

HOW LOVE CAME TO PROFESSOR GUILDEA

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- I -

Dull people often wondered how it came about that Father Murchison and Professor Frederic Guildea were intimate friends. The one was all faith, the other all scepticism. The nature of the Father was based on love. He viewed the world with an almost childlike tenderness above his long, black cassock; and his mild, yet perfectly fearless, blue eyes seemed always to be watching the goodness that exists in humanity, and rejoicing at what they saw. The Professor, on the other hand, had a hard face like a hatchet, tipped with an aggressive black goatee beard. His eyes were quick, piercing and irreverent. The lines about his small, thin-lipped mouth were almost cruel. His voice was harsh and dry, sometimes, when he grew energetic, almost soprano. It fired off words with a sharp and clipping utterance. His habitual manner was one of distrust and investigation. It was impossible to suppose that, in his busy life, he found any time for love, either of humanity in general or of an individual.

Yet his days were spent in scientific investigations which conferred immense benefits upon the world.

Both men were celibates. Father Murchison was a member of an Anglican order which forbade him to marry. Professor Guildea had a poor opinion of most things, but especially of women. He had formerly held a post as lecturer at Birmingham. But when his fame as a discoverer grew, he removed to London. There, at a lecture he gave in the East End, he first met Father Murchison. They spoke a few words. Perhaps the bright intelligence of the priest appealed to the man of science, who was inclined, as a rule, to regard the clergy with some contempt. Perhaps the transparent sincerity of this devotee, full of common sense, attracted him. As he was leaving the hall he abruptly asked the Father to call on him at his house in Hyde Park Place. And the Father, who seldom went into the West End, except to preach, accepted the invitation.

'When will you come?' said Guildea.

He was folding up the blue paper on which his notes were written in a tiny, clear hand. The leaves rustled drily in accompaniment to his sharp, dry voice.

'On Sunday week I am preaching in the evening at St. Saviour's, not far off,' said the Father.

'I don't go to church.'

'No,' said the Father, without any accent of surprise or condemnation.

'Come to supper afterwards?'

'Thank you, I will.'

'What time will you come?'

The Father smiled.

'As soon as I have finished my sermon. The service is at six-thirty.'

'About eight then, I suppose. Don't make the sermon too long. My number in Hyde Park Place is 100. Good-night to you.'

He snapped an elastic band round his papers and strode off without shaking hands.

On the appointed Sunday, Father Murchison preached to a densely crowded congregation at St. Saviour's. The subject of his sermon was sympathy, and the comparative uselessness of man in the world unless he can learn to love his neighbour as himself. The sermon was rather long, and when the preacher, in his flowing, black cloak, and his hard, round hat, with a straight brim over which hung the ends of a black cord, made his way towards the Professor's house, the hands of the illuminated clock disc at the Marble Arch pointed to twenty minutes past eight.

The Father hurried on, pushing his way through the crowd of standing soldiers, chattering women and giggling street boys in their Sunday best. It was a warm April night, and, when he reached number 100, Hyde Park Place, he found the Professor bareheaded on his doorstep, gazing out towards the Park railings, and enjoying the soft, moist air, in front of his lighted passage.

'Ha, a long sermon!' he exclaimed. 'Come in.'

'I fear it was,' said the Father, obeying the invitation. 'I am that dangerous thing — an extempore preacher.'

'More attractive to speak without notes, if you can do it. Hang your hat and coat — oh, cloak — here. We'll have supper at once. This is the dining room.'

He opened a door on the right and they entered a long, narrow room, with a gold paper and a black ceiling, from which hung an electric lamp with a gold-coloured shade. In the room stood a small oval table with covers laid for two. The Professor rang the bell. Then he said:

'People seem to talk better at an oval table than at a square one.'

'Really. Is that so?'

'Well, I've had precisely the same party twice, once at a square table, once at an oval table. The first dinner was a dull failure, the second a brilliant success. Sit down, won't you?'

'How d'you account for the difference?' said the Father, sitting down, and pulling the tail of his cassock well under him.

'H'm. I know how you'd account for it.'

'Indeed. How then?'

'At an oval table, since there are no corners, the chain of human sympathy — the electric current, is much more complete. Eh! Let me give you some soup.'

'Thank you.'

The Father took it, and, as he did so, turned his beaming blue eyes on his host. Then he smiled.

'What!' he said, in his pleasant, light tenor voice. 'You do go to church sometimes, then?'

'To-night is the first time for ages. And, mind you, I was tremendously bored.'

The Father still smiled, and his blue eyes gently twinkled.

'Dear, dear!' he said, 'what a pity!'

'But not by the sermon,' Guildea added. 'I don't pay a compliment. I state a fact. The sermon didn't bore me. If it had, I should have said so, or said nothing.'

'And which would you have done?'

The Professor smiled almost genially.

'Don't know,' he said. 'What wine d'you drink?'

'None, thank you. I'm a teetotaller. In my profession and *milieu* it is necessary to be one. Yes, I will have some soda water. I think you would have done the first.'

'Very likely, and very wrongly. You wouldn't have minded much.'

'I don't think I should.'

They were intimate already. The Father felt most pleasantly at home under the black ceiling. He drank some soda water and seemed to enjoy it more than the Professor enjoyed his claret.

'You smile at the theory of the chain of human sympathy, I see,' said the Father.

'Then what is your explanation of the failure of your square party with corners, the success of your oval party without them?'

'Probably on the first occasion the wit of the assembly had a chill on his liver, while on the second he was in perfect health. Yet, you see, I stick to the oval table.'

'And that means ——'

'Very little. By the way, your omission of any allusion to the notorious part liver plays in love was a serious one to-night.'

'Your omission of any desire for close human sympathy in your life is a more serious one.'

'How can you be sure I have no such desire?'

'I divine it. Your look, your manner, tell me it is so. You were disagreeing with my sermon all the time I was preaching. Weren't you?'

'Part of the time.'

The servant changed the plates. He was a middle-aged, blond, thin man, with a stony white face, pale, prominent eyes, and an accomplished manner of service. When he had left the room the Professor continued.

'Your remarks interested me, but I thought them exaggerated.'

'For instance?'

'Let me play the egoist for a moment. I spend most of my time in hard work, very hard work. The results of this work, you will allow, benefit humanity.'

'Enormously,' assented the Father, thinking of more than one of Guildea's discoveries.

'And the benefit conferred by this work, undertaken merely for its own sake, is just as great as if it were undertaken because I loved my fellow man, and sentimentally desired to see him more comfortable than he is at present. I'm as useful precisely in my present condition of — in my present non-affectional condition — as I should be if I were as full of gush as the sentimentalists who want to get murderers out of

prison, or to put a premium on tyranny — like Tolstoi — by preventing the punishment of tyrants.'

'One may do great harm with affection; great good without it. Yes, that is true. Even *le bon motif* is not everything, I know. Still I contend that, given your powers, you would be far more useful in the world with sympathy, affection for your kind, added to them than as you are. I believe even that you would do still more splendid work.' The Professor poured himself another glass of claret.

'You noticed my butler?' he said.

'I did.'

'He's a perfect servant. He makes me perfectly comfortable. Yet he has no feeling of liking for me. I treat him civilly. I pay him well. But I never think about him, or concern myself with him as a human being. I know nothing of his character except what I read of it in his last master's letter. There are, you may say, no truly human relations between us. You would affirm that his work would be better done if I had made him personally like me as man — of any class — can like man — of any other class?'

'I should, decidedly.'

'I contend that he couldn't do his work better than he does it at present.'

'But if any crisis occurred?'

'What?'

'Any crisis, change in your condition. If you needed his help, not only as a man and a butler, but as a man and a brother? He'd fail you then, probably. You would never get from your servant that finest service which can only be prompted by an honest affection.'

'You have finished?'

'Quite.'

'Let us go upstairs then. Yes, those are good prints. I picked them up in Birmingham when I was living there. This is my workroom.'

They came to a double room lined entirely with books, and brilliantly, rather hardly, lit by electricity. The windows at one end looked on to the Park, at the other on to the garden of a neighbouring house. The door by which they entered was concealed from the inner and smaller room by the jutting wall of the outer room, in which stood a huge writing-table loaded with letters, pamphlets and manuscripts. Between the two windows of the inner room was a cage in which a large, grey parrot was clambering, using both beak and claws to assist him in his slow and meditative peregrinations.

'You have a pet,' said the Father, surprised.

'I possess a parrot,' the Professor answered drily, 'I got him for a purpose when I was making a study of the imitative powers of birds, and I have never got rid of him. A cigar?'

'Thank you.'

They sat down. Father Murchison glanced at the parrot. It had paused in its journey, and, clinging to the bars of its cage, was regarding them with attentive round eyes

that looked deliberately intelligent, but by no means sympathetic. He looked away from it to Guildea, who was smoking, with his head thrown back, his sharp, pointed chin, on which the small black beard bristled, upturned. He was moving his under lip up and down rapidly. This action caused the beard to stir and look peculiarly aggressive. The Father suddenly chuckled softly.

'Why's that?' cried Guildea, letting his chin drop down on his breast and looking at his guest sharply.

'I was thinking it would have to be a crisis indeed that could make you cling to our butler's affection for assistance.'

Guldea smiled too.

'You're right. It would. Here he comes.'

The man entered with coffee. He offered it gently, and retired like a shadow retreating on a wall.

'Splendid, inhuman fellow,' remarked Guildea.

'I prefer the East End lad who does my errands in Bird Street,' said the Father. 'I know all his worries. He knows some of mine. We are friends. He's more noisy than your man. He even breathes hard when he is especially solicitous, but he would do more for me than put the coals on my fire, or black my square-toed boots.'

'Men are differently made. To me the watchful eye of affection would be abominable.'

'What about that bird?'

The Father pointed to the parrot. It had got up on its perch and, with one foot uplifted in an impressive, almost benedictory, manner, was gazing steadily at the Professor.

'That's the watchful eye of imitation, with a mind at the back of it, desirous of reproducing the peculiarities of others. No, I thought your sermon to-night very fresh, very clever. But I have no wish for affection. Reasonable liking, of course, one desires' — he tugged sharply at his beard, as if to warn himself against sentimentality — 'but anything more would be most irksome, and would push me, I feel sure, towards cruelty. It would also hamper one's work.'

'I don't think so.'

'The sort of work I do. I shall continue to benefit the world without loving, and it will continue to accept the benefits without loving me. That's all as it should be.'

He drank his coffee. Then he added rather aggressively:

'I have neither time nor inclination for sentimentality.'

When Guildea let Father Murchison out, he followed the Father on to the doorstep and stood there for a moment. The Father glanced across the damp road into the Park.

'I see you've got a gate just opposite you,' he said idly.

'Yes. I often slip across for a stroll to clear my brain. Good-night to you. Come again some day.'

'With pleasure. Good-night.'

The Priest strode away, leaving Guildea standing on the step.

Father Murchison came many times again to number 100, Hyde Park Place. He had a feeling of liking for most men and women whom he knew, and of tenderness for all, whether he knew them or not, but he grew to have a special sentiment towards Guildea. Strangely enough, it was a sentiment of pity. He pitied this hard-working, eminently successful man of big brain and bold heart, who never seemed depressed, who never wanted assistance, who never complained of the twisted skein of life or faltered in his progress along the way. The Father pitied Guildea, in fact, because Guildea wanted so little. He had told them so, for the intercourse of the two men, from the beginning, had been singularly frank.

One evening, when they were talking together, the Father happened to speak of one of the oddities of life, the fact that those who do not want things often get them, while those who seek them vehemently are disappointed in their search.

'Then I ought to have affection poured upon me,' said Guildea smiling rather grimly. 'For I hate it.'

'Perhaps some day you will.'

'I hope not, most sincerely.'

Father Murchison said nothing for a moment. He was drawing together the ends of the broad band round his cassock. When he spoke he seemed to be answering someone.

'Yes,' he said slowly, 'yes, that *is* my feeling — pity.'

'For whom?' said the Professor.

Then, suddenly, he understood. He did not say that he understood, but Father Murchison felt, and saw, that it was quite unnecessary to answer his friend's question. So Guildea, strangely enough, found himself closely acquainted with a man — his opposite in all ways — who pitied him.

The fact that he did not mind this, and scarcely ever thought about it, shows perhaps as clearly as anything could, the peculiar indifference of his nature.

- II -

One Autumn evening, a year and a half after Father Murchison and the Professor had first met, the Father called in Hyde Park Place and enquired of the blond and stony butler — his name was Pitting — whether his master was at home.

'Yes, sir,' replied Pitting. 'Will you please come this way?'

He moved noiselessly up the rather narrow stairs, followed by the Father, tenderly opened the library door, and in his soft, cold voice, announced:

'Father Murchison.'

Guildea was sitting in an armchair, before a small fire. His thin, long-fingered hands lay outstretched upon his knees, his head was sunk down on his chest. He appeared to be pondering deeply. Pitting very slightly raised his voice.

'Father Murchison to see you, sir,' he repeated.

The Professor jumped up rather suddenly and turned sharply round as the Father came in.

'Oh,' he said. 'It's you, is it? Glad to see you. Come to the fire.'

The Father glanced at him and thought him looking unusually fatigued.

'You don't look well to-night,' the Father said.

'No?'

'You must be working too hard. That lecture you are going to give in Paris is bothering you?'

'Not a bit. It's all arranged. I could deliver it to you at this moment verbatim. Well, sit down.'

The Father did so, and Guildea sank once more into his chair and stared hard into the fire without another word. He seemed to be thinking profoundly. His friend did not interrupt him, but quietly lit a pipe and began to smoke reflectively. The eyes of Guildea were fixed upon the fire. The Father glanced about the room, at the walls of soberly bound books, at the crowded writing-table, at the windows, before which hung heavy, dark-blue curtains of old brocade, at the cage, which stood between them. A green baize covering was thrown over it. The Father wondered why. He had never seen Napoleon — so the parrot was named — covered up at night before. While he was looking at the baize Guildea suddenly jerked up his head, and, taking his hands from his knees and clasping them, said abruptly:

'D'you think I'm an attractive man?'

Father Murchison jumped. Such a question coming from such a man astounded him.

'Bless me!' he ejaculated. 'What makes you ask? Do you mean attractive to the opposite sex?'

'That's what I don't know,' said the Professor gloomily, and staring again into the fire. 'That's what I don't know.'

The Father grew more astonished.

'Don't know!' he exclaimed.

And he laid down his pipe.

'Let's say — d'you think I'm attractive, that there's anything about me which might draw a — a human being, or an animal, irresistibly to me?'

'Whether you desired it or not?'

'Exactly — or — no, let us say definitely — if I did not desire it.'

Father Murchison pursed up his rather full, cherubic lips, and little wrinkles appeared about the corners of his blue eyes.

'There might be, of course,' he said, after a pause. 'Human nature is weak, engagingly weak, Guildea. And you're inclined to flout it. I could understand a certain class of lady — the lion-hunting, the intellectual lady, seeking you. Your reputation, your great name ——'

'Yes, yes,' Guildea interrupted, rather irritably — 'I know all that, I know.'

He twisted his long hands together, bending the palms outwards till his thin, pointed fingers cracked. His forehead was wrinkled in a frown.

'I imagine,' he said — he stopped and coughed drily, almost shrilly — 'I imagine it would be very disagreeable to be liked, to be run after — that is the usual expression, isn't it — by anything one objected to.'

And now he half turned in his chair, crossed his legs one over the other, and looked

at his guest with an unusual, almost piercing interrogation.

'Anything?' said the Father.

'Well — well, anyone. I imagine nothing could be more unpleasant.'

'I don't,' he said, 'I don't. That's just it. That's the curious part of it, that I ——'

He broke off deliberately, got up and stretched.

'I'll have a pipe, too,' he said.

He went over to the mantelpiece, got his pipe, filled it and lighted it. As he held the match to the tobacco, bending forward with an enquiring expression, his eyes fell upon the green baize that covered Napoleon's cage. He threw the match into the grate, and puffed at the pipe as he walked forward to the cage. When he reached it he put out his hand, took hold of the baize and began to pull it away. Then suddenly he pushed it back over the cage.

'No,' he said, as if to himself, 'no.'

He returned rather hastily to the fire and threw himself once more into his armchair.

'You're wondering,' he said to Father Murchison. 'So am I. I don't know at all what to make of it. I'll just tell you the facts and you must tell me what you think of them. The night before last, after a day of hard work — but no harder than usual — I went to the front door to get a breath of fresh air. You know I often do that.'

'Yes, I found you on the doorstep when I first came here.'

'Just so. I didn't put on hat or coat. I just stood on the step as I was. My mind, I remember, was still full of my work. It was rather a dark night, not very dark. The hour was about eleven, or a quarter past. I was staring at the Park, and presently I found that my eyes were directed towards somebody who was sitting, back to me, on one of the benches. I saw the person — if it was a person — through the railings.

'If it was a person!' said the Father. 'What do you mean by that?'

'Wait a minute. I say that because it was too dark for me to know. I merely saw some blackish object on the bench, rising into view above the level of the back of the seat. I couldn't say it was man, woman or child. But something there was, and I found that I was looking at it.'

'Some poor creature without a home, I suppose,' said the Father.

'I said that to myself. Still, I was taken with an extraordinary interest about this object, so great an interest that I got my hat and crossed the road to go into the Park. As you know, there's an entrance almost opposite to my house. Well, Murchison, I crossed the road, passed through the gate in the railings, went up to the seat, and found that there was — nothing on it.'

'Were you looking at it as you walked?'

'Part of the time. But I removed my eyes from it just as I passed through the gate, because there was a row going on a little way off, and I turned for an instant in that direction. When I saw that the seat was vacant I was seized by a most absurd sensation of disappointment, almost of anger. I stopped and looked about me to see if anything was moving away, but I could see nothing. It was a cold night and misty, and there were few people about. Feeling, as I say, foolishly and unnaturally disappointed, I retraced my steps to this house. When I got here I discovered that

during my short absence I had left the hall door open — half open.'

'Rather imprudent in London.'

'Yes. I had no idea, of course, that I had done so, till I got back. However, I was only away three minutes or so.'

'Yes.'

'It was not likely that anybody had gone in.'

'I suppose not.'

'Was it?'

'Why do you ask me that, Guildea?'

'Well, well!'

'Besides, if anybody had gone in, on your return you'd have caught him, surely.'

Guildea coughed again. The Father, surprised, could not fail to recognise that he was nervous and that his nervousness was affecting him physically.

'I must have caught cold that night,' he said, as if he had read his friend's thought and hastened to contradict it. Then he went on:

'I entered the hall, or passage, rather.'

He paused again. His uneasiness was becoming very apparent.

'And you did catch somebody?' said the Father.

Guildea cleared his throat.

'That's just it,' he said, 'now we come to it. I'm not imaginative, as you know.'

'You certainly are not.'

'No, but hardly had I stepped into the passage before I felt certain that somebody had got into the house during my absence. I felt convinced of it, and not only that. I also felt convinced that the intruder was the very person I had dimly seen sitting upon the seat in the Park. What d'you say to that?'

'I begin to think you are imaginative.'

'H'm! It seemed to me that the person — the occupant of the seat — and I, had simultaneously formed the project of interviewing each other, had simultaneously set out to put that project into execution. I became so certain of this that I walked hastily upstairs into this room, expecting to find the visitor awaiting me. But there was no one. I then came down again and went into the dining-room. No one. I was actually astonished. Isn't that odd?'

'Very,' said the Father, quite gravely.

The Professor's chill and gloomy manner, and uncomfortable, constrained appearance kept away the humour that might well have lurked round the steps of such a discourse.

'I went upstairs again,' he continued, 'sat down and thought the matter over. I resolved to forget it, and took up a book. I might perhaps have been able to read, but suddenly I thought I noticed ——'

He stopped abruptly. Father Murchison observed that he was staring towards the green baize that covered the parrot's cage.

'But that's nothing,' he said. 'Enough that I couldn't read, I resolved to explore the house. You know how small it is, how easily one can go all over it. I went into

every room without exception. To the servants, who were having supper, I made some excuse. They were surprised at my advent, no doubt.'

'And Pitting?'

'Oh, he got up politely when I came in, stood while I was there, but never said a word. I muttered 'don't disturb yourselves,' or something of the sort, and came out. Murchison, I found nobody new in the house — yet I return to this room entirely convinced that somebody had entered while I was in the Park.'

'And gone out again before you came back?'

'No, had stayed, and was still in the house.'

'But, my dear Guildea,' began the Father, now in great astonishment. 'Surely ——' 'I know what you want to say — what I should want to say in your place. Now, do wait. I am also convinced that this visitor has not left the house and is at this moment in it.'

He spoke with evident sincerity, with extreme gravity. Father Murchison looked him full in the face, and met his quick, keen eyes.

'No,' he said, as if in reply to an uttered question: 'I'm perfectly sane, I assure you. The whole matter seems almost as incredible to me as it must to you. But, as you know, I never quarrel with facts, however strange. I merely try to examine into them thoroughly. I have already consulted a doctor and been pronounced in perfect bodily health.'

He paused, as if expecting the Father to say something.

'Go on, Guildea,' he said, 'you haven't finished.'

'No. I felt that night positive that somebody had entered the house, and remained in it, and my conviction grew. I went to bed as usual, and, contrary to my expectation, slept as well as I generally do. Yet directly I woke up yesterday morning I knew that my household had been increased by one.'

'May I interrupt you for one moment? How did you know it?'

'By my mental sensation. I can only say that I was perfectly conscious of a new presence within my house, close to me.'

'How very strange,' said the Father. 'And you feel absolutely certain that you are not overworked? Your brain does not feel tired? Your head is quite clear?'

'Quite. I was never better. When I came down to breakfast that morning I looked sharply into Pitting's face. He was as coldly placid and inexpressive as usual. It was evident to me that his mind was in no way distressed. After breakfast I sat down to work, all the time ceaselessly conscious of the fact of this intruder upon my privacy. Nevertheless, I laboured for several hours, waiting for any developments that might occur to clear away the mysterious obscurity of this event. I lunched. About half-past two I was obliged to go out to attend a lecture. I therefore took my coat and hat, opened my door, and stepped on to the pavement. I was instantly aware that I was no longer intruded upon, and this although I was now in the street, surrounded by people. Consequently, I felt certain that the thing in my house must be thinking of me, perhaps even spying upon me.'

'Wait a moment,' interrupted the Father. 'What was your sensation? Was it one of

fear?'

'Oh, dear no. I was entirely puzzled — as I am now — and keenly interested, but not in any way alarmed. I delivered my lecture with my usual ease and returned home in the evening. On entering the house again I was perfectly conscious that the intruder was still there. Last night I dined alone and spent the hours after dinner in reading a scientific work in which I was deeply interested. While I read, however, I never for one moment lost the knowledge that some mind — very attentive to me — was within hail of mine. I will say more than this — the sensation constantly increased, and, by the time I got up to go to bed, I had come to a very strange conclusion.'

'What? What was it?'

'That whoever — or whatever — had entered my house during my short absence in the Park was more than interested in me.'

'More than interested in you?'

'Was fond, or was becoming fond, of me.'

'Oh!' exclaimed the Father. 'Now I understand why you asked me just now whether I thought there was anything about you that might draw a human being or an animal irresistibly to you.'

'Precisely. Since I came to this conclusion, Murchison, I will confess that my feeling of strong curiosity has become tinged with another feeling.'

'Of fear?'

'No, of dislike, or irritation. No — not fear, not fear.'

As Guildea repeated unnecessarily this asseveration he looked again towards the parrot's cage.

'What is there to be afraid of in such a matter?' he added. 'I am not a child to tremble before bogies.'

In saying the last words he raised his voice sharply; then he walked quickly to the cage, and, with an abrupt movement, pulled the baize covering from it. Napoleon was disclosed, apparently dozing upon his perch with his head held slightly on one side. As the light reached him, he moved, ruffled the feathers about his neck, blinked his eyes, and began slowly to sidle to and fro, thrusting his head forward and drawing it back with an air of complacent, though rather unmeaning, energy. Guildea stood by the cage, looking at him closely, and indeed with an attention that was so intense as to be remarkable, almost unnatural.

'How absurd these birds are!' he said at length, coming back to the fire.

'You have no more to tell me?' asked the Father.

'No. I am still aware of the presence of something in my house. I am still conscious of its close attention to me. I am still irritated, seriously annoyed — I confess it — by that attention.'

'You say you are aware of the presence of something at this moment?'

'At this moment — yes.'

'Do you mean in this room, with us, now?'

'I should say so — at any rate, quite near us.'

Again he glanced quickly, almost suspiciously, towards the cage of the parrot. The bird was sitting still on its perch now. Its head was bent down and cocked sideways, and it appeared to be listening attentively to something.

'That bird will have the intonations of my voice more correctly than ever by to-morrow morning,' said the Father, watching Guildea closely with his mild blue eyes. 'And it has always imitated me very cleverly.'

The Professor started slightly.

'Yes,' he said. 'Yes, no doubt. Well, what do you make of this affair?'

'Nothing at all. It is absolutely inexplicable. I can speak quite frankly to you, I feel sure.'

'Of course. That's why I have told you the whole thing.'

'I think you must be over-worked, over-strained, without knowing it.'

'And that the doctor was mistaken when he said I was all right?'

'Yes.'

Guildea knocked his pipe out against the chimney piece.

'It may be so,' he said, 'I will not be so unreasonable as to deny the possibility, although I feel as well as I ever did in my life. What do you advise then?'

'A week of complete rest away from London, in good air.'

'The usual prescription. I'll take it. I'll go to-morrow to Westgate and leave Napoleon to keep house in my absence.'

For some reason, which he could not explain to himself, the pleasure which Father Murchison felt in hearing the first part of his friend's final remark was lessened, was almost destroyed, by the last sentence.

He walked towards the City that night, deep in thought, remembering and carefully considering the first interview he had with Guildea in the latter's house a year and a half before.

On the following morning Guildea left London.

- III -

Father Murchison was so busy a man that he had little time for brooding over the affairs of others. During Guildea's week at the sea, however, the Father thought about him a great deal, with much wonder and some dismay. The dismay was soon banished, for the mild-eyed priest was quick to discern weakness in himself, quicker still to drive it forth as a most undesirable inmate of the soul. But the wonder remained. It was destined to a crescendo. Guildea had left London on a Thursday. On a Thursday he returned, having previously sent a note to Father Murchison to mention that he was leaving Westgate at a certain time. When his train ran into Victoria Station, at five o'clock in the evening, he was surprised to see the cloaked figure of his friend standing upon the grey platform behind a line of porters.

'What, Murchison!' he said. 'You here! Have you seceded from your order that you are taking this holiday?'

They shook hands.

'No,' said the Father. 'It happened that I had to be in this neighbourhood to-day, visiting a sick person. So I thought I would meet you.'

'And see if I were still a sick person, eh?'

The Professor glanced at him kindly, but with a dry little laugh.

'Are you?' replied the Father gently, looking at him with interest. 'No, I think not. You appear very well.'

The sea air had, in fact, put some brownish red into Guildea's always thin cheeks. His keen eyes were shining with life and energy, and he walked forward in his loose grey suit and fluttering overcoat with a vigour that was noticeable, carrying easily in his left hand his well-filled Gladstone bag.

The Father felt completely reassured.

'I never saw you look better,' he said.

'I never was better. Have you an hour to spare?'

'Two.'

'Good. I'll send my bag up by cab, and we'll walk across the Park to my house and have a cup of tea there. What d'you say?'

'I shall enjoy it.'

They walked out of the station yard, past the flower girls and newspaper sellers towards Grosvenor Place.

'And you have had a pleasant time?' the Father said.

'Pleasant enough, and lonely. I left my companion behind me in the passage at number 100, you know.'

'And you'll not find him there now, I feel sure.'

'H'm!' ejaculated Guildea. 'What a precious weakling you think me, Murchison.'

As he spoke he strode forward more quickly, as if moved to emphasise his sensation of bodily vigour.

'A weakling — no. But anyone who uses his brain as persistently as you do yours must require an occasional holiday.'

'And I required one very badly, eh?'

'You required one, I believe.'

'Well, I've had it. And now we'll see.'

The evening was closing in rapidly. They crossed the road at Hyde Park Corner, and entered the Park, in which were a number of people going home from work; men in corduroy trousers, caked with dried mud, and carrying tin cans slung over their shoulders, and flat panniers, in which lay their tools. Some of the younger ones talked loudly or whistled shrilly as they walked.

'Until the evening,' murmured Father Murchison to himself.

'What?' asked Guildea.

'I was only quoting the last words of the text, which seems written upon life, especially upon the life of pleasure: 'Man goeth forth to his work, and to his labour.'

'Ah, those fellows are not half bad fellows to have in an audience. There were a lot of them at the lecture I gave when I first met you, I remember. One of them tried to heckle me. He had a red beard. Chaps with red beards are always hecklers. I laid him low on that occasion. Well, Murchison, and now we're going to see.'

'What?'

'Whether my companion has departed.'

'Tell me — do you feel any expectation of — well — of again thinking something is there?'

'How carefully you choose language. No, I merely wonder.'

'You have no apprehension?'

'Not a scrap. But I confess to feeling curious.'

'Then the sea air hasn't taught you to recognise that the whole thing came from overstrain.'

'No,' said Guildea, very drily.

He walked on in silence for a minute. Then he added:

'You thought it would?'

'I certainly thought it might.'

'Make me realise that I had a sickly, morbid, rotten imagination — eh? Come now, Murchison, why not say frankly that you packed me off to Westgate to get rid of what you considered an acute form of hysteria?'

The Father was quite unmoved by this attack.

'Come now, Guildea,' he retorted, 'what did you expect me to think? I saw no indication of hysteria in you. I never have. One would suppose you the last man likely to have such a malady. But which is more natural — for me to believe in your hysteria or in the truth of such a story as you told me?'

'You have me there. No, I mustn't complain. Well, there's no hysteria about me now, at any rate.'

'And no stranger in your house, I hope.'

Father Murchison spoke the last words with earnest gravity, dropping the half-bantering tone — which they had both assumed.

'You take the matter very seriously, I believe,' said Guildea, also speaking more gravely.

'How else can I take it? You wouldn't have me laugh at it when you tell it me seriously?'

'No. If we find my visitor still in the house, I may even call upon you to exorcise it. But first I must do one thing.'

'And that is?'

'Prove to you, as well as to myself, that it is still there.'

'That might be difficult,' said the Father, considerably surprised by Guildea's matter-of-fact tone.

'I don't know. If it has remained in my house I think I can find a means. And I shall not be at all surprised if it is still there — despite the Westgate air.'

In saying the last words the Professor relapsed into his former tone of dry chaff. The Father could not quite make up his mind whether Guildea was feeling unusually grave or unusually gay. As the two men drew near to Hyde Park Place their conversation died away and they walked forward silently in the gathering darkness.

'Here we are!' said Guildea at last.

He thrust his key into the door, opened it and let Father Murchison into the passage,

following him closely, and banging the door.

'Here we are!' he repeated in a louder voice.

The electric light was turned on in anticipation of his arrival. He stood still and looked round.

'We'll have some tea at once,' he said. 'Ah, Pitting!'

The pale butler, who had heard the door bang, moved gently forward from the top of the stairs that led to the kitchen, greeted his master respectfully, took his coat and Father Murchison's cloak, and hung them on two pegs against the wall.

'All's right, Pitting? All's as usual?' said Guildea.

'Quite so, sir.'

'Bring me up some tea to the library.'

'Yes, sir.'

Pitting retreated. Guildea waited till he had disappeared, then opened the dining-room door, put his head into the room and kept it there for a moment, standing perfectly still. Presently he drew back into the passage, shut the door, and said:

'Let's go upstairs.'

Father Murchison looked at him enquiringly, but made no remark. They ascended the stairs and came into the library. Guildea glanced rather sharply round. A fire was burning on the hearth. The blue curtains were drawn. The bright gleam of the strong electric light fell on the long rows of books, on the writing table — very orderly in consequent of Guildea's holiday — and on the uncovered cage of the parrot. Guildea went up to the cage. Napoleon was sitting humped up on his perch with his feathers ruffled. His long toes, which looked as if they were covered with crocodile skin, clung to the bar. His round and blinking eyes were filmy, like old eyes. Guildea stared at the bird very hard, and then clucked with his tongue against his teeth. Napoleon shook himself, lifted one foot, extended his toes, sidled along the perch to the bars nearest to the Professor and thrust his head against them.

Guildea scratched it with his forefinger two or three times, still gazing attentively at the parrot; then he returned to the fire just as Pitting entered with the tea-tray.

Father Murchison was already sitting in an armchair on one side of the fire. Guildea took another chair and began to pour out tea, as Pitting left the room, closing the door gently behind him. The Father sipped his tea, found it hot and set the cup down on a little table at his side.

'You're fond of that parrot, aren't you?' he asked his friend.

'Not particularly. It's interesting to study sometimes. The parrot mind and nature are peculiar.'

'How long have you had him?'

'About four years. I nearly got rid of him just before I made your acquaintance. I'm very glad now I kept him.'

'Are you? Why is that?'

'I shall probably tell you in a day or two.'

The Father took his cup again. He did not press Guildea for an immediate explanation, but when they had both finished their tea he said:

'Well, has the sea-air had the desired effect?'

'No,' said Guildea.

The Father brushed some crumbs from the front of his cassock and sat up higher in his chair.

'Your visitor is still here?' he asked, and his blue eyes became almost ungentle and piercing as he gazed at his friend.

'Yes,' answered Guildea, calmly.

'How do you know it, when did you know it — when you looked into the dining-room just now?'

'No. Not until I came into this room. It welcomed me here.'

'Welcomed you! In what way?'

'Simply by being here, by making me feel that it is here, as I might feel that a man was if I came into the room when it was dark.'

He spoke quietly, with perfect composure in his usual dry manner.

'Very well,' the Father said, 'I shall not try to contend against your sensation, or to explain it away. Naturally, I am in amazement.'

'So am I. Never has anything in my life surprised me so much. Murchison, of course I cannot expect you to believe more than that I honestly suppose — imagine, if you like — that there is some intruder here, of which kind I am totally unaware. I cannot expect you to believe that there really is anything. If you were in my place, I in yours, I should certainly consider you the victim of some nervous delusion. I could not do otherwise. But — wait. Don't condemn me for a hysteria patient, or as a madman, for two or three days. I feel convinced that — unless I am indeed unwell, a mental invalid, which I don't think is possible — I shall be able very shortly to give you some proof that there is a newcomer in my house.'

'You don't tell me what kind of proof?'

'Not yet. Things must go a little farther first. But, perhaps even to-morrow I may be able to explain myself more fully. In the meanwhile, I'll say this, that if, eventually, I can't bring any kind of proof that I'm not dreaming, I'll let you take me to any doctor you like, and I'll resolutely try to adopt your present view — that I'm suffering from an absurd delusion. That is your view, of course?'

Father Murchison was silent for a moment. Then he said, rather doubtfully:

'It ought to be.'

'But isn't it?' asked Guildea, surprised.

'Well, you know, your manner is enormously convincing. Still, of course, I doubt. How can I do otherwise? The whole thing must be fancy.'

The Father spoke as if he were trying to recoil from a mental position he was being forced to take up.

'It must be fancy,' he repeated.

'I'll convince you by more than my manner, or I'll not try to convince you at all,' said Guildea.

When they parted that evening, he said:

'I'll write to you in a day or two probably. I think the proof I am going to give you

has been accumulating during my absence. But I shall soon know.'

Father Murchison was extremely puzzled as he sat on the top of the omnibus going homeward.

- IV -

In two days' time he received a note from Guildea asking him to call, if possible, the same evening. This he was unable to do as he had an engagement to fulfil at some East End gathering. The following day was Sunday. He wrote saying he would come on the Monday, and got a wire shortly afterwards: 'Yes, Monday come to dinner seven-thirty Guildea.' At half-past seven he stood on the doorstep of number 100.

Pitting let him in.

'Is the Professor quite well, Pitting?' the Father enquired as he took off his cloak.

'I believe so, sir. He has not made any complaint,' the butler formally replied. 'Will you come upstairs, sir?'

Guildea met them at the door of the library. He was very pale and sombre, and shook hands carelessly with his friend.

'Give us dinner,' he said to Pitting.

As the butler retired, Guildea shut the door rather cautiously. Father Murchison had never before seen him look so disturbed.

'You're worried, Guildea,' the Father said. 'Seriously worried.'

'Yes, I am. This business is beginning to tell on me a good deal.'

'Your belief in the presence of something here continues then?'

'Oh, dear, yes. There's no sort of doubt about the matter. The night I went across the road into the Park something got into the house, though what the devil it is I can't yet find out. But now, before we go down to dinner, I'll just tell you something about that proof I promised you. You remember?'

'Naturally.'

'Can't you imagine what it might be?'

Father Murchison moved his head to express a negative reply.

'Look about the room,' said Guildea. 'What do you see?'

The Father glanced round the room, slowly and carefully.

'Nothing unusual. You do not mean to tell me there is any appearance of ——'

'Oh, no, no, there's no conventional, white-robed, cloud-like figure. Bless my soul, no! I haven't fallen so low as that.'

He spoke with considerable irritation.

'Look again.'

Father Murchison looked at him, turned in the direction of his fixed eyes and saw the grey parrot clambering in its cage, slowly and persistently.

'What?' he said, quickly. 'Will the proof come from there?'

The Professor nodded.

'I believe so,' he said. 'Now let's go down to dinner. I want some food badly.'

They descended to the dining-room. While they ate and Pitting waited upon them,

the Professor talked about birds, their habits, their curiosities, their fears and their powers of imitation. He had evidently studied this subject with the thoroughness that was characteristic of him in all that he did.

'Parrots,' he said presently, 'are extraordinarily observant. It is a pity that their means of reproducing what they see are so limited. If it were not so, I have little doubt that their echo of gesture would be as remarkable as their echo of voice often is.'

'But hands are missing.'

'Yes. They do many things with their heads, however. I once knew an old woman near Goring on the Thames. She was afflicted with the palsy. She held her head perpetually sideways and it trembled, moving from right to left. Her sailor son brought her home a parrot from one of his voyages. It used to reproduce the old woman's palsied movement of the head exactly. Those grey parrots are always on the watch.'

Guildea said the last sentence slowly and deliberately, glancing sharply over his wine at Father Murchison, and, when he had spoken it, a sudden light of comprehension dawned in the Priest's mind. He opened his lips to make a swift remark. Guildea turned his bright eyes towards Pitting, who at the moment was tenderly bearing a cheese meringue from the lift that connected the dining-room with the lower regions. The Father closed his lips again. But presently, when the butler had placed some apples on the table, had meticulously arranged the decanters, brushed away the crumbs and evaporated, he said, quickly:

'I begin to understand. You think Napoleon is aware of the intruder?'

'I know it. He has been watching my visitant ever since the night of that visitant's arrival.'

Another flash of light came to the Priest.

'That was why you covered him with green baize one evening?'

'Exactly. An act of cowardice. His behaviour was beginning to grate upon my nerves.'

Guildea pursed up his thin lips and drew his brows down, giving to his face a look of sudden pain.

'But now I intend to follow his investigations,' he added, straightening his features.

'The week I wasted at Westgate was not wasted by him in London, I can assure you.'

'Have an apple.'

'No, thank you; no, thank you.'

The Father repeated the words without knowing that he did so. Guildea pushed away his glass.

'Let us come upstairs, then.'

'No, thank you,' reiterated the Father.

'Eh?'

'What am I saying?' exclaimed the Father, getting up. 'I was thinking over this extraordinary affair.'

'Ah, you're beginning to forget the hysteria theory?'

They walked out into the passage.

'Well, you are so very practical about the whole matter.'

'Why not? Here's something very strange and abnormal come into my life. What should I do but investigate it closely and calmly?'

'What, indeed?'

The Father began to feel rather bewildered, under a sort of compulsion which seemed laid upon him to give earnest attention to a matter that ought to strike him — so he felt — as entirely absurd. When they came into the library his eyes immediately turned, with profound curiosity, towards the parrot's cage. A slight smile curled the Professor's lips. He recognised the effect he was producing upon his friend. The Father saw the smile.

'Oh, I'm not won over yet,' he said in answer to it.

'I know. Perhaps you may be before the evening is over. Here comes the coffee. After we have drunk it we'll proceed to our experiment. Leave the coffee, Pitting, and don't disturb us again.'

'No, sir.'

'I won't have it black to-night,' said the Father, 'plenty of milk, please. I don't want my nerves played upon.'

'Suppose we don't take coffee at all?' said Guildea. 'If we do, you may trot out the theory that we are not in a perfectly normal condition. I know you, Murchison, devout Priest and devout sceptic.'

The Father laughed and pushed away his cup.

'Very well, then. No coffee.'

'One cigarette, and then to business.'

The grey blue smoke curled up.

'What are we going to do?' said the Father.

He was sitting bolt upright as if ready for action. Indeed there was no suggestion of repose in the attitudes of either of the men.

'Hide ourselves, and watch Napoleon. By the way — that reminds me.'

He got up, went to a corner of the room, picked up a piece of green baize and threw it over the cage.

'I'll pull that off when we are hidden.'

'And tell me first if you have had any manifestation of this supposed presence in the last few days?'

'Merely an increasingly intense sensation of something here, perpetually watching me, perpetually attending to all my doings.'

'Do you feel that it follows you about?'

'Not always. It was in this room when you arrived. It is here now — I feel. But, in going down to dinner, we seemed to get away from it. The conclusion is that it remained here. Don't let us talk about it just now.'

They spoke of other things till their cigarettes were finished. Then, as they threw away the smouldering ash, Guildea said:

'Now, Murchison, for the sake of this experiment, I suggest that we should conceal ourselves behind the curtains on either side of the cage, so that the bird's attention

may not be drawn towards us and so distracted from that which we want to know more about. I will pull away the green baize when we are hidden. Keep perfectly still, watch the bird's proceedings, and tell me afterwards how you feel about them, how you explain them. Tread softly.'

The Father obeyed, and they stole towards the curtains that fell before the two windows. The Father concealed himself behind those on the left of the cage, the Professor behind those on the right. The latter, as soon as they were hidden, stretched out his arm, drew the baize down from the cage, and let it fall on the floor. The parrot, which had evidently fallen asleep in the warm darkness, moved on its perch as the light shone upon it, ruffled the feathers round its throat, and lifted first one foot and then the other. It turned its head round on its supple, and apparently elastic, neck, and, diving its beak into the down upon its back, made some searching investigations with, as it seemed, a satisfactory result, for it soon lifted its head again, glanced around its cage, and began to address itself to a nut which had been fixed between the bars for its refreshment. With its curved beak it felt and tapped the nut, at first gently, then with severity. Finally it plucked the nut from the bars, seized it with its rough, grey toes, and, holding it down firmly on the perch, cracked it and pecked out its contents, scattering some on the floor of the cage and letting the fractured shell fall into the china bath that was fixed against the bars. This accomplished, the bird paused meditatively, extended one leg backwards, and went through an elaborate process of wing-stretching that made it look as if it were lopsided and deformed. With its head reversed, it again applied itself to a subtle and exhaustive search among the feathers of its wing. This time its investigation seemed interminable, and Father Murchison had time to realise the absurdity of the whole position, and to wonder why he had lent himself to it. Yet he did not find his sense of humour laughing at it. On the contrary, he was smitten by a sudden gust of horror. When he was talking to his friend and watching him, the Professor's manner, generally so calm, even so prosaic, vouched for the truth of his story and the well-adjusted balance of his mind. But when he was hidden this was not so. And Father Murchison, standing behind his curtain, with his eyes upon the unconcerned Napoleon, began to whisper to himself the word — madness, with a quickening sensation of pity and of dread.

The parrot sharply contracted one wing, ruffled the feathers around its throat again, then extended its other leg backwards, and proceeded to the cleaning of its other wing. In the still room the dry sound of the feathers being spread was distinctly audible. Father Murchison saw the blue curtains behind which Guildea stood tremble slightly, as if a breath of wind had come through the window they shrouded. The clock in the far room chimed, and a coal dropped into the grate, making a noise like dead leaves stirring abruptly on hard ground. And again a gust of pity and of dread swept over the Father. It seemed to him that he had behaved very foolishly, if not wrongly, in encouraging what must surely be the strange dementia of his friend. He ought to have declined to lend himself to a proceeding that, ludicrous, even childish in itself, might well be dangerous in the

encouragement it gave to a diseased expectation. Napoleon's protruding leg, extended wing and twisted neck, his busy and unconscious devotion to the arrangement of his person, his evident sensation of complete loneliness, most comfortable solitude, brought home with vehemence to the Father the undignified buffoonery of his conduct; the more piteous buffoonery of his friend. He seized the curtains with his hand and was about to thrust them aside and issue forth, when an abrupt movement of the parrot stopped him. The bird, as if sharply attracted by something, paused in its pecking, and, with its head still bent backward and twisted sideways on its neck, seemed to listen intently. Its round eye looked glistening and strained, like the eye of a disturbed pigeon. Contracting its wing, it lifted its head and sat for a moment erect on its perch, shifting its feet mechanically up and down, as if a dawning excitement produced in it an uncontrollable desire of movement. Then it thrust its head forward in the direction of the further room and remained perfectly still. Its attitude so strongly suggested the concentration of its attention on something immediately before it, that Father Murchison instinctively stared about the room, half expecting to see Pitting advance softly, having entered through the hidden door. He did not come, and there was no sound in the chamber.

Nevertheless, the parrot was obviously getting excited and increasingly attentive. It bent its head lower and lower, stretching out its neck until, almost falling from the perch, it half extended its wings, raising them slightly from its back, as if about to take flight, and fluttering them rapidly up and down. It continued this fluttering movement for what seemed to the Father an immense time. At length, raising its wings as far as possible, it dropped them slowly and deliberately down to its back, caught hold of the edge of its bath with its beak, hoisted itself on to the floor of the cage, waddled to the bars, thrust its head against them, and stood quite still in the exact attitude it always assumed when its head was being scratched by the Professor. So complete was the suggestion of this delight conveyed by the bird, that Father Murchison felt as if he saw a white finger gently pushed among the soft feathers of its head, and he was seized by a most strong conviction that something, unseen by him but seen and welcomed by Napoleon, stood immediately before the cage.

The parrot presently withdrew its head, as if the coaxing finger had been lifted from it, and its pronounced air of acute physical enjoyment faded into one of marked attention and alert curiosity. Pulling itself up by the bars it climbed again upon its perch, sidled to the left side of the cage, and began apparently to watch something with profound interest. It bowed its head oddly, paused for a moment, then bowed its head again. Father Murchison found himself conceiving — from this elaborate movement of the head — a distinct idea of a personality. The bird's proceedings suggested extreme sentimentality combined with that sort of weak determination which is often the most persistent. Such weak determination is a very common attribute of persons who are partially idiotic. Father Murchison was moved to think of these poor creatures who will often, so strangely and unreasonably, attach themselves with persistence to those who love them least. Like many priests, he had

had some experience of them, for the amorous idiot is peculiarly sensitive to the attraction of preachers. This bowing movement of the parrot recalled to his memory a terrible, pale woman who for a time haunted all churches in which he ministered, who was perpetually endeavouring to catch his eye, and who always bent her head with an obsequious and cunningly conscious smile when she did so. The parrot went on bowing, making a short pause between each genuflection, as if it waited for a signal to be given that called into play its imitative faculty.

'Yes, yes, it's imitating an idiot,' Father Murchison caught himself saying as he watched.

And he looked again about the room, but saw nothing; except the furniture, the dancing fire, and the serried ranks of the books. Presently the parrot ceased from bowing, and assumed the concentrated and stretched attitude of one listening very keenly. He opened his beak, showing his black tongue, shut it, then opened it again. The Father thought he was going to speak, but he remained silent, although it was obvious that he was trying to bring out something. He bowed again two or three times, paused, and then, again opening his beak, made some remark. The Father could not distinguish any words, but the voice was sickly and disagreeable, a cooing and, at the same time, querulous voice, like a woman's, he thought. And he put his ear nearer to the curtain, listening with almost feverish attention. The bowing was resumed, but this time Napoleon added to it a sidling movement, affectionate and affected, like the movement of a silly and eager thing, nestling up to someone, or giving someone a gentle and furtive nudge. Again the Father thought of that terrible, pale woman who had haunted churches. Several times he had come upon her waiting for him after evening services. Once she had hung her head smiling, and lolled out her tongue and pushed against him sideways in the dark. He remembered how his flesh had shrunk from the poor thing, the sick loathing of her that he could not banish by remembering that her mind was all astray. The parrot paused, listened, opened his beak, and again said something in the same dove-like, amorous voice, full of sickly suggestion and yet hard, even dangerous, in its intonation. A loathsome voice, the Father thought it. But this time, although he heard the voice more distinctly than before, he could not make up his mind whether it was like a woman's voice or a man's — or perhaps a child's. It seemed to be a human voice, and yet oddly sexless. In order to resolve his doubt he withdrew into the darkness of the curtains, ceased to watch Napoleon and simply listened with keen attention, striving to forget that he was listening to a bird, and to imagine that he was overhearing a human being in conversation. After two or three minutes' silence the voice spoke again, and at some length, apparently repeating several times an affectionate series of ejaculations with a cooing emphasis that was unutterably mawkish and offensive. The sickliness of the voice, its falling intonations and its strange indelicacy, combined with a die-away softness and meretricious refinement, made the Father's flesh creep. Yet he could not distinguish any words, nor could he decide on the voice's sex or age. One thing alone he was certain of as he stood still in the darkness — that such a sound could only proceed from something peculiarly

loathsome, could only express a personality unendurably abominable to him, if not to everybody. The voice presently failed, in a sort of husky gasp, and there was a prolonged silence. It was broken by the Professor, who suddenly pulled away the curtains that hid the Father and said to him:

'Come out now, and look.'

The Father came into the light, blinking, glanced towards the cage, and saw Napoleon poised motionless on one foot with his head under his wing. He appeared to be asleep. The Professor was pale, and his mobile lips were drawn into an expression of extreme disgust.

'Faugh!' he said.

He walked to the windows of the further room, pulled aside the curtains and pushed the glass up, letting in the air. The bare trees were visible in the grey gloom outside. Guildea leaned out for a minute drawing the night air into his lungs. Presently he turned round to the Father, and exclaimed abruptly:

'Pestilent! Isn't it?'

'Yes — most pestilent.'

'Ever hear anything like it?'

'Not exactly.'

'Nor I. It gives me nausea, Murchison, absolute physical nausea.'

He closed the window and walked uneasily about the room.

'What d'you make of it?' he asked, over his shoulder.

'How d'you mean exactly?'

'Is it man's, woman's, or child's voice?'

'I can't tell, I can't make up my mind.'

'Nor I.'

'Have you heard it often?'

'Yes, since I returned from Westgate. There are never any words that I can distinguish. What a voice!'

He spat into the fire.

'Forgive me,' he said, throwing himself down in a chair. 'It turns my stomach — literally.'

'And mine,' said the Father truly.

'The worst of it is,' continued Guildea, with a high, nervous accent, 'that there's no brain with it, none at all — only the cunning of idiocy.'

The Father started at this exact expression of his own conviction by another.

'Why d'you start like that?' said Guildea, with a quick suspicion which showed the unnatural condition of his nerves.

'Well, the very same idea occurred to me.'

'What?'

'That I was listening to the voice of something idiotic.'

'Ah! That's the devil of it, you know, to a man like me. I could fight against brain — but this!'

He sprang up again, poked the fire violently, then stood on the hearth-rug with his

back to it, and his hands thrust into the high pockets of his trousers.

'That's the voice of the thing that's got into my house,' he said. 'Pleasant, isn't it?'

And now there was really horror in his eyes, and his voice.

'I must get it out,' he exclaimed. 'I must get it out. But how?'

He tugged at his short black beard with a quivering hand.

'How?' he continued. 'For what is it? Where is it?'

'You feel it's here — now?'

'Undoubtedly. But I couldn't tell you in what part of the room.'

He stared about, glancing rapidly at everything.

'Then you consider yourself haunted?' said Father Murchison.

He, too, was much moved and disturbed, although he was not conscious of the presence of anything near them in the room.

'I have never believed in any nonsense of that kind, as you know,' Guildea answered. 'I simply state a fact, which I cannot understand, and which is beginning to be very painful to me. There is something here. But whereas most so-called hauntings have been described to me as inimical, what I am conscious of is that I am admired, loved, desired. This is distinctly horrible to me, Murchison, distinctly horrible.'

Father Murchison suddenly remembered the first evening he had spent with Guildea, and the latter's expression almost of disgust, at the idea of receiving warm affection from anyone. In the light of that long ago conversation, the present event seemed supremely strange, and almost like a punishment for an offence committed by the Professor against humanity. But, looking up at his friend's twitching face, the Father resolved not to be caught in the net of his hideous belief.

'There can be nothing here,' he said. 'It's impossible.'

'What does that bird imitate, then?'

'The voice of someone who has been here.'

'Within the last week then. For it never spoke like that before, and mind, I noticed that it was watching and striving to imitate something before I went away, since the night that I went into the Park, only since then.'

'Somebody with a voice like that must have been here while you were away,' Father Murchison repeated, with a gentle obstinacy.

'I'll soon find out.'

Guildea pressed the bell. Pitting stole in almost immediately.

'Pitting,' said the Professor, speaking in a high, sharp voice, 'did anyone come into this room during my absence at the sea?'

'Certainly not, sir, except the maids — and me, sir.'

'Not a soul? You are certain?'

'Perfectly certain, sir.'

The cold voice of the butler sounded surprised, almost resentful. The Professor flung out his hand towards the cage.

'Has the bird been here the whole time?'

'Yes, sir.'

'He was not moved, taken elsewhere, even for a moment?'

Pitting's pale face began to look almost expressive, and his lips were pursed.

'Certainly not, sir.'

'Thank you. That will do.'

The butler retired, moving with a sort of ostentatious rectitude. When he had reached the door, and was just going out, his master called:

'Wait a minute, Pitting.'

The butler paused. Guildea bit his lips, tugged at his beard uneasily two or three times, and then said:

'Have you noticed — er — the parrot talking lately in a — a very peculiar, very disagreeable voice?'

'Yes, sir — a soft voice like, sir.'

'Ha! Since when?'

'Since you went away, sir. He's always at it.'

'Exactly. Well, and what did you think of it?'

'Beg pardon, sir?'

'What do you think about his talking in this voice?'

'Oh, that it's only his play, sir.'

'I see. That's all, Pitting.'

The butler disappeared and closed the door noiselessly behind him.

Guildea turned his eyes on his friend.

'There, you see!' he ejaculated.

'It's certainly very odd,' said the Father. 'Very odd indeed. You are certain you have no maid who talks at all like that?'

'My dear Murchison! Would you keep a servant with such a voice about you for two days?'

'No.'

'My housemaid has been with me for five years, my cook for seven. You've heard Pitting speak. The three of them make up my entire household. A parrot never speaks in a voice it has not heard. Where has it heard that voice?'

'But we hear nothing?'

'No. Nor do we see anything. But it does. It feels something too. Didn't you observe it presenting its head to be scratched?'

'Certainly it seemed to be doing so.'

'It was doing so.'

Father Murchison said nothing. He was full of interesting discomfort that almost amounted to apprehension.

'Are you convinced?' said Guildea, rather irritably.

'No. The whole matter is very strange. But till I hear, see or feel — as you do — the presence of something, I cannot believe.'

'You mean that you will not?'

'Perhaps. Well, it is time I went.'

Guildea did not try to detain him, but said, as he let him out:

'Do me a favour, come again to-morrow night.'

The Father had an engagement. He hesitated, looked into the Professor's face and said:

'I will. At nine I'll be with you. Good-night.'

When he was on the pavement he felt relieved. He turned round, saw Guildea stepping into his passage, and shivered.

- V -

Father Murchison walked all the way home to Bird Street that night. He required exercise after the strange and disagreeable evening he had spent, an evening upon which he looked back already as a man looks back upon a nightmare. In his ears, as he walked, sounded the gentle and intolerable voice. Even the memory of it caused him physical discomfort. He tried to put it from him, and to consider the whole matter calmly. The Professor had offered his proof that there was some strange presence in his house. Could any reasonable man accept such proof? Father Murchison told himself that no reasonable man could accept it. The parrot's proceedings were, no doubt, extraordinary. The bird had succeeded in producing an extraordinary illusion of an invisible presence in the room. But that there really was such a presence the Father insisted on denying to himself. The devoutly religious, those who believe implicitly in miracles recorded in the Bible, and who regulate their lives by the messages they suppose themselves to receive directly from the Great Ruler of a hidden World, are seldom inclined to accept any notion of supernatural intrusion into the affairs of daily life. They put it from them with anxious determination. They regard it fixedly as hocus-pocus, childish if not wicked.

Father Murchison inclined to the normal view of the devoted churchman. He was determined to incline to it. He could not — so he now told himself — accept the idea that his friend was being supernaturally punished for his lack of humanity, his deficiency in affection, by being obliged to endure the love of some horrible thing, which could not be seen, heard, or handled. Nevertheless, retribution did certainly seem to wait upon Guildea's condition. That which he had unnaturally dreaded and shrunk from in his thought he seemed to now be forced unnaturally to suffer. The Father prayed for his friend that night before the little, humble altar in the barely-furnished, cell-like chamber where he slept.

On the following evening, when he called in Hyde Park Place, the door was opened by the housemaid, and Father Murchison mounted the stairs, wondering what had become of Pitting. He was met at the library door by Guildea and was painfully struck by the alteration in his appearance. His face was ashen in hue, and there were lines beneath his eyes. The eyes themselves looked excited and horribly forlorn. His hair and dress were disordered and his lips twitched continually, as if he were shaken by some acute nervous apprehension.

'What has become of Pitting?' asked the Father, grasping Guildea's hot and feverish hand.

'He has left my service.'

'Left your service!' exclaimed the Father in utter amazement.

'Yes, this afternoon.'

'May one ask why?'

'I'm going to tell you. It's all part and parcel of this — this most odious business.

You remember once discussing the relations men ought to have with their servants?'

'Ah!' cried the Father, with a flash of inspiration. 'The crisis has occurred?'

'Exactly,' said the Professor, with a bitter smile. 'The crisis has occurred. I called upon Pitting to be a man and a brother. He responded by declining the invitation. I upbraided him. He gave me warning. I paid him his wages and told him he could go at once. And he has gone. What are you looking at me like that for?'

'I don't know,' said Father Murchison, hastily dropping his eyes, and looking away.

'Why,' he added. 'Napoleon is gone too.'

'I sold him to-day to one of those shops in Shaftesbury Avenue.'

'Why?'

'He sickened me with his abominable imitations of — his intercourse with — well, you know what he was at last night. Besides, I have no further need of his proof to tell me I am not dreaming. And, being convinced as I now am, that all I have thought to have happened has actually happened, I care very little about convincing others. Forgive me for saying so, Murchison, but I am now certain that my anxiety to make you believe in the presence of something here really arose from some faint doubt on that subject — within myself. All doubt has now vanished.'

'Tell me why.'

'I will.'

Both men were standing by the fire. They continued to stand while Guildea went on:

'Last night I felt it.'

'What?' cried the Father.

'I say that last night, as I was going upstairs to bed, I felt something accompanying me and nestling up against me.'

'How horrible!' exclaimed the Father, involuntarily.

Guildea smiled drearily.

'I will not deny the horror of it. I cannot, since I was compelled to call on Pitting for assistance.'

'But — tell me — what was it, at least what did it seem to be?'

'It seemed to be a human being. It seemed, I say; and what I mean exactly is that the effect upon me was rather that of human contact than of anything else. But I could see nothing, hear nothing. Only, three times, I felt this gentle, but determined, push against me, as if to coax me and to attract my attention. The first time it happened I was on the landing outside this room, with my foot on the first stair. I will confess to you, Murchison, that I bounded upstairs like one pursued. That is the shameful truth. Just as I was about to enter my bedroom, however, I felt the thing entering with me, and, as I have said, squeezing, with loathsome, sickening tenderness,

against my side. Then ——'

He paused, turned towards the fire and leaned his head on his arm. The Father was greatly moved by the strange helplessness and despair of the attitude. He laid his hand affectionately on Guildea's shoulder.

'Then?'

Guildea lifted his head. He looked painfully abashed.

'Then, Murchison, I am ashamed to say, I broke down, suddenly, unaccountably, in a way I should have thought wholly impossible to me. I struck out with my hands to thrust the thing away. It pressed more closely to me. The pressure, the contact became unbearable to me. I shouted out for Pitting. I — I believe I must have cried — 'Help.''

'He came, of course?'

'Yes, with his usual soft, unemotional quiet. His calm — its opposition to my excitement of disgust and horror — must, I suppose, have irritated me. I was not myself, no, no!'

He stopped abruptly. Then ——

'But I need hardly tell you that,' he added, with most piteous irony.

'And what did you say to Pitting?'

'I said that he should have been quicker. He begged my pardon. His cold voice really maddened me, and I burst out into some foolish, contemptible diatribe, called him a machine, taunted him, then — as I felt that loathsome thing nestling once more to me — begged him to assist me, to stay with me, not to leave me alone — I meant in the company of my tormentor. Whether he was frightened, or whether he was angry at my unjust and violent manner and speech a moment before, I don't know. In any case he answered that he was engaged as a butler, and not to sit up all night with people. I suspect he thought I had taken too much to drink. No doubt that was it. I believe I swore at him as a coward — I! This morning he said he wished to leave my service. I gave him a month's wages, a good character as a butler, and sent him off at once.'

'But the night? How did you pass it?'

'I sat up all night.'

'Where? In your bedroom?'

'Yes — with the door open — to let it go.'

'You felt that it stayed?'

'It never left me for a moment, but it did not touch me again. When it was light I took a bath, lay down for a little while, but did not close my eyes. After breakfast I had the explanation with Pitting and paid him. Then I came up here. My nerves were in a very shattered condition. Well, I sat down, tried to write, to think. But the silence was broken in the most abominable manner.'

'How?'

'By the murmur of that appalling voice, that voice of a love-sick idiot, sickly but determined. Ugh!'

He shuddered in every limb. Then he pulled himself together, resumed, with a self-

conscious effort, his most determined, most aggressive, manner, and added: 'I couldn't stand that. I had come to the end of my tether; so I sprang up, ordered a cab to be called, seized the cage and drove with it to a bird shop in Shaftesbury Avenue. There I sold the parrot for a trifle. I think, Murchison, that I must have been nearly mad then, for, as I came out of the wretched shop, and stood for an instant on the pavement among the cages of rabbits, guinea-pigs, and puppy dogs, I laughed aloud. I felt as if a load was lifted from my shoulders, as if in selling that voice I had sold the cursed thing that torments me. But when I got back to the house it was here. It's here now. I suppose it will always be here.'

He shuffled his feet on the rug in front of the fire.

'What on earth am I to do?' he said. 'I'm ashamed of myself, Murchison, but — but I suppose there are things in the world that certain men simply can't endure. Well, I can't endure this, and there's an end of the matter.'

He ceased. The Father was silent. In presence of this extraordinary distress he did not know what to say. He recognised the uselessness of trying to comfort Guildea, and he sat with his eyes turned, almost moodily, to the ground. And while he sat there he tried to give himself to the influences within the room, to feel all that was within it. He even, half-unconsciously, tried to force his imagination to play tricks with him. But he remained totally unaware of any third person with them. At length he said:

'Guildea, I cannot pretend to doubt the reality of your misery here. You must go away, and at once. When is your Paris lecture?'

'Next week. In nine days from now.'

'Go to Paris to-morrow then; you say you have never had any consciousness that this — this thing pursued you beyond your own front door?'

'Never — hitherto.'

'Go to-morrow morning. Stay away till after your lecture. And then let us see if the affair is at an end. Hope, my dear friend, hope.'

He had stood up. Now he clasped the Professor's hand.

'See all your friends in Paris. Seek distractions. I would ask you also to seek — other help.'

He said the last words with a gentle, earnest gravity and simplicity that touched Guildea, who returned his handclasp almost warmly.

'I'll go,' he said. 'I'll catch the ten o'clock train, and to-night I'll sleep at an hotel, at the Grosvenor — that's close to the station. It will be more convenient for the train.'

As Father Murchison went home that night he kept thinking of that sentence: 'It will be more convenient for the train.' The weakness in Guildea that had prompted its utterance appalled him.

- VI -

No letter came to Father Murchison from the Professor during the next few days, and this silence reassured him, for it seemed to betoken that all was well. The day of the lecture dawned, and passed. On the following morning, the Father eagerly

opened the *Times*, and scanned its pages to see if there were any report of the great meeting of scientific men which Guildea had addressed. He glanced up and down the columns with anxious eyes, then suddenly his hands stiffened as they held the sheets. He had come upon the following paragraph:

We regret to announce that Professor Frederic Guildea was suddenly seized with severe illness yesterday evening while addressing a scientific meeting in Paris. It was observed that he looked very pale and nervous when he rose to his feet. Nevertheless, he spoke in French fluently for about a quarter of an hour. Then he appeared to become uneasy. He faltered and glanced about like a man apprehensive, or in severe distress. He even stopped once or twice, and seemed unable to go on, to remember what he wished to say. But, pulling himself together with an obvious effort, he continued to address the audience. Suddenly, however, he paused again, edged furtively along the platform, as if pursued by something which he feared, struck out with his hands, uttered a loud, harsh cry and fainted. The sensation in the hall was indescribable. People rose from their seats. Women screamed, and, for a moment, there was a veritable panic. It is feared that the Professor's mind must have temporarily given way owing to overwork. We understand that he will return to England as soon as possible, and we sincerely hope that necessary rest and quiet will soon have the desired effect, and that he will be completely restored to health and enabled to prosecute further the investigations which have already so benefited the world.

The Father dropped the paper, hurried out into Bird Street, sent a wire of enquiry to Paris, and received the same day the following reply: 'Returning to-morrow. Please call evening. Guildea.' On that evening the Father called in Hyde Park Place, was at once admitted, and found Guildea sitting by the fire in the library, ghastly pale, with a heavy rug over his knees. He looked like a man emaciated by a long and severe illness, and in his wide open eyes there was an expression of fixed horror. The Father started at the sight of him, and could scarcely refrain from crying out. He was beginning to express his sympathy when Guildea stopped him with a trembling gesture.

'I know all that,' Guildea said, 'I know. This Paris affair ——' He faltered and stopped.

'You ought never to have gone,' said the Father. 'I was wrong. I ought not to have advised your going. You were not fit.'

'I was perfectly fit,' he answered, with the irritability of sickness. 'But I was — I was accompanied by that abominable thing.'

He glanced hastily round him, shifted his chair and pulled the rug higher over his knees. The Father wondered why he was thus wrapped up. For the fire was bright and red and the night was not very cold.

'I was accompanied to Paris,' he continued, pressing his upper teeth upon his lower

lip.

He paused again, obviously striving to control himself. But the effort was vain. There was no resistance in the man. He writhed in his chair and suddenly burst forth in a tone of hopeless lamentation.

'Murchison, this being, thing — whatever it is — no longer leaves me even for a moment. It will not stay here unless I am here, for it loves me, persistently, idiotically. It accompanied me to Paris, stayed with me there, pursued me to the lecture hall, pressed against me, caressed me while I was speaking. It has returned with me here. It is here now,' — he uttered a sharp cry — 'now, as I sit here with you. It is nestling up to me, fawning upon me, touching my hands. Man, man, can't you feel that it is here?'

'No,' the Father answered truly.

'I try to protect myself from its loathsome contact,' Guildea continued, with fierce excitement, clutching the thick rug with both hands. 'But nothing is of any avail against it. Nothing. What is it? What can it be? Why should it have come to me that night?'

'Perhaps as a punishment,' said the Father, with a quick softness.

'For what?'

'You hated affection. You put human feeling aside with contempt. You had, you desired to have, no love for anyone. Nor did you desire to receive any love from anything. Perhaps this is a punishment.'

Guldea stared into his face.

'D'you believe that?' he cried.

'I don't know,' said the Father. 'But it may be so. Try to endure it, even to welcome it. Possibly then the persecution will cease.'

'I know it means me no harm,' Guildea exclaimed, 'it seeks me out of affection. It was led to me by some amazing attraction which I exercise over it ignorantly. I know that. But to a man of my nature that is the ghastly part of the matter. If it would hate me, I could bear it. If it would attack me, if it would try to do me some dreadful harm, I should become a man again. I should be braced to fight against it. But this gentleness, this abominable solicitude, this brainless worship of an idiot, persistent, sickly, horribly physical, I cannot endure. What does it want of me? What would it demand of me? It nestles to me. It leans against me. I feel its touch, like the touch of a feather, trembling about my heart, as if it sought to number my pulsations, to find out the inmost secrets of my impulses and desires. No privacy is left to me.' He sprang up excitedly. 'I cannot withdraw,' he cried, 'I cannot be alone, untouched, unworshipped, unwatched for even one-half second. Murchison, I am dying of this, I am dying.'

He sank down again in his chair, staring apprehensively on all sides, with the passion of some blind man, deluded in the belief that by his furious and continued effort he will attain sight. The Father knew well that he sought to pierce the veil of the invisible, and have knowledge of the thing that loved him.

'Guildea,' the Father said, with instant earnestness, 'try to endure this — do more —

try to give this thing what it seeks.'

'But it seeks my love.'

'Learn to give it your love and it may go, having received what it came for.'

'T'sh! You talk like a priest. Suffer your persecutors. Do good to them that spitefully use you. You talk as a priest.'

'As a friend I spoke naturally, indeed, right out of my heart. The idea suddenly came to me that all this — truth or seeming, it doesn't matter which — may be some strange form of lesson. I have had lessons — painful ones. I shall have many more. If you could welcome ——'

'I can't! I can't!' Guildea cried fiercely. 'Hatred! I can give it that — always that, nothing but that — hatred, hatred.'

He raised his voice, glared into the emptiness of the room, and repeated, 'Hatred!' As he spoke the waxen pallor of his cheeks increased, until he looked like a corpse with living eyes. The Father feared that he was going to collapse and faint, but suddenly he raised himself upon his chair and said, in a high and keen voice, full of suppressed excitement:

'Murchison, Murchison!'

'Yes. What is it?'

An amazing ecstasy shone in Guildea's eyes.

'It wants to leave me,' he cried. 'It wants to go! Don't lose a moment! Let it out! The window — the window!'

The Father, wondering, went to the near window, drew aside the curtains and pushed it open. The branches of the trees in the garden creaked drily in the light wind. Guildea leaned forward on the arms of his chair. There was silence for a moment. Then Guildea, speaking in a rapid whisper, said:

'No, no. Open this door — open the hall door. I feel — I feel that it will return the way it came. Make haste — ah, go!'

The Father obeyed — to soothe him, hurried to the door and opened it wide. Then he glanced back to Guildea. He was standing up, bent forward. His eyes were glaring with eager expectation, and, as the Father turned, he made a furious gesture towards the passage with his thin hands.

The Father hastened out and down the stairs. As he descended in the twilight he fancied he heard a slight cry from the room behind him, but he did not pause. He flung the hall door open, standing back against the wall. After waiting a moment — to satisfy Guildea, he was about to close the door again, and had his hand on it, when he was attracted irresistibly to look forth towards the park. The night was lit by a young moon, and, gazing through the railings, his eyes fell upon a bench beyond them.

Upon the bench something was sitting, huddled together very strangely.

The Father remembered instantly Guildea's description of that former night, that night of Advent, and a sensation of horror-stricken curiosity stole through him. Was there then really something that had indeed come to the Professor? And had it finished its work, fulfilled its desire and gone back to its former existence?

The Father hesitated a moment in the doorway. Then he stepped out resolutely and crossed the road, keeping his eyes fixed upon this black or dark object that leaned so strangely upon the bench. He could not tell yet what it was like, but he fancied it was unlike anything with which his eyes were acquainted. He reached the opposite path, and was about to pass through the gate in the railings, when his arm was brusquely grasped. He started, turned round, and saw a policeman eyeing him suspiciously.

'What are you up to?' said the policeman.

The Father was suddenly aware that he had no hat upon his head, and that his appearance, as he stole forward in his cassock, with his eyes intently fixed upon the bench in the Park, was probably unusual enough to excite suspicion.

'It's all right, policeman,' he answered quickly, thrusting some money into the constable's hand.

Then, breaking from him, the Father hurried towards the bench, bitterly vexed at the interruption. When he reached it, nothing was there. Guildea's experience had been almost exactly repeated and, filled with unreasonable disappointment, the Father returned to the house, entered it, shut the door and hastened up the narrow stairway into the library.

On the hearthrug, close to the fire, he found Guildea lying with his head lolled against the armchair from which he had recently risen. There was a shocking expression of terror on his convulsed face. On examining him the Father found that he was dead.

The doctor, who was called in, said that the cause of death was failure of the heart. When Father Murchison was told this, he murmured:

'Failure of the heart! It was that then!'

He turned to the doctor and said:

'Could it have been prevented?'

The doctor drew on his gloves and answered:

'Possibly, if it had been taken in time. Weakness of the heart requires a great deal of care. The Professor was too much absorbed in his work. He should have lived very differently.'

The Father nodded.

'Yes, yes,' he said, sadly.