

FURTHER ADVENTURES OF THE ANGEL IN THE VILLAGE.

XXIX.

"That's all right," said Crump when the bandaging was replaced. "It's a trick of memory, no doubt, but these excrescences of yours don't seem nearly so large as they did yesterday. I suppose they struck me rather forcibly. Stop and have lunch with me now you're down here. Midday meal, you know. The youngsters will be swallowed up by school again in the afternoon."

"I never saw anything heal so well in my life," he said, as they walked into the dining-room. "Your blood and flesh must be as clean and free from bacteria as they make 'em. Whatever stuff there is in your head," he added sotto voce.

At lunch he watched the Angel narrowly, and talked to draw him out.

"Journey tire you yesterday?" he said suddenly.

"Journey!" said the Angel. "Oh! my wings felt a little stiff."

("Not to be had,") said Crump to himself. ("Suppose I must enter into it.")

"So you flew all the way, eigh? No conveyance?"

"There wasn't any way," explained the Angel, taking mustard. "I was flying up a symphony with some Griffins and Fiery Cherubim, and suddenly everything went dark and I was in this world of yours."

"Dear me!" said Crump. "And that's why you haven't any luggage." He drew his serviette across his mouth, and a smile flickered in his eyes.

"I suppose you know this world of ours pretty well? Watching us over the adamantine walls and all that kind of thing. Eigh?"

"Not very well. We dream of it sometimes. In the moonlight, when the Nightmares have fanned us to sleep with their wings."

"Ah, yes--of course," said Crump. "Very poetical way of putting it. Won't you take some Burgundy? It's just beside you."

"There's a persuasion in this world, you know, that Angels' Visits are by no means infrequent. Perhaps some of your--friends have travelled? They are supposed to come down to deserving persons in prisons, and do refined Nautches and that kind of thing. Faust business, you know."

"I've never heard of anything of the kind," said the Angel.

"Only the other day a lady whose baby was my patient for the time

being--indigestion--assured me that certain facial contortions the little creature made indicated that it was Dreaming of Angels. In the novels of Mrs Henry Wood that is spoken of as an infallible symptom of an early departure. I suppose you can't throw any light on that obscure pathological manifestation?"

"I don't understand it at all," said the Angel, puzzled, and not clearly apprehending the Doctor's drift.

("Getting huffy,") said Crump to himself. ("Sees I'm poking fun at him.") "There's one thing I'm curious about. Do the new arrivals complain much about their medical attendants? I've always fancied there must be a good deal of hydropathic talk just at first. I was looking at that picture in the Academy only this June...."

"New Arrivals!" said the Angel. "I really don't follow you."

The Doctor stared. "Don't they come?"

"Come!" said the Angel. "Who?"

"The people who die here."

"After they've gone to pieces here?"

"That's the general belief, you know."

"People, like the woman who screamed out of the door, and the blackfaced man and his volutations and the horrible little things that threw husks!--certainly not. I never saw such creatures before I fell into this world."

"Oh! but come!" said the Doctor. "You'll tell me next your official robes are not white and that you can't play the harp."

"There's no such thing as white in the Angelic Land," said the Angel. "It's that queer blank colour you get by mixing up all the others."

"Why, my dear Sir!" said the doctor, suddenly altering his tone, "you positively know nothing about the Land you come from. White's the very essence of it."

The Angel stared at him. Was the man jesting? He looked perfectly serious.

"Look here," said Crump, and getting up, he went to the sideboard on which a copy of the Parish Magazine was lying. He brought it round to the Angel and opened it at the coloured supplement. "Here's some real angels," he said. "You see it's not simply the wings make the Angel. White you see, with a curly whisp of robe, sailing up into the sky with their wings furled. Those are angels on the best authority. Hydroxyl kind of hair. One has a bit of a harp, you see, and the other is helping

this wingless lady--kind of larval Angel, you know--upward."

"Oh! but really!" said the Angel, "those are not angels at all."

"But they are," said Crump, putting the magazine back on the sideboard and resuming his seat with an air of intense satisfaction. "I can assure you I have the best authority...."

"I can assure you...."

Crump tucked in the corners of his mouth and shook his head from side to side even as he had done to the Vicar. "No good," he said, "can't alter our ideas just because an irresponsible visitor...."

"If these are angels," said the Angel, "then I have never been in the Angelic Land."

"Precisely," said Crump, ineffably self-satisfied; "that was just what I was getting at."

The Angel stared at him for a minute round-eyed, and then was seized for the second time by the human disorder of laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha!" said Crump, joining in. "I thought you were not quite so mad as you seemed. Ha, ha, ha!"

And for the rest of the lunch they were both very merry, for entirely different reasons, and Crump insisted upon treating the Angel as a "dorg" of the highest degree.

XXX.

After the Angel had left Crump's house he went up the hill again towards the Vicarage. But--possibly moved by the desire to avoid Mrs Gustick--he turned aside at the stile and made a detour by the Lark's Field and Bradley's Farm.

He came upon the Respectable Tramp slumbering peacefully among the wild-flowers. He stopped to look, struck by the celestial tranquillity of that individual's face. And even as he did so the Respectable Tramp awoke with a start and sat up. He was a pallid creature, dressed in rusty black, with a broken-spirited crush hat cocked over one eye. "Good afternoon," he said affably. "How are you?"

"Very well, thank you," said the Angel, who had mastered the phrase.

The Respectable Tramp eyed the Angel critically. "Padding the Hoof, matey?" he said. "Like me."

The Angel was puzzled by him. "Why," asked the Angel, "do you sleep like this instead of sleeping up in the air on a Bed?"

"Well I'm blowed!" said the Respectable Tramp. "Why don't I sleep in a bed? Well, it's like this. Sandringham's got the painters in, there's the drains up in Windsor Castle, and I 'aven't no other 'ouse to go to.

You 'aven't the price of a arf pint in your pocket, 'ave yer?"

"I have nothing in my pocket," said the Angel.

"Is this here village called Siddermorton?" said the Tramp, rising creakily to his feet and pointing to the clustering roofs down the hill.

"Yes," said the Angel, "they call it Siddermorton."

"I know it, I know it," said the Tramp. "And a very pretty little village it is too." He stretched and yawned, and stood regarding the place. "'Ouses," he said reflectively; "Projuce"--waving his hand at the cornfields and orchards. "Looks cosy, don't it?"

"It has a quaint beauty of its own," said the Angel.

"It 'as a quaint beauty of its own--yes.... Lord! I'd like to sack the blooming place.... I was born there."

"Dear me," said the Angel.

"Yes, I was born there. Ever heard of a pithed frog?"

"Pithed frog," said the Angel. "No!"

"It's a thing these here vivisectionists do. They takes a frog and they

cuts out his brains and they shoves a bit of pith in the place of 'em. That's a pithed frog. Well--that there village is full of pithed human beings."

The Angel took it quite seriously. "Is that so?" he said.

"That's so--you take my word for it. Everyone of them 'as 'ad their brains cut out and chunks of rotten touchwood put in the place of it. And you see that little red place there?"

"That's called the national school," said the Angel.

"Yes--that's where they piths 'em," said the Tramp, quite in love with his conceit.

"Really! That's very interesting."

"It stands to reason," said the Tramp. "If they 'ad brains they'd 'ave ideas, and if they 'ad ideas they'd think for themselves. And you can go through that village from end to end and never meet anybody doing as much. Pithed human beings they are. I know that village. I was born there, and I might be there now, a toilin' for my betters, if I 'adnt struck against the pithin'."

"Is it a painful operation?" asked the Angel.

"In parts. Though it aint the heads gets hurt. And it lasts a long time. They take 'em young into that school, and they says to them, 'come in 'ere and we'll improve your minds,' they says, and in the little kiddies go as good as gold. And they begins shovin' it into them. Bit by bit and 'ard and dry, shovin' out the nice juicy brains. Dates and lists and things. Out they comes, no brains in their 'eads, and wound up nice and tight, ready to touch their 'ats to anyone who looks at them. Why! One touched 'is 'at to me yesterday. And they runs about spry and does all the dirty work, and feels thankful they're allowed to live. They take a positive pride in 'ard work for its own sake. Arter they bin pithed. See that chap ploughin'?"

"Yes," said the Angel; "is he pithed?"

"Rather. Else he'd be paddin' the hoof this pleasant weather--like me and the blessed Apostles."

"I begin to understand," said the Angel, rather dubiously.

"I knew you would," said the Philosophical Tramp. "I thought you was the right sort. But speaking serious, aint it ridiculous?--centuries and centuries of civilization, and look at that poor swine there, sweatin' 'isself empty and trudging up that 'ill-side. 'E's English, 'e is. 'E belongs to the top race in creation, 'e does. 'E's one of the rulers of Indjer. It's enough to make a nigger laugh. The flag that's braved a thousand years the battle an' the breeze--that's 'is flag. There never

was a country was as great and glorious as this. Never. And that's wot it makes of us. I'll tell you a little story about them parts as you seems to be a bit of a stranger. There's a chap called Gotch, Sir John Gotch they calls 'im, and when 'e was a young gent from Oxford, I was a little chap of eight and my sister was a girl of seventeen. Their servant she was. But Lord! everybody's 'eard that story--it's common enough, of 'im or the likes of 'im."

"I haven't," said the Angel.

"All that's pretty and lively of the gals they chucks into the gutters, and all the men with a pennorth of spunk or adventure, all who won't drink what the Curate's wife sends 'em instead of beer, and touch their hats promiscuous, and leave the rabbits and birds alone for their betters, gets drove out of the villages as rough characters. Patriotism! Talk about improvin' the race! Wot's left aint fit to look a nigger in the face, a Chinaman 'ud be ashamed of 'em...."

"But I don't understand," said the Angel. "I don't follow you."

At that the Philosophic Tramp became more explicit, and told the Angel the simple story of Sir John Gotch and the kitchen-maid. It's scarcely necessary to repeat it. You may understand that it left the Angel puzzled. It was full of words he did not understand, for the only vehicle of emotion the Tramp possessed was blasphemy. Yet, though their tongues differed so, he could still convey to the Angel some of his own

(probably unfounded) persuasion of the injustice and cruelty of life,
and of the utter detestableness of Sir John Gotch.

The last the Angel saw of him was his dusty black back receding down the
lane towards Iping Hanger. A pheasant appeared by the roadside, and the
Philosophical Tramp immediately caught up a stone and sent the bird
clucking with a viciously accurate shot. Then he disappeared round the
corner.