When the World Shook

H. Rider Haggard

Dedication

Ditchingham, 1918.

MY DEAR CURZON,

More than thirty years ago you tried to protect me, then a stranger to you, from one of the falsest and most malignant accusations ever made against a writer.

So complete was your exposure of the methods of those at work to blacken a person whom they knew to be innocent, that, as you will remember, they refused to publish your analysis which destroyed their charges and, incidentally, revealed their motives.

Although for this reason vindication came otherwise, your kindness is one that I have never forgotten, since, whatever the immediate issue of any effort, in the end it is the intention that avails.

Therefore in gratitude and memory I ask you to accept this romance, as I know that you do not disdain the study of romance in the intervals of your Imperial work.

The application of its parable to our state and possibilities—beneath or beyond these glimpses of the moon—I leave to your discernment.

Believe me,

Ever sincerely yours,

H. RIDER HAGGARD.

Chapter 1. Arbuthnot Describes Himself

I suppose that I, Humphrey Arbuthnot, should begin this history in which Destiny has caused me to play so prominent a part, with some short account of myself and of my circumstances.

I was born forty years ago in this very Devonshire village in which I write, but not in the same house. Now I live in the Priory, an ancient place and a fine one in its way, with its panelled rooms, its beautiful gardens where, in this mild climate, in addition to our own, flourish so many plants which one would only expect to find in countries that lie nearer to the sun, and its green, undulating park studded with great timber trees. The view, too, is perfect; behind and around the rich Devonshire landscape with its hills and valleys and its scarped faces of red sandstone, and at a distance in front, the sea. There are little towns quite near too, that live for the most part on visitors, but these are so hidden away by the contours of the ground that from the Priory one cannot see them. Such is Fulcombe where I live, though for obvious reasons I do not give it its real name.

Many years ago my father, the Rev. Humphrey Arbuthnot, whose only child I am, after whom also I am named Humphrey, was the vicar of this place with which our family is said to have some rather vague hereditary connection. If so, it was severed in the Carolian times because my ancestors fought on the side of Parliament.

My father was a recluse, and a widower, for my mother, a Scotswoman, died at or shortly after my birth. Being very High Church for those days he was not popular with the family that owned the Priory before me. Indeed its head, a somewhat vulgar person of the name of Enfield who had made money in trade, almost persecuted him, as he was in a position to do, being the local magnate and the owner of the rectorial tithes.

I mention this fact because owing to it as a boy I made up my mind that one day I would buy that place and sit in his seat, a wild enough idea at the time. Yet it became

engrained in me, as do such aspirations of our youth, and when the opportunity arose in after years I carried it out. Poor old Enfield! He fell on evil fortunes, for in trying to bolster up a favourite son who was a gambler, a spendthrift, and an ungrateful scamp, in the end he was practically ruined and when the bad times came, was forced to sell the Fulcombe estate. I think of him kindly now, for after all he was good to me and gave me many a day's shooting and leave to fish for trout in the river.

By the poor people, however, of all the district round, for the parish itself is very small, my father was much beloved, although he did practise confession, wear vestments and set lighted candles on the altar, and was even said to have openly expressed the wish, to which however he never attained, that he could see a censer swinging in the chancel. Indeed the church which, as monks built it, is very large and fine, was always full on Sundays, though many of the worshippers came from far away, some of them doubtless out of curiosity because of its papistical repute, also because, in a learned fashion, my father's preaching was very good indeed.

For my part I feel that I owe much to these High-Church views. They opened certain doors to me and taught me something of the mysteries which lie at the back of all religions and therefore have their home in the inspired soul of man whence religions are born. Only the pity is that in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred he never discovers, never even guesses at that entombed aspiration, never sinks a shaft down on to this secret but most precious vein of ore.

I have said that my father was learned; but this is a mild description, for never did I know anyone quite so learned. He was one of those men who is so good all round that he became pre-eminent in nothing. A classic of the first water, a very respectable mathematician, an expert in theology, a student of sundry foreign languages and literature in his lighter moments, an inquirer into sociology, a theoretical musician though his playing of the organ excruciated most people because it was too correct, a really first-class authority upon flint instruments and the best grower of garden vegetables in the county, also of apples—such were some of his attainments. That was what made his sermons so popular, since at times one or the other of these subjects

would break out into them, his theory being that God spoke to us through all of these things.

But if I began to drift into an analysis of my father's abilities, I should never stop. It would take a book to describe them. And yet mark this, with them all his name is as dead to the world to-day as though he had never been. Light reflected from a hundred facets dissipates itself in space and is lost; that concentrated in one tremendous ray pierces to the stars.

Now I am going to be frank about myself, for without frankness what is the value of such a record as this? Then it becomes simply another convention, or rather conventional method of expressing the octoroon kind of truths with which the highly civilised races feed themselves, as fastidious ladies eat cakes and bread from which all but the smallest particle of nourishment has been extracted.

The fact is, therefore, that I inherited most of my father's abilities, except his love for flint instruments which always bored me to distraction, because although they are by association really the most human of things, somehow to me they never convey any idea of humanity. In addition I have a practical side which he lacked; had he possessed it surely he must have become an archbishop instead of dying the vicar of an unknown parish. Also I have a spiritual sense, mayhap mystical would be a better term, which with all this religion was missing from my father's nature.

For I think that notwithstanding his charity and devotion he never quite got away from the shell of things, never cracked it and set his teeth in the kernel which alone can feed our souls. His keen intellect, to take an example, recognised every one of the difficulties of our faith and flashed hither and thither in the darkness, seeking explanation, seeking light, trying to reconcile, to explain. He was not great enough to put all this aside and go straight to the informing Soul beneath that strives to express itself everywhere, even through those husks which are called the World, the Flesh and the Devil, and as yet does not always quite succeed.

It is this boggling over exteriors, this peering into pitfalls, this desire to prove that what such senses as we have tell us is impossible, is in fact possible, which causes the overthrow of many an earnest, seeking heart and renders its work,

conducted on false lines, quite nugatory. These will trust to themselves and their own intelligence and not be content to spring from the cliffs of human experience into the everlasting arms of that Infinite which are stretched out to receive them and to give them rest and the keys of knowledge. When will man learn what was taught to him of old, that faith is the only plank wherewith he can float upon this sea and that his miserable works avail him nothing; also that it is a plank made of many sorts of wood, perhaps to suit our different weights?

So to be honest, in a sense I believe myself to be my father's superior, and I know that he agreed with me. Perhaps this is owing to the blood of my Scotch mother which mixed well with his own; perhaps because the essential spirit given to me, though cast in his mould, was in fact quite different—or of another alloy. Do we, I wonder, really understand that there are millions and billions of these alloys, so many indeed that Nature, or whatever is behind Nature, never uses the same twice over? That is why no two human beings are or ever will be quite identical. Their flesh, the body of their humiliation, is identical in all, any chemist will prove it to you, but that which animates the flesh is distinct and different because it comes from the home of that infinite variety which is necessary to the ultimate evolution of the good and bad that we symbolise as heaven and hell.

Further, I had and to a certain extent still have another advantage over my father, which certainly came to me from my mother, who was, as I judge from all descriptions and such likenesses as remain of her, an extremely handsome woman. I was born much better looking. He was small and dark, a little man with deep-set eyes and beetling brows. I am also dark, but tall above the average, and well made. I do not know that I need say more about my personal appearance, to me not a very attractive subject, but the fact remains that they called me "handsome Humphrey" at the University, and I was the captain of my college boat and won many prizes at athletic sports when I had time to train for them.

Until I went up to Oxford my father educated me, partly because he knew that he could do it better than anyone else, and partly to save school expenses. The experiment was very successful, as my love of all outdoor sports and of

any small hazardous adventure that came to my hand, also of associating with fisherfolk whom the dangers of the deep make men among men, saved me from becoming a milksop. For the rest I learned more from my father, whom I always desired to please because I loved him, than I should have done at the best and most costly of schools. This was shown when at last I went to college with a scholarship, for there I did very well indeed, as search would still reveal.

Here I had better set out some of my shortcomings, which in their sum have made a failure of me. Yes, a failure in the highest sense, though I trust what Stevenson calls “a faithful failure.” These have their root in fastidiousness and that lack of perseverance, which really means a lack of faith, again using the word in its higher and wider sense. For if one had real faith one would always persevere, knowing that in every work undertaken with high aim, there is an element of nobility, however humble and unrecognised that work may seem to be. God after all is the God of Work, it is written large upon the face of the Universe. I will not expand upon the thought; it would lead me too far afield, but those who have understanding will know what I mean.

As regards what I interpret as fastidiousness, this is not very easy to express. Perhaps a definition will help. I am like a man with an over-developed sense of smell, who when walking through a foreign city, however clean and well kept, can always catch the evil savours that are inseparable from such cities. More, his keen perception of them interferes with all other perceptions and spoils his walks. The result is that in after years, whenever he thinks of that beautiful city, he remembers, not its historic buildings or its wide boulevards, or whatever it has to boast, but rather its ancient, fish-like smell. At least he remembers that first owing to this defect in his temperament.

So it is with everything. A lovely woman is spoiled for such a one because she eats too much or has too high a voice; he does not care for his shooting because the scenery is flat, or for his fishing because the gnats bite as well as the trout. In short he is out of tune with the world as it is. Moreover, this is a quality which, where it exists, cannot be overcome; it affects day-labourers as well as gentlemen at large. It is bred in the bone.

Probably the second failure-breeding fault, lack of perseverance, has its roots in the first, at any rate in my case. At least on leaving college with some reputation, I was called to the Bar where, owing to certain solicitor and other connections, I had a good opening. Also, owing to the excellence of my memory and powers of work, I began very well, making money even during my first year. Then, as it happened, a certain case came my way and, my leader falling ill suddenly after it was opened, was left in my hands. The man whose cause I was pleading was, I think, one of the biggest scoundrels it is possible to conceive. It was a will case and if he won, the effect would be to beggar two most estimable middle-aged women who were justly entitled to the property, to which end personally I am convinced he had committed forgery; the perjury that accompanied it I do not even mention.

Well, he did win, thanks to me, and the estimable middle-aged ladies were beggared, and as I heard afterwards, driven to such extremities that one of them died of her misery and the other became a lodging-house keeper. The details do not matter, but I may explain that these ladies were unattractive in appearance and manner and broke down beneath my cross-examination which made them appear to be telling falsehoods, whereas they were only completely confused. Further, I invented an ingenious theory of the facts which, although the judge regarded it with suspicion, convinced an unusually stupid jury who gave me their verdict.

Everybody congratulated me and at the time I was triumphant, especially as my leader had declared that our case was impossible. Afterwards, however, my conscience smote me sorely, so much so that arguing from the false premise of this business, I came to the conclusion that the practice of the Law was not suited to an honest man. I did not take the large view that such matters average themselves up and that if I had done harm in this instance, I might live to do good in many others, and perhaps become a just judge, even a great judge. Here I may mention that in after years, when I grew rich, I rescued that surviving old lady from her lodging-house, although to this day she does not know the name of her anonymous friend. So by degrees, without saying anything, for I kept on my chambers, I slipped out of practice, to the great disappointment of everybody connected with me, and took to authorship.

A marvel came to pass, my first book was an enormous success. The whole world talked of it. A leading journal, delighted to have discovered someone, wrote it up; other journals followed suit to be in the movement. One of them, I remember, which had already dismissed it with three or four sneering lines, came out with a second and two-column notice. It sold like wildfire and I suppose had some merits, for it is still read, though few know that I wrote it, since fortunately it was published under a pseudonym.

Again I was much elated and set to work to write another and, as I believe, a much better book. But jealousies had been excited by this leaping into fame of a totally unknown person, which were, moreover, accentuated through a foolish article that I published in answer to some criticisms, wherein I spoke my mind with an insane freedom and biting sarcasm. Indeed I was even mad enough to quote names and to give the example of the very powerful journal which at first carped at my work and then gushed over it when it became the fashion. All of this made me many bitter enemies, as I found out when my next book appeared.

It was torn to shreds, it was reviled as subversive of morality and religion, good arrows in those days. It was called puerile, half-educated stuff—I half-educated! More, an utterly false charge of plagiarism was cooked up against me and so well and venomously run that vast numbers of people concluded that I was a thief of the lowest order. Lastly, my father, from whom the secret could no longer be kept, sternly disapproved of both these books which I admit were written from a very radical and somewhat anti-church point of view. The result was our first quarrel and before it was made up, he died suddenly.

Now again fastidiousness and my lack of perseverance did their work, and solemnly I swore that I would never write another book, an oath which I have kept till this moment, at least so far as publication is concerned, and now break only because I consider it my duty so to do and am not animated by any pecuniary object.

Thus came to an end my second attempt at carving out a career. By now I had grown savage and cynical, rather revengeful also, I fear. Knowing myself to possess considerable abilities in sundry directions, I sat down, as it were, to think things over and digest my past experiences.

Then it was that the truth of a very ancient adage struck upon my mind, namely, that money is power. Had I sufficient money I could laugh at unjust critics for example; indeed they or their papers would scarcely dare to criticise me for fear lest it should be in my power to do them a bad turn. Again I could follow my own ideas in life and perhaps work good in the world, and live in such surroundings as commended themselves to me. It was as clear as daylight, but—how to make the money?

I had some capital as the result of my father's death, about £8,000 in all, plus a little more that my two books had brought in. In what way could I employ it to the best advantage? I remembered that a cousin of my father and therefore my own, was a successful stock-broker, also that there had been some affection between them. I went to him, he was a good, easy-natured man who was frankly glad to see me, and offered to put £5,000 into his business, for I was not minded to risk every thing I had, if he would give me a share in the profits. He laughed heartily at my audacity.

"Why, my boy," he said, "being totally inexperienced at this game, you might lose us more than that in a month. But I like your courage, I like your courage, and the truth is that I do want help. I will think it over and write to you."

He thought it over and in the end offered to try me for a year at a fixed salary with a promise of some kind of a partnership if I suited him. Meanwhile my £5,000 remained in my pocket.

I accepted, not without reluctance since with the impatience of youth I wanted everything at once. I worked hard in that office and soon mastered the business, for my knowledge of figures—I had taken a first-class mathematical degree at college—came to my aid, as in a way did my acquaintance with Law and Literature. Moreover I had a certain aptitude for what is called high finance. Further, Fortune, as usual, showed me a favourable face.

In one year I got the partnership with a small share in the large profits of the business. In two the partner above me retired, and I took his place with a third share of the firm. In three my cousin, satisfied that it was in able hands, began to cease his attendance at the office and betook himself to

gardening which was his hobby. In four I paid him out altogether, although to do this I had to borrow money on our credit, for by agreement the title of the firm was continued. Then came that extraordinary time of boom which many will remember to their cost. I made a bold stroke and won. On a certain Saturday when the books were made up, I found that after discharging all liabilities, I should not be worth more than £20,000. On the following Saturday but two when the books were made up, I was worth £153,000! L'appetit vient en mangeant. It seemed nothing to me when so many were worth millions.

For the next year I worked as few have done, and when I struck a balance at the end of it, I found that on the most conservative estimate I was the owner of a million and a half in hard cash, or its equivalent. I was so tired out that I remember this discovery did not excite me at all. I felt utterly weary of all wealth-hunting and of the City and its ways. Moreover my old fastidiousness and lack of perseverance re-asserted themselves. I reflected, rather late in the day perhaps, on the ruin that this speculation was bringing to thousands, of which some lamentable instances had recently come to my notice, and once more considered whether it were a suitable career for an upright man. I had wealth; why should I not take it and enjoy life?

Also—and here my business acumen came in, I was sure that these times could not last. It is easy to make money on a rising market, but when it is falling the matter is very different. In five minutes I made up my mind. I sent for my junior partners, for I had taken in two, and told them that I intended to retire at once. They were dismayed both at my loss, for really I was the firm, and because, as they pointed out, if I withdrew all my capital, there would not be sufficient left to enable them to carry on.

One of them, a blunt and honest man, said to my face that it would be dishonourable of me to do so. I was inclined to answer him sharply, then remembered that his words were true.

"Very well," I said, "I will leave you £600,000 on which you shall pay me five per cent interest, but no share of the profits."

On these terms we dissolved the partnership and in a year they had lost the £600,000, for the slump came with a vengeance. It saved them, however, and to-day they are earning a reasonable income. But I have never asked them for that £600,000.

Chapter 2. Bastin And Bickley

Behold me once more a man without an occupation, but now the possessor of about £900,000. It was a very considerable fortune, if not a large one in England; nothing like the millions of which I had dreamed, but still enough. To make the most of it and to be sure that it remained, I invested it very well, mostly in large mortgages at four per cent which, if the security is good, do not depreciate in capital value. Never again did I touch a single speculative stock, who desired to think no more about money. It was at this time that I bought the Fulcombe property. It cost me about £120,000 of my capital, or with alterations, repairs, etc., say £150,000, on which sum it may pay a net two and a half per cent, not more.

This £3,700 odd I have always devoted to the upkeep of the place, which is therefore in first-rate order. The rest I live on, or save.

These arrangements, with the beautifying and furnishing of the house and the restoration of the church in memory of my father, occupied and amused me for a year or so, but when they were finished time began to hang heavy on my hands. What was the use of possessing about £20,000 a year when there was nothing upon which it could be spent? For after all my own wants were few and simple and the acquisition of valuable pictures and costly furniture is limited by space. Oh! in my small way I was like the weary King Ecclesiast. For I too made me great works and had possessions of great and small cattle (I tried farming and lost money over it!) and gathered me silver and gold and the peculiar treasure of kings, which I presume means whatever a man in authority chiefly desires, and so forth. But “behold all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun.”

So, notwithstanding my wealth and health and the deference which is the rich man’s portion, especially when the limit of his riches is not known, it came about that I too “hated life,” and this when I was not much over thirty. I did not know what to do; for Society as the word is generally understood, I had no taste; it bored me; horse-racing and

cards I loathed, who had already gambled too much on a big scale. The killing of creatures under the name of sport palled upon me, indeed I began to doubt if it were right, while the office of a junior county magistrate in a place where there was no crime, only occupied me an hour or two a month.

Lastly my neighbours were few and with all due deference to them, extremely dull. At least I could not understand them because in them there did not seem to be anything to understand, and I am quite certain that they did not understand me. More, when they came to learn that I was radical in my views and had written certain “dreadful” and somewhat socialistic books in the form of fiction, they both feared and mistrusted me as an enemy to their particular section of the race. As I had not married and showed no inclination to do so, their womenkind also, out of their intimate knowledge, proclaimed that I led an immoral life, though a little reflection would have shown them that there was no one in the neighbourhood which for a time I seldom left, who could possibly have tempted an educated creature to such courses.

Terrible is the lot of a man who, while still young and possessing the intellect necessary to achievement, is deprived of all ambition. And I had none at all. I did not even wish to purchase a peerage or a baronetcy in this fashion or in that, and, as in my father’s case, my tastes were so many and so catholic that I could not lose myself in any one of them. They never became more than diversions to me. A hobby is only really amusing when it becomes an obsession.

At length my lonesome friendlessness oppressed me so much that I took steps to mitigate it. In my college life I had two particular friends whom I think I must have selected because they were so absolutely different from myself.

They were named Bastin and Bickley. Bastin—Basil was his Christian name—was an uncouth, shock-headed, flat-footed person of large, rugged frame and equally rugged honesty, with a mind almost incredibly simple. Nothing surprised him because he lacked the faculty of surprise. He was like that kind of fish which lies at the bottom of the sea and takes every kind of food into its great maw without distinguishing its flavour. Metaphorically speaking, heavenly manna and decayed cabbage were just the same to Bastin. He was not

fastidious and both were mental pabulum—of a sort—together with whatever lay between these extremes. Yet he was good, so painfully good that one felt that without exertion to himself he had booked a first-class ticket straight to Heaven; indeed that his guardian angel had tied it round his neck at birth lest he should lose it, already numbered and dated like an identification disc.

I am bound to add that Bastin never went wrong because he never felt the slightest temptation to do so. This I suppose constitutes real virtue, since, in view of certain Bible sayings, the person who is tempted and would like to yield to the temptation, is equally a sinner with the person who does yield. To be truly good one should be too good to be tempted, or too weak to make the effort worth the tempter's while—in short not deserving of his powder and shot.

I need hardly add that Bastin went into the Church; indeed, he could not have gone anywhere else; it absorbed him naturally, as doubtless Heaven will do in due course. Only I think it likely that until they get to know him he will bore the angels so much that they will continually move him up higher. Also if they have any susceptibilities left, probably he will tread upon their toes—an art in which I never knew his equal. However, I always loved Bastin, perhaps because no one else did, a fact of which he remained totally unconscious, or perhaps because of his brutal way of telling one what he conceived to be the truth, which, as he had less imagination than a dormouse, generally it was not. For if the truth is a jewel, it is one coloured and veiled by many different lights and atmospheres.

It only remains to add that he was learned in his theological fashion and that among his further peculiarities were the slow, monotonous voice in which he uttered his views in long sentences, and his total indifference to adverse argument however sound and convincing.

My other friend, Bickley, was a person of a quite different character. Like Bastin, he was learned, but his tendencies faced another way. If Bastin's omnivorous throat could swallow a camel, especially a theological camel, Bickley's would strain at the smallest gnat, especially a theological gnat. The very best and most upright of men, yet he believed in nothing that he could not taste, see or handle. He was convinced, for instance, that man is a brute-

descended accident and no more, that what we call the soul or the mind is produced by a certain action of the grey matter of the brain; that everything apparently inexplicable has a perfectly mundane explanation, if only one could find it; that miracles certainly never did happen, and never will; that all religions are the fruit of human hopes and fears and the most convincing proof of human weakness; that notwithstanding our infinite variations we are the subjects of Nature's single law and the victims of blind, black and brutal chance.

Such was Bickley with his clever, well-cut face that always reminded me of a cameo, and thoughtful brow; his strong, capable hands and his rather steely mouth, the mere set of which suggested controversy of an uncompromising kind. Naturally as the Church had claimed Bastin, so medicine claimed Bickley.

Now as it happened the man who succeeded my father as vicar of Fulcombe was given a better living and went away shortly after I had purchased the place and with it the advowson. Just at this time also I received a letter written in the large, sprawling hand of Bastin from whom I had not heard for years. It went straight to the point, saying that he, Bastin, had seen in a Church paper that the last incumbent had resigned the living of Fulcombe which was in my gift. He would therefore be obliged if I would give it to him as the place he was at in Yorkshire did not suit his wife's health.

Here I may state that afterwards I learned that what did not suit Mrs. Bastin was the organist, who was pretty. She was by nature a woman with a temperament so insanely jealous that actually she managed to be suspicious of Bastin, whom she had captured in an unguarded moment when he was thinking of something else and who would as soon have thought of even looking at any woman as he would of worshipping Baal. As a matter of fact it took him months to know one female from another. Except as possible providers of subscriptions and props of Mothers' Meetings, women had no interest for him.

To return—with that engaging honesty which I have mentioned—Bastin's letter went on to set out all his own disabilities, which, he added, would probably render him unsuitable for the place he desired to fill. He was a High Churchman, a fact which would certainly offend many; he

had no claims to being a preacher although he was extraordinarily well acquainted with the writings of the Early Fathers. (What on earth had that to do with the question, I wondered.) On the other hand he had generally been considered a good visitor and was fond of walking (he meant to call on distant parishioners, but did not say so).

Then followed a page and a half on the evils of the existing system of the presentation to livings by private persons, ending with the suggestion that I had probably committed a sin in buying this particular advowson in order to increase my local authority, that is, if I had bought it, a point on which he was ignorant. Finally he informed me that as he had to christen a sick baby five miles away on a certain moor and it was too wet for him to ride his bicycle, he must stop. And he stopped.

There was, however, a P.S. to the letter, which ran as follows:

“Someone told me that you were dead a few years ago, and of course it may be another man of the same name who owns Fulcombe. If so, no doubt the Post Office will send back this letter.”

That was his only allusion to my humble self in all those diffuse pages. It was a long while since I had received an epistle which made me laugh so much, and of course I gave him the living by return of post, and even informed him that I would increase its stipend to a sum which I considered suitable to the position.

About ten days later I received another letter from Bastin which, as a scrawl on the flap of the envelope informed me, he had carried for a week in his pocket and forgotten to post. Except by inference it returned no thanks for my intended benefits. What it did say, however, was that he thought it wrong of me to have settled a matter of such spiritual importance in so great a hurry, though he had observed that rich men were nearly always selfish where their time was concerned. Moreover, he considered that I ought first to have made inquiries as to his present character and attainments, etc., etc.

To this epistle I replied by telegraph to the effect that I should as soon think of making inquiries about the character of an archangel, or that of one of his High Church saints.

This telegram, he told me afterwards, he considered unseemly and even ribald, especially as it had given great offence to the postmaster, who was one of the sidesmen in his church.

Thus it came about that I appointed the Rev. Basil Bastin to the living of Fulcombe, feeling sure that he would provide me with endless amusement and act as a moral tonic and discipline. Also I appreciated the man's blunt candour. In due course he arrived, and I confess that after a few Sundays of experience I began to have doubts as to the wisdom of my choice, glad as I was to see him personally. His sermons at once bored me, and, when they did not send me to sleep, excited in me a desire for debate. How could he be so profoundly acquainted with mysteries before which the world had stood amazed for ages? Was there nothing too hot or too heavy in the spiritual way for him to dismiss in a few blundering and casual words, as he might any ordinary incident of every-day life, I wondered? Also his idea of High Church observances was not mine, or, I imagine, that of anybody else. But I will not attempt to set it out.

His peculiarities, however, were easy to excuse and entirely swallowed up by the innate goodness of his nature which soon made him beloved of everyone in the place, for although he thought that probably most things were sins, I never knew him to discover a sin which he considered to be beyond the reach of forgiveness. Bastin was indeed a most charitable man and in his way wide-minded.

The person whom I could not tolerate, however, was his wife, who, to my fancy, more resembled a vessel, a very unattractive vessel, full of vinegar than a woman. Her name was Sarah and she was small, plain, flat, sandy-haired and odious, quite obsessed, moreover, with her jealousies of the Rev. Basil, at whom it pleased her to suppose that every woman in the countryside under fifty was throwing herself.

Here I will confess that to the best of my ability I took care that they did in outward seeming, that is, whenever she was present, instructing them to sit aside with him in darkened corners, to present him with flowers, and so forth. Several of them easily fell into the humour of the thing, and I have seen him depart from a dinner-party followed by that glowering Sarah, with a handful of rosebuds and violets, to say nothing of the traditional offerings of slippers,

embroidered markers and the like. Well, it was my only way of coming even with her, which I think she knew, for she hated me poisonously.

So much for Basil Bastin. Now for Bickley. Him I had met on several occasions since our college days, and after I was settled at the Priory from time to time I asked him to stay with me. At length he came, and I found out that he was not at all comfortable in his London practice which was of a nature uncongenial to him; further, that he did not get on with his partners. Then, after reflection, I made a suggestion to him. I pointed out that, owing to its popularity amongst seaside visitors, the neighbourhood of Fulcombe was a rising one, and that although there were doctors in it, there was no really first-class surgeon for miles.

Now Bickley was a first-class surgeon, having held very high hospital appointments, and indeed still holding them. Why, I asked, should he not come and set up here on his own? I would appoint him doctor to the estate and also give him charge of a cottage hospital which I was endowing, with liberty to build and arrange it as he liked. Further, as I considered that it would be of great advantage to me to have a man of real ability within reach, I would guarantee for three years whatever income he was earning in London.

He thanked me warmly and in the end acted on the idea, with startling results so far as his prospects were concerned. Very soon his really remarkable skill became known and he was earning more money than as an unmarried man he could possibly want. Indeed, scarcely a big operation took place at any town within twenty miles, and even much farther away, at which he was not called in to assist.

Needless to say his advent was a great boon to me, for as he lived in a house I let him quite near by, whenever he had a spare evening he would drop in to dinner, and from our absolutely opposite standpoints we discussed all things human and divine. Thus I was enabled to sharpen my wits upon the hard steel of his clear intellect which was yet, in a sense, so limited.

I must add that I never converted him to my way of thinking and he never converted me to his, any more than he converted Bastin, for whom, queerly enough, he had a liking. They pounded away at each other, Bickley frequently

getting the best of it in the argument, and when at last Bastin rose to go, he generally made the same remark. It was:

“It really is sad, my dear Bickley, to find a man of your intellect so utterly wrongheaded and misguided. I have convicted you of error at least half a dozen times, and not to confess it is mere pigheadedness. Good night. I am sure that Sarah will be sitting up for me.”

“Silly old idiot!” Bickley would say, shaking his fist after him. “The only way to get him to see the truth would be to saw his head open and pour it in.”

Then we would both laugh.

Such were my two most intimate friends, although I admit it was rather like the equator cultivating close relationships with the north and south poles. Certainly Bastin was as far from Bickley as those points of the earth are apart, while I. as it were, sat equally distant between the two. However, we were all very happy together, since in certain characters, there are few things that bind men more closely than profound differences of opinion.

Now I must turn to my more personal affairs. After all, it is impossible for a man to satisfy his soul, if he has anything of the sort about him which in the remotest degree answers to that description, with the husks of wealth, luxury and indolence, supplemented by occasional theological and other arguments between his friends; Becoming profoundly convinced of this truth, I searched round for something to do and, like Noah’s dove on the waste of waters, found nothing. Then I asked Bickley and Bastin for their opinions as to my best future course. Bickley proved a barren draw. He rubbed his nose and feebly suggested that I might go in for “research work,” which, of course, only represented his own ambitions. I asked him indignantly how I could do such a thing without any scientific qualifications whatever. He admitted the difficulty, but replied that I might endow others who had the qualifications.

“In short, become a mulch cow for sucking scientists,” I replied, and broke off the conversation.

Bastin’s idea was, first, that I should teach in a Sunday School; secondly, that if this career did not satisfy all my

aspirations, I might be ordained and become a missionary.

On my rejection of this brilliant advice, he remarked that the only other thing he could think of was that I should get married and have a large family, which might possibly advantage the nation and ultimately enrich the Kingdom of Heaven, though of such things no one could be quite sure. At any rate, he was certain that at present I was in practice neglecting my duty, whatever it might be, and in fact one of those cumberers of the earth who, he observed in the newspaper he took in and read when he had time, were “very happily named—the idle rich.”

“Which reminds me,” he added, “that the clothing-club finances are in a perfectly scandalous condition; in fact, it is £25 in debt, an amount that as the squire of the parish I consider it incumbent on you to make good, not as a charity but as an obligation.”

“Look here, my friend,” I said, ignoring all the rest, “will you answer me a plain question? Have you found marriage such a success that you consider it your duty to recommend it to others? And if you have, why have you not got the large family of which you speak?”

“Of course not,” he replied with his usual frankness. “Indeed, it is in many ways so disagreeable that I am convinced it must be right and for the good of all concerned. As regards the family I am sure I do not know, but Sarah never liked babies, which perhaps has something to do with it.”

Then he sighed, adding, “You see, Arbuthnot, we have to take things as we find them in this world and hope for a better.”

“Which is just what I am trying to do, you unilluminating old donkey!” I exclaimed, and left him there shaking his head over matters in general, but I think principally over Sarah.

By the way, I think that the villagers recognised this good lady’s vinegary nature. At least, they used to call her “Sour Sal.”

Chapter 3. Natalie

Now what Bastin had said about marriage stuck in my mind as his blundering remarks had a way of doing, perhaps because of the grain of honest truth with which they were often permeated. Probably in my position it was more or less my duty to marry. But here came the rub; I had never experienced any leanings that way. I was as much a man as others, more so than many are, perhaps, and I liked women, but at the same time they repelled me.

My old fastidiousness came in; to my taste there was always something wrong about them. While they attracted one part of my nature they revolted another part, and on the whole I preferred to do without their intimate society, rather than work violence to this second and higher part of me. Moreover, quite at the beginning of my career I had concluded from observation that a man gets on better in life alone, rather than with another to drag at his side, or by whom perhaps he must be dragged. Still true marriage, such as most men and some women have dreamed of in their youth, had always been one of my ideals; indeed it was on and around this vision that I wrote that first book of mine which was so successful. Since I knew this to be unattainable in our imperfect conditions, however, notwithstanding Bastin's strictures, again I dismissed the whole matter from my mind as a vain imagination.

As an alternative I reflected upon a parliamentary career which I was not too old to begin, and even toyed with one or two opportunities that offered themselves, as these do to men of wealth and advanced views. They never came to anything, for in the end I decided that Party politics were so hateful and so dishonest, that I could not bring myself to put my neck beneath their yoke. I was sure that if I tried to do so, I should fail more completely than I had done at the Bar and in Literature. Here, too, I am quite certain that I was right.

The upshot of it all was that I sought refuge in that last expedient of weary Englishmen, travel, not as a globe-trotter, but leisurely and with an inquiring mind, learning much but again finding, like the ancient writer whom I have

quoted already, that there is no new thing under the sun; that with certain variations it is the same thing over and over again.

No, I will make an exception, the East did interest me enormously. There it was, at Benares, that I came into touch with certain thinkers who opened my eyes to a great deal. They released some hidden spring in my nature which hitherto had always been striving to break through the crust of our conventions and inherited ideas. I know now that what I was seeking was nothing less than the Infinite; that I had “immortal longings in me.” I listened to all their solemn talk of epochs and years measureless to man, and reflected with a thrill that after all man might have his part in every one of them. Yes, that bird of passage as he seemed to be, flying out of darkness into darkness, still he might have spread his wings in the light of other suns millions upon millions of years ago, and might still spread them, grown radiant and glorious, millions upon millions of years hence in a time unborn.

If only I could know the truth. Was Life (according to Bickley) merely a short activity bounded by nothingness before and behind; or (according to Bastin) a conventional golden-harped and haloed immortality, a word of which he did not in the least understand the meaning?

Or was it something quite different from either of these, something vast and splendid beyond the reach of vision, something God-sent, beginning and ending in the Eternal Absolute and at last partaking of His attributes and nature and from aeon to aeon shot through with His light? And how was the truth to be learned? I asked my Eastern friends, and they talked vaguely of long ascetic preparation, of years upon years of learning, from whom I could not quite discover. I was sure it could not be from them, because clearly they did not know; they only passed on what they had heard elsewhere, when or how they either could not or would not explain. So at length I gave it up, having satisfied myself that all this was but an effort of Oriental imagination called into life by the sweet influences of the Eastern stars.

I gave it up and went away, thinking that I should forget. But I did not forget. I was quick with a new hope, or at any rate with a new aspiration, and that secret child of holy desire grew and grew within my soul, till at length it flashed upon

me that this soul of mine was itself the hidden Master from which I must learn my lesson. No wonder that those Eastern friends could not give his name, seeing that whatever they really knew, as distinguished from what they had heard, and it was little enough, each of them had learned from the teaching of his own soul.

Thus, then, I too became a dreamer with only one longing, the longing for wisdom, for that spirit touch which should open my eyes and enable me to see.

Yet now it happened strangely enough that when I seemed within myself to have little further interest in the things of the world, and least of all in women, I, who had taken another guest to dwell with me, those things of the world came back to me and in the shape of Woman the Inevitable. Probably it was so decreed since is it not written that no man can live to himself alone, or lose himself in watching and nurturing the growth of his own soul?

It happened thus. I went to Rome on my way home from India, and stayed there a while. On the day after my arrival I wrote my name in the book of our Minister to Italy at that time, Sir Alfred Upton, not because I wished him to ask me to dinner, but for the reason that I had heard of him as a man of archeological tastes and thought that he might enable me to see things which otherwise I should not see.

As it chanced he knew about me through some of my Devonshire neighbours who were friends of his, and did ask me to dinner on the following night. I accepted and found myself one of a considerable party, some of them distinguished English people who wore Orders, as is customary when one dines with the representative of our Sovereign. Seeing these, and this shows that in the best of us vanity is only latent, for the first time in my life I was sorry that I had none and was only plain Mr. Arbuthnot who, as Sir Alfred explained to me politely, must go in to dinner last, because all the rest had titles, and without even a lady as there was not one to spare.

Nor was my lot bettered when I got there, as I found myself seated between an Italian countess and a Russian prince, neither of whom could talk English, while, alas, I knew no foreign language, not even French in which they addressed me, seeming surprised that I did not understand them. I was

humiliated at my own ignorance, although in fact I was not ignorant, only my education had been classical. Indeed I was a good classic and had kept up my knowledge more or less, especially since I became an idle man. In my confusion it occurred to me that the Italian countess might know Latin from which her own language was derived, and addressed her in that tongue. She stared, and Sir Alfred, who was not far off and overheard me (he also knew Latin), burst into laughter and proceeded to explain the joke in a loud voice, first in French and then in English, to the assembled company, who all became infected with merriment and also stared at me as a curiosity.

Then it was that for the first time I saw Natalie, for owing to a mistake of my driver I had arrived rather late and had not been introduced to her. As her father's only daughter, her mother being dead, she was seated at the end of the table behind a fan-like arrangement of white Madonna lilies, and she had bent forward and, like the others, was looking at me, but in such a fashion that her head from that distance seemed as though it were surrounded and crowned with lilies. Indeed the greatest art could not have produced a more beautiful effect which was, however, really one of naked accident.

An angel looking down upon earth through the lilies of Heaven—that was the rather absurd thought which flashed into my mind. I did not quite realise her face at first except that it seemed to be both dark and fair; as a fact her waving hair which grew rather low upon her forehead, was dark, and her large, soft eyes were grey. I did not know, and to this moment I do not know if she was really beautiful, but certainly the light that shone through those eyes of hers and seemed to be reflected upon her delicate features, was beauty itself. It was like that glowing through a thin vase of the purest alabaster within which a lamp is placed, and I felt this effect to arise from no chance, like that of the lily-setting, but, as it were, from the lamp of the spirit within.

Our eyes met, and I suppose that she saw the wonder and admiration in mine. At any rate her amused smile faded, leaving the face rather serious, though still sweetly serious, and a tinge of colour crept over it as the first hue of dawn creeps into a pearly sky. Then she withdrew herself behind the screen of lilies and for the rest of that dinner which I thought was never coming to an end, practically I saw her

no more. Only I noted as she passed out that although not tall, she was rounded and graceful in shape and that her hands were peculiarly delicate.

Afterwards in the drawing-room her father, with whom I had talked at the table, introduced me to her, saying:

“My daughter is the real archaeologist, Mr. Arbuthnot, and I think if you ask her, she may be able to help you.”

Then he bustled away to speak to some of his important guests, from whom I think he was seeking political information.

“My father exaggerates,” she said in a soft and very sympathetic voice, “but perhaps”—and she motioned me to a seat at her side.

Then we talked of the places and things that I more particularly desired to see and, well, the end of it was that I went back to my hotel in love with Natalie; and as she afterwards confessed, she went to bed in love with me.

It was a curious business, more like meeting a very old friend from whom one had been separated by circumstances for a score of years or so than anything else. We were, so to speak, intimate from the first; we knew all about each other, although here and there was something new, something different which we could not remember, lines of thought, veins of memory which we did not possess in common. On one point I am absolutely clear: it was not solely the everyday and ancient appeal of woman to man and man to woman which drew us together, though doubtless this had its part in our attachment as under our human conditions it must do, seeing that it is Nature’s bait to ensure the continuance of the race. It was something more, something quite beyond that elementary impulse.

At any rate we loved, and one evening in the shelter of the solemn walls of the great Coliseum at Rome, which at that hour were shut to all except ourselves, we confessed our love. I really think we must have chosen the spot by tacit but mutual consent because we felt it to be fitting. It was so old, so impregnated with every human experience, from the direst crime of the tyrant who thought himself a god, to the sublimest sacrifice of the martyr who already was half a god; with every vice and virtue also which lies between

these extremes, that it seemed to be the most fitting altar whereon to offer our hearts and all that caused them to beat, each to the other.

So Natalie and I were betrothed within a month of our first meeting. Within three we were married, for what was there to prevent or delay? Naturally Sir Alfred was delighted, seeing that he possessed but small private resources and I was able to make ample provision for his daughter who had hitherto shown herself somewhat difficult in this business of matrimony and now was bordering on her twenty-seventh year. Everybody was delighted, everything went smoothly as a sledge sliding down a slope of frozen snow and the mists of time hid whatever might be at the end of that slope. Probably a plain; at the worst the upward rise of ordinary life.

That is what we thought, if we thought at all. Certainly we never dreamed of a precipice. Why should we, who were young, by comparison, quite healthy and very rich? Who thinks of precipices under such circumstances, when disaster seems to be eliminated and death is yet a long way off?

And yet we ought to have done so, because we should have known that smooth surfaces without impediment to the runners often end in something of the kind.

I am bound to say that when we returned home to Fulcombe, where of course we met with a great reception, including the ringing (out of tune) of the new peal of bells that I had given to the church, Bastin made haste to point this out.

“Your wife seems a very nice and beautiful lady, Arbuthnot,” he reflected aloud after dinner, when Mrs. Bastin, glowering as usual, though what at I do not know, had been escorted from the room by Natalie, “and really, when I come to think of it, you are an unusually fortunate person. You possess a great deal of money, much more than you have any right to; which you seem to have done very little to earn and do not spend quite as I should like you to do, and this nice property, that ought to be owned by a great number of people, as, according to the views you express, I should have thought you would acknowledge, and everything else that a man can want. It is very strange that you should be

so favoured and not because of any particular merits of your own which one can see. However, I have no doubt it will all come even in the end and you will get your share of troubles, like others. Perhaps Mrs. Arbuthnot will have no children as there is so much for them to take. Or perhaps you will lose all your money and have to work for your living, which might be good for you. Or," he added, still thinking aloud after his fashion, "perhaps she will die young—she has that kind of face, although, of course, I hope she won't," he added, waking up.

I do not know why, but his wandering words struck me cold; the proverbial funeral bell at the marriage feast was nothing to them. I suppose it was because in a flash of intuition I knew that they would come true and that he was an appointed Cassandra. Perhaps this uncanny knowledge overcame my natural indignation at such super-gaucherie of which no one but Bastin could have been capable, and even prevented me from replying at all, so that I merely sat still and looked at him.

But Bickley did reply with some vigour.

"Forgive me for saying so, Bastin," he said, bristling all over as it were, "but your remarks, which may or may not be in accordance with the principles of your religion, seem to me to be in singularly bad taste. They would have turned the stomachs of a gathering of early Christians, who appear to have been the worst mannered people in the world, and at any decent heathen feast your neck would have been wrung as that of a bird of ill omen."

"Why?" asked Bastin blankly. "I only said what I thought to be the truth. The truth is better than what you call good taste."

"Then I will say what I think also to be the truth," replied Bickley, growing furious. "It is that you use your Christianity as a cloak for bad manners. It teaches consideration and sympathy for others of which you seem to have none. Moreover, since you talk of the death of people's wives, I will tell you something about your own, as a doctor, which I can do as I never attended her. It is highly probable, in my opinion, that she will die before Mrs. Arbuthnot, who is quite a healthy person with a good prospect of life."

“Perhaps,” said Bastin. “If so, it will be God’s will and I shall not complain” (here Bickley snorted), “though I do not see what you can know about it. But why should you cast reflections on the early Christians who were people of strong principle living in rough times, and had to wage war against an established devil-worship? I know you are angry because they smashed up the statues of Venus and so forth, but had I been in their place I should have done the same.”

“Of course you would, who doubts it? But as for the early Christians and their iconoclastic performances—well, curse them, that’s all!” and he sprang up and left the room.

I followed him.

Let it not be supposed from the above scene that there was any ill-feeling between Bastin and Bickley. On the contrary they were much attached to each other, and this kind of quarrel meant no more than the strong expression of their individual views to which they were accustomed from their college days. For instance Bastin was always talking about the early Christians and missionaries, while Bickley loathed both, the early Christians because of the destruction which they had wrought in Egypt, Italy, Greece and elsewhere, of all that was beautiful; and the missionaries because, as he said, they were degrading and spoiling the native races and by inducing them to wear clothes, rendering them liable to disease. Bastin would answer that their souls were more important than their bodies, to which Bickley replied that as there was no such thing as a soul except in the stupid imagination of priests, he differed entirely on the point. As it was quite impossible for either to convince the other, there the conversation would end, or drift into something in which they were mutually interested, such as natural history and the hygiene of the neighbourhood.

Here I may state that Bickley’s keen professional eye was not mistaken when he diagnosed Mrs. Bastin’s state of health as dangerous. As a matter of fact she was suffering from heart disease that a doctor can often recognise by the colour of the lips, etc., which brought about her death under the following circumstances:

Her husband attended some ecclesiastical function at a town over twenty miles away and was to have returned by a train which would have brought him home about five