

CHAPTER THE FOURTH

WAR

Section 1

FROM that moment when I insulted old Mrs. Verrall I became representative, I was a man who stood for all the disinherited of the world. I had no hope of pride or pleasure left in me, I was raging rebellion against God and mankind. There were no more vague intentions swaying me this way and that; I was perfectly clear now upon what I meant to do. I would make my protest and die.

I would make my protest and die. I was going to kill Nettie--Nettie who had smiled and promised and given herself to another, and who stood now for all the conceivable delightfulnesses, the lost imaginations of the youthful heart, the unattainable joys in life; and Verrall who stood for all who profited by the incurable injustice of our social order. I would kill them both. And that being done I would blow my brains out and see what vengeance followed my blank refusal to live.

So indeed I was resolved. I raged monstrously. And above me, abolishing the stars, triumphant over the yellow waning moon that

followed it below, the giant meteor towered up towards the zenith.

"Let me only kill!" I cried. "Let me only kill!"

So I shouted in my frenzy. I was in a fever that defied hunger and fatigue; for a long time I had prowled over the heath towards Lowchester talking to myself, and now that night had fully come I was tramping homeward, walking the long seventeen miles without a thought of rest. And I had eaten nothing since the morning.

I suppose I must count myself mad, but I can recall my ravings.

There were times when I walked weeping through that brightness that was neither night nor day. There were times when I reasoned in a topsy-turvy fashion with what I called the Spirit of All Things. But always I spoke to that white glory in the sky.

"Why am I here only to suffer ignominies?" I asked. "Why have you made me with pride that cannot be satisfied, with desires that turn and rend me? Is it a jest, this world--a joke you play on your guests? I--even I--have a better humor than that!"

"Why not learn from me a certain decency of mercy? Why not undo? Have I ever tormented--day by day, some wretched worm--making filth for it to trail through, filth that disgusts it, starving it, bruising it, mocking it? Why should you? Your jokes are clumsy.

Try--try some milder fun up there; do you hear? Something that doesn't hurt so infernally."

"You say this is your purpose--your purpose with me. You are making something with me--birth pangs of a soul. Ah! How can I believe you? You forget I have eyes for other things. Let my own case go, but what of that frog beneath the cart-wheel, God?--and the bird the cat had torn?"

And after such blasphemies I would fling out a ridiculous little debating society hand. "Answer me that!"

A week ago it had been moonlight, white and black and hard across the spaces of the park, but now the light was livid and full of the quality of haze. An extraordinarily low white mist, not three feet above the ground, drifted broodingly across the grass, and the trees rose ghostly out of that phantom sea. Great and shadowy and strange was the world that night, no one seemed abroad; I and my little cracked voice drifted solitary through the silent mysteries. Sometimes I argued as I have told, sometimes I tumbled along in moody vacuity, sometimes my torment was vivid and acute.

Abruptly out of apathy would come a boiling paroxysm of fury, when I thought of Nettie mocking me and laughing, and of her and Verrall clasped in one another's arms.

"I will not have it so!" I screamed. "I will not have it so!"

And in one of these raving fits I drew my revolver from my pocket and fired into the quiet night. Three times I fired it.

The bullets tore through the air, the startled trees told one another in diminishing echoes the thing I had done, and then, with a slow finality, the vast and patient night healed again to calm. My shots, my curses and blasphemies, my prayers--for anon I prayed--that Silence took them all.

It was--how can I express it?--a stifled outcry tranquilized, lost, amid the serene assumptions, the overwhelming empire of that brightness. The noise of my shots, the impact upon things, had for the instant been enormous, then it had passed away. I found myself standing with the revolver held up, astonished, my emotions penetrated by something I could not understand. Then I looked up over my shoulder at the great star, and remained staring at it.

"Who are YOU?" I said at last.

I was like a man in a solitary desert who has suddenly heard a voice. . . .

That, too, passed.

As I came over Clayton Crest I recalled that I missed the multitude

that now night after night walked out to stare at the comet, and the little preacher in the waste beyond the hoardings, who warned sinners to repent before the Judgment, was not in his usual place.

It was long past midnight, and every one had gone home. But I did not think of this at first, and the solitude perplexed me and left a memory behind. The gas-lamps were all extinguished because of the brightness of the comet, and that too was unfamiliar. The little newsagent in the still High Street had shut up and gone to bed, but one belated board had been put out late and forgotten, and it still bore its placard.

The word upon it--there was but one word upon it in staring letters--was: "WAR."

You figure that empty mean street, emptily echoing to my footsteps--no soul awake and audible but me. Then my halt at the placard. And amidst that sleeping stillness, smeared hastily upon the board, a little askew and crumpled, but quite distinct beneath that cool meteoric glare, preposterous and appalling, the measureless evil of that word--

"WAR!"

Section 2

I awoke in that state of equanimity that so often follows an emotional drenching.

It was late, and my mother was beside my bed. She had some breakfast for me on a battered tray.

"Don't get up yet, dear," she said. "You've been sleeping. It was three o'clock when you got home last night. You must have been tired out."

"Your poor face," she went on, "was as white as a sheet and your eyes shining. . . . It frightened me to let you in. And you stumbled on the stairs."

My eyes went quietly to my coat pocket, where something still bulged. She probably had not noticed. "I went to Checkshill," I said. "You know--perhaps--?"

"I got a letter last evening, dear," and as she bent near me to put the tray upon my knees, she kissed my hair softly. For a moment we both remained still, resting on that, her cheek just touching my head.

I took the tray from her to end the pause.

"Don't touch my clothes, mummy," I said sharply, as she moved towards them. "I'm still equal to a clothes-brush."

And then, as she turned away, I astonished her by saying, "You dear mother, you! A little--I understand. Only--now--dear mother; oh! let me be! Let me be!"

And, with the docility of a good servant, she went from me. Dear heart of submission that the world and I had used so ill!

It seemed to me that morning that I could never give way to a gust of passion again. A sorrowful firmness of the mind possessed me. My purpose seemed now as inflexible as iron; there was neither love nor hate nor fear left in me--only I pitied my mother greatly for all that was still to come. I ate my breakfast slowly, and thought where I could find out about Shaphambury, and how I might hope to get there. I had not five shillings in the world.

I dressed methodically, choosing the least frayed of my collars, and shaving much more carefully than was my wont; then I went down to the Public Library to consult a map.

Shaphambury was on the coast of Essex, a long and complicated journey from Clayton. I went to the railway-station and made some memoranda from the time-tables. The porters I asked were not very

clear about Shaphambury, but the booking-office clerk was helpful, and we puzzled out all I wanted to know. Then I came out into the coaly street again. At the least I ought to have two pounds.

I went back to the Public Library and into the newspaper room to think over this problem.

A fact intruded itself upon me. People seemed in an altogether exceptional stir about the morning journals, there was something unusual in the air of the room, more people and more talking than usual, and for a moment I was puzzled. Then I bethought me: "This war with Germany, of course!" A naval battle was supposed to be in progress in the North Sea. Let them! I returned to the consideration of my own affairs.

Parload?

Could I go and make it up with him, and then borrow? I weighed the chances of that. Then I thought of selling or pawning something, but that seemed difficult. My winter overcoat had not cost a pound when it was new, my watch was not likely to fetch many shillings. Still, both these things might be factors. I thought with a certain repugnance of the little store my mother was probably making for the rent. She was very secretive about that, and it was locked in an old tea-caddy in her bedroom. I knew it would be almost impossible to get any of that money from her willingly, and though I told

myself that in this issue of passion and death no detail mattered, I could not get rid of tormenting scruples whenever I thought of that tea-caddy. Was there no other course? Perhaps after every other source had been tapped I might supplement with a few shillings frankly begged from her. "These others," I said to myself, thinking without passion for once of the sons of the Secure, "would find it difficult to run their romances on a pawnshop basis. However, we must manage it."

I felt the day was passing on, but I did not get excited about that. "Slow is swiftest," Parload used to say, and I meant to get everything thought out completely, to take a long aim and then to act as a bullet flies.

I hesitated at a pawnshop on my way home to my midday meal, but I determined not to pledge my watch until I could bring my overcoat also.

I ate silently, revolving plans.

Section 3

After our midday dinner--it was a potato-pie, mostly potato with some scraps of cabbage and bacon--I put on my overcoat and got it

out of the house while my mother was in the scullery at the back.

A scullery in the old world was, in the case of such houses as ours, a damp, unsavory, mainly subterranean region behind the dark living-room kitchen, that was rendered more than typically dirty in our case by the fact that into it the coal-cellar, a yawning pit of black uncleanness, opened, and diffused small crunchable particles about the uneven brick floor. It was the region of "washing-up," that greasy, damp function that followed every meal; its atmosphere had ever a cooling steaminess and the memory of boiled cabbage, and the sooty black stains where saucepan or kettle had been put down for a minute, scraps of potato-peel caught by the strainer of the escape-pipe, and rags of a quite indescribable horribleness of acquisition, called "dish-clouts," rise in my memory at the name. The altar of this place was the "sink," a tank of stone, revolting to a refined touch, grease-filmed and unpleasant to see, and above this was a tap for cold water, so arranged that when the water descended it splashed and wetted whoever had turned it on. This tap was our water supply. And in such a place you must fancy a little old woman, rather incompetent and very gentle, a soul of unselfishness and sacrifice, in dirty clothes, all come from their original colors to a common dusty dark gray, in worn, ill-fitting boots, with hands distorted by ill use, and untidy graying hair--my mother. In the winter her hands would be "chapped," and she would have a cough. And while she washes up I go out, to sell my overcoat and watch in order that I may desert her.

I gave way to queer hesitations in pawning my two negotiable articles. A weakly indisposition to pawn in Clayton, where the pawnbroker knew me, carried me to the door of the place in Lynch Street, Swathinglea, where I had bought my revolver. Then came an idea that I was giving too many facts about myself to one man, and I came back to Clayton after all. I forget how much money I got, but I remember that it was rather less than the sum I had made out to be the single fare to Shaphambury. Still deliberate, I went back to the Public Library to find out whether it was possible, by walking for ten or twelve miles anywhere, to shorten the journey. My boots were in a dreadful state, the sole of the left one also was now peeling off, and I could not help perceiving that all my plans might be wrecked if at this crisis I went on shoe leather in which I could only shuffle. So long as I went softly they would serve, but not for hard walking. I went to the shoemaker in Hacker Street, but he would not promise any repairs for me under forty-eight hours.

I got back home about five minutes to three, resolved to start by the five train for Birmingham in any case, but still dissatisfied about my money. I thought of pawning a book or something of that sort, but I could think of nothing of obvious value in the house. My mother's silver--two gravy-spoons and a salt-cellar--had been pawned for some weeks, since, in fact, the June quarter day. But my mind was full of hypothetical opportunities.

As I came up the steps to our door, I remarked that Mr. Gabbitas looked at me suddenly round his dull red curtains with a sort of alarmed resolution in his eye and vanished, and as I walked along the passage he opened his door upon me suddenly and intercepted me.

You are figuring me, I hope, as a dark and sullen lout in shabby, cheap, old-world clothes that are shiny at all the wearing surfaces, and with a discolored red tie and frayed linen. My left hand keeps in my pocket as though there is something it prefers to keep a grip upon there. Mr. Gabbitas was shorter than I, and the first note he struck in the impression he made upon any one was of something bright and birdlike. I think he wanted to be birdlike, he possessed the possibility of an avian charm, but, as a matter of fact, there was nothing of the glowing vitality of the bird in his being. And a bird is never out of breath and with an open mouth. He was in the clerical dress of that time, that costume that seems now almost the strangest of all our old-world clothing, and he presented it in its cheapest form--black of a poor texture, ill-fitting, strangely cut. Its long skirts accentuated the tubbiness of his body, the shortness of his legs. The white tie below his all-round collar, beneath his innocent large-spectacled face, was a little grubby, and between his not very clean teeth he held a briar pipe. His complexion was whitish, and although he was only thirty-three or four perhaps, his sandy hair was already thinning from the top of his head.

To your eye, now, he would seem the strangest figure, in the utter disregard of all physical beauty or dignity about him. You would find him extraordinarily odd, but in the old days he met not only with acceptance but respect. He was alive until within a year or so ago, but his later appearance changed. As I saw him that afternoon he was a very slovenly, ungainly little human being indeed, not only was his clothing altogether ugly and queer, but had you stripped the man stark, you would certainly have seen in the bulging paunch that comes from flabby muscles and flabbily controlled appetites, and in the rounded shoulders and flawed and yellowish skin, the same failure of any effort toward clean beauty. You had an instinctive sense that so he had been from the beginning. You felt he was not only drifting through life, eating what came in his way, believing what came in his way, doing without any vigor what came in his way, but that into life also he had drifted. You could not believe him the child of pride and high resolve, or of any splendid passion of love. He had just HAPPENED. . . But we all happened then. Why am I taking this tone over this poor little curate in particular?

"Hello!" he said, with an assumption of friendly ease. "Haven't seen you for weeks! Come in and have a gossip."

An invitation from the drawing-room lodger was in the nature of a command. I would have liked very greatly to have refused it, never was invitation more inopportune, but I had not the wit to think

of an excuse. "All right," I said awkwardly, and he held the door open for me.

"I'd be very glad if you would," he amplified. "One doesn't get much opportunity of intelligent talk in this parish."

What the devil was he up to, was my secret preoccupation. He fussed about me with a nervous hospitality, talking in jumpy fragments, rubbing his hands together, and taking peeps at me over and round his glasses. As I sat down in his leather-covered armchair, I had an odd memory of the one in the Clayton dentist's operating-room--I know not why.

"They're going to give us trouble in the North Sea, it seems," he remarked with a sort of innocent zest. "I'm glad they mean fighting."

There was an air of culture about his room that always cowed me, and that made me constrained even on this occasion. The table under the window was littered with photographic material and the later albums of his continental souvenirs, and on the American cloth trimmed shelves that filled the recesses on either side of the fireplace were what I used to think in those days a quite incredible number of books--perhaps eight hundred altogether, including the reverend gentleman's photograph albums and college and school text-books. This suggestion of learning was enforced by the little wooden shield bearing a college coat-of-arms that hung over

the looking-glass, and by a photograph of Mr. Gabbitas in cap and gown in an Oxford frame that adorned the opposite wall. And in the middle of that wall stood his writing-desk, which I knew to have pigeon-holes when it was open, and which made him seem not merely cultured but literary. At that he wrote sermons, composing them himself!

"Yes," he said, taking possession of the hearthrug, "the war had to come sooner or later. If we smash their fleet for them now; well, there's an end to the matter!"

He stood on his toes and then bumped down on his heels, and looked blandly through his spectacles at a water-color by his sister--the subject was a bunch of violets--above the sideboard which was his pantry and tea-chest and cellar. "Yes," he said as he did so.

I coughed, and wondered how I might presently get away.

He invited me to smoke--that queer old practice!--and then when I declined, began talking in a confidential tone of this "dreadful business" of the strikes. "The war won't improve THAT outlook," he said, and was very grave for a moment.

He spoke of the want of thought for their wives and children shown by the colliers in striking merely for the sake of the union, and this stirred me to controversy, and distracted me a little from my

resolution to escape.

"I don't quite agree with that," I said, clearing my throat. "If the men didn't strike for the union now, if they let that be broken up, where would they be when the pinch of reductions did come?"

To which he replied that they couldn't expect to get top-price wages when the masters were selling bottom-price coal. I replied, "That isn't it. The masters don't treat them fairly. They have to protect themselves."

To which Mr. Gabbitas answered, "Well, I don't know. I've been in the Four Towns some time, and I must say I don't think the balance of injustice falls on the masters' side."

"It falls on the men," I agreed, wilfully misunderstanding him.

And so we worked our way toward an argument. "Confound this argument!" I thought; but I had no skill in self-extraction, and my irritation crept into my voice. Three little spots of color came into the cheeks and nose of Mr. Gabbitas, but his voice showed nothing of his ruffled temper.

"You see," I said, "I'm a socialist. I don't think this world was made for a small minority to dance on the faces of every one else."

"My dear fellow," said the Rev. Gabbitas, "I'M a socialist too. Who isn't. But that doesn't lead me to class hatred."

"You haven't felt the heel of this confounded system. I have."

"Ah!" said he; and catching him on that note came a rap at the front door, and, as he hung suspended, the sound of my mother letting some one in and a timid rap.

"NOW," thought I, and stood up, resolutely, but he would not let me. "No, no, no!" said he. "It's only for the Dorcas money."

He put his hand against my chest with an effect of physical compulsion, and cried, "Come in!"

"Our talk's just getting interesting," he protested; and there entered Miss Ramell, an elderly little young lady who was mighty in Church help in Clayton.

He greeted her--she took no notice of me--and went to his bureau, and I remained standing by my chair but unable to get out of the room. "I'm not interrupting?" asked Miss Ramell.

"Not in the least," he said; drew out the carriers and opened his desk. I could not help seeing what he did.

I was so fretted by my impotence to leave him that at the moment it did not connect at all with the research of the morning that he was taking out money. I listened sullenly to his talk with Miss Ramell, and saw only, as they say in Wales, with the front of my eyes, the small flat drawer that had, it seemed, quite a number of sovereigns scattered over its floor. "They're so unreasonable," complained Miss Ramell. Who could be otherwise in a social organization that bordered on insanity?

I turned away from them, put my foot on the fender, stuck my elbow on the plush-fringed mantelboard, and studied the photographs, pipes, and ash-trays that adorned it. What was it I had to think out before I went to the station?

Of course! My mind made a queer little reluctant leap--it felt like being forced to leap over a bottomless chasm--and alighted upon the sovereigns that were just disappearing again as Mr. Gabbitas shut his drawer.

"I won't interrupt your talk further," said Miss Ramell, receding doorward.

Mr. Gabbitas played round her politely, and opened the door for her and conducted her into the passage, and for a moment or so I had the fullest sense of proximity to those--it seemed to me there must be ten or twelve--sovereigns. . . .

The front door closed and he returned. My chance of escape had gone.

Section 4

"I MUST be going," I said, with a curiously reinforced desire to get away out of that room.

"My dear chap!" he insisted, "I can't think of it. Surely--there's nothing to call you away." Then with an evident desire to shift the venue of our talk, he asked, "You never told me what you thought of Burble's little book."

I was now, beneath my dull display of submission, furiously angry with him. It occurred to me to ask myself why I should defer and qualify my opinions to him. Why should I pretend a feeling of intellectual and social inferiority toward him. He asked what I thought of Burble. I resolved to tell him--if necessary with arrogance. Then perhaps he would release me. I did not sit down again, but stood by the corner of the fireplace.

"That was the little book you lent me last summer?" I said.

"He reasons closely, eh?" he said, and indicated the armchair with a flat hand, and beamed persuasively.

I remained standing. "I didn't think much of his reasoning powers," I said.

"He was one of the cleverest bishops London ever had."

"That may be. But he was dodging about in a jolly feeble case," said I.

"You mean?"

"That he's wrong. I don't think he proves his case. I don't think Christianity is true. He knows himself for the pretender he is. His reasoning's--Rot."

Mr. Gabbitas went, I think, a shade paler than his wont, and propitiation vanished from his manner. His eyes and mouth were round, his face seemed to get round, his eyebrows curved at my remarks.

"I'm sorry you think that," he said at last, with a catch in his breath.

He did not repeat his suggestion that I should sit. He made a step or two toward the window and turned. "I suppose you will admit--" he

began, with a faintly irritating note of intellectual condescension.

. . . .

I will not tell you of his arguments or mine. You will find if you care to look for them, in out-of-the-way corners of our book museums, the shriveled cheap publications--the publications of the Rationalist Press Association, for example--on which my arguments were based. Lying in that curious limbo with them, mixed up with them and indistinguishable, are the endless "Replies" of orthodoxy, like the mixed dead in some hard-fought trench. All those disputes of our fathers, and they were sometimes furious disputes, have gone now beyond the range of comprehension. You younger people, I know, read them with impatient perplexity. You cannot understand how sane creatures could imagine they had joined issue at all in most of these controversies. All the old methods of systematic thinking, the queer absurdities of the Aristotelian logic, have followed magic numbers and mystical numbers, and the Rumpelstiltskin magic of names now into the blackness of the unthinkable. You can no more understand our theological passions than you can understand the fancies that made all ancient peoples speak of their gods only by circumlocutions, that made savages pine away and die because they had been photographed, or an Elizabethan farmer turn back from a day's expedition because he had met three crows. Even I, who have been through it all, recall our controversies now with something near incredulity.

Faith we can understand to-day, all men live by faith, but in the old time every one confused quite hopelessly Faith and a forced, incredible Belief in certain pseudo-concrete statements. I am inclined to say that neither believers nor unbelievers had faith as we understand it--they had insufficient intellectual power. They could not trust unless they had something to see and touch and say, like their barbarous ancestors who could not make a bargain without exchange of tokens. If they no longer worshipped stocks and stones, or eked out their needs with pilgrimages and images, they still held fiercely to audible images, to printed words and formulae.

But why revive the echoes of the ancient logomachies?

Suffice it that we lost our tempers very readily in pursuit of God and Truth, and said exquisitely foolish things on either side. And on the whole--from the impartial perspective of my three and seventy years--I adjudicate that if my dialectic was bad, that of the Rev. Gabbitas was altogether worse.

Little pink spots came into his cheeks, a squealing note into his voice. We interrupted each other more and more rudely. We invented facts and appealed to authorities whose names I mispronounced; and, finding Gabbitas shy of the higher criticism and the Germans, I used the names of Karl Marx and Engels as Bible exegetes with no little effect. A silly wrangle! a preposterous wrangle!--you must imagine our talk becoming louder, with a developing quarrelsome

note--my mother no doubt hovering on the staircase and listening in alarm as who should say, "My dear, don't offend it! Oh, don't offend it! Mr. Gabbitas enjoys its friendship. Try to think whatever Mr. Gabbitas says"--though we still kept in touch with a pretence of mutual deference. The ethical superiority of Christianity to all other religions came to the fore--I know not how. We dealt with the matter in bold, imaginative generalizations, because of the insufficiency of our historical knowledge. I was moved to denounce Christianity as the ethic of slaves, and declare myself a disciple of a German writer of no little vogue in those days, named Nietzsche.

For a disciple I must confess I was particularly ill acquainted with the works of the master. Indeed, all I knew of him had come to me through a two-column article in *The Clarion* for the previous week. . . . But the Rev. Gabbitas did not read *The Clarion*.

I am, I know, putting a strain upon your credulity when I tell you that I now have little doubt that the Rev. Gabbitas was absolutely ignorant even of the name of Nietzsche, although that writer presented a separate and distinct attitude of attack upon the faith that was in the reverend gentleman's keeping.

"I'm a disciple of Nietzsche," said I, with an air of extensive explanation.

He shied away so awkwardly at the name that I repeated it at once.

"But do you know what Nietzsche says?" I pressed him viciously.

"He has certainly been adequately answered," said he, still trying to carry it off.

"Who by?" I rapped out hotly. "Tell me that!" and became mercilessly expectant.

Section 5

A happy accident relieved Mr. Gabbitas from the embarrassment of that challenge, and carried me another step along my course of personal disaster.

It came on the heels of my question in the form of a clatter of horses without, and the gride and cessation of wheels. I glimpsed a straw-hatted coachman and a pair of grays. It seemed an incredibly magnificent carriage for Clayton.

"Eh!" said the Rev. Gabbitas, going to the window. "Why, it's old Mrs. Verrall! It's old Mrs. Verrall. Really! What CAN she want with me?"

He turned to me, and the flush of controversy had passed and his face shone like the sun. It was not every day, I perceived, that Mrs. Verrall came to see him.

"I get so many interruptions," he said, almost grinning. "You must excuse me a minute! Then--then I'll tell you about that fellow. But don't go. I pray you don't go. I can assure you. . . . MOST interesting."

He went out of the room waving vague prohibitory gestures.

"I MUST go," I cried after him.

"No, no, no!" in the passage. "I've got your answer," I think it was he added, and "quite mistaken;" and I saw him running down the steps to talk to the old lady.

I swore. I made three steps to the window, and this brought me within a yard of that accursed drawer.

I glanced at it, and then at that old woman who was so absolutely powerful, and instantly her son and Nettie's face were flaming in my brain. The Stuarts had, no doubt, already accepted accomplished facts. And I too--

What was I doing here?

What was I doing here while judgment escaped me?

I woke up. I was injected with energy. I took one reassuring look at the curate's obsequious back, at the old lady's projected nose and quivering hand, and then with swift, clean movements I had the little drawer open, four sovereigns in my pocket, and the drawer shut again. Then again at the window--they were still talking.

That was all right. He might not look in that drawer for hours. I glanced at his clock. Twenty minutes still before the Birmingham train. Time to buy a pair of boots and get away. But how I was to get to the station?

I went out boldly into the passage, and took my hat and stick. . . .
Walk past him?

Yes. That was all right! He could not argue with me while so important a person engaged him. . . . I came boldly down the steps.

"I want a list made, Mr. Gabbitas, of all the really DESERVING cases," old Mrs. Verrall was saying.

It is curious, but it did not occur to me that here was a mother whose son I was going to kill. I did not see her in that aspect at all. Instead, I was possessed by a realization of the blazing

imbecility of a social system that gave this palsied old woman the power to give or withhold the urgent necessities of life from hundreds of her fellow-creatures just according to her poor, foolish old fancies of desert.

"We could make a PROVISIONAL list of that sort," he was saying, and glanced round with a preoccupied expression at me.

"I MUST go," I said at his flash of inquiry, and added, "I'll be back in twenty minutes," and went on my way. He turned again to his patroness as though he forgot me on the instant. Perhaps after all he was not sorry.

I felt extraordinarily cool and capable, exhilarated, if anything, by this prompt, effectual theft. After all, my great determination would achieve itself. I was no longer oppressed by a sense of obstacles, I felt I could grasp accidents and turn them to my advantage. I would go now down Hacker Street to the little shoemaker's--get a sound, good pair of boots--ten minutes--and then to the railway-station--five minutes more--and off! I felt as efficient and non-moral as if I was Nietzsche's Over-man already come. It did not occur to me that the curate's clock might have a considerable margin of error.

Section 6

I missed the train.

Partly that was because the curate's clock was slow, and partly it was due to the commercial obstinacy of the shoemaker, who would try on another pair after I had declared my time was up. I bought the final pair however, gave him a wrong address for the return of the old ones, and only ceased to feel like the Nietzschean Over-man, when I saw the train running out of the station.

Even then I did not lose my head. It occurred to me almost at once that, in the event of a prompt pursuit, there would be a great advantage in not taking a train from Clayton; that, indeed, to have done so would have been an error from which only luck had saved me. As it was, I had already been very indiscreet in my inquiries about Shaphambury; for once on the scent the clerk could not fail to remember me. Now the chances were against his coming into the case. I did not go into the station therefore at all, I made no demonstration of having missed the train, but walked quietly past, down the road, crossed the iron footbridge, and took the way back circuitously by White's brickfields and the allotments to the way over Clayton Crest to Two-Mile Stone, where I calculated I should have an ample margin for the 6.13 train.

I was not very greatly excited or alarmed then. Suppose, I reasoned,

that by some accident the curate goes to that drawer at once: will he be certain to miss four out of ten or eleven sovereigns? If he does, will he at once think I have taken them? If he does, will he act at once or wait for my return? If he acts at once, will he talk to my mother or call in the police? Then there are a dozen roads and even railways out of the Clayton region, how is he to know which I have taken? Suppose he goes straight at once to the right station, they will not remember my departure for the simple reason that I didn't depart. But they may remember about Shaphambury? It was unlikely.

I resolved not to go directly to Shaphambury from Birmingham, but to go thence to Monkshampton, thence to Wyvern, and then come down on Shaphambury from the north. That might involve a night at some intermediate stopping-place but it would effectually conceal me from any but the most persistent pursuit. And this was not a case of murder yet, but only the theft of four sovereigns.

I had argued away all anxiety before I reached Clayton Crest.

At the Crest I looked back. What a world it was! And suddenly it came to me that I was looking at this world for the last time. If I overtook the fugitives and succeeded, I should die with them--or hang. I stopped and looked back more attentively at that wide ugly valley.

It was my native valley, and I was going out of it, I thought never to return, and yet in that last prospect, the group of towns that had borne me and dwarfed and crippled and made me, seemed, in some indefinable manner, strange. I was, perhaps, more used to seeing it from this comprehensive view-point when it was veiled and softened by night; now it came out in all its weekday reek, under a clear afternoon sun. That may account a little for its unfamiliarity.

And perhaps, too, there was something in the emotions through which I had been passing for a week and more, to intensify my insight, to enable me to pierce the unusual, to question the accepted. But it came to me then, I am sure, for the first time, how promiscuous, how higgledy-piggledy was the whole of that jumble of mines and homes, collieries and potbanks, railway yards, canals, schools, forges and blast furnaces, churches, chapels, allotment hovels, a vast irregular agglomeration of ugly smoking accidents in which men lived as happy as frogs in a dustbin. Each thing jostled and damaged the other things about it, each thing ignored the other things about it; the smoke of the furnace defiled the potbank clay, the clatter of the railway deafened the worshipers in church, the public-house thrust corruption at the school doors, the dismal homes squeezed miserably amidst the monstrosities of industrialism, with an effect of groping imbecility. Humanity choked amidst its products, and all its energy went in increasing its disorder, like a blind stricken thing that struggles and sinks in a morass.

I did not think these things clearly that afternoon. Much less did

I ask how I, with my murderous purpose, stood to them all. I write down that realization of disorder and suffocation here and now as though I had thought it, but indeed then I only felt it, felt it transitorily as I looked back, and then stood with the thing escaping from my mind.

I should never see that country-side again.

I came back to that. At any rate I wasn't sorry. The chances were I should die in sweet air, under a clean sky.

From distant Swathinglea came a little sound, the minute undulation of a remote crowd, and then rapidly three shots.

That held me perplexed for a space. . . . Well, anyhow I was leaving it all! Thank God I was leaving it all! Then, as I turned to go on, I thought of my mother.

It seemed an evil world in which to leave one's mother. My thoughts focused upon her very vividly for a moment. Down there, under that afternoon light, she was going to and fro, unaware as yet that she had lost me, bent and poking about in the darkling underground kitchen, perhaps carrying a lamp into the scullery to trim, or sitting patiently, staring into the fire, waiting tea for me. A great pity for her, a great remorse at the blacker troubles that lowered over her innocent head, came to me. Why, after all, was

I doing this thing?

Why?

I stopped again dead, with the hill crest rising between me and home. I had more than half a mind to return to her.

Then I thought of the curate's sovereigns. If he has missed them already, what should I return to? And, even if I returned, how could I put them back?

And what of the night after I renounced my revenge? What of the time when young Verrall came back? And Nettie?

No! The thing had to be done.

But at least I might have kissed my mother before I came away, left her some message, reassured her at least for a little while.

All night she would listen and wait for me. . . .

Should I send her a telegram from Two-Mile Stone?

It was no good now; too late, too late. To do that would be to tell the course I had taken, to bring pursuit upon me, swift and sure, if pursuit there was to be. No. My mother must suffer!

I went on grimly toward Two-Mile Stone, but now as if some greater will than mine directed my footsteps thither.

I reached Birmingham before darkness came, and just caught the last train for Monkshampton, where I had planned to pass the night.