

THE ANGEL EXPLORES THE VILLAGE.

XXIV.

Very unwisely, as I think, the Vicar allowed the Angel to go down into the village by himself, to enlarge his ideas of humanity. Unwisely, because how was he to imagine the reception the Angel would receive? Not thoughtlessly, I am afraid. He had always carried himself with decorum in the village, and the idea of a slow procession through the little street with all the inevitable curious remarks, explanations, pointings, was too much for him. The Angel might do the strangest things, the village was certain to think them. Peering faces. "Who's he got now?" Besides, was it not his duty to prepare his sermon in good time? The Angel, duly directed, went down cheerfully by himself--still innocent of most of the peculiarities of the human as distinguished from the angelic turn of mind.

The Angel walked slowly, his white hands folded behind his hunched back, his sweet face looking this way and that. He peered curiously into the eyes of the people he met. A little child picking a bunch of vetch and honeysuckle looked in his face, and forthwith came and put them in his hand. It was about the only kindness he had from a human being (saving only the Vicar and one other). He heard Mother Gustick scolding that granddaughter of hers as he passed the door. "You Brazen Faggit--you!" said Mother Gustick. "You Trumpery Baggage!"

The Angel stopped, startled at the strange sounds of Mother Gustick's voice. "Put yer best clo'es on, and yer feather in yer 'at, and off you goes to meet en, fal lal, and me at 'ome slaving for ye. 'Tis a Fancy Lady you'll be wantin' to be, my gal, a walkin' Touch and Go, with yer idleness and finery----"

The voice ceased abruptly, and a great peace came upon the battered air. "Most grotesque and strange!" said the Angel, still surveying this wonderful box of discords. "Walking Touch and Go!" He did not know that Mrs Gustick had suddenly become aware of his existence, and was scrutinizing his appearance through the window-blind. Abruptly the door flew open, and she stared out into the Angel's face. A strange apparition, grey and dusty hair, and the dirty pink dress unhooked to show the stringy throat, a discoloured gargoyle, presently to begin spouting incomprehensible abuse.

"Now, then, Mister," began Mrs Gustick. "Have ye nothin' better to do than listen at people's doors for what you can pick up?"

The Angel stared at her in astonishment.

"D'year!" said Mrs Gustick, evidently very angry indeed. "Listenin'."

"Have you any objection to my hearing...."

"Object to my hearing! Course I have! Whad yer think? You aint such a Ninny...."

"But if ye didn't want me to hear, why did you cry out so loud? I thought...."

"You thought! Softie--that's what you are! You silly girt staring Gaby, what don't know any better than to come holding yer girt mouth wide open for all that you can catch holt on? And then off up there to tell! You great Fat-Faced, Tale-Bearin' Silly-Billy! I'd be ashamed to come poking and peering round quiet people's houses...."

The Angel was surprised to find that some inexplicable quality in her voice excited the most disagreeable sensations in him and a strong desire to withdraw. But, resisting this, he stood listening politely (as the custom is in the Angelic Land, so long as anyone is speaking). The entire eruption was beyond his comprehension. He could not perceive any reason for the sudden projection of this vituperative head, out of infinity, so to speak. And questions without a break for an answer were outside his experience altogether.

Mrs Gustick proceeded with her characteristic fluency, assured him he was no gentleman, enquired if he called himself one, remarked that every tramp did as much nowadays, compared him to a Stuck Pig, marvelled at his impudence, asked him if he wasn't ashamed of himself standing there, enquired if he was rooted to the ground, was curious to be told what he

meant by it, wanted to know whether he robbed a scarecrow for his clothes, suggested that an abnormal vanity prompted his behaviour, enquired if his mother knew he was out, and finally remarking, "I got somethin'll move you, my gentleman," disappeared with a ferocious slamming of the door.

The interval struck the Angel as singularly peaceful. His whirling mind had time to analyse his sensations. He ceased bowing and smiling, and stood merely astonished.

"This is a curious painful feeling," said the Angel. "Almost worse than Hungry, and quite different. When one is hungry one wants to eat. I suppose she was a woman. Here one wants to get away. I suppose I might just as well go."

He turned slowly and went down the road meditating. He heard the cottage door re-open, and turning his head, saw through intervening scarlet runners Mrs Gustick with a steaming saucepan full of boiling cabbage water in her hand.

"'Tis well you went, Mister Stolen Breeches," came the voice of Mrs Gustick floating down through the vermilion blossoms. "Don't you come peeping and prying round this yer cottage again or I'll learn ye manners, I will!"

The Angel stood in a state of considerable perplexity. He had no desire

to come within earshot of the cottage again--ever. He did not understand the precise import of the black pot, but his general impression was entirely disagreeable. There was no explaining it.

"I mean it!" said Mrs Gustick, crescendo. "Drat it!--I mean it."

The Angel turned and went on, a dazzled look in his eyes.

"She was very grotesque!" said the Angel. "Very. Much more than the little man in black. And she means it.---- But what she means I don't know!..." He became silent. "I suppose they all mean something," he said, presently, still perplexed.

XXV.

Then the Angel came in sight of the forge, where Sandy Bright's brother was shoeing a horse for the carter from Upmorton. Two hobbledehoyes were standing by the forge staring in a bovine way at the proceedings. As the Angel approached these two and then the carter turned slowly through an angle of thirty degrees and watched his approach, staring quietly and steadily at him. The expression on their faces was one of abstract interest.

The Angel became self-conscious for the first time in his life. He drew nearer, trying to maintain an amiable expression on his face, an expression that beat in vain against their granitic stare. His hands were behind him. He smiled pleasantly, looking curiously at the (to him) incomprehensible employment of the smith. But the battery of eyes seemed to angle for his regard. Trying to meet the three pairs at once, the Angel lost his alertness and stumbled over a stone. One of the yokels gave a sarcastic cough, and was immediately covered with confusion at the Angel's enquiring gaze, nudging his companion with his elbow to cover his disorder. None spoke, and the Angel did not speak.

So soon as the Angel had passed, one of the three hummed this tune in an aggressive tone.

Then all three of them laughed. One tried to sing something and found

his throat contained phlegm. The Angel proceeded on his way.

"Who's e then?" said the second hobbledehoy.

"Ping, ping, ping," went the blacksmith's hammer.

"Spose he's one of these here foweners," said the carter from Upmorton.

"Däamned silly fool he do look to be sure."

"Tas the way with them foweners," said the first hobbledehoy sagely.

"Got something very like the 'ump," said the carter from Upmorton.

"Dää-ä-ämned if 'E ent."

Then the silence healed again, and they resumed their quiet expressionless consideration of the Angel's retreating figure.

"Very like the 'ump et is," said the carter after an enormous pause.

XXVI.

The Angel went on through the village, finding it all wonderful enough.

"They begin, and just a little while and then they end," he said to himself in a puzzled voice. "But what are they doing meanwhile?" Once he heard some invisible mouth chant inaudible words to the tune the man at the forge had hummed.

"That's the poor creature the Vicar shot with that great gun of his," said Sarah Glue (of 1, Church Cottages) peering over the blind.

"He looks Frenchified," said Susan Hopper, peering through the interstices of that convenient veil on curiosity.

"He has sweet eyes," said Sarah Glue, who had met them for a moment.

The Angel sauntered on. The postman passed him and touched his hat to him; further down was a dog asleep in the sun. He went on and saw Mendham, who nodded distantly and hurried past. (The Curate did not care to be seen talking to an angel in the village, until more was known about him). There came from one of the houses the sound of a child screaming in a passion, that brought a puzzled look to the angelic face. Then the Angel reached the bridge below the last of the houses, and stood leaning over the parapet watching the glittering little cascade from the mill.

"They begin, and just a little while, and then they end," said the weir from the mill. The water raced under the bridge, green and dark, and streaked with foam.

Beyond the mill rose the square tower of the church, with the churchyard behind it, a spray of tombstones and wooden headboards splashed up the hillside. A half dozen of beech trees framed the picture.

Then the Angel heard a shuffling of feet and the gride of wheels behind him, and turning his head saw a man dressed in dirty brown rags and a felt hat grey with dust, who was standing with a slight swaying motion and fixedly regarding the Angelic back. Beyond him was another almost equally dirty, pushing a knife grinder's barrow over the bridge.

"Mornin'," said the first person smiling weakly. "Goomorn'." He arrested an escaping hiccough.

The Angel stared at him. He had never seen a really fatuous smile before. "Who are you?" said the Angel.

The fatuous smile faded. "No your business whoaaam. Wishergoomorn."

"Carm on:" said the man with the grindstone, passing on his way.

"Wishergoomorn," said the dirty man, in a tone of extreme aggravation.

"Carncher Answerme?"

"Carm on you fool!" said the man with the grindstone--receding.

"I don't understand," said the Angel.

"Donunderstan'. Sim'l enough. Wishergoomorn'. Willyanswerme? Wontchr? gemwishergem goomorn. Cusom answer goomorn. No gem. Haverteachyer."

The Angel was puzzled. The drunken man stood swaying for a moment, then he made an unsteady snatch at his hat and threw it down at the Angel's feet. "Ver well," he said, as one who decides great issues.

"Carm on!" said the voice of the man with the grindstone--stopping perhaps twenty yards off.

"You wan fight, you ----" the Angel failed to catch the word. "I'll show yer, not answer gem's goomorn."

He began to struggle with his jacket. "Think I'm drun," he said, "I show yer." The man with the grindstone sat down on the shaft to watch. "Carm on," he said. The jacket was intricate, and the drunken man began to struggle about the road, in his attempts to extricate himself, breathing threatenings and slaughter. Slowly the Angel began to suspect, remotely enough, that these demonstrations were hostile. "Mur wun know yer when I done wi' yer," said the drunken man, coat almost over his head.

At last the garment lay on the ground, and through the frequent interstices of his reminiscences of a waistcoat, the drunken tinker displayed a fine hairy and muscular body to the Angel's observant eyes. He squared up in masterly fashion.

"Take the paint off yer," he remarked, advancing and receding, fists up and elbows out.

"Carm on," floated down the road.

The Angel's attention was concentrated on two huge hairy black fists, that swayed and advanced and retreated. "Come on d'yer say? I'll show yer," said the gentleman in rags, and then with extraordinary ferocity; "My crikey! I'll show yer."

Suddenly he lurched forward, and with a newborn instinct and raising a defensive arm as he did so, the Angel stepped aside to avoid him. The fist missed the Angelic shoulder by a hairsbreadth, and the tinker collapsed in a heap with his face against the parapet of the bridge. The Angel hesitated over the writhing dusty heap of blasphemy for a moment, and then turned towards the man's companion up the road. "Lemmeget up," said the man on the bridge: "Lemmeget up, you swine. I'll show yer."

A strange disgust, a quivering repulsion came upon the Angel. He walked slowly away from the drunkard towards the man with the grindstone.

"What does it all mean?" said the Angel. "I don't understand it."

"Dam fool!... say's it's 'is silver weddin'," answered the man with the grindstone, evidently much annoyed; and then, in a tone of growing impatience, he called down the road once more; "Carm on!"

"Silver wedding!" said the Angel. "What is a silver wedding?"

"Jest is rot," said the man on the barrow. "But 'E's always avin' some 'scuse like that. Fair sickenin it is. Lars week it wus 'is bloomin' birthday, and then 'e ad'nt ardlly got sober orf a comlimentary drunk to my noo barrer. (Carm on, you fool.)"

"But I don't understand," said the Angel. "Why does he sway about so? Why does he keep on trying to pick up his hat like that--and missing it?"

"Why!" said the tinker. "Well this is a blasted innocent country! Why! Because 'E's blind! Wot else? (Carm on--Dam yer). Because 'E's just as full as 'E can 'old. That's why!"

The Angel noticing the tone of the second tinker's voice, judged it wiser not to question him further. But he stood by the grindstone and continued to watch the mysterious evolutions on the bridge.

"Carm on! I shall 'ave to go and pick up that 'at I suppose.... 'E's always at it. I ne'er 'ad such a blooming pard before. Always at it, 'e is."

The man with the barrow meditated. "Taint as if 'e was a gentleman and 'adnt no livin' to get. An' 'e's such a reckless fool when 'e gets a bit on. Goes offerin out everyone 'e meets. (There you go!) I'm blessed if 'e didn't offer out a 'ole bloomin' Salvation Army. No judgment in it. (Oh! Carm on! Carm on!). 'Ave to go and pick this bloomin' 'at up now I s'pose. 'E don't care, wot trouble 'e gives."

The Angel watched the second tinker walk back, and, with affectionate blasphemy, assist the first to his hat and his coat. Then he turned, absolutely mystified, towards the village again.

XXVII.

After that incident the Angel walked along past the mill and round behind the church, to examine the tombstones.

"This seems to be the place where they put the broken pieces," said the Angel--reading the inscriptions. "Curious word--relict! Resurgam! Then they are not done with quite. What a huge pile it requires to keep her down.... It is spirited of her."

"Hawkins?" said the Angel softly,.... "Hawkins? The name is strange to me.... He did not die then.... It is plain enough,--Joined the Angelic Hosts, May 17, 1863. He must have felt as much out of place as I do down here. But I wonder why they put that little pot thing on the top of this monument. Curious! There are several others about--little stone pots with a rag of stiff stone drapery over them."

Just then the boys came pouring out of the National School, and first one and then several stopped agape at the Angel's crooked black figure among the white tombs. "Ent 'e gart a bääk on en!" remarked one critic.

"'E's got 'air like a girl!" said another.

The Angel turned towards them. He was struck by the queer little heads sticking up over the lichenous wall. He smiled faintly at their staring

faces, and then turned to marvel at the iron railings that enclosed the Fitz-Jarvis tomb. "A queer air of uncertainty," he said. "Slabs, piles of stone, these railings.... Are they afraid?... Do these Dead ever try and get up again? There's an air of repression--fortification----"

"Gét yer 'air cut, Gét yer 'air cut," sang three little boys together.

"Curious these Human Beings are!" said the Angel. "That man yesterday wanted to cut off my wings, now these little creatures want me to cut off my hair! And the man on the bridge offered to take the 'paint' off me. They will leave nothing of me soon."

"Where did you get that 'at?" sang another little boy. "Where did you get them clo'es?"

"They ask questions that they evidently do not want answered," said the Angel. "I can tell from the tone." He looked thoughtfully at the little boys. "I don't understand the methods of Human intercourse. These are probably friendly advances, a kind of ritual. But I don't know the responses. I think I will go back to the little fat man in black, with the gold chain across his stomach, and ask him to explain. It is difficult."

He turned towards the lych gate. "Oh!" said one of the little boys, in a shrill falsetto, and threw a beech-nut husk. It came bounding across

the churchyard path. The Angel stopped in surprise.

This made all the little boys laugh. A second imitating the first, said "Oh!" and hit the Angel. His astonishment was really delicious. They all began crying "Oh!" and throwing beechnut husks. One hit the Angel's hand, another stung him smartly by the ear. The Angel made ungainly movements towards them. He spluttered some expostulation and made for the roadway. The little boys were amazed and shocked at his discomfiture and cowardice. Such sawney behaviour could not be encouraged. The pelting grew vigorously. You may perhaps be able to imagine those vivid moments, daring small boys running in close and delivering shots, milder small boys rushing round behind with flying discharges. Milton Screever's mongrel dog was roused to yelping ecstasy at the sight, and danced (full of wild imaginings) nearer and nearer to the angelic legs.

"Hi, hi!" said a vigorous voice. "I never did! Where's Mr Jarvis? Manners, manners! you young rascals."

The youngsters scattered right and left, some over the wall into the playground, some down the street.

"Frightful pest these boys are getting!" said Crump, coming up. "I'm sorry they have been annoying you."

The Angel seemed quite upset. "I don't understand," he said. "These

Human ways...."

"Yes, of course. Unusual to you. How's your excrescence?"

"My what?" said the Angel.

"Bifid limb, you know. How is it? Now you're down this way, come in. Come in and let me have a look at it again. You young roughs! And meanwhile these little louts of ours will be getting off home. They're all alike in these villages. Can't understand anything abnormal. See an odd-looking stranger. Chuck a stone. No imagination beyond the parish.... (I'll give you physic if I catch you annoying strangers again.) ... I suppose it's what one might expect.... Come along this way."

So the Angel, horribly perplexed still, was hurried into the surgery to have his wound re-dressed.