J.BUCKROSE

A BACHELOR'S COMEDY

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Buckrose J.

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I

This was no comedy to those most concerned, of course, for comedy is like happiness – directly a person knows he is in it, he is out of it. Tragedy, on the other hand, can only touch those who do not take themselves seriously enough.

No man, however, could take himself more seriously than did the Reverend Andrew Deane as he travelled down alone in a third-class railway carriage to his new living of Gaythorpe-on-the-Marsh.

When the train neared Millsby, the station for Gaythorpe, he rose hastily and peered at the piece of looking-glass provided for self-conscious travellers. Yes, his worst fears were altogether justified. His hair curled in a stiff bush above his forehead, in spite of brilliantine applied at the very last moment before leaving his London lodgings. Why – he demanded desperately of himself – why had he not brought a bottle in his pocket?

For he considered curls not only undignified but unclerical. His sensitiveness on the subject had started at the age of six, when he still wore them rather long and other little boys called him "Annie"! He fought the other little boys and induced his mother to have his hair cut, but the wound remained and rankled.

"Pshaw! Most annoying!" he said, passing his hand over his offending head. Then he sat down and blew his nose nervously as the train glided into Millsby station.

"Morning, Mr. Deane. I suppose you are the Reverend Deane?" said a fat gentleman with black hair and a red face, approaching the carriage door.

"Yes. Thank you. How-do-you-do?" said Andy, rather jerkily.

"My name's Thorpe," said the fat man, with colossal repose. "I'm the churchwarden. Glad to welcome you to your new parish, though it's only for a few hours."

"You are very kind," responded Andy, feeling sure that the porter, the stationmaster and three stragglers were listening, and anxious to be as like his late senior curate – who was tall, lean, and immensely impressive – as possible.

"I expect you're going to see what you want in the way of furniture for the Vicarage?" said Mr. Thorpe, moving ponderously towards the gate.

"Yes," said Andy breathlessly.

It is rather a breathless thing, of course, to stand finally on the summit of one's desires.

"Cart's waiting. No luggage this time, I s'pose?" said Mr. Thorpe, who economised words. "Come this way, then." And to the stationmaster, who stepped forward, thin and alert: "This is the Reverend Deane, our new Vicar."

Again the parson shook hands, but that was nothing; because an eternal handshaking is as essential a part of a clergyman's life as putting on his trousers: it was the absence of the Andrew that went home to him. All his life he had been dogged by an undignified "Andy," which was even more unclerical than the curls. Now he meant to drop it for ever. No one here had known him before at school or college – no one here was acquainted with the aunt by marriage and the cousins who had been his family since the age of sixteen – he would drop the boyish "Andy" into the limbo of the past.

From all this it will be gathered, and rightly, that the Reverend Andrew Deane had obtained a living almost as soon as it was legally possible, and that he had a boyish air which made every one treat him like a boy.

"There's a good strawberry bed in the Vicarage garden," said Mr. Thorpe, as he settled himself in the cart. "Gee-up, mare!"

Then he seemed to think he had said all there was to say, and they jogged on silently through the quiet lanes.

After the hurry and bustle of the growing years, and the time at college, and the London curacy, Andy seemed, as he sat there, to have come out into some quiet place where he could look round and listen. He felt, unconsciously, as a man does who has stood on a country road to watch a noisy procession pass: the last straggler vanishes in the cloud of dust behind it – the clash of music and shouting dies away – and a lark that has sung unnoticed all the time, goes on singing.

This is the voice of peace grown audible at last, and those are very happy who hear it.

"H-hem," said Mr. Thorpe, rousing himself at a sharp corner. "Funny you should be a bachelor. We seem in for unmarried parsons."

"In the present day there are many – " began Andy. But when Mr. Thorpe started a speech he had a sort of steam-roller habit of finishing it.

"I was looking at the church-books the other day – they only go back to 1687 – and the first vicar whose name stands there was a bachelor. He was there fifty years. He signed himself Will Ford, though he's called Gulielmus now on his grave by the churchyard path. Gee-up, mare!"

But in that minute Andy saw it all, and across the centuries he greeted a brother.

"That's the church," said Mr. Thorpe, pulling up on the crest of a little hill and pointing with his whip towards a square tower with the roofs of a village clustering near; a flight of rooks trailed across blue sky and grey-white clouds.

Andy drew a long breath.

"It's – it's extraordinarily peaceful," he said.

"Not so peaceful as you'd – However, best find out for yourself," said Mr. Thorpe.

So they jogged on again, cop, cop, cop in a sunny silence, until they neared the Vicarage, when the churchwarden added —

"Mr. and Mrs. Stamford are away, else they'd have asked you to lunch, of course, as they gave you the living. I thought you'd maybe look round the Vicarage, and then come up to my house for a meal. Mrs. Thorpe has a cold fowl waiting for you when you're ready for it."

"Thank you. It's awfully good – "

"And I'd have stopped to show you round myself," said Mr. Thorpe, rolling on, as it were, over Andy's acknowledgments, "but I have to see a man about some pigs. However, young Sam Petch'll be there. He was odd man to the old Vicar."

"Do you advise me to retain his services?" inquired Andy, with the responsible dignity of a vicar and a householder.

"Um," said Mr. Thorpe. "I don't know. The poor old Vicar grew very feeble towards the end, and let things go. And those Petches are none of 'em models. They don't seem to know when they're speaking the truth and when they aren't. And young Sam drinks a bit too. No, I can't really advise you to keep him on."

"I shall certainly not do so after what you tell me," said the new Vicar, sitting very erect. "I have the strongest feelings about the households of the clergy – they should be above reproach."

"Y-yes," said Mr. Thorpe. Then, relieved, "And, of course, the Petches have William to fall back on."

"If there is any one responsible that settles – " began Andy, when the mare shied violently at a man on the road, and he had to devote his attention to his new hat.

"It's the man who's waiting to see me about the pigs," said Mr. Thorpe calmly, indicating a red-faced, angry-looking person on the roadside. "He looks as if he was tired of waiting. Should you mind walking across the churchyard instead of driving round to the Vicarage gate?"

"Of course," cried Andy, jumping down; and followed by Mr. Thorpe's hearty "Mind you come up for a meal as soon as you're ready," he went through the churchyard gate.

It clicked loosely behind him, easy with the passing of the generations, and as he walked down the path a great many of these thoughts which are common to all generous youth passed through his mind; for there is, in every one of us, such a glorious wish to do something for the world when we are young, though we can no more talk about it, then, than Andy could have done as he looked at the gravestone of that Gulielmus who in life had been plain Will Ford.

Even to his own soul, Andy did not say those things; he only remarked to himself that he would be always, as it were, Gulielmus. The abbreviation should not intrude. The Reverend Andrew Deane he was, and the Reverend Andrew Deane he would remain.

Thus reflecting he reached the little gate leading into the Vicarage garden, and a tall, middle-aged man stood there, cap in hand. Honesty was in his blue eyes – respectful candour in his pleasant voice.

"Mr. Thorpe wished me to show you round, sir," he said.

"Ah! Good-day. Where is the lad?"

"The lad?" said the man, a little surprised. "Oh, he's got a place at Millsby, sir."

"Good. That's excellent," said Andy, much relieved at not being obliged to start with a dismissal. "Now for the house."

"Peas here," said the man, passing a plot of ground, "and beans there. I bought the seed and sowed them on my own responsibility. 'Whoever's coming,' says I to myself, 'old or young, he'll want peas and beans.' "

The words flowed in that delightful easy way which is of all human sounds the most comfortable, running into the heart like a cordial.

"Most thoughtful of you," said Andy warmly.

And his fellow-curates in London had talked of the apathy of village people! He would tell them about this when he saw them. What working-man of their flock would buy peas and beans and sow them for love of the Church?

"I put a row of potatoes in too," continued the man. "Says I to my wife, 'Married *or* single, he'll want potatoes.' "

"You're married, then?" said Andy, as they reached the house door, wishful to show interest in the domestic concerns of this ardent churchman.

"Yes," replied the man. "My wife can't get about much, I'm sorry to say. Legs given way. But" – he gave a queer side look at Andy – "it isn't that she's lost power, so to speak: the power's only moved from her legs into her tongue."

Andy smiled back – and when two men enjoy together the immemorial joke about a woman's tongue it is as good as a sign of freemasonry – then he said solemnly, "Very sad for you both, I am sure."

"Yes," said the man, immediately solemn too. "I'm sure I don't know what we would do if it wasn't for William."

"William!" repeated Andy. "Why – what is your name?"

"Samuel Petch," said the man.

"Then it will be *young* Sam Petch who has taken a situation at Millsby?" demanded Andy.

"*I'm* young Sam Petch. Father's old Sam Petch. He's eighty-one."

"Oh!" said Andy.

And almost in silence he went over the Vicarage escorted by his pleasant and obliging guide, who said at every turn, "We ought to trim honeysuckle; I only waited until you came," or "I put a few newspapers down here, because the sun seemed to be fading the paint."

Andy tramped up and down stairs, and peered into cellars, and found no words in which to inform young Sam Petch that his services were not required.

How was it possible in face of that trustful confidence to say abruptly, “You are mistaken. You may remove your peas, beans, and potatoes, or I will pay for them. Even your wife’s legs are nothing to me, though I deplore them. You must depart”? Andy could not do it.

At last Sam Petch went back to lock up the opened rooms while the new Vicar stood alone at his own front door. It was rather a dignified door, with pillars where roses grew and five steps leading into the garden, and Andy’s heart swelled with a proud sense of possession. Here he would stand welcoming in the senior curate who had treated him like a rather stupid schoolboy. Here the aunt and cousins who could not remember that he was a man and a clergyman would take on a proper attitude of respect. Here the lady lay-helper who had so condescended to him in the London parish would be received, kindly, but – He held out a hand and rehearsed the greeting. The bland and prosperous Vicar on his own threshold. Quite equal to dealing with anything.

“A-hem!” coughed Sam Petch behind him.

“Ah – that you, Sam?” said Andy, turning very red and drawing in his hand. “We – er – we had better be moving on. I was just – er – exercising my arm.”

“Exercise splendid thing, sir,” said Sam, tactfully looking away. And while they walked down the road Andy said to himself that a man accustomed for two years to dealing with sharp Cockneys would find the simple villager a very easy problem. All he had to do was to wait until they reached the cottage at the next turning and then say, firmly but kindly, that he did not need Mr. Petch’s services.

The turning was two hundred yards away – one hundred and fifty —

“Here’s my poor wife at the gate,” said Sam. “Looked after the old Vicar like a mother, she did, until her legs went. It’s one of her bad days, but she was bent on saying a word of welcome to you as you went past.”

And of course Andy had to put it off a little longer while he took Mrs. Petch’s hand and bade her “Good morning.”

She placed her other hand on her heart, and began to speak quickly in a thin, high voice with a gasp in it.

“I’m done up, sir – waiting here so long for you – will you step in?”

So, of course, Andy went through the little garden in the wake of Mrs. Petch’s dragging footsteps.

“It’s such a comfort,” said Mrs. Petch, sitting limply, “to feel we’re settled again. Unsettledness is what tries the female nerves worse than anything, as you’ll no doubt find out some day, sir.”

Andy passed his hand across his brow. It was very difficult. But it was now or never. He rushed blindly at the fence with an incoherent —

“I’m sorry to disappoint you, Mrs. Petch, but I have – that is to say – your husband’s services will not be required.”

He mopped his brow, forgetful of all clerical dignity, while Mr. and Mrs. Petch looked at him and said nothing, and he felt as if red-hot worms were crawling about his unprotected person. Still they said nothing; and that was what made it so awful. At last a parrot screeched in the stillness.

“You – you have a relative to – er – fall back upon,” said poor Andy.

Mrs. Petch took a drink of water and passed a handkerchief across her eyes, then she asked faintly —

“What relative?”

“One named – er – William,” said Andy. “I understand – ”

“T-that’s William!” interrupted Mrs. Petch, pointing to the parrot; then she laughed hysterically and burst into tears. “We get five shillings a week from an old mistress of mine as long as the parrot lives. And for that my poor husband is to lose his place. Oh, it’s hard – it’s cruel hard.”

Andy stood up, rather upset, but determined now to go through with it.

“Look here,” he said. “That’s not the only reason. I gather that your husband is addicted to drink.” Andy paused and elevated his chin. “A clergyman’s household must be above reproach.”

"It's not true," said Mrs. Petch eagerly. "He's always so much livelier than the other men at Gaythorpe that when he gets a glass and is a bit livelier still, they think he's drunk."

"Give me a chance, sir," said Sam Petch, in a low tone, speaking at last.

And of all the winged words in any language which he could have chosen to shoot straight at Andy's heart, those were most sure to hit the core of it.

A chance!

Oh, Andy's young soul had been wrung during those two years in London by the sight of thousands who had never had a chance, or who had missed it, or had wilfully wasted it. The ragged horde of them with haggard eyes and dirty soft hands seemed to press about him in the flowery silence of the cottage doorway.

"All right," he said, drawing a long breath. "I'll give you a chance."

"You shan't have cause to regret it, sir," said Sam Petch quietly, with a simple manliness that pleased Andy.

All the same, on leaving the cottage, he felt bound to pause at the door in order to deliver a further warning.

"I must ask you to adhere to the strict truth in all our dealings together," he remarked austerely.

"He always does," said Mrs. Petch, before her husband could reply.

"I shall be glad to find it so," said Andy.

"Only," added Sam Petch, scratching his head, "it's so hard to tell the difference. A lie – well, often it isn't exactly a lie – "

"What else can it be?" demanded Andy.

"A lie – " repeated Sam. "Well, it's often" – he searched the ceiling and derived inspiration from a string of onions – "it's often the truth the other way out."

"The difference between truth and falsehood is always perfectly clear and distinct," said Andy, opening the door. And, really, he was still young enough to think so.

Sam Petch accompanied him with a sort of subdued dignity to the Thorpes', and there said farewell.

"You may rely on me, sir," he said.

Andy held out his hand impulsively.

"I think I may, Petch."

Then the churchwarden's wife came hospitably forward and shook hands with the new Vicar. She was as fat as Mr. Thorpe, but with a different sort of fatness; for while he seemed to be made of something very solid, like wood, she shook and wobbled to such an extent that Andy, following her down two steps into a cool room, held his breath involuntarily for fear she should crack.

"Mr. Thorpe's out still," she said, panting slightly. "But my nephew will take you to wash your hands. Wa-alter!"

A fat youth with round cheeks that swelled up under his eyes came reluctantly through the French window, followed by a friend.

"They're holidaying," said Mrs. Thorpe. "Now you go and have a wash, and then come down and help yourself. I shall be somewhere about when you've finished your meal."

The fat boy escorted the guest upstairs, and left him in the spotless stuffiness of the spare-bedroom, where everything smelt of camphor and lavender. When Andy came down he was almost dismayed to see the banquet which had been prepared for him. Cold fowls. A whole ham. A huge trifle. A dish of tarts and cheesecakes. A cream cheese. It was stupendous. And Mrs. Thorpe's fowls and cheeses and hams were all bigger, tarts more full of jam, cheesecakes more overflowing with yellow richness, than any in the whole shire.

Mrs. Thorpe had never been an uncharitable woman, and in speaking of a mean relative the most scornful thing she could say was, "You could eat one of her cheesecakes in a mouthful. Now you know the sort of woman!"

Andy sat down, realising that he was very hungry, and he was rather consoled to find that some one had obviously been lunching before him. He would scarcely have dared to mar the exquisite proportions of the trifle or to disturb the elegant decoration of the fowls. The previous luncher had even spilt fragments on the shining tablecloth.

He glanced at his watch, and began to eat hastily, finding his time was growing short, and as he was finishing Mrs. Thorpe came in. She paused at the door, gave a little grunt of astonishment which she changed into a cough, and said heartily —

"Well, I am glad you've enjoyed your lunch. Mary" – she shouted down a long stone passage – "bring in the coffee."

Mary – and this was a queer thing – Mary also paused in the doorway with a grunt of astonishment which she turned into a cough; but Andy did not notice this, and after drinking his coffee he climbed into Mr. Thorpe's cart, and was driven to the station, feeling as only a man can feel who gets what he wants from life before he loses his illusions.

The groom eyed him curiously as he sat looking straight ahead with the light of youth and hopeful candour shining in his eyes – but the groom's gaze was upon his slack waistcoat, not upon his face.

And in a corner of the Thorpes' orchard fat Walter and his friend were still munching the last remnants of a stolen feast.

The cart arrived so early at the railway station that Andy had nearly half an hour to wait, and as one country person after another came upon the platform, and joined a group, an obvious whisper went round, followed by a furtive inspection of the black-coated stranger.

Andy straightened his shoulders, and unconsciously endeavoured to assume an expression of benevolent dignity. Naturally, they were interested in the new Vicar of Gaythorpe. It would have surprised Andy very much at the moment to have met any one who was not interested in that gentleman, and he felt a little glow, in passing one of the groups, to hear a woman say —

"He's so slight and thin. You'd wonder where he *could* put it."

"H-hush!" warned the rest.

Andy smiled inwardly and settled his collar. Of course they referred to his brain. Well, it was rather a wonderful thing to have a living presented to one at twenty-five by a man who had only chanced to hear a single sermon. He thought it all over again. The old friend of his Vicar attending morning service – the interview three days later – the astonishing offer of a living that was a rich one, as livings go in these days.

"Of course," said Andy to himself, stepping into the railway carriage, "I *was* rather trenchant that morning."

He glanced out of the window as the train slipped away through the spring afternoon, and congratulated himself on the impression he seemed to have made on his new neighbours. They would be eager to see him again. Ridiculous for the London clergy to talk of apathy in the face of such interest as he had seen at Millsby station. The parishioners were already discussing the mental qualifications of the new Vicar with a keenness that was perfectly delightful.

And in the next compartment three women bent together, discussing a wonder.

"*Was it six cheesecakes that Thorpe's groom said?*"

"*And eight tarts! And you know Mrs. Thorpe's tarts.*"

"*Besides ham and fowl and half one of her great trifles.*"

"*He must have got some complaint.*"

"*Oh, I hear them London curates is half starved. P'raps he'd never seen a meal like that before, and he couldn't stop.*"

"*But you'd think he'd burst!*"

"*That's just it. That's just where the wonder comes in. Cool and thin as a lath after it all.*"

"*I shall go to hear him preach.*"

"*So shall I. Good as the Sword-Eating Man at Bardswell Fair. Ha-ha!*"
Poor Andy!

CHAPTER II

As Andy passed through his own hall between his own umbrella-stand and eight-day clock on his way to pay a parochial call, he stepped lightly, less like the proud incumbent of an excellent country living than a schoolboy who endeavours to escape a maiden aunt.

But it was no use. Before he reached the porch a door was opened, and Mrs. Jebb, the housekeeper, fluttered forth from the back regions. She had previously fluttered in and out of matrimony in rather the same way, and seemed to have brought nothing from it but a wedding ring and a black satin dress trimmed with beads.

She had, however, brought something hidden as well – a profound conviction that she was fascinating to the gentlemen. Her late husband had been wont to remark, during their brief married life, that there was a something in her way of looking out of her eye-corners that was enough to upset an aconite. He meant a rather different thing, but he was not as cultured as Mrs. Jebb would have liked him to be. Still the habit of – as she inwardly phrased it – "eye-cornering" clung to her still.

Andy's aunt chose her solely because she and sex seemed to have no connection – which is only another proof that nobody knows anything at all about anybody else – and she called herself a lady-cook-housekeeper.

She "eye-cornered" Andy now as she came flitting after him to the front door, but more for the sake of practice than from any ulterior motive.

"*Might* I ask you – you *do* pass the grocer's shop – and we are out of soft sugar?" She had a way of talking in gasps until she got fairly started, when nothing would stop her. "I am so sorry to make mistakes, but I must ask you to try and remember that I never expected to serve even in the – er – higher reaches of domestic – when Mr. Jebb – "

"Excuse me," said Andy, seizing his hat from the peg, "I am rather pressed for – "

"*And* a pound of rice, if you *would* be so very kind?"

"Delighted. Of course," said Andy incoherently, escaping down the steps.

He had already learned that the reminiscences of life with Mr. Jebb were so long and varied that it seemed strange a year could have held them all, and of so intimate and pathetic a nature that, once fairly started, it were sheer brutality to cut them short.

But half-way down the drive a thin voice floated out to him —

"Candles – a pound of candles – if you *could*?"

He looked back, and there she stood on the doorstep, eye-cornering Andy from afar, with strands of brownish hair and odd bits of cheap white lace fluttering about her.

"All right," he shouted back; but to himself he grunted, "Silly old kitten. What on earth did Aunt Dixon get me an old fool like that for?"

Then a sudden waft of lilac scent warmed by sunshine, which is the essence of spring, swept across Andy's freckled nose, and he felt kind to all the world.

"Oh, let her *be* a kitten! I don't care. It's hardish lines on an old woman like that having to go out into service – "

Old woman!

What a glorious thing it is that nobody can see into the mind of anybody else.

Andy turned into Parson's Lane, where the birds sang, and wild flowers bloomed earlier than anywhere else, and lovers walked silent on summer evenings; and he began to whistle from pure happiness. Then he remembered his position and hummed the "March of the Men of Harlech" instead.

The widow's house stood at the farther end of the village, and when Andy went in at the farm gate he saw preparations going forward for that little tragedy, a country sale. The room into which he was ushered stood carpetless, miraculously swept and garnished, its large table crowded with glass

and china that had remained for years hidden in the great storeroom, excepting on rare festivals, when it was brought out with care and put away by the hands of the mistress. A big sideboard filled one wall.

"I'm afraid," said Andy, "that I've come at the wrong time, Mrs. Simpson. I'll call again."

Mrs. Simpson, who was a fair woman with a meek brow and an obstinate mouth, motioned him to a seat.

"Everything's ready," she said. "We go into the little cottage near you to-night. My husband's cousins, the Thorpes, wanted us to stop with them for a few days, but I felt I couldn't."

"I hope – I hope you'll be comfortable in your new home," said Andy, who was not glib at consolation.

Mrs. Simpson crossed her hands on her lap.

"Oh, I shall be comfortable enough. My husband's family have behaved well. They have clubbed together to make me and the children a little allowance – and they're buying in all the furniture we need."

Andy rose. He could not find anything to say to a woman years older than himself, who had lost her husband and her home – so, of course, he was a poor sort of parson.

"Is there a garden in your new home? May I send you some flowers?" he asked, going towards the door.

"Thank you; but flowers make dirt in a little house."

They were near the big sideboard now, and in his confusion Andy caught his elbow in the corner.

"That is going to be sold, too," said Mrs. Simpson. "The Thorpes won't buy that in."

"Ah – yes," said Andy.

Then, suddenly, Mrs. Simpson's face began to work like a child's before it cries aloud, and she passed her hand over the smooth surface of the top.

"Nobody's ever polished it but myself. We bought it in London on our honeymoon. Now Mrs. Will Werrit'll get it – and those girls of hers'll put hot-water jugs on the polished top."

Andy stood there, touched to the heart, struggling for something to say, and only able to stammer out ridiculously at last —

"Perhaps they'll use mats."

But as he went home he began to wonder if he could afford to buy the sideboard and present it to Mrs. Simpson. No; he had had so many expenses on entering the incumbency that there was practically nothing at the bank. The little fortune which had sufficed for his education and for furnishing the Vicarage was now at an end. He literally could not lay hands on a spare five-pound note. A certain sum he had set aside for the new bicycle which was a necessity in a country living, but that was all he had over and above the amount for current expenses —

His thoughts stopped in that unpleasant way everybody knows, when a conclusion is forced upon an unwilling mind. He turned into the yard and pulled out his old bicycle. It would do. It was not a dignified machine, but it would do.

He had to see that as he trundled it dismally back again and went into the house to search for a bill of Mrs. Simpson's sale among his papers.

Oh, nonsense! He wouldn't!

He sat down to tea and glanced at his dining-room furniture, almost ecclesiastical in its chaste simplicity, and heaved a sigh of annoyance. Then, taking a large piece of cake in one hand and a newspaper in the other, he endeavoured to immerse himself in the news of the day.

Did Mr. and Mrs. Simpson feel anything like as jolly as he did when he bought his new furniture? If so —

He turned to the foreign telegrams, and in the midst of China and Peru he saw Mrs. and an imaginary Mr. Simpson buying a sideboard for their new home.

Pshaw! He flung down his paper and rang for the little maid.

"Please tell Mrs. Jebb I shall want lunch at twelve to-morrow. I am going out."

Then, feeling that it was a deed which accorded more with a freckled nose and an abbreviated Christian name than with the dignified attitude of a Vicar of position, he began to search the sale catalogue for a mahogany sideboard. He knew that the senior curate would never have done such a thing. He would have given the money to the deserving poor.

Andy felt profoundly thankful that the senior curate would never know as he wrote to countermand his order for a new bicycle.

After that he went across the field and looked over the hedge into the churchyard, where that Mrs. Werrit who was his rival for the sideboard chanced to be tending the graves of such Werrits as were already taking their rest. People in Gaythorpe said that it was the only time a true Werrit did rest; and Mrs. Will was one to the backbone though she had been born a Thorpe of Millsby.

It was strange to Andy, who had always lived in towns, to find that nearly all the people were more or less related to one another: the Thorpes and Werrits permeated the social relationships of the countryside in the very same way as one or two great families have done the aristocracy of England. It is a thing that is going, but it survives still in many country places, and it produces a social atmosphere which is rather different from any other.

“Good afternoon,” said Andy.

“Oh, good afternoon, Mr. Deane,” called Mrs. Will Werrit, shrill and piping.

Andy stood idly watching the low sun slant across the graves, and across the woman’s kneeling figure. A cuckoo cried up into the clear, keen air; a little way off a cock was crowing. Something that Andy felt, and tried to grasp, and couldn’t, was in that quiet afternoon.

He came back over the fields with his hands deep in his pockets, unconsciously trying to make out what it was, and he felt inclined to write a piece of poetry that afternoon because he was young and alone and in love with life. It is an instinct, under such circumstances, for people to try to catch hold of the glory by putting it into words, just as a child instinctively tries to get hold of the sunshine, and both occupations are equally silly and joyful and engrossing.

So Andy walked in through his study window and sat at his table, looking out over the green and golden day that shimmered up by most exquisite gradations to a sky just before sunset. Green of the close-cut lawn – green and gold of the holly hedge – gold and green of the trees full in the sun – gold of the lower sky – translucent green of the cloudless upper reaches. No wonder Andy’s growing soul groped and groped after some way of keeping this. No wonder he stretched out baby hands of the soul. And no wonder that he grasped nothing. Or so near nothing that this is all he found to say about the Werrits near the church porch with Mrs. Will Werrit bending over them. He called it “The Others,” and was melancholy – as all happy poets are —

“When I can bear no more
  The sound of tears,
And all the muffled roar
  Of hopes and fears,
I let my tired mind a vigil keep,
  To watch in silence where the others sleep.

A moment – and I go
  Where green grass waves,
Where still-eyed daisies grow
  On quiet graves,
While every afternoon the setting sun
Falls on the names there, like a benison.”

Andy read it over. He thought it was very beautiful indeed, and began to compose an epitaph for himself when he should lie, like Gulielmus, beneath the shadow of the ancient church.

"A great poet and a great priest. Fifty years of untiring service – "

Oh, he was so young and so happy that he enjoyed it very much indeed. And he was so hungry afterwards that he was able to eat Mrs. Jebb's pastry.

The next day about two o'clock he went across the lawn to speak to his gardener about the radishes when it suddenly occurred to him that he had seen nothing of that worthy since half-past ten, though he had been about the place all the morning. Evidently young Sam Petch was beginning his games. This should be put a stop to at once. Andy walked over the short grass with a determined step, and was about to start the inquisition when Sam, with a pleasant smile, remarked —

"Nice morning I had of it. Searching high and low, I was, for bits of cloth to nail up the creepers on the stable wall. And in the end my poor missus gave me the clippings she'd saved for pegging a hearthrug."

Andy looked hard at his gardener, but it was his own eyes which fell before the radiant honesty shining in Sam Petch's face.

"Very good of Mrs. Petch – I must see if I haven't an old pair – "

He broke off, for he had come closer to Sam in speaking, and there was somewhere in the air an unmistakable odour of the public-house.

"Your oldest would be too good for that job," said Sam hastily. "My wife would sponge 'em with beer with a drop o' gin in it and they'd look like new. She does that, time and again, to my old clothes. These I have on she did last night. On'y drawback is, you can't get the smell of the liquor out all at once. You'll maybe not have noticed, but I smell a smell of drink about this here jacket yet, though I've been out in it since morning."

Andy looked hard again. Again he was met by the clear, blue gaze of honesty and simple candour. He walked away, making no remark.

But half-way across the grass he paused, shook his head, and went back.

"I would have you know," he said, copying as closely as possible the air and manner of the senior curate, "that I am perfectly able to appreciate the difference between the odour of beer applied externally and internally. Pray remember that for the future."

Then, head in air, he marched towards the house, feeling greatly annoyed that a dandelion root should trip him up half-way and spoil the exit.

Sam watched him go into the house, and then bent over the mowing machine in a paroxysm of helpless laughter.

"Golly – he's a rum 'un – but not so soft as he looks."

For young Sam Petch had many failings, but also the great virtue of being able to enjoy a joke against himself.

Meanwhile, Andy made his way to Mrs. Simpson's sale, and as he entered the house the auctioneer's raucous voice could be heard selling the spare-bedroom furniture. Every one was upstairs save a few who waited in the dining-room so as to have a good place when the auctioneer came in there.

Mrs. Thorpe and Mrs. Will Werrit, for instance, had planted themselves firmly by the table on which Mrs. Simpson's cut glass and china were displayed. They were not surprised to see the new Vicar, as they supposed he would be wanting things for his house, and Mrs. Thorpe tore herself away from a fascinating and confidential conversation with her neighbour to say pleasantly glancing at him over her ample chest —

"I hope you're comfortable at Gaythorpe, Mr. Deane?"

That was what Mrs. Thorpe wanted every one to be in this world – comfortable – and it was certainly what she hoped for in the world to come.

"I'm more than comfortable," said Andy. "I love the place already. And after London it seems so peaceful – like one big family."

Mrs. Will Werrit's thin lips curled at the corners.

"Are big families peaceful in London?" she said.

"Well, well!" said Mrs. Thorpe, soothingly. "Human nature is human nature. And how does your housekeeper cook, Mr. Deane?"

"Oh, not very grandly," said Andy, with a laugh.

"Can she make decent pastry?" asked Mrs. Will Werrit.

"No. But I'm not much of a pastry lover – "

"Oh!" said Mrs. Thorpe and Mrs. Will Werrit. Then they coughed behind their gloves to tone down the ejaculation, and carefully avoided each other's glance.

But Andy wondered what on earth there was to be so surprised at in the fact that he did not like pastry. He walked to the window and stood there with his hands in his pockets while the two women resumed their interrupted conversation.

"Did you hear?" said Mrs. Will Werrit. "He said he didn't like pastry. After eating six tarts and eight cheesecakes at a sitting."

"Well, well. I'm sure I don't know how that got about. I never told a soul, that I can swear."

"Nobody," said Mrs. Will Werrit, snapping her lips together, "can blame a lad for liking tarts and cheesecakes. But what I hate is his lying about it."

"Come, come! You can't call it lying," said Mrs. Thorpe. "Poor lad, he's ashamed of his appetite, I expect." She touched a set of glass dishes on the table before her. "I'm bidding for those."

"Don't touch 'em!" said Mrs. Will sharply. "There's a woman looking at you. You don't want anybody to notice them before they're auctioned if you can help it. They'll be running you up."

"I shan't go beyond two shillings apiece," said Mrs. Thorpe.

"You don't know. Sales are such queer things. You'd think" – Mrs. Will lowered her voice still further and glanced at Andy's back – "you'd think sometimes when you get home with a lot of rubbish you've no use for, that you'd been *possessed*." She paused. "I shall bid for the jelly glasses. I remember thinking I should like them the last time we had supper here before Mr. Simpson's illness."

"Did you, now?" said Mrs. Thorpe. "Well, I thought the same about the glass dishes on that very night. Last party they gave before he was taken ill."

And yet they were good women, and would do the widow and her children a thousand kindnesses. It is such things that make the dullest-seeming person so tremendously interesting.

"Finger-bowls!" said Mrs. Will Werrit, touching one with a scornful finger. "No wonder he died in debt!"

"Maybe they were a wedding – " began Mrs. Thorpe, but a great trampling of feet announced that the auctioneer was coming downstairs, and with a hasty "Now, stick to your place; don't let yourself be pushed into a corner," the two ladies prepared gleefully for the conflict.

Andy grew very tired indeed of waiting, as one thing after another was knocked down to flushed and excited buyers. The auctioneer was a kind-hearted man, and went out of his way to try and make the best price he could of the things, cracking jokes with a bad headache in a stentorian voice, which may not be a picturesque sacrifice upon the altar of charity, but is a very real one, all the same. And he understood his audience so well that he had them all in high good-humour, ready to bid for anything.

"And now," he remarked, "we come to the sideboard. You're not like the greedy boy who said, 'Best first for fear I can't hold it.' I kept the best until the last, sure that the spacious residences of those I see around me *could* hold it, and find it the greatest ornament of their homes." He put his hand to his head, feeling he was getting muddled. "Ladies – it's not drink – it's love! I meant to say this exquisite sideboard in solid mahogany, plate-glass back, will be the chief ornament of *some* home: for to my regret only one of you can possess it." He paused. How his head ached! "Now, what shall I say for this magnificent piece of furniture fit for a ducal palace?"

"Five pounds," said a red-faced man near the door.

"Five pounds! You offer the paltry sum of five pounds for this magnificent sideboard, which contains a cellaret for the wedding champagne and a cupboard for the christening cake! Ladies and gentlemen – "

He threw himself, as it were, upon their better feelings. And several people who did not want the sideboard began to bid for it as if their happiness in life depended upon their getting it.

"Five pounds ten! Six pounds! Seven pounds ten!"

"Eight!" said Andy, beginning to be awfully excited too.

"Eight ten!" said Mrs. Will Werrit.

"Nine!" said Andy.

"Nine ten!" said a new voice – clear, and yet breathless.

"Ten pounds!" said Andy, glaring in the direction of the voice.

"Ten ten!" and the crowd opened, leaving a little space around a girl who seemed to bloom suddenly upon the dull background of oldish faces like an evening primrose on the twilight. She was pale with the fear of being late and the excitement of arriving just in time, and she waited with parted lips for Andy's defiant "Eleven!"

The other buyers had all stopped bidding, and her quick "Eleven ten!" rang clear across a silence.

"Twelve!" said Andy, doggedly fixing his chin into his collar.

"Twelve ten!"

"Thirteen!" said Andy, looking at his opponent with extreme distaste.

"Thirteen ten!" responded she, catching her breath.

"Fourteen!" shouted Andy, who had actually forgotten both the sideboard and Mrs. Simpson, and only felt that he would sell his shirt rather than let this girl conquer him.

"Fourteen ten!"

"Fifteen!"

"Fifteen ten!"

"Sixteen!"

Back and forth rang the words like pistol shots.

"Nineteen ten!" They were both pale now, and trembling with excitement. An electric thrill ran through the room, a strange spirit hovered almost visibly about the commonplace group in the farmhouse parlour, and the auctioneer recognised it easily enough and without surprise, for he had grown used to knowing that men and women touch the borders of the Inexplicable at little country sales.

"Twenty!"

Andy had the 'twenty-one' ready on his lips, when, instead of the expected retort, there was a moment's silence that could be felt.

"Going at twenty!"

"Now, won't any one give another ten shillings for this exceptionally handsome sideboard?"

"Going – going – gone!"

The hammer fell, and with that sound the two young people stared at each other with a sort of odd surprise, as if they had just awakened from a queer dream.

"That's Miss Elizabeth Atterton," whispered Mrs. Thorpe to Andy as he began to push his way out, marvelling at his own folly.

Twenty pounds was a ridiculous sum for him to have paid for the thing in any case, and just now when he was so short of money it was sheer lunacy.

"Miss Elizabeth Atterton," he said vaguely – "oh, the young lady who bid against me? I see."

Then he made arrangements for the delivery of the sideboard, and went home to find a dapper, middle-aged gentleman walking down the drive.

"How-de-do. Just been to call on you. Sorry to find you out," said the dapper gentleman.

"Do come in," said Andy, "and have a cup of tea."

"Sorry I can't. But I'll go back with you for a few minutes, if I may. Fact is, I told my daughter to bring the cart round here for me at four. She's gone off to a sale or something. Queer taste. But it's better than developing nerves. If a female of my household developed nerves I should – er – duck her."

"Sensible plan," said Andy, wisely shaking his head. "Most women are as full of fancies as an egg is full of meat."

"Just so, just so," said the dapper gentleman, sitting very straight. And thus they disposed of the mystery and tragedy of womanhood.

"Miss Elizabeth Atterton is here with the cart, sir," said the little maid, putting her head in at the door.

"Ha, my daughter's here early," said Mr. Atterton, rising.

Andy accompanied him to the cart, where Miss Elizabeth Atterton stood holding the head of a rather restive pony. The light shone full on her face, showing most clearly the gold in her brown hair and in her eyes and in her exquisite skin, which was of a deep cream with a faint red in the cheeks-not at all like milk and roses, but like some perfect fruit grown in the youth of the world. Her features were irregular, the upper lip being rather too long and the nose broad and short, but her forehead and her eyes were very lovely.

"My daughter Elizabeth," said Mr. Atterton, as Andy took the pony's head. "Oh, by the way, my gloves," and he bolted back to fetch them.

"I am afraid I ran the price of your sideboard up," said Elizabeth stiffly.

"Not at all," said Andy, with equal stiffness.

Then Mr. Atterton came out, and the little cart clattered away through the lilac-scented afternoon.

CHAPTER III

Nothing could be less like a messenger of Fate than a mahogany sideboard with a plate-glass back.

And yet —

"Here's Mrs. Simpson's little girl for the third time since seven!" said Mrs. Jebb, coming hastily into the room, with ribbon-strings all aflutter about her, as usual.

"What does she want?" said Andy, buttering his toast.

"Something about a sideboard," said Mrs. Jebb, poised, as it were, upon one hand at the table corner. "Three times before breakfast about a sideboard! You really must make a stand, or you will never have a minute to call your own. You are too good-natured."

And she turned her head slightly, so as to give Andy the benefit of that glance which the late Mr. Jebb found irresistible.

"Nonsense," said Andy. "It's what I'm paid for;" and he rustled his letters together, carefully avoiding the amorous eye.

"As your aunt remarked, in engaging my services," said Mrs. Jebb, "it is a great thing for you to have a lady in the house. I hope you will let me help you in any way that I can."

"Thank you. I'll go round to Mrs. Simpson's at once," said Andy, leaving an excellent corner of the buttered toast. "By the way, I should like my potatoes soft in the middle if you don't mind."

"Of course. Anything you wish, please mention at once," said Mrs. Jebb. Nothing could subdue her gaiety upon this summer morning, when the birds were singing, and the sun was shining, and Hope threw wreaths upon the tombstone of Mr. Jebb.

Andy glared at her.

"There is nothing more at present, thank you," he said, going out; then Mrs. Jebb went to the window and looked after him with an easy tear in her eye.

"Impetuous," she murmured, "impetuous, but *sweet*."

Could Andy but have heard her!

However, by this time he was already entering the little garden before Mrs. Simpson's cottage at the lane end, and all his thoughts were engrossed by the unexpected sight of the famous sideboard standings in sections around the creeper-covered doorway. The widow sat weeping on an empty box near that part containing the cellaret, while a dark, anxious-looking little girl of about six stood pulling her mother's sleeve, and a big boy of three hammered the little girl with broad, fat fists.

"Stop that," said Andy, seizing the boy from behind; but the culprit turned on him such a jolly, good-natured smile that he was disarmed, and only said lamely —

"You shouldn't hit your little sister."

"I haven't got nobody elth to hit," lisped the cherub, looking up at Andy with blue-eyed surprise.

"You mustn't mind what he says," interposed Sally anxiously. "Boys are born naughty. They can't help it."

Andy glanced at Mrs. Simpson, who still sat with her face hidden, evidently overcome by her feelings, and he braced himself for a scene of tearful gratitude. It was unpleasant, but no doubt inevitable, so the best thing to do was to get it over as soon as possible.

"H-hem! I see you got the sideboard all right, Mrs. Simpson. I am afraid it would be rather late last night before you received it, but the carrier – "

"I've been sitting on this box since six, waiting to see you," interposed Mrs. Simpson.

"Please don't! Don't say a word more. I'm only too delighted," began Andy.

"There's nothing," wept Mrs. Simpson, "to be delighted about. It won't go into the house. And you can't keep a sideboard in a garden. Oh, I know you meant well, but this makes me realise my comedown more than anything else that has happened. After thinking I'd got it, it still has to go all

the same. I dreamt last night that rows of great girls came up one after the other and banged hot-water cans down on the polished top, and when I wasn't dreaming I was looking out of the window to see if it rained. And Mrs. Werrit will get my sideboard after all. And the Thorpe family will say they were in the right not to buy it in for me. And I shall look like a fool. I hate people that always turn out to be right in the end."

It was a very long speech for Mrs. Simpson, who was usually neither tearful nor garrulous, and Andy saw that the woman had been stirred to the foundations of her being.

"What can I do? If I could do anything?" he said helplessly.

Mrs. Simpson dabbed her eyes with a black-bordered handkerchief and tried to pull herself together.

"I never gave way like this before – not even when my husband died. And you mustn't think me ungrateful. It was very kind indeed of you to buy the sideboard for me. Only, you see how it all is."

"Well, suppose we get the thing moved away from here at once," said Andy, ruefully surveying the scene.

Mrs. Simpson looked at him.

"There's one thing – but I don't suppose you would – one couldn't expect – "

"What is it?" demanded Andy. "I'd do anything I could, but I don't see – "

"Well, I was wondering if you could possibly take care of it for me at the Vicarage until I did get a house where there was room for it."

"Why, splendid!" said Andy. "The very thing. Of course I will."

"Splendid!" said Jimmy, butting at Andy's legs like a young goat.

"And mother can go across and shine it, can't she?" said Sally gravely. "She doesn't never let anybody shine it but herself."

"Of course she can," said Andy, "and you too. I have heaps of empty rooms."

"But it must be in a room with a fire," said Mrs. Simpson, beginning to weep again. "It would soon look different if it was put away in an unoccupied room."

"It's not a piano," smiled Andy. "Oh, it'll be all right in the drawing-room. That isn't furnished yet you know."

"It ought to be in a room with a fire," persisted Mrs. Simpson, setting her lips.

"But my study is not large enough, and the dining-room is fully furnished. I really could not – "

"Of course. I said not from very first. I couldn't expect it," said Mrs. Simpson, rising with resigned sadness. "Shall I let Mrs. Will Werrit know, or will you?"

"But, Mrs. Simpson, I assure you it'll be *perfectly* all right," urged Andy.

"I'm sure you think so, Mr. Deane, and I'm most grateful to you for what you've done. I'll drop a line to Mrs. Will Werrit at once."

She turned to go into the cottage and Jimmy set up a piercing yell, the tired little girl whimpered; there were loose straw and paper blowing desolately about the garden. It seemed most melancholy to Andy, this everyday trouble of a broken-up home. The dreariness of it pierced through the young hope and glamour that surrounded him, and for one dull moment he heard the hopeless chant which underlies all life: "Is it worth while? Is it worth while?"

As Andy stood there, staring blankly at the dust and straw, the tasteful appearance of his dining-room seemed quite suddenly to be a very small thing – and he had thought it so tremendously important.

"We will put your sideboard into the dining-room, then, until we find a better place for it," he said.

"Well, that is good of you – though it's an ornament to any room," said Mrs. Simpson, brightening at once. "We must make some arrangement by which it becomes your property altogether if I die first," she added, in a burst of real gratitude.

"No," said Andy, driven to asserting himself at last by the idea of being saddled with the sideboard for life. "No. To that I will never agree." He paused. "But there's no need to talk about dying at present."

Mrs. Simpson dried her eyes, folded her hands, and spoke with almost her wonted tranquillity.

"You never know. Anybody would have taken a lease of Mr. Simpson's life."

"I am sorry I never knew your husband," said Andy, resuming his professional manner.

"Well," said Mrs. Simpson, "I don't suppose you'd have seen much of him if he'd been here. He didn't like the clergy. Not that he had anything against them, but he didn't like them." She paused, then, wishful to avoid offence, she added: "It was just a matter of taste. He never could eat oysters either, and they're a delicacy, as everybody knows."

"Of course," said Andy solemnly, his face grave but his heart light with laughter, and the dolorous chanting of the underworld forgotten.

Life was a splendid thing – like the spring morning – and something glorious must be round the corner.

CHAPTER IV

Mrs. Stamford, the wife of the Squire of the parish, stood before the mantelpiece awaiting the arrival of the new Vicar. She was a tall, spare woman, and her garments always seemed to cling to her, not because they couldn't come off, but because they dared not. Even in repose, Mrs. Stamford always looked as if she had that moment finished doing something energetic, or were just about to start again.

"Pleased to see you, Mr. Deane," she said, when Andy, very flat and shining about the head, was ushered in. "Only got back a day or two since, or we should have looked you up before. Have you got settled down? How d'you like Gaythorpe?"

She fired these remarks with such directness that Andy could not help feeling as if some one had thrown something at him.

"I like it immensely." Then, after a moment's pause, and with a good deal of effort, "I am more than grateful to you and Mr. Stamford – "

"Oh, that's all right; we'll take that as read," interrupted Mrs. Stamford with a short laugh so exactly like that of William the parrot that Andy could not help having a bewildered feeling that she would next begin to draw corks as well. However, she looked towards the door behind her guest instead, and remarked in a voice which she kept for that one topic —

"Here is my son, Dick."

A tall young fellow, very like his mother, but somehow indefinably weaker, came forward and shook hands without effusion.

"Got settled down yet?"

"Quite, thank you."

"You'll find it dullish, I expect."

"No – rather exciting, so far."

The young men took each other's measure, and then Dick Stamford said in a different tone —

"Well, come in and have a game of billiards with me when you've nothing better to do."

"Thanks, I shall be very pleased," said Andy.

It was queer how anxiously Mrs. Stamford had looked from one to the other during the little conversation, and more odd still that this tough, unemotional woman should be unable to keep back a long sigh of relief when it was over.

"Have a turn in the garden until the others turn up?" said Dick, after a pause.

So the two young men went out, and a moment later Mr. Stamford came into the room, limping slightly, and walking with a stick. As he closed the door he looked across anxiously at his wife.

"Well?"

"I think it will be a success. He has taken Mr. Deane round the garden."

"I wonder, Ellen, if we ought not to have let him remain in the Guards. He showed no tendency to drink when he was with his regiment, so far as I know."

Mrs. Stamford's mouth set into those firm lines her husband knew so well.

"It was his duty to come home and look after things when your accident made you unable to do so. He will be master here. He must learn how to manage the estate."

Mr. Stamford smiled at his wife, and it could be seen then whence Dick's weakness came.

"You wanted him home, Ellen, and so did I."

"I should never have suggested it if I had not thought it the right thing," said Mrs. Stamford, flushing a little.

"Of course not – of course not," agreed her husband. "Young companionship is all he needs, and I think Mr. Deane will supply that deficiency. It was his open look and pleasant, manly tone that struck me when I first heard him preach. 'Just the sort of young fellow to make a nice companion for

Dick,' I said to myself." He rubbed his hands together as he repeated this little story for the hundredth time, after the manner of people who live deep in the country and have little to talk about. "I went straight to my cousin after the service and asked if the lad wouldn't do for us."

"Your cousin thought it an unsuitable appointment. He wanted you to take the senior curate," said Mrs. Stamford, "and in some ways he was quite right. Of course this boy can't preach."

"No." Mr. Stamford chuckled. "I believe, though, he thinks he got the living on account of that sermon about Saul."

"Oh, well, so long as he doesn't preach more than half an hour *I* don't care what he says."

They were both smiling as the two young men came in through the glass door, and then luncheon was announced.

"Mrs. Atterton and Elizabeth can't be coming," said Mrs. Stamford, glancing at the clock. "Anyhow, we won't wait any longer."

So they went across the spacious old hall into a dining-room where everything was so harmonious and so mellowed by long companionship, that you noticed the various objects in it at first no more than you do, at first sight, the details of any beautiful thing which has grown and not been made. Mr. Stamford himself was no more conscious of his treasure-house than he was of the nose upon his face. He was, of course, in some hidden place, proud of both. The nose was the best kind of nose, and the house was the best kind of house, and it would have been incongruous if a Stamford of Gaythorpe Manor had been provided with a nose or a house that was less than the best; but he felt no more inclination to draw his visitor's attention to his surroundings than to his nose.

"Cold beef, please," said Andy, in answer to the butler's discreet inquiries; and when the man returned with quite a mountain of thins slices on the plate he felt too much of a stranger to offer any remonstrance.

Mrs. Stamford gave the man an imperceptible nod of approval, for it had already penetrated to her ears – as such things do penetrate in country places – that the new Vicar had an enormous appetite.

But Andy wrestled with the cold beef, all unheeding, for it takes a lifetime to learn – and some happy ones never learn – how different are people's thoughts of us from what we imagine they must be – not worse, necessarily, or better, but so extraordinarily different.

Then a cart went past the window to the front door and they all looked up.

"Elizabeth at last. Dick!" said his mother.

The young man left his luncheon and went, with more alertness than Andy had supposed him capable of, to welcome the belated guest. A minute later he returned with her, and Mr. and Mrs. Stamford both glanced with pleased eyes at the tall, gallant-looking couple who came down the long room together. Evidently, felt Andy, there was something in the air, though he saw, when Elizabeth sat down, that she had no engagement ring on her finger.

"I'm so sorry to be late," she said, "but at the last moment mamma's back gave way."

"Oh, how unfortunate; but I quite understand," responded Mrs. Stamford, more nearly gushing than Andy could have believed possible.

"I hoped Mrs. Atterton's back had been better of late," said Mr. Stamford.

Then Mrs. Stamford added, to draw the stranger into the conversation, "Poor Mrs. Atterton is troubled with a weak back, Mr. Deane."

Thus was Andy introduced to that feature of Gaythorpe society – Mrs. Atterton's back. He looked across at Elizabeth and remembered vividly his first sight of her, shining out, as it were, between the drab, middle-aged crowd, and his secret resentment against her was increased. She obviously had everything; it must have been simply a childish desire to 'best' him which had led her to bid against him until he was obliged to pay some pounds more than he need have done.

"And how," said Elizabeth, leaning towards him, "do you like Gaythorpe?"

The question did not surprise him, because it would have been much more unusual at this period if any one had failed to ask it; but what did astonish him was the change in Elizabeth's manner from

the extreme stiffness of their last parting to an eager kindness that made Andy say to himself, with some pleasant feeling of man-of-the-worldness, that she was evidently the sort who would flirt with a broomstick if nothing else were available. *He* had known that kind in London town. And he winked to himself astutely over the fruit-tart as he responded to her overtures with some reserve.

After luncheon they all went into the garden, and just for a moment, while Dick fetched the key of one of the fruit-houses, and Mrs. Stamford was settling her husband in his long chair, Andy and the young lady were alone together on a broad grass walk beside a hedge of lilacs. There was a border of flowering plants on the other side just coming into bloom, and at the end you could see a little figure of Love without an arm under a copper beech. Somewhere in the distance a pigeon was cooing. The full sun lay very calm and bright and even over the old stable tower and the long house, and the grass path before them. The stable clock chimed a quarter to three. It all seemed the very embodiment of age-long prosperity and pleasant ease.

Andy felt at peace with all the world. She could flirt with him if she liked – he didn't care.

"So you're fond of walking?" he said indulgently, continuing a topic started at luncheon.

"Yes," she said, staring at the grass path. Then she put out a hand, not touching him, only nearly, and the colour in her cheeks deepened until they were like some exquisite fruit that a young sun had kissed in orchards that belonged to the youth of the world. But Elizabeth was always greatly annoyed at her trick of blushing, and compared herself bitterly to a beetroot.

"You were going to say!" remarked Andy.

"Oh, there's Mr. Stamford coming. I must tell you. I've been to see Mrs. Simpson," said Elizabeth.

"Well?" said Andy, taken aback.

"You wanted it for her. And I bid against you until you had to pay pounds more than you need have done. And you must have had so many expenses getting into your house. And it was all so idiotic of me. My sister always says I'm an idiot, and I am. I only stopped when I did because I hadn't another penny until next July."

"Why" – Andy stood still, facing her, and the most wonderful scent from all the sun-warmed lilacs blew across them – enveloped them – "why – you wanted it for Mrs. Simpson too?"

"You surely couldn't think," said Elizabeth, "that I wanted that beast for *myself*!"

"You thought I did," muttered Andy.

"Oh – a man – that's different," said Miss Elizabeth.

"My furniture is all Sheraton – modern, of course, but good in style," said Andy loftily. Then he saw Elizabeth's hair against the lilacs, all brown and gold, and something made him forget he was the new Vicar – he was a boy and she a girl, with a joke between them. "I say," he chuckled, "you know it wouldn't go into her house. She's made me put her sideboard into my dining-room."

Ha-ha-ha! They laughed together for the first time, and the sound mingled with the rustling of young leaves and the love-song of a thrush, as much a part of the sweetness of nature in springtime as the rest.

Then Dick Stamford came towards them with his mother, and Elizabeth slipped her arm through that of the elder woman with her little air of reposeful tenderness which sat almost oddly on a young girl. She had that sort of kindness in her ways which most girls only learn from their first baby, and her voice held deep notes which caught the heart every now and then, breaking her light chatter like a stone in a narrow stream.

"You'll stay tea, Elizabeth, and then Dick shall take you home," said Mrs. Stamford.

"I'm awfully sorry, but I must have the cart round in half an hour. Mamma's back – " apologised Elizabeth.

So mamma's back was not only a convenience to herself, personally.

Then Andy said good-bye, and Mrs. Stamford, leaving Dick and Elizabeth alone, strolled down the drive with her other guest.

"You will find Gaythorpe very quiet," said Mrs. Stamford at the gate, obviously thinking of something else, and yet lingering.

Andy glanced back at it all, and a sudden vivid picture of the tumult of things warring beyond this quiet place struck across his mind.

"This seems – " He sought a way to say it, but none came. "This does seem quiet." He tried again. "Seems as if it had been lived in easily for ages."

"Um. Well, people have no leisure to live now; they've only time to make a living," said Mrs. Stamford absently. Then she said what she had been meaning to say all down the drive. "My son is a great deal alone here in the evenings. More alone than is good for him. I shall be grateful if you will come in when you can and have a game of billiards. You play, don't you?"

"Oh yes – we had a couple of tables at the Men's Institute in my last parish. I shall be very pleased to come," said Andy.

So he went away down the road, feeling that pleasant as the world had been that morning early, it was immensely more delightful now.

Two urchins watched him go up the road, then squashed disreputable hats down on their brows and began to imitate his professional stride which he had unconsciously copied on first arrival in London from the senior curate.

"Parson Andy walks like this! Parson Andy walks like this!" they chanted together under their breath, stepping down the road behind him.

For by this abbreviation was the Reverend Andrew Deane already known to his parishioners. It was inevitable, of course, but as yet he remained in blissful ignorance of the fact, and only the night before had secretly burned a satin tie-case on which a tactless cousin had embroidered 'Andy.'

As he went across the churchyard, taking the short-cut home, he glanced once more at the gravestone of Gulielmus; and having glanced, he stood a moment, thinking.

It was most probable that this dead brother of his had been entertained by a Stamford of Gaythorpe Manor, just as he had been. Will Ford – who was now Gulielmus – had no doubt walked back by the very path beside which his body now lay sleeping.

What had he felt? Why had he never married? How had life gone with him?

Andy was standing very still in the warm quiet of the spring afternoon when suddenly a sense of jolly-good-fellowship and kindness seemed to fill his spirit – as if some comrade had passed that way and shouted a merry greeting. There was nothing strange or abnormal about it, either then or in the ineffaceable after-remembrance of it.

Only – Andy had felt on his first journey to Gaythorpe as if, across the centuries, he greeted a brother; now he felt as if, across the centuries, a brother greeted him.

CHAPTER V

Andy sat in his study, endeavouring to prepare a Sunday-morning sermon that should justify the high opinion of his preaching which had led Mr. Stamford to present him to the living of Gaythorpe.

A light rain fell outside and a scent of the honeysuckle – it being now June – came through the open window; but Andy was not yet aware that every wayside flower preaches the finest sermon man can preach to man, and says, more convincingly than any parson ever could, 'God so loved the world.'

The new Vicar, therefore, had taken in turn such topics as the Origin of Evil and the Reason for Free Will, handling them with a courage perfectly remarkable when you consider how the saints of all ages have hesitated afraid before them. This morning, however, having settled these questions, he cast about him for something else which should be at once striking and profound, and it was some time before he noticed a gradually increasing noise in the other part of the house.

Even when he did become aware of it he brushed it aside from his mind and went peacefully on, reconciling the doctrine of evolution with the second chapter of Genesis. At last, however, the study door was burst open in a manner that even a poet could not ignore, and Mrs. Jebb paused, inarticulate with some unknown emotion, upon the threshold.

"*Not* the boiler burst again?" exclaimed Andy, who had already learned some of the trials of a housekeeper.

Mrs. Jebb swallowed, blinked, and demanded —

"Did you give that – female – permission to clean my furniture?"

It was a long way from the dawn of the world to Mrs. Simpson's sideboard, and for the moment Andy felt nonplussed; then he remembered.

"Oh, she's turned up to polish it, poor woman, has she?" he said, with an air of relief. "I told her she could. It's all right."

Mrs. Jebb fluttered forward, wavering a little like a butterfly that has imbibed too much nectar, and she alighted with one trembling hand upon the writing-table edge.

"It is not all right," she said. "It is all very, very wrong, Mr. Deane. Poor, I am, reduced to domestic service, I may be – but I will retire to the workhouse before I will allow a female from outside to polish furniture in this house while I remain your lady-cook-housekeeper."

"Really, Mrs. Jebb – I'm sure I never – " began Andy.

"What will the parish say?" went on Mrs. Jebb, growing still more agitated as she saw Andy's concerned face. "What will the world say? Naturally that I'm not fit to be your housekeeper, if Mrs. Simpson has to come with dusters and furniture polish and an – an infant, to clean the Vicar's dining-room sideboard."

A dragging sound as of something being pulled reluctantly along, a bump, a yell, and Mrs. Simpson's voice in the rear, shrill with motherly indignation.

"How dare you call this dear child names?" she cried, replying to the limitless opprobrium which lay behind the word 'infant' rather than to the term itself.

"Come, come," said Andy, rising. "He is an infant all right, aren't you, Jimmy? Not twenty-one yet, ha-ha! There is nothing unpleasant in the word 'infant.' "

He smiled ingratiatingly from one angry face to the other, trying to carry it off easily, but in truth as frightened as a decent young man always is when he stands between two quarrelling women.

"There's a way," replied Mrs. Simpson slowly, glaring with her prominent light-blue eyes at Mrs. Jebb – "there's a way of saying 'woman' that implies things I wouldn't sully my lips by uttering. And yet 'woman' isn't a bad word."

"It all comes to this," panted Mrs. Jebb. "Is Mrs. Simpson to walk in without a with-your-leave or a by-your-leave and start polishing your sideboard, or is she not?"

"It's *her* sideboard," said Andy weakly. "But I'm sure you'll look after it all right, if Mrs. Simpson doesn't mind."

"Why should she mind? And if it's hers, why doesn't she take it away? Dozens of times I've said that the hideous thing completely ruins your dining-room, and I'm sure – "

"Now," interposed Mrs. Simpson, who grew, quiet as her opponent grew noisy, "*now* I shall say what I'd meant to keep to myself, because Mrs. Jebb has her living to earn, poor thing, and I wouldn't do her an injury. That sideboard in its present state, Mr. Deane, is a disgrace. So is your beautiful table. So is all the furniture."

"It only wants dusting. We've not had time this morning," quavered Mrs. Jebb, retreating before this onslaught.

"It wants what you'll never give it," said Mrs. Simpson, hauling Jimmy away, and looking back for a last shot. "It wants elbow-grease."

"Look here," said Andy, pulling himself together. "I – er – really – discord in a clergyman's house is what I greatly dislike. Mrs. Jebb, I told Mrs. Simpson she could come and clean her sideboard. Mrs. Simpson, you must put yourself in Mrs. Jebb's place and consider if your feelings might not have been hurt under similar circumstances. This really won't do."

He threw his head back, settled his chin in his collar, and looked as nearly like the senior curate before a refractory Bible Class as nature permitted.

Mrs. Simpson paused.

"I came peacefully enough," she said, "and I was going to tell Mrs. Jebb, only she went off at such a tangent, that I did ring five times. But I couldn't make any one hear, so I walked into the hall. Then I saw the dining-room door open, and nobody there, so I went in *there* and started polishing. I'll own it may have looked funny, but she shouldn't have spoken as she did."

"There! That makes all the difference. Doesn't it, Mrs. Jebb?" said Andy eagerly, forgetting to be dignified. "I say, shake hands and make it up. Jimmy, shake hands with Mrs. Jebb to start with."

"Won't. Hate her. She's got yeller teef like old Towzer."

"Hush, hush," said Mrs. Simpson, changing all in a minute from the fighting woman to the careful mother. "Jimmy mustn't talk like that. Jimmy must beg the lady's pardon."

"Won't," said that gentleman truculently.

"Jimmy must do as he's told," said Mrs. Simpson, then, grasping the pudgy little hand firmly, she held it out to the housekeeper.

"I'm sure I've no wish – " began Mrs. Jebb, with trembling stateliness, when Andy cast aside the mantle of the senior curate, grabbed Mrs. Jebb's hand in his own, and pushed the bony fingers of his lady-cook-housekeeper towards Jimmy.

"I say," he exclaimed boyishly, "you can't refuse to shake hands with a little chap like that!"

Mrs. Jebb felt the touch of the firm, young fingers on her wrist, weakened, advanced a step, finally 'eye-cornered' Andy with a tremulous smile and waggled once the fat hand of Master Simpson.

"I'm sure," she said, "I've no wish to be un-neighbourly, Mrs. Simpson. It was just seeing you there on your knees rubbing the sideboard front when I never expected to see anything but the cat or Mr. Deane. I ought to be able to enter into a widow's feelings if anybody ever could. With Mr. Jebb I was not merely a wife, I was an obsession."

"With all my wordly goods I thee endow, of course," quoted Mrs. Simpson vaguely, in whose mind the words possession and obsession had somehow run together and produced a blurred impression of Mrs. Jebb's meaning. But she saw Andy was anxious for peace, and gratitude for the sideboard gradually overcoming her anger, she wished to do her part.

"Two widows living near together should be on good terms," said Mrs. Jebb, her annoyance also cooling, while prudence dictated a course obviously pleasing to Andy. "Will you step into my room and have a cup of tea? I am no breakfast-eater, and generally take one at eleven. And" – she concluded the amend generously, "Jimmy shall have a biscuit with pink sugar on the top."

That settled it; for Jimmy was so fond of eating that he would have accompanied the sweep – his idea of the embodiment of evil – to search for biscuits with pink sugar on them.

So the baize door of the study banged in the rear of an amicable trio while Andy sat down and mopped his brow. It was difficult to catch evolution by the tail after that – he seemed to have gone so far from it. But he knitted his brow, shook his fountain-pen, and started on the quest.

One thought, however, would creep in and out of the books of reference and between the written words – it was not so easy as it looked, to live in a place where everybody was so inextricably mixed up with everybody else. And later in the day he was to have another striking proof of this queer inter-independence of which a townsman knows so little. For when he walked past the Petches' cottage he beheld the Attertons' landau, drawn by a sleek and fat pair of horses and driven by a sleek and fat coachman, standing in front of the little gate. Elizabeth Atterton and an ample lady in grey occupied the carriage, and they were inspecting a parrot in a cage, which Mrs. Petch rested on the step.

"I trust," said Mrs. Atterton, "that William is in good health. He looks" – she paused – "he looks far from well, Emma."

"Moulting, 'm," said Mrs. Petch. "That's all."

"But this is not the season for moulting," objected Elizabeth.

"Ah," said Mrs. Petch, with an easy smile, "but William always was different to other birds. Scores and hundreds of times I've heard my poor mistress say so."

"Well, it was a remark my poor aunt often made," said Mrs. Atterton, eyeing the dejected attitude and naked chest of the parrot doubtfully.

"I'm sure you give him every attention. You would, of course, when your annuity dies with him. My poor aunt no doubt felt that." She paused again, and added in answer to Mrs. Petch's look of wounded innocence, "Of course, you would in any case. I do not forget what a devoted maid you were to poor Aunt Arabella."

"She trusted me with William," said Mrs. Petch simply, applying the corner of her apron to her eye.

"I know. I was not reflecting on you in any way, of course, Emma," said Mrs. Atterton kindly. "Only, I promised to see after William sometimes, and I like to do it. Poor William! Of course, one can't expect him to live for ever."

"Parrots sometimes live to be a hundred," said Mrs. Petch quickly. "Sam read that in the paper only the other day, 'm."

"Well, we'll hope William may," said Mrs. Atterton comfortably. "I never liked him, even in his best days, but I don't want him to die."

There was a reposeful kindness about Mrs. Atterton that seemed exactly like that of her daughter Elizabeth – and yet, in its essence it was altogether different.

"Good afternoon, sir," said Mrs. Petch, long before Andy reached the group. She greeted him with such alacrity, indeed, that an enemy might have thought she welcomed the interruption to the interview with William.

"Oh, mamma, here is Mr. Deane. Mr. Deane, you haven't met my mother?" said Elizabeth, who was, for some foolish and obscure reason, a little nervous.

"No – er – I am very glad – that is – I am sorry – at least, I mean to say I am delighted to meet you now," said Andy, who, for some equally foolish and obscure reason, was nervous too.

Mrs. Atterton beamed placidly on him.

"Sorry I did not see you when you called, Mr. Deane, but it was one of my bad days. My back – " She paused, as if that explained all, and Andy filled in the blank with a sympathetic —

"Of course. I'm afraid you are a great sufferer."

"Oh," said Mrs. Atterton pleasantly, "it is not that I have any great pain, but I collapse. Don't I, Elizabeth?"

"Mamma is so patient," said Elizabeth, with loving sincerity. "She hates to make us feel – "

"Come, come, come! Bring that cup of tea! Bring that cup of tea!" interrupted William, croaking hideously.

"Poor Aunt Arabella! Couldn't you fancy you heard her voice from the grave?" murmured Mrs. Atterton, shedding an easy tear.

"William belonged to my great-aunt, Mr. Deane," explained Elizabeth.

Then it swept over Andy again with renewed force, how everybody here was connected in some way with everybody else. He had always known in a general way, of course, as we all do, that if you slip on a banana skin and use expressions better left unemployed you may influence some one for evil in central China – but he had never before come near enough to the principle to be able to see the working of it with the naked eye.

"I thought when I first came to Gaythorpe that William was a person," said Andy, noticing the pink nails of Elizabeth's ungloved hand upon the carriage door.

"Well, poor Aunt Arabella always did say he had an immortal soul – and you never know," said Mrs. Atterton, willing to give everything created the benefit of the doubt.

Then the fat coachman, who was tired of waiting, made one of his fat charges stamp idly on the ground in a perfunctory manner, and Mrs. Atterton said the horses were growing restive and it was time to go.

"So glad we are to see you on Thursday evening," she said, over her shoulder. "Good-bye, Mr. Deane. Good afternoon, Emma. Let me know how William is, please."

The farewells of Andy and Elizabeth were somehow merged in the salutations of Mrs. Atterton, and the responses of Mrs. Petch, but they looked at each other just as the carriage went off with a direct glance which held more than either of them could yet understand of young hope and joy and question.

"What was it?" that look said. They didn't know – they didn't know – only something glorious!

Andy stood staring after the carriage until at last Mrs. Petch's voice from behind penetrated his understanding.

"Cars are all very well," she said, "but there *is* a something about a carriage and pair – however, they *own* motor-cars – it isn't that."

Andy understood that the wealth and standing of the Atterton family were being defended, and replied at once —

"Of course. All the same, I can't understand when you have a Limousine – "

"Mrs. Atterton's back won't stand motor-cars," said Mrs. Petch gravely, but if so perfectly behaved a gardener's wife could have ever winked, Andy would have said she winked then. However, he felt the light must have dazzled his eyes.

"Quite so," he said. "It is a great affliction."

"Yes, sir. It is, indeed," responded Mrs. Petch at once. "Everything in life, as you may say, and yet a back to spoil it all."

"There's always – er – something," said Andy, feeling he ought to improve the occasion.

"There is, indeed," sighed Mrs. Petch, with a sort of serious cheerfulness. "No rose without a thorn in this world, sir, and we can't expect any different. We should never want to go to another if we'd everything we wanted here."

"Nice, right-thinking woman!" reflected Andy, as he went up the road.

He was on his way to visit a woman called old Mrs. Werrit, an obscure connection of the Werrit family who had drifted near them again in her extreme old age, and Andy had been told that day that she was dying. But he was ready enough to help any old person to die, just as he was ready to help any young one to live, and he went up some crooked stairs to the bedroom, full of confidence in himself and his office.

For some time the old woman said nothing in response to his remarks, and allowed a daughter of Mrs. Will Werrit's to answer for her. Maggie Werrit felt rather glad that her aged relative was not

in a talkative mood because she lacked that polish which the best boarding-school in Bardwell had imparted to the latest generation of the family, and the new Vicar would look down on them all if he heard one of them talk about 'ankerchers.'

"I hope you don't suffer much?" said Andy, sitting down beside the bed.

Then Mrs. Werrit opened her eyes, and he was surprised to find how full of life they were in that sunken, dull old face.

"I did suffer," she said, "but that's over now," and she shut her eyes again.

Andy took out his little book and prepared to read, when Mrs. Werrit looked at him once more.

"The others are all gone first," she said. "Every one of us six but me."

"I'm sorry," said Andy, very gently.

"You needn't be," said old Mrs. Werrit. "It doesn't matter now." She paused, and added after a moment, "You'll find out – all that matters at the very end – is how near you've gotten to God in your life."

Then she closed her eyes again, and Andy shut his little book and put it in his pocket without a word, and crept reverently down the crooked stairs as if he were leaving the presence of some one very great.

When he was far down the village street, and too far from the little house to go back again, he realised that, for the first time in his professional career, he had failed in his ministration to the aged poor. He fingered his little book, feeling inclined to go back again, and all the way home something within him smarted and burned underneath his wandering thoughts.

Youth knows nothing more unpleasant than those secret growing pains of the soul of which it does not understand the meaning.

Perhaps it was these – or it might have been the dull evening after a day of clouds and storms – anyway, Andy felt driven forth after supper to tramp restlessly up and down the garden path by the churchyard hedge. Had he chosen the right life? Was he fitted for a country parson?

New and perplexing doubts of himself began to assail him for the first time as he tramped up and down, casting a glance at Brother Gulielmus every now and then over the churchyard hedge.

Had he tramped up and down here too? For the garden dated back to that time, though the house was modern. Had he wondered and felt restless too?

But gradually the regular motion quieted Andy's nerves, and he began to notice how the crimson rambler had grown, and to feel the freshness of the dew-laden air.

Then, quite suddenly, for no reason at all, he remembered with wonderful vividness how Elizabeth's hand had looked upon the door of the carriage. His mental picture of her face was indistinct, but her hand seemed painted on the summer darkness, and he felt an intense longing to take it in his own.

That was all he wanted – so exquisite a thing is the first beginning of young love.

"Mr. Deane! Mr. Deane! Will you have eggs and bacon for breakfast, or the rest of the cold ham?" shrilled Mrs. Jebb from the doorstep.

"Oh, just as you like. I've told you so before," said Andy.

"But I *like* to consult your tastes," said Mrs. Jebb pathetically.

"Eggs and bacon, then," said Andy.

"It's damp under foot," said Mrs. Jebb. Then something in the woman's voice and look as she tried to keep him there for company struck home to Andy's perceptions, and he suddenly realised that she might be dull and lonely too.

"I say – it's awfully good of you to bother about my tastes like that. You mustn't think I don't appreciate it," he said eagerly. "Those gooseberry dumplings we've been having are fine."

"Now Mr. Jebb couldn't assimilate boiled paste at any price," began Mrs. Jebb, delighted.

So Andy listened to her for quarter of an hour and then went back to the path by the churchyard hedge and that dream which Mrs. Jebb had interrupted.

Or perhaps it was scarcely a dream as yet – only the indescribably delicate stuff of which dreams are made.

Gradually, however, the quietness of all about Andy seemed to fit in with his misty memories of Elizabeth. Tenderness. Sweetness. Repose. Why – those meant Elizabeth – they were but other names for her.

Words gathered in his mind, singing of themselves about her sweetness. The nightingale in a little wood half a mile away was no more singing to his mate than Andy there, beneath the churchyard hedge.

Only, the nightingale's song was lovely for every one, and Andy's could never be lovely for any one but Elizabeth.

He pictured them, hand in hand, there in the garden together, watching the village as it went to sleep.

"Let us watch the quiet village
Till each little casement glows
For there's something in the sight, Love,
That is like a heart's repose.

Let us watch the starlight glimmer
Through the windless evening air,
For there's something in your eyes, Love,
That is like a star at prayer.

Let us watch – "

"Beg pardon, sir. Didn't see you. Churchyard's chortesh way home for me," said Sam Petch, blundering through the gate in the hedge. "Beautiful night, sir."

Sam was not uproariously drunk, but he was affably so, and took no notice of Andy's frigid —

"I will speak with you in the morning, Petch. Go home at once."

"Sho I will, sir. Sho I will," said Sam heartily. "An'thing to oblige. Good-night, sir." He paused, then looked back and said pleasantly, "Had a bit o' bad luck on my way home, sir. Wife sent me for sixpennoth o' brandy for her spasms, and I've broke the bottle. I suppose you haven't a drop you could – "

"No," said Andy sternly. "Go home."

"Of course, sir. *Of* course. No offence taken and none meant," said Sam, moving off. He paused again and added solemnly, "It's a great relief to me, after the way our poor late Vicar went on, to find you don't keep no spirits in the house, sir. A great relief it is. Good-night."

CHAPTER VI

When Andy went into the garden next morning he buckled on tight the mantle of the senior curate and advanced across the grass to where Sam Petch was bending over a flower-bed with an air of decent contrition. No skulking behind bushes for him – he prodded dismally for all the world to see.

Andy, in spite of himself, felt slightly mollified, but he had made up his mind to say a certain thing, and he said it.

"This state of things cannot continue. You bring discredit on my profession, my parish, and myself."

There – that was it – just as the senior curate would have put it; Andy took hold of his coat lapel, coughed, and waited – just as the senior curate would have done.

It is one of those facts about human nature which cannot be explained, that while Andy disliked the senior curate exceedingly, and had groaned under his oppressive rule, he strove to imitate that gentleman. Perhaps he unconsciously wanted people to be as much impressed by him as he had been by the senior curate.

Anyway, Sam Petch appeared to be greatly impressed by the dignified rebuke.

"I own I'd had a drop too much," he said repentantly. "But Bill Shaw drank five times what I did and never turned a hair. It shows how unfair things is, sir."

"If a little makes you drunk you must refrain from that little," said Andy, severely.

"I know," acknowledged Sam. "But it is hard when a man can't take his mug o' beer with the rest without getting what you might call jolly; isn't it, sir?"

"After all – what is a mug of beer?" argued Andy. "I'm not a total abstainer myself, but I will become one if you will."

Sam's potations of the previous night still hung about him sufficiently to make him very irritable, and he suddenly lost control of his temper.

"It's all very well talking like that," he said. "You, who don't care whether you ever have another drink or not – what do you know about it? Give up the thing you like best and then I'll do the same."

Andy looked at the man, and the mantle of the senior curate was blown away in the blast of truth that swept across him. He even forgot to notice the disrespectfulness of Sam's manner as that wind burst open a closed chamber in his mind and he saw farther than he had ever done before.

"All right," he said simply. "I like" – he sought for his preference – "I like butter best of anything – always did, as a little kid – I'll give up that."

"I'll give up beer, then," agreed Sam Petch; but he made certain mental reservations of which Andy, naturally, could know nothing. Every man had a right to beer on a Saturday night, of course; that was the privilege of a British working-man which was above and beyond all other agreements.

Then Andy went back into the house with a complete sense of failure dogging his footsteps. It was a ridiculous and undignified thing to do, to make a compact of that nature with a drunken gardener. He ought to have insisted in a dignified manner upon instant reform or instant dismissal.

"Mrs. Jebb," he said, looking in at the kitchen door, "please do not send butter into the room with my meals. I shall not be taking any for some time."

"What? No butter?" said Mrs. Jebb. "Are you bilious? Well, I know towards the last Mr. Jebb never could – "

"And I am dining out to-night," continued Andy, who was particularly disinclined, just then, for Mr. Jebb.

"How convenient! I mean, how strange!" said Mrs. Jebb. "I was just about to ask if you would have any objection to my going over to Millsby Hall this evening."

"Why – are you invited too?" said Andy, very much astonished. "I mean, there's no reason why you should not be dining with the Attertons, only I hadn't heard – "

"Once a lady always a lady, of course," replied Mrs. Jebb, smoothing her lace cravat. "But the conventions of life are such that, as lady-cook-housekeeper, I neither am, nor expect to be, bidden to Mrs. Atterton's table. I was referring to the Long Night."

She gave to the two last words such a melancholy emphasis that Andy had a vague idea, for the moment, that she was in some new way referring to the demise of Mr. Jebb.

"The long night?" he echoed stupidly.

"I mean the final evening of the Parish Dancing Class," said Mrs. Jebb, "which Mr. and Miss Fanny Kirke have pressed me to attend."

"Of course," said Andy. "I'd forgotten. It is to be held at Millsby Hall, of course, so that Mrs. Atterton may see the final practice of the country dances for the Garden Fête next week."

"Mr. and Miss Kirke told me in confidence," added Mrs. Jebb, with an indescribable air of being 'in the know,' "that Mrs. Atterton's back would not permit of her coming to the village schoolroom."

"Ah," said Andy, to whom even the back of the Beloved's mamma was sacred. "Well, go, by all means, Mrs. Jebb. I expect I shall see you dancing like a girl."

"My girlhood's days are over," sighed Mrs. Jebb. "But" – she cheered up – "married ladies are very popular in ballrooms now, I understand. The gentlemen seem to like mature conversation combined with their dancing. And I do not intend to refuse. I think it neither Christian nor right, Mr. Deane, for a widow to make a suttee of herself."

"Of course not," agreed Andy absently. "Well – no butter – you quite understand?"

"Trust me," said Mrs. Jebb effusively, "to understand a gentleman's inside. For months before he died, Mr. Jebb – "

Andy departed, and the recording angel put it down to the right side of his everlasting account that he did *not* say, "Damn Mr. Jebb."

The day seemed long, and the afternoon appeared to stretch out interminably until the hour when Andy could adorn himself in a new clerical dress-suit which he now thanked the aunt and cousins in Birmingham for insisting upon; thus arrayed, he surveyed his newly plastered curls in the looking-glass, and felt that, though severely freckled and rather short than otherwise, he was the right thing.

He stepped jauntily in the cool of the evening past Brother Gulielmus asleep, and never gave him a thought, only wondering if he had buckled his braces high enough, or if his trousers were, after all, a shade too long. He paused behind the yew at the corner to adjust matters, and gazed down at his legs with a keen preoccupation that left no room for anything else.

He felt it was such an immensely important thing that Elizabeth should see him with his trousers exactly the right length, and he was very much startled to hear a voice behind him saying tentatively —

"Excuse me – as a married lady – perhaps I *might* oblige with a safety-pin – "

Mrs. Jebb again! – taking the air in the congenial neighbourhood of the tombstones.

Not daring to trust himself to speech, Andy shook his head and marched out of the churchyard. He began to hate Mrs. Jebb.

But when he came in sight of Millsby Hall he forgot all about her, and approached with beating pulses the extremely ugly, modern house which sheltered the lady of his dreams. It had been built by Mr. Atterton's father after he developed from a small county landowner into the owner of a watering-place. Marshaven, previously to 1850, had been the resort of fishermen and waterfowl only; now it was crowded from June to September with train-loads of trippers from all over the country, and Mr. Atterton found the joy and interest of his existence in supervising the erection of ever-new rows of red-brick villas, and in putting his finger into every pie which the town council of that prosperous resort made for the purpose of attracting visitors.

"I believe we've got that matter arranged with the Bandmaster," he said, rubbing his hands energetically as he entered his drawing-room that evening. "I did think for a time that the situation looked serious, but I approached him informally at first, and then officially, as the Chairman of the

‘Amusements Committee,’ and I think the crisis is over.” He paused, and smiled with satisfaction at his assembled family. “I’m glad to have my mind free for the Promenade question – that will take some engineering – but of one thing I am absolutely determined,” – he hit one hand on the other – “I will *not*

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.