

THE CURATE.

XV.

The Vicar opened the door half mechanically to let out Crump, and saw Mendham, his curate, coming up the pathway by the hedge of purple vetch and meadowsweet. At that his hand went up to his chin and his eyes grew perplexed. Suppose he was deceived. The Doctor passed the Curate with a sweep of his hand from his hat brim. Crump was an extraordinarily clever fellow, the Vicar thought, and knew far more of anyone's brain than one did oneself. The Vicar felt that so acutely. It made the coming explanation difficult. Suppose he were to go back into the drawing-room, and find just a tramp asleep on the hearthrug.

Mendham was a cadaverous man with a magnificent beard. He looked, indeed, as though he had run to beard as a mustard plant does to seed. But when he spoke you found he had a voice as well.

"My wife came home in a dreadful state," he brayed out at long range.

"Come in," said the Vicar; "come in. Most remarkable occurrence. Please come in. Come into the study. I'm really dreadfully sorry. But when I explain...."

"And apologise, I hope," brayed the Curate.

"And apologise. No, not that way. This way. The study."

"Now what was that woman?" said the Curate, turning on the Vicar as the latter closed the study door.

"What woman?"

"Pah!"

"But really!"

"The painted creature in light attire--disgustingly light attire, to speak freely--with whom you were promenading the garden."

"My dear Mendham--that was an Angel!"

"A very pretty Angel?"

"The world is getting so matter-of-fact," said the Vicar.

"The world," roared the Curate, "grows blacker every day. But to find a man in your position, shamelessly, openly...."

"Bother!" said the Vicar aside. He rarely swore. "Look here, Mendham, you really misunderstand. I can assure you...."

"Very well," said the Curate. "Explain!" He stood with his lank legs apart, his arms folded, scowling at his Vicar over his big beard.

(Explanations, I repeat, I have always considered the peculiar fallacy of this scientific age.)

The Vicar looked about him helplessly. The world had all gone dull and dead. Had he been dreaming all the afternoon? Was there really an angel in the drawing-room? Or was he the sport of a complicated hallucination?

"Well?" said Mendham, at the end of a minute.

The Vicar's hand fluttered about his chin. "It's such a round-about story," he said.

"No doubt it will be," said Mendham harshly.

The Vicar restrained a movement of impatience.

"I went out to look for a strange bird this afternoon.... Do you believe in angels, Mendham, real angels?"

"I'm not here to discuss theology. I am the husband of an insulted woman."

"But I tell you it's not a figure of speech; this is an angel, a real angel with wings. He's in the next room now. You do misunderstand me, so...."

"Really, Hilyer--"

"It is true I tell you, Mendham. I swear it is true." The Vicar's voice grew impassioned. "What sin I have done that I should entertain and clothe angelic visitants, I don't know. I only know that--inconvenient as it undoubtedly will be--I have an angel now in the drawing-room, wearing my new suit and finishing his tea. And he's stopping with me, indefinitely, at my invitation. No doubt it was rash of me. But I can't turn him out, you know, because Mrs Mendham----I may be a weakling, but I am still a gentleman."

"Really, Hilyer--"

"I can assure you it is true." There was a note of hysterical desperation in the Vicar's voice. "I fired at him, taking him for a flamingo, and hit him in the wing."

"I thought this was a case for the Bishop. I find it is a case for the Lunacy Commissioners."

"Come and see him, Mendham!"

"But there are no angels."

"We teach the people differently," said the Vicar.

"Not as material bodies," said the Curate.

"Anyhow, come and see him."

"I don't want to see your hallucinations," began the Curate.

"I can't explain anything unless you come and see him," said the Vicar.

"A man who's more like an angel than anything else in heaven or earth.

You simply must see if you wish to understand."

"I don't wish to understand," said the Curate. "I don't wish to lend myself to any imposture. Surely, Hilyer, if this is not an imposition, you can tell me yourself.... Flamingo, indeed!"

XVI.

The Angel had finished his tea and was standing looking pensively out of the window. He thought the old church down the valley lit by the light of the setting sun was very beautiful, but he could not understand the serried ranks of tombstones that lay up the hillside beyond. He turned as Mendham and the Vicar came in.

Now Mendham could bully his Vicar cheerfully enough, just as he could bully his congregation; but he was not the sort of man to bully a stranger. He looked at the Angel, and the "strange woman" theory was disposed of. The Angel's beauty was too clearly the beauty of the youth.

"Mr Hilyer tells me," Mendham began, in an almost apologetic tone, "that you--ah--it's so curious--claim to be an Angel."

"Are an Angel," said the Vicar.

The Angel bowed.

"Naturally," said Mendham, "we are curious."

"Very," said the Angel. "The blackness and the shape."

"I beg your pardon?" said Mendham.

"The blackness and the flaps," repeated the Angel; "and no wings."

"Precisely," said Mendham, who was altogether at a loss. "We are, of course, curious to know something of how you came into the village in such a peculiar costume."

The Angel looked at the Vicar. The Vicar touched his chin.

"You see," began the Vicar.

"Let him explain," said Mendham; "I beg."

"I wanted to suggest," began the Vicar.

"And I don't want you to suggest."

"Bother!" said the Vicar.

The Angel looked from one to the other. "Such rugose expressions flit across your faces!" he said.

"You see, Mr--Mr--I don't know your name," said Mendham, with a certain diminution of suavity. "The case stands thus: My wife--four ladies, I might say--are playing lawn tennis, when you suddenly rush out on them, sir; you rush out on them from among the rhododendra in a very defective

costume. You and Mr Hilyer."

"But I--" said the Vicar.

"I know. It was this gentleman's costume was defective. Naturally--it is my place in fact--to demand an explanation." His voice was growing in volume. "And I must demand an explanation."

The Angel smiled faintly at his note of anger and his sudden attitude of determination--arms tightly folded.

"I am rather new to the world," the Angel began.

"Nineteen at least," said Mendham. "Old enough to know better. That's a poor excuse."

"May I ask one question first?" said the Angel.

"Well?"

"Do you think I am a Man--like yourself? As the chequered man did."

"If you are not a man--"

"One other question. Have you never heard of an Angel?"

"I warn you not to try that story upon me," said Mendham, now back at his familiar crescendo.

The Vicar interrupted: "But Mendham--he has wings!"

"Please let me talk to him," said Mendham.

"You are so quaint," said the Angel; "you interrupt everything I have to say."

"But what have you to say?" said Mendham.

"That I really am an Angel...."

"Pshaw!"

"There you go!"

"But tell me, honestly, how you came to be in the shrubbery of Siddermorton Vicarage--in the state in which you were. And in the Vicar's company. Cannot you abandon this ridiculous story of yours?..."

The Angel shrugged his wings. "What is the matter with this man?" he said to the Vicar.

"My dear Mendham," said the Vicar, "a few words from me...."

"Surely my question is straightforward enough!"

"But you won't tell me the answer you want, and it's no good my telling you any other."

"Pshaw!" said the Curate again. And then turning suddenly on the Vicar, "Where does he come from?"

The Vicar was in a dreadful state of doubt by this time.

"He says he is an Angel!" said the Vicar. "Why don't you listen to him?"

"No angel would alarm four ladies...."

"Is that what it is all about?" said the Angel.

"Enough cause too, I should think!" said the Curate.

"But I really did not know," said the Angel.

"This is altogether too much!"

"I am sincerely sorry I alarmed these ladies."

"You ought to be. But I see I shall get nothing out of you two." Mendham went towards the door. "I am convinced there is something discreditable at the bottom of this business. Or why not tell a simple straightforward story? I will confess you puzzle me. Why, in this enlightened age, you should tell this fantastic, this far-fetched story of an Angel, altogether beats me. What good can it do?..."

"But stop and look at his wings!" said the Vicar. "I can assure you he has wings!"

Mendham had his fingers on the door-handle. "I have seen quite enough," he said. "It may be this is simply a foolish attempt at a hoax, Hilyer."

"But Mendham!" said the Vicar.

The Curate halted in the doorway and looked at the Vicar over his shoulder. The accumulating judgment of months found vent. "I cannot understand, Hilyer, why you are in the Church. For the life of me I cannot. The air is full of Social Movements, of Economic change, the Woman Movement, Rational Dress, The Reunion of Christendom, Socialism, Individualism--all the great and moving Questions of the Hour! Surely, we who follow the Great Reformer.... And here you are stuffing birds, and startling ladies with your callous disregard...."

"But Mendham," began the Vicar.

The Curate would not hear him. "You shame the Apostles with your levity.... But this is only a preliminary enquiry," he said, with a threatening note in his sonorous voice, and so vanished abruptly (with a violent slam) from the room.

XVII.

"Are all men so odd as this?" said the Angel.

"I'm in such a difficult position," said the Vicar. "You see," he said, and stopped, searching his chin for an idea.

"I'm beginning to see," said the Angel.

"They won't believe it."

"I see that."

"They will think I tell lies."

"And?"

"That will be extremely painful to me."

"Painful... Pain," said the Angel. "I hope not."

The Vicar shook his head. The good report of the village had been the breath of his life, so far. "You see," he said, "it would look so much more plausible if you said you were just a man."

"But I'm not," said the Angel.

"No, you're not," said the Vicar. "So that's no good."

"Nobody here, you know, has ever seen an Angel, or heard of one--except in church. If you had made your debut in the chancel--on Sunday--it might have been different. But that's too late now.... (Bother!) Nobody, absolutely nobody, will believe in you."

"I hope I am not inconveniencing you?"

"Not at all," said the Vicar; "not at all. Only----. Naturally it may be inconvenient if you tell a too incredible story. If I might suggest (ahem)----."

"Well?"

"You see, people in the world, being men themselves, will almost certainly regard you as a man. If you say you are not, they will simply say you do not tell the truth. Only exceptional people appreciate the exceptional. When in Rome one must--well, respect Roman prejudices a little--talk Latin. You will find it better----"

"You propose I should feign to become a man?"

"You have my meaning at once."

The Angel stared at the Vicar's hollyhocks and thought.

"Possibly, after all," he said slowly, "I shall become a man. I may have been too hasty in saying I was not. You say there are no angels in this world. Who am I to set myself up against your experience? A mere thing of a day--so far as this world goes. If you say there are no angels--clearly I must be something else. I eat--angels do not eat. I may be a man already."

"A convenient view, at any rate," said the Vicar.

"If it is convenient to you----"

"It is. And then to account for your presence here."

"If," said the Vicar, after a hesitating moment of reflection, "if, for instance, you had been an ordinary man with a weakness for wading, and you had gone wading in the Sidder, and your clothes had been stolen, for instance, and I had come upon you in that position of inconvenience; the explanation I shall have to make to Mrs Mendham----would be shorn at least of the supernatural element. There is such a feeling against the supernatural element nowadays--even in the pulpit. You would hardly believe----"

"It's a pity that was not the case," said the Angel.

"Of course," said the Vicar. "It is a great pity that was not the case. But at anyrate you will oblige me if you do not obtrude your angelic nature. You will oblige everyone, in fact. There is a settled opinion that angels do not do this kind of thing. And nothing is more painful--as I can testify--than a decaying settled opinion.... Settled opinions are mental teeth in more ways than one. For my own part,"--the Vicar's hand passed over his eyes for a moment--"I cannot but believe you are an angel.... Surely I can believe my own eyes."

"We always do ours," said the Angel.

"And so do we, within limits."

Then the clock upon the mantel chimed seven, and almost simultaneously Mrs Hinijer announced dinner.