

Chapter 6. The Eccentric Seclusion of the Old Lady

The conversation of Rupert Grant had two great elements of interest--first, the long fantasias of detective deduction in which he was engaged, and, second, his genuine romantic interest in the life of London. His brother Basil said of him: "His reasoning is particularly cold and clear, and invariably leads him wrong. But his poetry comes in abruptly and leads him right." Whether this was true of Rupert as a whole, or no, it was certainly curiously supported by one story about him which I think worth telling.

We were walking along a lonely terrace in Brompton together. The street was full of that bright blue twilight which comes about half past eight in summer, and which seems for the moment to be not so much a coming of darkness as the turning on of a new azure illuminator, as if the earth were lit suddenly by a sapphire sun. In the cool blue the lemon tint of the lamps had already begun to flame, and as Rupert and I passed them, Rupert talking excitedly, one after another the pale sparks sprang out of the dusk. Rupert was talking excitedly because he was trying to prove to me the nine hundred and ninety-ninth of his amateur detective theories. He would go about London, with this mad logic in his brain, seeing a conspiracy in a cab accident, and a special providence in a falling fusee. His suspicions at the moment were fixed upon an unhappy milkman who walked in front of us. So arresting were the incidents which afterwards overtook us that I am really afraid that I have forgotten what were the main outlines of the milkman's crime. I think it had something to do with the fact that he had only one small can of milk to carry, and that of that he had left the lid loose and walked so quickly that he spilled milk on the pavement. This showed that he was not thinking of his small burden, and this again showed that he anticipated some other than lacteal business at the end of his walk, and this (taken in conjunction with something about muddy boots) showed something else that I have entirely forgotten. I am afraid that I derided this detailed revelation unmercifully; and I am afraid that Rupert Grant, who, though the best of fellows, had a good deal of the sensitiveness of the artistic temperament, slightly resented my derision. He endeavoured to take a whiff of his cigar, with the placidity which he associated with his profession, but the cigar, I think, was nearly bitten through.

"My dear fellow," he said acidly, "I'll bet you half a crown that wherever that milkman comes to a real stop I'll find out something curious."

"My resources are equal to that risk," I said, laughing. "Done."

We walked on for about a quarter of an hour in silence in the trail of the

mysterious milkman. He walked quicker and quicker, and we had some ado to keep up with him; and every now and then he left a splash of milk, silver in the lamplight. Suddenly, almost before we could note it, he disappeared down the area steps of a house. I believe Rupert really believed that the milkman was a fairy; for a second he seemed to accept him as having vanished. Then calling something to me which somehow took no hold on my mind, he darted after the mystic milkman, and disappeared himself into the area.

I waited for at least five minutes, leaning against a lamp-post in the lonely street. Then the milkman came swinging up the steps without his can and hurried off clattering down the road. Two or three minutes more elapsed, and then Rupert came bounding up also, his face pale but yet laughing; a not uncommon contradiction in him, denoting excitement.

"My friend," he said, rubbing his hands, "so much for all your scepticism. So much for your philistine ignorance of the possibilities of a romantic city. Two and sixpence, my boy, is the form in which your prosaic good nature will have to express itself."

"What?" I said incredulously, "do you mean to say that you really did find anything the matter with the poor milkman?"

His face fell.

"Oh, the milkman," he said, with a miserable affectation at having misunderstood me. "No, I--I--didn't exactly bring anything home to the milkman himself, I--"

"What did the milkman say and do?" I said, with inexorable sternness.

"Well, to tell the truth," said Rupert, shifting restlessly from one foot to another, "the milkman himself, as far as merely physical appearances went, just said, 'Milk, Miss,' and handed in the can. That is not to say, of course, that he did not make some secret sign or some--"

I broke into a violent laugh. "You idiot," I said, "why don't you own yourself wrong and have done with it? Why should he have made a secret sign any more than any one else? You own he said nothing and did nothing worth mentioning. You own that, don't you?"

His face grew grave.

"Well, since you ask me, I must admit that I do. It is possible that the milkman did not betray himself. It is even possible that I was wrong about him."

"Then come along with you," I said, with a certain amicable anger, "and remember that you owe me half a crown."

"As to that, I differ from you," said Rupert coolly. "The milkman's remarks may have been quite innocent. Even the milkman may have been. But I do not owe you half a crown. For the terms of the bet were, I think, as follows, as I propounded them, that wherever that milkman came to a real stop I should find out something curious."

"Well?" I said.

"Well," he answered, "I jolly well have. You just come with me," and before I could speak he had turned tail once more and whisked through the blue dark into the moat or basement of the house. I followed almost before I made any decision.

When we got down into the area I felt indescribably foolish literally, as the saying is, in a hole. There was nothing but a closed door, shuttered windows, the steps down which we had come, the ridiculous well in which I found myself, and the ridiculous man who had brought me there, and who stood there with dancing eyes. I was just about to turn back when Rupert caught me by the elbow.

"Just listen to that," he said, and keeping my coat gripped in his right hand, he rapped with the knuckles of his left on the shutters of the basement window. His air was so definite that I paused and even inclined my head for a moment towards it. From inside was coming the murmur of an unmistakable human voice.

"Have you been talking to somebody inside?" I asked suddenly, turning to Rupert.

"No, I haven't," he replied, with a grim smile, "but I should very much like to. Do you know what somebody is saying in there?"

"No, of course not," I replied.

"Then I recommend you to listen," said Rupert sharply.

In the dead silence of the aristocratic street at evening, I stood a moment and listened. From behind the wooden partition, in which there was a long lean crack, was coming a continuous and moaning sound which took the form of the words: "When shall I get out? When shall I get out? Will they ever let me out?" or words to that effect.

"Do you know anything about this?" I said, turning upon Rupert very abruptly.

"Perhaps you think I am the criminal," he said sardonically, "instead of being in some small sense the detective. I came into this area two or three minutes ago, having told you that I knew there was something funny going on, and this woman behind the shutters (for it evidently is a woman) was moaning like mad. No, my dear friend, beyond that I do not know anything about her. She is not, startling as it may seem, my disinherited daughter, or a member of my secret seraglio. But when I hear a human being wailing that she can't get out, and talking to herself like a mad woman and beating on the shutters with her fists, as she was doing two or three minutes ago, I think it worth mentioning, that is all."

"My dear fellow," I said, "I apologize; this is no time for arguing. What is to be done?"

Rupert Grant had a long clasp-knife naked and brilliant in his hand.

"First of all," he said, "house-breaking." And he forced the blade into the crevice of the wood and broke away a huge splinter, leaving a gap and glimpse of the dark window-pane inside. The room within was entirely unlighted, so that for the first few seconds the window seemed a dead and opaque surface, as dark as a strip of slate. Then came a realization which, though in a sense gradual, made us step back and catch our breath. Two large dim human eyes were so close to us that the window itself seemed suddenly to be a mask. A pale human face was pressed against the glass within, and with increased distinctness, with the increase of the opening came the words:

"When shall I get out?"

"What can all this be?" I said.

Rupert made no answer, but lifting his walking-stick and pointing the ferrule like a fencing sword at the glass, punched a hole in it, smaller and more accurate than I should have supposed possible. The moment he had done so the voice spouted out of the hole, so to speak, piercing and querulous and clear, making the same demand for liberty.

"Can't you get out, madam?" I said, drawing near the hole in some perturbation.

"Get out? Of course I can't," moaned the unknown female bitterly. "They won't let me. I told them I would be let out. I told them I'd call the police. But it's no good. Nobody knows, nobody comes. They could keep me as long as they liked only--"

I was in the very act of breaking the window finally with my stick, incensed with this very sinister mystery, when Rupert held my arm hard, held it with a curious, still, and secret rigidity as if he desired to stop me, but did not desire to be observed to do so. I paused a moment, and in the act swung slightly round, so that I was facing the supporting wall of the front door steps. The act froze me into a sudden stillness like that of Rupert, for a figure almost as motionless as the pillars of the portico, but unmistakably human, had put his head out from between the doorposts and was gazing down into the area. One of the lighted lamps of the street was just behind his head, throwing it into abrupt darkness. Consequently, nothing whatever could be seen of his face beyond one fact, that he was unquestionably staring at us. I must say I thought Rupert's calmness magnificent. He rang the area bell quite idly, and went on talking to me with the easy end of a conversation which had never had any beginning. The black glaring figure in the portico did not stir. I almost thought it was really a statue. In another moment the grey area was golden with gaslight as the basement door was opened suddenly and a small and decorous housemaid stood in it.

"Pray excuse me," said Rupert, in a voice which he contrived to make somehow or other at once affable and underbred, "but we thought perhaps that you might do something for the Waifs and Strays. We don't expect--"

"Not here," said the small servant, with the incomparable severity of the menial of the non-philanthropic, and slammed the door in our faces.

"Very sad, very sad--the indifference of these people," said the philanthropist with gravity, as we went together up the steps. As we did so the motionless figure in the portico suddenly disappeared.

"Well, what do you make of that?" asked Rupert, slapping his gloves together when we got into the street.

I do not mind admitting that I was seriously upset. Under such conditions I had but one thought.

"Don't you think," I said a trifle timidly, "that we had better tell your brother?"

"Oh, if you like," said Rupert, in a lordly way. "He is quite near, as I promised to meet him at Gloucester Road Station. Shall we take a cab? Perhaps, as you say, it might amuse him."

Gloucester Road Station had, as if by accident, a somewhat deserted look. After a little looking about we discovered Basil Grant with his great head and his great white hat blocking the ticket-office window. I thought at first that he was taking a

ticket for somewhere and being an astonishingly long time about it. As a matter of fact, he was discussing religion with the booking-office clerk, and had almost got his head through the hole in his excitement. When we dragged him away it was some time before he would talk of anything but the growth of an Oriental fatalism in modern thought, which had been well typified by some of the official's ingenious but perverse fallacies. At last we managed to get him to understand that we had made an astounding discovery. When he did listen, he listened attentively, walking between us up and down the lamp-lit street, while we told him in a rather feverish duet of the great house in South Kensington, of the equivocal milkman, of the lady imprisoned in the basement, and the man staring from the porch. At length he said:

"If you're thinking of going back to look the thing up, you must be careful what you do. It's no good you two going there. To go twice on the same pretext would look dubious. To go on a different pretext would look worse. You may be quite certain that the inquisitive gentleman who looked at you looked thoroughly, and will wear, so to speak, your portraits next to his heart. If you want to find out if there is anything in this without a police raid I fancy you had better wait outside. I'll go in and see them."

His slow and reflective walk brought us at length within sight of the house. It stood up ponderous and purple against the last pallor of twilight. It looked like an ogre's castle. And so apparently it was.

"Do you think it's safe, Basil," said his brother, pausing, a little pale, under the lamp, "to go into that place alone? Of course we shall be near enough to hear if you yell, but these devils might do something--something sudden--or odd. I can't feel it's safe."

"I know of nothing that is safe," said Basil composedly, "except, possibly--death," and he went up the steps and rang at the bell. When the massive respectable door opened for an instant, cutting a square of gaslight in the gathering dark, and then closed with a bang, burying our friend inside, we could not repress a shudder. It had been like the heavy gaping and closing of the dim lips of some evil leviathan. A freshening night breeze began to blow up the street, and we turned up the collars of our coats. At the end of twenty minutes, in which we had scarcely moved or spoken, we were as cold as icebergs, but more, I think, from apprehension than the atmosphere. Suddenly Rupert made an abrupt movement towards the house.

"I can't stand this," he began, but almost as he spoke sprang back into the shadow, for the panel of gold was again cut out of the black house front, and the burly figure of Basil was silhouetted against it coming out. He was roaring with

laughter and talking so loudly that you could have heard every syllable across the street. Another voice, or, possibly, two voices, were laughing and talking back at him from within.

"No, no, no," Basil was calling out, with a sort of hilarious hostility. "That's quite wrong. That's the most ghastly heresy of all. It's the soul, my dear chap, the soul that's the arbiter of cosmic forces. When you see a cosmic force you don't like, trick it, my boy. But I must really be off."

"Come and pitch into us again," came the laughing voice from out of the house. "We still have some bones unbroken."

"Thanks very much, I will--good night," shouted Grant, who had by this time reached the street.

"Good night," came the friendly call in reply, before the door closed.

"Basil," said Rupert Grant, in a hoarse whisper, "what are we to do?"

The elder brother looked thoughtfully from one of us to the other.

"What is to be done, Basil?" I repeated in uncontrollable excitement.

"I'm not sure," said Basil doubtfully. "What do you say to getting some dinner somewhere and going to the Court Theatre tonight? I tried to get those fellows to come, but they couldn't."

We stared blankly.

"Go to the Court Theatre?" repeated Rupert. "What would be the good of that?"

"Good? What do you mean?" answered Basil, staring also. "Have you turned Puritan or Passive Resister, or something? For fun, of course."

"But, great God in Heaven! What are we going to do, I mean!" cried Rupert. "What about the poor woman locked up in that house? Shall I go for the police?"

Basil's face cleared with immediate comprehension, and he laughed.

"Oh, that," he said. "I'd forgotten that. That's all right. Some mistake, possibly. Or some quite trifling private affair. But I'm sorry those fellows couldn't come with us. Shall we take one of these green omnibuses? There is a restaurant in Sloane Square."

"I sometimes think you play the fool to frighten us," I said irritably. "How can we leave that woman locked up? How can it be a mere private affair? How can crime and kidnapping and murder, for all I know, be private affairs? If you found a corpse in a man's drawing-room, would you think it bad taste to talk about it just as if it was a confounded dado or an infernal etching?"

Basil laughed heartily.

"That's very forcible," he said. "As a matter of fact, though, I know it's all right in this case. And there comes the green omnibus."

"How do you know it's all right in this case?" persisted his brother angrily.

"My dear chap, the thing's obvious," answered Basil, holding a return ticket between his teeth while he fumbled in his waistcoat pocket. "Those two fellows never committed a crime in their lives. They're not the kind. Have either of you chaps got a halfpenny? I want to get a paper before the omnibus comes."

"Oh, curse the paper!" cried Rupert, in a fury. "Do you mean to tell me, Basil Grant, that you are going to leave a fellow creature in pitch darkness in a private dungeon, because you've had ten minutes' talk with the keepers of it and thought them rather good men?"

"Good men do commit crimes sometimes," said Basil, taking the ticket out of his mouth. "But this kind of good man doesn't commit that kind of crime. Well, shall we get on this omnibus?"

The great green vehicle was indeed plunging and lumbering along the dim wide street towards us. Basil had stepped from the curb, and for an instant it was touch and go whether we should all have leaped on to it and been borne away to the restaurant and the theatre.

"Basil," I said, taking him firmly by the shoulder, "I simply won't leave this street and this house."

"Nor will I," said Rupert, glaring at it and biting his fingers. "There's some black work going on there. If I left it I should never sleep again."

Basil Grant looked at us both seriously.

"Of course if you feel like that," he said, "we'll investigate further. You'll find it's all right, though. They're only two young Oxford fellows. Extremely nice, too,

though rather infected with this pseudo-Darwinian business. Ethics of evolution and all that."

"I think," said Rupert darkly, ringing the bell, "that we shall enlighten you further about their ethics."

"And may I ask," said Basil gloomily, "what it is that you propose to do?"

"I propose, first of all," said Rupert, "to get into this house; secondly, to have a look at these nice young Oxford men; thirdly, to knock them down, bind them, gag them, and search the house."

Basil stared indignantly for a few minutes. Then he was shaken for an instant with one of his sudden laughs.

"Poor little boys," he said. "But it almost serves them right for holding such silly views, after all," and he quaked again with amusement "there's something confoundedly Darwinian about it."

"I suppose you mean to help us?" said Rupert.

"Oh, yes, I'll be in it," answered Basil, "if it's only to prevent your doing the poor chaps any harm."

He was standing in the rear of our little procession, looking indifferent and sometimes even sulky, but somehow the instant the door opened he stepped first into the hall, glowing with urbanity.

"So sorry to haunt you like this," he said. "I met two friends outside who very much want to know you. May I bring them in?"

"Delighted, of course," said a young voice, the unmistakable voice of the Isis, and I realized that the door had been opened, not by the decorous little servant girl, but by one of our hosts in person. He was a short, but shapely young gentleman, with curly dark hair and a square, snub-nosed face. He wore slippers and a sort of blazer of some incredible college purple.

"This way," he said; "mind the steps by the staircase. This house is more crooked and old-fashioned than you would think from its snobbish exterior. There are quite a lot of odd corners in the place really."

"That," said Rupert, with a savage smile, "I can quite believe."

We were by this time in the study or back parlour, used by the young inhabitants as a sitting-room, an apartment littered with magazines and books ranging from Dante to detective stories. The other youth, who stood with his back to the fire smoking a corncob, was big and burly, with dead brown hair brushed forward and a Norfolk jacket. He was that particular type of man whose every feature and action is heavy and clumsy, and yet who is, you would say, rather exceptionally a gentleman.

"Any more arguments?" he said, when introductions had been effected. "I must say, Mr Grant, you were rather severe upon eminent men of science such as we. I've half a mind to chuck my D.Sc. and turn minor poet."

"Bosh," answered Grant. "I never said a word against eminent men of science. What I complain of is a vague popular philosophy which supposes itself to be scientific when it is really nothing but a sort of new religion and an uncommonly nasty one. When people talked about the fall of man they knew they were talking about a mystery, a thing they didn't understand. Now that they talk about the survival of the fittest they think they do understand it, whereas they have not merely no notion, they have an elaborately false notion of what the words mean. The Darwinian movement has made no difference to mankind, except that, instead of talking unphilosophically about philosophy, they now talk unscientifically about science."

"That is all very well," said the big young man, whose name appeared to be Burrows. "Of course, in a sense, science, like mathematics or the violin, can only be perfectly understood by specialists. Still, the rudiments may be of public use. Greenwood here," indicating the little man in the blazer, "doesn't know one note of music from another. Still, he knows something. He knows enough to take off his hat when they play 'God save the King'. He doesn't take it off by mistake when they play 'Oh, dem Golden Slippers'. Just in the same way science--"

Here Mr Burrows stopped abruptly. He was interrupted by an argument uncommon in philosophical controversy and perhaps not wholly legitimate. Rupert Grant had bounded on him from behind, flung an arm round his throat, and bent the giant backwards.

"Knock the other fellow down, Swinburne," he called out, and before I knew where I was I was locked in a grapple with the man in the purple blazer. He was a wiry fighter, who bent and sprang like a whalebone, but I was heavier and had taken him utterly by surprise. I twitched one of his feet from under him; he swung for a moment on the single foot, and then we fell with a crash amid the litter of newspapers, myself on top.

My attention for a moment released by victory, I could hear Basil's voice finishing some long sentence of which I had not heard the beginning.

"... wholly, I must confess, unintelligible to me, my dear sir, and I need not say unpleasant. Still one must side with one's old friends against the most fascinating new ones. Permit me, therefore, in tying you up in this antimacassar, to make it as commodious as handcuffs can reasonably be while..."

I had staggered to my feet. The gigantic Burrows was toiling in the garotte of Rupert, while Basil was striving to master his mighty hands. Rupert and Basil were both particularly strong, but so was Mr Burrows; how strong, we knew a second afterwards. His head was held back by Rupert's arm, but a convulsive heave went over his whole frame. An instant after his head plunged forward like a bull's, and Rupert Grant was slung head over heels, a catherine wheel of legs, on the floor in front of him. Simultaneously the bull's head butted Basil in the chest, bringing him also to the ground with a crash, and the monster, with a Berserker roar, leaped at me and knocked me into the corner of the room, smashing the waste-paper basket. The bewildered Greenwood sprang furiously to his feet. Basil did the same. But they had the best of it now.

Greenwood dashed to the bell and pulled it violently, sending peals through the great house. Before I could get panting to my feet, and before Rupert, who had been literally stunned for a few moments, could even lift his head from the floor, two footmen were in the room. Defeated even when we were in a majority, we were now outnumbered. Greenwood and one of the footmen flung themselves upon me, crushing me back into the corner upon the wreck of the paper basket. The other two flew at Basil, and pinned him against the wall. Rupert lifted himself on his elbow, but he was still dazed.

In the strained silence of our helplessness I heard the voice of Basil come with a loud incongruous cheerfulness.

"Now this," he said, "is what I call enjoying oneself."

I caught a glimpse of his face, flushed and forced against the bookcase, from between the swaying limbs of my captors and his. To my astonishment his eyes were really brilliant with pleasure, like those of a child heated by a favourite game.

I made several apoplectic efforts to rise, but the servant was on top of me so heavily that Greenwood could afford to leave me to him. He turned quickly to come to reinforce the two who were mastering Basil. The latter's head was already sinking lower and lower, like a leaking ship, as his enemies pressed him down.

He flung up one hand just as I thought him falling and hung on to a huge tome in the bookcase, a volume, I afterwards discovered, of St Chrysostom's theology. Just as Greenwood bounded across the room towards the group, Basil plucked the ponderous tome bodily out of the shelf, swung it, and sent it spinning through the air, so that it struck Greenwood flat in the face and knocked him over like a rolling ninepin. At the same instant Basil's stiffness broke, and he sank, his enemies closing over him.

Rupert's head was clear, but his body shaken; he was hanging as best he could on to the half-prostrate Greenwood. They were rolling over each other on the floor, both somewhat enfeebled by their falls, but Rupert certainly the more so. I was still successfully held down. The floor was a sea of torn and trampled papers and magazines, like an immense waste-paper basket. Burrows and his companion were almost up to the knees in them, as in a drift of dead leaves. And Greenwood had his leg stuck right through a sheet of the Pall Mall Gazette, which clung to it ludicrously, like some fantastic trouser frill.

Basil, shut from me in a human prison, a prison of powerful bodies, might be dead for all I knew. I fancied, however, that the broad back of Mr Burrows, which was turned towards me, had a certain bend of effort in it as if my friend still needed some holding down. Suddenly that broad back swayed hither and thither. It was swaying on one leg; Basil, somehow, had hold of the other. Burrows' huge fists and those of the footman were battering Basil's sunken head like an anvil, but nothing could get the giant's ankle out of his sudden and savage grip. While his own head was forced slowly down in darkness and great pain, the right leg of his captor was being forced in the air. Burrows swung to and fro with a purple face. Then suddenly the floor and the walls and the ceiling shook together, as the colossus fell, all his length seeming to fill the floor. Basil sprang up with dancing eyes, and with three blows like battering-rams knocked the footman into a cocked hat. Then he sprang on top of Burrows, with one antimacassar in his hand and another in his teeth, and bound him hand and foot almost before he knew clearly that his head had struck the floor. Then Basil sprang at Greenwood, whom Rupert was struggling to hold down, and between them they secured him easily. The man who had hold of me let go and turned to his rescue, but I leaped up like a spring released, and, to my infinite satisfaction, knocked the fellow down. The other footman, bleeding at the mouth and quite demoralized, was stumbling out of the room. My late captor, without a word, slunk after him, seeing that the battle was won. Rupert was sitting astride the pinioned Mr Greenwood, Basil astride the pinioned Mr Burrows.

To my surprise the latter gentleman, lying bound on his back, spoke in a perfectly calm voice to the man who sat on top of him.

"And now, gentlemen," he said, "since you have got your own way, perhaps you wouldn't mind telling us what the deuce all this is?"

"This," said Basil, with a radiant face, looking down at his captive, "this is what we call the survival of the fittest."

Rupert, who had been steadily collecting himself throughout the latter phases of the fight, was intellectually altogether himself again at the end of it. Springing up from the prostrate Greenwood, and knotting a handkerchief round his left hand, which was bleeding from a blow, he sang out quite coolly:

"Basil, will you mount guard over the captive of your bow and spear and antimacassar? Swinburne and I will clear out the prison downstairs."

"All right," said Basil, rising also and seating himself in a leisured way in an armchair. "Don't hurry for us," he said, glancing round at the litter of the room, "we have all the illustrated papers."

Rupert lurched thoughtfully out of the room, and I followed him even more slowly; in fact, I lingered long enough to hear, as I passed through the room, the passages and the kitchen stairs, Basil's voice continuing conversationally:

"And now, Mr Burrows," he said, settling himself sociably in the chair, "there's no reason why we shouldn't go on with that amusing argument. I'm sorry that you have to express yourself lying on your back on the floor, and, as I told you before, I've no more notion why you are there than the man in the moon. A conversationalist like yourself, however, can scarcely be seriously handicapped by any bodily posture. You were saying, if I remember right, when this incidental fracas occurred, that the rudiments of science might with advantage be made public."

"Precisely," said the large man on the floor in an easy tone. "I hold that nothing more than a rough sketch of the universe as seen by science can be..."

And here the voices died away as we descended into the basement. I noticed that Mr Greenwood did not join in the amicable controversy. Strange as it may appear, I think he looked back upon our proceedings with a slight degree of resentment. Mr Burrows, however, was all philosophy and chattiness. We left them, as I say, together, and sank deeper and deeper into the under-world of that mysterious house, which, perhaps, appeared to us somewhat more Tartarean than it really was, owing to our knowledge of its semi-criminal mystery and of the human secret locked below.

The basement floor had several doors, as is usual in such a house; doors that would naturally lead to the kitchen, the scullery, the pantry, the servants' hall, and so on. Rupert flung open all the doors with indescribable rapidity. Four out of the five opened on entirely empty apartments. The fifth was locked. Rupert broke the door in like a bandbox, and we fell into the sudden blackness of the sealed, unlighted room.

Rupert stood on the threshold, and called out like a man calling into an abyss:

"Whoever you are, come out. You are free. The people who held you captive are captives themselves. We heard you crying and we came to deliver you. We have bound your enemies upstairs hand and foot. You are free."

For some seconds after he had spoken into the darkness there was a dead silence in it. Then there came a kind of muttering and moaning. We might easily have taken it for the wind or rats if we had not happened to have heard it before. It was unmistakably the voice of the imprisoned woman, drearily demanding liberty, just as we had heard her demand it.

"Has anybody got a match?" said Rupert grimly. "I fancy we have come pretty near the end of this business."

I struck a match and held it up. It revealed a large, bare, yellow-papered apartment with a dark-clad figure at the other end of it near the window. An instant after it burned my fingers and dropped, leaving darkness. It had, however, revealed something more practical--an iron gas bracket just above my head. I struck another match and lit the gas. And we found ourselves suddenly and seriously in the presence of the captive.

At a sort of workbox in the window of this subterranean breakfast-room sat an elderly lady with a singularly high colour and almost startling silver hair. She had, as if designedly to relieve these effects, a pair of Mephistophelian black eyebrows and a very neat black dress. The glare of the gas lit up her piquant hair and face perfectly against the brown background of the shutters. The background was blue and not brown in one place; at the place where Rupert's knife had torn a great opening in the wood about an hour before.

"Madam," said he, advancing with a gesture of the hat, "permit me to have the pleasure of announcing to you that you are free. Your complaints happened to strike our ears as we passed down the street, and we have therefore ventured to come to your rescue."

The old lady with the red face and the black eyebrows looked at us for a moment

with something of the apoplectic stare of a parrot. Then she said, with a sudden gust or breathing of relief:

"Rescue? Where is Mr Greenwood? Where is Mr Burrows? Did you say you had rescued me?"

"Yes, madam," said Rupert, with a beaming condescension. "We have very satisfactorily dealt with Mr Greenwood and Mr Burrows. We have settled affairs with them very satisfactorily."

The old lady rose from her chair and came very quickly towards us.

"What did you say to them? How did you persuade them?" she cried.

"We persuaded them, my dear madam," said Rupert, laughing, "by knocking them down and tying them up. But what is the matter?"

To the surprise of every one the old lady walked slowly back to her seat by the window.

"Do I understand," she said, with the air of a person about to begin knitting, "that you have knocked down Mr Burrows and tied him up?"

"We have," said Rupert proudly; "we have resisted their oppression and conquered it."

"Oh, thanks," answered the old lady, and sat down by the window.

A considerable pause followed.

"The road is quite clear for you, madam," said Rupert pleasantly.

The old lady rose, cocking her black eyebrows and her silver crest at us for an instant.

"But what about Greenwood and Burrows?" she said. "What did I understand you to say had become of them?"

"They are lying on the floor upstairs," said Rupert, chuckling. "Tied hand and foot."

"Well, that settles it," said the old lady, coming with a kind of bang into her seat again, "I must stop where I am."

Rupert looked bewildered.

"Stop where you are?" he said. "Why should you stop any longer where you are? What power can force you now to stop in this miserable cell?"

"The question rather is," said the old lady, with composure, "what power can force me to go anywhere else?"

We both stared wildly at her and she stared tranquilly at us both.

At last I said, "Do you really mean to say that we are to leave you here?"

"I suppose you don't intend to tie me up," she said, "and carry me off? I certainly shall not go otherwise."

"But, my dear madam," cried out Rupert, in a radiant exasperation, "we heard you with our own ears crying because you could not get out."

"Eavesdroppers often hear rather misleading things," replied the captive grimly. "I suppose I did break down a bit and lose my temper and talk to myself. But I have some sense of honour for all that."

"Some sense of honour?" repeated Rupert, and the last light of intelligence died out of his face, leaving it the face of an idiot with rolling eyes.

He moved vaguely towards the door and I followed. But I turned yet once more in the toils of my conscience and curiosity. "Can we do nothing for you, madam?" I said forlornly.

"Why," said the lady, "if you are particularly anxious to do me a little favour you might untie the gentlemen upstairs."

Rupert plunged heavily up the kitchen staircase, shaking it with his vague violence. With mouth open to speak he stumbled to the door of the sitting-room and scene of battle.

"Theoretically speaking, that is no doubt true," Mr Burrows was saying, lying on his back and arguing easily with Basil; "but we must consider the matter as it appears to our sense. The origin of morality..."

"Basil," cried Rupert, gasping, "she won't come out."

"Who won't come out?" asked Basil, a little cross at being interrupted in an argument.

"The lady downstairs," replied Rupert. "The lady who was locked up. She won't come out. And she says that all she wants is for us to let these fellows loose."

"And a jolly sensible suggestion," cried Basil, and with a bound he was on top of the prostrate Burrows once more and was unknotting his bonds with hands and teeth.

"A brilliant idea. Swinburne, just undo Mr Greenwood."

In a dazed and automatic way I released the little gentleman in the purple jacket, who did not seem to regard any of the proceedings as particularly sensible or brilliant. The gigantic Burrows, on the other hand, was heaving with herculean laughter.

"Well," said Basil, in his cheeriest way, "I think we must be getting away. We've so much enjoyed our evening. Far too much regard for you to stand on ceremony. If I may so express myself, we've made ourselves at home. Good night. Thanks so much. Come along, Rupert."

"Basil," said Rupert desperately, "for God's sake come and see what you can make of the woman downstairs. I can't get the discomfort out of my mind. I admit that things look as if we had made a mistake. But these gentlemen won't mind perhaps..."

"No, no," cried Burrows, with a sort of Rabelaisian uproariousness. "No, no, look in the pantry, gentlemen. Examine the coal-hole. Make a tour of the chimneys. There are corpses all over the house, I assure you."

This adventure of ours was destined to differ in one respect from others which I have narrated. I had been through many wild days with Basil Grant, days for the first half of which the sun and the moon seemed to have gone mad. But it had almost invariably happened that towards the end of the day and its adventure things had cleared themselves like the sky after rain, and a luminous and quiet meaning had gradually dawned upon me. But this day's work was destined to end in confusion worse confounded. Before we left that house, ten minutes afterwards, one half-witted touch was added which rolled all our minds in cloud. If Rupert's head had suddenly fallen off on the floor, if wings had begun to sprout out of Greenwood's shoulders, we could scarcely have been more suddenly stricken. And yet of this we had no explanation. We had to go to bed that night with the prodigy and get up next morning with it and let it stand in our memories

for weeks and months. As will be seen, it was not until months afterwards that by another accident and in another way it was explained. For the present I only state what happened.

When all five of us went down the kitchen stairs again, Rupert leading, the two hosts bringing up the rear, we found the door of the prison again closed. Throwing it open we found the place again as black as pitch. The old lady, if she was still there, had turned out the gas: she seemed to have a weird preference for sitting in the dark.

Without another word Rupert lit the gas again. The little old lady turned her bird-like head as we all stumbled forward in the strong gaslight. Then, with a quickness that almost made me jump, she sprang up and swept a sort of old-fashioned curtsy or reverence. I looked quickly at Greenwood and Burrows, to whom it was natural to suppose this subservience had been offered. I felt irritated at what was implied in this subservience, and desired to see the faces of the tyrants as they received it. To my surprise they did not seem to have seen it at all: Burrows was paring his nails with a small penknife. Greenwood was at the back of the group and had hardly entered the room. And then an amazing fact became apparent. It was Basil Grant who stood foremost of the group, the golden gaslight lighting up his strong face and figure. His face wore an expression indescribably conscious, with the suspicion of a very grave smile. His head was slightly bent with a restrained bow. It was he who had acknowledged the lady's obeisance. And it was he, beyond any shadow of reasonable doubt, to whom it had really been directed.

"So I hear," he said, in a kindly yet somehow formal voice, "I hear, madam, that my friends have been trying to rescue you. But without success."

"No one, naturally, knows my faults better than you," answered the lady with a high colour. "But you have not found me guilty of treachery."

"I willingly attest it, madam," replied Basil, in the same level tones, "and the fact is that I am so much gratified with your exhibition of loyalty that I permit myself the pleasure of exercising some very large discretionary powers. You would not leave this room at the request of these gentlemen. But you know that you can safely leave it at mine."

The captive made another reverence. "I have never complained of your injustice," she said. "I need scarcely say what I think of your generosity."

And before our staring eyes could blink she had passed out of the room, Basil holding the door open for her.

He turned to Greenwood with a relapse into joviality. "This will be a relief to you," he said.

"Yes, it will," replied that immovable young gentleman with a face like a sphinx.

We found ourselves outside in the dark blue night, shaken and dazed as if we had fallen into it from some high tower.

"Basil," said Rupert at last, in a weak voice, "I always thought you were my brother. But are you a man? I mean--are you only a man?"

"At present," replied Basil, "my mere humanity is proved by one of the most unmistakable symbols--hunger. We are too late for the theatre in Sloane Square. But we are not too late for the restaurant. Here comes the green omnibus!" and he had leaped on it before we could speak. -----

As I said, it was months after that Rupert Grant suddenly entered my room, swinging a satchel in his hand and with a general air of having jumped over the garden wall, and implored me to go with him upon the latest and wildest of his expeditions. He proposed to himself no less a thing than the discovery of the actual origin, whereabouts, and headquarters of the source of all our joys and sorrows--the Club of Queer Trades. I should expand this story for ever if I explained how ultimately we ran this strange entity to its lair. The process meant a hundred interesting things. The tracking of a member, the bribing of a cabman, the fighting of roughs, the lifting of a paving stone, the finding of a cellar, the finding of a cellar below the cellar, the finding of the subterranean passage, the finding of the Club of Queer Trades.

I have had many strange experiences in my life, but never a stranger one than that I felt when I came out of those rambling, sightless, and seemingly hopeless passages into the sudden splendour of a sumptuous and hospitable dining-room, surrounded upon almost every side by faces that I knew. There was Mr Montmorency, the Arboreal House-Agent, seated between the two brisk young men who were occasionally vicars, and always Professional Detainers. There was Mr P. G. Northover, founder of the Adventure and Romance Agency. There was Professor Chadd, who invented the dancing Language.

As we entered, all the members seemed to sink suddenly into their chairs, and with the very action the vacancy of the presidential seat gaped at us like a missing tooth.

"The president's not here," said Mr P. G. Northover, turning suddenly to Professor Chadd.

"N--no," said the philosopher, with more than his ordinary vagueness. "I can't imagine where he is."

"Good heavens," said Mr Montmorency, jumping up, "I really feel a little nervous. I'll go and see." And he ran out of the room.

An instant after he ran back again, twittering with a timid ecstasy.

"He's there, gentlemen--he's there all right--he's coming in now," he cried, and sat down. Rupert and I could hardly help feeling the beginnings of a sort of wonder as to who this person might be who was the first member of this insane brotherhood. Who, we thought indistinctly, could be maddest in this world of madmen: what fantastic was it whose shadow filled all these fantastics with so loyal an expectation?

Suddenly we were answered. The door flew open and the room was filled and shaken with a shout, in the midst of which Basil Grant, smiling and in evening dress, took his seat at the head of the table.

How we ate that dinner I have no idea. In the common way I am a person particularly prone to enjoy the long luxuriance of the club dinner. But on this occasion it seemed a hopeless and endless string of courses. Hors-d'oeuvre sardines seemed as big as herrings, soup seemed a sort of ocean, larks were ducks, ducks were ostriches until that dinner was over. The cheese course was maddening. I had often heard of the moon being made of green cheese. That night I thought the green cheese was made of the moon. And all the time Basil Grant went on laughing and eating and drinking, and never threw one glance at us to tell us why he was there, the king of these capering idiots.

At last came the moment which I knew must in some way enlighten us, the time of the club speeches and the club toasts. Basil Grant rose to his feet amid a surge of songs and cheers.

"Gentlemen," he said, "it is a custom in this society that the president for the year opens the proceedings not by any general toast of sentiment, but by calling upon each member to give a brief account of his trade. We then drink to that calling and to all who follow it. It is my business, as the senior member, to open by stating my claim to membership of this club. Years ago, gentlemen, I was a judge; I did my best in that capacity to do justice and to administer the law. But it gradually dawned on me that in my work, as it was, I was not touching even the

fringe of justice. I was seated in the seat of the mighty, I was robed in scarlet and ermine; nevertheless, I held a small and lowly and futile post. I had to go by a mean rule as much as a postman, and my red and gold was worth no more than his. Daily there passed before me taut and passionate problems, the stringency of which I had to pretend to relieve by silly imprisonments or silly damages, while I knew all the time, by the light of my living common sense, that they would have been far better relieved by a kiss or a thrashing, or a few words of explanation, or a duel, or a tour in the West Highlands. Then, as this grew on me, there grew on me continuously the sense of a mountainous frivolity. Every word said in the court, a whisper or an oath, seemed more connected with life than the words I had to say. Then came the time when I publicly blasphemed the whole bosh, was classed as a madman and melted from public life."

Something in the atmosphere told me that it was not only Rupert and I who were listening with intensity to this statement.

"Well, I discovered that I could be of no real use. I offered myself privately as a purely moral judge to settle purely moral differences. Before very long these unofficial courts of honour (kept strictly secret) had spread over the whole of society. People were tried before me not for the practical trifles for which nobody cares, such as committing a murder, or keeping a dog without a licence. My criminals were tried for the faults which really make social life impossible. They were tried before me for selfishness, or for an impossible vanity, or for scandalmongering, or for stinginess to guests or dependents. Of course these courts had no sort of real coercive powers. The fulfilment of their punishments rested entirely on the honour of the ladies and gentlemen involved, including the honour of the culprits. But you would be amazed to know how completely our orders were always obeyed. Only lately I had a most pleasing example. A maiden lady in South Kensington whom I had condemned to solitary confinement for being the means of breaking off an engagement through backbiting, absolutely refused to leave her prison, although some well-meaning persons had been inopportune enough to rescue her."

Rupert Grant was staring at his brother, his mouth fallen agape. So, for the matter of that, I expect, was I. This, then, was the explanation of the old lady's strange discontent and her still stranger content with her lot. She was one of the culprits of his Voluntary Criminal Court. She was one of the clients of his Queer Trade.

We were still dazed when we drank, amid a crash of glasses, the health of Basil's new judiciary. We had only a confused sense of everything having been put right, the sense men will have when they come into the presence of God. We dimly heard Basil say:

"Mr P. G. Northover will now explain the Adventure and Romance Agency."

And we heard equally dimly Northover beginning the statement he had made long ago to Major Brown. Thus our epic ended where it had begun, like a true cycle.