed by Japan and other powerful allies, was inclined to take the matter up in the interests of its exiled subjects; and there had been wild talk about ambassadors and ultimatums. But something much more serious, in its personal interest for March himself, seemed to fill his meeting with his friend with a mixture of embarrassment and indignation.

Perhaps it increased his annoyance that there was a certain unusual liveliness about the usually languid figure of Fisher. The ordinary image of him in March's mind was that of a pallid and bald-browed gentleman, who seemed to be prematurely old as well as prematurely bald. He was remembered as a man who expressed the opinions of a pessimist in the language of a lounge. Even now March could not be certain whether the change was merely a sort of masquerade of sunshine, or that effect of clear colors and clean-cut outlines that is always visible on the parade of a marine resort, relieved against the blue dado of the sea. But Fisher had a flower in his buttonhole, and his friend could have sworn he carried his cane with something almost like the swagger of a fighter. With such clouds gathering over England, the pessimist seemed to be the only man who carried his own sunshine.

"Look here," said Harold March, abruptly, "you've been no end of a friend to me, and I never was so proud of a friendship before; but there's something I must get off my chest. The more I found out, the less I understood how you could stand it. And I tell you I'm going to stand it no longer."

Horne Fisher gazed across at him gravely and attentively, but rather as if he were

a long way off.

"You know I always liked you," said Fisher, quietly, "but I also respect you, which is not always the same thing. You may possibly guess that I like a good many people I don't respect. Perhaps it is my tragedy, perhaps it is my fault. But you are very different, and I promise you this: that I will never try to keep you as somebody to be liked, at the price of your not being respected."

"I know you are magnanimous," said March after a silence, "and yet you tolerate and perpetuate everything that is mean." Then after another silence he added: "Do you remember when we first met, when you were fishing in that brook in the affair of the target? And do you remember you said that, after all, it might do no harm if I could blow the whole tangle of this society to hell with dynamite."

"Yes, and what of that?" asked Fisher.

"Only that I'm going to blow it to hell with dynamite," said Harold March, "and I think it right to give you fair warning. For a long time I didn't believe things were as bad as you said they were. But I never felt as if I could have bottled up what you knew, supposing you really knew it. Well, the long and the short of it is that I've got a conscience; and now, at last, I've also got a chance. I've been put in charge of a big independent paper, with a free hand, and we're going to open a cannonade on corruption."

"That will be--Attwood, I suppose," said Fisher, reflectively. "Timber merchant. Knows a lot about China."

"He knows a lot about England," said March, doggedly, "and now I know it, too, we're not going to hush it up any longer. The people of this country have a right to know how they're ruled--or, rather, ruined. The Chancellor is in the pocket of the money lenders and has to do as he is told; otherwise he's bankrupt, and a bad sort of bankruptcy, too, with nothing but cards and actresses behind it. The Prime Minister was in the petrol-contract business; and deep in it, too. The Foreign Minister is a wreck of drink and drugs. When you say that plainly about a man who may send thousands of Englishmen to die for nothing, you're called personal. If a poor engine driver gets drunk and sends thirty or forty people to death, nobody complains of the exposure being personal. The engine driver is not a person."

"I quite agree with you," said Fisher, calmly. "You are perfectly right."

"If you agree with us, why the devil don't you act with us?" demanded his friend. "If you think it's right, why don't you do what's right? It's awful to think of a man

of your abilities simply blocking the road to reform."

"We have often talked about that," replied Fisher, with the same composure. "The Prime Minister is my father's friend. The Foreign Minister married my sister. The Chancellor of the Exchequer is my first cousin. I mention the genealogy in some detail just now for a particular reason. The truth is I have a curious kind of cheerfulness at the moment. It isn't altogether the sun and the sea, sir. I am enjoying an emotion that is entirely new to me; a happy sensation I never remember having had before."

"What the devil do you mean?"

"I am feeling proud of my family," said Horne Fisher.

Harold March stared at him with round blue eyes, and seemed too much mystified even to ask a question. Fisher leaned back in his chair in his lazy fashion, and smiled as he continued.

"Look here, my dear fellow. Let me ask a question in turn. You imply that I have always known these things about my unfortunate kinsmen. So I have. Do you suppose that Attwood hasn't always known them? Do you suppose he hasn't always known you as an honest man who would say these things when he got a chance? Why does Attwood unmuzzle you like a dog at this moment, after all these years? I know why he does; I know a good many things, far too many things. And therefore, as I have the honor to remark, I am proud of my family at last."

"But why?" repeated March, rather feebly.

"I am proud of the Chancellor because he gambled and the Foreign Minister because he drank and the Prime Minister because he took a commission on a contract," said Fisher, firmly. "I am proud of them because they did these things, and can be denounced for them, and know they can be denounced for them, and are standing firm for all that. I take off my hat to them because they are defying blackmail, and refusing to smash their country to save themselves. I salute them as if they were going to die on the battlefield."

After a pause he continued: "And it will be a battlefield, too, and not a metaphorical one. We have yielded to foreign financiers so long that now it is war or ruin, Even the people, even the country people, are beginning to suspect that they are being ruined. That is the meaning of the regrettable incidents in the newspapers."

"The meaning of the outrages on Orientals?" asked March.

"The meaning of the outrages on Orientals," replied Fisher, "is that the financiers have introduced Chinese labor into this country with the deliberate intention of reducing workmen and peasants to starvation. Our unhappy politicians have made concession after concession; and now they are asking concessions which amount to our ordering a massacre of our own poor. If we do not fight now we shall never fight again. They will have put England in an economic position of starving in a week. But we are going to fight now; I shouldn't wonder if there were an ultimatum in a week and an invasion in a fortnight. All the past corruption and cowardice is hampering us, of course; the West country is pretty stormy and doubtful even in a military sense; and the Irish regiments there, that are supposed to support us by the new treaty, are pretty well in mutiny; for, of course, this infernal coolie capitalism is being pushed in Ireland, too. But it's to stop now; and if the government message of reassurance gets through to them in time, they may turn up after all by the time the enemy lands. For my poor old gang is going to stand to its guns at last. Of course it's only natural that when they have been whitewashed for half a century as paragons, their sins should come back on them at the very moment when they are behaving like men for the first time in their lives. Well, I tell you, March, I know them inside out; and I know they are behaving like heroes. Every man of them ought to have a statue, and on the pedestal words like those of the noblest ruffian of the Revolution: 'Que mon nom soit fletri; que la France soit libre.'"

"Good God!" cried March, "shall we never get to the bottom of your mines and countermines?"

After a silence Fisher answered in a lower voice, looking his friend in the eyes.

"Did you think there was nothing but evil at the bottom of them?" he asked, gently. "Did you think I had found nothing but filth in the deep seas into which fate has thrown me? Believe me, you never know the best about men till you know the worst about them. It does not dispose of their strange human souls to know that they were exhibited to the world as impossibly impeccable wax works, who never looked after a woman or knew the meaning of a bribe. Even in a palace, life can be lived well; and even in a Parliament, life can be lived with occasional efforts to live it well. I tell you it is as true of these rich fools and rascals as it is true of every poor footpad and pickpocket; that only God knows how good they have tried to be. God alone knows what the conscience can survive, or how a man who has lost his honor will still try to save his soul."

There was another silence, and March sat staring at the table and Fisher at the sea. Then Fisher suddenly sprang to his feet and caught up his hat and stick

with all his new alertness and even pugnacity.

"Look here, old fellow," he cried, "let us make a bargain. Before you open your campaign for Attwood come down and stay with us for one week, to hear what we're really doing. I mean with the Faithful Few, formerly known as the Old Gang, occasionally to be described as the Low Lot. There are really only five of us that are quite fixed, and organizing the national defense; and we're living like a garrison in a sort of broken-down hotel in Kent. Come and see what we're really doing and what there is to be done, and do us justice. And after that, with unalterable love and affection for you, publish and be damned."

Thus it came about that in the last week before war, when events moved most rapidly, Harold March found himself one of a sort of small house party of the people he was proposing to denounce. They were living simply enough, for people with their tastes, in an old brown-brick inn faced with ivy and surrounded by rather dismal gardens. At the back of the building the garden ran up very steeply to a road along the ridge above; and a zigzag path scaled the slope in sharp angles, turning to and fro amid evergreens so somber that they might rather be called everblack. Here and there up the slope were statues having all the cold monstrosity of such minor ornaments of the eighteenth century; and a whole row of them ran as on a terrace along the last bank at the bottom, opposite the back door. This detail fixed itself first in March's mind merely because it figured in the first conversation he had with one of the cabinet ministers.

The cabinet ministers were rather older than he had expected to find them. The Prime Minister no longer looked like a boy, though he still looked a little like a baby. But it was one of those old and venerable babies, and the baby had soft gray hair. Everything about him was soft, to his speech and his way of walking; but over and above that his chief function seemed to be sleep. People left alone with him got so used to his eyes being closed that they were almost startled when they realized in the stillness that the eyes were wide open, and even watching. One thing at least would always make the old gentleman open his eyes. The one thing he really cared for in this world was his hobby of armored weapons, especially Eastern weapons, and he would talk for hours about Damascus blades and Arab swordmanship. Lord James Herries, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, was a short, dark, sturdy man with a very sallow face and a very sullen manner, which contrasted with the gorgeous flower in his buttonhole and his festive trick of being always slightly overdressed. It was something of a euphemism to call him a well-known man about town. There was perhaps more mystery in the question of how a man who lived for pleasure seemed to get so little pleasure out of it. Sir David Archer, the Foreign Secretary, was the only one of them who was a self-made man, and the only one of them who looked like an aristocrat. He was tall and thin and very handsome, with a grizzled beard; his gray hair was very curly,

and even rose in front in two rebellious ringlets that seemed to the fanciful to tremble like the antennae of some giant insect, or to stir sympathetically with the restless tufted eyebrows over his rather haggard eyes. For the Foreign Secretary made no secret of his somewhat nervous condition, whatever might be the cause of it.

"Do you know that mood when one could scream because a mat is crooked?" he said to March, as they walked up and down in the back garden below the line of dingy statues. "Women get into it when they've worked too hard; and I've been working pretty hard lately, of course. It drives me mad when Herries will wear his hat a little crooked--habit of looking like a gay dog. Sometime I swear I'll knock it off. That statue of Britannia over there isn't quite straight; it sticks forward a bit as if the lady were going to topple over. The damned thing is that it doesn't topple over and be done with it. See, it's clamped with an iron prop. Don't be surprised if I get up in the middle of the night to hike it down."

They paced the path for a few moments in silence and then he continued. "It's odd those little things seem specially big when there are bigger things to worry about. We'd better go in and do some work."

Horne Fisher evidently allowed for all the neurotic possibilities of Archer and the dissipated habits of Herries; and whatever his faith in their present firmness, did not unduly tax their time and attention, even in the case of the Prime Minister. He had got the consent of the latter finally to the committing of the important documents, with the orders to the Western armies, to the care of a less conspicuous and more solid person--an uncle of his named Horne Hewitt, a rather colorless country squire who had been a good soldier, and was the military adviser of the committee. He was charged with expediting the government pledge, along with the concerted military plans, to the half-mutinous command in the west; and the still more urgent task of seeing that it did not fall into the hands of the enemy, who might appear at any moment from the east. Over and above this military official, the only other person present was a police official, a certain Doctor Prince, originally a police surgeon and now a distinguished detective, sent to be a bodyguard to the group. He was a square-faced man with big spectacles and a grimace that expressed the intention of keeping his mouth shut. Nobody else shared their captivity except the hotel proprietor, a crusty Kentish man with a crab-apple face, one or two of his servants, and another servant privately attached to Lord James Herries. He was a young Scotchman named Campbell, who looked much more distinguished than his bilious-looking master, having chestnut hair and a long saturnine face with large but fine features. He was probably the one really efficient person in the house.

After about four days of the informal council, March had come to feel a sort of

grotesque sublimity about these dubious figures, defiant in the twilight of danger, as if they were hunchbacks and cripples left alone to defend a town. All were working hard; and he himself looked up from writing a page of memoranda in a private room to see Horne Fisher standing in the doorway, accoutered as if for travel. He fancied that Fisher looked a little pale; and after a moment that gentleman shut the door behind him and said, quietly:

"Well, the worst has happened. Or nearly the worst."

"The enemy has landed," cried March, and sprang erect out of his chair.

"Oh, I knew the enemy would land," said Fisher, with composure. "Yes, he's landed; but that's not the worst that could happen. The worst is that there's a leak of some sort, even from this fortress of ours. It's been a bit of a shock to me, I can tell you; though I suppose it's illogical. After all, I was full of admiration at finding three honest men in politics. I ought not to be full of astonishment if I find only two."

He ruminated a moment and then said, in such a fashion that March could hardly tell if he were changing the subject or no:

"It's hard at first to believe that a fellow like Herries, who had pickled himself in vice like vinegar, can have any scruple left. But about that I've noticed a curious thing. Patriotism is not the first virtue. Patriotism rots into Prussianism when you pretend it is the first virtue. But patriotism is sometimes the last virtue. A man will swindle or seduce who will not sell his country. But who knows?"

"But what is to be done?" cried March, indignantly.

"My uncle has the papers safe enough," replied Fisher, "and is sending them west to-night; but somebody is trying to get at them from outside, I fear with the assistance of somebody inside. All I can do at present is to try to head off the man outside; and I must get away now and do it. I shall be back in about twenty-four hours. While I'm away I want you to keep an eye on these people and find out what you can. Au revoir." He vanished down the stairs; and from the window March could see him mount a motor cycle and trail away toward the neighboring town.

On the following morning, March was sitting in the window seat of the old inn parlor, which was oak-paneled and ordinarily rather dark; but on that occasion it was full of the white light of a curiously clear morning--the moon had shone brilliantly for the last two or three nights. He was himself somewhat in shadow in the corner of the window seat; and Lord James Herries, coming in hastily from

the garden behind, did not see him. Lord James clutched the back of a chair, as if to steady himself, and, sitting down abruptly at the table, littered with the last meal, poured himself out a tumbler of brandy and drank it. He sat with his back to March, but his yellow face appeared in a round mirror beyond and the tinge of it was like that of some horrible malady. As March moved he started violently and faced round.

"My God!" he cried, "have you seen what's outside?"

"Outside?" repeated the other, glancing over his shoulder at the garden.

"Oh, go and look for yourself," cried Herries in a sort of fury. "Hewitt's murdered and his papers stolen, that's all."

He turned his back again and sat down with a thud; his square shoulders were shaking. Harold March darted out of the doorway into the back garden with its steep slope of statues.

The first thing he saw was Doctor Prince, the detective, peering through his spectacles at something on the ground; the second was the thing he was peering at. Even after the sensational news he had heard inside, the sight was something of a sensation.

The monstrous stone image of Britannia was lying prone and face downward on the garden path; and there stuck out at random from underneath it, like the legs of a smashed fly, an arm clad in a white shirt sleeve and a leg clad in a khaki trouser, and hair of the unmistakable sandy gray that belonged to Horne Fisher's unfortunate uncle. There were pools of blood and the limbs were quite stiff in death.

"Couldn't this have been an accident?" said March, finding words at last.

"Look for yourself, I say," repeated the harsh voice of Herries, who had followed him with restless movements out of the door. "The papers are gone, I tell you. The fellow tore the coat off the corpse and cut the papers out of the inner pocket. There's the coat over there on the bank, with the great slash in it."

"But wait a minute," said the detective, Prince, quietly. "In that case there seems to be something of a mystery. A murderer might somehow have managed to throw the statue down on him, as he seems to have done. But I bet he couldn't easily have lifted it up again. I've tried; and I'm sure it would want three men at least. Yet we must suppose, on that theory, that the murderer first knocked him down as he walked past, using the statue as a stone club, then lifted it up again, took

him out and deprived him of his coat, then put him back again in the posture of death and neatly replaced the statue. I tell you it's physically impossible. And how else could he have unclothed a man covered with that stone monument? It's worse than the conjurer's trick, when a man shuffles a coat off with his wrists tied."

"Could he have thrown down the statue after he'd stripped the corpse?" asked March.

"And why?" asked Prince, sharply. "If he'd killed his man and got his papers, he'd be away like the wind. He wouldn't potter about in a garden excavating the pedestals of statues. Besides--Hullo, who's that up there?"

High on the ridge above them, drawn in dark thin lines against the sky, was a figure looking so long and lean as to be almost spidery. The dark silhouette of the head showed two small tufts like horns; and they could almost have sworn that the horns moved.

"Archer!" shouted Herries, with sudden passion, and called to him with curses to come down. The figure drew back at the first cry, with an agitated movement so abrupt as almost to be called an antic. The next moment the man seemed to reconsider and collect himself, and began to come down the zigzag garden path, but with obvious reluctance, his feet falling in slower and slower rhythm. Through March's mind were throbbing the phrases that this man himself had used, about going mad in the middle of the night and wrecking the stone figure. Just so, he could fancy, the maniac who had done such a thing might climb the crest of the hill, in that feverish dancing fashion, and look down on the wreck he had made. But the wreck he had made here was not only a wreck of stone.

When the man emerged at last on to the garden path, with the full light on his face and figure, he was walking slowly indeed, but easily, and with no appearance of fear.

"This is a terrible thing," he said. "I saw it from above; I was taking a stroll along the ridge."

"Do you mean that you saw the murder?" demanded March, "or the accident? I mean did you see the statue fall?"

"No," said Archer, "I mean I saw the statue fallen."

Prince seemed to be paying but little attention; his eye was riveted on an object lying on the path a yard or two from the corpse. It seemed to be a rusty iron bar

bent crooked at one end.

"One thing I don't understand," he said, "is all this blood. The poor fellow's skull isn't smashed; most likely his neck is broken; but blood seems to have spouted as if all his arteries were severed. I was wondering if some other instrument . . . that iron thing, for instance; but I don't see that even that is sharp enough. I suppose nobody knows what it is."

"I know what it is," said Archer in his deep but somewhat shaky voice. "I've seen it in my nightmares. It was the iron clamp or prop on the pedestal, stuck on to keep the wretched image upright when it began to wobble, I suppose. Anyhow, it was always stuck in the stonework there; and I suppose it came out when the thing collapsed."

Doctor Prince nodded, but he continued to look down at the pools of blood and the bar of iron.

"I'm certain there's something more underneath all this," he said at last. "Perhaps something more underneath the statue. I have a huge sort of hunch that there is. We are four men now and between us we can lift that great tombstone there."

They all bent their strength to the business; there was a silence save for heavy breathing; and then, after an instant of the tottering and staggering of eight legs, the great carven column of rock was rolled away, and the body lying in its shirt and trousers was fully revealed. The spectacles of Doctor Prince seemed almost to enlarge with a restrained radiance like great eyes; for other things were revealed also. One was that the unfortunate Hewitt had a deep gash across the jugular, which the triumphant doctor instantly identified as having been made with a sharp steel edge like a razor. The other was that immediately under the bank lay littered three shining scraps of steel, each nearly a foot long, one pointed and another fitted into a gorgeously jeweled hilt or handle. It was evidently a sort of long Oriental knife, long enough to be called a sword, but with a curious wavy edge; and there was a touch or two of blood on the point.

"I should have expected more blood, hardly on the point," observed Doctor Prince, thoughtfully, "but this is certainly the instrument. The slash was certainly made with a weapon shaped like this, and probably the slashing of the pocket as well. I suppose the brute threw in the statue, by way of giving him a public funeral."

March did not answer; he was mesmerized by the strange stones that glittered on the strange sword hilt; and their possible significance was broadening upon him like a dreadful dawn. It was a curious Asiatic weapon. He knew what name was connected in his memory with curious Asiatic weapons. Lord James spoke his

secret thought for him, and yet it startled him like an irrelevance.

"Where is the Prime Minister?" Herries had cried, suddenly, and somehow like the bark of a dog at some discovery.

Doctor Prince turned on him his goggles and his grim face; and it was grimmer than ever.

"I cannot find him anywhere," he said. "I looked for him at once, as soon as I found the papers were gone. That servant of yours, Campbell, made a most efficient search, but there are no traces."

There was a long silence, at the end of which Herries uttered another cry, but upon an entirely new note.

"Well, you needn't look for him any longer," he said, "for here he comes, along with your friend Fisher. They look as if they'd been for a little walking tour."

The two figures approaching up the path were indeed those of Fisher, splashed with the mire of travel and carrying a scratch like that of a bramble across one side of his bald forehead, and of the great and gray-haired statesman who looked like a baby and was interested in Eastern swords and swordmanship. But beyond this bodily recognition, March could make neither head nor tail of their presence or demeanor, which seemed to give a final touch of nonsense to the whole nightmare. The more closely he watched them, as they stood listening to the revelations of the detective, the more puzzled he was by their attitude--Fisher seemed grieved by the death of his uncle, but hardly shocked at it; the older man seemed almost openly thinking about something else, and neither had anything to suggest about a further pursuit of the fugitive spy and murderer, in spite of the prodigious importance of the documents he had stolen. When the detective had gone off to busy himself with that department of the business, to telephone and write his report, when Herries had gone back, probably to the brandy bottle, and the Prime Minister had blandly sauntered away toward a comfortable armchair in another part of the garden, Horne Fisher spoke directly to Harold March.

"My friend," he said, "I want you to come with me at once; there is no one else I can trust so much as that. The journey will take us most of the day, and the chief business cannot be done till nightfall. So we can talk things over thoroughly on the way. But I want you to be with me; for I rather think it is my hour."

March and Fisher both had motor bicycles; and the first half of their day's journey consisted in coasting eastward amid the unconvivial noise of those uncomfortable engines. But when they came out beyond Canterbury into the flats

of eastern Kent, Fisher stopped at a pleasant little public house beside a sleepy stream; and they sat down to eat and to drink and to speak almost for the first time. It was a brilliant afternoon, birds were singing in the wood behind, and the sun shone full on their ale bench and table; but the face of Fisher in the strong sunlight had a gravity never seen on it before.

"Before we go any farther," he said, "there is something you ought to know. You and I have seen some mysterious things and got to the bottom of them before now; and it's only right that you should get to the bottom of this one. But in dealing with the death of my uncle I must begin at the other end from where our old detective yarns began. I will give you the steps of deduction presently, if you want to listen to them; but I did not reach the truth of this by steps of deduction. I will first of all tell you the truth itself, because I knew the truth from the first. The other cases I approached from the outside, but in this case I was inside. I myself was the very core and center of everything."

Something in the speaker's pendent eyelids and grave gray eyes suddenly shook March to his foundations; and he cried, distractedly, "I don't understand!" as men do when they fear that they do understand. There was no sound for a space but the happy chatter of the birds, and then Horne Fisher said, calmly:

"It was I who killed my uncle. If you particularly want more, it was I who stole the state papers from him."

"Fisher!" cried his friend in a strangled voice.

"Let me tell you the whole thing before we part," continued the other, "and let me put it, for the sake of clearness, as we used to put our old problems. Now there are two things that are puzzling people about that problem, aren't there? The first is how the murderer managed to slip off the dead man's coat, when he was already pinned to the ground with that stone incubus. The other, which is much smaller and less puzzling, is the fact of the sword that cut his throat being slightly stained at the point, instead of a good deal more stained at the edge. Well, I can dispose of the first question easily. Horne Hewitt took off his own coat before he was killed. I might say he took off his coat to be killed."

"Do you call that an explanation?" exclaimed March. "The words seem more meaningless, than the facts."

"Well, let us go on to the other facts," continued Fisher, equably. "The reason that particular sword is not stained at the edge with Hewitt's blood is that it was not used to kill Hewitt."

"But the doctor," protested March, "declared distinctly that the wound was made by that particular sword."

"I beg your pardon," replied Fisher. "He did not declare that it was made by that particular sword. He declared it was made by a sword of that particular pattern."

"But it was quite a queer and exceptional pattern," argued March; "surely it is far too fantastic a coincidence to imagine--"

"It was a fantastic coincidence," reflected Horne Fisher. "It's extraordinary what coincidences do sometimes occur. By the oddest chance in the world, by one chance in a million, it so happened that another sword of exactly the same shape was in the same garden at the same time. It may be partly explained, by the fact that I brought them both into the garden myself . . . come, my dear fellow; surely you can see now what it means. Put those two things together; there were two duplicate swords and he took off his coat for himself. It may assist your speculations to recall the fact that I am not exactly an assassin."

"A duel!" exclaimed March, recovering himself. "Of course I ought to have thought of that. But who was the spy who stole the papers?"

"My uncle was the spy who stole the papers," replied Fisher, "or who tried to steal the papers when I stopped him--in the only way I could. The papers, that should have gone west to reassure our friends and give them the plans for repelling the invasion, would in a few hours have been in the hands of the invader. What could I do? To have denounced one of our friends at this moment would have been to play into the hands of your friend Attwood, and all the party of panic and slavery. Besides, it may be that a man over forty has a subconscious desire to die as he has lived, and that I wanted, in a sense, to carry my secrets to the grave. Perhaps a hobby hardens with age; and my hobby has been silence. Perhaps I feel that I have killed my mother's brother, but I have saved my mother's name. Anyhow, I chose a time when I knew you were all asleep, and he was walking alone in the garden. I saw all the stone statues standing in the moonlight; and I myself was like one of those stone statues walking. In a voice that was not my own, I told him of his treason and demanded the papers; and when he refused, I forced him to take one of the two swords. The swords were among some specimens sent down here for the Prime Minister's inspection; he is a collector, you know; they were the only equal weapons I could find. To cut an ugly tale short, we fought there on the path in front of the Britannia statue; he was a man of great strength, but I had somewhat the advantage in skill. His sword grazed my forehead almost at the moment when mine sank into the joint in his neck. He fell against the statue, like Caesar against Pompey's, hanging on to the iron rail; his sword was already broken. When I saw the blood from that deadly wound, everything else went from

me; I dropped my sword and ran as if to lift him up. As I bent toward him something happened too quick for me to follow. I do not know whether the iron bar was rotted with rust and came away in his hand, or whether he rent it out of the rock with his apelike strength; but the thing was in his hand, and with his dying energies he swung it over my head, as I knelt there unarmed beside him. I looked up wildly to avoid the blow, and saw above us the great bulk of Britannia leaning outward like the figurehead of a ship. The next instant I saw it was leaning an inch or two more than usual, and all the skies with their outstanding stars seemed to be leaning with it. For the third second it was as if the skies fell; and in the fourth I was standing in the quiet garden, looking down on that flat ruin of stone and bone at which you were looking to-day. He had plucked out the last prop that held up the British goddess, and she had fallen and crushed the traitor in her fall. I turned and darted for the coat which I knew to contain the package, ripped it up with my sword, and raced away up the garden path to where my motor bike was waiting on the road above. I had every reason for haste; but I fled without looking back at the statue and the body; and I think the thing I fled from was the sight of that appalling allegory.

"Then I did the rest of what I had to do. All through the night and into the daybreak and the daylight I went humming through the villages and markets of South England like a traveling bullet, till I came to the headquarters in the West where the trouble was. I was just in time. I was able to placard the place, so to speak, with the news that the government had not betrayed them, and that they would find supports if they would push eastward against the enemy. There's no time to tell you all that happened; but I tell you it was the day of my life. A triumph like a torchlight procession, with torchlights that might have been firebrands. The mutinies simmered down; the men of Somerset and the western counties came pouring into the market places; the men who died with Arthur and stood firm with Alfred. The Irish regiments rallied to them, after a scene like a riot, and marched eastward out of the town singing Fenian songs. There was all that is not understood, about the dark laughter of that people, in the delight with which, even when marching with the English to the defense of England, they shouted at the top of their voices, 'High upon the gallows tree stood the noble-hearted three . . . With England's cruel cord about them cast.' However, the chorus was 'God save Ireland,' and we could all have sung that just then, in one sense or another.

"But there was another side to my mission. I carried the plans of the defense; and to a great extent, luckily, the plans of the invasion also. I won't worry you with strategics; but we knew where the enemy had pushed forward the great battery that covered all his movements; and though our friends from the West could hardly arrive in time to intercept the main movement, they might get within long artillery range of the battery and shell it, if they only knew exactly where it was.

They could hardly tell that unless somebody round about here sent up some sort of signal. But, somehow, I rather fancy that somebody will."

With that he got up from the table, and they remounted their machines and went eastward into the advancing twilight of evening. The levels of the landscape were repeated in flat strips of floating cloud and the last colors of day clung to the circle of the horizon. Receding farther and farther behind them was the semicircle of the last hills; and it was quite suddenly that they saw afar off the dim line of the sea. It was not a strip of bright blue as they had seen it from the sunny veranda, but of a sinister and smoky violet, a tint that seemed ominous and dark. Here Horne Fisher dismounted once more.

"We must walk the rest of the way," he said, "and the last bit of all I must walk alone."

He bent down and began to unstrap something from his bicycle. It was something that had puzzled his companion all the way in spite of what held him to more interesting riddles; it appeared to be several lengths of pole strapped together and wrapped up in paper. Fisher took it under his arm and began to pick his way across the turf. The ground was growing more tumbled and irregular and he was walking toward a mass of thickets and small woods; night grew darker every moment. "We must not talk any more," said Fisher. "I shall whisper to you when you are to halt. Don't try to follow me then, for it will only spoil the show; one man can barely crawl safely to the spot, and two would certainly be caught."

"I would follow you anywhere," replied March, "but I would halt, too, if that is better."

"I know you would," said his friend in a low voice. "Perhaps you're the only man I ever quite trusted in this world."

A few paces farther on they came to the end of a great ridge or mound looking monstrous against the dim sky; and Fisher stopped with a gesture. He caught his companion's hand and wrung it with a violent tenderness, and then darted forward into the darkness. March could faintly see his figure crawling along under the shadow of the ridge, then he lost sight of it, and then he saw it again standing on another mound two hundred yards away. Beside him stood a singular erection made apparently of two rods. He bent over it and there was the flare of a light; all March's schoolboy memories woke in him, and he knew what it was. It was the stand of a rocket. The confused, incongruous memories still possessed him up to the very moment of a fierce but familiar sound; and an instant after the rocket left its perch and went up into endless space like a starry arrow aimed at the stars. March thought suddenly of the signs of the last days

and knew he was looking at the apocalyptic meteor of something like a Day of judgment.

Far up in the infinite heavens the rocket drooped and sprang into scarlet stars. For a moment the whole landscape out to the sea and back to the crescent of the wooded hills was like a lake of ruby light, of a red strangely rich and glorious, as if the world were steeped in wine rather than blood, or the earth were an earthly paradise, over which paused forever the sanguine moment of morning.

"God save England!" cried Fisher, with a tongue like the peal of a trumpet. "And now it is for God to save."

As darkness sank again over land and sea, there came another sound; far away in the passes of the hills behind them the guns spoke like the baying of great hounds. Something that was not a rocket, that came not hissing but screaming, went over Harold March's head and expanded beyond the mound into light and deafening din, staggering the brain with unbearable brutalities of noise. Another came, and then another, and the world was full of uproar and volcanic vapor and chaotic light. The artillery of the West country and the Irish had located the great enemy battery, and were pounding it to pieces.

In the mad excitement of that moment March peered through the storm, looking again for the long lean figure that stood beside the stand of the rocket. Then another flash lit up the whole ridge. The figure was not there.

Before the fires of the rocket had faded from the sky, long before the first gun had sounded from the distant hills, a splutter of rifle fire had flashed and flickered all around from the hidden trenches of the enemy. Something lay in the shadow at the foot of the ridge, as stiff as the stick of the fallen rocket; and the man who knew too much knew what is worth knowing. www.freeclassicebooks.com