

Trollope Anthony

The Fixed Period



Anthony Trollope

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«Public Domain»

Trollope A.

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VOLUME I

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

It may be doubted whether a brighter, more prosperous, and specially a more orderly colony than Britannula was ever settled by British colonists. But it had its period of separation from the mother country, though never of rebellion, – like its elder sister New Zealand. Indeed, in that respect it simply followed the lead given her by the Australias, which, when they set up for themselves, did so with the full co-operation of England. There was, no doubt, a special cause with us which did not exist in Australia, and which was only, in part, understood by the British Government when we Britannulists were allowed to stand by ourselves. The great doctrine of a "Fixed Period" was received by them at first with ridicule, and then with dismay; but it was undoubtedly the strong faith which we of Britannula had in that doctrine which induced our separation. Nothing could have been more successful than our efforts to live alone during the thirty years that we remained our own masters. We repudiated no debt, – as have done some of our neighbours; and no attempts have been made towards communism, – as has been the case with others. We have been laborious, contented, and prosperous; and if we have been reabsorbed by the mother country, in accordance with what I cannot but call the pusillanimous conduct of certain of our elder Britannulists, it has not been from any failure on the part of the island, but from the opposition with which the Fixed Period has been regarded.

I think I must begin my story by explaining in moderate language a few of the manifest advantages which would attend the adoption of the Fixed Period in all countries. As far as the law went it was adopted in Britannula. Its adoption was the first thing discussed by our young Assembly, when we found ourselves alone; and though there were disputes on the subject, in none of them was opposition made to the system. I myself, at the age of thirty, had been elected Speaker of that Parliament. But I was, nevertheless, able to discuss the merits of the bills in committee, and I did so with some enthusiasm. Thirty years have passed since, and my "period" is drawing nigh. But I am still as energetic as ever, and as assured that the doctrine will ultimately prevail over the face of the civilised world, though I will acknowledge that men are not as yet ripe for it.

The Fixed Period has been so far discussed as to make it almost unnecessary for me to explain its tenets, though its advantages may require a few words of argument in a world that is at present dead to its charms. It consists altogether of the abolition of the miseries, weakness, and *fainéant* imbecility of old age, by the prearranged ceasing to live of those who would otherwise become old. Need I explain to the inhabitants of England, for whom I chiefly write, how extreme are those sufferings, and how great the costliness of that old age which is unable in any degree to supply its own wants? Such old age should not, we Britannulists maintain, be allowed to be. This should be prevented, in the interests both of the young and of those who do become old when obliged to linger on after their "period" of work is over. Two mistakes have been made by mankind in reference to their own race, – first, in allowing the world to be burdened with the continued maintenance of those whose cares should have been made to cease, and whose troubles should be at an end. Does not the Psalmist say the same? – "If by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow." And the second, in requiring those who remain to live a useless and painful life. Both these errors

have come from an ill-judged and a thoughtless tenderness, – a tenderness to the young in not calling upon them to provide for the decent and comfortable departure of their progenitors; and a tenderness to the old lest the man, when uninstructed and unconscious of good and evil, should be unwilling to leave the world for which he is not fitted. But such tenderness is no better than unpardonable weakness. Statistics have told us that the sufficient sustenance of an old man is more costly than the feeding of a young one, – as is also the care, nourishment, and education of the as yet unprofitable child. Statistics also have told us that the unprofitable young and the no less unprofitable old form a third of the population. Let the reader think of the burden with which the labour of the world is thus saddled. To these are to be added all who, because of illness cannot work, and because of idleness will not. How are a people to thrive when so weighted? And for what good? As for the children, they are clearly necessary. They have to be nourished in order that they may do good work as their time shall come. But for whose good are the old and effete to be maintained amid all these troubles and miseries? Had there been any one in our Parliament capable of showing that they could reasonably desire it, the bill would not have been passed. Though to me the politico-economical view of the subject was always very strong, the relief to be brought to the aged was the one argument to which no reply could be given.

It was put forward by some who opposed the movement, that the old themselves would not like it. I never felt sure of that, nor do I now. When the colony had become used to the Fixed Period system, the old would become accustomed as well as the young. It is to be understood that a euthanasia was to be prepared for them; – and how many, as men now are, does a euthanasia await? And they would depart with the full respect of all their fellow-citizens. To how many does that lot now fall? During the last years of their lives they were to be saved from any of the horrors of poverty. How many now lack the comforts they cannot earn for themselves? And to them there would be no degraded feeling that they were the recipients of charity. They would be prepared for their departure, for the benefit of their country, surrounded by all the comforts to which, at their time of life, they would be susceptible, in a college maintained at the public expense; and each, as he drew nearer to the happy day, would be treated with still increasing honour. I myself had gone most closely into the question of expense, and had found that by the use of machinery the college could almost be made self-supporting. But we should save on an average £50 for each man and woman who had departed. When our population should have become a million, presuming that one only in fifty would have reached the desired age, the sum actually saved to the colony would amount to £1,000,000 a-year. It would keep us out of debt, make for us our railways, render all our rivers navigable, construct our bridges, and leave us shortly the richest people on God's earth! And this would be effected by a measure doing more good to the aged than to any other class of the community!

Many arguments were used against us, but were vain and futile in their conception. In it religion was brought to bear; and in talking of this the terrible word "murder" was brought into common use. I remember startling the House by forbidding any member to use a phrase so revolting to the majesty of the people. Murder! Did any one who attempted to deter us by the use of foul language, bethink himself that murder, to be murder, must be opposed to the law? This thing was to be done by the law. There can be no other murder. If a murderer be hanged, – in England, I mean, for in Britannula we have no capital punishment, – is that murder? It is not so, only because the law enacts it. I and a few others did succeed at last in stopping the use of that word. Then they talked to us of Methuselah, and endeavoured to draw an argument from the age of the patriarchs. I asked them in committee whether they were prepared to prove that the 969 years, as spoken of in Genesis, were the same measure of time as 969 years now, and told them that if the sanitary arrangements of the world would again permit men to live as long as the patriarchs, we would gladly change the Fixed Period.

In fact, there was not a word to be said against us except that which referred to the feelings of the young and old. Feelings are changeable, I told them at that great and glorious meeting which we had at Gladstonopolis, and though naturally governed only by instinct, would be taught at last to

comply with reason. I had lately read how feelings had been allowed in England to stand in the way of the great work of cremation. A son will not like, you say, to lead his father into the college. But ought he not to like to do so? and if so, will not reason teach him to like to do what he ought? I can conceive with rapture the pride, the honour, the affection with which, when the Fixed Period had come, I could have led my father into the college, there to enjoy for twelve months that preparation for euthanasia which no cares for this world would be allowed to disturb. All the existing ideas of the grave would be absent. There would be no further struggles to prolong the time of misery which nature had herself produced. That temptation to the young to begrudge to the old the costly comforts which they could not earn would be no longer fostered. It would be a pride for the young man to feel that his parent's name had been enrolled to all coming time in the bright books of the college which was to be established for the Fixed Period. I have a son of my own, and I have carefully educated him to look forward to the day in which he shall deposit me there as the proudest of his life. Circumstances, as I shall relate in this story, have somewhat interfered with him; but he will, I trust, yet come back to the right way of thinking. That I shall never spend that last happy year within the walls of the college, is to me, from a selfish point of view, the saddest part of England's reassuming our island as a colony.

My readers will perceive that I am an enthusiast. But there are reforms so great that a man cannot but be enthusiastic when he has received into his very soul the truth of any human improvement. Alas me! I shall never live to see carried out the glory of this measure to which I have devoted the best years of my existence. The college, which has been built under my auspices as a preparation for the happy departure, is to be made a Chamber of Commerce. Those aged men who were awaiting, as I verily believe, in impatience the coming day of their perfected dignity, have been turned loose in the world, and allowed to grovel again with mundane thoughts amidst the idleness of years that are useless. Our bridges, our railways, our Government are not provided for. Our young men are again becoming torpid beneath the weight imposed upon them. I was, in truth, wrong to think that so great a reform could be brought to perfection within the days of the first reformers. A divine idea has to be made common to men's minds by frequent ventilation before it will be seen to be fit for humanity. Did not the first Christians all suffer affliction, poverty, and martyrdom? How many centuries has it taken in the history of the world to induce it to denounce the not yet abolished theory of slavery? A throne, a lord, and a bishop still remain to encumber the earth! What right had I, then, as the first of the Fixed-Periodists, to hope that I might live to see my scheme carried out, or that I might be allowed to depart as among the first glorious recipients of its advantages?

It would appear absurd to say that had there been such a law in force in England, England would not have prevented its adoption in Britannula. That is a matter of course. But it has been because the old men are still alive in England that the young in Britannula are to be afflicted, – the young and the old as well. The Prime Minister in Downing Street was seventy-two when we were debarred from carrying out our project, and the Secretary for the Colonies was sixty-nine. Had they been among us, and had we been allowed to use our wisdom without interference from effete old age, where would they have been? I wish to speak with all respect of Sir William Gladstone. When we named our metropolis after him, we were aware of his good qualities. He has not the eloquence of his great-grandfather, but he is, they tell us, a safe man. As to the Minister for the Crown Colonies, – of which, alas! Britannula has again become one, – I do not, I own, look upon him as a great statesman. The present Duke of Hatfield has none of the dash, if he has more than the prudence, of his grandfather. He was elected to the present Upper Chamber as a strong anti-Church Liberal, but he never has had the spirit to be a true reformer. It is now due to the "feelings" which fill no doubt the bosoms of these two anti-Fixed-Period seniors, that the doctrine of the Fixed Period has for a time been quenched in Britannula. It is sad to think that the strength and intellect and spirit of manhood should thus be conquered by that very imbecility which it is their desire to banish from the world.

Two years since I had become the President of that which we gloried to call the rising Empire of the South Pacific. And in spite of all internal opposition, the college of the Fixed Period was already

completed. I then received violent notice from the British Government that Britannula had ceased to be independent, and had again been absorbed by the mother country among the Crown Colonies. How that information was received, and with what weakness on the part of the Britannulists, I now proceed to tell.

I confess that I for one was not at first prepared to obey. We were small, but we were independent, and owed no more of submission to Great Britain than we do to the Salomon Islands or to Otaheite. It was for us to make our own laws, and we had hitherto made them in conformity with the institutions, and, I must say, with the prejudices of so-called civilisation. We had now made a first attempt at progress beyond these limits, and we were immediately stopped by the fatuous darkness of the old men whom, had Great Britain known her own interest, she would already have silenced by a Fixed Period law on her own account. No greater instance of uncalled-for tyranny is told of in the history of the world as already written. But my brother Britannulists did not agree with me that, in the interest of the coming races, it was our duty rather to die at our posts than yield to the menaces of the Duke of Hatfield. One British gunboat, they declared, in the harbour of Gladstonopolis, would reduce us – to order. What order? A 250-ton steam-swiveller could no doubt crush us, and bring our Fixed Period college in premature ruin about our ears. But, as was said, the captain of the gunboat would never dare to touch the wire that should commit so wide a destruction. An Englishman would hesitate to fire a shot that would send perhaps five thousand of his fellow-creatures to destruction before their Fixed Period. But even in Britannula fear still remains. It was decided, I will confess by the common voice of the island, that we should admit this Governor, and swear fealty again to the British Crown. Sir Ferdinando Brown was allowed to land, and by the rejoicing made at the first Government House ball, as I have already learned since I left the island, it appeared that the Britannulists rejoiced rather than otherwise at their thralldom.

Two months have passed since that time, and I, being a worn-out old man, and fitted only for the glory of the college, have nothing left me but to write this story, so that coming ages may see how noble were our efforts. But in truth, the difficulties which lay in our way were very stern. The philosophical truth on which the system is founded was too strong, too mighty, too divine, to be adopted by man in the immediate age of its first appearance. But it has appeared; and I perhaps should be contented and gratified, during the years which I am doomed to linger through impotent imbecility, to think that I have been the first reformer of my time, though I shall be doomed to perish without having enjoyed its fruits.

I must now explain before I begin my story certain details of our plan, which created much schism among ourselves. In the first place, what should be the Fixed Period? When a party of us, three or four hundred in number, first emigrated from New Zealand to Britannula, we were, almost all of us, young people. We would not consent to measures in regard to their public debt which the Houses in New Zealand threatened to take; and as this island had been discovered, and a part of it cultivated, thither we determined to go. Our resolution was very popular, not only with certain parties in New Zealand, but also in the mother country. Others followed us, and we settled ourselves with great prosperity. But we were essentially a young community. There were not above ten among us who had then reached any Fixed Period; and not above twenty others who could be said to be approaching it. There never could arrive a time or a people when, or among whom, the system could be tried with so good a hope of success. It was so long before we had been allowed to stand on our bottom, that the Fixed Period became a matter of common conversation in Britannula. There were many who looked forward to it as the creator of a new idea of wealth and comfort; and it was in those days that the calculation was made as to the rivers and railways. I think that in England they thought that a few, and but a few, among us were dreamers of a dream. Had they believed that the Fixed Period would ever have become law, they would not have permitted us to be law-makers. I acknowledge that. But when we were once independent, then again to reduce us to submission by a 250-ton steam-swiveller was an act of gross tyranny.

What should be the Fixed Period? That was the first question which demanded an immediate answer. Years were named absurd in their intended leniency; – eighty and even eighty-five! Let us say a hundred, said I, aloud, turning upon them all the battery of my ridicule. I suggested sixty; but the term was received with silence. I pointed out that the few old men now on the island might be exempted, and that even those above fifty-five might be allowed to drag out their existences if they were weak enough to select for themselves so degrading a position. This latter proposition was accepted at once, and the exempt showed no repugnance even when it was proved to them that they would be left alone in the community and entitled to no honour, and never allowed even to enter the pleasant gardens of the college. I think now that sixty was too early an age, and that sixty-five, to which I gracefully yielded, is the proper Fixed Period for the human race. Let any man look among his friends and see whether men of sixty-five are not in the way of those who are still aspiring to rise in the world. A judge shall be deaf on the bench when younger men below him can hear with accuracy. His voice shall have descended to a poor treble, or his eyesight shall be dim and failing. At any rate, his limbs will have lost all that robust agility which is needed for the adequate performance of the work of the world. It is self-evident that at sixty-five a man has done all that he is fit to do. He should be troubled no longer with labour, and therefore should be troubled no longer with life. "It is all vanity and vexation of spirit," such a one would say, if still brave, and still desirous of honour. "Lead me into the college, and there let me prepare myself for that brighter life which will require no mortal strength." My words did avail with many, and then they demanded that seventy should be the Fixed Period.

How long we fought over this point need not now be told. But we decided at last to divide the interval. Sixty-seven and a half was named by a majority of the Assembly as the Fixed Period. Surely the colony was determined to grow in truth old before it could go into the college. But then there came a further dispute. On which side of the Fixed Period should the year of grace be taken? Our debates even on this subject were long and animated. It was said that the seclusion within the college would be tantamount to penal departure, and that the old men should thus have the last lingering drops of breath allowed them, without, in the world at large. It was at last decided that men and women should be brought into the college at sixty-seven, and that before their sixty-eighth birthday they should have departed. Then the bells were rung, and the whole community rejoiced, and banquets were eaten, and the young men and women called each other brother and sister, and it was felt that a great reform had been inaugurated among us for the benefit of mankind at large.

Little was thought about it at home in England when the bill was passed. There was, I suppose, in the estimation of Englishmen, time enough to think about it. The idea was so strange to them that it was considered impossible that we should carry it out. They heard of the bill, no doubt; but I maintain that, as we had been allowed to separate ourselves and stand alone, it was no more their concern than if it had been done in Arizona or Idaho, or any of those Western States of America which have lately formed themselves into a new union. It was from them, no doubt, that we chiefly expected that sympathy which, however, we did not receive. The world was clearly not yet alive to the grand things in store for it. We received, indeed, a violent remonstrance from the old-fashioned Government at Washington; but in answer to that we stated that we were prepared to stand and fall by the new system – that we expected glory rather than ignominy, and to be followed by mankind rather than repudiated. We had a lengthened correspondence also with New Zealand and with Australia; but England at first did not believe us; and when she was given to understand that we were in earnest, she brought to bear upon us the one argument that could have force, and sent to our harbour her 250-ton steam-swiveller. The 250-ton swiveller, no doubt, was unanswerable – unless we were prepared to die for our system. I was prepared, but I could not carry the people of my country with me.

I have now given the necessary prelude to the story which I have to tell. I cannot but think that, in spite of the isolated manners of Great Britain, readers in that country generally must have become acquainted with the views of the Fixed-Periodists. It cannot but be that a scheme with such power

to change, – and, I may say, to improve, – the manners and habits of mankind, should be known in a country in which a portion of the inhabitants do, at any rate, read and write. They boast, indeed, that not a man or a woman in the British Islands is now ignorant of his letters; but I am informed that the knowledge seldom approaches to any literary taste. It may be that a portion of the masses should have been ignorant of what was being done within the empire of the South Pacific. I have therefore written this preliminary chapter to explain to them what was the condition of Britannula in regard to the Fixed Period just twelve months before England had taken possession of us, and once more made us her own. Sir Ferdinando Brown now rules us, I must say, not with a rod of iron, but very much after his own good will. He makes us flowery speeches, and thinks that they will stand in lieu of independence. He collects his revenue, and informs us that to be taxed is the highest privilege of an ornate civilisation. He pointed to the gunboat in the bay when it came, and called it the divine depository of beneficent power. For a time, no doubt, British "tenderness" will prevail. But I shall have wasted my thoughts, and in vain poured out my eloquence as to the Fixed Period, if, in the course of years, it does not again spring to the front, and prove itself to be necessary before man can accomplish all that he is destined to achieve.

CHAPTER II

GABRIEL CRASWELLER

I will now begin my tale. It is above thirty years since I commenced my agitation in Britannula. We were a small people, and had not then been blessed by separation; but we were, I think, peculiarly intelligent. We were the very cream, as it were, that had been skimmed from the milk-pail of the people of a wider colony, themselves gifted with more than ordinary intelligence. We were the *élite* of the selected population of New Zealand. I think I may say that no race so well informed ever before set itself down to form a new nation. I am now nearly sixty years old, – very nearly fit for the college which, alas! will never be open for me, – and I was nearly thirty when I began to be in earnest as to the Fixed Period. At that time my dearest friend and most trusted coadjutor was Gabriel Crasweller. He was ten years my senior then, and is now therefore fit for deposition in the college were the college there to receive him. He was one of those who brought with them merino sheep into the colony. At great labour and expense he exported from New Zealand a small flock of choice animals, with which he was successful from the first. He took possession of the lands of Little Christchurch, five or six miles from Gladstonopolis, and showed great judgment in the selection. A prettier spot, as it turned out, for the fattening of both beef and mutton and for the growth of wool, it would have been impossible to have found. Everything that human nature wants was there at Little Christchurch. The streams which watered the land were bright and rapid, and always running. The grasses were peculiarly rich, and the old English fruit-trees, which we had brought with us from New Zealand, thrived there with an exuberant fertility, of which the mother country, I am told, knows nothing. He had imported pheasants' eggs, and salmon-spawn, and young deer, and black-cock and grouse, and those beautiful little Alderney cows no bigger than good-sized dogs, which, when milked, give nothing but cream. All these things thrived with him uncommonly, so that it may be declared of him that his lines had fallen in pleasant places. But he had no son; and therefore in discussing with him, as I did daily, the question of the Fixed Period, I promised him that it should be my lot to deposit him in the sacred college when the day of his withdrawal should have come. He had been married before we left New Zealand, and was childless when he made for himself and his wife his homestead at Little Christchurch. But there, after a few years, a daughter was born to him, and I ought to have remembered, when I promised to him that last act of friendship, that it might become the duty of that child's husband to do for him with filial reverence the loving work which I had undertaken to perform.

Many and most interesting were the conversations held between Crasweller and myself on the great subject which filled our hearts. He undoubtedly was sympathetic, and took delight in expatiating on all those benefits that would come to the world from the race of mankind which knew nothing of the debility of old age. He saw the beauty of the theory as well as did I myself, and would speak often of the weakness of that pretended tenderness which would fear to commence a new operation in regard to the feelings of the men and women of the old world. "Can any man love another better than I do you?" I would say to him with energy; "and yet would I scruple for a moment to deposit you in the college when the day had come? I should lead you in with that perfect reverence which it is impossible that the young should feel for the old when they become feeble and incapable." I doubt now whether he relished these allusions to his own seclusion. He would run away from his own individual case, and generalise widely about some future time. And when the time for voting came, he certainly did vote for seventy-five. But I took no offence at his vote. Gabriel Crasweller was almost my dearest friend, and as his girl grew up it was a matter of regret to me that my only son was not quite old enough to be her husband.

Eva Crasweller was, I think, the most perfect piece I ever beheld of youthful feminine beauty. I have not yet seen those English beauties of which so much is said in their own romances, but whom the young men from New York and San Francisco who make their way to Gladstonopolis

do not seem to admire very much. Eva was perfect in symmetry, in features, in complexion, and in simplicity of manners. All languages are the same to her; but that accomplishment has become so common in Britannula that but little is thought of it. I do not know whether she ravished our ears most with the old-fashioned piano and the nearly obsolete violin, or with the modern mousometor, or the more perfect melpomeneon. It was wonderful to hear the way with which she expressed herself at the meeting held about the rising buildings of the college when she was only sixteen. But I think she touched me most with just a roly-poly pudding which she made with her own fair hands for our dinner one Sunday at Little Christchurch. And once when I saw her by chance take a kiss from her lover behind the door, I felt that it was a pity indeed that a man should ever become old. Perhaps, however, in the eyes of some her brightest charm lay in the wealth which her father possessed. His sheep had greatly increased in number; the valleys were filled with his cattle; and he could always sell his salmon for half-a-crown a pound and his pheasants for seven-and-sixpence a brace. Everything had thriven with Crasweller, and everything must belong to Eva as soon as he should have been led into the college. Eva's mother was now dead, and no other child had been born. Crasweller had also embarked his money largely in the wool trade, and had become a sleeping-partner in the house of Grundle & Grabbe. He was an older man by ten years than either of his partners, but yet Grundle's eldest son Abraham was older than Eva when Crasweller lent his money to the firm. It was soon known who was to be the happiest man in the empire. It was young Abraham, by whom Eva was kissed behind the door that Sunday when we ate the roly-poly pudding. Then she came into the room, and, with her eyes raised to heaven, and with a halo of glory almost round her head as she poured forth her voice, she touched the mousometor, and gave us the Old Hundredth psalm.

She was a fine girl at all points, and had been quite alive to the dawn of the Fixed Period system. But at this time, on the memorable occasion of the eating of that dinner, it first began to strike me that my friend Crasweller was getting very near his Fixed Period, and it occurred to me to ask myself questions as to what might be the daughter's wishes. It was the state of her feelings rather that would push itself into my mind. Quite lately he had said nothing about it, – nor had she. On that Sunday morning when he and his girl were at church, – for Crasweller had stuck to the old habit of saying his prayers in a special place on a special day, – I had discussed the matter with young Grundle. Nobody had been into the college as yet. Three or four had died naturally, but Crasweller was about to be the first. We were arranging that he should be attended by pleasant visitors till within the last week or two, and I was making special allusion to the law which required that he should abandon all control of his property immediately on his entering the college. "I suppose he would do that," said Grundle, expressing considerable interest by the tone of his voice.

"Oh, certainly," said I; "he must do that in accordance with the law. But he can make his will up to the very moment in which he is deposited." He had then about twelve months to run. I suppose there was not a man or woman in the community who was not accurately aware of the very day of Crasweller's birth. We had already introduced the habit of tattooing on the backs of the babies the day on which they were born; and we had succeeded in operating also on many of the children who had come into the world before the great law. Some there were who would not submit on behalf of themselves or their children; and we did look forward to some little confusion in this matter. A register had of course been commenced, and there were already those who refused to state their exact ages; but I had been long on the lookout for this, and had a little book of my own in which were inscribed the "periods" of all those who had come to Britannula with us; and since I had first thought of the Fixed Period I had been very careful to note faithfully the births as they occurred. The reader will see how important, as time went on, it would become to have an accurate record, and I already then feared that there might be some want of fidelity after I myself had been deposited. But my friend Crasweller was the first on the list, and there was no doubt in the empire as to the exact day on which he was born. All Britannula knew that he would be the first, and that he was to be deposited on the 13th of June 1980. In conversation with my friend I had frequently alluded to the very day, – to the

happy day, as I used to call it before I became acquainted with his actual feelings, – and he never ventured to deny that on that day he would become sixty-seven.

I have attempted to describe his daughter Eva, and I must say a word as to the personal qualities of her father. He too was a remarkably handsome man, and though his hair was beautifully white, had fewer of the symptoms of age than any old man I had before known. He was tall, robust, and broad, and there was no beginning even of a stoop about him. He spoke always clearly and audibly, and he was known for the firm voice with which he would perform occasionally at some of our decimal readings. We had fixed our price at a decimal in order that the sum so raised might be used for the ornamentation of the college. Our population at Gladstonopolis was so thriving that we found it as easy to collect ten pennies as one. At these readings Gabriel Crasweller was the favourite performer, and it had begun to be whispered by some caitiffs who would willingly disarrange the whole starry system for their own immediate gratification, that Crasweller should not be deposited because of the beauty of his voice. And then the difficulty was somewhat increased by the care and precision with which he attended to his own business. He was as careful as ever about his flocks, and at shearing-time would stand all day in the wool-shed to see to the packing of his wool and the marking of his bales.

"It would be a pity," said to me a Britannulist one day, – a man younger than myself, – "to lock up old Crasweller, and let the business go into the hands of young Grundle. Young Grundle will never know half as much about sheep, in spite of his conceit; and Crasweller is a deal fitter for his work than for living idle in the college till you shall put an end to him."

There was much in these words which made me very angry. According to this man's feelings, the whole system was to be made to suit itself to the peculiarities of one individual constitution. A man who so spoke could have known nothing of the general beauty of the Fixed Period. And he had alluded to the manner of depositing in most disrespectful terms. I had felt it to be essentially necessary so to maintain the dignity of the ceremony as to make it appear as unlike an execution as possible. And this depositing of Crasweller was to be the first, and should – according to my own intentions – be attended with a peculiar grace and reverence. "I don't know what you call locking up," said I, angrily. "Had Mr Crasweller been about to be dragged to a felon's prison, you could not have used more opprobrious language; and as to putting an end to him, you must, I think, be ignorant of the method proposed for adding honour and glory to the last moments in this world of those dear friends whose happy lot it will be to be withdrawn from the world's troubles amidst the love and veneration of their fellow-subjects." As to the actual mode of transition, there had been many discussions held by the executive in President Square, and it had at last been decided that certain veins should be opened while the departing one should, under the influence of morphine, be gently entranced within a warm bath. I, as president of the empire, had agreed to use the lancet in the first two or three cases, thereby intending to increase the honours conferred. Under these circumstances I did feel the sting bitterly when he spoke of my putting "an end" to him. "But you have not," I said, "at all realised the feeling of the ceremony. A few ill-spoken words, such as these you have just uttered, will do us more harm in the minds of many than all your voting will have done good." In answer to this he merely repeated his observation that Crasweller was a very bad specimen to begin with. "He has got ten years of work in him," said my friend, "and yet you intend to make away with him without the slightest compunction."

Make away with him! What an expression to use, – and this from the mouth of one who had been a determined Fixed-Periodist! It angered me to think that men should be so little reasonable as to draw deductions as to an entire system from a single instance. Crasweller might in truth be strong and hearty at the Fixed Period. But that period had been chosen with reference to the community at large; and what though he might have to depart a year or two before he was worn out, still he would do so with everything around him to make him happy, and would depart before he had ever known the agony of a headache. Looking at the entire question with the eyes of reason, I could not but tell myself that a better example of a triumphant beginning to our system could not have been found. But yet there was in it something unfortunate. Had our first hero been compelled to abandon his business

by old age – had he become doting over its details – parsimonious, or extravagant, or even short-sighted in his speculations – public feeling, than which nothing is more ignorant, would have risen in favour of the Fixed Period. "How true is the president's reasoning," the people would have said. "Look at Crasweller; he would have ruined Little Christchurch had he stayed there much longer." But everything he did seemed to prosper; and it occurred to me at last that he forced himself into abnormal sprightliness, with a view of bringing disgrace upon the law of the Fixed Period. If there were any such feeling, I regard it as certainly mean.

On the day after the dinner at which Eva's pudding was eaten, Abraham Grundle came to me at the Executive Hall, and said that he had a few things to discuss with me of importance. Abraham was a good-looking young man, with black hair and bright eyes, and a remarkably handsome moustache; and he was one well inclined to business, in whose hands the firm of Grundle, Grabbe, & Crasweller was likely to thrive; but I myself had never liked him much. I had thought him to be a little wanting in that reverence which he owed to his elders, and to be, moreover, somewhat over-fond of money. It had leaked out that though he was no doubt attached to Eva Crasweller, he had thought quite as much of Little Christchurch; and though he could kiss Eva behind the door, after the ways of young men, still he was more intent on the fleeces than on her lips. "I want to say a word to you, Mr President," he began, "upon a subject that disturbs my conscience very much."

"Your conscience?" said I.

"Yes, Mr President. I believe you're aware that I am engaged to marry Miss Crasweller?"

It may be as well to explain here that my own eldest son, as fine a boy as ever delighted a mother's eye, was only two years younger than Eva, and that my wife, Mrs Neverbend, had of late got it into her head that he was quite old enough to marry the girl. It was in vain that I told her that all that had been settled while Jack was still at the didascalion. He had been Colonel of the Curriculum, as they now call the head boy; but Eva had not then cared for Colonels of Curriculums, but had thought more of young Grundle's moustache. My wife declared that all that was altered, – that Jack was, in fact, a much more manly fellow than Abraham with his shiny bit of beard; and that if one could get at a maiden's heart, we should find that Eva thought so. In answer to this I bade her hold her tongue, and remember that in Britannula a promise was always held to be as good as a bond. "I suppose a young woman may change her mind in Britannula as well as elsewhere," said my wife. I turned all this over in my mind, because the slopes of Little Christchurch are very alluring, and they would all belong to Eva so soon. And then it would be well, as I was about to perform for Crasweller so important a portion of his final ceremony, our close intimacy should be drawn still nearer by a family connection. I did think of it; but then it occurred to me that the girl's engagement to young Grundle was an established fact, and it did not behove me to sanction the breach of a contract. "Oh yes," said I to the young man, "I am aware that there is an understanding to that effect between you and Eva's father."

"And between me and Eva, I can assure you."

Having observed the kiss behind the door on the previous day, I could not deny the truth of this assertion.

"It is quite understood," continued Abraham, "and I had always thought that it was to take place at once, so that Eva might get used to her new life before her papa was deposited."

To this I merely bowed my head, as though to signify that it was a matter with which I was not personally concerned. "I had taken it for granted that my old friend would like to see his daughter settled, and Little Christchurch put into his daughter's hands before he should bid adieu to his own sublunary affairs," I remarked, when I found that he paused.

"We all thought so up at the warehouse," said he, – "I and father, and Grabbe, and Postlecott, our chief clerk. Postlecott is the next but three on the books, and is getting very melancholy. But he is especially anxious just at present to see how Crasweller bears it."

"What has all that to do with Eva's marriage?"

"I suppose I might marry her. But he hasn't made any will."

"What does that matter? There is nobody to interfere with Eva."

"But he might go off, Mr Neverbend," whispered Grundle; "and where should I be then? If he was to get across to Auckland, or to Sydney, and to leave some one to manage the property for him, what could you do? That's what I want to know. The law says that he shall be deposited on a certain day."

"He will become as nobody in the eye of the law," said I, with all the authority of a President.

"But if he and his daughter have understood each other; and if some deed be forthcoming by which Little Christchurch shall have been left to trustees; and if he goes on living at Sydney, let us say, on the fat of the land, – drawing all the income, and leaving the trustees as legal owners, – where should I be then?"

"In that case," said I, having taken two or three minutes for consideration, – "in that case, I presume the property would be confiscated by law, and would go to his natural heir. Now if his natural heir be then your wife, it will be just the same as though the property were yours." Young Grundle shook his head. "I don't know what more you would want. At any rate, there is no more for you to get." I confess that at that moment the idea of my boy's chance of succeeding with the heiress did present itself to my mind. According to what my wife had said, Jack would have jumped at the girl with just what she stood up in; and had sworn to his mother, when he had been told that morning about the kiss behind the door, that he would knock that brute's head off his shoulders before many days were gone by. Looking at the matter merely on behalf of Jack, it appeared to me that Little Christchurch would, in that case, be quite safe, let Crasweller be deposited, – or run away to Sydney.

"You do not know for certain about the confiscation of the property," said Abraham.

"I've told you as much, Mr Grundle, as it is fit that you should know," I replied, with severity. "For the absolute condition of the law you must look in the statute-book, and not come to the President of the empire."

Abraham Grundle then departed. I had assumed an angry air, as though I were offended with him, for troubling me on a matter by referring simply to an individual. But he had in truth given rise to very serious and solemn thoughts. Could it be that Crasweller, my own confidential friend – the man to whom I had trusted the very secrets of my soul on this important matter, – could it be that he should be unwilling to be deposited when the day had come? Could it be that he should be anxious to fly from his country and her laws, just as the time had arrived when those laws might operate upon him for the benefit of that country? I could not think that he was so vain, so greedy, so selfish, and so unpatriotic. But this was not all. Should he attempt to fly, could we prevent his flying? And if he did fly, what step should we take next? The Government of New South Wales was hostile to us on the very matter of the Fixed Period, and certainly would not surrender him in obedience to any law of extradition. And he might leave his property to trustees who would manage it on his behalf; although, as far as Britannula was concerned, he would be beyond the reach of law, and regarded even as being without the pale of life. And if he, the first of the Fixed-Periodists, were to run away, the fashion of so running would become common. We should thus be rid of our old men, and our object would be so far attained. But looking forward, I could see at a glance that if one or two wealthy members of our community were thus to escape, it would be almost impossible to carry out the law with reference to those who should have no such means. But that which vexed me most was that Gabriel Crasweller should desire to escape, – that he should be anxious to throw over the whole system to preserve the poor remnant of his life. If he would do so, who could be expected to abstain? If he should prove false when the moment came, who would prove true? And he, the first, the very first on our list! Young Grundle had now left me, and as I sat thinking of it I was for a moment tempted to abandon the Fixed Period altogether. But as I remained there in silent meditation, better thoughts came to me. Had I dared to regard myself as the foremost spirit of my age, and should I thus be turned back by the human weakness of one poor creature who had not sufficiently collected the strength of his heart to be able to look death in the face and to laugh him down. It was a difficulty – a difficulty the

more. It might be the crushing difficulty which would put an end to the system as far as my existence was concerned. But I bethought me how many early reformers had perished in their efforts, and how seldom it had been given to the first man to scale the walls of prejudice, and force himself into the citadel of reason. But they had not yielded when things had gone against them; and though they had not brought their visions down to the palpable touch of humanity, still they had persevered, and their efforts had not been altogether lost to the world.

"So it shall be with me," said I. "Though I may never live to deposit a human being within that sanctuary, and though I may be doomed by the foolish prejudice of men to drag out a miserable existence amidst the sorrows and weakness of old age; though it may never be given to me to feel the ineffable comforts of a triumphant deposition, – still my name will be handed down to coming ages, and I shall be spoken of as the first who endeavoured to save grey hairs from being brought with sorrow to the grave."

I am now writing on board H.M. gunboat John Bright, – for the tyrannical slaves of a modern monarch have taken me in the flesh and are carrying me off to England, so that, as they say, all that nonsense of a Fixed Period may die away in Britannula. They think, – poor ignorant fighting men, – that such a theory can be made to perish because one individual shall have been mastered. But no! The idea will still live, and in ages to come men will prosper and be strong, and thrive, unpolluted by the greed and cowardice of second childhood, because John Neverbend was at one time President of Britannula.

It occurred to me then, as I sat meditating over the tidings conveyed to me by Abraham Grundle, that it would be well that I should see Crasweller, and talk to him freely on the subject. It had sometimes been that by my strength I had reinvigorated his halting courage. This suggestion that he might run away as the day of his deposition drew nigh, – or rather, that others might run away, – had been the subject of some conversation between him and me. "How will it be," he had said, "if they mizzle?" He had intended to allude to the possible premature departure of those who were about to be deposited.

"Men will never be so weak," I said.

"I suppose you'd take all their property?"

"Every stick of it."

"But property is a thing which can be conveyed away."

"We should keep a sharp look-out upon themselves. There might be a writ, you know, *ne exeant regno*. If we are driven to a pinch, that will be the last thing to do. But I should be sorry to be driven to express my fear of human weakness by any general measure of that kind. It would be tantamount to an accusation of cowardice against the whole empire."

Crasweller had only shaken his head. But I had understood him to shake it on the part of the human race generally, and not on his own behalf.

CHAPTER III THE FIRST BREAK-DOWN

It was now mid-winter, and it wanted just twelve months to that 30th of June on which, in accordance with all our plans, Crasweller was to be deposited. A full year would, no doubt, suffice for him to arrange his worldly affairs, and to see his daughter married; but it would not more than suffice. He still went about his business with an alacrity marvellous in one who was so soon about to withdraw himself from the world. The fleeces for bearing which he was preparing his flocks, though they might be shorn by him, would never return their prices to his account. They would do so for his daughter and his son-in-law; but in these circumstances, it would have been well for him to have left the flocks to his son-in-law, and to have turned his mind to the consideration of other matters. "There should be a year devoted to that final year to be passed within the college, so that, by degrees, the mind may be weaned from the ignoble art of money-making." I had once so spoken to him; but there he was, as intent as ever, with his mind fixed on the records of the price of wool as they came back to him from the English and American markets. "It is all for his daughter," I had said to myself. "Had he been blessed with a son, it would have been otherwise with him." So I got on to my steam-tricycle, and in a few minutes I was at Little Christchurch. He was coming in after a hard day's work among the flocks, and seemed to be triumphant and careful at the same time.

"I tell you what it is, Neverbend," said he; "we shall have the fluke over here if we don't look after ourselves."

"Have you found symptoms of it?"

"Well; not exactly among my own sheep; but I know the signs of it so well. My grasses are peculiarly dry, and my flocks are remarkably well looked after; but I can see indications of it. Only fancy where we should all be if fluke showed itself in Britannula! If it once got ahead we should be no better off than the Australians."

This might be anxiety for his daughter; but it looked strangely like that personal feeling which would have been expected in him twenty years ago. "Crasweller," said I, "do you mind coming into the house, and having a little chat?" and so I got off my tricycle.

"I was going to be very busy," he said, showing an unwillingness. "I have fifty young foals in that meadow there; and I like to see that they get their suppers served to them warm."

"Bother the young foals!" said I. "As if you had not men enough about the place to see to feeding your stock without troubling yourself. I have come out from Gladstonopolis, because I want to see you; and now I am to be sent back in order that you might attend to the administration of hot mashes! Come into the house." Then I entered in under the verandah, and he followed. "You certainly have got the best-furnished house in the empire," said I, as I threw myself on to a double arm-chair, and lighted my cigar in the inner verandah.

"Yes, yes," said he; "it is pretty comfortable."

He was evidently melancholy, and knew the purpose for which I had come. "I don't suppose any girl in the old country was ever better provided for than will be Eva." This I said wishing to comfort him, and at the same time to prepare for what was to be said.

"Eva is a good girl, – a dear girl. But I am not at all so sure about that young fellow Abraham Grundle. It's a pity, President, your son had not been born a few years sooner." At this moment my boy was half a head taller than young Grundle, and a much better specimen of a Britannulist. "But it is too late now, I suppose, to talk of that. It seems to me that Jack never even thinks of looking at Eva."

This was a view of the case which certainly was strange to me, and seemed to indicate that Crasweller was gradually becoming fit for the college. If he could not see that Jack was madly in love with Eva, he could see nothing at all. But I had not come out to Little Christchurch at the present moment to talk to him about the love matters of the two children. I was intent on something of

infinitely greater importance. "Crasweller," said I, "you and I have always agreed to the letter on this great matter of the Fixed Period." He looked into my face with supplicating, weak eyes, but he said nothing. "Your period now will soon have been reached, and I think it well that we, as dear loving friends, should learn to discuss the matter closely as it draws nearer. I do not think that it becomes either of us to be afraid of it."

"That's all very well for you," he replied. "I am your senior."

"Ten years, I believe."

"About nine, I think."

This might have come from a mistake of his as to my exact age; and though I was surprised at the error, I did not notice it on this occasion. "You have no objection to the law as it stands now?" I said.

"It might have been seventy."

"That has all been discussed fully, and you have given your assent. Look round on the men whom you can remember, and tell me, on how many of them life has not sat as a burden at seventy years of age?"

"Men are so different," said he. "As far as one can judge of his own capacities, I was never better able to manage my business than I am at present. It is more than I can say for that young fellow Grundle, who is so anxious to step into my shoes."

"My dear Crasweller," I rejoined, "it was out of the question so to arrange the law as to vary the term to suit the peculiarities of one man or another."

"But in a change of such terrible severity you should have suited the eldest."

This was dreadful to me, – that he, the first to receive at the hands of his country the great honour intended for him, – that he should have already allowed his mind to have rebelled against it! If he, who had once been so keen a supporter of the Fixed Period, now turned round and opposed it, how could others who should follow be expected to yield themselves up in a fitting frame of mind? And then I spoke my thoughts freely to him. "Are you afraid of departure?" I said, – "afraid of that which must come; afraid to meet as a friend that which you must meet so soon as friend or enemy?" I paused; but he sat looking at me without reply. "To fear departure; – must it not be the greatest evil of all our life, if it be necessary? Can God have brought us into the world, intending us so to leave it that the very act of doing so shall be regarded by us as a curse so terrible as to neutralise all the blessings of our existence? Can it be that He who created us should have intended that we should so regard our dismissal from the world? The teachers of religion have endeavoured to reconcile us to it, and have, in their vain zeal, endeavoured to effect it by picturing to our imaginations a hell-fire into which ninety-nine must fall; while one shall be allowed to escape to a heaven, which is hardly made more alluring to us! Is that the way to make a man comfortable at the prospect of leaving this world? But it is necessary to our dignity as men that we shall find the mode of doing so. To lie quivering and quaking on my bed at the expectation of the Black Angel of Death, does not suit my manhood, – which would fear nothing; – which does not, and shall not, stand in awe of aught but my own sins. How best shall we prepare ourselves for the day which we know cannot be avoided? That is the question which I have ever been asking myself, – which you and I have asked ourselves, and which I thought we had answered. Let us turn the inevitable into that which shall in itself be esteemed a glory to us. Let us teach the world so to look forward with longing eyes, and not with a faint heart. I had thought to have touched some few, not by the eloquence of my words, but by the energy of my thoughts; and you, oh my friend, have ever been he whom it has been my greatest joy to have had with me as the sharer of my aspirations."

"But I am nine years older than you are."

I again passed by the one year added to my age. There was nothing now in so trifling an error. "But you still agree with me as to the fundamental truth of our doctrine."

"I suppose so," said Crasweller.

"I suppose so!" repeated I. "Is that all that can be said for the philosophy to which we have devoted ourselves, and in which nothing false can be found?"

"It won't teach any one to think it better to live than to die while he is fit to perform all the functions of life. It might be very well if you could arrange that a man should be deposited as soon as he becomes absolutely infirm."

"Some men are infirm at forty."

"Then deposit them," said Crasweller.

"Yes; but they will not own that they are infirm. If a man be weak at that age, he thinks that with advancing years he will resume the strength of his youth. There must, in fact, be a Fixed Period. We have discussed that fifty times, and have always arrived at the same conclusion."

He sat still, silent, unhappy, and confused. I saw that there was something on his mind to which he hardly dared to give words. Wishing to encourage him, I went on. "After all, you have a full twelve months yet before the day shall have come."

"Two years," he said, doggedly.

"Exactly; two years before your departure, but twelve months before deposition."

"Two years before deposition," said Crasweller.

At this I own I was astonished. Nothing was better known in the empire than the ages of the two or three first inhabitants to be deposited. I would have undertaken to declare that not a man or a woman in Britannula was in doubt as to Mr Crasweller's exact age. It had been written in the records, and upon the stones belonging to the college. There was no doubt that within twelve months of the present date he was due to be detained there as the first inhabitant. And now I was astounded to hear him claim another year, which could not be allowed him.

"That impudent fellow Grundle has been with me," he continued, "and wishes to make me believe that he can get rid of me in one year. I have, at any rate, two years left of my out-of-door existence, and I do not mean to give up a day of it for Grundle or any one else."

It was something to see that he still recognised the law, though he was so meanly anxious to evade it. There had been some whisperings in the empire among the elderly men and women of a desire to obtain the assistance of Great Britain in setting it aside. Peter Grundle, for instance, Crasweller's senior partner, had been heard to say that England would not allow a deposited man to be slaughtered. There was much in that which had angered me. The word slaughter was in itself peculiarly objectionable to my ears, – to me who had undertaken to perform the first ceremony as an act of grace. And what had England to do with our laws? It was as though Russia were to turn upon the United States and declare that their Congress should be put down. What would avail the loudest voice of Great Britain against the smallest spark of a law passed by our Assembly? – unless, indeed, Great Britain should condescend to avail herself of her great power, and thus to crush the free voice of those whom she had already recognised as independent. As I now write, this is what she has already done, and history will have to tell the story. But it was especially sad to have to think that there should be a Britannulist so base, such a coward, such a traitor, as himself to propose this expedient for adding a few years to his own wretched life.

But Crasweller did not, as it seemed, intend to avail himself of these whispers. His mind was intent on devising some falsehood by which he should obtain for himself just one other year of life, and his expectant son-in-law purposed to prevent him. I hardly knew as I turned it all in my mind, which of the two was the more sordid; but I think that my sympathies were rather in accord with the cowardice of the old man than with the greed of the young. After all, I had known from the beginning that the fear of death was a human weakness. To obliterate that fear from the human heart, and to build up a perfect manhood that should be liberated from so vile a thralldom, had been one of the chief objects of my scheme. I had no right to be angry with Crasweller, because Crasweller, when tried, proved himself to be no stronger than the world at large. It was a matter to me of infinite regret that it should be so. He was the very man, the very friend, on whom I had relied with confidence!

But his weakness was only a proof that I myself had been mistaken. In all that Assembly by which the law had been passed, consisting chiefly of young men, was there one on whom I could rest with confidence to carry out the purpose of the law when his own time should come? Ought I not so to have arranged matters that I myself should have been the first, – to have postponed the use of the college till such time as I might myself have been deposited? This had occurred to me often throughout the whole agitation; but then it had occurred also that none might perhaps follow me, when under such circumstances I should have departed!

But in my heart I could forgive Crasweller. For Grundle I felt nothing but personal dislike. He was anxious to hurry on the deposition of his father-in-law, in order that the entire possession of Little Christchurch might come into his own hands just one year the earlier! No doubt he knew the exact age of the man as well as I did, but it was not for him to have hastened his deposition. And then I could not but think, even in this moment of public misery, how willing Jack would have been to have assisted old Crasweller in his little fraud, so that Eva might have been the reward. My belief is that he would have sworn against his own father, perjured himself in the very teeth of truth, to have obtained from Eva that little privilege which I had once seen Grundle enjoying.

I was sitting there silent in Crasweller's verandah as all this passed through my mind. But before I spoke again I was enabled to see clearly what duty required of me. Eva and Little Christchurch, with Jack's feelings and interests, and all my wife's longings, must be laid on one side, and my whole energy must be devoted to the literal carrying out of the law. It was a great world's movement that had been projected, and if it were to fail now, just at its commencement, when everything had been arranged for the work, when again would there be hope? It was a matter which required legislative sanction in whatever country might adopt it. No despot could attempt it, let his power be ever so confirmed. The whole country would rise against him when informed, in its ignorance, of the contemplated intention. Nor could it be effected by any congress of which the large majority were not at any rate under forty years of age. I had seen enough of human nature to understand its weakness in this respect. All circumstances had combined to make it practicable in Britannula, but all these circumstances might never be combined again. And it seemed to me to depend now entirely on the power which I might exert in creating courage in the heart of the poor timid creature who sat before me. I did know that were Britannula to appeal aloud to England, England, with that desire for interference which has always characterised her, would interfere. But if the empire allowed the working of the law to be commenced in silence, then the Fixed Period might perhaps be regarded as a thing settled. How much, then, depended on the words which I might use!

"Crasweller," I said, "my friend, my brother!"

"I don't know much about that. A man ought not to be so anxious to kill his brother."

"If I could take your place, as God will be my judge, I would do so with as ready a step as a young man to the arms of his beloved. And if for myself, why not for my brother?"

"You do not know," he said. "You have not, in truth, been tried."

"Would that you could try me!"

"And we are not all made of such stuff as you. You have talked about this till you have come to be in love with deposition and departure. But such is not the natural condition of a man. Look back upon all the centuries, and you will perceive that life has ever been dear to the best of men. And you will perceive also that they who have brought themselves to suicide have encountered the contempt of their fellow-creatures."

I would not tell him of Cato and Brutus, feeling that I could not stir him to grandeur of heart by Roman instances. He would have told me that in those days, as far as the Romans knew,

"the Everlasting had not fixed
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter."

I must reach him by other methods than these, if at all. "Who can be more alive than you," I said, "to the fact that man, by the fear of death, is degraded below the level of the brutes?"

"If so, he is degraded," said Crasweller. "It is his condition."

"But need he remain so? Is it not for you and me to raise him to a higher level?"

"Not for me – not for me, certainly. I own that I am no more than man. Little Christchurch is so pleasant to me, and Eva's smiles and happiness; and the lowing of my flocks and the bleating of my sheep are so gracious in my ears, and it is so sweet to my eyes to see how fairly I have turned this wilderness into a paradise, that I own that I would fain stay here a little longer."

"But the law, my friend, the law, – the law which you yourself have been so active in creating."

"The law allows me two years yet," said he; that look of stubbornness which I had before observed again spreading itself over his face.

Now this was a lie; an absolute, undoubted, demonstrable lie. And yet it was a lie which, by its mere telling, might be made available for its intended purpose. If it were known through the capital that Crasweller was anxious to obtain a year's grace by means of so foul a lie, the year's grace would be accorded to him. And then the Fixed Period would be at an end.

"I will tell you what it is," said he, anxious to represent his wishes to me in another light. "Grundle wants to get rid of me."

"Grundle, I fear, has truth on his side," said I, determined to show him that I, at any rate, would not consent to lend myself to the furtherance of a falsehood.

"Grundle wants to get rid of me," he repeated in the same tone. "But he shan't find that I am so easy to deal with. Eva already does not above half like him. Eva thinks that this depositing plan is abominable. She says that no good Christians ever thought of it."

"A child – a sweet child – but still only a child; and brought up by her mother with all the old prejudices."

"I don't know much about that. I never knew a decent woman who wasn't an Episcopalian. Eva is at any rate a good girl, to endeavour to save her father; and I'll tell you what – it is not too late yet. As far as my opinion goes, Jack Neverbend is ten to one a better sort of fellow than Abraham Grundle. Of course a promise has been made; but promises are like pie-crusts. Don't you think that Jack Neverbend is quite old enough to marry a wife, and that he only needs be told to make up his mind to do it? Little Christchurch would do just as well for him as for Grundle. If he don't think much of the girl he must think something of the sheep."

Not think much of the girl! Just at this time Jack was talking to his mother, morning, noon, and night, about Eva, and threatening young Grundle with all kinds of schoolboy punishments if he should persevere in his suit. Only yesterday he had insulted Abraham grossly, and, as I had reason to suspect, had been more than once out to Christchurch on some clandestine object, as to which it was necessary, he thought, to keep old Crasweller in the dark. And then to be told in this manner that Jack didn't think much of Eva, and should be encouraged in preference to look after the sheep! He would have sacrificed every sheep on the place for the sake of half an hour with Eva alone in the woods. But he was afraid of Crasweller, whom he knew to have sanctioned an engagement with Abraham Grundle.

"I don't think that we need bring Jack and his love into this dispute," said I.

"Only that it isn't too late, you know. Do you think that Jack could be brought to lend an ear to it?"

Perish Jack! perish Eva! perish Jack's mother, before I would allow myself to be bribed in this manner, to abandon the great object of all my life! This was evidently Crasweller's purpose. He was endeavouring to tempt me with his flocks and herds. The temptation, had he known it, would have been with Eva, – with Eva and the genuine, downright, honest love of my gallant boy. I knew, too, that at home I should not dare to tell my wife that the offer had been made to me and had been refused. My wife could not understand, – Crasweller could not understand, – how strong may be the passion

founded on the conviction of a life. And honesty, simple honesty, would forbid it. For me to strike a bargain with one already destined for deposition, – that he should be withdrawn from his glorious, his almost immortal state, on the payment of a bribe to me and my family! I had called this man my friend and brother, but how little had the man known me! Could I have saved all Gladstonopolis from imminent flames by yielding an inch in my convictions, I would not have done so in my then frame of mind; and yet this man, – my friend and brother, – had supposed that I could be bought to change my purpose by the pretty slopes and fat flocks of Little Christchurch!

"Crasweller," said I, "let us keep these two things separate; or rather, in discussing the momentous question of the Fixed Period, let us forget the loves of a boy and a girl."

"But the sheep, and the oxen, and the pastures! I can still make my will."

"The sheep, and the oxen, and the pastures must also be forgotten. They can have nothing to do with the settlement of this matter. My boy is dear to me, and Eva is dear also, but not to save even their young lives could I consent to a falsehood in this matter."

"Falsehood! There is no falsehood intended."

"Then there need be no bargain as to Eva, and no need for discussing the flocks and herds on this occasion. Crasweller, you are sixty-six now, and will be sixty-seven this time next year. Then the period of your deposition will have arrived, and in the year following, – two years hence, mind, – the Fixed Period of your departure will have come."

"No."

"Is not such the truth?"

"No; you put it all on a year too far. I was never more than nine years older than you. I remember it all as well as though it were yesterday when we first agreed to come away from New Zealand. When will you have to be deposited?"

"In 1989," I said carefully. "My Fixed Period is 1990."

"Exactly; and mine is nine years earlier. It always was nine years earlier."

It was all manifestly untrue. He knew it to be untrue. For the sake of one poor year he was imploring my assent to a base falsehood, and was endeavouring to add strength to his prayer by a bribe. How could I talk to a man who would so far descend from the dignity of manhood? The law was there to support me, and the definition of the law was in this instance supported by ample evidence. I need only go before the executive of which I myself was the chief, desire that the established documents should be searched, and demand the body of Gabriel Crasweller to be deposited in accordance with the law as enacted. But there was no one else to whom I could leave the performance of this invidious task, as a matter of course. There were aldermen in Gladstonopolis and magistrates in the country whose duty it would no doubt be to see that the law was carried out. Arrangements to this effect had been studiously made by myself. Such arrangements would no doubt be carried out when the working of the Fixed Period had become a thing established. But I had long foreseen that the first deposition should be effected with some *éclat* of voluntary glory. It would be very detrimental to the cause to see my special friend Crasweller hauled away to the college by constables through the streets of Gladstonopolis, protesting that he was forced to his doom twelve months before the appointed time. Crasweller was a popular man in Britannula, and the people around would not be so conversant with the fact as was I, nor would they have the same reasons to be anxious that the law should be accurately followed. And yet how much depended upon the accuracy of following the law! A willing obedience was especially desired in the first instance, and a willing obedience I had expected from my friend Crasweller.

"Crasweller," I said, addressing him with great solemnity; "it is not so."

"It is – it is; I say it is."

"It is not so. The books that have been printed and sworn to, which have had your own assent with that of others, are all against you."

"It was a mistake. I have got a letter from my old aunt in Hampshire, written to my mother when I was born, which proves the mistake."

"I remember the letter well," I said, – for we had all gone through such documents in performing the important task of settling the Period. "You were born in New South Wales, and the old lady in England did not write till the following year."

"Who says so? How can you prove it? She wasn't at all the woman to let a year go by before she congratulated her sister."

"We have your own signature affirming the date."

"How was I to know when I was born? All that goes for nothing."

"And unfortunately," said I, as though clenching the matter, "the Bible exists in which your father entered the date with his usual exemplary accuracy." Then he was silent for a moment as though having no further evidence to offer. "Crasweller," said I, "are you not man enough to do this thing in a straightforward, manly manner?"

"One year!" he exclaimed. "I only ask for one year. I do think that, as the first victim, I have a right to expect that one year should be granted me. Then Jack Neverbend shall have Little Christchurch, and the sheep, and the cattle, and Eva also, as his own for ever and ever, – or at any rate till he too shall be led away to execution!"

A victim; and execution! What language in which to speak of the great system! For myself I was determined that though I would be gentle with him I would not yield an inch. The law at any rate was with me, and I did not think as yet that Crasweller would lend himself to those who spoke of inviting the interference of England. The law was on my side, and so must still be all those who in the Assembly had voted for the Fixed Period. There had been enthusiasm then, and the different clauses had been carried by large majorities. A dozen different clauses had been carried, each referring to various branches of the question. Not only had the period been fixed, but money had been voted for the college; and the mode of life at the college had been settled; the very amusements of the old men had been sanctioned; and last, but not least, the very manner of departure had been fixed. There was the college now, a graceful building surrounded by growing shrubs and broad pleasant walks for the old men, endowed with a kitchen in which their taste should be consulted, and with a chapel for such of those who would require to pray in public; and all this would be made a laughing-stock to Britannula, if this old man Crasweller declined to enter the gates. "It must be done," I said in a tone of firm decision.

"No!" he exclaimed.

"Crasweller, it must be done. The law demands it."

"No, no; not by me. You and young Grundle together are in a conspiracy to get rid of me. I am not going to be shut up a whole year before my time."

With that he stalked into the inner house, leaving me alone on the verandah. I had nothing for it but to turn on the electric lamp of my tricycle and steam back to Government House at Gladstonopolis with a sad heart.

CHAPTER IV

JACK NEVERBEND

Six months passed away, which, I must own to me was a period of great doubt and unhappiness, though it was relieved by certain moments of triumph. Of course, as the time drew nearer, the question of Crasweller's deposition became generally discussed by the public of Gladstonopolis. And so also did the loves of Abraham Grundle and Eva Crasweller. There were "Evaites" and "Abrahamites" in the community; for though the match had not yet been altogether broken, it was known that the two young people differed altogether on the question of the old man's deposition. It was said by the defendents of Grundle, who were to be found for the most part among the young men and young women, that Abraham was simply anxious to carry out the laws of his country. It happened that, during this period, he was elected to a vacant seat in the Assembly, so that, when the matter came on for discussion there, he was able to explain publicly his motives; and it must be owned that he did so with good words and with a certain amount of youthful eloquence. As for Eva, she was simply intent on preserving the lees of her father's life, and had been heard to express an opinion that the college was "all humbug," and that people ought to be allowed to live as long as it pleased God to let them. Of course she had with her the elderly ladies of the community, and among them my own wife as the foremost. Mrs Neverbend had never made herself prominent before in any public question; but on this she seemed to entertain a very warm opinion. Whether this arose entirely from her desire to promote Jack's welfare, or from a reflection that her own period of deposition was gradually becoming nearer, I never could quite make up my mind. She had, at any rate, ten years to run, and I never heard from her any expressed fear of, – departure. She was, – and is, – a brave, good woman, attached to her household duties, anxious for her husband's comfort, but beyond measure solicitous for all good things to befall that scapegrace Jack Neverbend, for whom she thinks that nothing is sufficiently rich or sufficiently grand. Jack is a handsome boy, I grant, but that is about all that can be said of him; and in this matter he has been diametrically opposed to his father from first to last.

It will be seen that, in such circumstances, none of these moments of triumph to which I have alluded can have come to me within my own home. There Mrs Neverbend and Jack, and after a while Eva, sat together in perpetual council against me. When these meetings first began, Eva still acknowledged herself to be the promised bride of Abraham Grundle. There were her own vows, and her parent's assent, and something perhaps of remaining love. But presently she whispered to my wife that she could not but feel horror for the man who was anxious to "murder her father;" and by-and-by she began to own that she thought Jack a fine fellow. We had a wonderful cricket club in Gladstonopolis, and Britannula had challenged the English cricketers to come and play on the Little Christchurch ground, which they declared to be the only cricket ground as yet prepared on the face of the earth which had all the accomplishments possible for the due prosecution of the game. Now Jack, though very young, was captain of the club, and devoted much more of his time to that occupation than to his more legitimate business as a merchant. Eva, who had not hitherto paid much attention to cricket, became on a sudden passionately devoted to it; whereas Abraham Grundle, with a steadiness beyond his years, gave himself up more than ever to the business of the Assembly, and expressed some contempt for the game, though he was no mean player.

It had become necessary during this period to bring forward in the Assembly the whole question of the Fixed Period, as it was felt that, in the present state of public opinion, it would not be expedient to carry out the established law without the increased sanction which would be given to it by a further vote in the House. Public opinion would have forbidden us to deposit Crasweller without some such further authority. Therefore it was deemed necessary that a question should be asked, in which Crasweller's name was not mentioned, but which might lead to some general debate. Young Grundle demanded one morning whether it was the intention of the Government to see that the different

clauses as to the new law respecting depositions were at once carried out. "The House is aware, I believe," he said, "that the first operation will soon be needed." I may as well state here that this was repeated to Eva, and that she pretended to take huff at such a question from her lover. It was most indecent, she said; and she, after such words, must drop him for ever. It was not for some months after that, that she allowed Jack's name to be mentioned with her own; but I was aware that it was partly settled between her and Jack and Mrs Neverbend. Grundle declared his intention of proceeding against old Crasweller in reference to the breach of contract, according to the laws of Britannula; but that Jack's party disregarded altogether. In telling this, however, I am advancing a little beyond the point in my story to which I have as yet carried my reader.

Then there arose a debate upon the whole principle of the measure, which was carried on with great warmth. I, as President, of course took no part in it; but, in accordance with our constitution, I heard it all from the chair which I usually occupied at the Speaker's right hand. The arguments on which the greatest stress was laid tended to show that the Fixed Period had been carried chiefly with a view to relieving the miseries of the old. And it was conclusively shown that, in a very great majority of cases, life beyond sixty-eight was all vanity and vexation of spirit. That other argument as to the costliness of old men to the state was for the present dropped. Had you listened to young Grundle, insisting with all the vehemence of youth on the absolute wretchedness to which the aged had been condemned by the absence of any such law, – had you heard the miseries of rheumatism, gout, stone, and general debility pictured in the eloquent words of five-and-twenty, – you would have felt that all who could lend themselves to perpetuate such a state of things must be guilty of fiendish cruelty. He really rose to a great height of parliamentary excellence, and altogether carried with him the younger, and luckily the greater, part of the House. There was really nothing to be said on the other side, except a repetition of the prejudices of the Old World. But, alas! so strong are the weaknesses of the world, that prejudice can always vanquish truth by the mere strength of its battalions. Not till it had been proved and re-proved ten times over, was it understood that the sun could not have stood still upon Gideon. Crasweller, who was a member, and who took his seat during these debates without venturing to speak, merely whispered to his neighbour that the heartless greedy fellow was unwilling to wait for the wools of Little Christchurch.

Three divisions were made on the debate, and thrice did the Fixed-Periodists beat the old party by a majority of fifteen in a House consisting of eighty-five members. So strong was the feeling in the empire, that only two members were absent, and the number remained the same during the whole week of the debate. This, I did think, was a triumph; and I felt that the old country, which had really nothing on earth to do with the matter, could not interfere with an opinion expressed so strongly. My heart throbbed with pleasureable emotion as I heard that old age, which I was myself approaching, depicted in terms which made its impotence truly conspicuous, – till I felt that, had it been proposed to deposit all of us who had reached the age of fifty-eight, I really think that I should joyfully have given my assent to such a measure, and have walked off at once and deposited myself in the college.

But it was only at such moments that I was allowed to experience this feeling of triumph. I was encountered not only in my own house but in society generally, and on the very streets of Gladstonopolis, by the expression of an opinion that Crasweller would not be made to retire to the college at his Fixed Period. "What on earth is there to hinder it?" I said once to my old friend Ruggles. Ruggles was now somewhat over sixty, and was an agent in the town for country wool-growers. He took no part in politics; and though he had never agreed to the principle of the Fixed Period, had not interested himself in opposition to it. He was a man whom I regarded as indifferent to length of life, but one who would, upon the whole, rather face such lot as Nature might intend for him, than seek to improve it by any new reform.

"Eva Crasweller will hinder it," said Ruggles.

"Eva is a mere child. Do you suppose that her opinion will be allowed to interrupt the laws of the whole community, and oppose the progress of civilisation?"

"Her feelings will," said Ruggles. "Who's to stand a daughter interceding for the life of her father?"

"One man cannot, but eighty-five can do so."

"The eighty-five will be to the community just what the one would be to the eighty-five. I am not saying anything about your law. I am not expressing an opinion whether it would be good or bad. I should like to live out my own time, though I acknowledge that you Assembly men have on your shoulders the responsibility of deciding whether I shall do so or not. You could lead me away and deposit me without any trouble, because I am not popular. But the people are beginning to talk about Eva Crasweller and Abraham Grundle, and I tell you that all the volunteers you have in Britannula will not suffice to take the old man to the college, and to keep him there till you have polished him off. He would be deposited again at Little Christchurch in triumph, and the college would be left a wreck behind him."

This view of the case was peculiarly distressing to me. As the chief magistrate of the community, nothing is so abhorrent to me as rebellion. Of a populace that are not law-abiding, nothing but evil can be predicted; whereas a people who will obey the laws cannot but be prosperous. It grieved me greatly to be told that the inhabitants of Gladstonopolis would rise in tumult and destroy the college merely to favour the views of a pretty girl. Was there any honour, or worse again, could there be any utility, in being the President of a republic in which such things could happen? I left my friend Ruggles in the street, and passed on to the executive hall in a very painful frame of mind.

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