

AFTER DINNER.

XVIII.

The Angel and the Vicar sat at dinner. The Vicar, with his napkin tucked in at his neck, watched the Angel struggling with his soup. "You will soon get into the way of it," said the Vicar. The knife and fork business was done awkwardly but with effect. The Angel looked furtively at Delia, the little waiting maid. When presently they sat cracking nuts--which the Angel found congenial enough--and the girl had gone, the Angel asked: "Was that a lady, too?"

"Well," said the Vicar (crack). "No--she is not a lady. She is a servant."

"Yes," said the Angel; "she had rather a nicer shape."

"You mustn't tell Mrs Mendham that," said the Vicar, covertly satisfied.

"She didn't stick out so much at the shoulders and hips, and there was more of her in between. And the colour of her robes was not discordant--simply neutral. And her face----"

"Mrs Mendham and her daughters had been playing tennis," said the Vicar, feeling he ought not to listen to detraction even of his mortal enemy.

"Do you like these things--these nuts?"

"Very much," said the Angel. Crack.

"You see," said the Vicar (Chum, chum, chum). "For my own part I entirely believe you are an angel."

"Yes!" said the Angel.

"I shot you--I saw you flutter. It's beyond dispute. In my own mind. I admit it's curious and against my preconceptions, but--practically--I'm assured, perfectly assured in fact, that I saw what I certainly did see. But after the behaviour of these people. (Crack). I really don't see how we are to persuade people. Nowadays people are so very particular about evidence. So that I think there is a great deal to be said for the attitude you assume. Temporarily at least I think it would be best of you to do as you propose to do, and behave as a man as far as possible. Of course there is no knowing how or when you may go back. After what has happened (Gluck, gluck, gluck--as the Vicar refills his glass)--after what has happened I should not be surprised to see the side of the room fall away, and the hosts of heaven appear to take you away again--take us both away even. You have so far enlarged my imagination. All these years I have been forgetting Wonderland. But still----. It will certainly be wiser to break the thing gently to them."

"This life of yours," said the Angel. "I'm still in the dark about it. How do you begin?"

"Dear me!" said the Vicar. "Fancy having to explain that! We begin existence here, you know, as babies, silly pink helpless things wrapped in white, with goggling eyes, that yelp dismally at the Font. Then these babies grow larger and become even beautiful--when their faces are washed. And they continue to grow to a certain size. They become children, boys and girls, youths and maidens (Crack), young men and young women. That is the finest time in life, according to many--certainly the most beautiful. Full of great hopes and dreams, vague emotions and unexpected dangers."

"That was a maiden?" said the Angel, indicating the door through which Delia had disappeared.

"Yes," said the Vicar, "that was a maiden." And paused thoughtfully.

"And then?"

"Then," said the Vicar, "the glamour fades and life begins in earnest. The young men and young women pair off--most of them. They come to me shy and bashful, in smart ugly dresses, and I marry them. And then little pink babies come to them, and some of the youths and maidens that were, grow fat and vulgar, and some grow thin and shrewish, and their pretty complexions go, and they get a queer delusion of superiority over

the younger people, and all the delight and glory goes out of their lives. So they call the delight and glory of the younger ones, Illusion. And then they begin to drop to pieces."

"Drop to pieces!" said the Angel. "How grotesque!"

"Their hair comes off and gets dull coloured or ashen grey," said the Vicar. "I, for instance." He bowed his head forward to show a circular shining patch the size of a florin. "And their teeth come out. Their faces collapse and become as wrinkled and dry as a shrivelled apple. 'Corrugated' you called mine. They care more and more for what they have to eat and to drink, and less and less for any of the other delights of life. Their limbs get loose in the joints, and their hearts slack, or little pieces from their lungs come coughing up. Pain...."

"Ah!" said the Angel.

"Pain comes into their lives more and more. And then they go. They do not like to go, but they have to--out of this world, very reluctantly, clutching its pain at last in their eagerness to stop...."

"Where do they go?"

"Once I thought I knew. But now I am older I know I do not know. We have a Legend--perhaps it is not a legend. One may be a churchman and disbelieve. Stokes says there is nothing in it...." The Vicar shook his

head at the bananas.

"And you?" said the Angel. "Were you a little pink baby?"

"A little while ago I was a little pink baby."

"Were you robed then as you are now?"

"Oh no! Dear me! What a queer idea! Had long white clothes, I suppose, like the rest of them."

"And then you were a little boy?"

"A little boy."

"And then a glorious youth?"

"I was not a very glorious youth, I am afraid. I was sickly, and too poor to be radiant, and with a timid heart. I studied hard and pored over the dying thoughts of men long dead. So I lost the glory, and no maiden came to me, and the dulness of life began too soon."

"And you have your little pink babies?"

"None," said the Vicar with a scarce perceptible pause. "Yet all the same, as you see, I am beginning to drop to pieces. Presently my back

will droop like a wilting flowerstalk. And then, in a few thousand days more I shall be done with, and I shall go out of this world of mine.... Whither I do not know."

"And you have to eat like this every day?"

"Eat, and get clothes and keep this roof above me. There are some very disagreeable things in this world called Cold and Rain. And the other people here--how and why is too long a story--have made me a kind of chorus to their lives. They bring their little pink babies to me and I have to say a name and some other things over each new pink baby. And when the children have grown to be youths and maidens, they come again and are confirmed. You will understand that better later. Then before they may join in couples and have pink babies of their own, they must come again and hear me read out of a book. They would be outcast, and no other maiden would speak to the maiden who had a little pink baby without I had read over her for twenty minutes out of my book. It's a necessary thing, as you will see. Odd as it may seem to you. And afterwards when they are falling to pieces, I try and persuade them of a strange world in which I scarcely believe myself, where life is altogether different from what they have had--or desire. And in the end, I bury them, and read out of my book to those who will presently follow into the unknown land. I stand at the beginning, and at the zenith, and at the setting of their lives. And on every seventh day, I who am a man myself, I who see no further than they do, talk to them of the Life to Come--the life of which we know nothing. If such a life

there be. And slowly I drop to pieces amidst my prophesying."

"What a strange life!" said the Angel.

"Yes," said the Vicar. "What a strange life! But the thing that makes it strange to me is new. I had taken it as a matter of course until you came into my life."

"This life of ours is so insistent," said the Vicar. "It, and its petty needs, its temporary pleasures (Crack) swathe our souls about. While I am preaching to these people of mine of another life, some are ministering to one appetite and eating sweets, others--the old men--are slumbering, the youths glance at the maidens, the grown men protrude white waistcoats and gold chains, pomp and vanity on a substratum of carnal substance, their wives flaunt garish bonnets at one another. And I go on droning away of the things unseen and unrealised--'Eye hath not seen,' I read, 'nor ear heard, nor hath it entered into the imagination of man to conceive,' and I look up to catch an adult male immortal admiring the fit of a pair of three and sixpenny gloves. It is damping year after year. When I was ailing in my youth I felt almost the assurance of vision that beneath this temporary phantasm world was the real world--the enduring world of the Life Everlasting. But now----"

He glanced at his chubby white hand, fingering the stem of his glass. "I have put on flesh since then," he said. [Pause].

"I have changed and developed very much. The battle of the Flesh and Spirit does not trouble me as it did. Every day I feel less confidence in my beliefs, and more in God. I live, I am afraid, a quiescent life, duties fairly done, a little ornithology and a little chess, a trifle of mathematical trifling. My times are in His hands----"

The Vicar sighed and became pensive. The Angel watched him, and the Angel's eyes were troubled with the puzzle of him. "Gluck, gluck, gluck," went the decanter as the Vicar refilled his glass.

XIX.

So the Angel dined and talked to the Vicar, and presently the night came and he was overtaken by yawning.

"Yah----oh!" said the Angel suddenly. "Dear me! A higher power seemed suddenly to stretch my mouth open and a great breath of air went rushing down my throat."

"You yawned," said the Vicar. "Do you never yawn in the angelic country?"

"Never," said the Angel.

"And yet you are immortal!----I suppose you want to go to bed."

"Bed!" said the Angel. "Where's that?"

So the Vicar explained darkness to him and the art of going to bed. (The Angels, it seems sleep only in order to dream, and dream, like primitive man, with their foreheads on their knees. And they sleep among the white poppy meadows in the heat of the day.) The Angel found the bedroom arrangements quaint enough.

"Why is everything raised up on big wooden legs?" he said. "You have the

floor, and then you put everything you have upon a wooden quadruped. Why do you do it?" The Vicar explained with philosophical vagueness. The Angel burnt his finger in the candle-flame--and displayed an absolute ignorance of the elementary principles of combustion. He was merely charmed when a line of fire ran up the curtains. The Vicar had to deliver a lecture on fire so soon as the flame was extinguished. He had all kinds of explanations to make--even the soap needed explaining. It was an hour or more before the Angel was safely tucked in for the night.

"He's very beautiful," said the Vicar, descending the staircase, quite tired out; "and he's a real angel no doubt. But I am afraid he will be a dreadful anxiety, all the same, before he gets into our earthly way with things."

He seemed quite worried. He helped himself to an extra glass of sherry before he put away the wine in the cellaret.

XX.

The Curate stood in front of the looking-glass and solemnly divested himself of his collar.

"I never heard a more fantastic story," said Mrs Mendham from the basket chair. "The man must be mad. Are you sure----."

"Perfectly, my dear. I've told you every word, every incident----."

"Well!" said Mrs Mendham, and spread her hands. "There's no sense in it."

"Precisely, my dear."

"The Vicar," said Mrs Mendham, "must be mad."

"This hunchback is certainly one of the strangest creatures I've seen for a long time. Foreign looking, with a big bright coloured face and long brown hair.... It can't have been cut for months!" The Curate put his studs carefully upon the shelf of the dressing-table. "And a kind of staring look about his eyes, and a simpering smile. Quite a silly looking person. Effeminate."

"But who can he be?" said Mrs Mendham.

"I can't imagine, my dear. Nor where he came from. He might be a chorister or something of that sort."

"But why should he be about the shrubbery ... in that dreadful costume?"

"I don't know. The Vicar gave me no explanation. He simply said, 'Mendham, this is an Angel.'"

"I wonder if he drinks.... They may have been bathing near the spring, of course," reflected Mrs Mendham. "But I noticed no other clothes on his arm."

The Curate sat down on his bed and unlaced his boots.

"It's a perfect mystery to me, my dear." (Flick, flick of laces.)

"Hallucination is the only charitable----"

"You are sure, George, that it was not a woman."

"Perfectly," said the Curate.

"I know what men are, of course."

"It was a young man of nineteen or twenty," said the Curate.

"I can't understand it," said Mrs Mendham. "You say the creature is staying at the Vicarage?"

"Hilyer is simply mad," said the Curate. He got up and went padding round the room to the door to put out his boots. "To judge by his manner you would really think he believed this cripple was an Angel." ("Are your shoes out, dear?")

("They're just by the wardrobe"), said Mrs Mendham. "He always was a little queer, you know. There was always something childish about him.... An Angel!"

The Curate came and stood by the fire, fumbling with his braces. Mrs Mendham liked a fire even in the summer. "He shirks all the serious problems in life and is always trifling with some new foolishness," said the Curate. "Angel indeed!" He laughed suddenly. "Hilyer must be mad," he said.

Mrs Mendham laughed too. "Even that doesn't explain the hunchback," she said.

"The hunchback must be mad too," said the Curate.

"It's the only way of explaining it in a sensible way," said Mrs Mendham. [Pause.]

"Angel or no angel," said Mrs Mendham, "I know what is due to me. Even supposing the man thought he was in the company of an angel, that is no reason why he should not behave like a gentleman."

"That is perfectly true."

"You will write to the Bishop, of course?"

Mendham coughed. "No, I shan't write to the Bishop," said Mendham. "I think it seems a little disloyal.... And he took no notice of the last, you know."

"But surely----"

"I shall write to Austin. In confidence. He will be sure to tell the Bishop, you know. And you must remember, my dear----"

"That Hilyer can dismiss you, you were going to say. My dear, the man's much too weak! I should have a word to say about that. And besides, you do all his work for him. Practically, we manage the parish from end to end. I do not know what would become of the poor if it was not for me. They'd have free quarters in the Vicarage to-morrow. There is that Goody Ansell----"

"I know, my dear," said the Curate, turning away and proceeding with his

undressing. "You were telling me about her only this afternoon."

XXI.

And thus in the little bedroom over the gable we reach a first resting place in this story. And as we have been hard at it, getting our story spread out before you, it may be perhaps well to recapitulate a little.

Looking back you will see that much has been done; we began with a blaze of light "not uniform but broken all over by curving flashes like the waving of swords," and the sound of a mighty harping, and the advent of an Angel with polychromatic wings.

Swiftly, dexterously, as the reader must admit, wings have been clipped, halo handled off, the glory clapped into coat and trousers, and the Angel made for all practical purposes a man, under a suspicion of being either a lunatic or an impostor. You have heard too, or at least been able to judge, what the Vicar and the Doctor and the Curate's wife thought of the strange arrival. And further remarkable opinions are to follow.

The afterglow of the summer sunset in the north-west darkens into night and the Angel sleeps, dreaming himself back in the wonderful world where it is always light, and everyone is happy, where fire does not burn and ice does not chill; where rivulets of starlight go streaming through the amaranthine meadows, out to the seas of Peace. He dreams, and it seems to him that once more his wings glow with a thousand colours and flash

through the crystal air of the world from which he has come.

So he dreams. But the Vicar lies awake, too perplexed for dreaming. Chiefly he is troubled by the possibilities of Mrs Mendham; but the evening's talk has opened strange vistas in his mind, and he is stimulated by a sense as of something seen darkly by the indistinct vision of a hitherto unsuspected wonderland lying about his world. For twenty years now he has held his village living and lived his daily life, protected by his familiar creed, by the clamour of the details of life, from any mystical dreaming. But now interweaving with the familiar bother of his persecuting neighbour, is an altogether unfamiliar sense of strange new things.

There was something ominous in the feeling. Once, indeed, it rose above all other considerations, and in a kind of terror he blundered out of bed, bruised his shins very convincingly, found the matches at last, and lit a candle to assure himself of the reality of his own customary world again. But on the whole the more tangible trouble was the Mendham avalanche. Her tongue seemed to be hanging above him like the sword of Damocles. What might she not say of this business, before her indignant imagination came to rest?

And while the successful captor of the Strange Bird was sleeping thus uneasily, Gully of Sidderton was carefully unloading his gun after a wearisome blank day, and Sandy Bright was on his knees in prayer, with the window carefully fastened. Annie Durgan was sleeping hard with her

mouth open, and Amory's mother was dreaming of washing, and both of them had long since exhausted the topics of the Sound and the Glare. Lumpy Durgan was sitting up in his bed, now crooning the fragment of a tune and now listening intently for a sound he had heard once and longed to hear again. As for the solicitor's clerk at Iping Hanger, he was trying to write poetry about a confectioner's girl at Portburdock, and the Strange Bird was quite out of his head. But the ploughman who had seen it on the confines of Siddermorton Park had a black eye. That had been one of the more tangible consequences of a little argument about birds' legs in the "Ship." It is worthy of this passing mention, since it is probably the only known instance of an Angel causing anything of the kind.