Title

A Clergyman's Daughter

By
George Orwell

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A Clergyman's Daughter

Chapter 1

As the alarm clock on the chest of drawers exploded like a horrid little bomb of bell metal, Dorothy, wrenched from the depths of some complex, troubling dream, awoke with a start and lay on her back looking into the darkness in extreme exhaustion.

The alarm clock continued its nagging, feminine clamour, which would go on for five minutes or thereabouts if you did not stop it. Dorothy was aching from head to foot, and an insidious and contemptible self-pity, which usually seized upon her when it was time to get up in the morning, caused her to bury her head under the bedclothes and try to shut the hateful noise out of her ears. She struggled against her fatigue, however, and, according to her custom, exhorted herself sharply in the second person plural. Come on, Dorothy, up you get! No snoozing, please! Proverbs vi, 9. Then she remembered that if the noise went on any longer it would wake her father, and with a hurried movement she bounded out of bed, seized the clock from the chest of drawers, and turned off the alarm. It was kept on the chest of drawers precisely in order that she should have to get out of bed to silence it. Still in darkness, she knelt down at her bedside and repeated the Lord's Prayer, but rather distractedly, her feet being troubled by the cold.

It was just half past five, and coldish for an August morning. Dorothy (her name was Dorothy Hare, and she was the only child of the Reverend Charles Hare, Rector of St Athelstan's, Knype Hill, Suffolk) put on her aged flannelette dressing-gown and felt her way downstairs. There was a chill morning smell of dust, damp plaster, and the fried dabs from yesterday's supper, and from either side of the passage on the second floor she could hear the antiphonal snoring of her father and of Ellen, the maid of all work. With care — for the kitchen table had a nasty trick of reaching out of the darkness and banging you on the hip-bone — Dorothy felt her way into the kitchen, lighted the candle on the mantelpiece, and, still aching with fatigue, knelt down and raked the ashes out of the range.

The kitchen fire was a 'beast' to light. The chimney was crooked and therefore perpetually half choked, and the fire, before it would light, expected to be dosed with a cupful of kerosene, like a drunkard's morning nip of gin. Having set the kettle to boil for her father's shaving-water, Dorothy went upstairs and turned on her bath. Ellen was still snoring, with heavy youthful snores. She was a good hard-working servant once she was awake, but she was one of those girls whom the Devil and all his angels cannot get out of bed before seven in the morning.

Dorothy filled the bath as slowly as possible — the splashing always woke her father if she turned on the tap too fast — and stood for a moment regarding the pale, unappetizing pool of water. Her body had gone goose-flesh all over. She detested cold baths; it was for that very reason that she made it a rule to take all her baths cold from April to November. Putting a tentative hand into the water — and it was horribly cold — she drove herself forward with her usual exhortations. Come on, Dorothy! In you go! No funking, please! Then she stepped resolutely into the bath, sat down and let the icy girdle of water slide up her body and immerse her all except her hair, which she had twisted up behind her head. The next moment she came to the surface gasping and wriggling, and had no sooner got her breath back than she remembered her 'memo list', which she had brought down in her dressing-gown pocket and intended to read. She reached out for it, and, leaning over the side of the bath, waist deep in icy water, read through the 'memo list' by the light of the candle on the chair.

It ran:

7 oc. H.C.
Mrs T baby? Must visit.
BREAKFAST. Bacon. MUST ask father money. (P)
Ask Ellen what stuff kitchen father's tonic NB. to ask about stuff for curtains at Solepipe's.
Visiting call on Mrs P cutting from Daily M angelica tea good for rheumatism Mrs L's cornplaster.
12 oc. Rehearsal Charles I. NB. to order 1/2 lb glue 1 pot aluminium paint.
DINNER (crossed out) LUNCHEON . . .?
Take round Parish Mag NB. Mrs F owes 3/6d.
4.30 pm Mothers' U tea don't forget 2 1/2 yards casement cloth.
Flowers for church NB. 1 tin Brasso.
SUPPER. Scrambled eggs.
Type Father's sermon what about new ribbon typewriter?
NB. to fork between peas bindweed awful.

Dorothy got out of her bath, and as she dried herself with a towel hardly bigger than a table napkin — they could never afford decent- sized towels at the Rectory — her hair came unpinned and fell down over her collar-bones in two heavy strands. It was thick, fine, exceedingly pale hair, and it was perhaps as well that her father had forbidden her to bob it, for it was her only positive beauty. For the rest, she was a girl of middle height, rather thin, but strong and shapely, and her face was her weak point. It was a thin, blonde, unremarkable kind of face, with pale eyes and a nose just a shade too long; if you looked closely you could see crow's feet round the eyes, and the mouth, when it was in repose, looked tired. Not definitely a spinsterish face as yet, but it certainly would be so in a few years' time. Nevertheless, strangers commonly took her to be several years younger than her real age (she was not quite twenty-eight) because of the expression of almost childish earnestness in her eyes. Her left forearm was spotted with tiny red marks like insect bites.

Dorothy put on her nightdress again and cleaned her teeth — plain water, of course; better not to use toothpaste before H.C. After all, either you are fasting or you aren't. The R.C.s are quite right there — and, even as she did so, suddenly faltered and stopped. She put her toothbrush down. A deadly pang, an actual physical pang, had gone through her viscera.

She had remembered, with the ugly shock with which one remembers something disagreeable for the first time in the morning, the bill at Cargill's, the butcher's, which had been owing for seven months. That dreadful bill — it might be nineteen pounds or even twenty, and there was hardly the remotest hope of paying it — was one of the chief torments of her life. At all hours of the night or day it was waiting just round the corner of her consciousness, ready to spring upon her and agonize her; and with it came the memory of a score of lesser bills, mounting up to a figure of which she dared not even think. Almost involuntarily she began to pray, 'Please God, let not Cargill send in his bill again today!' but the next moment she decided that this prayer was worldly and blasphemous, and she asked forgiveness for it. Then she put on her dressing- gown and ran down to the kitchen in hopes of putting the bill out of mind.

The fire had gone out, as usual. Dorothy relaid it, dirtying her hands with coal-dust, dosed it afresh with kerosene and hung about anxiously until the kettle boiled. Father expected his shaving- water to be ready at a quarter past six. Just seven minutes late, Dorothy took the can upstairs and knocked at her father's door.

'Come in, come in!' said a muffled, irritable voice.

The room, heavily curtained, was stuffy, with a masculine smell. The Rector had lighted the candle on his bed-table, and was lying on his side, looking at his gold watch, which he had just drawn from beneath his pillow. His hair was as white and thick as thistledown. One dark bright eye glanced irritably over his shoulder at Dorothy.

'Good morning, father.'

'I do wish, Dorothy,' said the Rector indistinctly — his voice always sounded muffled and senile until he put his false teeth in — 'you would make some effort to get Ellen out of bed in the mornings. Or else be a little more punctual yourself.'

'I'm so sorry, Father. The kitchen fire kept going out.'

'Very well! Put it down on the dressing-table. Put it down and draw those curtains.'

It was daylight now, but a dull, clouded morning. Dorothy hastened up to her room and dressed herself with the lightning speed which she found necessary six mornings out of seven. There was only a tiny square of mirror in the room, and even that she did not use. She simply hung her gold cross about her neck — plain gold cross; no crucifixes, please! — twisted her hair into a knot behind, stuck a number of hairpins rather sketchily into it, and threw her clothes (grey jersey, threadbare Irish tweed coat and skirt, stockings not quite matching the coat and skirt, and much-worn brown shoes) on to herself in the space of about three minutes. She had got to 'do out' the dining-room and her father's study before church, besides saying her prayers in preparation for Holy Communion, which took her not less than twenty minutes.

When she wheeled her bicycle out of the front gate the morning was still overcast, and the grass sodden with heavy dew. Through the mist that wreathed the hillside St Athelstan's Church loomed dimly, like a leaden sphinx, its single bell tolling funereally boom! boom! boom! Only one of the bells was now in active use; the other seven had been unswung from their cage and had lain silent these three years past, slowly splintering the floor of the belfry beneath their weight. In the distance, from the mists below, you could hear the offensive clatter of the bell in the R.C. church — a nasty, cheap, tinny little thing which the Rector of St Athelstan's used to compare with a muffin-bell.

Dorothy mounted her bicycle and rode swiftly up the hill, leaning over her handlebars. The bridge of her thin nose was pink in the morning cold. A redshank whistled overhead, invisible against the clouded sky. Early in the morning my song shall rise to Thee! Dorothy propped her bicycle against the lychgate, and, finding her hands still grey with coal-dust, knelt down and scrubbed them clean in the long wet grass between the graves. Then the bell stopped ringing, and she jumped up and hastened into church, just as Proggett, the sexton, in ragged cassock and vast labourer's boots, was clumping up the aisle to take his place at the side altar.

The church was very cold, with a scent of candle-wax and ancient dust. It was a large church, much too large for its congregation, and ruinous and more than half empty. The three narrow islands of pews stretched barely half-way down the nave, and beyond them were great wastes of bare stone floor in which a few worn inscriptions marked the sites of ancient graves. The roof over the chancel was sagging visibly; beside the Church Expenses box two fragments of riddled beam explained mutely that this was due to that mortal foe of Christendom, the death-watch beetle. The light filtered, pale- coloured, through windows of anaemic glass. Through the open south door you could see a ragged cypress and the boughs of a lime-tree, greyish in the sunless air and swaying faintly.

As usual, there was only one other communicant — old Miss Mayfill, of The Grange. The attendance at Holy Communion was so bad that the Rector could not even get any boys to serve him, except on Sunday mornings, when the boys liked showing off in front of the congregation in their cassocks and surplices. Dorothy went into the pew behind Miss Mayfill, and, in penance for some sin of yesterday, pushed away the hassock and knelt on the bare stones. The service was beginning. The Rector, in cassock and short linen surplice, was

reciting the prayers in a swift practised voice, clear enough now that his teeth were in, and curiously ungenial. In his fastidious, aged face, pale as a silver coin, there was an expression of aloofness, almost of contempt. 'This is a valid sacrament,' he seemed to be saying, 'and it is my duty to administer it to you. But remember that I am only your priest, not your friend. As a human being I dislike you and despise you.' Proggett, the sexton, a man of forty with curly grey hair and a red, harassed face, stood patiently by, uncomprehending but reverent, fiddling with the little communion bell which was lost in his huge red hands.

Dorothy pressed her fingers against her eyes. She had not yet succeeded in concentrating her thoughts — indeed, the memory of Cargill's bill was still worrying her intermittently. The prayers, which she knew by heart, were flowing through her head unheeded. She raised her eyes for a moment, and they began immediately to stray. First upwards, to the headless roof-angels on whose necks you could still see the sawcuts of the Puritan soldiers, then back again, to Miss Mayfill's black, quasi-pork-pie hat and tremulous jet ear-rings. Miss Mayfill wore a long musty black overcoat, with a little collar of greasy-looking astrakhan, which had been the same ever since Dorothy could remember. It was of some very peculiar stuff, like watered silk but coarser, with rivulets of black piping wandering all over it in no discoverable pattern. It might even have been that legendary and proverbial substance, black bombazine. Miss Mayfill was very old, so old that no one remembered her as anything but an old woman. A faint scent radiated from her — an ethereal scent, analysable as eau-de-Cologne, mothballs, and a sub-flavour of gin.

Dorothy drew a long glass-headed pin from the lapel of her coat, and furtively, under cover of Miss Mayfill's back, pressed the point against her forearm. Her flesh tingled apprehensively. She made it a rule, whenever she caught herself not attending to her prayers, to prick her arm hard enough to make blood come. It was her chosen form of self-discipline, her guard against irreverence and sacrilegious thoughts.

With the pin poised in readiness she managed for several moments to pray more collectedly. Her father had turned one dark eye disapprovingly upon Miss Mayfill, who was crossing herself at intervals, a practice he disliked. A starling chattered outside. With a shock Dorothy discovered that she was looking vaingloriously at the pleats of her father's surplice, which she herself had sewn two years ago. She set her teeth and drove the pin an eighth of an inch into her arm.

They were kneeling again. It was the General Confession. Dorothy recalled her eyes — wandering, alas! yet again, this time to the stained-glass window on her right, designed by Sir Warde Tooke, A.R.A., in 1851 and representing St Athelstan's welcome at the gate of heaven by Gabriel and a legion of angels all remarkably like one another and the Prince Consort — and pressed the pinpoint against a different part of her arm. She began to meditate conscientiously upon the meaning of each phrase of the prayer, and so brought her mind back to a more attentive state. But even so she was all but obliged to use the pin again when Proggett tinkled the bell in the middle of 'Therefore with Angels and Archangels'— being visited, as always, by a dreadful temptation to begin laughing at that passage. It was because of a story her father had told her once, of how when he was a little boy, and serving the priest at the altar, the communion bell had a screw-on clapper, which had come loose; and so the priest had said: 'Therefore with Angels and Archangels, and with all the company of Heaven, we laud and magnify Thy glorious name; evermore praising Thee, and saying, Screw it up, you little fat-head, screw it up!'

As the Rector finished the consecration Miss Mayfill began to struggle to her feet with extreme difficulty and slowness, like some disjointed wooden creature picking itself up by sections, and disengaging at each movement a powerful whiff of mothballs. There was an extraordinary creaking sound — from her stays, presumably, but it was a noise as of bones grating against one another. You could have imagined that there was only a dry skeleton

inside that black overcoat.

Dorothy remained on her feet a moment longer. Miss Mayfill was creeping towards the altar with slow, tottering steps. She could barely walk, but she took bitter offence if you offered to help her. In her ancient, bloodless face her mouth was surprisingly large, loose, and wet. The underlip, pendulous with age, slobbered forward, exposing a strip of gum and a row of false teeth as yellow as the keys of an old piano. On the upper lip was a fringe of dark, dewy moustache. It was not an appetizing mouth; not the kind of mouth that you would like to see drinking out of your cup. Suddenly, spontaneously, as though the Devil himself had put it there, the prayer slipped from Dorothy's lips: O God, let me not have to take the chalice after Miss Mayfill!

The next moment, in self-horror, she grasped the meaning of what she had said, and wished that she had bitten her tongue in two rather than utter that deadly blasphemy upon the altar steps. She drew the pin again from her lapel and drove it into her arm so hard that it was all she could do to suppress a cry of pain. Then she stepped to the altar and knelt down meekly on Miss Mayfill's left, so as to make quite sure of taking the chalice after her.

Kneeling, with head bent and hands clasped against her knees, she set herself swiftly to pray for forgiveness before her father should reach her with the wafer. But the current of her thoughts had been broken. Suddenly it was quite useless attempting to pray; her lips moved, but there was neither heart nor meaning in her prayers. She could hear Proggett's boots shuffling and her father's clear low voice murmuring 'Take and eat', she could see the worn strip of red carpet beneath her knees, she could smell dust and eau-de-Cologne and mothballs; but of the Body and Blood of Christ, of the purpose for which she had come here, she was as though deprived of the power to think. A deadly blankness had descended upon her mind. It seemed to her that actually she COULD not pray. She struggled, collected her thoughts, uttered mechanically the opening phrases of a prayer; but they were useless, meaningless — nothing but the dead shells of words. Her father was holding the wafer before her in his shapely, aged hand. He held it between finger and thumb, fastidiously, somehow distastefully, as though it had been a spoon of medicine. His eye was upon Miss Mayfill, who was doubling herself up like a geometrid caterpillar, with many creakings and crossing herself so elaborately that one might have imagined that she was sketching a series of braid frogs on the front of her coat. For several seconds Dorothy hesitated and did not take the wafer. She dared not take it. Better, far better to step down from the altar than to accept the sacrament with such chaos in her heart!

Then it happened that she glanced sidelong, through the open south door. A momentary spear of sunlight had pierced the clouds. It struck downwards through the leaves of the limes, and a spray of leaves in the doorway gleamed with a transient, matchless green, greener than jade or emerald or Atlantic waters. It was as though some jewel of unimaginable splendour had flashed for an instant, filling the doorway with green light, and then faded. A flood of joy ran through Dorothy's heart. The flash of living colour had brought back to her, by a process deeper than reason, her peace of mind, her love of God, her power to worship. Somehow, because of the greenness of the leaves, it was again possible to pray. O all ye green things upon the earth, praise ye the Lord! She began to pray, ardently, joyfully, thankfully. The wafer melted upon her tongue. She took the chalice from her father, and tasted with repulsion, even with an added joy in this small act of self- abasement, the wet imprint of Miss Mayfill's lips on its silver rim.

2

St Athelstan's Church stood at the highest point of Knype Hill, and if you chose to climb the tower you could see ten miles or so across the surrounding country. Not that there was anything worth looking at — only the low, barely undulating East Anglian landscape, intolerably dull in summer, but redeemed in winter by the recurring patterns of the elms, naked and fanshaped against leaden skies.

Immediately below you lay the town, with the High Street running east and west and dividing unequally. The southern section of the town was the ancient, agricultural, and respectable section. On the northern side were the buildings of the Blifil-Gordon sugar- beet refinery, and all round and leading up to them were higgledy- piggledly rows of vile yellow brick cottages, mostly inhabited by the employees of the factory. The factory employees, who made up more than half of the town's two thousand inhabitants, were newcomers, townfolk, and godless almost to a man.

The two pivots, or foci, about which the social life of the town moved were Knype Hill Conservative Club (fully licensed), from whose bow window, any time after the bar was open, the large, rosy- gilled faces of the town's elite were to be seen gazing like chubby goldfish from an aquarium pane; and Ye Olde Tea Shoppe, a little farther down the High Street, the principal rendezvous of the Knype Hill ladies. Not to be present at Ye Olde Tea Shoppe between ten and eleven every morning, to drink your 'morning coffee' and spend your half-hour or so in that agreeable twitter of upper-middle- class voices ('My dear, he had NINE spades to the ace-queen and he went one no trump, if you please. What, my dear, you don't mean to say you're paying for my coffee AGAIN? Oh, but my dear, it is simply TOO sweet of you! Now tomorrow I shall SIMPLY INSIST upon paying for yours. And just LOOK at dear little Toto sitting up and looking such a CLEVER little man with his little black nose wiggling, and he would, would he, the darling duck, he would, he would, and his mother would give him a lump of sugar, she would, she would. THERE, Toto!'), was to be definitely out of Knype Hill society. The Rector in his acid way nicknamed these ladies 'the coffee brigade'. Close to the colony of sham-picturesque villas inhabited by the coffee brigade, but cut off from them by its larger grounds, was The Grange, Miss Mayfill's house. It was a curious, machicolated, imitation castle of dark red brick — somebody's Folly, built about 1870 — and fortunately almost hidden among dense shrubberies.

The Rectory stood half way up the hill, with its face to the church and its back to the High Street. It was a house of the wrong age, inconveniently large, and faced with chronically peeling yellow plaster. Some earlier Rector had added, at one side, a large greenhouse which Dorothy used as a workroom, but which was constantly out of repair. The front garden was choked with ragged fir-trees and a great spreading ash which shadowed the front rooms and made it impossible to grow any flowers. There was a large vegetable garden at the back. Proggett did the heavy digging of the garden in the spring and autumn, and Dorothy did the sowing, planting, and weeding in such spare time as she could command; in spite of which the vegetable garden was usually an impenetrable jungle of weeds.

Dorothy jumped off her bicycle at the front gate, upon which some officious person had stuck a poster inscribed 'Vote for Blifil- Gordon and Higher Wages!' (There was a by-election going on, and Mr Blifil-Gordon was standing in the Conservative interest.) As Dorothy opened the front door she saw two letters lying on the worn coconut mat. One was from the Rural Dean, and the other was a nasty, thin-looking letter from Catkin & Palm, her father's clerical tailors. It was a bill undoubtedly. The Rector had followed his usual practice of collecting the letters that interested him and leaving the others. Dorothy was just bending down to pick up the letters, when she saw, with a horrid shock of dismay, an unstamped envelope sticking to the letter flap.

It was a bill — for certain it was a bill! Moreover, as soon as she set eyes on it she ‘knew’ that it was that horrible bill from Cargill’s, the butcher’s. A sinking feeling passed through her entrails. For a moment she actually began to pray that it might not be Cargill’s bill — that it might only be the bill for three and nine from Solepipe’s, the draper’s, or the bill from the International or the baker’s or the dairy — anything except Cargill’s bill! Then, mastering her panic, she took the envelope from the letter-flap and tore it open with a convulsive movement.

‘To account rendered: L21 7S. 9d.’

This was written in the innocuous handwriting of Mr Cargill’s accountant. But underneath, in thick, accusing-looking letters, was added and heavily underlined: ‘Shd. like to bring to your notice that this bill has been owing a VERY LONG TIME. The EARLIEST POSSIBLE settlement will oblige, S. Cargill.’

Dorothy had turned a shade paler, and was conscious of not wanting any breakfast. She thrust the bill into her pocket and went into the dining-room. It was a smallish, dark room, badly in need of repapering, and, like every other room in the Rectory, it had the air of having been furnished from the sweepings of an antique shop. The furniture was ‘good’, but battered beyond repair, and the chairs were so worm-eaten that you could only sit on them in safety if you knew their individual foibles. There were old, dark, defaced steel engravings hanging on the walls, one of them — an engraving of Van Dyck’s portrait of Charles I— probably of some value if it had not been ruined by damp.

The Rector was standing before the empty grate, warming himself at an imaginary fire and reading a letter that came from a long blue envelope. He was still wearing his cassock of black watered silk, which set off to perfection his thick white hair and his pale, fine, none too amiable face. As Dorothy came in he laid the letter aside, drew out his gold watch and scrutinized it significantly.

‘I’m afraid I’m a bit late, Father.’

‘Yes, Dorothy, you are A BIT LATE,’ said the Rector, repeating her words with delicate but marked emphasis. ‘You are twelve minutes late, to be exact. Don’t you think, Dorothy, that when I have to get up at a quarter past six to celebrate Holy Communion, and come home exceedingly tired and hungry, it would be better if you could manage to come to breakfast without being A BIT LATE?’

It was clear that the Rector was in what Dorothy called, euphemistically, his ‘uncomfortable mood’. He had one of those weary, cultivated voices which are never definitely angry and never anywhere near good humour — one of those voices which seem all the while to be saying, ‘I really CANNOT see what you are making all this fuss about!’ The impression he gave was of suffering perpetually from other people’s stupidity and tiresomeness.

‘I’m so sorry, Father! I simply had to go and ask after Mrs Tawney.’ (Mrs Tawney was the ‘Mrs T’ of the ‘memo list’.) ‘Her baby was born last night, and you know she promised me she’d come and be churched after it was born. But of course she won’t if she thinks we aren’t taking any interest in her. You know what these women are — they seem so to hate being churched. They’ll never come unless I coax them into it.’

The Rector did not actually grunt, but he uttered a small dissatisfied sound as he moved towards the breakfast table. It was intended to mean, first, that it was Mrs Tawney’s duty to come and be churched without Dorothy’s coaxing; secondly, that Dorothy had no business to waste her time visiting all the riffraff of the town, especially before breakfast. Mrs Tawney was a labourer’s wife and lived in partibus infidelium, north of the High Street. The Rector laid his hand on the back of his chair, and, without speaking, cast Dorothy a glance which meant: ‘Are we ready NOW? Or are there to be any MORE delays?’

‘I think everything’s here, Father,’ said Dorothy. ‘Perhaps if you’d just say grace —’

‘Benedictus benedicat,’ said the Rector, lifting the worn silver coverlet off the breakfast

dish. The silver coverlet, like the silver-gilt marmalade spoon, was a family heirloom; the knives and forks, and most of the crockery, came from Woolworths. ‘Bacon again, I see,’ the Rector added, eyeing the three minute rashers that lay curled up on squares of fried bread.

‘It’s all we’ve got in the house, I’m afraid,’ Dorothy said.

The Rector picked up his fork between finger and thumb, and with a very delicate movement, as though playing at spillikins, turned one of the rashers over.

‘I know, of course,’ he said, ‘that bacon for breakfast is an English institution almost as old as parliamentary government. But still, don’t you think we might OCCASIONALLY have a change, Dorothy?’

‘Bacon’s so cheap now,’ said Dorothy regretfully. ‘It seems a sin not to buy it. This was only fivepence a pound, and I saw some quite decent-looking bacon as low as threepence.’

‘Ah, Danish, I suppose? What a variety of Danish invasions we have had in this country! First with fire and sword, and now with their abominable cheap bacon. Which has been responsible for the more deaths, I wonder?’

Feeling a little better after this witticism, the Rector settled himself in his chair and made a fairly good breakfast off the despised bacon, while Dorothy (she was not having any bacon this morning — a penance she had set herself yesterday for saying ‘Damn’ and idling for half an hour after lunch) meditated upon a good conversational opening.

There was an unspeakably hateful job in front of her — a demand for money. At the very best of times getting money out of her father was next door to impossible, and it was obvious that this morning he was going to be even more ‘difficult’ than usual. ‘Difficult’ was another of her euphemisms. He’s had bad news, I suppose, she thought despondently, looking at the blue envelope.

Probably no one who had ever spoken to the Rector for as long as ten minutes would have denied that he was a ‘difficult’ kind of man. The secret of his almost unfailing ill humour really lay in the fact that he was an anachronism. He ought never to have been born into the modern world; its whole atmosphere disgusted and infuriated him. A couple of centuries earlier, a happy pluralist writing poems or collecting fossils while curates at 40 pounds a year administered his parishes, he would have been perfectly at home. Even now, if he had been a richer man, he might have consoled himself by shutting the twentieth century out of his consciousness. But to live in past ages is very expensive; you can’t do it on less than two thousand a year. The Rector, tethered by his poverty to the age of Lenin and the Daily Mail, was kept in a state of chronic exasperation which it was only natural that he should work off on the person nearest to him — usually, that is, on Dorothy.

He had been born in 1871, the younger son of the younger son of a baronet, and had gone into the Church for the outmoded reason that the Church is the traditional profession for younger sons. His first cure had been in a large, slummy parish in East London — a nasty, hooliganish place it had been, and he looked back on it with loathing. Even in those days the lower class (as he made a point of calling them) were getting decidedly out of hand. It was a little better when he was curate-in-charge at some remote place in Kent (Dorothy had been born in Kent), where the decently down- trodden villagers still touched their hats to ‘parson’. But by that time he had married, and his marriage had been diabolically unhappy; moreover, because clergymen must not quarrel with their wives, its unhappiness had been secret and therefore ten times worse. He had come to Knype Hill in 1908, aged thirty-seven and with a temper incurably soured — a temper which had ended by alienating every man, woman, and child in the parish.

It was not that he was a bad priest, merely AS a priest. In his purely clerical duties he was scrupulously correct — perhaps a little too correct for a Low Church East Anglian parish. He conducted his services with perfect taste, preached admirable sermons, and got up at uncomfortable hours of the morning to celebrate Holy Communion every Wednesday and

Friday. But that a clergyman has any duties outside the four walls of the church was a thing that had never seriously occurred to him. Unable to afford a curate, he left the dirty work of the parish entirely to his wife, and after her death (she died in 1921) to Dorothy. People used to say, spitefully and untruly, that he would have let Dorothy preach his sermons for him if it had been possible. The 'lower classes' had grasped from the first what was his attitude towards them, and if he had been a rich man they would probably have licked his boots, according to their custom; as it was, they merely hated him. Not that he cared whether they hated him or not, for he was largely unaware of their existence. But even with the upper classes he had got on no better. With the County he had quarrelled one by one, and as for the petty gentry of the town, as the grandson of a baronet he despised them, and was at no pains to hide it. In twenty-three years he had succeeded in reducing the congregation of St Athelstan's from six hundred to something under two hundred.

This was not solely due to personal reasons. It was also because the old-fashioned High Anglicanism to which the Rector obstinately clung was of a kind to annoy all parties in the parish about equally. Nowadays, a clergyman who wants to keep his congregation has only two courses open to him. Either it must be Anglo- Catholicism pure and simple — or rather, pure and not simple; or he must be daringly modern and broad-minded and preach comforting sermons proving that there is no Hell and all good religions are the same. The Rector did neither. On the one hand, he had the deepest contempt for the Anglo-Catholic movement. It had passed over his head, leaving him absolutely untouched; 'Roman Fever' was his name for it. On the other hand, he was too 'high' for the older members of his congregation. From time to time he scared them almost out of their wits by the use of the fatal word 'Catholic', not only in its sanctified place in the Creeds, but also from the pulpit. Naturally the congregation dwindled year by year, and it was the Best People who were the first to go. Lord Pockthorne of Pockthorne Court, who owned a fifth of the county, Mr Leavis, the retired leather merchant, Sir Edward Huson of Crabtree Hall, and such of the petty gentry as owned motor-cars, had all deserted St Athelstan's. Most of them drove over on Sunday mornings to Millborough, five miles away. Millborough was a town of five thousand inhabitants, and you had your choice of two churches, St Edmund's and St Wedekind's. St Edmund's was Modernist — text from Blake's 'Jerusalem' blazoned over the altar, and communion wine out of liqueur glasses — and St Wedekind's was Anglo-Catholic and in a state of perpetual guerrilla warfare with the Bishop. But Mr Cameron, the secretary of the Knype Hill Conservative Club, was a Roman Catholic convert, and his children were in the thick of the Roman Catholic literary movement. They were said to have a parrot which they were teaching to say 'Extra ecclesiam nulla salus'. In effect, no one of any standing remained true to St Athelstan's, except Miss Mayfill, of The Grange. Most of Miss Mayfill's money was bequeathed to the Church — so she said; meanwhile, she had never been known to put more than sixpence in the collection bag, and she seemed likely to go on living for ever.

The first ten minutes of breakfast passed in complete silence. Dorothy was trying to summon up courage to speak — obviously she had got to start SOME kind of conversation before raising the money- question — but her father was not an easy man with whom to make small talk. At times he would fall into such deep fits of abstraction that you could hardly get him to listen to you; at other times he was all too attentive, listened carefully to what you said and then pointed out, rather wearily, that it was not worth saying. Polite platitudes — the weather, and so forth — generally moved him to sarcasm. Nevertheless, Dorothy decided to try the weather first.

'It's a funny kind of day, isn't it?' she said — aware, even as she made it, of the inanity of this remark.

'WHAT is funny?' inquired the Rector.

'Well, I mean, it was so cold and misty this morning, and now the sun's come out and it's turned quite fine.'

'IS there anything particularly funny about that?'

That was no good, obviously. He MUST have had bad news, she thought. She tried again.

'I do wish you'd come out and have a look at the things in the back garden some time, Father. The runner beans are doing so splendidly! The pods are going to be over a foot long. I'm going to keep all the best of them for the Harvest Festival, of course. I thought it would look so nice if we decorated the pulpit with festoons of runner beans and a few tomatoes hanging in among them.'

This was a faux pas. The Rector looked up from his plate with an expression of profound distaste.

'My dear Dorothy,' he said sharply, 'IS it necessary to begin worrying me about the Harvest Festival already?'

'I'm sorry, Father!' said Dorothy, disconcerted. 'I didn't mean to worry you. I just thought —'

'Do you suppose', proceeded the Rector, 'it is any pleasure to me to have to preach my sermon among festoons of runner beans? I am not a greengrocer. It quite puts me off my breakfast to think of it. When is the wretched thing due to happen?'

'It's September the sixteenth, Father.'

'That's nearly a month hence. For Heaven's sake let me forget it a little longer! I suppose we must have this ridiculous business once a year to tickle the vanity of every amateur gardener in the parish. But don't let's think of it more than is absolutely necessary.'

The Rector had, as Dorothy ought to have remembered, a perfect abhorrence of Harvest Festivals. He had even lost a valuable parishioner — a Mr Toagis, a surly retired market gardener — through his dislike, as he said, of seeing his church dressed up to imitate a coster's stall. Mr Toagis, anima naturaliter Nonconformistica, had been kept 'Church' solely by the privilege, at Harvest Festival time, of decorating the side altar with a sort of Stonehenge composed of gigantic vegetable marrows. The previous summer he had succeeded in growing a perfect leviathan of a pumpkin, a fiery red thing so enormous that it took two men to lift it. This monstrous object had been placed in the chancel, where it dwarfed the altar and took all the colour out of the east window. In no matter what part of the church you were standing, the pumpkin, as the saying goes, hit you in the eye. Mr Toagis was in raptures. He hung about the church at all hours, unable to tear himself away from his adored pumpkin, and even bringing relays of friends in to admire it. From the expression of his face you would have thought that he was quoting Wordsworth on Westminster Bridge:

Earth has not any thing to show more fair:
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
A sight so touching in its majesty!

Dorothy even had hopes, after this, of getting him to come to Holy Communion. But when the Rector saw the pumpkin he was seriously angry, and ordered 'that revolting thing' to be removed at once. Mr Toagis had instantly 'gone chapel', and he and his heirs were lost to the Church for ever.

Dorothy decided to make one final attempt at conversation.

'We're getting on with the costumes for Charles I,' she said. (The Church School children were rehearsing a play entitled Charles I in aid of the organ fund.) 'But I do wish we'd chosen something a bit easier. The armour is a dreadful job to make, and I'm afraid the jackboots are going to be worse. I think next time we must really have a Roman or Greek play. Something where they only have to wear togas.'

This elicited only another muted grunt from the Rector. School plays, pageants, bazaars, jumble sales, and concerts in aid of were not quite so bad in his eyes as Harvest Festivals, but he did not pretend to be interested in them. They were necessary evils, he used to say. At this moment Ellen, the maidservant, pushed open the door and came gauchely into the room with one large, scaly hand holding her sacking apron against her belly. She was a tall, round-shouldered girl with mouse-coloured hair, a plaintive voice, and a bad complexion, and she suffered chronically from eczema. Her eyes flitted apprehensively towards the Rector, but she addressed herself to Dorothy, for she was too much afraid of the Rector to speak to him directly.

'Please, Miss —' she began.

'Yes, Ellen?'

'Please, Miss,' went on Ellen plaintively, 'Mr Porter's in the kitchen, and he says, please could the Rector come round and baptize Mrs Porter's baby? Because they don't think as it's going to live the day out, and it ain't been baptized yet, Miss.'

Dorothy stood up. 'Sit down,' said the Rector promptly, with his mouth full.

'What do they think is the matter with the baby?' said Dorothy.

'Well, Miss, it's turning quite black. And it's had diarrhoea something cruel.'

The Rector emptied his mouth with an effort. 'Must I have these disgusting details while I am eating my breakfast?' he exclaimed. He turned on Ellen: 'Send Porter about his business and tell him I'll be round at his house at twelve o'clock. I really cannot think why it is that the lower classes always seem to choose mealtimes to come pestering one,' he added, casting another irritated glance at Dorothy as she sat down.

Mr Porter was a labouring man — a bricklayer, to be exact. The Rector's views on baptism were entirely sound. If it had been urgently necessary he would have walked twenty miles through snow to baptize a dying baby. But he did not like to see Dorothy proposing to leave the breakfast table at the call of a common bricklayer.

There was no further conversation during breakfast. Dorothy's heart was sinking lower and lower. The demand for money had got to be made, and yet it was perfectly obvious that it was foredoomed to failure. His breakfast finished, the Rector got up from the table and began to fill his pipe from the tobacco-jar on the mantelpiece. Dorothy uttered a short prayer for courage, and then pinched herself. Go on, Dorothy! Out with it! No funking, please! With an effort she mastered her voice and said:

'Father —'

'What is it?' said the Rector, pausing with the match in his hand.

'Father, I've something I want to ask you. Something important.'

The expression of the Rector's face changed. He had divined instantly what she was going to say; and, curiously enough, he now looked less irritable than before. A stony calm had settled upon his face. He looked like a rather exceptionally aloof and unhelpful sphinx.

'Now, my dear Dorothy, I know very well what you are going to say. I suppose you are going to ask me for money again. Is that it?'

'Yes, Father. Because —'

'Well, I may as well save you the trouble. I have no money at all — absolutely no money at all until next quarter. You have had your allowance, and I can't give you a halfpenny more. It's quite useless to come worrying me now.'

'But, Father —'

Dorothy's heart sank yet lower. What was worst of all when she came to him for money was the terrible, unhelpful calmness of his attitude. He was never so unmoved as when you were reminding him that he was up to his eyes in debt. Apparently he could not understand that tradesmen occasionally want to be paid, and that no house can be kept going without an adequate supply of money. He allowed Dorothy eighteen pounds a month for all the

household expenses, including Ellen's wages, and at the same time he was 'dainty' about his food and instantly detected any falling off in its quality. The result was, of course, that the household was perennially in debt. But the Rector paid not the smallest attention to his debts — indeed, he was hardly even aware of them. When he lost money over an investment, he was deeply agitated; but as for a debt to a mere tradesman — well, it was the kind of thing that he simply could not bother his head about.

A peaceful plume of smoke floated upwards from the Rector's pipe. He was gazing with a meditative eye at the steel engraving of Charles I and had probably forgotten already about Dorothy's demand for money. Seeing him so unconcerned, a pang of desperation went through Dorothy, and her courage came back to her. She said more sharply than before:

'Father, please listen to me! I MUST have some money soon! I simply MUST! We can't go on as we're doing. We owe money to nearly every tradesman in the town. It's got so that some mornings I can hardly bear to go down the street and think of all the bills that are owing. Do you know that we owe Cargill nearly twenty-two pounds?'

'What of it?' said the Rector between puffs of smoke.

'But the bill's been mounting up for over seven months! He's sent it in over and over again. We MUST pay it! It's so unfair to him to keep him waiting for his money like that!'

'Nonsense, my dear child! These people expect to be kept waiting for their money. They like it. It brings them more in the end. Goodness knows how much I owe to Catkin & Palm — I should hardly care to inquire. They are dunning me by every post. But you don't hear ME complaining, do you?'

'But, Father, I can't look at it as you do, I can't! It's so dreadful to be always in debt! Even if it isn't actually wrong, it's so HATEFUL. It makes me so ashamed! When I go into Cargill's shop to order the joint, he speaks to me so shortly and makes me wait after the other customers, all because our bill's mounting up the whole time. And yet I daren't stop ordering from him. I believe he'd run us in if I did.'

The Rector frowned. 'What! Do you mean to say the fellow has been impertinent to you?'

'I didn't say he'd been impertinent, Father. But you can't blame him if he's angry when his bill's not paid.'

'I most certainly can blame him! It is simply abominable how these people take it upon themselves to behave nowadays — abominable! But there you are, you see. That is the kind of thing that we are exposed to in this delightful century. That is democracy — PROGRESS, as they are pleased to call it. Don't order from the fellow again. Tell him at once that you are taking your account elsewhere. That's the only way to treat these people.'

'But, Father, that doesn't settle anything. Really and truly, don't you think we ought to pay him? Surely we can get hold of the money somehow? Couldn't you sell out some shares, or something?'

'My dear child, don't talk to me about selling out shares! I have just had the most disagreeable news from my broker. He tells me that my Sumatra Tin shares have dropped from seven and fourpence to six and a penny. It means a loss of nearly sixty pounds. I am telling him to sell out at once before they drop any further.'

'Then if you sell out you'll have some ready money, won't you? Don't you think it would be better to get out of debt once and for all?'

'Nonsense, nonsense,' said the Rector more calmly, putting his pipe back in his mouth. 'You know nothing whatever about these matters. I shall have to reinvest at once in something more hopeful — it's the only way of getting my money back.'

With one thumb in the belt of his cassock he frowned abstractedly at the steel engraving. His broker had advised United Celanese. Here — in Sumatra Tin, United Celanese, and numberless other remote and dimly imagined companies — was the central cause of the Rector's money troubles. He was an inveterate gambler. Not, of course, that he thought of it

as gambling; it was merely a lifelong search for a ‘good investment’. On coming of age he had inherited four thousand pounds, which had gradually dwindled, thanks to his ‘investments’, to about twelve hundred. What was worse, every year he managed to scrape together, out of his miserable income, another fifty pounds which vanished by the same road. It is a curious fact that the lure of a ‘good investment’ seems to haunt clergymen more persistently than any other class of man. Perhaps it is the modern equivalent of the demons in female shape who used to haunt the anchorites of the Dark Ages.

‘I shall buy five hundred United Celanese,’ said the Rector finally.

Dorothy began to give up hope. Her father was now thinking of his ‘investments’ (she new nothing whatever about these ‘investments’, except that they went wrong with phenomenal regularity), and in another moment the question of the shop-debts would have slipped entirely out of his mind. She made a final effort.

‘Father, let’s get this settled, please. Do you think you’ll be able to let me have some extra money fairly soon? Not this moment, perhaps — but in the next month or two?’

‘No, my dear, I don’t. About Christmas time, possibly — it’s very unlikely even then. But for the present, certainly not. I haven’t a halfpenny I can spare.’

‘But, Father, it’s so horrible to feel we can’t pay our debts! It disgraces us so! Last time Mr Welwyn-Foster was here’ (Mr Welwyn- Foster was the Rural Dean) ‘Mrs Welwyn-Foster was going all round the town asking everyone the most personal questions about us — asking how we spent our time, and how much money we had, and how many tons of coal we used in a year, and everything. She’s always trying to pry into our affairs. Suppose she found out that we were badly in debt!’

‘Surely it is our own business? I fail entirely to see what it has to do with Mrs Welwyn-Foster or anyone else.’

‘But she’d repeat it all over the place — and she’d exaggerate it too! You know what Mrs Welwyn-Foster is. In every parish she goes to she tries to find out something disgraceful about the clergyman, and then she repeats every word of it to the Bishop. I don’t want to be uncharitable about her, but really she —’

Realizing that she DID want to be uncharitable, Dorothy was silent.

‘She is a detestable woman,’ said the Rector evenly. ‘What of it? Who ever heard of a Rural Dean’s wife who wasn’t detestable?’

‘But, Father, I don’t seem to be able to get you to see how serious things are! We’ve simply nothing to live on for the next month. I don’t even know where the meat’s coming from for today’s dinner.’

‘Luncheon, Dorothy, luncheon!’ said the Rector with a touch of irritation. ‘I do wish you would drop that abominable lower-class habit of calling the midday meal DINNER!’

‘For luncheon, then. Where are we to get the meat from? I daren’t ask Cargill for another joint.’

‘Go to the other butcher — what’s his name? Salter — and take no notice of Cargill. He knows he’ll be paid sooner or later. Good gracious, I don’t know what all this fuss is about! Doesn’t everyone owe money to his tradesmen? I distinctly remember’— the Rector straightened his shoulders a little, and, putting his pipe back into his mouth, looked into the distance; his voice became reminiscent and perceptibly more agreeable —‘I distinctly remember that when I was up at Oxford, my father had still not paid some of his own Oxford bills of thirty years earlier. Tom’ (Tom was the Rector’s cousin, the Baronet) ‘owed seven thousand before he came into his money. He told me so himself.’

At that, Dorothy’s last hope vanished. When her father began to talk about his cousin Tom, and about things that had happened ‘when I was up at Oxford’, there was nothing more to be done with him. It meant that he had slipped into an imaginary golden past in which such vulgar things as butchers’ bills simply did not exist. There were long periods together when