Jerome K. Jerome

Three Men on the Bummel

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"Three Men on the Bummel" is a humorous novel by Jerome K. Jerome. The sequel brings back the three companions who figured in "Three Men in a Boat". Their lives are too stressful and they need a break from the daily mundane, so they put their heads together and come up with a brilliant idea they decide to travel through the Black Forest of Germany on a bicycling tour.

Содержание

Three Men on The Bummel
by Jerome K. Jerome

Dedication

To the gentle
Guide
Who lets me ever go my own way, yet brings me right—
To the laughter – loving
Philosopher
Who, if he has not reconciled me to bearing the toothache patently, at least has taught me the comfort that
This even will also pass—
To the good
Friend
Who smiles when i tell him of my troubles, and who when i ask for help, answers only "wait!"—
To the grave – faced
Jester
To whom all life is but a volume of old humour—
To good master
Time
This little work of a poor
Pupil
Is dedicated

Chapter I

Three men need change – Anecdote showing evil result of deception – Moral cowardice of George – Harris has ideas – Yarn of the Ancient Mariner and the Inexperienced Yachtsman – A hearty crew – Danger of sailing when the wind is off the land – Impossibility of sailing when the wind is off the sea – The argumentativeness of Ethelbertha – The dampness of the river – Harris suggests a bicycle tour – George thinks of the wind – Harris suggests the Black Forest – George thinks of the hills – Plan adopted by Harris for ascent of hills – Interruption by Mrs. Harris

"What we want," said Harris, "is a change."

At this moment the door opened, and Mrs. Harris put her head in to say that Ethelbertha had sent her to remind me that we must not be late getting home because of Clarence. Ethelbertha, I am inclined to think, is unnecessarily nervous about the children. As a matter of fact, there was nothing wrong with the child whatever. He had been out with his aunt that morning; and if he looks wistfully at a pastrycook's window she takes him inside and buys him cream buns and "maids – of – honour" until he insists that he has had enough, and politely, but firmly, refuses to eat another anything. Then, of course, he wants only one helping of pudding at lunch, and Ethelbertha thinks he is sickening for something. Mrs. Harris added that it would be as well for us to come upstairs soon, on our own account also, as otherwise we should miss Muriel's rendering of "The Mad Hatter's Tea Party," out of *Alice in Wonderland*. Muriel is Harris's second, age eight: she is a bright, intelligent child; but I prefer her myself in serious pieces. We said we would finish our cigarettes and follow almost immediately; we also begged her not to let Muriel begin until we arrived. She promised to hold the child back as long as possible, and went. Harris, as soon as the door was closed, resumed his interrupted sentence.

"You know what I mean," he said, "a complete change."

The question was how to get it.

George suggested "business." It was the sort of suggestion George would make. A bachelor thinks a married woman doesn't know enough to get out of the way of a steam – roller. I knew a young fellow once, an engineer, who thought he would go to Vienna "on business." His wife wanted to know "what business?" He told her it would be his duty to visit the mines in the neighbourhood of the Austrian capital, and to make reports. She said she would go with him; she was that sort of woman. He tried to dissuade her: he told her that a mine was no place for a beautiful woman. She said she felt that herself, and that therefore she did not intend to accompany him down the shafts; she would see him off in the morning, and then amuse herself until his return, looking round the Vienna shops, and buying a few things she might want. Having started the idea, he did not see very well how to get out of it; and for ten long summer days he did visit the mines in the neighbourhood of Vienna, and in the evening wrote reports about them, which she posted for him to his firm, who didn't want them.

I should be grieved to think that either Ethelbertha or Mrs. Harris belonged to that class of wife, but it is as well not to overdo "business" – it should be kept for cases of real emergency.

"No," I said, "the thing is to be frank and manly. I shall tell Ethelbertha that I have come to the conclusion a man never values happiness that is always with him. I shall tell her that, for the sake of learning to appreciate my own advantages as I know they should be appreciated, I intend to tear myself away from her and the children for at least three weeks. I shall tell her," I continued, turning to Harris, "that it is you who have shown me my duty in this respect; that it is to you we shall owe—"

Harris put down his glass rather hurriedly.

"If you don't mind, old man," he interrupted, "I'd really rather you didn't. She'll talk it over with my wife, and – well, I should not be happy, taking credit that I do not deserve."

"But you do deserve it," I insisted; "it was your suggestion."

"It was you gave me the idea," interrupted Harris again. "You know you said it was a mistake for a man to get into a groove, and that unbroken domesticity cloyed the brain."

"I was speaking generally," I explained.

"It struck me as very apt," said Harris. "I thought of repeating it to Clara; she has a great opinion of your sense, I know. I am sure that if—"

"We won't risk it," I interrupted, in my turn; "it is a delicate matter, and I see a way out of it. We will say George suggested the idea."

There is a lack of genial helpfulness about George that it sometimes vexes me to notice. You would have thought he would have welcomed the chance of assisting two old friends out of a dilemma; instead, he became disagreeable.

"You do," said George, "and I shall tell them both that my original plan was that we should make a party – children and all; that I should bring my aunt, and that we should hire a charming old chateau I know of in Normandy, on the coast, where the climate is peculiarly adapted to delicate children, and the milk such as you do not get in England. I shall add that you over – rode that suggestion, arguing we should be happier by ourselves."

With a man like George kindness is of no use; you have to be firm.

"You do," said Harris, "and I, for one, will close with the offer. We will just take that chateau. You will bring your aunt – I will see to that, – and we will have a month of it. The children are all fond of you; J. and I will be nowhere. You've promised to teach Edgar fishing; and it is you who will have to play wild beasts. Since last Sunday Dick and Muriel have talked of nothing else but your hippopotamus. We will picnic in the woods – there will only be eleven of us, – and in the evenings we will have music and recitations. Muriel is master of six pieces already, as perhaps you know; and all the other children are quick studies."

George climbed down – he has no real courage – but he did not do it gracefully. He said that if we were mean and cowardly and false – hearted enough to stoop to such a shabby trick, he supposed he couldn't help it; and that if I didn't intend to finish the whole bottle of claret myself, he would trouble me to spare him a glass. He also added, somewhat illogically, that it really did not matter, seeing both Ethelbertha and Mrs. Harris were women of sense who would judge him better than to believe for a moment that the suggestion emanated from him.

This little point settled, the question was: What sort of a change?

Harris, as usual, was for the sea. He said he knew a yacht, just the very thing – one that we could manage by ourselves; no skulking lot of lubbers loafing about, adding to the expense and taking away from the romance. Give him a handy boy, he would sail it himself. We knew that yacht, and we told him so; we had been on it with Harris before. It smells of bilge – water and greens to the exclusion of all other scents; no ordinary sea air can hope to head against it. So far as sense of smell is concerned, one might be spending a week in Limehouse Hole. There is no place to get out of the rain; the saloon is ten feet by four, and half of that is taken up by a stove, which falls to pieces when you go to light it. You have to take your bath on deck, and the towel blows overboard just as you step out of the tub. Harris and the boy do all the interesting work – the lugging and the reefing, the letting her go and the heeling her over, and all that sort of thing, – leaving George and myself to do the peeling of the potatoes and the washing up.

"Very well, then," said Harris, "let's take a proper yacht, with a skipper, and do the thing in style."

That also I objected to. I know that skipper; his notion of yachting is to lie in what he calls the "offing," where he can be well in touch with his wife and family, to say nothing of his favourite public – house.

Years ago, when I was young and inexperienced, I hired a yacht myself. Three things had combined to lead me into this foolishness: I had had a stroke of unexpected luck; Ethelbertha had expressed a yearning for sea air; and the very next morning, in taking up casually at the club a copy of the *Sportsman*, I had come across the following advertisement —

> TO YACHTSMEN. – Unique Opportunity. – "Rogue," 28–ton Yawl. – Owner, called away suddenly on business, is willing to let this superbly – fitted "greyhound of the sea" for any period short or long. Two cabins and saloon; pianette, by Woffenkoff; new copper. Terms, 10 guineas a week. – Apply Pertwee and Co., 3A Bucklersbury.

It had seemed to me like the answer to a prayer. "The new copper" did not interest me; what little washing we might want could wait, I thought. But the "pianette by Woffenkoff" sounded alluring. I pictured Ethelbertha playing in the evening – something with a chorus, in which, perhaps, the crew, with a little training, might join – while our moving home bounded, "greyhound – like," over the silvery billows.

I took a cab and drove direct to 3A Bucklersbury. Mr. Pertwee was an unpretentious – looking gentleman, who had an unostentatious office on the third floor. He showed me a picture in water – colours of the *Rogue* flying before the wind. The deck was at an angle of 95 to the ocean. In the picture no human beings were represented on the deck; I suppose they had slipped off. Indeed, I do not see how anyone could have kept on, unless nailed. I pointed out this disadvantage to the agent, who, however, explained to me that the picture represented the *Rogue* doubling something or other on the well – known occasion of her winning the Medway Challenge Shield. Mr. Pertwee assumed that I knew all about the event, so that I did not like to ask any questions. Two specks near the frame of the picture, which at first I had taken for moths, represented, it appeared, the second and third winners in this celebrated race. A photograph of the yacht at anchor off Gravesend was less impressive, but suggested more stability. All answers to my inquiries being satisfactory, I took the thing for a fortnight. Mr. Pertwee said it was fortunate I wanted it only for a fortnight – later on I came to agree with him, – the time fitting in exactly with another hiring. Had I required it for three weeks he would have been compelled to refuse me.

The letting being thus arranged, Mr. Pertwee asked me if I had a skipper in my eye. That I had not was also fortunate – things seemed to be turning out luckily for me all round, – because Mr. Pertwee felt sure I could not do better than keep on Mr. Goyles, at present in charge – an excellent skipper, so Mr. Pertwee assured me, a man who knew the sea as a man knows his own wife, and who had never lost a life.

It was still early in the day, and the yacht was lying off Harwich. I caught the ten forty – five from Liverpool Street, and by one o'clock was talking to Mr. Goyles on deck. He was a stout man, and had a fatherly way with him. I told him my idea, which was to take the outlying Dutch islands and then creep up to Norway. He said, "Aye, aye, sir," and appeared quite enthusiastic about the trip; said he should enjoy it himself. We came to the question of victualling, and he grew more enthusiastic. The amount of food suggested by Mr. Goyles, I confess, surprised me. Had we been living in the days of Drake and the Spanish Main, I should have feared he was arranging for something illegal. However, he laughed in his fatherly way, and assured me we were not overdoing it. Anything left the crew would divide and take home with them – it seemed this was the custom. It appeared to me that I was providing for this crew for the winter, but I did not like to appear stingy, and said no more. The amount of drink required also surprised me. I arranged for what I thought we should need for ourselves, and then Mr. Goyles spoke up for the crew. I must say that for him, he did think of his men.

"We don't want anything in the nature of an orgie, Mr. Goyles," I suggested.

"Orgie!" replied Mr. Goyles; "why they'll take that little drop in their tea."

He explained to me that his motto was, Get good men and treat them well.

"They work better for you," said Mr. Goyles; "and they come again."

Personally, I didn't feel I wanted them to come again. I was beginning to take a dislike to them before I had seen them; I regarded them as a greedy and guzzling crew. But Mr. Goyles was so cheerfully emphatic, and I was so inexperienced, that again I let him have his way. He also promised that even in this department he would see to it personally that nothing was wasted.

I also left him to engage the crew. He said he could do the thing, and would, for me, with the help two men and a boy. If he was alluding to the clearing up of the victuals and drink, I think he was making an under – estimate; but possibly he may have been speaking of the sailing of the yacht.

I called at my tailors on the way home and ordered a yachting suit, with a white hat, which they promised to bustle up and have ready in time; and then I went home and told Ethelbertha all I had done. Her delight was clouded by only one reflection – would the dressmaker be able to finish a yachting costume for her in time? That is so like a woman.

Our honeymoon, which had taken place not very long before, had been somewhat curtailed, so we decided we would invite nobody, but have the yacht to ourselves. And thankful I am to Heaven that we did so decide. On Monday we put on all our clothes and started. I forget what Ethelbertha wore, but, whatever it may have been, it looked very fetching. My own costume was a dark blue trimmed with a narrow white braid, which, I think, was rather effective.

Mr. Goyles met us on deck, and told us that lunch was ready. I must admit Goyles had secured the services of a very fair cook. The capabilities of the other members of the crew I had no opportunity of judging. Speaking of them in a state of rest, however, I can say of them they appeared to be a cheerful crew.

My idea had been that so soon as the men had finished their dinner we would weigh anchor, while I, smoking a cigar, with Ethelbertha by my side, would lean over the gunwale and watch the white cliffs of the Fatherland sink imperceptibly into the horizon. Ethelbertha and I carried out our part of the programme, and waited, with the deck to ourselves.

"They seem to be taking their time," said Ethelbertha.

"If, in the course of fourteen days," I said, "they eat half of what is on this yacht, they will want a fairly long time for every meal. We had better not hurry them, or they won't get through a quarter of it."

"They must have gone to sleep," said Ethelbertha, later on. "It will be tea – time soon."

They were certainly very quiet. I went for'ard, and hailed Captain Goyles down the ladder. I hailed him three times; then he came up slowly. He appeared to be a heavier and older man than when I had seen him last. He had a cold cigar in his mouth.

"When you are ready, Captain Goyles," I said, "we'll start."

Captain Goyles removed the cigar from his mouth.

"Not to – day we won't, sir," he replied, "*with* your permission."

"Why, what's the matter with to – day?" I said. I know sailors are a superstitious folk; I thought maybe a Monday might be considered unlucky.

"The day's all right," answered Captain Goyles, "it's the wind I'm a – thinking of. It don't look much like changing."

"But do we want it to change?" I asked. "It seems to me to be just where it should be, dead behind us."

"Aye, aye," said Captain Goyles, "dead's the right word to use, for dead we'd all be, bar Providence, if we was to put out in this. You see, sir," he explained, in answer to my look of surprise, "this is what we call a 'land wind,' that is, it's a – blowing, as one might say, direct off the land."

When I came to think of it the man was right; the wind was blowing off the land.

"It may change in the night," said Captain Goyles, more hopefully "anyhow, it's not violent, and she rides well."

Captain Goyles resumed his cigar, and I returned aft, and explained to Ethelbertha the reason for the delay. Ethelbertha, who appeared to be less high spirited than when we first boarded, wanted to know *why* we couldn't sail when the wind was off the land.

"If it was not blowing off the land," said Ethelbertha, "it would be blowing off the sea, and that would send us back into the shore again. It seems to me this is just the very wind we want."

I said: "That is your inexperience, love; it *seems* to be the very wind we want, but it is not. It's what we call a land wind, and a land wind is always very dangerous."

Ethelbertha wanted to know *why* a land wind was very dangerous.

Her argumentativeness annoyed me somewhat; maybe I was feeling a bit cross; the monotonous rolling heave of a small yacht at anchor depresses an ardent spirit.

"I can't explain it to you," I replied, which was true, "but to set sail in this wind would be the height of foolhardiness, and I care for you too much, dear, to expose you to unnecessary risks."

I thought this rather a neat conclusion, but Ethelbertha merely replied that she wished, under the circumstances, we hadn't come on board till Tuesday, and went below.

In the morning the wind veered round to the north; I was up early, and observed this to Captain Goyles.

"Aye, aye, sir," he remarked; "it's unfortunate, but it can't be helped."

"You don't think it possible for us to start to – day?" I hazarded.

He did not get angry with me, he only laughed.

"Well, sir," said he, "if you was a – wanting to go to Ipswich, I should say as it couldn't be better for us, but our destination being, as you see, the Dutch coast – why there you are!"

I broke the news to Ethelbertha, and we agreed to spend the day on shore. Harwich is not a merry town, towards evening you might call it dull. We had some tea and watercress at Dovercourt, and then returned to the quay to look for Captain Goyles and the boat. We waited an hour for him. When he came he was more cheerful than we were; if he had not told me himself that he never drank anything but one glass of hot grog before turning in for the night, I should have said he was drunk.

The next morning the wind was in the south, which made Captain Goyles rather anxious, it appearing that it was equally unsafe to move or to stop where we were; our only hope was it would change before anything happened. By this time, Ethelbertha had taken a dislike to the yacht; she said that, personally, she would rather be spending a week in a bathing machine, seeing that a bathing machine was at least steady.

We passed another day in Harwich, and that night and the next, the wind still continuing in the south, we slept at the "King's Head." On Friday the wind was blowing direct from the east. I met Captain Goyles on the quay, and suggested that, under these circumstances, we might start. He appeared irritated at my persistence.

"If you knew a bit more, sir," he said, "you'd see for yourself that it's impossible. The wind's a – blowing direct off the sea."

I said: "Captain Goyles, tell me what is this thing I have hired? Is it a yacht or a house – boat?"

He seemed surprised at my question.

He said: "It's a yawl."

"What I mean is," I said, "can it be moved at all, or is it a fixture here? If it is a fixture," I continued, "tell me so frankly, then we will get some ivy in boxes and train over the port – holes, stick some flowers and an awning on deck, and make the thing look pretty. If, on the other hand, it can be moved—"

"Moved!" interrupted Captain Goyles. "You get the right wind behind the *Rogue*—"

I said: "What is the right wind?"

Captain Goyles looked puzzled.

"In the course of this week," I went on, "we have had wind from the north, from the south, from the east, from the west – with variations. If you can think of any other point of the compass

from which it can blow, tell me, and I will wait for it. If not, and if that anchor has not grown into the bottom of the ocean, we will have it up to – day and see what happens."

He grasped the fact that I was determined.

"Very well, sir," he said, "you're master and I'm man. I've only got one child as is still dependent on me, thank God, and no doubt your executors will feel it their duty to do the right thing by the old woman."

His solemnity impressed me.

"Mr. Goyles," I said, "be honest with me. Is there any hope, in any weather, of getting away from this damned hole?"

Captain Goyles's kindly geniality returned to him.

"You see, sir," he said, "this is a very peculiar coast. We'd be all right if we were once out, but getting away from it in a cockle – shell like that – well, to be frank, sir, it wants doing."

I left Captain Goyles with the assurance that he would watch the weather as a mother would her sleeping babe; it was his own simile, and it struck me as rather touching. I saw him again at twelve o'clock; he was watching it from the window of the "Chain and Anchor."

At five o'clock that evening a stroke of luck occurred; in the middle of the High Street I met a couple of yachting friends, who had had to put in by reason of a strained rudder. I told them my story, and they appeared less surprised than amused. Captain Goyles and the two men were still watching the weather. I ran into the "King's Head," and prepared Ethelbertha. The four of us crept quietly down to the quay, where we found our boat. Only the boy was on board; my two friends took charge of the yacht, and by six o'clock we were scudding merrily up the coast.

We put in that night at Aldborough, and the next day worked up to Yarmouth, where, as my friends had to leave, I decided to abandon the yacht. We sold the stores by auction on Yarmouth sands early in the morning. I made a loss, but had the satisfaction of "doing" Captain Goyles. I left the *Rogue* in charge of a local mariner, who, for a couple of sovereigns, undertook to see to its return to Harwich; and we came back to London by train. There may be yachts other than the *Rogue*, and skippers other than Mr. Goyles, but that experience has prejudiced me against both.

George also thought a yacht would be a good deal of responsibility, so we dismissed the idea.

"What about the river?" suggested Harris.

"We have had some pleasant times on that."

George pulled in silence at his cigar, and I cracked another nut.

"The river is not what it used to be," said I; "I don't know what, but there's a something – a dampness – about the river air that always starts my lumbago."

"It's the same with me," said George. "I don't know how it is, but I never can sleep now in the neighbourhood of the river. I spent a week at Joe's place in the spring, and every night I woke up at seven o'clock and never got a wink afterwards."

"I merely suggested it," observed Harris. "Personally, I don't think it good for me, either; it touches my gout."

"What suits me best," I said, "is mountain air. What say you to a walking tour in Scotland?"

"It's always wet in Scotland," said George. "I was three weeks in Scotland the year before last, and was never dry once all the time – not in that sense."

"It's fine enough in Switzerland," said Harris.

"They would never stand our going to Switzerland by ourselves," I objected. "You know what happened last time. It must be some place where no delicately nurtured woman or child could possibly live; a country of bad hotels and comfortless travelling; where we shall have to rough it, to work hard, to starve perhaps—"

"Easy!" interrupted George, "easy, there! Don't forget I'm coming with you."

"I have it!" exclaimed Harris; "a bicycle tour!"

George looked doubtful.

"There's a lot of uphill about a bicycle tour," said he, "and the wind is against you."

"So there is downhill, and the wind behind you," said Harris.

"I've never noticed it," said George.

"You won't think of anything better than a bicycle tour," persisted Harris.

I was inclined to agree with him.

"And I'll tell you where," continued he; "through the Black Forest."

"Why, that's *all* uphill," said George.

"Not all," retorted Harris; "say two – thirds. And there's one thing you've forgotten."

He looked round cautiously, and sunk his voice to a whisper.

"There are little railways going up those hills, little cogwheel things that—"

The door opened, and Mrs. Harris appeared. She said that Ethelbertha was putting on her bonnet, and that Muriel, after waiting, had given "The Mad Hatter's Tea Party" without us.

"Club, to – morrow, at four," whispered Harris to me, as he rose, and I passed it on to George as we went upstairs.

Chapter II

A delicate business – What Ethelbertha might have said – What she did say – What Mrs. Harris said – What we told George – We will start on Wednesday – George suggests the possibility of improving our minds – Harris and I are doubtful – Which man on a tandem does the most work? – The opinion of the man in front – Views of the man behind – How Harris lost his wife – The luggage question – The wisdom of my late Uncle Podger – Beginning of story about a man who had a bag

I opened the ball with Ethelbertha that same evening. I commenced by being purposely a little irritable. My idea was that Ethelbertha would remark upon this. I should admit it, and account for it by over brain pressure. This would naturally lead to talk about my health in general, and the evident necessity there was for my taking prompt and vigorous measures. I thought that with a little tact I might even manage so that the suggestion should come from Ethelbertha herself. I imagined her saying: "No, dear, it is change you want; complete change. Now be persuaded by me, and go away for a month. No, do not ask me to come with you. I know you would rather that I did, but I will not. It is the society of other men you need. Try and persuade George and Harris to go with you. Believe me, a highly strung brain such as yours demands occasional relaxation from the strain of domestic surroundings. Forget for a little while that children want music lessons, and boots, and bicycles, with tincture of rhubarb three times a day; forget there are such things in life as cooks, and house decorators, and next – door dogs, and butchers' bills. Go away to some green corner of the earth, where all is new and strange to you, where your over – wrought mind will gather peace and fresh ideas. Go away for a space and give me time to miss you, and to reflect upon your goodness and virtue, which, continually present with me, I may, human – like, be apt to forget, as one, through use, grows indifferent to the blessing of the sun and the beauty of the moon. Go away, and come back refreshed in mind and body, a brighter, better man – if that be possible – than when you went away."

But even when we obtain our desires they never come to us garbed as we would wish. To begin with, Ethelbertha did not seem to remark that I was irritable; I had to draw her attention to it. I said:

"You must forgive me, I'm not feeling quite myself to – night."

She said: "Oh! I have not noticed anything different; what's the matter with you?"

"I can't tell you what it is," I said; "I've felt it coming on for weeks."

"It's that whisky," said Ethelbertha. "You never touch it except when we go to the Harris's. You know you can't stand it; you have not a strong head."

"It isn't the whisky," I replied; "it's deeper than that. I fancy it's more mental than bodily."

"You've been reading those criticisms again," said Ethelbertha, more sympathetically; "why don't you take my advice and put them on the fire?"

"And it isn't the criticisms," I answered; "they've been quite flattering of late – one or two of them."

"Well, what is it?" said Ethelbertha; "there must be something to account for it."

"No, there isn't," I replied; "that's the remarkable thing about it; I can only describe it as a strange feeling of unrest that seems to have taken possession of me."

Ethelbertha glanced across at me with a somewhat curious expression, I thought; but as she said nothing, I continued the argument myself.

"This aching monotony of life, these days of peaceful, uneventful felicity, they appal one."

"I should not grumble at them," said Ethelbertha; "we might get some of the other sort, and like them still less."

"I'm not so sure of that," I replied. "In a life of continuous joy, I can imagine even pain coming as a welcome variation. I wonder sometimes whether the saints in heaven do not occasionally feel the continual serenity a burden. To myself a life of endless bliss, uninterrupted by a single contrasting note, would, I feel, grow maddening. I suppose," I continued, "I am a strange sort of man; I can hardly understand myself at times. There are moments," I added, "when I hate myself."

Often a little speech like this, hinting at hidden depths of indescribable emotion has touched Ethelbertha, but to – night she appeared strangely unsympathetic. With regard to heaven and its possible effect upon me, she suggested my not worrying myself about that, remarking it was always foolish to go half – way to meet trouble that might never come; while as to my being a strange sort of fellow, that, she supposed, I could not help, and if other people were willing to put up with me, there was an end of the matter. The monotony of life, she added, was a common experience; there she could sympathise with me.

"You don't know I long," said Ethelbertha, "to get away occasionally, even from you; but I know it can never be, so I do not brood upon it."

I had never heard Ethelbertha speak like this before; it astonished and grieved me beyond measure.

"That's not a very kind remark to make," I said, "not a wifely remark."

"I know it isn't," she replied; "that is why I have never said it before. You men never can understand," continued Ethelbertha, "that, however fond a woman may be of a man, there are times when he palls upon her. You don't know how I long to be able sometimes to put on my bonnet and go out, with nobody to ask me where I am going, why I am going, how long I am going to be, and when I shall be back. You don't know how I sometimes long to order a dinner that I should like and that the children would like, but at the sight of which you would put on your hat and be off to the Club. You don't know how much I feel inclined sometimes to invite some woman here that I like, and that I know you don't; to go and see the people that I want to see, to go to bed when *I* am tired, and to get up when *I* feel I want to get up. Two people living together are bound both to be continually sacrificing their own desires to the other one. It is sometimes a good thing to slacken the strain a bit."

On thinking over Ethelbertha's words afterwards, have come to see their wisdom; but at the time I admit I was hurt and indignant.

"If your desire," I said, "is to get rid of me—"

"Now, don't be an old goose," said Ethelbertha; "I only want to get rid of you for a little while, just long enough to forget there are one or two corners about you that are not perfect, just long enough to let me remember what a dear fellow you are in other respects, and to look forward to your return, as I used to look forward to your coming in the old days when I did not see you so often as to become, perhaps, a little indifferent to you, as one grows indifferent to the glory of the sun, just because he is there every day."

I did not like the tone that Ethelbertha took. There seemed to be a frivolity about her, unsuited to the theme into which we had drifted. That a woman should contemplate cheerfully an absence of three or four weeks from her husband appeared to me to be not altogether nice, not what I call womanly; it was not like Ethelbertha at all. I was worried, I felt I didn't want to go this trip at all. If it had not been for George and Harris, I would have abandoned it. As it was, I could not see how to change my mind with dignity.

"Very well, Ethelbertha," I replied, "it shall be as you wish. If you desire a holiday from my presence, you shall enjoy it; but if it be not impertinent curiosity on the part of a husband, I should like to know what you propose doing in my absence?"

"We will take that house at Folkestone," answered Ethelbertha, "and I'll go down there with Kate. And if you want to do Clara Harris a good turn," added Ethelbertha, "you'll persuade Harris to go with you, and then Clara can join us. We three used to have some very jolly times together before

you men ever came along, and it would be just delightful to renew them. Do you think," continued Ethelbertha, "that you could persuade Mr. Harris to go with you?"

I said I would try.

"There's a dear boy," said Ethelbertha; "try hard. You might get George to join you."

I replied there was not much advantage in George's coming, seeing he was a bachelor, and that therefore nobody would be much benefited by his absence. But a woman never understands satire. Ethelbertha merely remarked it would look unkind leaving him behind. I promised to put it to him.

I met Harris at the Club in the afternoon, and asked him how he had got on.

He said, "Oh, that's all right; there's no difficulty about getting away."

But there was that about his tone that suggested incomplete satisfaction, so I pressed him for further details.

"She was as sweet as milk about it," he continued; "said it was an excellent idea of George's, and that she thought it would do me good."

"That seems all right," I said; "what's wrong about that?"

"There's nothing wrong about that," he answered, "but that wasn't all. She went on to talk of other things."

"I understand," I said.

"There's that bathroom fad of hers," he continued.

"I've heard of it," I said; "she has started Ethelbertha on the same idea."

"Well, I've had to agree to that being put in hand at once; I couldn't argue any more when she was so nice about the other thing. That will cost me a hundred pounds, at the very least."

"As much as that?" I asked.

"Every penny of it," said Harris; "the estimate alone is sixty."

I was sorry to hear him say this.

"Then there's the kitchen stove," continued Harris; "everything that has gone wrong in the house for the last two years has been the fault of that kitchen stove."

"I know," I said. "We have been in seven houses since we were married, and every kitchen stove has been worse than the last. Our present one is not only incompetent; it is spiteful. It knows when we are giving a party, and goes out of its way to do its worst."

"*We* are going to have a new one," said Harris, but he did not say it proudly. "Clara thought it would be such a saving of expense, having the two things done at the same time. I believe," said Harris, "if a woman wanted a diamond tiara, she would explain that it was to save the expense of a bonnet."

"How much do you reckon the stove is going to cost you?" I asked. I felt interested in the subject.

"I don't know," answered Harris; "another twenty, I suppose. Then we talked about the piano. Could you ever notice," said Harris, "any difference between one piano and another?"

"Some of them seem to be a bit louder than others," I answered; "but one gets used to that."

"Ours is all wrong about the treble," said Harris. "By the way, what *is* the treble?"

"It's the shrill end of the thing," I explained; "the part that sounds as if you'd trod on its tail. The brilliant selections always end up with a flourish on it."

"They want more of it," said Harris; "our old one hasn't got enough of it. I'll have to put it in the nursery, and get a new one for the drawing – room."

"Anything else?" I asked.

"No," said Harris; "she didn't seem able to think of anything else."

"You'll find when you get home," I said, "she has thought of one other thing."

"What's that?" said Harris.

"A house at Folkestone for the season."

"What should she want a house at Folkestone for?" said Harris.

"To live in," I suggested, "during the summer months."

"She's going to her people in Wales," said Harris, "for the holidays, with the children; we've had an invitation."

"Possibly," I said, "she'll go to Wales before she goes to Folkestone, or maybe she'll take Wales on her way home; but she'll want a house at Folkestone for the season, notwithstanding. I may be mistaken – I hope for your sake that I am – but I feel a presentiment that I'm not."

"This trip," said Harris, "is going to be expensive."

"It was an idiotic suggestion," I said, "from the beginning."

"It was foolish of us to listen to him," said Harris; "he'll get us into real trouble one of these days."

"He always was a muddler," I agreed.

"So headstrong," added Harris.

We heard his voice at that moment in the hall, asking for letters.

"Better not say anything to him," I suggested; "it's too late to go back now."

"There would be no advantage in doing so," replied Harris. "I should have to get that bathroom and piano in any case now."

He came in looking very cheerful.

"Well," he said, "is it all right? Have you managed it?"

There was that about his tone I did not altogether like; I noticed Harris resented it also.

"Managed what?" I said.

"Why, to get off," said George.

I felt the time was come to explain things to George.

"In married life," I said, "the man proposes, the woman submits. It is her duty; all religion teaches it."

George folded his hands and fixed his eyes on the ceiling.

"We may chaff and joke a little about these things," I continued; "but when it comes to practice, that is what always happens. We have mentioned to our wives that we are going. Naturally, they are grieved; they would prefer to come with us; failing that, they would have us remain with them. But we have explained to them our wishes on the subject, and – there's an end of the matter."

George said, "Forgive me; I did not understand. I am only a bachelor. People tell me this, that, and the other, and I listen."

I said, "That is where you do wrong. When you want information come to Harris or myself; we will tell you the truth about these questions."

George thanked us, and we proceeded with the business in hand.

"When shall we start?" said George.

"So far as I am concerned," replied Harris, "the sooner the better."

His idea, I fancy, was to get away before Mrs. H. thought of other things. We fixed the following Wednesday.

"What about route?" said Harris.

"I have an idea," said George. "I take it you fellows are naturally anxious to improve your minds?"

I said, "We don't want to become monstrosities. To a reasonable degree, yes, if it can be done without much expense and with little personal trouble."

"It can," said George. "We know Holland and the Rhine. Very well, my suggestion is that we take the boat to Hamburg, see Berlin and Dresden, and work our way to the Schwarzwald, through Nuremberg and Stuttgart."

"There are some pretty bits in Mesopotamia, so I've been told," murmured Harris.

George said Mesopotamia was too much out of our way, but that the Berlin – Dresden route was quite practicable. For good or evil, he persuaded us into it.

"The machines, I suppose," said George, "as before. Harris and I on the tandem, J.—"

"I think not," interrupted Harris, firmly. "You and J. on the tandem, I on the single."

"All the same to me," agreed George. "J. and I on the tandem, Harris—"

"I do not mind taking my turn," I interrupted, "but I am not going to carry George *all* the way; the burden should be divided."

"Very well," agreed Harris, "we'll divide it. But it must be on the distinct understanding that he works."

"That he what?" said George.

"That he works," repeated Harris, firmly; "at all events, uphill."

"Great Scott!" said George; "don't you want *any* exercise?"

There is always unpleasantness about this tandem. It is the theory of the man in front that the man behind does nothing; it is equally the theory of the man behind that he alone is the motive power, the man in front merely doing the puffing. The mystery will never be solved. It is annoying when Prudence is whispering to you on the one side not to overdo your strength and bring on heart disease; while Justice into the other ear is remarking, "Why should you do it all? This isn't a cab. He's not your passenger: " to hear him grunt out:

"What's the matter – lost your pedals?"

Harris, in his early married days, made much trouble for himself on one occasion, owing to this impossibility of knowing what the person behind is doing. He was riding with his wife through Holland. The roads were stony, and the machine jumped a good deal.

"Sit tight," said Harris, without turning his head.

What Mrs. Harris thought he said was, "Jump off." Why she should have thought he said "Jump off," when he said "Sit tight," neither of them can explain.

Mrs. Harris puts it in this way, "If you had said, 'Sit tight,' why should I have jumped off?"

Harris puts it, "If I had wanted you to jump off, why should I have said 'Sit tight!'?"

The bitterness is past, but they argue about the matter to this day.

Be the explanation what it may, however, nothing alters the fact that Mrs. Harris did jump off, while Harris pedalled away hard, under the impression she was still behind him. It appears that at first she thought he was riding up the hill merely to show off. They were both young in those days, and he used to do that sort of thing. She expected him to spring to earth on reaching the summit, and lean in a careless and graceful attitude against the machine, waiting for her. When, on the contrary, she saw him pass the summit and proceed rapidly down a long and steep incline, she was seized, first with surprise, secondly with indignation, and lastly with alarm. She ran to the top of the hill and shouted, but he never turned his head. She watched him disappear into a wood a mile and a half distant, and then sat down and cried. They had had a slight difference that morning, and she wondered if he had taken it seriously and intended desertion. She had no money; she knew no Dutch. People passed, and seemed sorry for her; she tried to make them understand what had happened. They gathered that she had lost something, but could not grasp what. They took her to the nearest village, and found a policeman for her. He concluded from her pantomime that some man had stolen her bicycle. They put the telegraph into operation, and discovered in a village four miles off an unfortunate boy riding a lady's machine of an obsolete pattern. They brought him to her in a cart, but as she did not appear to want either him or his bicycle they let him go again, and resigned themselves to bewilderment.

Meanwhile, Harris continued his ride with much enjoyment. It seemed to him that he had suddenly become a stronger, and in every way a more capable cyclist. Said he to what he thought was Mrs. Harris:

"I haven't felt this machine so light for months. It's this air, I think; it's doing me good."

Then he told her not to be afraid, and he would show her how fast he *could* go. He bent down over the handles, and put his heart into his work. The bicycle bounded over the road like a thing of life; farmhouses and churches, dogs and chickens came to him and passed. Old folks stood and gazed at him, the children cheered him.

In this way he sped merrily onward for about five miles. Then, as he explains it, the feeling began to grow upon him that something was wrong. He was not surprised at the silence; the wind was blowing strongly, and the machine was rattling a good deal. It was a sense of void that came upon him. He stretched out his hand behind him, and felt; there was nothing there but space. He jumped, or rather fell off, and looked back up the road; it stretched white and straight through the dark wood, and not a living soul could be seen upon it. He remounted, and rode back up the hill. In ten minutes he came to where the road broke into four; there he dismounted and tried to remember which fork he had come down.

While he was deliberating a man passed, sitting sideways on a horse. Harris stopped him, and explained to him that he had lost his wife. The man appeared to be neither surprised nor sorry for him. While they were talking another farmer came along, to whom the first man explained the matter, not as an accident, but as a good story. What appeared to surprise the second man most was that Harris should be making a fuss about the thing. He could get no sense out of either of them, and cursing them he mounted his machine again, and took the middle road on chance. Half – way up, he came upon a party of two young women with one young man between them. They appeared to be making the most of him. He asked them if they had seen his wife. They asked him what she was like. He did not know enough Dutch to describe her properly; all he could tell them was she was a very beautiful woman, of medium size. Evidently this did not satisfy them, the description was too general; any man could say that, and by this means perhaps get possession of a wife that did not belong to him. They asked him how she was dressed; for the life of him he could not recollect.

I doubt if any man could tell how any woman was dressed ten minutes after he had left her. He recollected a blue skirt, and then there was something that carried the dress on, as it were, up to the neck. Possibly, this may have been a blouse; he retained a dim vision of a belt; but what sort of a blouse? Was it green, or yellow, or blue? Had it a collar, or was it fastened with a bow? Were there feathers in her hat, or flowers? Or was it a hat at all? He dared not say, for fear of making a mistake and being sent miles after the wrong party. The two young women giggled, which in his then state of mind irritated Harris. The young man, who appeared anxious to get rid of him, suggested the police station at the next town. Harris made his way there. The police gave him a piece of paper, and told him to write down a full description of his wife, together with details of when and where he had lost her. He did not know where he had lost her; all he could tell them was the name of the village where he had lunched. He knew he had her with him then, and that they had started from there together.

The police looked suspicious; they were doubtful about three matters: Firstly, was she really his wife? Secondly, had he really lost her? Thirdly, why had he lost her? With the aid of a hotel – keeper, however, who spoke a little English, he overcame their scruples. They promised to act, and in the evening they brought her to him in a covered wagon, together with a bill for expenses. The meeting was not a tender one. Mrs. Harris is not a good actress, and always has great difficulty in disguising her feelings. On this occasion, she frankly admits, she made no attempt to disguise them.

The wheel business settled, there arose the ever – lasting luggage question.

"The usual list, I suppose," said George, preparing to write.

That was wisdom I had taught them; I had learned it myself years ago from my Uncle Podger.

"Always before beginning to pack," my Uncle would say, "make a list."

He was a methodical man.

"Take a piece of paper" – he always began at the beginning—"put down on it everything you can possibly require, then go over it and see that it contains nothing you can possibly do without. Imagine yourself in bed; what have you got on? Very well, put it down – together with a change. You get up; what do you do? Wash yourself. What do you wash yourself with? Soap; put down soap. Go on till you have finished. Then take your clothes. Begin at your feet; what do you wear on your feet? Boots, shoes, socks; put them down. Work up till you get to your head. What else do you want

besides clothes? A little brandy; put it down. A corkscrew, put it down. Put down everything, then you don't forget anything."

That is the plan he always pursued himself. The list made, he would go over it carefully, as he always advised, to see that he had forgotten nothing. Then he would go over it again, and strike out everything it was possible to dispense with.

Then he would lose the list.

Said George: "Just sufficient for a day or two we will take with us on our bikes. The bulk of our luggage we must send on from town to town."

"We must be careful," I said; "I knew a man once—"

Harris looked at his watch.

"We'll hear about him on the boat," said Harris; "I have got to meet Clara at Waterloo Station in half an hour."

"It won't take half an hour," I said; "it's a true story, and—"

"Don't waste it," said George: "I am told there are rainy evenings in the Black Forest; we may he glad of it. What we have to do now is to finish this list."

Now I come to think of it, I never did get off that story; something always interrupted it. And it really was true.

Chapter III

Harris's one fault – Harris and the Angel – A patent bicycle lamp – The ideal saddle – The "Overhauler" – His eagle eye – His method – His cheery confidence – His simple and inexpensive tastes – His appearance – How to get rid of him – George as prophet – The gentle art of making oneself disagreeable in a foreign tongue – George as a student of human nature – He proposes an experiment – His Prudence – Harris's support secured, upon conditions

On Monday afternoon Harris came round; he had a cycling paper in his hand.

I said: "If you take my advice, you will leave it alone."

Harris said: "Leave what alone?"

I said: "That brand – new, patent, revolution in cycling, record – breaking, Tomfoolishness, whatever it may be, the advertisement of which you have there in your hand."

He said: "Well, I don't know; there will be some steep hills for us to negotiate; I guess we shall want a good brake."

I said: "We shall want a brake, I agree; what we shall not want is a mechanical surprise that we don't understand, and that never acts when it is wanted."

"This thing," he said, "acts automatically."

"You needn't tell me," I said. "I know exactly what it will do, by instinct. Going uphill it will jamb the wheel so effectively that we shall have to carry the machine bodily. The air at the top of the hill will do it good, and it will suddenly come right again. Going downhill it will start reflecting what a nuisance it has been. This will lead to remorse, and finally to despair. It will say to itself: 'I'm not fit to be a brake. I don't help these fellows; I only hinder them. I'm a curse, that's what I am;' and, without a word of warning, it will 'chuck' the whole business. That is what that brake will do. Leave it alone. You are a good fellow," I continued, "but you have one fault."

"What?" he asked, indignantly.

"You have too much faith," I answered. "If you read an advertisement, you go away and believe it. Every experiment that every fool has thought of in connection with cycling you have tried. Your guardian angel appears to be a capable and conscientious spirit, and hitherto she has seen you through; take my advice and don't try her too far. She must have had a busy time since you started cycling. Don't go on till you make her mad."

He said: "If every man talked like that there would be no advancement made in any department of life. If nobody ever tried a new thing the world would come to a standstill. It is by—"

"I know all that can be said on that side of the argument," I interrupted. "I agree in trying new experiments up to thirty – five; *after* thirty – five I consider a man is entitled to think of himself. You and I have done our duty in this direction, you especially. You have been blown up by a patent gas lamp—"

He said: "I really think, you know, that was my fault; I think I must have screwed it up too tight."

I said: "I am quite willing to believe that if there was a wrong way of handling the thing that is the way you handle it. You should take that tendency of yours into consideration; it bears upon the argument. Myself, I did not notice what you did; I only know we were riding peacefully and pleasantly along the Whitby Road, discussing the Thirty Years' War, when your lamp went off like a pistol – shot. The start sent me into the ditch; and your wife's face, when I told her there was nothing the matter and that she was not to worry, because the two men would carry you upstairs, and the doctor would be round in a minute bringing the nurse with him, still lingers in my memory."

He said: "I wish you had thought to pick up the lamp. I should like to have found out what was the cause of its going off like that."

I said: "There was not time to pick up the lamp. I calculate it would have taken two hours to have collected it. As to its 'going off,' the mere fact of its being advertised as the safest lamp ever invented would of itself, to anyone but you, have suggested accident. Then there was that electric lamp," I continued.

"Well, that really did give a fine light," he replied; "you said so yourself."

I said: "It gave a brilliant light in the King's Road, Brighton, and frightened a horse. The moment we got into the dark beyond Kemp Town it went out, and you were summoned for riding without a light. You may remember that on sunny afternoons you used to ride about with that lamp shining for all it was worth. When lighting – up time came it was naturally tired, and wanted a rest."

"It was a bit irritating, that lamp," he murmured; "I remember it."

I said: "It irritated me; it must have been worse for you. Then there are saddles," I went on – I wished to get this lesson home to him. "Can you think of any saddle ever advertised that you have *not* tried?"

He said: "It has been an idea of mine that the right saddle is to be found."

I said: "You give up that idea; this is an imperfect world of joy and sorrow mingled. There may be a better land where bicycle saddles are made out of rainbow, stuffed with cloud; in this world the simplest thing is to get used to something hard. There was that saddle you bought in Birmingham; it was divided in the middle, and looked like a pair of kidneys."

He said: "You mean that one constructed on anatomical principles."

"Very likely," I replied. "The box you bought it in had a picture on the cover, representing a sitting skeleton – or rather that part of a skeleton which does sit."

He said: "It was quite correct; it showed you the true position of the—"

I said: "We will not go into details; the picture always seemed to me indelicate."

He said: "Medically speaking, it was right."

"Possibly," I said, "for a man who rode in nothing but his bones. I only know that I tried it myself, and that to a man who wore flesh it was agony. Every time you went over a stone or a rut it nipped you; it was like riding on an irritable lobster. You rode that for a month."

"I thought it only right to give it a fair trial," he answered.

I said: "You gave your family a fair trial also; if you will allow me the use of slang. Your wife told me that never in the whole course of your married life had she known you so bad tempered, so un – Christian like, as you were that month. Then you remember that other saddle, the one with the spring under it."

He said: "You mean 'the Spiral.'"

I said: "I mean the one that jerked you up and down like a Jack – in – the – box; sometimes you came down again in the right place, and sometimes you didn't. I am not referring to these matters merely to recall painful memories, but I want to impress you with the folly of trying experiments at your time of life."

He said. "I wish you wouldn't harp so much on my age. A man at thirty– four—"

"A man at what?"

He said: "If you don't want the thing, don't have it. If your machine runs away with you down a mountain, and you and George get flung through a church roof, don't blame me."

"I cannot promise for George," I said; "a little thing will sometimes irritate him, as you know. If such an accident as you suggest happen, he may be cross, but I will undertake to explain to him that it was not your fault."

"Is the thing all right?" he asked.

"The tandem," I replied, "is well."

He said: "Have you overhauled it?"

I said: "I have not, nor is anyone else going to overhaul it. The thing is now in working order, and it is going to remain in working order till we start."

I have had experience of this "overhauling." There was a man at Folkestone; I used to meet him on the Lees. He proposed one evening we should go for a long bicycle ride together on the following day, and I agreed. I got up early, for me; I made an effort, and was pleased with myself. He came half an hour late: I was waiting for him in the garden. It was a lovely day. He said —

"That's a good – looking machine of yours. How does it run?"

"Oh, like most of them!" I answered; "easily enough in the morning; goes a little stiffly after lunch."

He caught hold of it by the front wheel and the fork and shook it violently.

I said: "Don't do that; you'll hurt it."

I did not see why he should shake it; it had not done anything to him. Besides, if it wanted shaking, I was the proper person to shake it. I felt much as I should had he started whacking my dog.

He said: "This front wheel wobbles."

I said: "It doesn't if you don't wobble it." It didn't wobble, as a matter of fact – nothing worth calling a wobble.

He said: "This is dangerous; have you got a screw – hammer?"

I ought to have been firm, but I thought that perhaps he really did know something about the business. I went to the tool shed to see what I could find. When I came back he was sitting on the ground with the front wheel between his legs. He was playing with it, twiddling it round between his fingers; the remnant of the machine was lying on the gravel path beside him.

He said: "Something has happened to this front wheel of yours."

"It looks like it, doesn't it?" I answered. But he was the sort of man that never understands satire.

He said: "It looks to me as if the bearings were all wrong."

I said: "Don't you trouble about it any more; you will make yourself tired. Let us put it back and get off."

He said: "We may as well see what is the matter with it, now it is out." He talked as though it had dropped out by accident.

Before I could stop him he had unscrewed something somewhere, and out rolled all over the path some dozen or so little balls.

"Catch 'em!" he shouted; "catch 'em! We mustn't lose any of them." He was quite excited about them.

We grovelled round for half an hour, and found sixteen. He said he hoped we had got them all, because, if not, it would make a serious difference to the machine. He said there was nothing you should be more careful about in taking a bicycle to pieces than seeing you did not lose any of the balls. He explained that you ought to count them as you took them out, and see that exactly the same number went back in each place. I promised, if ever I took a bicycle to pieces I would remember his advice.

I put the balls for safety in my hat, and I put my hat upon the doorstep. It was not a sensible thing to do, I admit. As a matter of fact, it was a silly thing to do. I am not as a rule addle – headed; his influence must have affected me.

He then said that while he was about it he would see to the chain for me, and at once began taking off the gear – case. I did try to persuade him from that. I told him what an experienced friend of mine once said to me solemnly —

"If anything goes wrong with your gear – case, sell the machine and buy a new one; it comes cheaper."

He said: "People talk like that who understand nothing about machines. Nothing is easier than taking off a gear – case."

I had to confess he was right. In less than five minutes he had the gear – case in two pieces, lying on the path, and was grovelling for screws. He said it was always a mystery to him the way screws disappeared.

We were still looking for the screws when Ethelbertha came out. She seemed surprised to find us there; she said she thought we had started hours ago.

He said: "We shan't be long now. I'm just helping your husband to overhaul this machine of his. It's a good machine; but they all want going over occasionally."

Ethelbertha said: "If you want to wash yourselves when you have done you might go into the back kitchen, if you don't mind; the girls have just finished the bedrooms."

She told me that if she met Kate they would probably go for a sail; but that in any case she would be back to lunch. I would have given a sovereign to be going with her. I was getting heartily sick of standing about watching this fool breaking up my bicycle.

Common sense continued to whisper to me: "Stop him, before he does any more mischief. You have a right to protect your own property from the ravages of a lunatic. Take him by the scruff of the neck, and kick him out of the gate!"

But I am weak when it comes to hurting other people's feelings, and I let him muddle on.

He gave up looking for the rest of the screws. He said screws had a knack of turning up when you least expected them; and that now he would see to the chain. He tightened it till it would not move; next he loosened it until it was twice as loose as it was before. Then he said we had better think about getting the front wheel back into its place again.

I held the fork open, and he worried with the wheel. At the end of ten minutes I suggested he should hold the forks, and that I should handle the wheel; and we changed places. At the end of his first minute he dropped the machine, and took a short walk round the croquet lawn, with his hands pressed together between his thighs. He explained as he walked that the thing to be careful about was to avoid getting your fingers pinched between the forks and the spokes of the wheel. I replied I was convinced, from my own experience, that there was much truth in what he said. He wrapped himself up in a couple of dusters, and we commenced again. At length we did get the thing into position; and the moment it was in position he burst out laughing.

I said: "What's the joke?"

He said: "Well, I am an ass!"

It was the first thing he had said that made me respect him. I asked him what had led him to the discovery.

He said: "We've forgotten the balls!"

I looked for my hat; it was lying topsy – turvy in the middle of the path, and Ethelbertha's favourite hound was swallowing the balls as fast as he could pick them up.

"He will kill himself," said Ebbson – I have never met him since that day, thank the Lord; but I think his name was Ebbson—"they are solid steel."

I said: "I am not troubling about the dog. He has had a bootlace and a packet of needles already this week. Nature's the best guide; puppies seem to require this kind of stimulant. What I am thinking about is my bicycle."

He was of a cheerful disposition. He said: "Well, we must put back all we can find, and trust to Providence."

We found eleven. We fixed six on one side and five on the other, and half an hour later the wheel was in its place again. It need hardly be added that it really did wobble now; a child might have noticed it. Ebbson said it would do for the present. He appeared to be getting a bit tired himself. If I had let him, he would, I believe, at this point have gone home. I was determined now, however, that he should stop and finish; I had abandoned all thoughts of a ride. My pride in the machine he had killed. My only interest lay now in seeing him scratch and bump and pinch himself. I revived his drooping spirits with a glass of beer and some judicious praise. I said:

"Watching you do this is of real use to me. It is not only your skill and dexterity that fascinates me, it is your cheery confidence in yourself, your inexplicable hopefulness, that does me good."

Thus encouraged, he set to work to refix the gear – case. He stood the bicycle against the house, and worked from the off side. Then he stood it against a tree, and worked from the near side. Then I held it for him, while he lay on the ground with his head between the wheels, and worked at it from below, and dropped oil upon himself. Then he took it away from me, and doubled himself across it like a pack – saddle, till he lost his balance and slid over on to his head. Three times he said:

"Thank Heaven, that's right at last!"

And twice he said:

"No, I'm damned if it is after all!"

What he said the third time I try to forget.

Then he lost his temper and tried bullying the thing. The bicycle, I was glad to see, showed spirit; and the subsequent proceedings degenerated into little else than a rough – and – tumble fight between him and the machine. One moment the bicycle would be on the gravel path, and he on top of it; the next, the position would be reversed – he on the gravel path, the bicycle on him. Now he would be standing flushed with victory, the bicycle firmly fixed between his legs. But his triumph would be short – lived. By a sudden, quick movement it would free itself, and, turning upon him, hit him sharply over the head with one of its handles.

At a quarter to one, dirty and dishevelled, cut and breeding, he said: "I think that will do;" and rose and wiped his brow.

The bicycle looked as if it also had had enough of it. Which had received most punishment it would have been difficult to say. I took him into the back kitchen, where, so far as was possible without soda and proper tools, he cleaned himself, and sent him home.

The bicycle I put into a cab and took round to the nearest repairing shop. The foreman of the works came up and looked at it.

"What do you want me to do with that?" said he.

"I want you," I said, "so far as is possible, to restore it."

"It's a bit far gone," said he; "but I'll do my best."

He did his best, which came to two pounds ten. But it was never the same machine again; and at the end of the season I left it in an agent's hands to sell. I wished to deceive nobody; I instructed the man to advertise it as a last year's machine. The agent advised me not to mention any date. He said:

"In this business it isn't a question of what is true and what isn't; it's a question of what you can get people to believe. Now, between you and me, it don't look like a last year's machine; so far as looks are concerned, it might be a ten – year old. We'll say nothing about date; we'll just get what we can."

I left the matter to him, and he got me five pounds, which he said was more than he had expected.

There are two ways you can get exercise out of a bicycle: you can "overhaul" it, or you can ride it. On the whole, I am not sure that a man who takes his pleasure overhauling does not have the best of the bargain. He is independent of the weather and the wind; the state of the roads troubles him not. Give him a screw – hammer, a bundle of rags, an oil – can, and something to sit down upon, and he is happy for the day. He has to put up with certain disadvantages, of course; there is no joy without alloy. He himself always looks like a tinker, and his machine always suggests the idea that, having stolen it, he has tried to disguise it; but as he rarely gets beyond the first milestone with it, this, perhaps, does not much matter. The mistake some people make is in thinking they can get both forms of sport out of the same machine. This is impossible; no machine will stand the double strain. You must make up your mind whether you are going to be an "overhauler" or a rider. Personally, I prefer to ride, therefore I take care to have near me nothing that can tempt me to overhaul. When anything happens to my machine I wheel it to the nearest repairing shop. If I am too far from the town or village to walk, I sit by the roadside and wait till a cart comes along. My chief danger, I always

find, is from the wandering overhauler. The sight of a broken – down machine is to the overhauler as a wayside corpse to a crow; he swoops down upon it with a friendly yell of triumph. At first I used to try politeness. I would say:

"It is nothing; don't you trouble. You ride on, and enjoy yourself, I beg it of you as a favour; please go away."

Experience has taught me, however, that courtesy is of no use in such an extremity. Now I say:

"You go away and leave the thing alone, or I will knock your silly head off."

And if you look determined, and have a good stout cudgel in your hand, you can generally drive him off.

George came in later in the day. He said:

"Well, do you think everything will be ready?"

I said: "Everything will be ready by Wednesday, except, perhaps, you and Harris."

He said: "Is the tandem all right?"

"The tandem," I said, "is well."

He said: "You don't think it wants overhauling?"

I replied: "Age and experience have taught me that there are few matters concerning which a man does well to be positive. Consequently, there remain to me now but a limited number of questions upon which I feel any degree of certainty. Among such still – unshaken beliefs, however, is the conviction that that tandem does not want overhauling. I also feel a presentiment that, provided my life is spared, no human being between now and Wednesday morning is going to overhaul it."

George said: "I should not show temper over the matter, if I were you. There will come a day, perhaps not far distant, when that bicycle, with a couple of mountains between it and the nearest repairing shop, will, in spite of your chronic desire for rest, *have* to be overhauled. Then you will clamour for people to tell you where you put the oil – can, and what you have done with the screw – hammer. Then, while you exert yourself holding the thing steady against a tree, you will suggest that somebody else should clean the chain and pump the back wheel."

I felt there was justice in George's rebuke – also a certain amount of prophetic wisdom. I said:

"Forgive me if I seemed unresponsive. The truth is, Harris was round here this morning—"

George said: "Say no more; I understand. Besides, what I came to talk to you about was another matter. Look at that."

He handed me a small book bound in red cloth. It was a guide to English conversation for the use of German travellers. It commenced "On a Steam – boat," and terminated "At the Doctor's"; its longest chapter being devoted to conversation in a railway carriage, among, apparently, a compartment load of quarrelsome and ill – mannered lunatics: "Can you not get further away from me, sir?" – "It is impossible, madam; my neighbour, here, is very stout" – "Shall we not endeavour to arrange our legs?" – "Please have the goodness to keep your elbows down" – "Pray do not inconvenience yourself, madam, if my shoulder is of any accommodation to you," whether intended to be said sarcastically or not, there was nothing to indicate—"I really must request you to move a little, madam, I can hardly breathe," the author's idea being, presumably, that by this time the whole party was mixed up together on the floor. The chapter concluded with the phrase, "Here we are at our destination, God be thanked! (*Gott sei dank*!)" a pious exclamation, which under the circumstances must have taken the form of a chorus.

At the end of the book was an appendix, giving the German traveller hints concerning the preservation of his health and comfort during his sojourn in English towns, chief among such hints being advice to him to always travel with a supply of disinfectant powder, to always lock his bedroom door at night, and to always carefully count his small change.

"It is not a brilliant publication," I remarked, handing the book back to George; "it is not a book that personally I would recommend to any German about to visit England; I think it would get him disliked. But I have read books published in London for the use of English travellers abroad every

whit as foolish. Some educated idiot, misunderstanding seven languages, would appear to go about writing these books for the misinformation and false guidance of modern Europe."

"You cannot deny," said George, "that these books are in large request. They are bought by the thousand, I know. In every town in Europe there must be people going about talking this sort of thing."

"Maybe," I replied; "but fortunately nobody understands them. I have noticed, myself, men standing on railway platforms and at street corners reading aloud from such books. Nobody knows what language they are speaking; nobody has the slightest knowledge of what they are saying. This is, perhaps, as well; were they understood they would probably be assaulted."

George said: "Maybe you are right; my idea is to see what would happen if they were understood. My proposal is to get to London early on Wednesday morning, and spend an hour or two going about and shopping with the aid of this book. There are one or two little things I want – a hat and a pair of bedroom slippers, among other articles. Our boat does not leave Tilbury till twelve, and that just gives us time. I want to try this sort of talk where I can properly judge of its effect. I want to see how the foreigner feels when he is talked to in this way."

It struck me as a sporting idea. In my enthusiasm I offered to accompany him, and wait outside the shop. I said I thought that Harris would like to be in it, too – or rather outside.

George said that was not quite his scheme. His proposal was that Harris and I should accompany him into the shop. With Harris, who looks formidable, to support him, and myself at the door to call the police if necessary, he said he was willing to adventure the thing.

We walked round to Harris's, and put the proposal before him. He examined the book, especially the chapters dealing with the purchase of shoes and hats. He said:

"If George talks to any bootmaker or any hatter the things that are put down here, it is not support he will want; it is carrying to the hospital that he will need."

That made George angry.

"You talk," said George, "as though I were a foolhardy boy without any sense. I shall select from the more polite and less irritating speeches; the grosser insults I shall avoid."

This being clearly understood, Harris gave in his adhesion; and our start was fixed for early Wednesday morning.

Chapter IV

Why Harris considers alarm clocks unnecessary in a family – Social instinct of the young – A child's thoughts about the morning – The sleepless watchman – The mystery of him – His over anxiety – Night thoughts – The sort of work one does before breakfast – The good sheep and the bad – Disadvantages of being virtuous – Harris's new stove begins badly – The daily out – going of my Uncle Podger – The elderly city man considered as a racer – We arrive in London – We talk the language of the traveller

George came down on Tuesday evening, and slept at Harris's place. We thought this a better arrangement than his own suggestion, which was that we should call for him on our way and "pick him up." Picking George up in the morning means picking him out of bed to begin with, and shaking him awake – in itself an exhausting effort with which to commence the day; helping him find his things and finish his packing; and then waiting for him while he eats his breakfast, a tedious entertainment from the spectator's point of view, full of wearisome repetition.

I knew that if he slept at "Beggarbush" he would be up in time; I have slept there myself, and I know what happens. About the middle of the night, as you judge, though in reality it may be somewhat later, you are startled out of your first sleep by what sounds like a rush of cavalry along the passage, just outside your door. Your half – awakened intelligence fluctuates between burglars, the Day of Judgment, and a gas explosion. You sit up in bed and listen intently. You are not kept waiting long; the next moment a door is violently slammed, and somebody, or something, is evidently coming downstairs on a tea – tray.

"I told you so," says a voice outside, and immediately some hard substance, a head one would say from the ring of it, rebounds against the panel of your door.

By this time you are charging madly round the room for your clothes. Nothing is where you put it overnight, the articles most essential have disappeared entirely; and meanwhile the murder, or revolution, or whatever it is, continues unchecked. You pause for a moment, with your head under the wardrobe, where you think you can see your slippers, to listen to a steady, monotonous thumping upon a distant door. The victim, you presume, has taken refuge there; they mean to have him out and finish him. Will you be in time? The knocking ceases, and a voice, sweetly reassuring in its gentle plaintiveness, asks meekly:

"Pa, may I get up?"

You do not hear the other voice, but the responses are:

"No, it was only the bath – no, she ain't really hurt, – only wet, you know. Yes, ma, I'll tell 'em what you say. No, it was a pure accident. Yes; good – night, papa."

Then the same voice, exerting itself so as to be heard in a distant part of the house, remarks:

"You've got to come upstairs again. Pa says it isn't time yet to get up."

You return to bed, and lie listening to somebody being dragged upstairs, evidently against their will. By a thoughtful arrangement the spare rooms at "Beggarbush" are exactly underneath the nurseries. The same somebody, you conclude, still offering the most creditable opposition, is being put back into bed. You can follow the contest with much exactitude, because every time the body is flung down upon the spring mattress, the bedstead, just above your head, makes a sort of jump; while every time the body succeeds in struggling out again, you are aware by the thud upon the floor. After a time the struggle wanes, or maybe the bed collapses; and you drift back into sleep. But the next moment, or what seems to be the next moment, you again open your eyes under the consciousness of a

presence. The door is being held ajar, and four solemn faces, piled one on top of the other, are peering at you, as though you were some natural curiosity kept in this particular room. Seeing you awake, the top face, walking calmly over the other three, comes in and sits on the bed in a friendly attitude.

"Oh!" it says, "we didn't know you were awake. I've been awake some time."

"So I gather," you reply, shortly.

"Pa doesn't like us to get up too early," it continues. "He says everybody else in the house is liable to be disturbed if we get up. So, of course, we mustn't."

The tone is that of gentle resignation. It is instinct with the spirit of virtuous pride, arising from the consciousness of self – sacrifice.

"Don't you call this being up?" you suggest.

"Oh, no; we're not really up, you know, because we're not properly dressed." The fact is self – evident. "Pa's always very tired in the morning," the voice continues; "of course, that's because he works hard all day. Are you ever tired in the morning?"

At this point he turns and notices, for the first time, that the three other children have also entered, and are sitting in a semi – circle on the floor. From their attitude it is clear they have mistaken the whole thing for one of the slower forms of entertainment, some comic lecture or conjuring exhibition, and are waiting patiently for you to get out of bed and do something. It shocks him, the idea of their being in the guest's bedchamber. He peremptorily orders them out. They do not answer him, they do not argue; in dead silence, and with one accord they fall upon him. All you can see from the bed is a confused tangle of waving arms and legs, suggestive of an intoxicated octopus trying to find bottom. Not a word is spoken; that seems to be the etiquette of the thing. If you are sleeping in your pyjamas, you spring from the bed, and only add to the confusion; if you are wearing a less showy garment, you stop where you are and shout commands, which are utterly unheeded. The simplest plan is to leave it to the eldest boy. He does get them out after a while, and closes the door upon them. It re – opens immediately, and one, generally Muriel, is shot back into the room. She enters as from a catapult. She is handicapped by having long hair, which can be used as a convenient handle. Evidently aware of this natural disadvantage, she clutches it herself tightly in one hand, and punches with the other. He opens the door again, and cleverly uses her as a battering – ram against the wall of those without. You can hear the dull crash as her head enters among them, and scatters them. When the victory is complete, he comes back and resumes his seat on the bed. There is no bitterness about him; he has forgotten the whole incident.

"I like the morning," he says, "don't you?"

"Some mornings," you agree, "are all right; others are not so peaceful."

He takes no notice of your exception; a far – away look steals over his somewhat ethereal face.

"I should like to die in the morning," he says; "everything is so beautiful then."

"Well," you answer, "perhaps you will, if your father ever invites an irritable man to come and sleep here, and doesn't warn him beforehand."

He descends from his contemplative mood, and becomes himself again.

"It's jolly in the garden," he suggests; "you wouldn't like to get up and have a game of cricket, would you?"

It was not the idea with which you went to bed, but now, as things have turned out, it seems as good a plan as lying there hopelessly awake; and you agree.

You learn, later in the day, that the explanation of the proceeding is that you, unable to sleep, woke up early in the morning, and thought you would like a game of cricket. The children, taught to be ever courteous to guests, felt it their duty to humour you. Mrs. Harris remarks at breakfast that at least you might have seen to it that the children were properly dressed before you took them out; while Harris points out to you, pathetically, how, by your one morning's example and encouragement, you have undone his labour of months.

On this Wednesday morning, George, it seems, clamoured to get up at a quarter – past five, and persuaded them to let him teach them cycling tricks round the cucumber frames on Harris's new wheel. Even Mrs. Harris, however, did not blame George on this occasion; she felt intuitively the idea could not have been entirely his.

It is not that the Harris children have the faintest notion of avoiding blame at the expense of a friend and comrade. One and all they are honesty itself in accepting responsibility for their own misdeeds. It simply is, that is how the thing presents itself to their understanding. When you explain to them that you had no original intention of getting up at five o'clock in the morning to play cricket on the croquet lawn, or to mimic the history of the early Church by shooting with a cross – bow at dolls tied to a tree; that as a matter of fact, left to your own initiative, you would have slept peacefully till roused in Christian fashion with a cup of tea at eight, they are firstly astonished, secondly apologetic, and thirdly sincerely contrite. In the present instance, waiving the purely academic question whether the awakening of George at a little before five was due to natural instinct on his part, or to the accidental passing of a home – made boomerang through his bedroom window, the dear children frankly admitted that the blame for his uprising was their own. As the eldest boy said:

"We ought to have remembered that Uncle George had a long day, before him, and we ought to have dissuaded him from getting up. I blame myself entirely."

But an occasional change of habit does nobody any harm; and besides, as Harris and I agreed, it was good training for George. In the Black Forest we should be up at five every morning; that we had determined on. Indeed, George himself had suggested half – past four, but Harris and I had argued that five would be early enough as an average; that would enable us to be on our machines by six, and to break the back of our journey before the heat of the day set in. Occasionally we might start a little earlier, but not as a habit.

I myself was up that morning at five. This was earlier than I had intended. I had said to myself on going to sleep, "Six o'clock, sharp!"

There are men I know who can wake themselves at any time to the minute. They say to themselves literally, as they lay their heads upon the pillow, "Four – thirty,""Four – forty – five," or "Five – fifteen," as the case may be; and as the clock strikes they open their eyes. It is very wonderful this; the more one dwells upon it, the greater the mystery grows. Some Ego within us, acting quite independently of our conscious self, must be capable of counting the hours while we sleep. Unaided by clock or sun, or any other medium known to our five senses, it keeps watch through the darkness. At the exact moment it whispers "Time!" and we awake. The work of an old riverside fellow I once talked with called him to be out of bed each morning half an hour before high tide. He told me that never once had he overslept himself by a minute. Latterly, he never even troubled to work out the tide for himself. He would lie down tired, and sleep a dreamless sleep, and each morning at a different hour this ghostly watchman, true as the tide itself, would silently call him. Did the man's spirit haunt through the darkness the muddy river stairs; or had it knowledge of the ways of Nature? Whatever the process, the man himself was unconscious of it.

In my own case my inward watchman is, perhaps, somewhat out of practice. He does his best; but he is over – anxious; he worries himself, and loses count. I say to him, maybe, "Five – thirty, please;" and he wakes me with a start at half – past two. I look at my watch. He suggests that, perhaps, I forgot to wind it up. I put it to my ear; it is still going. He thinks, maybe, something has happened to it; he is confident himself it is half – past five, if not a little later. To satisfy him, I put on a pair of slippers and go downstairs to inspect the dining – room clock. What happens to a man when he wanders about the house in the middle of the night, clad in a dressing – gown and a pair of slippers, there is no need to recount; most men know by experience. Everything – especially everything with a sharp corner – takes a cowardly delight in hitting him. When you are wearing a pair of stout boots, things get out of your way; when you venture among furniture in woolwork slippers and no socks, it comes at you and kicks you. I return to bed bad tempered, and refusing to listen to his further absurd

suggestion that all the clocks in the house have entered into a conspiracy against me, take half an hour to get to sleep again. From four to five he wakes me every ten minutes. I wish I had never said a word to him about the thing. At five o'clock he goes to sleep himself, worn out, and leaves it to the girl, who does it half an hour later than usual.

On this particular Wednesday he worried me to such an extent, that I got up at five simply to be rid of him. I did not know what to do with myself. Our train did not leave till eight; all our luggage had been packed and sent on the night before, together with the bicycles, to Fenchurch Street Station. I went into my study; I thought I would put in an hour's writing. The early morning, before one has breakfasted, is not, I take it, a good season for literary effort. I wrote three paragraphs of a story, and then read them over to myself. Some unkind things have been said about my work; but nothing has yet been written which would have done justice to those three paragraphs. I threw them into the waste – paper basket, and sat trying to remember what, if any, charitable institutions provided pensions for decayed authors.

To escape from this train of reflection, I put a golf – ball in my pocket, and selecting a driver, strolled out into the paddock. A couple of sheep were browsing there, and they followed and took a keen interest in my practice. The one was a kindly, sympathetic old party. I do not think she understood the game; I think it was my doing this innocent thing so early in the morning that appealed to her. At every stroke I made she bleated:

"Go – o – o – d, go – o – o – d ind – e – e – d!"

She seemed as pleased as if she had done it herself.

As for the other one, she was a cantankerous, disagreeable old thing, as discouraging to me as her friend was helpful.

"Ba – a – ad, da – a – a – m ba – a – a – d!" was her comment on almost every stroke. As a matter of fact, some were really excellent strokes; but she did it just to be contradictory, and for the sake of irritating. I could see that.

By a most regrettable accident, one of my swiftest balls struck the good sheep on the nose. And at that the bad sheep laughed – laughed distinctly and undoubtedly, a husky, vulgar laugh; and, while her friend stood glued to the ground, too astonished to move, she changed her note for the first time and bleated:

"Go – o – o – d, ve – e – ry go – o – o – d! Be – e – e – est sho – o – o – ot he – e – e's ma – a – a – de!"

I would have given half – a – crown if it had been she I had hit instead of the other one. It is ever the good and amiable who suffer in this world.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.