

THREE GROTESQUES

I

POGSON'S DESCENT

POGSON was called Horrid Pogson at his Public School, except in his own House, where he was known as the Loathly Hound. He acquired some notoriety from his custom, at the beginning of term, of raffling a sovereign amongst thirty or forty school-fellows who each paid a shilling for their chance of winning. The raffle was strictly honourable; Pogson, although he always took a ticket, never won the sovereign. When he was eighteen years old he reached the Sixth Form and was made a prefect. He ceased from raffling sovereigns, parted his hair in the middle, and was severe on small boys who played Old Maid, Beggar-my-Neighbour or Bridge on half holidays before, or even after, Evening Chapel. He ceased to attend games of football, at which somewhat hectic sport he had always been an indifferent

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performer, and took a considerable interest in the High Church Movement. When he left school, being possessed of ample private means, he expressed a wish to present the chapel with a stained-glass window containing the figure of Sir Galahad with the Pogson armorial bearings—four mushrooms rampant on a *pré vert*—on his shield. For some obscure reason the Head-master objected to the design, and the scheme was abandoned.

During his residence at the University of Oxford, where he matriculated at the age of nineteen, he displayed the self-respecting reserve that is characteristic of the best type of undergraduate. Not that he lacked friends; he showed, indeed, a happy gift in seeking the society of those who, by reason of birth, wealth or environment seemed to bear on their brows the radiance of a high destiny. Blougram, afterwards the famous Bishop *in partibus infidelium*, was one of his friends; and Zanichelli, who was obviously destined to high office in the Vatican, but, in a moment of religious doubt abandoned his career at the voice of conscience and joined the staff of the *Asino*, was another.

He was popular at the University Draughts Club, a society which observes strict silence during its meetings, and his one speech in his college debating society, followed as it was by his progress across the quadrangle beneath a pelting hail of soda water, bananas, currant cake, tennis shoes and editions of the Greek and Latin Classics, is still remembered. In athletics he took no share, the marked corpulence of his frame rendering him unfit for violent exercise, but he became proficient in the art of steering a punt with a paddle. Commonplace hail-fellow-well-met popularity he never attained and never sought, but the unpleasing nicknames of his schooldays did not follow him to Oxford. At College he was known simply as the Cow. At the age of twenty-one, he discovered that he had made an offer of marriage to a lady in a photographer's shop, who had, indeed, been selected for that position with a view to such an event taking place. Her attachment to him was modified by the receipt of a substantial cheque. This was his only lapse from the high, though bleak road of the normal, and until he

married at thirty-five, women played no part in his life. In spite of a leaning towards literature—he was an enthusiastic student of Lewis Morris, Macaulay, A. C., E. F., and R. H. Benson—he never really wavered in his desire for a clerical career until a position was offered him in the family business, when he sensibly realised that to refuse £500 a year with a steady increase would be an insult to an all-seeing Providence. But he never allowed the distractions of a business life wholly to overwhelm his original convictions. He became a churchwarden in a pseudo-Gothic edifice at the back of Bayswater, and eventually married the vicar's daughter. He wore boots with rubber soles on Sunday, and his face grew broader and broader. He accumulated a great amount of money and spent very little. Nothing of any importance happened to him. At least nothing happened to him until he was forty years old. Then a really wonderful event came upon him. He died suddenly whilst he was reading the *Daily Mail* in his office, and went to Hell.

When Pogson reached the door of Hell he

awoke, and imagined for a moment that he was still sitting in his office with the *Daily Mail* on his knees. For the ante-chamber to Hell was exactly like his office or any of the thousand other offices that were its neighbours. But when he looked at the paper he found that it was not a news-sheet, but a kind of bill full of entries in fine copper-plate handwriting. Pogson read a few of the entries, but could make nothing of them, and then a severe looking person who was dressed like John Worthing in the second act of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, came through a side door and bowed to him politely.

"Don't enter without knocking!" said Pogson, from sheer force of habit. But he was beginning to feel that something was wrong. "Who are you?" he asked.

"I am the Devil," said the severe person, placing his hat on a chair. "You, I know, are Mr. Pogson, the long-awaited. I see you have brought your credentials with you."

"Where am I?" gasped Pogson.

"A poet," answered the severe person, "would say that you were in the jaws of

Hell. Let me offer you a hearty welcome, Mr. Pogson. We can't have too many of your type."

"Hell," cried Pogson. "What nonsense! There's been a mistake. I'm a churchwarden."

The Devil waved a hand towards the great door.

"You will find plenty of others," he said, gently. "Shall we go to look for them?"

Pogson made a violent effort to conquer his growing alarm.

"Really, I protest!" he cried. "It's all a mistake, I'm not dead. I *can't* be dead! I was reading the *Daily Mail*, and I feel just as I always felt. It's monstrous!"

"We can only conclude that you were never really alive, Mr. Pogson," said the Devil. "Suppose that we look at your record." He spread out the paper that Pogson had been holding. Pogson read a few lines of the neat writing without being able to discover what they meant. The Devil explained. "A list of your virtues," he said pleasantly. "The plus and minus signs denote their degree of intensity. Smug

ness, you see, is followed by + 100 ; Heroism by - 1000 ; Humour is—dear me! the compiler doesn't seem to have included Humour ; but Self-satisfaction, which is much the same as lack of Humour, reaches + 100. That accounts for the omission. I have the pleasure of informing you, Mr. Pogson," continued the Devil, "that you are fully qualified. Consider yourself matriculated amongst my disciples. I will lead the way."

Pogson began to cry.

"I tell you it's a mistake," he said. "I never did a wicked thing in my life. I was punctual, sober, diligent. You'll be sorry for this when I write to the papers." For he felt exactly as if he were in an inferior or foreign hotel.

The Devil, who had advanced towards the great door, turned to look at him.

"Did you ever do anything that was good?" he asked. Pogson answered, "Hundreds, hundreds of things!" but when he tried to enumerate his good actions he could remember nothing but the fact that he always put a shilling into the offertory on Sundays. The Devil shrugged his shoulders and waved

his ebony walking-stick. The doors rolled back, and Pogson gazed upon Hell.

He was immensely relieved to find that it greatly resembled London, especially that part of London in which he had lived. There were the same long rows of prim, flat-faced houses with their front gates and their tradesmen's entrances and their obese stucco flower-pots; an odour that recalled innumerable Sunday dinners arose from their areas, and the steady clank of a thousand pianos came from their drawing-rooms. The streets were full of motors, and fierce errand boys on bicycles, and men in tall hats, and women with painted faces. Dismembered carcasses hung in the open windows of the butchers' shops; over-driven horses fell down and died; gusts of fetid air arose from underground railways; in fact, it was all delightfully homely. The soul of Pogson revived; he rubbed his ghostly hands together. "Why, it's just like the world!" he cried; "it *is* the world; there's no difference at all."

"No," said the Devil, "it is the same environment in which you have always lived.

You will find an admirable house reserved for you, resembling your own in London; a wife like your wife; an office in every respect identical with your office in the City. You may continue your earthly work there and you may lunch at an Aerated Bread Shop. You may even meet friends like your friends on earth."

"But this is very pleasant!" cried Pogson. "When one thinks how frightened one was of Hell! Everything, then, is exactly the same as in the world?"

The Devil looked at him for a moment, and smiled slightly.

"One thing," he said, "is not quite the same."

"Oh! one thing doesn't matter," said Pogson airily. "What is it?"

"Your own soul," answered the Devil. Pogson stared at him.

"What do you mean?" demanded Pogson. He felt completely master of the situation. "Please explain yourself," he added curtly; "I have a great dislike of mystery."

"This is what I mean," answered the Devil. "Your life here will be the same in

every detail as your life on earth. You will marry money, grow fat, and be dreadfully respectable. There will be only one difference. You will have the kind of soul which might have been yours in the world: the soul of a poet, a dreamer, an adventurer, full of ideals, of mighty schemes, of thrilling fantasies and yearnings, of immense lusts for beauty and freedom. But you will not be free, Mr. Pogson. You will never be free."

The Devil took off his hat to Pogson. Then he hailed a motor-omnibus and drove away on the top of it, smiling. And even then Pogson felt that what the Devil had said was the truth, for the new soul that was born in him struggled and quivered, and loathed the motor-omnibuses and the fat reek of domestic altars and the level lines of respectable residences that extended interminably, and cried aloud for limitless plains where the air was clean, for passion, for great adventure and the shock of armies, and mighty dawns seen from the edge of the world. And Pogson told his soul to be quiet, but it would not obey him.

Then Pogson knew that he was in Hell.

II

THE REMINISCENT BISHOP

He was a good bishop, but very grim. He had iron-grey whiskers and falcon eyes, and he spoke with a strong North-country accent. For twenty years he did his work in the world conscientiously, but his family was a sore trial to him. There was no smoking-room at the Palace, so his two sons became undomestic, and one of them went into the illegitimate form of drama that is called musical comedy, and married a lady with very beautiful legs. The other son went to America, and succumbed shortly afterwards to a surfeit of the beverages peculiar to that Republic. His daughters were admirable morally, but physically osseous. His wife worshipped him. When he was sixty years old he had a severe attack of influenza, which developed into pneumonia during one of his sermons in the Cathedral. Two days later the doctors held a consultation, and agreed that there was no hope of his recovery. His family, with the

exception of his daughter-in-law, was summoned to his bedside.

Throughout the third day of his illness he lay rigid and unconscious, looking like his own effigy carved in white stone. Towards nightfall, however, he began to speak very rapidly, and the watchers by the bed realised that he imagined himself to be living through his schooldays at Eton. He recited scraps of Horace, talked the jargon of the playground, gave instructions to a fag about his breakfast, chattered, in a queer high-pitched voice of a hundred trivial things. Then the Bishop was back in Oxford, leading that incomparable life in the loveliest of cities ; his voice became deeper, and the words were a strange mixture of boating slang and classical learning and theology ; the name of Newman occurred again and again, and there was talk of the Bicester hounds.

The voice changed again, becoming wonderfully gentle. The confused babble of reminiscences gave place to direct speech, as if the Bishop were addressing someone whom he could actually see. So tender, so inspired

seemed the voice that the watchers by the bed felt as if some alien spirit were speaking through those bloodless lips, and feared that the end was near.

This is what the voice said :

Do you remember that night in the garden at Florence, when the air was heavy with the perfume of great roses, and the moon hung like a yellow sickle over the Arno? Have you forgotten, even though you are dead, how I kissed your mouth that trembled, and hid my face in the deep softness of your hair, and shivered with an ecstasy that was keener than pain when your arms stole round me? Have you forgotten that when everything called me from you—honour, duty, your peace, my career, and I had resolved—God knows how!—to leave Italy for ever, you fell into a passion of weeping—and I remained?

The voice paused, and the wife of the Bishop rose from her place by the bedside. She made a sign to her children, and they left the room. The aspect of her face was strange to them. The voice continued to speak distinctly.

May you forget it all if the memory has

power to hurt you as it hurts me; but I can never forget. On my death-bed your face rises before me, and my latest sigh is for you. I can look back on years of influence, power, work well done, what the world calls success. All dead ashes! My life began and ended with you. How slender you were, how very slender! When you walked in the Tuscan garden you moved like a lily that sways beneath a light breeze. Your hair was dark as the heart of a sunflower, and your eyes were like the deep lake water at midnight. You had the funniest hands—very soft, very strong, with dimples in the palms and restless fingers, always moving, like the fingers of a very little child.

The voice paused again and the Bishop's wife leant over the bed and said "Alfred" three times in a commanding voice. But the Bishop ignored her. After a moment he began to speak again.

How beautiful you were! In the streets everyone turned to look at you and to wonder at the gaunt Englishman who was always with you. And you were brilliant, and your laughter was like the sudden sunshine of spring; but sometimes you would be sad, and

sit for hours with your hands clasped about your knees staring across the city with those inscrutable eyes. Do you remember the books we read in the garden,—the vision of him who sleeps in lonely Ravenna, far from his own city and his beautiful San Giovanni; the burnished silver of the sonnets to Laura, and the complaint of the ill-starred lover of Silvia—most melancholy and musical of all voices of poets? And how I read you my own verses, and you thought them quite as fine as Dante and Leopardi? And how we used to go to the theatre, and the journey home on the wild night when the Arno was angry and the lights on the Bridge turned blue, and the great raindrops hammered on the roof of the carriage, and the horse fell down at the Porta Romana, and I carried you to the villa door because you had new shoes,—very fine ones, with black rosettes on the instep? And then the little room that held all heaven for me,—the warmth, the silence, the dim light on your shadowy hair . . .

The voice sank to a long ecstatic sigh. “*O speranze, speranze, Almeni inganni!*” it murmured.

The Bishop's wife could bear it no longer. She leant over the bed so that her lips were close to the Bishop's ear. "Alfred," she almost shouted, "Alfred! Rouse yourself! They are going to disestablish the Church!"

The Bishop opened his eyes and smiled. Then he spoke in the voice of his undergraduate days. "Let them disestablish her and be damned to them!" he said gaily, and relapsed into complete unconsciousness. And the Bishop's wife wept.

The most dreadful part of this painful affair is that the Bishop did not die, but recovered almost miraculously, and lived for very many years.

III

THE OLD MAID

Although it was the day of the Revolution, the old maid sat in her usual place in the window that overlooked the chief square of the city. All through the morning the

Republicans had bombarded the walls, killing several mules and a cow, and bringing down a fair number of chimney-pots. At noon the South Gate was forced, and an immense rabble of heroes surged into the city. Simultaneously, the Royalist army left by the North Gate. At two o'clock the Republic was proclaimed by the President-elect, amid a grand blowing of trumpets, crashing of bells, discharging of rifles and general hullabaloo—the combined effect much resembling the “1812” Overture of the great composer Tschaïkowsky. Even the oldest inhabitant said that in all his experience he had never known so bloodless a revolution. In fact, he seemed seriously disappointed.

The Old Maid took no interest in revolutions. At sunset, when she was still sewing at her window, the square was thronged with gesticulating patriots, but she looked up very seldom from her work, and when she did so it was only to speak to her cat, a swollen monster which lay at ease amongst the dragged petunias in a large window-box. For thirty years she might have been

seen in that place at that hour, the visible embodiment of industrious solitude, apparently quite heedless of the shifting figures and hum of voices in the square—an image of the Permanent set high above the ebb and flow of the Transitory. The only revolutions that had power to effect her were the deaths or disappearances of her cats; and cats, after all, were replaced as easily as kings.

The brief twilight faded; milky electric lights glowed amongst the trees of the Square, a band played several sentimental melodies in a business-like manner, and the patriots drifted away towards their dinners. Outside the cafés the tables were crowded; gay voices and snatches of song mingled with the rattle of plates and the shouts of waiters, and there was a continuous throbbing of guitars. The Old Maid lit her lamp and then resumed her work. Her sharp profile and angular shoulders were plainly visible to passers-by in the Square, but no one took any notice of her. It seemed that she had no friends.

She did not seem to need them, but

worked tranquilly, ignoring the sounds of revelry and the shouts of children who ran hither and thither with Japanese lanterns that made zigzags in the dark like huge erratic fireflies. About nine o'clock the Square was almost deserted, for there was a grand display of fireworks in the Public Gardens, with a set piece that depicted the ludicrous collapse of the late dynasty. It was strange that, when the Square was apparently empty and even the waiters had put on vivid check suits and Republican neck-ties and gone off to see the spectacle, the Old Maid began to peer frequently from her window. It was stranger that, whenever she looked out, her narrow little eyes became bright with hatred.

For she could see that there were still a few dim figures in the Square—figures that walked slowly or sat on the benches beneath the trees. They had been there twenty-five or thirty years ago, when she was young, these slow-moving couples; they would remain even when old age made her eyes too dim to see them. Revolutions and the change of years could not hurt them, for the

power that led them out to wander in the cool darkness was immortal. They were lovers, and the Old Maid hated them heartily, for she had never known love. When they passed near the window she would shake her head angrily. When they laughed together it was as if they mocked her. How she hated them! To-night, however, there were very few of them; the rest had gone to see the effigy of the late King (in a uniform that he had actually worn, with a battered straw hat on its pendulous head) burnt in the public gardens by the saviours of society.

A sheaf of rockets that soared high above the city and spangled the sky with floating emeralds and rubies told her that the firework display had begun. A moment afterwards there was a knock at her door, and a thick-set young man with black brows entered quickly and silently. He was her nephew, and honoured her very rarely with a visit. She looked at him with some alarm, imagining that he had come to borrow money; but his first words banished her fears.

"My beloved and reverend Aunt," he said, "I come to bid you farewell. I am going to take a journey for the benefit of my health. I have plenty of money and some leisure, and one must see the world when one is young. But I have a superfluity of luggage which may cause trouble at the frontier or even nearer. So with your kind permission, I am going to leave some of it here."

Having uttered these words, this remarkable young man produced a long knife from one of his boots and a revolver and a pear-shaped piece of iron from his coat pockets. The Old Maid looked at him with the expression of tolerant interest that grown-up people assume when they watch the efforts of a juvenile conjuror.

"You are doubtless unaware," continued the nephew, "that there has been a revolution, and that the Royalist party have, so to speak, shot the moon. I happen to be a Royalist—it's the only side for a gentleman—but by an unlucky chance I was having my hair cut when my friends executed a masterly retreat, so I wasn't in time to join them.

They ran like rabbits. I spent this afternoon in a disused drain, meditating profoundly on the vanity of human greatness, and wondering what I should do with these useful but incriminating implements. I thought of leaving them in the drain, but the drain was very damp. Then I thought of you, and your room seemed to me exactly the haven of peace which they needed. Please rub the knife occasionally with good mutton-fat, and be careful not to drop the iron pear on the floor or to use it as an ornament on the stove. It's a delicate piece of work, and comes to bits very easily. To-night I leave the city, but I shall return very soon and come to claim my belongings. Farewell, dear Aunt. To avoid any possible misunderstanding, I shall withdraw from your presence by the back window."

With these words the energetic young fellow left the room. The Old Maid rose from her chair, placed the revolver and the knife on the top-shelf of the meat-safe, and was about to leave the iron pear in the same receptacle, when it occurred to her that the last object had certain decorative quali-

ties. All old maids have a secret love of knobs ; a knob is solid and respectable, and when you look at it you know where you are with it. After a moment's hesitation she placed the iron pear upright in the dry soil of the window box, between two draggled petunias. Then she ate her supper and went to bed.

It had long been a habit of the leaders of the Republican party to frequent a café which was not far from the Old Maid's house. Here they sat on very hard iron chairs, drank little cups of coffee and little glasses of sticky syrup, and used very large words about the future of humanity. After the Revolution they were still faithful to their former *rendezvous*, although the grand café on the other side of the square had substituted a cap of liberty for the gilt crown that glittered magnificently from the balcony of its first floor, and nightly invoked long life for the Republic with a series of gas-jets. For the most part the leaders of the new order were persons of mild and scholarly aspect, and wore spectacles and tight frock-coats. After the first days of excitement were over they

attracted no sort of attention. The Old Maid saw them when she looked out of the window but was quite unaware of their importance.

They were not happy, for a large garrison town about fifty miles from the capital had remained faithful to the ex-King, and the Cardinal-Archbishop, who had left the city in an automobile without appearing to trouble about the speed limit, was scouring the country in that vehicle and stirring up the peasants on behalf of the Royalists. But the Old Maid knew nothing of such matters ; she had forgotten all about the Revolution, and never even wondered if her nephew had got safely across the frontier. Her house was the only one in the square which did not display a Republican flag.

Summer had come ; there was fierce sunshine all day, but the evening was cool, and the night magnificent with stars. There seemed to be more lovers than ever in the square, and when the moon rose the Old Maid could see them everywhere. She hated them more and more fiercely, and when the sound of their voices came in through the window she longed to lean out and to tell

them what fools they were. Years ago she had done this, but they had only laughed, with a horrible, good-natured, superior laughter which made her feel helpless.

One evening, after a very hot day which had given her a headache, she was looking out into the square, when a girl and a boy passed her window. The boy's arm was round the girl and she was looking up into his face. She was a peasant—black-eyed, red-cheeked, coarsely handsome, with broad hips, and strong arms that were bare to the elbow. The Old Maid hated her, and the girl looking up, saw the hatred in her eyes. She nudged the boy and giggled. "The old witch has no flag," she said, and made a wry face at the Old Maid. The boy, a handsome insolent rascal, took off his hat with a flourish. "Good evening, Mrs. Royalist," he said. The Old Maid leant out of the window, glaring at them, but silent. Her eyes evidently annoyed the girl; she slipped from her lover's arm, and placing her hands on her hips, began to strut defiantly to and fro before the Old Maid, and made more faces.

Then the pent-up rage of many years broke out at last. The Old Maid looked round for a missile—for anything heavy that would crush that insolent face to a pulp and change the smile on the leering mouth to a grin of agony. Her hand touched the iron pear; she snatched it from the flower-box and flung it with all her might at the girl's head. It missed that object by some yards, hit the ground, bounced high in the air like a tennis ball, and fell again near a group of people who sat outside the little café. There was a blinding flash of flame, and an immense explosion that seemed to shake all the houses as dice are shaken in a box; the glass in the windows of the café fell out and splintered deafeningly on the pavement, and the branches of the trees crashed down amongst the tables. A tumult of cries, groans, shouts, and the clatter of running feet rose in the square, but the leaders of the Republic did not join in the tumult, and this proves that it is very foolish of high officials and ministers to sit in a single group in time of revolution.

The Old Maid was very much surprised,

and, indeed, alarmed by what had happened, and the noise of the explosion made her headache worse. So she went to bed. But the lovers at whose heads she had tried to throw the iron pear gave information to the police, and the Old Maid had to get up and go to prison. The crowd was angry, and wanted to kill her there and then, but the police smuggled her away by back streets and placed her in a dirty cell, assuring her that she would certainly be hanged in the morning. And this distressing event would no doubt have taken place if the Royalist army, now greatly reinforced, had not selected that particular evening for a march on the city. By some means the Royalists were informed that all the Republican leaders had been blown sky high by a heroic old woman, and the good news cheered them so greatly that they broke into the city at dawn and chased the sleepy Republicans through the streets to the South Gate, where there was considerable competition as to who should be out first. By ten o'clock in the morning the big café in the Square had rapidly removed its gas-jets

and once again fixed the crown on the first-floor balcony. The Old Maid was delivered from prison and hailed as the saviour of her country by the King, his adherents, the general public and those Republicans who had been unable to retire by the South Gate. She was compared with Joan of Arc and Charlotte Corday and Jael the wife of Heber the Kenite, and was granted a large pension for life and a coat of arms with sixteen quarterings.

She had the wisdom of reticence, and no one suspected the real reason of her throwing the iron pear, for the two lovers disappeared with the routed Republicans. She herself soon forgot all about them, and realised that the guiding hand of Providence was responsible for the whole affair. And this, too, was the point of view of the Cardinal-Archbishop.