

THE TROUBLE OF THE BARBED WIRE.

XXXVIII.

So, ingloriously, ended the Angel's first and last appearance in Society. Vicar and Angel returned to the Vicarage; crestfallen black figures in the bright sunlight, going dejectedly. The Angel, deeply pained that the Vicar was pained. The Vicar, dishevelled and desperate, intercalating spasmodic remorse and apprehension with broken explanations of the Theory of Etiquette. "They do not understand," said the Vicar over and over again. "They will all be so very much aggrieved. I do not know what to say to them. It is all so confused, so perplexing." And at the gate of the Vicarage, at the very spot where Delia had first seemed beautiful, stood Horrocks the village constable, awaiting them. He held coiled up about his hand certain short lengths of barbed wire.

"Good evening, Horrocks," said the Vicar as the constable held the gate open.

"Evenin', Sir," said Horrocks, and added in a kind of mysterious undertone, "Could I speak to you a minute, Sir?"

"Certainly," said the Vicar. The Angel walked on thoughtfully to the house, and meeting Delia in the hall stopped her and cross-examined her

at length over differences between Servants and Ladies.

"You'll excuse my taking the liberty, Sir," said Horrocks, "but there's trouble brewin' for that crippled gent you got stayin' here."

"Bless me!" said the Vicar. "You don't say so!"

"Sir John Gotch, Sir. He's very angry indeed, Sir. His language, Sir----. But I felt bound to tell you, Sir. He's certain set on taking out a summons on account of that there barbed wire. Certain set, Sir, he is."

"Sir John Gotch!" said the Vicar. "Wire! I don't understand."

"He asked me to find out who did it. Course I've had to do my duty, Sir. Naturally a disagreeable one."

"Barbed wire! Duty! I don't understand you, Horrocks."

"I'm afraid, Sir, there's no denying the evidence. I've made careful enquiries, Sir." And forthwith the constable began telling the Vicar of a new and terrible outrage committed by the Angelic visitor.

But we need not follow that explanation in detail--or the subsequent confession. (For my own part I think there is nothing more tedious than dialogue). It gave the Vicar a new view of the Angelic character, a

vignette of the Angelic indignation. A shady lane, sun-mottled, sweet hedges full of honeysuckle and vetch on either side, and a little girl gathering flowers, forgetful of the barbed wire which, all along the Sidderford Road, fenced in the dignity of Sir John Gotch from "bounders" and the detested "million." Then suddenly a gashed hand, a bitter outcry, and the Angel sympathetic, comforting, inquisitive. Explanations sob-set, and then--altogether novel phenomenon in the Angelic career--passion. A furious onslaught upon the barbed wire of Sir John Gotch, barbed wire recklessly handled, slashed, bent and broken. Yet the Angel acted without personal malice--saw in the thing only an ugly and vicious plant that trailed insidiously among its fellows. Finally the Angel's explanations gave the Vicar a picture of the Angel alone amidst his destruction, trembling and amazed at the sudden force, not himself, that had sprung up within him, and set him striking and cutting. Amazed, too, at the crimson blood that trickled down his fingers.

"It is still more horrible," said the Angel when the Vicar explained the artificial nature of the thing. "If I had seen the man who put this silly-cruel stuff there to hurt little children, I know I should have tried to inflict pain upon him. I have never felt like this before. I am indeed becoming tainted and coloured altogether by the wickedness of this world."

"To think, too, that you men should be so foolish as to uphold the laws that let a man do such spiteful things. Yes--I know; you will say it has

to be so. For some remoter reason. That is a thing that only makes me angrier. Why cannot an act rest on its own merits?... As it does in the Angelic Land."

That was the incident the history of which the Vicar now gradually learnt, getting the bare outline from Horrocks, the colour and emotion subsequently from the Angel. The thing had happened the day before the musical festival at Siddermorton House.

"Have you told Sir John who did it?" asked the Vicar. "And are you sure?"

"Quite sure, Sir. There can be no doubting it was your gentleman, Sir. I've not told Sir John yet, Sir. But I shall have to tell Sir John this evening. Meaning no offence to you, Sir, as I hopes you'll see. It's my duty, Sir. Besides which--"

"Of course," said the Vicar, hastily. "Certainly it's your duty. And what will Sir John do?"

"He's dreadful set against the person who did it--destroying property like that--and sort of slapping his arrangements in the face."

Pause. Horrocks made a movement. The Vicar, tie almost at the back of his neck now, a most unusual thing for him, stared blankly at his toes.

"I thought I'd tell you, Sir," said Horrocks.

"Yes," said the Vicar. "Thanks, Horrocks, thanks!" He scratched the back of his head. "You might perhaps ... I think it's the best way ... Quite sure Mr Angel did it?"

"Sherlock 'Omes, Sir, couldn't be cocksurer."

"Then I'd better give you a little note to the Squire."

XXXIX.

The Vicar's table-talk at dinner that night, after the Angel had stated his case, was full of grim explanations, prisons, madness.

"It's too late to tell the truth about you now," said the Vicar.

"Besides, that's impossible. I really do not know what to say. We must face our circumstances, I suppose. I am so undecided--so torn. It's the two worlds. If your Angelic world were only a dream, or if this world were only a dream--or if I could believe either or both dreams, it would be all right with me. But here is a real Angel and a real summons--how to reconcile them I do not know. I must talk to Gotch.... But he won't understand. Nobody will understand...."

"I am putting you to terrible inconvenience, I am afraid. My appalling unworldliness--"

"It's not you," said the Vicar. "It's not you. I perceive you have brought something strange and beautiful into my life. It's not you. It's myself. If I had more faith either way. If I could believe entirely in this world, and call you an Abnormal Phenomenon, as Crump does. But no. Terrestrial Angelic, Angelic Terrestrial.... See-Saw."

"Still, Gotch is certain to be disagreeable, most disagreeable. He always is. It puts me into his hands. He is a bad moral influence, I

know. Drinking. Gambling. Worse. Still, one must render unto Cæsar the things that are Cæsar's. And he is against Disestablishment...."

Then the Vicar would revert to the social collapse of the afternoon.

"You are so very fundamental, you know," he said--several times.

The Angel went to his own room puzzled but very depressed. Every day the world had frowned darker upon him and his angelic ways. He could see how the trouble affected the Vicar, yet he could not imagine how he could avert it. It was all so strange and unreasonable. Twice again, too, he had been pelted out of the village.

He found the violin lying on his bed where he had laid it before dinner. And taking it up he began to play to comfort himself. But now he played no delicious vision of the Angelic Land. The iron of the world was entering into his soul. For a week now he had known pain and rejection, suspicion and hatred; a strange new spirit of revolt was growing up in his heart. He played a melody, still sweet and tender as those of the Angelic Land, but charged with a new note, the note of human sorrow and effort, now swelling into something like defiance, dying now into a plaintive sadness. He played softly, playing to himself to comfort himself, but the Vicar heard, and all his finite bothers were swallowed up in a hazy melancholy, a melancholy that was quite remote from sorrow. And besides the Vicar, the Angel had another hearer of whom neither Angel nor Vicar was thinking.