Marsh Richard

A Second Coming

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Содержание

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I
The Tales which were Told

CHAPTER I
THE INTERRUPTED DINNER

He stood at the corner of the table with his hat and overcoat on, just as he had rushed into the room.

'Christ has come again!'

The servants were serving the entrees. Their breeding failed them. They stopped to stare at Chisholm. The guests stared too, those at the end leaning over the board to see him better. He looked like a man newly startled out of dreaming, blinking at the lights and glittering table array. His hat was a little on one side of his head. He was hot and short of breath, as if he had been running. They regarded him as a little bewildered, while he, on his part, looked back at them as if they were the creatures of a dream.

'Christ has come again!'

He repeated the words in a curious, tremulous, sobbing voice, which was wholly unlike his own.

Conversation had languished. Just before his entrance there had been one of those prolonged pauses which, to an ambitious hostess, are as a sound of doom. The dinner bade fair to be a failure. If people will not talk, to offer them to eat is vain. Criticism takes the place of appetite. Amplett looked, for him, bad-tempered. He was leaning back in his chair, smiling wryly at the wineglass which he was twiddling between his fingers. His wife, on the contrary, sat very upright- with her an ominous sign. She looked straight in front of her, with a tender softness in her glance which only to those who did not know her suggested paradise. Over the whole table there was an air of vague depression, an irresistible tendency to be bored.

Chisholm's unceremonious entry created a diversion. It filliped the atmosphere. Amplett's bad temper vanished on the instant.

'Hollo, Hugh! thought you weren't coming. Sit down, man; in your coat and hat if you like, only do sit down!'

Chisholm eyed him as if not quite certain that it was he who was being spoken to, or who the speaker was. There was that about his bearing which seemed to have a singular effect upon his host. Amplett, leaning farther over the table, called to him in short, sharp tones:

'Why do you stand and look like that? What's the matter?'

'Christ has come again!'

As he repeated the words for the third time, there was in his voice a note of exultation which was in odd dissonance with what was generally believed to be his character. The self-possession for which he was renowned seemed to have wholly deserted him. Something seemed to have shaken his nature to its depths; he who was used to declare that life could offer nothing which was of interest to him.

People glanced at each other, and at the strange-looking man at the end of the table. Was he mad or drunk? As if in answer to their glances he stretched out his hands a little in front of him, saying:

'It is true! It is true! Christ has come again! I have come from His presence here to you!'

Mrs. Amplett's voice rang out sharply:

'Hugh, what is the matter with you? Are you insane?'

'I was insane. Now I am wise. I know, for I have seen. I have been among the first to see.'

There was something in his manner which affected them strangely. A wildness, an exultation, an intensity! If it had not been so entirely out of keeping with the man's everyday disposition it might not have seemed so curious. But those who knew him best were moved most. They were aware that his nerves were not easily affected; that something extraordinary must have occurred to have produced this bearing. Clement Fordham rose from his chair and went to him.

'Come, Hugh, tell me what's wrong outside.'

He made as if to slip his arm through Chisholm's, who would have none of it. He held Fordham off with hand extended.

'Thank you, Fordham, but for the present I'll stay here. I am not mad, nor have I been drinking. I'm as sober and as sane as you.'

A voice came down the table, Bertie Vaughan's. In it there was a ring of laughter:

'Tell us, Chisholm, what you've seen.'

'I will tell you.'

Chisholm removed his hat, as if suddenly remembering that he had it on. He rested the brim against the edge of the table, looking down the two rows of faces towards Amplett at the end. Mrs. Amplett interposed:

'Hadn't you better sit down, Hugh, and have something to eat? The entrees are getting cold. Or you might tell your story after we've finished dinner. Hunger magnifies; wonders grow less when one has dined.'

There was a chorus of dissentient voices.

'No, no, Mrs. Amplett. Let him tell his story now.'

'I will tell it to you now.'

The hostess gave way. Chisholm told his tale. He riveted his auditors' attention. The servants listened openly.

'I walked here. As you know, the night is fine, and I thought the stroll would do me good. As I was passing through Bryanston Square a man came round the corner on a bicycle. The road has recently been watered, and is still wet and greasy. His tyre must

have skidded, or something, because he entirely lost control of his machine, and went dashing into the hydrant which stands by the kerb. He was moving pretty fast, and as it came into contact with the hydrant his machine was splintered, and he was pitched over the handle-bar heavily on to his head. He was some fifteen or twenty yards from where I was. I went to him as rapidly as I could, but by the time I reached him he was already dead.'

'Dead!'

The word came in a sort of chorus from half a dozen throats.

'Dead,' repeated Chisholm.

'Are you sure that he was dead?'

The question came from Amplett.

'Certain. He was a very unpleasant sight. He must have fallen with more violence even than I had supposed. His skull was shattered. He must have come down on it on the hard road, and then twisted over on to his back. He was a big, heavy man, and the wrench which he had given himself in rolling over had broken his neck. I was so astonished to find him dead, and at the spectacle which he presented, that for a second or two I was at a loss as to what steps I ought to take. No other person was in the square, and, so far as I could judge, the accident had not been witnessed from either of the windows. While I hesitated, on a sudden I was conscious that someone was at my side.'

He stopped as if to take breath. There came a rain of questions.

'Someone? What do you mean by someone?'

'I will try and tell you exactly what I saw. It is not easy. I am yet too near-fresh from the Presence.'

He clasped his hands a little more tightly on the brim of his hat, then closed his eyes for a second or two, opening them to look straight down the table, as if endeavouring to bring well within the focus of his vision something which was there.

'I was looking down at the dead man as he lay there in an ugly heap, conscious that I was due for dinner, and wondering what steps I ought to take. I felt no interest in him-none whatever; neither his living nor his dying was anything to me. My chief feeling was one of annoyance that he should have chosen that moment to fall dead right in my path; it was an unwarrantable intrusion of his affairs into mine. As I stood, I knew that someone was on his other side, looking down at him with me. And I was afraid-yes, I was afraid.'

The speaker had turned pale-the pallor of fear had come upon the cheeks of the man whose imperturbable courage had been proved a hundred times. His voice sank lower.

'For some moments I continued with eyes cast down; I did not dare to look up. At last, when my pulse grew a little calmer, I ventured to raise my eyes. On the other side of the dead bicyclist was one who was in the figure of a man. I knew that it was Christ.'

He spoke with an accent of intense conviction, the like of which his hearers had never heard from the lips of anyone before. It was as though Chisholm spoke with the faith which can move mountains. Those who listened were perforce dumb.

'His glance met mine. I knew myself to be the thing I was. I was ashamed. He pointed to the body lying in the roadway, saying: "Your brother sleeps?" I could not answer. Seeing that I was silent, He spoke again: "Are you not of one spirit and of one flesh? I come to wake your brother out of slumber." He inclined His hand towards the dead man, saying: "Arise, you who sleep." Immediately he that was dead stood up. He seemed bewildered, and exclaimed as in a fit of passion: "That's a nice spill. Curse the infernal slippery road!" Then he turned and saw Who was standing at his side. As he did so, he burst into a storm of tears, crying like a child; and when he cried, He that had been there was not. The bicyclist and I were alone together.'

A pause followed Chisholm's words.

'And then what happened?'

The query came from Mrs. Amplett.

'Nothing happened. I hurried off as fast as I could, for I was still afraid, and left the bicyclist sobbing in the roadway.'

There was another interval of silence, until Gregory Hawkes, putting his eyeglass in its place, fixedly regarded Chisholm.

'Are we to accept this as a sober narrative of actual fact, or-where's the joke?'

'I have told you the truth. Christ has come again!'

'Christ in Bryanston Square!'

Mr. Hawkes's tone was satirical.

'Yes, Christ in Bryanston Square. Why not in Bryanston Square if on the hill of Calvary? Is not this His own city?'

'His own city!'

Again there was the satiric touch.

One of the servants, dropping a dish, began to excuse himself.

'Pardon me, sir, but I'm a Seventh-Day Christian, and I've been looking for the Second Coming these three years now, and more. Hearing from Mr. Chisholm that it's come at last has made me feel a little nervous.'

Mrs. Amplett turned to the butler.

'Goss, let the servants leave the room.'

They went, as if they bore their tails between their legs, some with the entrée dishes still in their hands.

'I wish,' murmured Bertie Vaughan,' that this little incident could have been conveniently postponed till after we had dined.'

Arthur Warton, of St. Ethelburga's, showed signs of disapprobation.

'I believe that I am as broad-minded a priest as you will easily find, but there are seasons at which certain topics should not be touched upon. Without wishing in any way to thrust forward my clerical office, I would point out to Mr. Chisholm that this assuredly is one.'

'Is there then a season at which Christ should not come again?'

'Mr. Chisholm!'

'Or in which He should not restore the dead to life?'

'I should not wish to disturb the harmony of the gathering, Mr. Amplett, but I am afraid the-eh-circumstances are not-eh-fortuitous. I cannot sit here and allow my sacred office to be

mocked.'

'Mocked! Is it to mock your sacred office to spread abroad the news that He has come again? I am fresh from His presence, and tell you so-you that claim to be His priest.'

Fordham, who had been standing by him all the time, came a little closer.

'Come, Hugh, let's get out of this, you and I, and talk over things quietly together.'

Again Chisholm kept him from him with his outstretched hand.

'In your tone, Fordham, more even than in your words, there is suggestion. Of what? that I am mad? You have known me all my life. Have I struck you as being of the stuff which makes for madness? As a victim of hysteria? As a subject of hallucinations? As a liar? I am as sane as you, as clear-headed, as matter-of-fact, as truthful. I tell you, in very truth and very deed, that to-night I have seen Christ hard by here in the square.'

'My dear fellow, these people have come here to dine.'

'Is, then, dinner more than Christ?'

Smiling his easy, tolerant smile, Fordham touched Chisholm lightly with his fingers on the arm.

'My very dear old chap, this sort of thing is so awfully unlike you, don't you know?'

'You, also, will be changed when you have seen Christ. Fordham, I have seen Christ!'

The intensity of his utterance seemed to strike his hearers

a blow. The women shivered, turning pale-even those who were painted. Mr. Warton leaned across the table towards Mrs. Amplett.

'I really think that you ladies had better retire. Our friend seems to be in a curious mood.'

The hostess nodded. She rose from her seat, looking very queerly at Mr. Chisholm, for whom her penchant is well known. The other women followed her example. The rustling concourse fluttered from the room, the Incumbent of St. Ethelburga holding the door open to let them pass, and himself bringing up the rear. The laymen were left alone together, Chisholm and Fordham standing at the head of the table with, on their faces, such very different expressions.

The host seemed snappish.

'You see what you've done? I offer you my congratulations, Mr. Chisholm. I don't know if you call the sort of thing with which you have been favouring us good form.'

'Is good form more than Christ?'

Amplett made an impatient sound with his lips. He stood up.

'Upon my word of honour, Mr. Chisholm, you must be either drunk or mad. I trust, for your own sake, that you are merely mad. Come, gentlemen, let's join the ladies.'

The men quitted the room in a body. Only Clement Fordham stayed with his friend. Chisholm watched them as they went. Then, when the last had gone and the door was closed, he turned to his companion.

'Yet it is the truth that this night I have seen Christ!'

The other laughed.

'Then, in that case, let's hope that you won't see much more of Him- no impiety intended, I assure you. Now let you and me take our two selves away.'

He slipped his arm through his friend's. As they were about to move, the door opened and a servant entered. It was the man who had dropped the dish. He approached Chisholm with stuttering tongue.

'Pardon me, sir, if I seem to take a liberty, but might I ask if the Second Coming has really come at last? As a Seventh-Day Christian it's a subject in which I take an interest, and the fact is that there's a difference of opinion between my wife and me as to whether it's to be this year or next.'

The man bore ignorance on his countenance written large, and worse. Hugh Chisholm turned from him with repugnance.

'He's your brother,' whispered Fordham in his ear, as they moved towards the door.

The expression of Hugh Chisholm's face was stern.

CHAPTER II
THE WOMAN AND THE COATS

Mr. Davis looked about him with bloodshot eyes. His battered bowler was perched rakishly on the back of his head, and his hands were thrust deep into his trousers pockets. He did not seem to find the aspect of the room enlivening. His wife, standing at a small oblong deal table, was making a parcel of two black coats to which she had just been giving the finishing stitches. The man, the woman, the table, and the coats, practically represented the entire contents of the apartment.

The fact appeared to cause Mr. Davis no slight dissatisfaction. His bearing, his looks, his voice, all betrayed it.

'I want some money,' he observed.

'Then you'll have to want,' returned his wife.

'Ain't you got none?'

'No, nor shan't have, not till I've took these two coats in.'

'Then what'll it be?'

'You know very well what it'll be-three-and-six-one-and-nine apiece-if there ain't no fines.'

'And this is what they call the land of liberty, the 'ome of the free, where people slave and slave-for one-and-nine.'

Mr. Davis seemed conscious that the conclusion of his sentence was slightly impotent, and spat on the floor as if to signify his regret.

''Tain't much slaving you do, anyhow.'

'No, nor it ain't much I'm likely to do; I'm no servile wretch; I'm free-born.'

'Prefers to make your living off me, you do.'

'Well, and why not? Ain't woman the inferior animal? Didn't Nature mean it to be her pride to minister to man? Ain't it only the false veneer of a rotten civilization what's upset all that? If I gives my talents for the good of the species, as I do do, as is well known I do do, ain't it only right that you should give me something in return, if it's only a crust and water? Ain't that law and justice- natural law, mind you, and natural justice?'

'I don't know nothing about law, natural or otherwise, but I do know it ain't justice.'

Mr. Davis looked at his wife, more in sorrow than in anger. He was silent for some seconds, as if meditating on the peculiar baseness of human nature. When he spoke there was a whine in his raucous voice, which was, perhaps, meant to denote his consciousness of how much he stood in need of sympathy.

'I'm sorry, Matilda, to hear you talk to me like that, because it forces me to do something what I shouldn't otherwise have done. Give me them coats.'

She had just finished packing up the coats in the linen wrapper, and was pinning up one end. Snatching up the parcel, she clasped it to her bosom as if it had been some precious thing.

'No, Tommy, not the coats!'

'Matilda, once more I ask you to give me them coats.'

'What do you want them for?'

'Once more, Matilda, I ask you to give me them coats.'

'No, Tommy, that I won't-never! not if you was to kill me! You know what happened the last time, and all I had to go through; and you promised you'd never do it again, and you shan't, not while I can help it-no, that you shan't!'

Clasping the parcel tightly to her, she drew back towards a corner of the room, like some wild creature standing at bay. Mr. Davis, advancing towards the table, leaned on it, addressing her as if he desired to impress her with the fact that he was endeavouring not to allow his feelings to get the better of his judgment.

'Listen to me, Matilda. I'm soft and tender, as well you know, and should therefore regret having to start knocking you about; but want is want, and I want 'arf a sovereign this day, and have it I must.'

'What do you want it for?'

Mr. Davis brought his clenched fist sharply down upon the table-possibly by way of a hint.

'Never you mind what I want it for. I do want it, and that's enough for you. You trouble yourself with your own affairs, and don't poke your nose into mine, my girl; you'll find it safest.'

'I'll try to get it for you, Tommy.'

Mr. Davis was scornful.

'Oh, you will, will you! How are you going to set about getting 'arf a sovereign? Perhaps you'll be so good as to let me know.

Because if you can lay hands on 'arf a sovereign whenever one's wanted, it's a trick worth knowing. You're such a clever one at getting 'old of the pieces, you are, and always have been.'

The man's irony seemed to cause the woman to wince. She drew a little farther back towards her corner.

'I don't rightly know how I shall get hold of it, not just now, I don't; but I daresay I shall manage somehow.'

'Oh, you do, do you? Shall I tell you how you'll manage? You listen to me. You'll go to them there slave-drivers with them two coats, and they'll keep you waiting for two mortal hours or more. Then they'll dock sixpence for fines-you're always getting fined; you 'ardly ever take anything in without you're fined; you're a slovenly workwoman, that's what you are, my lass, and that's the truth! – you'll come away with three bob, and spend 'arf a crown on rent, or some such silly nonsense; and then when it comes to me, you'll start snivelling, and act the crybaby, and I shall have to treat you to a kicking, and find myself further off my 'arf sovereign than ever I was. I don't want no more of your nonsense. Give me them two coats!'

'You'll pawn 'em if I do.'

'Of course I'll pawn 'em. What do you suppose I'm going to do with them-eat 'em, or give them to the Queen?'

'You'll get me into trouble again! They're due in to-day. You know what happened last time. If they lock me up again, I'll be sent away.'

'Then be sent away, and be 'anged to you for a nasty, mean,

snivelling cat! Why don't you earn enough to keep your 'usband like a gentleman? If you don't, it's your fault, isn't it? Give me them two coats!'

'No, Tommy, I won't!'

He went closer to her.

'For the last time; will you give me them two coats?'

'No!'

She hugged the parcel closer, and she closed her eyes, so that she should not see him strike her. He hit her once, twice, thrice, choosing his mark with care and discretion. Under the first two blows she reeled; the last sent her in a heap to the floor. When she was down he kicked her in a business-like, methodical fashion, then picked up the parcel which had fallen from her grasp.

'You've brought it on yourself, as you very well know. It's the kind of thing I don't care to have to do. I'm not like some, what's always spoiling to knock their wives about; but when I do have to do it, there's no one does it more thorough, I will say that.'

He left her lying in a heap on the boards. On his way to the pawnbroker's he encountered a friend, Joe Cooke. Mr. Cooke stopped and hailed him.

'What yer, Tommy! Are you coming along with us to-night on that there little razzle?'

'Of course I am. Didn't I say I was? And when I say I'm coming, don't I always come?'

'All right, old coxybird! Keep your 'air on! No one said you didn't. Got the rhino?'

'I have. Leastways, I soon shall have, when I've turned this little lot into coin of the realm.'

He pointed to the bundle which he bore beneath his arm. Mr. Cooke grinned.

'What yer got there?'

'I've got a couple of coats what my wife's been wearing out her eyes on for a set of slave-driving sweaters. Three-and-six they was to pay her for them. I rather reckon that I'll get more than three-and-six for them, unless I'm wrong. And when I have melted 'em, Joe, I don't mind if I do you a wet.'

Joe did not mind, either. The two fell in side by side. Mr. Cooke drew his hand across his mouth.

'Ever since my old woman died I've felt I ought to have another-a good one, mind you. There's nothing like having someone to whom you can turn for a bob or so.'

'It's more than a bob or so I get out of my old woman, you may take my word. If she don't keep me like a gentleman, she hears of it.'

Mr. Cooke regarded his friend with genuine admiration.

'Ah! but we're not all so fly as you, Tommy, nor yet so lucky.'

'Perhaps not-not, mind you, that that's owing to any fault of yours. It's as we're made.'

Mr. Davis, with the bundle under his arm, bore himself with an air of modest pride, as one who appreciated his natural advantages.

They reached the pawnbroker's. The entrance to the pledge

department was in a little alley leading off the main street. As Mr. Davis stood at the mouth of this alley to say a parting word to his friend as a prelude to the important business of the pledging, someone touched him on the arm.

A voice accosted him.

'What is it that you would do?'

Mr. Davis spun round like a teetotum. He stared at the Stranger.

'Hollo, matey! Who are you?'

'I am He that you know not of.'

Mr. Davis drew a little back, as if a trifle disconcerted. His voice was huskier than even it was wont to be.

'What's the little game?'

'I bid you tell me what is this thing that you would do?'

Mr. Davis seemed to find in the words, which were quietly uttered, a compelling influence which made him curiously frank.

'I am going to pawn these here two coats which my wife's been making.'

'Is it well?'

Mr. Davis slunk farther from the Stranger. 'What's it got to do with you?'

'Is it well?'

There was a sorrowful intonation in the repetition of the inquiry, blended with a singularly penetrant sternness. Mr. Davis cowered as if he had been struck a blow. He turned to his friend.

'Say, Joe, who is this bloke?'

The Stranger spoke to Mr. Cooke.

'Look on Me, and you shall know.'

Mr. Cooke looked-and knew. He began to tremble as if he would have fallen to the ground. Mr. Davis, noting his friend's condition, became uneasy.

'Say, Joe, what's the matter with you? What's he done to you, Joe?'

Mr. Cooke was silent. The Stranger answered:

'Would that that which has been done to him could be done to you, and to all this city! But you are of those that cannot know, for in them is no knowledge. Yet return to your wife, and make your peace with her, lest worse befall.'

Mr. Davis began to slink out of the alley, with furtive air and face carefully averted from the Stranger. As he reached the pavement, a big man, with a scarlet handkerchief twisted round his neck, caught him by the shoulder. The big man's speech was flavoured with adjectives.

'Why, Tommy! what's up with you? You look as if you was just a-going to see Jack Ketch.'

Then came the flood of adjectives to give the sentence balance. Mr. Davis tried to wriggle from his questioner's too strenuous grip.

'Let me go, Pug-let me go!'

'What for? What's wrong? Who's been doing something to yer?'

Mr. Davis made a movement of his head towards the Stranger.

He spoke in a husky whisper.

'That bloke-over there.'

The big man dragged the unwilling Mr. Davis forward.

'What's my friend been doing to you, and what have you been doing to him?'

There was the usual adjectival torrent. The Stranger replied to the inquiry with another.

'Why are you so unclean of mouth? Is it because you are unclean of heart, or because you do not know what the things are which you utter?'

The retorted question seemed to take the big man aback. His manner became still more blusterous:

'I don't want none of your lip, and I won't have any, and you can take that from me! I don't know what kind of a Gospel-pitcher you are; but if you think because preaching's your lay that you can come it over me, I'll just show you can't by knocking the head right off yer.'

'What big things the little say!'

The retort seemed to goad Mr. Davis's friend to a state of considerable excitement.

'Little, am I? I'll show you! I'll learn you! I'll give you a lesson free gratis, and for nothing now, right straight off.' He began to tear off his cap and coat. 'Here, some of you chaps, catch hold while I'm a-showing him!' As he turned up his shirtsleeves, he addressed the crowd which had gathered: 'These blokes come to us, and because we're poor they think they can treat us as if we

was dirt, and come the pa and ma game over us as if we was a lot of kids. I've had enough of it-in fact, I've had too much. For the future I mean to set about every one of them as tries to come it over me. Now, then, my bloke, put up your dooks or eat your words. Don't think you're going to get out of it by standing still, because if you don't beg pardon for what you said to me just now I'll-'

The man, who was by profession a pugilist, advanced towards the Stranger in professional style. The Stranger raised His right hand.

'Stay! and let your arm be withered. Better lose your arm than all that you have.'

Before the eyes of those who were standing by the man's arm began to dwindle till there was nothing protruding from the shirtsleeve which he had rolled up to his shoulder but a withered stump. The man stood as if rooted to the ground, the expression of his countenance so changed as to amount to complete transfiguration. The crowd was still until a voice inquired of the Stranger:

'Who are you?'

The Stranger pointed to the man whose arm was withered.

'Can you not see? The world still looks for a sign.'

There were murmurs among the people.

'He's a conjurer!'

'The bloke's a mesmerist, that's what he is!'

'He's one of those hanky-panky coves!'

'I am none of these things. I come from a city not built of hands to this city of man's glory and his shame to bring to you a message-no new thing, but that old one which the world has forgotten.'

'What's the message, Guv'nor?'

'Those who see Me and know Me will know what is My message; those who know Me not, neither will they know My message.'

Mr. Cooke fell on his knees on the pavement.

'Oh, Guv'nor, what shall I do?'

'Cease to weep; there are more than enough tears already.'

'I'm only a silly fool, Guv'nor; tell me what I ought to do.'

'Do well; be clean; judge no one.'

A woman came hurrying through the crowd. It was Mrs. Davis. At sight of her husband she burst into exclamations:

'Oh, Tommy, have you pawned them?'

'No, Matilda, I haven't, and I'm not going to, neither.'

'Thank God!'

She threw her arms about her husband's neck and kissed him.

'That is good hearing,' said the Stranger.

The people's attention had been diverted by Mrs. Davis's appearance. When they turned again to look for the Stranger He was gone.

CHAPTER III
THE WORDS OF THE PREACHER

'They say that the Jews do not look forward to the rebuilding of their Holy City of Jerusalem, to their return to the Promised Land. They say that we Christians do not look forward to the Second Coming of Christ. As to the indictment against the Chosen People, we will not pronounce: we are not Jews. But as to the charge against us Christians, there we are on firmer ground. We can speak, and we must. My answer is, It's a lie. We do look forward to His Second Coming. We watch and wait for it. It is the subject of our constant prayers. We have His promise, in words which cannot fail. The whole fabric of our faith is built upon our assurance of His return. If the delay seems long, it is because, in His sight, a thousand years are as a day. Who are we to time His movements, and fix the hour of His coming so that it may fall in with our convenience? We know that He will come, in His own time, in His own way. He will forgive us if we strain our eyes eastward, watching for the first rays of the dawn to gild the mountains and the plains, and herald the glory of His advent. But beyond that His will, not ours, be done. We know, O Lord Christ, Thou wilt return when it seems well in Thy sight.'

The Rev. Philip Evans was a short, somewhat sturdily built man, who was a little too heavy for his height. His dress was, to all intents and purposes, that of a layman, though something

about the colour and cut of the several garments suggested the dissenting minister of a certain modern type. He was a hairy man; his brown hair, beard, and whiskers were just beginning to be touched with gray. He wore spectacles, big round glasses, set in bright steel frames. He had a trick of snatching at them with his left hand every now and then, as if to twitch them straight upon his nose. He was not an orator, but was something of a rhetorician. He had the gift of the gab, and the present-day knack of treating what are supposed to be sacred subjects in secular fashion-of 'bringing them down,' as he himself described it, 'to the intelligence' of his hearers, apparently unconscious of the truth that what he supposed to be their standard of intelligence was, in fact, his own.

There was about his manner, methods, gestures, voice, a species of nervous force, the product of restlessness rather than vitality, which attracted the sort of persons to whom he specially appealed, when they had nothing better to do, and held them, if not so firmly as the music-hall and theatrical performances which they preferentially patronised, still, with a sufficient share of interest. The band and the choir had something to do with the success which attended his labours. But, after all, these were merely side-shows. Indubitably the chief attraction was the man himself, and the air of brightness and 'go' which his personality lent to the proceedings. One never knew what would be the next thing he would say or do.

That Sunday evening the great hall was thronged. It nearly

always was. In the great thoroughfare without the people passed continually to and fro, a motley crowd, mostly in pursuit of mischief. All sorts and conditions of persons, as they neared the entrance, would come in, if only to rest for a few minutes, and listen by the way, and look on. There was a constant coming and going. Philip Evans was one of the sights of town, not the least of its notorieties; and those very individuals against whom his diatribes were principally directed found, upon occasion, a moderate degree of entertainment in listening to examples of his comminatory thunders.

The subject of his evening's discourse had been announced as 'The Second Coming: Is it Fact or Dream?' He had chosen as his text the eleventh verse of the third chapter of St. John's Revelation: 'Behold, I come quickly; hold fast that which thou hast, that no man take thy crown.' He had pointed out to his audience that these words were full of suggestion, even apart from their context; pre-eminently so in connection with it. They had in them, he maintained, Christ's own promise that He would return to the world in which He had endured so much disappointment and suffering, such ignominy and such shame. He supported his assertion by the usual cross references to Biblical passages, construing them to suit his arguments by the dogmatic methods with which custom has made us familiar.

'If there is one thing sure, it is the word of Jesus Christ; if there is one thing Christ has promised us, it is that He will return. If we believe that He came once, we must believe that He will

come again. We have no option, unless we make out Christ to be a liar. There was no meaning in his First Coming unless it is His intention to return. The work He began has to be finished. If you deny a personal Christ, then you are at least logical in regarding His whole story as allegorical, the story that He was and will be; in which case may He help you, and open your eyes that you may see. But if you are a Christian, it is because you believe in Christ, the living Christ, the very Christ, the Christ made man, that was and will be. Your faith, our faith, is not a symbol, it's a fact. It's a solid thing, not the distillation of a dream. We believe that Jesus Christ was like unto us, hungry as we are, and athirst; that He felt as we feel, knew our joys and sorrows, our trials and temptations. He came to us once, that is certain. To attempt to whittle away that fact is to make of our Christianity a laughing-stock, and our plight most lamentable. Better for us, a thousand, thousand times, that we had never been born! But He came-we know He came! And, knowing that, we know that we have His promise that He will come again, and rejoice!

'Of the time and manner of His Second Coming there is none mortal that may certainly speak. To pretend to speak on the subject with special insight or knowledge would be intolerable presumption-worse, akin to blasphemy! Thy will, not ours, be done. We only stand and wait. In Thy hand, Lord God, is the issue. We know it, and give thanks. But while recognising our inability to probe into the workings of the Most High, I think we may be excused if we make certain reflections on the theme

which to us, as Christians, is of such vital moment.

'First, as to the time. Knowing nothing, we do know this, that it may be at any instant of any hour of any day. The Lord Jesus Christ may be speeding to us now. He may be in our midst even while I speak. Why not? We know that He was in a certain synagogue while service was taking place, without any there having had the slightest warning of His intended presence. What He did then can He not do now? And will He not? Who shall say?

'For, as to the manner, we can at least venture to say this, that we know not, with any sort of certainty, what the manner of His coming will be. The dark passages of the Scripture are dark perhaps of intention, and, maybe, will continue obscure, until in the fulness of time all things are made plain. There are those who affirm that He will come with pomp and power, in the fulness of His power, as a conquering king, with legions of angels, to be the Judge of all the earth. To me it appears that those who say this go further than the evidence before us warrants. And it may be observed that precisely the same views were held by a large section of the Jews in the year of our Lord. They thought that He would come in the splendour of His majesty. And because He did not, they hung Him on the tree. Let us not stand in peril of the same mistake. As He came before, in the simple garb of a simple man, may He not come in that same form again? Why not? Who are we that we should answer? I adjure you, in His most holy Name, to keep on this matter an open mind, lest we

be guilty of the same sin as those purblind Jews.

'What we have to do is to know Him when He does come. The notion that we shall be sure to do so seems to me to be born of delusion. Did the Jews know Him when He came before? No! Why? Because He was a contradiction of all their preconceived ideas. They expected one thing, and found another. They looked for a king in his glittering robes; and, instead, there was a Man who had not where to lay His head. There is the crux of the matter; because He was so like themselves, they did not know Him for what He was. The difference was spiritual, whereas they expected it to be material. The tendency of the world is now, as it was then, to look at the material side. Let us be careful that we are not deceived. It is by the spirit we shall know Him when He comes!'

The words had been rapidly spoken, and the preacher paused at this point, perhaps to take breath, or perhaps to collect his thoughts prior to diverting the current of his discourse into a slightly different channel. At any rate, there was a distinct pause in the flow of language. While it continued, Someone stood up in the body of the hall, and a Voice inquired:

'Who shall know Him when He comes?'

The question was clearly audible all over the building. It was by no means unusual, in that place, for incidents to occur which were not in accordance with the programme. Interruptions were not infrequent. Both preacher and people were used to them. By a considerable part of the audience such interludes were regarded

as not the least interesting portion of the proceedings. To the fashion in which he was wont to deal with such incidents the Rev. Philip Evans owed, in no slight degree, his vogue. It was his habit to lose neither his presence of mind nor his temper. He was, after his manner, a fighter born. Seldom did he show to more advantage than in dealing out cut-and-thrust to a rash intervener.

When the Voice asking the question rose from the body of the hall, there were those who at once concluded that such an intervention had occurred. For the instant, the movement in and out of the doors ceased. Heads were craned forward, and eyes and ears strained to lose nothing of what was about to happen. Mr. Evans, to whom the question seemed addressed, appeared to be no whit taken by surprise. His retort was prompt:

'Sir, pray God that you may know Him when He comes.'

The Voice replied:

'I shall know as I shall be known. But who is there shall know Me?'

The Speaker moved towards the platform, threading His way between the crowded rows of seats with an ease and a celerity which seemed strange. None endeavoured to stop Him. Philip Evans remained silent and motionless, watching Him as He came.

When the Stranger had gained the platform, He turned towards the people, asking:

'Who is there here that knows Me? Is there one?' There was not one that answered. He turned to the preacher. 'Look at Me

well. Do you not know Me?'

For once in a way Philip Evans seemed uncomfortable and ill at ease and abashed.

'How shall I know you, since you are to me a stranger?'

'And yet you have looked for My coming?'

'Your coming? Who are you?'

'Look at Me well. Is there nothing by which you may know Me?'

'I may have seen you before; but, if so, I have certainly forgotten it, which is the more strange, since your face is an unusual one.'

'Oh, you Christians, that preach of what you have no knowledge, and lay down the law of which you have no understanding!' He turned to the people. 'You followers of Christ, that never knew Him, and never shall, and would not if you could, yet make a boast of His name, and blazon it upon your foreheads, crying, Behold His children! You call upon Him in the morning and at night, careless if He listen, and fearful lest He hear; saying, with your lips, "We look for His coming"; and, with your hearts, "Send it not in our time." It is by the spirit you shall know Him. Yes, of a truth. Is there not one among you in whom the spirit is? Is there not one?'

The Stranger stood with His arms extended in front of Him, in an attitude of appeal. The hush of a perfect silence reigned in the great hall. Every countenance was turned to Him, but so far as could be seen, not a muscle moved. The predominant

expression upon the expanse of faces was astonishment, mingled with curiosity. His arms sank to His sides.

'He came unto His own, and His own knew Him not!'

The words fell from His lips in tones of infinite pathos. He passed from the platform through the hall, and out of the door, followed by the eyes of all who were there, none seeking to stay Him.

When He had gone, one of the persons who were associated with the conduct of the service went up to Mr. Evans. A few whispered words were exchanged between them. Then this person, going to the edge of the platform, announced:

'After what has just occurred, I regret to have to inform you that Mr. Evans feels himself unable to continue his address. He trusts to be able, God willing, to bring it to a close on a more auspicious occasion. This evening's service will be brought to a conclusion by singing the hymn "Lo, He comes, in clouds descending!"'

CHAPTER IV
THE CHILDREN'S MOTHER

'You've had your pennyworth.'

'Oh, Charlie, I haven't! you must send me higher. You mustn't stop; I've only just begun to swing.'

'I shall stop; it's my turn. You'd keep on for ever.'

The boy drew to one side. The swing began to slow. Doris grew indignant. She endeavoured to swing herself, wriggling on the seat, twisting herself in various attitudes. The result was failure. The swing moved slower. She tried a final appeal.

'Oh, Charlie, I do think you might push me just a little longer; it's not fair. You said you'd give me a good one. Then I'll give you a splendid swing.'

'You've had a good one. You'd keep on for ever, you would. Get off!'

The swing stopped dead. The girl made a vain attempt to give it momentum.

'It's beastly of you,' she said.

She scrambled to the ground. The boy got on. He was not content to sit; he stood upright.

'Now, then,' he cried, 'why don't you start me? Don't you see I'm ready?'

'You'll tumble off. Mamma said you weren't to stand.'

'Shall stand. Go and tell! Start me!'

'You will tumble.'

'All right, then, I will tumble. Start me! Don't you hear?'

She 'started' him. The swing having received its initial impetus, he swung himself. He mounted higher and higher. Doris watched him, leaning her right shoulder against the beech tree, her hands behind her back. She interpolated occasional remarks on the risk which he was running.

'You'll fall if you don't take care. You oughtn't to go so high. Mamma said you oughtn't to go so high.'

He received her observations with scorn.

'Just as though I will fall! How silly you are! You will keep on!'

As he spoke, one of the ropes gave way. The other rope swerving, he was dashed against an upright. He fell to the ground. The thing was the work of an instant. He was ascending jubilantly towards the sky: the same second he was lying on the ground. Doris did not realise what had happened. She had been envying him the ease with which he swung himself, the height of his ascent. She did not understand why he had stopped so suddenly. She perceived how still he seemed, half wondering.

'Charlie!' His silence frightened her. Her voice sank. 'Charlie!' She became angry. 'Why don't you answer me?' She moved closer to him, observing in what an ugly heap he lay. 'Charlie!'

Yet he vouchsafed her no reply. He lay so still. It was such an unusual thing for Charlie to be still, the strangeness of it began to get upon her nerves. Her face clouded. She was making ready to rush off and alarm the house in an agony of weeping. Already she

was starting, when Someone came to her from across the lawn, and laid His hand upon her shoulder.

'Doris, what is wrong?'

The voice was a stranger's, and the presence. But she paid no heed to that: all her thoughts were concentrated on a single theme.

'Charlie!' she gasped.

'What ails Charlie?'

The Stranger, kneeling beside the silent boy, bent over him, gently turning him so that He could see his face. Then, raising him from the ground, gathering him in His arms, He held him to His breast; and, stooping, He whispered in his ear:

'Wake up, Charlie! Doris wants you.'

And the boy sat up, and looked in the face of Him in whose arms he was.

'Hollo!' he said. 'Who are you?'

'The friend of little children.'

There was an appreciable space of time before the answer came, and when it did come it was accompanied by a smile, as the Stranger looked the boy straight in the eyes. The boy laughed outright.

'I like the look of you.'

Doris drew a little nearer. She had her fingers to her lips, seeming more than half afraid.

'Charlie, I thought you were hurt.'

'Hurt!' he flashed at her; then back at the Stranger: 'I'm not

hurt, am I?'

'No, you are not hurt; you are well, and whole, and strong.'

'But you tumbled from the swing.' The boy stared at Doris as if he thought she must be dreaming. 'The swing broke.'

'Broke?' Glancing up, he perceived the severed rope. 'Why, so it has.'

'It can soon be mended.'

The Stranger put the boy down, and went to the swing, and in a moment the two ends of the rope were joined together. Then He lifted them both on the seat, the boy and the girl together-there was ample room for both-and swung them gently to and fro. And as He swung He talked to them, and they to Him.

And when they had had enough of swinging He went with them, hand in hand, and sat with them on the grass by the side of the lake, with the trees at their back. And again He talked to them, and they to Him. And the simple things of which He spoke seemed strange to them, and wonderful. Never had anyone talked to them like that before. They kept as close to Him as they could, and put their arms about Him so far as they were able, and nestled their faces against His side, and they were happy.

While the Stranger and the children still conversed together there came down through the woods, towards the lake, a lady and a gentleman. He was a tall man, and held himself very straight, speaking as if he were very much in earnest.

'Doris, why should we keep on pretending to each other? I know that you love me, and you know that I love you. Why should

you spoil your life-and mine! – for the sake of such a hound?'

'He is my husband.'

She spoke a little below her breath, as if she were ashamed of the fact. He struck impatiently at the bracken with his stick.

'Your husband! That creature! As though it were not profanation to link you with such an animal.'

'And then there are the children.'

Her voice sank lower, as if this time she spoke of something sacred. He noted the difference in the intonation; apparently he resented it. He struck more vigorously at the bracken, as if actuated by a desire to relieve his feelings. There was an interval, during which both of them were silent. Then he turned to her with sudden passion.

'Doris, come with me, at once! now! Give yourself to me, and I'll devote my whole life to you. You've known enough of me through all these things to be sure that you can trust me. Aren't you sure that you can trust me?'

'Yes, I am sure that I can trust you-in a sense.'

Something in her face seemed to make an irresistible appeal to him. He took her in his arms, she offering no resistance.

'In a sense? In what sense? Can't you trust me in every sense?'

'I can trust you to be true to me; but I am not so sure that I can trust you to let me be true to myself.'

'What hair-splitting's this? I'll let you be true to your own womanhood; it's you who shirk. You seem to want me to treat you as if you were an automatic figure, not a creature of flesh

and blood. I can't do it-you can't trust me to do it; that thing's plain. Come, darling, let's take the future in our own hands, and together wrest happiness from life. You know that at my side you'll be content. See how you're trembling! There's proof of it. I'll swear I'll be content at yours! Come, Doris, come!'

'Where will you take me?'

'That's not your affair just now. I'll take you where I will. All you have to do is-come.'

She drew herself out of his arms, and a little away from him. She put up her hand as if to smooth her hair, he watching her with eager eyes.

'I'll come.'

He took her again in his embrace, softly, tenderly, as if she were some fragile, priceless thing. His voice trembled.

'You darling! When?'

'Now. Since all's over, and everything's to begin again, the sooner a beginning's made the better.' A sort of rage came into her voice-a note of hysteric pain. 'If you're to take me, take me as I am, in what I stand. I dare say he'll send my clothes on after me-and my jewels, perhaps.'

It seemed as if her tone troubled him, as if he endeavoured to soothe her.

'Don't talk like that, Doris. Everything that you want I'll get you- all that your heart can desire.'

'Except peace of mind!'

'I trust that I shall be able to get you even that. Only come!'

'Don't I tell you that I am ready? Why don't you start?'

He appeared to find her manner disconcerting. He searched her face, as if to discover if she were in earnest, then looked at his watch.

'If we make haste across the park, we shall be able to catch the express to town.'

'Then let's make haste and catch it.'

'Come!'

They began to walk quickly, side by side. As they passed round the bend they came on the two children sitting, with the Stranger, beside the lake. The children, scrambling to their feet, came running to them.

'Mamma,' they cried, 'come and see the friend of little children!'

At sight of them the woman drew back, as if afraid. The man interposed.

'Don't worry, you youngsters! Your mother's in a hurry-run away! Come, Doris, make haste; we've no time to lose if we wish to catch the train.'

He put his arm through hers, and made as if to draw her past them. She seemed disposed to linger.

'Let me-say good-bye to them.'

He whispered in her ear:

'There'll only be a scene; don't be foolish, child! There's not a moment to lose!' He turned angrily to the boy and girl. 'Don't you hear, you youngsters! – run away!' As the children moved aside,

frightened at his violence, and bewildered by the strangeness of their mother's manner, he gripped the woman's arm more firmly, beginning by sheer force to hurry her off. 'Come, Doris,' he exclaimed, 'don't be an idiot!'

The Stranger, who had been sitting on the grass, stood up and faced them.

'Rather be wise. There still is time. What is it you would do?'

The interruption took the pair completely by surprise. The man stared angrily at the Stranger.

'Who are you, sir? And what do you mean by interfering in what is no concern of yours?

'Are you sure that it is no concern of Mine?'

The man endeavoured to meet the Stranger's eyes, with but scant success. His erect, bold, defiant attitude gave place to one of curious uncertainty.

'How can it be any concern of yours?'

'All things are My concern, the things which you do, and the things which you leave undone. Would it were not so, for many and great are the burdens which you lay upon me. You wicked man! Yet more foolish even than wicked! What is this woman to you that you should seek to slay her body and soul? Is she not of those who know not what is the thing they do till it is done? It is well with you if this sin, also, shall not be laid to your charge, – that you are a blind leader of the blind!'

The Stranger turned to the woman.

'Your eyes shall be opened. Look upon this man to see him

as he is.'

The woman looked at the man. As she looked, a change came over him. Before her accusatory glance he seemed to dwindle and wax old. He grew ugly, his jaw dropped open, his eyes were full of lust, cruelty was writ upon his countenance. On a sudden he had become a thing of evil. She shrank back with a cry of horror and alarm, while he stood before her cowering like some guilty creature whose shame has been suddenly made plain. And the Stranger said to him:

'Go! and seek that peace of which you would have robbed her.'

The man, shambling away round the bend in the path, presently was lost to sight. The Stranger was left alone with the children and the woman. The woman stood before Him trembling, with bowed form and face cast down, and she cried:

'Who are you, sir?'

The Stranger replied:

'Look upon Me: and as you knew the man, so, also, you shall know Me.'

She looked on Him, and knew Him, and wept.

'Lord, I know You! Have mercy upon me!'

He answered:

'I am the friend of little children, and of the mothers that bare them; for the pains of the women are not little ones; and because they are great, so also shall great mercy be shown unto them. For unto those that suffer most, shall not most be forgiven? for is not suffering akin to repentance?'

And the woman cried:

'Lord, I am not worthy Thy forgiveness!'

And to her He said:

'Is any worthy? No, not one. Yet many are those to whom forgiveness comes. There are your children, that are an heritage to you of God. Take them, and as you are unto them, so shall God be unto you, and more. Return to your husband; say to him what things have happened unto you, and fear not because of him.'

And the woman went, holding a child by either hand. And the Stranger stood and watched them as they went. And when they had gone some distance, the woman turned and looked at Him. And He called to her:

'Be of good courage!'

And after that she saw Him no more.

CHAPTER V
THE OPERATION

The students crowded the benches. Some wore hats and gloves, and carried sticks or umbrellas; they had the appearance of having just dropped in to enjoy a little passing relaxation. Others, hatless and gloveless, wore instead an air of intense pre-occupation; they had note-books in their hands, and spent the time studying anatomical charts in sombre-covered volumes. Many were smoking pipes for the most part; the air was heavy with tobacco smoke. Nearly everybody talked; there was a continual clatter of voices; men on one side called to men on the other, exchanging jokes and laughter.

In the well below were the tables for the operator and his paraphernalia. Assistants were making all things ready. The smell of antiseptic fluids mingled with the odour of tobacco. Omnipresent was the pungent suggestion of carbolic acid. A glittering array of instruments was being sterilised and placed in order for the operator's hand. The anæsthetists were busy with their preparations to expedite unconsciousness, the dressers with their bandages to be applied when the knives had made an end.

There was about the whole theatre, and in particular about the little array of men upon the floor in their white shrouds, who were occupied in doing things the meaning of which was hidden from the average layman, something which the unaccustomed

eye and ear and stomach would have found repulsive. But in the bearing of those who were actually present there was no hint that the work in which they were to be engaged had about it any of the elements of the disagreeable. They were, taking them all in all, and so far as appearances went, a careless, lighthearted, jovial crew.

When the operator entered, accompanied by two colleagues, there was silence, or, rather, a distinct hush. Pipes were put out, men settled in their seats, note-books were opened, opera-glasses were produced. The operator was a man of medium height and slender build, with slight side-whiskers and thin brown hair, which was turning gray. He wore spectacles. Having donned the linen duster, he turned up his shirtsleeves close to his shoulders, and with bare arms began to examine the preparations which the assistants had made. He glanced at the instruments, commented on the bandages, gave some final directions to an irrigator; then each man fell into his place and waited. The door opened and a procession entered. A stretcher was carried in by two men, one at the head and one at the foot. A nurse walked by the side, holding the patient by the hand; two other nurses accompanied. The patient was lifted on to the table. The porters, with the stretcher, withdrew. The nurse who had held the patient's hand stooped and kissed her, whispering words of comfort. The operator bent also. What he said was clearly audible.

'Don't be afraid; it will be all right.'

The patient said nothing. She was a woman of about thirty

years, and was suffering from cancer in the womb.

Anæsthetics were applied, but she took them badly, fighting, struggling against their influence, crying and whimpering all the time. Force had to be used to restrain her movements on the table. When she felt their restraining hands, she began to be hysterical and to scream. A second attempt was made to bring about unconsciousness; again without result. The surgeons held a hurried consultation as to whether the operation should be carried out with the patient still in possession of her senses. It was resolved that there should be a third and more drastic effort to produce anæsthesia. On that occasion the desired result was brought about. Her cries and struggles ceased; she was in a state of torpor.

The body was bared; the knife began its work…

The operation was not wholly successful. There had been fears that it would fail; but as, if it were not attempted, an agonising death would certainly ensue, it had been felt that it was a case in which every possible chance should be taken advantage of, and in which the undoubted risk was worth incurring. The woman was still young. She had a husband who loved her and children whom she loved. She did not wish to die; so it had been decided that surgical science should do its best to win life for her.

But it appeared that the worst fears on her account were likely to be realised. The operation was a prolonged one. The resistance she had offered to the application of the anæsthetics had weakened her. Soon after the surgeon began his labours it

became obvious to those who knew him best that he had grave doubts as to what would be the issue. As he continued, his doubts grew more; they were exchanged for certainties, until it began to be whispered through the theatre that the operation, which was being brought to as rapid a conclusion as possible, was being conducted on a subject who was already dead.

The woman had died under the surgeon's knife. Shortly the fact was established beyond the possibility of challenge. Reagents of every kind were applied in the most effective possible manner; medical skill and experience did its utmost; but neither the Materia Medica nor the brains of doctors shall prevail against death, and this woman was already dead.

When the thing was made plain, there came into the atmosphere a peculiar quality. The students were very still; they neither moved nor spoke, but sat stiffly, with their eyes fixed on the naked woman extended on the oilskin pad. Some of those faces were white, their features set and rigid. This was notably the case with those who were youngest and most inexperienced, though there were those among the seniors who were ill at ease. It was almost as if they had been assisting at a homicide; before their eyes they had seen this woman done to death. The operator was a man whose nerve was notorious, or he would not have held the position which he did; but even he seemed to have been nonplussed by what had happened beneath his knife. His assistants clustered together, eyeing him askance, and each other, and the woman, with the useless bandages hiding the gaping

wound. His colleagues whispered apart. They and he were all drabbled with blood; each seemed conscious of his ensanguined hands. All in the building had come full of faith in the man whose fame as a surgeon was a byword; it was as though their faith had received an ugly jar.

While the hush endured, One rose from His place on the benches, and stepping on to the operating floor, moved towards the woman. An assistant endeavoured to interpose.

'Go back to your place, sir. What do you mean by coming here?'

'You have done your work. Am I not, then, to do Mine?'

The assistant stared, taken aback by what seemed to him to be impudence.

'Don't talk nonsense! Who are you, sir?'

'I am He you know not of-a help to those in pain.'

The assistant hesitated, glancing from the Speaker to his chief. The Stranger drew a sheet over the woman, so that only her face remained uncovered. Turning to the operator, He beckoned with His finger.

'Come!'

The surgeon went. The Stranger said to him, pointing towards the woman:

'Insomuch as what you have done was done for her, it is well; insomuch as it was done for your own advancing, it was ill. Yet be not afraid. Blessed are the hands which heal men's wounds, and wipe the tears of pain out of their eyes. Better to be of use to

those that suffer than to be a king. For the time shall come when you shall say: "As I did unto others, so do, Lord, unto me." And it shall be done. Yet do it, not for the swelling of your purse, but for your brother's sake, and your payment shall be of God.'

And the Stranger, turning, spoke to the students on the benches; and their eyes never moved from Him as, wondering, they listened to His words.

'Hearken, O young men, while I speak to you of the things which your fathers have forgotten, and would not remember if they could. You would go forth as healers of men? It is well. Go forth! Heal! The world is very sick. Women labour; men sigh because of their pains. But, physicians, heal first yourselves. Be sure that you go forth in the spirit of healing. Where there is suffering, there go; ask not why it comes, nor whence, nor what shall be the fee. Heal only. The labourer is worthy of his hire; yet it is not for his hire he should labour. Heal for the healing's sake, and because of the pain which is in the world. God shall measure out to the physician his appointed fee. Trouble not yourselves with that. The less your gain, the greater your gain. There is One that keeps count. Each piece of money you heap upon the other lessens your store. I tell you that there is joy in heaven each time a sufferer is eased, at his brother's hands, of pain, because it was his brother.'

When the Stranger ceased, the students looked from him at each other. They began to murmur among themselves.

'Who is this fellow?'

'What does he mean by preaching at us?'

'Inflicting on us a string of platitudes!'

And one, bolder than the rest, called out:

'Yours is excellent advice, sir, but in the light of what's just occurred it seems hardly to the point. Couldn't you demonstrate instead of talk?'

The Stranger looked in the direction from which the voice came.

'Stand up!'

The student stood up. He was a young man of about twenty-four, with a shrewd, earnest face. In his hand he held an open note-book.

'Always the world seeks for a sign; without a sign it will not believe-nor with a sign. What demonstration would you have of Me?'

'Are you a doctor, sir?'

'I am a healer of men.'

'With what degree?'

'One you know not of.'

'Yet I thought I knew something of all degrees.'

'Not all. Young man, you will find the world easy, heaven hard. Yet because there are many here like unto you, I will show to you a sign; exhibit My degree.'

The Stranger turned to the operating surgeon.

'You say that the woman whom you sought to heal is dead?'

'Beyond a doubt, unfortunately.'

'You are sure?'

'Certain.'

'Of that you are all persuaded?'

Again there came murmurs from the students on the benches:

'What's he up to?'

'Who's he getting at?'

'Throw him out!'

The Stranger waited till the murmuring was at an end. Then He turned to the woman, and, stooping, kissed her on the lips.

'Daughter!' He said.

And, behold, the woman sat up and looked about her.

'Where am I?' she asked, as one who wakes from sleep.

'Is all well with you?'

'Oh, yes, all's well with me, thank God!'

'That is good hearing.'

Then there was a tumult in the theatre. The students stood up in their places, speaking all together.

'How's he done it?'

'She must have been only shamming.'

'It's a trick!'

'It's a plant!'

'It's a got-up thing between them.'

Insults were hurled at the Stranger by a hundred different voices. In the heat of their excitement the students came streaming down from their seats on to the operating floor. They looked for the man who had done this thing.

'Where is he?' they cried. 'We'll make him confess how the trick was done.'

But He whom they sought was not there. He had already gone. When they discovered that this was so, and that He whom they sought was not to be found, but had vanished from before their eyes, their bewilderment grew still more. With one accord they turned to look at the woman.

As if alarmed by the noise of their threatening voices, and the confusion caused by their tumultuous movements, she had raised herself upon the operating table, so that she stood upright before them all, naked as she was born. And they saw that the bandages had fallen from off her, and that her body was without scratch and blemish, round and whole.

'It's a miracle!' they exclaimed.

A great silence fell over them all, until, presently, the surgeons and the students, looking each into the other's faces, began to ask, each of his neighbour:

'Who is the man that has done this thing?'

But the woman gave thanks unto God, weeping tears of joy.

CHAPTER VI
THE BLACKLEG

The foreman shrugged his shoulders. He avoided looking at the applicant, an undersized man, with straggling black beard and dull eyes. Even now, while pressing his appeal, he wore an air of being but slightly interested.

'You know, Jones, what the conditions of employ were-keep on the works.'

'But my little girl's ill!'

'Sorry to hear it; but you don't want to have any trouble. You heard how they treated your wife when she came in; they'd be much worse to you if I was to let you out. They're pretty near beat, and they know it, and they don't like it, and before they quite knock under they'd like to make a mark of someone. If it was you, they might make a mark too many; they're not overfond of you just now, as you know very well. And then where will you be, eh? How would your little girl be any better for their laying you out?'

Jones turned to his wife, a sort of feminine replica of himself. She had her shawl drawn over her head.

'You hear, Jane, what Mr. Mason says?'

Mrs. Jones sighed; even in her sigh there was a curious reproduction of her husband's lack of interest.

'All I know is that the doctor don't seem to have no great 'opes

about Matilda, and that she keeps a-calling for you, Tom.'

'Does she? Then I go! Mr. Mason, I'm a-goin'.'

'All right, Jones, go! Don't think that I don't feel for yer, 'cause I do, but as to coming back again, that's another matter. Mind, we can do without yer, and we don't want no fuss, that's all. Things have been bad enough up to now, and we don't want 'em to be no worse.'

Outside the gates there was a considerable crowd. Among the crowd were the pickets and a fair leaven of the men on strike; but a large majority of the people might have been described as sympathisers. Unwise sympathisers they for the most part were; more bent on striking than the strikers; more resolute to fight the battle to the bitter end. The knowledge that already surrender was in the air angered them. They were in an ugly temper, disposed to 'take it out of' the first most convenient object.

As Mrs. Jones had made her way through them towards the gates she had been subjected to gibes and jeers, and worse. She had been pushed and hustled. More than one hand had been laid rudely on her. Someone had thrown a shovelful of dirt with such adroitness that it had burst in a shower on her head. While she was still nearly blinded she had been pushed hither and thither with half good-humoured horse-play, which was near akin to something else.

Tom Jones was an unpopular figure. He was one of the most notorious of the blacklegs, in a sense their leader. He had persisted in being master of his own volition; asserted his right

to labour for whom he pleased, at whatever terms he chose. Such men are the greatest enemies of trades unions. Allow a man his freedom, and unionism, in its modern sense, is at an end. It is one of the questions of the moment whether the good of the greatest number does not imperatively demand special legislation which shall hold such men in bonds; which shall make it a penal offence for them to consider themselves free.

Word had gone round that Jones's little girl was ill; that the doctor had decided she was dying; that Mrs. Jones had come to fetch him home to bid the child good-bye. By most of those there it was unhesitatingly agreed that this was as it should be; that Jones was being served just right; that he was only getting a bit of what he ought to have, which, it was quite within the range of possibility, they would supplement with something else.

It was because of Jones and his like that the strike was failing, had failed; that they were beaten and broken, brought to their knees, in spite of all their organisation, of what they had endured. Jones! It was currently reported that the idea of giving the blacklegs food and lodging on the premises, and so rendering the wiles of the pickets of no avail, was Jones's. At any rate, he had been among the first to fall in with the proposition, and for many days he had not been outside the gates. Jones! Let him put his face outside those gates now and he would see what they would show him.

When the gates were opened, and Mrs. Jones had entered, they waited, murmuring and muttering, with twitching fingers

and lowering brows, wondering if the prospect of being able to bid his dying child good-bye would be sufficient inducement to him to trust himself outside there in the open. And while they wondered he came.

Again the gate was opened. Out came Jones; close behind him was his wife. Then the gate was shut to with a bang.

He was known by sight to many in the crowd. By them the knowledge of who he was was instantly communicated to all the rest. He was not greeted with any tumult; they were too much in earnest to be noisy. But, with one accord, they cursed him, and their curses, though not loudly uttered, reached him, every one. He stood fronting the array of angry faces, all inclined in his direction.

The three policemen, who kept a clear space in front of the works, and saw that ingress and egress was gained with some sort of ease, hardly seemed to know what to make of him, or of the situation. They glanced at Jones, then at the crowd, then at each other. All the morning the people had been gathering round the gate, the number increasing as the minutes passed. Except that they could not be induced to move away, there had been little to object to in their demeanour until now. As Jones appeared with his wife they formed together into a more compact mass. Another shovelful of dust was thrown by someone at the back with the same dexterity as before, so that it lighted on the man and the woman, partially obscuring them beneath a cloud of dust. That same instant perhaps a dozen stones were thrown, some of

which struck both Mr. and Mrs. Jones, the rest rattling against the gate.

It was done so quickly that the police had not a chance to offer interference. They had been instructed to make as little show of authority as possible, to bear as much as could be borne, and, until the last extremity, to do nothing to rouse the rancour of the strikers. In the face of this sudden assault the trio hesitated. Then the one nearest to the gate held his hand up to the crowd, shouting:

'Now, you chaps, none of that! Don't you go making fools of yourselves, or you'll be sorry!' He turned to the Joneses. 'You'd better go back and try to get out some other way. There'll be trouble if you stop here.'

Tom Jones asked him stolidly, gazing with his lack-lustre eyes intently at the crowd:

'Which other way?'

'I don't know-any other way. You can't get this way, that's plain- they mean mischief. Back you go, before you're sorry.'

The constable endeavoured to hustle the pair back within the gate. But Jones would not have it.

'My child's dying; this is the nearest way to her. I'm going this way.'

The officer persisted in his attempt to persuade him to change his mind.

'Don't be silly! You won't do your child any good by getting yourself knocked to pieces, will you?'

Tom Jones was obstinate.

'I'm going this way.'

Slipping past the constable, he moved towards the crowd. The people confronted him like a solid wall.

'Let me pass, you chaps.'

That moment the storm broke. The man's stolid demeanour, the complete indifference with which he faced their rage, might have had something to do with it. The effect of his request to be allowed to pass was as if he had dropped a lighted match into a powder-magazine. An explosion followed. The air was rent by curses; the people became all at once like madmen. Possessed with sudden frenzy, they crowded round the man, raining on him a hail of blows, each man struggling with his fellow in order to reach the object of his rage. Their very fury defeated their purpose. Not a few of the blows which were meant for Jones fell on their own companions. With the commencement of the attack Jones's stolidity completely vanished. He was transformed into a fiend, and behaved like one. His voice was heard above the others, pouring forth a flood of objurgations on the heads of his assailants. His wife was his slavish disciple. Her shrill tones were mingled with his deeper ones; they were at least as audible. Her language was no better, her passion was no less. The man and the woman fought like wild beasts. And so blinded by fury were the efforts of their assailants that the pair were able to give back much more than they received.

The attempts of the police at pacification were useless. They

were not in sufficient force. And there is a point in the temper of a crowd at which its rage is not to be appeased until it has vented itself on the object of its fury. All that the officers succeeded in doing was to lose their own tempers. Under certain circumstances there is irresistible contagion in a madman's frenzy. Presently they themselves were mingling in the frantic mêlée, apparently with as little show of reason as the rest.

Suddenly the crowd gave way towards the centre. Those in the middle were borne down by those who persisted in pressing on. There was a struggling, heaving, mouthing mass upon the ground, with the Joneses underneath. And, as the writhings and contortions of this heap grew less and less, there came One, before whose touch men gave way, so that, before they knew it, He stood there, in their very midst, before them all. In His presence their rage was stilled. Ceasing to contend, they drew back, looking towards Him with their bloodshot eyes. Where had been the pile of living men was a clear space, in which He stood. At His feet were two forms-Tom Jones and his wife. The woman cried and groaned, twisting her limbs; but the man lay still.

'What is it that you would do?'

With the sorrowful inflexion of the voice was blended a satiric intonation which seemed to strike some of those who heard as with a thong. One man, a big, burly fellow, chose to take the question as addressed to himself. He still trembled with excess of rage; his voice was husky; from his mouth there came a volley of oaths.

'Bash the – to a jelly-that's what we'd like to do to his – carcase! It's through the likes of him that our homes are broken up, our kids starving, our wives with pretty near nothing on. Killing's too good for such a-!'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.