Chapter 3. The Awful Reason of the Vicar's Visit

The revolt of Matter against Man (which I believe to exist) has now been reduced to a singular condition. It is the small things rather than the large things which make war against us and, I may add, beat us. The bones of the last mammoth have long ago decayed, a mighty wreck; the tempests no longer devour our navies, nor the mountains with hearts of fire heap hell over our cities. But we are engaged in a bitter and eternal war with small things; chiefly with microbes and with collar studs. The stud with which I was engaged (on fierce and equal terms) as I made the above reflections, was one which I was trying to introduce into my shirt collar when a loud knock came at the door.

My first thought was as to whether Basil Grant had called to fetch me. He and I were to turn up at the same dinner-party (for which I was in the act of dressing), and it might be that he had taken it into his head to come my way, though we had arranged to go separately. It was a small and confidential affair at the table of a good but unconventional political lady, an old friend of his. She had asked us both to meet a third guest, a Captain Fraser, who had made something of a name and was an authority on chimpanzees. As Basil was an old friend of the hostess and I had never seen her, I felt that it was quite possible that he (with his usual social sagacity) might have decided to take me along in order to break the ice. The theory, like all my theories, was complete; but as a fact it was not Basil.

I was handed a visiting card inscribed: "Rev. Ellis Shorter", and underneath was written in pencil, but in a hand in which even hurry could not conceal a depressing and gentlemanly excellence, "Asking the favour of a few moments' conversation on a most urgent matter."!

I had already subdued the stud, thereby proclaiming that the image of God has supremacy over all matters (a valuable truth), and throwing on my dress-coat and waistcoat, hurried into the drawing-room. He rose at my entrance, flapping like a seal; I can use no other description. He flapped a plaid shawl over his right arm; he flapped a pair of pathetic black gloves; he flapped his clothes; I may say, without exaggeration, that he flapped his eyelids, as he rose. He was a bald-browed, white-haired, white-whiskered old clergyman, of a flappy and floppy type. He said:

"I am so sorry. I am so very sorry. I am so extremely sorry. I come--I can only say--I can only say in my defence, that I come--upon an important matter. Pray forgive me."

I told him I forgave perfectly and waited.

"What I have to say," he said brokenly, "is so dreadful--it is so dreadful--I have lived a quiet life."

I was burning to get away, for it was already doubtful if I should be in time for dinner. But there was something about the old man's honest air of bitterness that seemed to open to me the possibilities of life larger and more tragic than my own.

I said gently: "Pray go on."

Nevertheless the old gentleman, being a gentleman as well as old, noticed my secret impatience and seemed still more unmanned.

"I'm so sorry," he said meekly; "I wouldn't have come--but for--your friend Major Brown recommended me to come here."

"Major Brown!" I said, with some interest.

"Yes," said the Reverend Mr Shorter, feverishly flapping his plaid shawl about. "He told me you helped him in a great difficulty--and my difficulty! Oh, my dear sir, it's a matter of life and death."

I rose abruptly, in an acute perplexity. "Will it take long, Mr Shorter?" I asked. "I have to go out to dinner almost at once."

He rose also, trembling from head to foot, and yet somehow, with all his moral palsy, he rose to the dignity of his age and his office.

"I have no right, Mr Swinburne--I have no right at all," he said. "If you have to go out to dinner, you have of course--a perfect right--of course a perfect right. But when you come back--a man will be dead."

And he sat down, quaking like a jelly.

The triviality of the dinner had been in those two minutes dwarfed and drowned in my mind. I did not want to go and see a political widow, and a captain who collected apes; I wanted to hear what had brought this dear, doddering old vicar into relation with immediate perils.

"Will you have a cigar?" I said.

"No, thank you," he said, with indescribable embarrassment, as if not smoking

cigars was a social disgrace.

"A glass of wine?" I said.

"No, thank you, no, thank you; not just now," he repeated with that hysterical eagerness with which people who do not drink at all often try to convey that on any other night of the week they would sit up all night drinking rum-punch. "Not just now, thank you."

"Nothing else I can get for you?" I said, feeling genuinely sorry for the well-mannered old donkey. "A cup of tea?"

I saw a struggle in his eye and I conquered. When the cup of tea came he drank it like a dipsomaniac gulping brandy. Then he fell back and said:

"I have had such a time, Mr Swinburne. I am not used to these excitements. As Vicar of Chuntsey, in Essex'--he threw this in with an indescribable airiness of vanity--'I have never known such things happen."

"What things happen?" I asked.

He straightened himself with sudden dignity.

"As Vicar of Chuntsey, in Essex," he said, "I have never been forcibly dressed up as an old woman and made to take part in a crime in the character of an old woman. Never once. My experience may be small. It may be insufficient. But it has never occurred to me before."

"I have never heard of it," I said, "as among the duties of a clergyman. But I am not well up in church matters. Excuse me if perhaps I failed to follow you correctly. Dressed up--as what?"

"As an old woman," said the vicar solemnly, "as an old woman."

I thought in my heart that it required no great transformation to make an old woman of him, but the thing was evidently more tragic than comic, and I said respectfully:

"May I ask how it occurred?"

"I will begin at the beginning," said Mr Shorter, "and I will tell my story with the utmost possible precision. At seventeen minutes past eleven this morning I left the vicarage to keep certain appointments and pay certain visits in the village. My

first visit was to Mr Jervis, the treasurer of our League of Christian Amusements, with whom I concluded some business touching the claim made by Parkes the gardener in the matter of the rolling of our tennis lawn. I then visited Mrs Arnett, a very earnest churchwoman, but permanently bedridden. She is the author of several small works of devotion, and of a book of verse, entitled (unless my memory misleads me) Eglantine."

He uttered all this not only with deliberation, but with something that can only be called, by a contradictory phrase, eager deliberation. He had, I think, a vague memory in his head of the detectives in the detective stories, who always sternly require that nothing should be kept back.

"I then proceeded," he went on, with the same maddening conscientiousness of manner, "to Mr Carr (not Mr James Carr, of course; Mr Robert Carr) who is temporarily assisting our organist, and having consulted with him (on the subject of a choir boy who is accused, I cannot as yet say whether justly or not, of cutting holes in the organ pipes), I finally dropped in upon a Dorcas meeting at the house of Miss Brett. The Dorcas meetings are usually held at the vicarage, but my wife being unwell, Miss Brett, a newcomer in our village, but very active in church work, had very kindly consented to hold them. The Dorcas society is entirely under my wife's management as a rule, and except for Miss Brett, who, as I say, is very active, I scarcely know any members of it. I had, however, promised to drop in on them, and I did so.

"When I arrived there were only four other maiden ladies with Miss Brett, but they were sewing very busily. It is very difficult, of course, for any person, however strongly impressed with the necessity in these matters of full and exact exposition of the facts, to remember and repeat the actual details of a conversation, particularly a conversation which (though inspired with a most worthy and admirable zeal for good work) was one which did not greatly impress the hearer's mind at the time and was in fact--er--mostly about socks. I can, however, remember distinctly that one of the spinster ladies (she was a thin person with a woollen shawl, who appeared to feel the cold, and I am almost sure she was introduced to me as Miss James) remarked that the weather was very changeable. Miss Brett then offered me a cup of tea, which I accepted, I cannot recall in what words. Miss Brett is a short and stout lady with white hair. The only other figure in the group that caught my attention was a Miss Mowbray, a small and neat lady of aristocratic manners, silver hair, and a high voice and colour. She was the most emphatic member of the party; and her views on the subject of pinafores, though expressed with a natural deference to myself, were in themselves strong and advanced. Beside her (although all five ladies were dressed simply in black) it could not be denied that the others looked in some way what you men of the world would call dowdy.

"After about ten minutes' conversation I rose to go, and as I did so I heard something which--I cannot describe it--something which seemed to--but I really cannot describe it."

"What did you hear?" I asked, with some impatience.

"I heard," said the vicar solemnly, "I heard Miss Mowbray (the lady with the silver hair) say to Miss James (the lady with the woollen shawl), the following extraordinary words. I committed them to memory on the spot, and as soon as circumstances set me free to do so, I noted them down on a piece of paper. I believe I have it here." He fumbled in his breast-pocket, bringing out mild things, note-books, circulars and programmes of village concerts. "I heard Miss Mowbray say to Miss James, the following words: 'Now's your time, Bill.'"

He gazed at me for a few moments after making this announcement, gravely and unflinchingly, as if conscious that here he was unshaken about his facts. Then he resumed, turning his bald head more towards the fire.

"This appeared to me remarkable. I could not by any means understand it. It seemed to me first of all peculiar that one maiden lady should address another maiden lady as 'Bill'. My experience, as I have said, may be incomplete; maiden ladies may have among themselves and in exclusively spinster circles wilder customs than I am aware of. But it seemed to me odd, and I could almost have sworn (if you will not misunderstand the phrase), I should have been strongly impelled to maintain at the time that the words, 'Now's your time, Bill', were by no means pronounced with that upper-class intonation which, as I have already said, had up to now characterized Miss Mowbray's conversation. In fact, the words, 'Now's your time, Bill', would have been, I fancy, unsuitable if pronounced with that upper-class intonation.

"I was surprised, I repeat, then, at the remark. But I was still more surprised when, looking round me in bewilderment, my hat and umbrella in hand, I saw the lean lady with the woollen shawl leaning upright against the door out of which I was just about to make my exit. She was still knitting, and I supposed that this erect posture against the door was only an eccentricity of spinsterhood and an oblivion of my intended departure.

"I said genially, 'I am so sorry to disturb you, Miss James, but I must really be going. I have--er--' I stopped here, for the words she had uttered in reply, though singularly brief and in tone extremely business-like, were such as to render that arrest of my remarks, I think, natural and excusable. I have these words also noted down. I have not the least idea of their meaning; so I have only been able to

render them phonetically. But she said," and Mr Shorter peered short-sightedly at his papers, "she said: 'Chuck it, fat 'ead,' and she added something that sounded like 'It's a kop', or (possibly) 'a kopt'. And then the last cord, either of my sanity or the sanity of the universe, snapped suddenly. My esteemed friend and helper, Miss Brett, standing by the mantelpiece, said: 'Put 'is old 'ead in a bag, Sam, and tie 'im up before you start jawin'. You'll be kopt yourselves some o' these days with this way of coin' things, har lar theater.'

"My head went round and round. Was it really true, as I had suddenly fancied a moment before, that unmarried ladies had some dreadful riotous society of their own from which all others were excluded? I remembered dimly in my classical days (I was a scholar in a small way once, but now, alas! rusty), I remembered the mysteries of the Bona Dea and their strange female freemasonry. I remembered the witches' Sabbaths. I was just, in my absurd lightheadedness, trying to remember a line of verse about Diana's nymphs, when Miss Mowbray threw her arm round me from behind. The moment it held me I knew it was not a woman's arm.

"Miss Brett--or what I had called Miss Brett--was standing in front of me with a big revolver in her hand and a broad grin on her face. Miss James was still leaning against the door, but had fallen into an attitude so totally new, and so totally unfeminine, that it gave one a shock. She was kicking her heels, with her hands in her pockets and her cap on one side. She was a man. I mean he was a wo--no, that is I saw that instead of being a woman she--he, I mean--that is, it was a man."

Mr Shorter became indescribably flurried and flapping in endeavouring to arrange these genders and his plaid shawl at the same time. He resumed with a higher fever of nervousness:

"As for Miss Mowbray, she--he, held me in a ring of iron. He had her arm--that is she had his arm--round her neck--my neck I mean--and I could not cry out. Miss Brett--that is, Mr Brett, at least Mr something who was not Miss Brett--had the revolver pointed at me. The other two ladies--or er--gentlemen, were rummaging in some bag in the background. It was all clear at last: they were criminals dressed up as women, to kidnap me! To kidnap the Vicar of Chuntsey, in Essex. But why? Was it to be Nonconformists?

"The brute leaning against the door called out carelessly, "'Urry up, 'Arry. Show the old bloke what the game is, and let's get off.'

"'Curse 'is eyes,' said Miss Brett--I mean the man with the revolver--'why should we show 'im the game?'

"'If you take my advice you bloomin' well will,' said the man at the door, whom they called Bill. 'A man wot knows wet 'e's doin' is worth ten wot don't, even if 'e's a potty old parson.'

"'Bill's right enough,' said the coarse voice of the man who held me (it had been Miss Mowbray's). 'Bring out the picture, 'Arry.'

"The man with the revolver walked across the room to where the other two women--I mean men--were turning over baggage, and asked them for something which they gave him. He came back with it across the room and held it out in front of me. And compared to the surprise of that display, all the previous surprises of this awful day shrank suddenly.

"It was a portrait of myself. That such a picture should be in the hands of these scoundrels might in any case have caused a mild surprise; but no more. It was no mild surprise that I felt. The likeness was an extremely good one, worked up with all the accessories of the conventional photographic studio. I was leaning my head on my hand and was relieved against a painted landscape of woodland. It was obvious that it was no snapshot; it was clear that I had sat for this photograph. And the truth was that I had never sat for such a photograph. It was a photograph that I had never had taken.

"I stared at it again and again. It seemed to me to be touched up a good deal; it was glazed as well as framed, and the glass blurred some of the details. But there unmistakably was my face, my eyes, my nose and mouth, my head and hand, posed for a professional photographer. And I had never posed so for any photographer.

"'Be'old the bloomin' miracle,' said the man with the revolver, with ill-timed facetiousness. 'Parson, prepare to meet your God.' And with this he slid the glass out of the frame. As the glass moved, I saw that part of the picture was painted on it in Chinese white, notably a pair of white whiskers and a clerical collar. And underneath was a portrait of an old lady in a quiet black dress, leaning her head on her hand against the woodland landscape. The old lady was as like me as one pin is like another. It had required only the whiskers and the collar to make it me in every hair.

"'Entertainin', ain't it?' said the man described as 'Arry, as he shot the glass back again. 'Remarkable resemblance, parson. Gratifyin' to the lady. Gratifyin' to you. And hi may hadd, particlery gratifyin' to us, as bein' the probable source of a very tolerable haul. You know Colonel Hawker, the man who's come to live in these parts, don't you?'

"I nodded.

"'Well,' said the man 'Arry, pointing to the picture, 'that's 'is mother. 'Oo ran to catch 'im when 'e fell? She did,' and he flung his fingers in a general gesture towards the photograph of the old lady who was exactly like me.

"'Tell the old gent wot 'e's got to do and be done with it,' broke out Bill from the door. 'Look 'ere, Reverend Shorter, we ain't goin' to do you no 'arm. We'll give you a sov. for your trouble if you like. And as for the old woman's clothes--why, you'll look lovely in 'em.'

"'You ain't much of a 'and at a description, Bill,' said the man behind me. 'Mr Shorter, it's like this. We've got to see this man Hawker tonight. Maybe 'e'll kiss us all and 'ave up the champagne when 'e sees us. Maybe on the other 'and--'e won't. Maybe 'e'll be dead when we goes away. Maybe not. But we've got to see 'im. Now as you know, 'e shuts 'isself up and never opens the door to a soul; only you don't know why and we does. The only one as can ever get at 'im is 'is mother. Well, it's a confounded funny coincidence,' he said, accenting the penultimate, 'it's a very unusual piece of good luck, but you're 'is mother.'

"'When first I saw 'er picture,' said the man Bill, shaking his head in a ruminant manner, 'when I first saw it I said--old Shorter. Those were my exact words--old Shorter.'

"'What do you mean, you wild creatures?' I gasped. 'What am I to do?'

"'That's easy said, your 'oldness,' said the man with the revolver, good-humouredly; 'you've got to put on those clothes,' and he pointed to a poke-bonnet and a heap of female clothes in the corner of the room.

"I will not dwell, Mr Swinburne, upon the details of what followed. I had no choice. I could not fight five men, to say nothing of a loaded pistol. In five minutes, sir, the Vicar of Chuntsey was dressed as an old woman--as somebody else's mother, if you please--and was dragged out of the house to take part in a crime.

"It was already late in the afternoon, and the nights of winter were closing in fast. On a dark road, in a blowing wind, we set out towards the lonely house of Colonel Hawker, perhaps the queerest cortege that ever straggled up that or any other road. To every human eye, in every external, we were six very respectable old ladies of small means, in black dresses and refined but antiquated bonnets; and we were really five criminals and a clergyman.

"I will cut a long story short. My brain was whirling like a windmill as I walked, trying to think of some manner of escape. To cry out, so long as we were far from houses, would be suicidal, for it would be easy for the ruffians to knife me or to gag me and fling me into a ditch. On the other hand, to attempt to stop strangers and explain the situation was impossible, because of the frantic folly of the situation itself. Long before I had persuaded the chance postman or carrier of so absurd a story, my companions would certainly have got off themselves, and in all probability would have carried me off, as a friend of theirs who had the misfortune to be mad or drunk. The last thought, however, was an inspiration; though a very terrible one. Had it come to this, that the Vicar of Chuntsey must pretend to be mad or drunk? It had come to this.

"I walked along with the rest up the deserted road, imitating and keeping pace, as far as I could, with their rapid and yet lady-like step, until at length I saw a lamp-post and a policeman standing under it. I had made up my mind. Until we reached them we were all equally demure and silent and swift. When we reached them I suddenly flung myself against the railings and roared out: 'Hooray! Hooray! Hooray! Rule Britannia! Get your 'air cut. Hoop-la! Boo!' It was a condition of no little novelty for a man in my position.

"The constable instantly flashed his lantern on me, or the draggled, drunken old woman that was my travesty. 'Now then, mum,' he began gruffly.

"'Come along quiet, or I'll eat your heart,' cried Sam in my ear hoarsely. 'Stop, or I'll flay you.' It was frightful to hear the words and see the neatly shawled old spinster who whispered them.

"I yelled, and yelled--I was in for it now. I screamed comic refrains that vulgar young men had sung, to my regret, at our village concerts; I rolled to and fro like a ninepin about to fall.

"'If you can't get your friend on quiet, ladies,' said the policeman, 'I shall have to take 'er up. Drunk and disorderly she is right enough.'

"I redoubled my efforts. I had not been brought up to this sort of thing; but I believe I eclipsed myself. Words that I did not know I had ever heard of seemed to come pouring out of my open mouth.

"'When we get you past,' whispered Bill, 'you'll howl louder; you'll howl louder when we're burning your feet off.'

"I screamed in my terror those awful songs of joy. In all the nightmares that men

have ever dreamed, there has never been anything so blighting and horrible as the faces of those five men, looking out of their poke-bonnets; the figures of district visitors with the faces of devils. I cannot think there is anything so heart-breaking in hell.

"For a sickening instant I thought that the bustle of my companions and the perfect respectability of all our dresses would overcome the policeman and induce him to let us pass. He wavered, so far as one can describe anything so solid as a policeman as wavering. I lurched suddenly forward and ran my head into his chest, calling out (if I remember correctly), 'Oh, crikey, blimey, Bill.' It was at that moment that I remembered most dearly that I was the Vicar of Chuntsey, in Essex.

"My desperate coup saved me. The policeman had me hard by the back of the neck.

"'You come along with me,' he began, but Bill cut in with his perfect imitation of a lady's finnicking voice.

"'Oh, pray, constable, don't make a disturbance with our poor friend. We will get her quietly home. She does drink too much, but she is quite a lady--only eccentric.'

"'She butted me in the stomach,' said the policeman briefly.

"'Eccentricities of genius,' said Sam earnestly.

"'Pray let me take her home,' reiterated Bill, in the resumed character of Miss James, 'she wants looking after.' 'She does,' said the policeman, 'but I'll look after her.'

"'That's no good,' cried Bill feverishly. 'She wants her friends. She wants a particular medicine we've got.'

"'Yes,' assented Miss Mowbray, with excitement, 'no other medicine any good, constable. Complaint quite unique.'

"'I'm all righ'. Cutchy, cutchy, coo!' remarked, to his eternal shame, the Vicar of Chuntsey.

"'Look here, ladies,' said the constable sternly, 'I don't like the eccentricity of your friend, and I don't like 'er songs, or 'er 'ead in my stomach. And now I come to think of it, I don't like the looks of you I've seen many as quiet dressed as you as

was wrong 'uns. Who are you?'

"'We've not our cards with us,' said Miss Mowbray, with indescribable dignity. 'Nor do we see why we should be insulted by any Jack-in-office who chooses to be rude to ladies, when he is paid to protect them. If you choose to take advantage of the weakness of our unfortunate friend, no doubt you are legally entitled to take her. But if you fancy you have any legal right to bully us, you will find yourself in the wrong box.'

"The truth and dignity of this staggered the policeman for a moment. Under cover of their advantage my five persecutors turned for an instant on me faces like faces of the damned and then swished off into the darkness. When the constable first turned his lantern and his suspicions on to them, I had seen the telegraphic look flash from face to face saying that only retreat was possible now.

"By this time I was sinking slowly to the pavement, in a state of acute reflection. So long as the ruffians were with me, I dared not quit the role of drunkard. For if I had begun to talk reasonably and explain the real case, the officer would merely have thought that I was slightly recovered and would have put me in charge of my friends. Now, however, if I liked I might safely undeceive him.

"But I confess I did not like. The chances of life are many, and it may doubtless sometimes lie in the narrow path of duty for a clergyman of the Church of England to pretend to be a drunken old woman; but such necessities are, I imagine, sufficiently rare to appear to many improbable. Suppose the story got about that I had pretended to be drunk. Suppose people did not all think it was pretence!

"I lurched up, the policeman half-lifting me. I went along weakly and quietly for about a hundred yards. The officer evidently thought that I was too sleepy and feeble to effect an escape, and so held me lightly and easily enough. Past one turning, two turnings, three turnings, four turnings, he trailed me with him, a limp and slow and reluctant figure. At the fourth turning, I suddenly broke from his hand and tore down the street like a maddened stag. He was unprepared, he was heavy, and it was dark. I ran and ran and ran, and in five minutes' running, found I was gaining. In half an hour I was out in the fields under the holy and blessed stars, where I tore off my accursed shawl and bonnet and buried them in clean earth."

The old gentleman had finished his story and leant back in his chair. Both the matter and the manner of his narration had, as time went on, impressed me favourably. He was an old duffer and pedant, but behind these things he was a country-bred man and gentleman, and had showed courage and a sporting

instinct in the hour of desperation. He had told his story with many quaint formalities of diction, but also with a very convincing realism.

"And now--" I began.

"And now," said Shorter, leaning forward again with something like servile energy, "and now, Mr Swinburne, what about that unhappy man Hawker. I cannot tell what those men meant, or how far what they said was real. But surely there is danger. I cannot go to the police, for reasons that you perceive. Among other things, they wouldn't believe me. What is to be done?"

I took out my watch. It was already half past twelve.

"My friend Basil Grant," I said, "is the best man we can go to. He and I were to have gone to the same dinner tonight; but he will just have come back by now. Have you any objection to taking a cab?"

"Not at all," he replied, rising politely, and gathering up his absurd plaid shawl.

A rattle in a hansom brought us underneath the sombre pile of workmen's flats in Lambeth which Grant inhabited; a climb up a wearisome wooden staircase brought us to his garret. When I entered that wooden and scrappy interior, the white gleam of Basil's shirt-front and the lustre of his fur coat flung on the wooden settle, struck me as a contrast. He was drinking a glass of wine before retiring. I was right; he had come back from the dinner-party.

He listened to the repetition of the story of the Rev. Ellis Shorter with the genuine simplicity and respect which he never failed to exhibit in dealing with any human being. When it was over he said simply:

"Do you know a man named Captain Fraser?"

I was so startled at this totally irrelevant reference to the worthy collector of chimpanzees with whom I ought to have dined that evening, that I glanced sharply at Grant. The result was that I did not look at Mr Shorter. I only heard him answer, in his most nervous tone, "No."

Basil, however, seemed to find something very curious about his answer or his demeanour generally, for he kept his big blue eyes fixed on the old clergyman, and though the eyes were quite quiet they stood out more and more from his head.

"You are quite sure, Mr Shorter," he repeated, "that you don't know Captain

Fraser?"

"Quite," answered the vicar, and I was certainly puzzled to find him returning so much to the timidity, not to say the demoralization, of his tone when he first entered my presence.

Basil sprang smartly to his feet.

"Then our course is clear," he said. "You have not even begun your investigation, my dear Mr Shorter; the first thing for us to do is to go together to see Captain Fraser."

"When?" asked the clergyman, stammering.

"Now," said Basil, putting one arm in his fur coat.

The old clergyman rose to his feet, quaking all over.

"I really do not think that it is necessary," he said.

Basil took his arm out of the fur coat, threw it over the chair again, and put his hands in his pockets.

"Oh," he said, with emphasis. "Oh--you don't think it necessary; then," and he added the words with great clearness and deliberation, "then, Mr Ellis Shorter, I can only say that I would like to see you without your whiskers."

And at these words I also rose to my feet, for the great tragedy of my life had come. Splendid and exciting as life was in continual contact with an intellect like Basil's, I had always the feeling that that splendour and excitement were on the borderland of sanity. He lived perpetually near the vision of the reason of things which makes men lose their reason. And I felt of his insanity as men feel of the death of friends with heart disease. It might come anywhere, in a field, in a hansom cab, looking at a sunset, smoking a cigarette. It had come now. At the very moment of delivering a judgement for the salvation of a fellow creature, Basil Grant had gone mad.

"Your whiskers," he cried, advancing with blazing eyes. "Give me your whiskers. And your bald head."

The old vicar naturally retreated a step or two. I stepped between.

"Sit down, Basil," I implored, "you're a little excited. Finish your wine."

"Whiskers," he answered sternly, "whiskers."

And with that he made a dash at the old gentleman, who made a dash for the door, but was intercepted. And then, before I knew where I was the quiet room was turned into something between a pantomime and a pandemonium by those two. Chairs were flung over with a crash, tables were vaulted with a noise like thunder, screens were smashed, crockery scattered in smithereens, and still Basil Grant bounded and bellowed after the Rev. Ellis Shorter.

And now I began to perceive something else, which added the last half-witted touch to my mystification. The Rev. Ellis Shorter, of Chuntsey, in Essex, was by no means behaving as I had previously noticed him to behave, or as, considering his age and station, I should have expected him to behave. His power of dodging, leaping, and fighting would have been amazing in a lad of seventeen, and in this doddering old vicar looked like a sort of farcical fairy-tale. Moreover, he did not seem to be so much astonished as I had thought. There was even a look of something like enjoyment in his eyes; so there was in the eye of Basil. In fact, the unintelligible truth must be told. They were both laughing.

At length Shorter was cornered.

"Come, come, Mr Grant," he panted, "you can't do anything to me. It's quite legal. And it doesn't do any one the least harm. It's only a social fiction. A result of our complex society, Mr Grant."

"I don't blame you, my man," said Basil coolly. "But I want your whiskers. And your bald head. Do they belong to Captain Fraser?"

"No, no," said Mr Shorter, laughing, "we provide them ourselves. They don't belong to Captain Fraser."

"What the deuce does all this mean?" I almost screamed. "Are you all in an infernal nightmare? Why should Mr Shorter's bald head belong to Captain Fraser? How could it? What the deuce has Captain Fraser to do with the affair? What is the matter with him? You dined with him, Basil."

"No," said Grant, "I didn't."

"Didn't you go to Mrs Thornton's dinner-party?" I asked, staring. "Why not?"

"Well," said Basil, with a slow and singular smile, "the fact is I was detained by a visitor. I have him, as a point of fact, in my bedroom."

"In your bedroom?" I repeated; but my imagination had reached that point when he might have said in his coal scuttle or his waistcoat pocket.

Grant stepped to the door of an inner room, flung it open and walked in. Then he came out again with the last of the bodily wonders of that wild night. He introduced into the sitting-room, in an apologetic manner, and by the nape of the neck, a limp clergyman with a bald head, white whiskers and a plaid shawl.

"Sit down, gentlemen," cried Grant, striking his hands heartily. "Sit down all of you and have a glass of wine. As you say, there is no harm in it, and if Captain Fraser had simply dropped me a hint I could have saved him from dropping a good sum of money. Not that you would have liked that, eh?"

The two duplicate clergymen, who were sipping their Burgundy with two duplicate grins, laughed heartily at this, and one of them carelessly pulled off his whiskers and laid them on the table.

"Basil," I said, "if you are my friend, save me. What is all this?"

He laughed again.

"Only another addition, Cherub, to your collection of Queer Trades. These two gentlemen (whose health I have now the pleasure of drinking) are Professional Detainers."

"And what on earth's that?" I asked.

"It's really very simple, Mr Swinburne," began he who had once been the Rev. Ellis Shorter, of Chuntsey, in Essex; and it gave me a shock indescribable to hear out of that pompous and familiar form come no longer its own pompous and familiar voice, but the brisk sharp tones of a young city man. "It is really nothing very important. We are paid by our clients to detain in conversation, on some harmless pretext, people whom they want out of the way for a few hours. And Captain Fraser--" and with that he hesitated and smiled.

Basil smiled also. He intervened.

"The fact is that Captain Fraser, who is one of my best friends, wanted us both out of the way very much. He is sailing tonight for East Africa, and the lady with whom we were all to have dined is--er--what is I believe described as 'the romance of his life'. He wanted that two hours with her, and employed these two reverend gentlemen to detain us at our houses so as to let him have the field to himself."

"And of course," said the late Mr Shorter apologetically to me, "as I had to keep a gentleman at home from keeping an appointment with a lady, I had to come with something rather hot and strong--rather urgent. It wouldn't have done to be tame."

"Oh," I said, "I acquit you of tameness."

"Thank you, sir," said the man respectfully, "always very grateful for any recommendation, sir."

The other man idly pushed back his artificial bald head, revealing close red hair, and spoke dreamily, perhaps under the influence of Basil's admirable Burgundy.

"It's wonderful how common it's getting, gentlemen. Our office is busy from morning till night. I've no doubt you've often knocked up against us before. You just take notice. When an old bachelor goes on boring you with hunting stories, when you're burning to be introduced to somebody, he's from our bureau. When a lady calls on parish work and stops hours, just when you wanted to go to the Robinsons', she's from our bureau. The Robinson hand, sir, may be darkly seen."

"There is one thing I don't understand," I said. "Why you are both vicars."

A shade crossed the brow of the temporary incumbent of Chuntsey, in Essex.

"That may have been a mistake, sir," he said. "But it was not our fault. It was all the munificence of Captain Fraser. He requested that the highest price and talent on our tariff should be employed to detain you gentlemen. Now the highest payment in our office goes to those who impersonate vicars, as being the most respectable and more of a strain. We are paid five guineas a visit. We have had the good fortune to satisfy the firm with our work; and we are now permanently vicars. Before that we had two years as colonels, the next in our scale. Colonels are four guineas."