Chapter II. Bastin and Bickley

Behold me once more a man without an occupation, but now the possessor of about £900,000. It was a very considerable fortune, if not a large one in England; nothing like the millions of which I had dreamed, but still enough. To make the most of it and to be sure that it remained, I invested it very well, mostly in large mortgages at four per cent which, if the security is good, do not depreciate in capital value. Never again did I touch a single speculative stock, who desired to think no more about money. It was at this time that I bought the Fulcombe property. It cost me about £120,000 of my capital, or with alterations, repairs, etc., say £150,000, on which sum it may pay a net two and a half per cent, not more.

This £3,700 odd I have always devoted to the upkeep of the place, which is therefore in first-rate order. The rest I live on, or save.

These arrangements, with the beautifying and furnishing of the house and the restoration of the church in memory of my father, occupied and amused me for a year or so, but when they were finished time began to hang heavy on my hands. What was the use of possessing about £20,000 a year when there was nothing upon which it could be spent? For after all my own wants were few and simple and the acquisition of valuable pictures and costly furniture is limited by space. Oh! in my small way I was like the weary King Ecclesiast. For I too made me great works

and had possessions of great and small cattle (I tried farming and lost money over it!) and gathered me silver and gold and the peculiar treasure of kings, which I presume means whatever a man in authority chiefly desires, and so forth. But "behold all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun."

So, notwithstanding my wealth and health and the deference which is the rich man's portion, especially when the limit of his riches is not known, it came about that I too "hated life," and this when I was not much over thirty. I did not know what to do; for Society as the word is generally understood, I had no taste; it bored me; horse-racing and cards I loathed, who had already gambled too much on a big scale. The killing of creatures under the name of sport palled upon me, indeed I began to doubt if it were right, while the office of a junior county magistrate in a place where there was no crime, only occupied me an hour or two a month.

Lastly my neighbours were few and with all due deference to them, extremely dull. At least I could not understand them because in them there did not seem to be anything to understand, and I am quite certain that they did not understand me. More, when they came to learn that I was radical in my views and had written certain "dreadful" and somewhat socialistic books in the form of fiction, they both feared and mistrusted me as an enemy to their particular section of the race. As I had not married and showed no inclination to do so, their womenkind also, out of their intimate knowledge, proclaimed that I led an immoral

life, though a little reflection would have shown them that there was no one in the neighbourhood which for a time I seldom left, who could possibly have tempted an educated creature to such courses.

Terrible is the lot of a man who, while still young and possessing the intellect necessary to achievement, is deprived of all ambition. And I had none at all. I did not even wish to purchase a peerage or a baronetcy in this fashion or in that, and, as in my father's case, my tastes were so many and so catholic that I could not lose myself in any one of them. They never became more than diversions to me. A hobby is only really amusing when it becomes an obsession.

At length my lonesome friendlessness oppressed me so much that I took steps to mitigate it. In my college life I had two particular friends whom I think I must have selected because they were so absolutely different from myself.

They were named Bastin and Bickley. Bastin--Basil was his Christian name--was an uncouth, shock-headed, flat-footed person of large, rugged frame and equally rugged honesty, with a mind almost incredibly simple. Nothing surprised him because he lacked the faculty of surprise. He was like that kind of fish which lies at the bottom of the sea and takes every kind of food into its great maw without distinguishing its flavour. Metaphorically speaking, heavenly manna and decayed cabbage were just the same to Bastin. He was not fastidious and both were mental pabulum--of a sort--together with whatever lay between these extremes.

Yet he was good, so painfully good that one felt that without exertion to himself he had booked a first-class ticket straight to Heaven; indeed that his guardian angel had tied it round his neck at birth lest he should lose it, already numbered and dated like an identification disc.

I am bound to add that Bastin never went wrong because he never felt the slightest temptation to do so. This I suppose constitutes real virtue, since, in view of certain Bible sayings, the person who is tempted and would like to yield to the temptation, is equally a sinner with the person who does yield. To be truly good one should be too good to be tempted, or too weak to make the effort worth the tempter's while--in short not deserving of his powder and shot.

I need hardly add that Bastin went into the Church; indeed, he could not have gone anywhere else; it absorbed him naturally, as doubtless Heaven will do in due course. Only I think it likely that until they get to know him he will bore the angels so much that they will continually move him up higher. Also if they have any susceptibilities left, probably he will tread upon their toes--an art in which I never knew his equal. However, I always loved Bastin, perhaps because no one else did, a fact of which he remained totally unconscious, or perhaps because of his brutal way of telling one what he conceived to be the truth, which, as he had less imagination than a dormouse, generally it was not. For if the truth is a jewel, it is one coloured and veiled by many different lights and atmospheres.

It only remains to add that he was learned in his theological fashion and that among his further peculiarities were the slow, monotonous voice in which he uttered his views in long sentences, and his total indifference to adverse argument however sound and convincing.

My other friend, Bickley, was a person of a quite different character. Like Bastin, he was learned, but his tendencies faced another way. If Bastin's omnivorous throat could swallow a camel, especially a theological camel, Bickley's would strain at the smallest gnat, especially a theological gnat. The very best and most upright of men, yet he believed in nothing that he could not taste, see or handle. He was convinced, for instance, that man is a brute-descended accident and no more, that what we call the soul or the mind is produced by a certain action of the grey matter of the brain; that everything apparently inexplicable has a perfectly mundane explanation, if only one could find it; that miracles certainly never did happen, and never will; that all religions are the fruit of human hopes and fears and the most convincing proof of human weakness; that notwithstanding our infinite variations we are the subjects of Nature's single law and the victims of blind, black and brutal chance.

Such was Bickley with his clever, well-cut face that always reminded me of a cameo, and thoughtful brow; his strong, capable hands and his rather steely mouth, the mere set of which suggested controversy of an uncompromising kind. Naturally as the Church had claimed Bastin, so medicine claimed Bickley.

Now as it happened the man who succeeded my father as vicar of Fulcombe was given a better living and went away shortly after I had purchased the place and with it the advowson. Just at this time also I received a letter written in the large, sprawling hand of Bastin from whom I had not heard for years. It went straight to the point, saying that he, Bastin, had seen in a Church paper that the last incumbent had resigned the living of Fulcombe which was in my gift. He would therefore be obliged if I would give it to him as the place he was at in Yorkshire did not suit his wife's health.

Here I may state that afterwards I learned that what did not suit Mrs. Bastin was the organist, who was pretty. She was by nature a woman with a temperament so insanely jealous that actually she managed to be suspicious of Bastin, whom she had captured in an unguarded moment when
he was thinking of something else and who would as soon have thought of even looking at any woman as he would of worshipping Baal. As a matter of fact it took him months to know one female from another. Except as possible providers of subscriptions and props of Mothers' Meetings, women had no interest for him.

To return--with that engaging honesty which I have mentioned--Bastin's letter went on to set out all his own disabilities, which, he added, would probably render him unsuitable for the place he desired to fill. He was a High Churchman, a fact which would certainly offend many; he

had no claims to being a preacher although he was extraordinarily well acquainted with the writings of the Early Fathers. (What on earth had that to do with the question, I wondered.) On the other hand he had generally been considered a good visitor and was fond of walking (he meant to call on distant parishioners, but did not say so).

Then followed a page and a half on the evils of the existing system of the presentation to livings by private persons, ending with the suggestion that I had probably committed a sin in buying this particular advowson in order to increase my local authority, that is, if I had bought it, a point on which he was ignorant. Finally he informed me that as he had to christen a sick baby five miles away on a certain moor and it was too wet for him to ride his bicycle, he must stop. And he stopped.

There was, however, a P.S. to the letter, which ran as follows:

"Someone told me that you were dead a few years ago, and of course it may be another man of the same name who owns Fulcombe. If so, no doubt the Post Office will send back this letter."

That was his only allusion to my humble self in all those diffuse pages. It was a long while since I had received an epistle which made me laugh so much, and of course I gave him the living by return of post, and even informed him that I would increase its stipend to a sum which I considered suitable to the position.

About ten days later I received another letter from Bastin which, as a scrawl on the flap of the envelope informed me, he had carried for a week in his pocket and forgotten to post. Except by inference it returned no thanks for my intended benefits. What it did say, however, was that he thought it wrong of me to have settled a matter of such spiritual importance in so great a hurry, though he had observed that rich men were nearly always selfish where their time was concerned. Moreover, he considered that I ought first to have made inquiries as to his present character and attainments, etc., etc.

To this epistle I replied by telegraph to the effect that I should as soon think of making inquiries about the character of an archangel, or that of one of his High Church saints. This telegram, he told me afterwards, he considered unseemly and even ribald, especially as it had given great offence to the postmaster, who was one of the sidesmen in his church.

Thus it came about that I appointed the Rev. Basil Bastin to the living of Fulcombe, feeling sure that he would provide me with endless amusement and act as a moral tonic and discipline. Also I appreciated the man's blunt candour. In due course he arrived, and I confess that after a few Sundays of experience I began to have doubts as to the wisdom of my choice, glad as I was to see him personally. His sermons at once bored me, and, when they did not send me to sleep, excited in me a desire for debate. How could he be so profoundly acquainted with

mysteries before which the world had stood amazed for ages? Was there nothing too hot or too heavy in the spiritual way for him to dismiss in a few blundering and casual words, as he might any ordinary incident of every-day life, I wondered? Also his idea of High Church observances was not mine, or, I imagine, that of anybody else. But I will not attempt to set it out.

His peculiarities, however, were easy to excuse and entirely swallowed up by the innate goodness of his nature which soon made him beloved of everyone in the place, for although he thought that probably most things were sins, I never knew him to discover a sin which he considered to be beyond the reach of forgiveness. Bastin was indeed a most charitable man and in his way wide-minded.

The person whom I could not tolerate, however, was his wife, who, to my fancy, more resembled a vessel, a very unattractive vessel, full of vinegar than a woman. Her name was Sarah and she was small, plain, flat, sandy-haired and odious, quite obsessed, moreover, with her jealousies of the Rev. Basil, at whom it pleased her to suppose that every woman in the countryside under fifty was throwing herself.

Here I will confess that to the best of my ability I took care that they did in outward seeming, that is, whenever she was present, instructing them to sit aside with him in darkened corners, to present him with flowers, and so forth. Several of them easily fell into the humour of the thing, and I have seen him depart from a dinner-party followed by

that glowering Sarah, with a handful of rosebuds and violets, to say nothing of the traditional offerings of slippers, embroidered markers and the like. Well, it was my only way of coming even with her, which I think she knew, for she hated me poisonously.

So much for Basil Bastin. Now for Bickley. Him I had met on several occasions since our college days, and after I was settled at the Priory from time to time I asked him to stay with me. At length he came, and I found out that he was not at all comfortable in his London practice which was of a nature uncongenial to him; further, that he did not get on with his partners. Then, after reflection, I made a suggestion to him. I pointed out that, owing to its popularity amongst seaside visitors, the neighbourhood of Fulcombe was a rising one, and that although there were doctors in it, there was no really first-class surgeon for miles.

Now Bickley was a first-class surgeon, having held very high hospital appointments, and indeed still holding them. Why, I asked, should he not come and set up here on his own? I would appoint him doctor to the estate and also give him charge of a cottage hospital which I was endowing, with liberty to build and arrange it as he liked. Further, as I considered that it would be of great advantage to me to have a man of real ability within reach, I would guarantee for three years whatever income he was earning in London.

He thanked me warmly and in the end acted on the idea, with startling

results so far as his prospects were concerned. Very soon his really remarkable skill became known and he was earning more money than as an unmarried man he could possibly want. Indeed, scarcely a big operation took place at any town within twenty miles, and even much farther away, at which he was not called in to assist.

Needless to say his advent was a great boon to me, for as he lived in a house I let him quite near by, whenever he had a spare evening he would drop in to dinner, and from our absolutely opposite standpoints we discussed all things human and divine. Thus I was enabled to sharpen my wits upon the hard steel of his clear intellect which was yet, in a sense, so limited.

I must add that I never converted him to my way of thinking and he never converted me to his, any more than he converted Bastin, for whom, queerly enough, he had a liking. They pounded away at each other, Bickley frequently getting the best of it in the argument, and when at last Bastin rose to go, he generally made the same remark. It was:

"It really is sad, my dear Bickley, to find a man of your intellect so utterly wrongheaded and misguided. I have convicted you of error at least half a dozen times, and not to confess it is mere pigheadedness. Good night. I am sure that Sarah will be sitting up for me."

"Silly old idiot!" Bickley would say, shaking his fist after him. "The only way to get him to see the truth would be to saw his head open and

pour it in."

Then we would both laugh.

Such were my two most intimate friends, although I admit it was rather like the equator cultivating close relationships with the north and south poles. Certainly Bastin was as far from Bickley as those points of the earth are apart, while I. as it were, sat equally distant between the two. However, we were all very happy together, since in certain characters, there are few things that bind men more closely than profound differences of opinion.

Now I must turn to my more personal affairs. After all, it is impossible for a man to satisfy his soul, if he has anything of the sort about him which in the remotest degree answers to that description, with the husks of wealth, luxury and indolence, supplemented by occasional theological and other arguments between his friends; Becoming profoundly convinced of this truth, I searched round for something to do and, like Noah's dove on the waste of waters, found nothing. Then I asked Bickley and Bastin for their opinions as to my best future course. Bickley proved a barren draw. He rubbed his nose and feebly suggested that I might go in for "research work," which, of course, only represented his own ambitions. I asked him indignantly how I could do such a thing without any scientific qualifications whatever. He admitted the difficulty, but replied that I might endow others who had the qualifications.

"In short, become a mulch cow for sucking scientists," I replied, and broke off the conversation.

Bastin's idea was, first, that I should teach in a Sunday School; secondly, that if this career did not satisfy all my aspirations, I might be ordained and become a missionary.

On my rejection of this brilliant advice, he remarked that the only other thing he could think of was that I should get married and have a large family, which might possibly advantage the nation and ultimately enrich the Kingdom of Heaven, though of such things no one could be quite sure. At any rate, he was certain that at present I was in practice neglecting my duty, whatever it might be, and in fact one of those cumberers of the earth who, he observed in the newspaper he took in and read when he had time, were "very happily named--the idle rich."

"Which reminds me," he added, "that the clothing-club finances are in a perfectly scandalous condition; in fact, it is £25 in debt, an amount that as the squire of the parish I consider it incumbent on you to make good, not as a charity but as an obligation."

"Look here, my friend," I said, ignoring all the rest, "will you answer me a plain question? Have you found marriage such a success that you consider it your duty to recommend it to others? And if you have, why have you not got the large family of which you speak?"

"Of course not," he replied with his usual frankness. "Indeed, it is in many ways so disagreeable that I am convinced it must be right and for the good of all concerned. As regards the family I am sure I do not know, but Sarah never liked babies, which perhaps has something to do with it."

Then he sighed, adding, "You see, Arbuthnot, we have to take things as we find them in this world and hope for a better."

"Which is just what I am trying to do, you unilluminating old donkey!" I exclaimed, and left him there shaking his head over matters in general, but I think principally over Sarah.

By the way, I think that the villagers recognised this good lady's vinegary nature. At least, they used to call her "Sour Sal."