

The Vicar's Party

When Mary arrived in the Mews about eight o'clock the Sabbath silence was thick and deep. She stood still, looking to left and right. Jane was in her sitting-room; she was watching Mary, where her curtain allowed her to pull it back a half-inch and observe unseen. At length Mary seemed to make up her mind; she came towards the watching eye.

'All right, young woman,' Jane said to herself, 'I will come to the Party with you.'

She responded to the knock.

'Will you come in and have a drink?' asked Jane.

'I think so,' said Mary, nodding and smiling.

Jane did not know, of course, that this 'smashing' young beauty was in her element with those of Jane's age, though it did not take her long to notice that Mary Chillingham behaved as if she were a sister rather than a niece. She felt that this was diplomatic, but it put her at her ease. She went to her kitchen and mixed a drink, put some ice in a saucer, and returned to her sitting-room.

Her visitor had picked out one of her books, and was looking at it.

'I was looking at your Matthew Arnold's Poems.

"Apollo comes leading
His choir, the Nine,

THE RED PRIEST

The leader is fairest,
But all are divine."

She said this in a singing voice. She left the place where she had been looking at the books, saying, 'Arnold used to be my favourite poet. When I pick up "The Scholar Gipsy" or some other thing of his, I feel as I always have. Do you like him?'

'Oh yes, I do,' Jane replied. 'I like "The Scholar Gipsy" as much as any poem.'

'So do I,' said Mary. 'I am not anti-modern but I don't feel the same about the moderns. "Dover Beach" . . .'

'Yes, "Dover Beach" . . .'

'I suppose England has changed,' mused Mary. 'No one would be thinking of Sophocles on Dover Beach today . . . would they?'

Jane felt guilty. *She* would not be thinking of Sophocles. So she did not answer. She pushed the tray with the drinks towards Mary—who knew all about Sophocles! 'I hope you like them sweet?' The smart thing was to prefer them dry, and Mary, she was sure, would like them dry.

'I like them sweet,' smiled Mary.

Jane felt humiliated. Matthew Arnold was the one poet among her books that she knew practically nothing about. Arnold she had always considered terribly dull and mid-Victorian. But she had not been at Newnham. This beautiful young woman *would* pick out the one book that she had been preparing to hide away somewhere as too old fashioned.

She stood up, stepped to the window, as if to do something to a curtain, and saw that there was no light coming out of her garage. Hughie was not there—luckily, according to Jane. His offensive pleasantries would have been rather more than she could stomach. 'Two little churchgoers!' that kind of thing.

THE VICAR'S PARTY

'It is like a maze, these Mews,' Mary observed as they left the house. 'Please lead the way.' Jane took her into Blessington Street saying, 'This is the best way'.

As they walked silently along Jane was rather startled when her new friend said suddenly. 'How much do you know about Father Card?'

She could think of nothing to answer at first, but, noticing that her words had silenced Jane, more than anything else, Mary laughed.

'Sorry, my question might be interpreted in more ways than one. What I meant was that our Vicar's rôle as Priest of St Catherine and the Angels on Sundays is not where his duties end. He has a sort of school—an adults' school. Have you attended that?'

Jane had flushed, as Mary Chillingham had good-naturedly come to her assistance. Mary had a talent, it seemed, for making her look and feel like a little child. The misunderstanding of her question—such an idiotic misunderstanding; the embarrassed silence that it induced in her! What on earth could Mary's question have meant that should have embarrassed her? The clownish interpretation which Jane had admitted as a possible alternative was so utterly silly that she trembled as she strode along. Mary saw her tremble and understood. And Jane found this young woman, who was so much more mature than she was, looking at her. She was kindly providing this trembling woman with an issue from a silly-billy position.

'Yes,' said Mary. 'Father Card is, I believe, a rather remarkable man. He quite truly says that any average congregation is completely ignorant of what they are doing when they go to church. When they say what they *believe*, they do not understand what they are saying. Take God. We say we "believe", but we have no clear idea of what it is we believe. The God of the Muslims, for instance,

is without attributes. In one sense that is more defined an entity than ours; to be without any attribute is to be a kind of Nothing. But our God, for the average churchgoer, is so hazy a Something, that the Great Blank of the Muslim has more definition. Well, Father Card offers us an enlightening dissertation on such subjects as that.'

Recognising that this girl knew so much more than she did, Jane felt insignificant. She was one of those averages spoken of.

'Have you attended?' Jane stammered.

'No. As I said, I have not been to these séances. But a friend of my mother's has told us all about it. I may say that my father, and a number of other people, disapprove. They object that, though they may not be very clever, all the same they do not require instruction . . . as to how to worship. I know one man who says this of Father Card: 'if Father C. attempts to teach me how to worship, I will give him a few simple lessons in how to preserve common sense against the encroachments of smartalec-ery. Some of them are very angry. They accuse him of teaching heresies, and one man, of attempting to introduce Buddhist doctrines into Christianity. During a sermon this fellow shouted out "This is not a Buddhist temple".'

Jane was so confused by the time they reached the Clergy House that she sincerely wished she had been on her way to a performance rather than to a party at Father Card's. She nearly said goodbye to Mary at the door.

'Be brave!' Mary whispered, for she easily detected signs of wilting in her over-tall companion. 'This is a very unorthodox shop. But imagine you are visiting his Grace of Canterbury.' Mary winked, and led the way in.

As soon as they were inside they found they were in a more or less bare spacious studio. It was full of people, standing and moving about. One of the curates, namely

Horrid, posted near the door, approached them smiling, and Mary presented the card, about which there had been such excitement in the church.

'Ah, Miss Chillingham. Delighted to see you. And who have we here?'

'This is Miss Greevey,' Mary announced. 'I was so bold as to invite Miss Greevey. We were having tea together.'

'I am sure your judgement is always superlatively good,' answered Horrid. 'Let us come and drive some of those ladies away from Father Card.'

The room was over full. It had once been rented as a Studio. It stood in the back garden of the Clergy House; and it was here that Father Card was engaged in disseminating heresy, Buddhism and other things when most honest folk had finished work for the day, or so some of his parishioners asserted.

Horrid cut his way through the somewhat adhesive material of the party, with a gay 'sorry', now and then. Father Card's head rose above those in his neighbourhood. There were four women in front of him, but he could be seen to be habited in a cassock, as were his curates, but his biretta grew upon the upper groove of his forehead, and he never failed to butt at it, as if it threatened to invade his face.

Horrid, with *his* party, stood obediently beneath the gaze of his principal, but clearly with no intention of displacing the two women already in possession of the Vicar's full attention.

'Is it true, Father, that Origen was a Buddhist converted to Christianity?' was the question being addressed to him by a very determined-looking woman.

'No, Mrs Sinclair, you have been misinformed,' Father Card told her firmly. 'At one time Buddhist tenets may have been found in his teaching—a very different thing.'

'Thank you, Father. But do you, yourself, believe . . . ?'

Father Card held up his hand appealingly, with a 'Madam, you wish to fasten on me . . . ?'

Horrid signalled to his chief, and spoke.

'Father Card, excuse me, I have two ladies here.'

'Ah, good evening, Miss Chillingham.'

Those who had been conversationally in possession of Father Card looked around at Miss Chillingham. Her great beauty at once convinced them that they were *de trop*. They melted away, with smiles and slightly significant nods of the head. Horrid and his two charges stepped briskly into the vacant space.

'Nature abhors a vacuum,' murmured Horrid. 'This is Miss Chillingham *and* Miss Greevey.'

'Excellent. And keep that lady with the green hat at a distance, will you?'

'It is very kind of you, Father Card, to allow us to speak to you,' said Mary. 'Jane Greevey, who is with me, is a great admirer of your work.'

Augustine Card recognised at once that this wonderfully attractive girl was, *par dessus le marché*, intelligent. This was not from anything she had said, of course, but her manner, and the calm self-reliant light from her eyes, instead of the self-consciousness which, as a rule, went with such looks, claimed first place. For such a woman to be able to think was as rare as to find a famous man, undominated by his fame.

Immediately Father Card came to life. The 'sleepwalking thinker', as he had been described by someone, awoke. The thrusting forward of the heavily wrinkled brow, as if sleepily, almost stupidly, searching for something, was transformed—so much so that Mary Chillingham wondered if the customary mask was, in fact, a carefully considered pose. The priest sighed almost familiarly.

'It is terribly stuffy here. There is hardly room for all these people. Please come to tea with us in the Clergy House . . . there we can have a quiet talk. This is rather like a terminus on a Bank Holiday!'

Mary said how much she would like to come to tea; and, looking in a large black diary, Father Card asked if she were free on Wednesday, that was in three days' time, and Mary thanked him with unaffected alacrity.

'I wonder if you are related to Sir Richard Chillingham—you look so like him?' he asked her, with a charming smile, and when she said he was her uncle, he exclaimed, 'I could have picked you out anywhere! The resemblance is remarkable. He is a great friend of my father's.'

At this Jane Greevey drifted away . . . this is almost a family party! she thought. Seeing a portrait of Cardinal Newman hanging on the wall she glided over towards it, and, after that, she noticed a little farther on another striking head. It was Wilberforce. From the noble head of the liberator, she passed to a German portrait of Lord Acton.

By this time Jane was a long way from her friend, whose aristocratic basis had now been established, and, seeing that there was a Sir Herbert Greevey, and that he was no connection at all of hers, she felt that she had better melt into the surrounding obscurity. She was not one of the Family.

Easily evading the watchful Horrid, near the door by which they had entered, Jane departed in a mood quite unlike that in which she had originally approached Mary Chillingham.