

# **Men Like Gods**

H. G. Wells

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To Florence Lamont in whose home at Englewood this story was christened

**BOOK THE FIRST**  
**THE IRRUPTION OF THE EARTHLINGS**

# CHAPTER THE FIRST

## MR. BARNSTAPLE TAKES A HOLIDAY

### SECTION 1

Mr. Barnstaple found himself in urgent need of a holiday, and he had no one to go with and nowhere to go. He was overworked. And he was tired of home.

He was a man of strong natural affections; he loved his family extremely so that he knew it by heart, and when he was in these jaded moods it bored him acutely. His three sons, who were all growing up, seemed to get leggier and larger every day; they sat down in the chairs he was just going to sit down in; they played him off his own pianola; they filled the house with hoarse, vast laughter at jokes that one couldn't demand to be told; they cut in on the elderly harmless flirtations that had hitherto been one of his chief consolations in this vale; they beat him at tennis; they fought playfully on the landings, and fell downstairs by twos and threes with an enormous racket. Their hats were everywhere. They were late for breakfast. They went to bed every night in a storm of uproar: "Haw, Haw, Haw — bump!" and their mother seemed to like it. They all cost money, with a cheerful disregard of the fact that everything had gone up except Mr. Barnstaple's earning power. And when he said a few plain truths about Mr. Lloyd George at meal-times, or made the slightest attempt to raise the tone of the table-talk above the level of the silliest persiflage, their attention wandered ostentatiously. . . .

At any rate it *seemed* ostentatiously.

He wanted badly to get away from his family to some place where he could think of its various members with quiet pride and affection, and otherwise not be disturbed by them. . . .

And also he wanted to get away for a time from Mr. Peeve. The very streets were becoming a torment to him, he wanted never to see a newspaper or a newspaper placard again. He was obsessed by apprehensions of some sort of financial and economic smash that would make the Great War seem a mere incidental catastrophe. This was because he was sub-editor and general factotum of the *Liberal*, that well-known organ of the more depressing aspects of advanced thought, and the unvarying pessimism of Mr. Peeve, his chief, was infecting him more and more. Formerly it had been possible to put up a sort of resistance to Mr. Peeve by joking furtively about his gloom with the other members of the staff, but now there were no other members of the staff: they had all been retrenched by Mr. Peeve in a mood of financial despondency. Practically, now, nobody wrote regularly for the *Liberal* except Mr. Barnstaple and Mr. Peeve. So Mr. Peeve had it all his own way with Mr. Barnstaple. He would sit hunched up in the editorial chair, with his hands deep in his trouser pockets, taking a gloomy view of everything, sometimes for two hours together. Mr. Barnstaple's natural tendency was towards a modest hopefulness and a belief in progress, but Mr. Peeve held very strongly that a belief in progress was at least six years out of date, and that the brightest hope that remained to Liberalism was for a good Day of Judgment soon. And having

finished the copy of what the staff, when there was a staff, used to call his weekly indigest, Mr. Peeve would depart and leave Mr. Barnstaple to get the rest of the paper together for the next week.

Even in ordinary times Mr. Peeve would have been hard enough to live with; but the times were not ordinary, they were full of disagreeable occurrences that made his melancholy anticipations all too plausible. The great coal lock-out had been going on for a month and seemed to foreshadow the commercial ruin of England; every morning brought intelligence of fresh outrages from Ireland, unforgivable and unforgettable outrages; a prolonged drought threatened the harvests of the world; the League of Nations, of which Mr. Barnstaple had hoped enormous things in the great days of President Wilson, was a melancholy and self-satisfied futility; everywhere there was conflict, everywhere unreason; seven-eighths of the world seemed to be sinking down towards chronic disorder and social dissolution. Even without Mr. Peeve it would have been difficult enough to have made headway against the facts.

Mr. Barnstaple was, indeed, ceasing to secrete hope, and for such types as he, hope is the essential solvent without which there is no digesting life. His hope had always been in liberalism and generous liberal effort, but he was beginning to think that liberalism would never do anything more for ever than sit hunched up with its hands in its pockets grumbling and peeving at the activities of baser but more energetic men. Whose scrambling activities would inevitably wreck the world.

Night and day now, Mr. Barnstaple was worrying about the world at large. By night even more than by day, for sleep was leaving him. And he was haunted by a dreadful craving to bring out a number of the Liberal of his very own — to alter it all after Mr. Peeve had gone away, to cut out all the dyspeptic stuff, the miserable, empty girding at this wrong and that, the gloating on cruel and unhappy things, the exaggeration of the simple, natural, human misdeeds of Mr. Lloyd George, the appeals to Lord Grey, Lord Robert Cecil, Lord Lansdowne, the Pope, Queen Anne, or the Emperor Frederick Barbarossa (it varied from week to week), to arise and give voice and form to the young aspirations of a world reborn, and, instead, to fill the number with — Utopia! to say to the amazed readers of the Liberal: Here are things that have to be done! Here are the things we are going to do! What a blow it would be for Mr. Peeve at his Sunday breakfast! For once, too astonished to secrete abnormally, he might even digest that meal!

But this was the most foolish of dreaming. There were the three young Barnstaples at home and their need for a decent start in life to consider. And beautiful as the thing was as a dream, Mr. Barnstaple had a very unpleasant conviction that he was not really clever enough to pull such a thing off. He would make a mess of it somehow. . . .

One might jump from the frying-pan into the fire. The Liberal was a dreary, discouraging, ungenerous paper, but anyhow it was not a base and wicked paper.

Still, if there was to be no such disastrous outbreak it was imperative that Mr. Barnstaple should rest from Mr. Peeve for a time. Once or twice already he had contradicted him. A row might occur anywhen. And the first step towards resting from Mr. Peeve was evidently to see a doctor. So Mr. Barnstaple went to a doctor.

“My nerves are getting out of control,” said Mr. Barnstaple. “I feel horribly neurasthenic.”

“You are suffering from neurasthenia,” said the doctor. “I dread my daily work.”

“You want a holiday.”

“You think I need a change?”

“As complete a change as you can manage.”

“Can you recommend any place where I could go?”

“Where do you want to go?”

“Nowhere definite. I thought you could recommend —”

“Let some place attract you — and go there. Do nothing to force your inclinations at the present time.”

Mr. Barnstaple paid the doctor the sum of one guinea, and armed with these instructions prepared to break the news of his illness and his necessary absence to Mr. Peeve whenever the occasion seemed ripe for doing so.

## SECTION 2

For a time this prospective holiday was merely a fresh addition to Mr. Barnstaple's already excessive burthen of worries. To decide to get away was to find oneself face to face at once with three apparently insurmountable problems: How to get away? Whither? And since Mr. Barnstaple was one of those people who tire very quickly of their own company: With whom? A sharp gleam of furtive scheming crept into the candid misery that had recently become Mr. Barnstaple's habitual expression. But then, no one took much notice of Mr. Barnstaple's expressions.

One thing was very clear in his mind. Not a word of this holiday must be breathed at home. If once Mrs. Barnstaple got wind of it, he knew exactly what would happen. She would, with an air of competent devotion, take charge of the entire business. “You must have a *good* holiday,” she would say. She would select some rather distant and expensive resort in Cornwall or Scotland or Brittany, she would buy a lot of outfit, she would have afterthoughts to swell the luggage with inconvenient parcels at the last moment, and she would bring the boys. Probably she would arrange for one or two groups of acquaintances to come to the same place to “liven things up.” If they did they were certain to bring the worst sides of their natures with them and to develop into the most indefatigable of bores. There would be no conversation. There would be much unreal laughter, There would be endless games. . . . *No!*

But how is a man to go away for a holiday without his wife getting wind of it? Somehow a bag must be packed and smuggled out of the house. . . .

The most hopeful thing about Mr. Barnstaple's position from Mr. Barnstaple's point of view was that he owned a small automobile of his very own. It was natural that this car

should play a large part in his secret plannings. It seemed to offer the easiest means of getting away; it converted the possible answer to Whither? from a fixed and definite place into what mathematicians call, I believe, a locus; and there was something so companionable about the little beast that it did to a slight but quite perceptible extent answer the question, With whom? It was a two-seater. It was known in the family as the Foot Bath, Colman's Mustard, and the Yellow Peril. As these names suggest, it was a low, open car of a clear yellow colour. Mr. Barnstaple used it to come up to the office from Sydenham because it did thirty-three miles to the gallon and was ever so much cheaper than a season ticket. It stood up in the court under the office window during the day. At Sydenham it lived in a shed of which Mr. Barnstaple carried the only key. So far he had managed to prevent the boys from either driving it or taking it to pieces. At times Mrs. Barnstaple made him drive her about Sydenham for her shopping, but she did not really like the little car because it exposed her to the elements too much and made her dusty and dishevelled. Both by reason of all that it made possible and by reason of all that it debarred, the little car was clearly indicated as the medium for the needed holiday. And Mr. Barnstaple really liked driving it. He drove very badly, but he drove very carefully; and though it sometimes stopped and refused to proceed, it did not do, or at any rate it had not so far done as most other things did in Mr. Barnstaple's life, which was to go due east when he turned the steering wheel west. So that it gave him an agreeable sense of mastery.

In the end Mr. Barnstaple made his decisions with great rapidity. Opportunity suddenly opened in front of him. Thursday was his day at the printer's, and he came home on Thursday evening feeling horribly jaded. The weather kept obstinately hot and dry. It made it none the less distressing that this drought presaged famine and misery for half the world. And London was in full season, smart and grinning: if anything it was a sillier year than 1913, the great tango year, which, in the light of subsequent events, Mr. Barnstaple had hitherto regarded as the silliest year in the world's history. The Star had the usual batch of bad news along the margin of the sporting and fashionable intelligence that got the displayed space. Fighting was going on between the Russians and Poles, and also in Ireland, Asia Minor, the India frontier, and Eastern Siberia. There had been three new horrible murders. The miners were still out, and a big engineering strike was threatened. There had been only standing room in the down train and it had started twenty minutes late.

He found a note from his wife explaining that her cousins at Wimbledon had telegraphed that there was an unexpected chance of seeing the tennis there with Mademoiselle Lenglen and all the rest of the champions, and that she had gone over with the boys and would not be back until late. It would do their game no end of good, she said, to see some really first-class tennis. Also it was the servants' social that night. Would he mind being left alone in the house for once? The servants would put him out some cold supper before they went.

Mr. Barnstaple read this note with resignation. While he ate his supper he ran his eye over a pamphlet a Chinese friend had sent him to show how the Japanese were deliberately breaking up what was left of the civilization and education of China.



It was only as he was sitting and smoking a pipe in his little back garden after supper that he realized all that being left alone in the house meant for him.

Then suddenly he became very active. He rang up Mr. Peeve, told him of the doctor's verdict, explained that the affairs of the Liberal were just then in a particularly leavable state, and got his holiday. Then he went to his bedroom and packed up a hasty selection of things to take with him in an old Gladstone bag that was not likely to be immediately missed, and put this in the dickey of his car. After which he spent some time upon a letter which he addressed to his wife and put away very carefully in his breast pocket.

Then he locked up the car-shed and composed himself in a deck-chair in the garden with his pipe and a nice thoughtful book on the Bankruptcy of Europe, so as to look and feel as innocent as possible before his family came home.

When his wife returned he told her casually that he believed he was suffering from neurasthenia, and that he had arranged to run up to London on the morrow and consult a doctor in the matter.

Mrs. Barnstaple wanted to choose him a doctor, but he got out of that by saying that he had to consider Peeve in the matter and that Peeve was very strongly set on the man he had already in fact consulted. And when Mrs. Barnstaple said that she believed they *all* wanted a good holiday, he just grunted in a non-committal manner.

In this way Mr. Barnstaple was able to get right away from his house with all the necessary luggage for some weeks' holiday, without arousing any insurmountable opposition. He started next morning Londonward. The traffic on the way was gay and plentiful, but by no means troublesome, and the Yellow Peril was running so sweetly that she might almost have been named the Golden Hope. In Camberwell he turned into the Camberwell New Road and made his way to the post-office at the top of Vauxhall Bridge Road. There he drew up. He was scared but elated by what he was doing. He went into the post-office and sent his wife a telegram. "Dr. Pagan," he wrote, "says solitude and rest urgently needed so am going off Lake District recuperate have got bag and things expecting this letter follows."

Then he came outside and fumbled in his pocket and produced and posted the letter he had written so carefully overnight. It was deliberately scrawled to suggest neurasthenia at an acute phase. Dr. Pagan, it explained, had ordered an immediate holiday and suggested that Mr. Barnstaple should "wander north." It would be better to cut off all letters for a few days, or even a week or so. He would not trouble to write unless something went wrong. No news would be good news. Rest assured all would be well. As soon as he had a certain address for letters he would wire it, but only very urgent things were to be sent on.

After this he resumed his seat in his car with such a sense of freedom as he had never felt since his first holidays from his first school. He made for the Great North Road, but at the traffic jam at Hyde Park Corner he allowed the policeman to turn him down towards Knightsbridge, and afterwards at the corner where the Bath Road forks away

from the Oxford Road an obstructive van put him into the former. But it did not matter very much. Any way led to Elsewhere and he could work northward later.

### SECTION 3

The day was one of those days of gay sunshine that were characteristic of the great drought of 1921. It was not in the least sultry. Indeed there was a freshness about it that blended with Mr. Barnstaple's mood to convince him that there were quite agreeable adventures before him. Hope had already returned to him. He knew he was on the way out of things, though as yet he had not the slightest suspicion how completely out of things the way was going to take him. It would be quite a little adventure presently to stop at an inn and get some lunch, and if he felt lonely as he went on he would give somebody a lift and talk. It would be quite easy to give people lifts because so long as his back was generally towards Sydenham. and the Liberal office, it did not matter at all now in which direction he went.

A little way out of Slough he was passed by an enormous grey touring car. It made him start and swerve. It came up alongside him without a sound, and though according to his only very slightly inaccurate speedometer, he was doing a good twenty-seven miles an hour, it had passed him in a moment. Its occupants, he noted, were three gentlemen and a lady. They were all sitting up and looking backward as though they were interested in something that was following them. They went by too quickly for him to note more than that the lady was radiantly lovely in an immediate and indisputable way, and that the gentleman nearest to him had a peculiarly elfin yet elderly face.

Before he could recover from the eclat of this passage a car with the voice of a prehistoric saurian warned him that he was again being overtaken. This was how Mr. Barnstaple liked being passed. By negotiation. He slowed down, abandoned any claim to the crown of the road and made encouraging gestures with his hand. A large, smooth, swift Limousine availed itself of his permission to use the thirty odd feet or so of road to the right of him. It was carrying a fair load of luggage, but except for a young gentleman with an eye-glass who was sitting beside the driver, he saw nothing of its passengers. It swept round a corner ahead in the wake of the touring car.

Now even a mechanical foot-bath does not like being passed in this lordly fashion on a bright morning on the open road. Mr. Barnstaple's accelerator went down and he came round that corner a good ten miles per hour faster than his usual cautious practice. He found the road quite clear ahead of him.

Indeed he found the road much too clear ahead of him. It stretched straight in front of him for perhaps a third of a mile. On the left were a low, well-trimmed hedge, scattered trees, level fields, some small cottages lying back, remote poplars, and a distant view of Windsor Castle. On the right were level fields, a small inn, and a background of low, wooded hills. A conspicuous feature in this tranquil landscape was the board advertisement of a riverside hotel at Maidenhead. Before him was a sort of heat flicker in the air and two or three little dust whirls spinning along the road. And there was not a sign of the grey touring car and not a sign of the Limousine.

It took Mr. Barnstaple the better part of two seconds to realize the full astonishment of this fact. Neither to right nor left was there any possible side road down which either car could have vanished. And if they had already got round the further bend, then they must be travelling at the rate of two or three hundred miles per hour!

It was Mr. Barnstaple's excellent custom whenever he was in doubt to slow down. He slowed down now. He went on at a pace of perhaps fifteen miles an hour, staring open-mouthed about the empty landscape for some clue to this mysterious disappearance. Curiously enough he had no feeling that he himself was in any sort of danger.

Then his car seemed to strike something and skidded. It skidded round so violently that for a moment or so Mr. Barnstaple lost his head. He could not remember what ought to be done when a car skids. He recalled something vaguely about steering in the direction in which the car is skidding, but he could not make out in the excitement of the moment in what direction the car was skidding.

Afterwards he remembered that at this point he heard a sound. It was exactly the same sound, coming as the climax of an accumulating pressure, sharp like the snapping of a lute string, which one hears at the end — or beginning — of insensibility under anaesthetics.

He had seemed to twist round towards the hedge on the right, but now he found the road ahead of him again. He touched his accelerator and then slowed down and stopped. He stopped in the profoundest astonishment.

This was an entirely different road from the one he had been upon half a minute before. The hedges had changed, the trees had altered, Windsor Castle had vanished, and — a small compensation — the big Limousine was in sight again. It was standing by the roadside about two hundred yards away,

## CHAPTER THE SECOND

### THE WONDERFUL ROAD

#### SECTION 1

For a time Mr. Barnstaple's attention was very unequally divided between the Limousine, whose passengers were now descending, and the scenery about him. This latter was indeed so strange and beautiful that it was only as people who must be sharing his admiration and amazement and who therefore might conceivably help to elucidate and relieve his growing and quite overwhelming perplexity, that the little group ahead presently arose to any importance in his consciousness.

The road itself instead of being the packed together pebbles and dirt smeared with tar with a surface of grit, dust, and animal excrement, of a normal English high road, was apparently made of glass, clear in places as still water and in places milky or opalescent, shot with streaks of soft colour or glittering richly with clouds of embedded golden flakes. It was perhaps twelve or fifteen yards wide. On either side was a band of greensward, of a finer grass than Mr. Barnstaple had ever seen before — and he was an expert and observant mower of lawns — and beyond this a wide border of flowers. Where Mr. Barnstaple sat agape in his car and perhaps for thirty yards in either direction this border was a mass of some unfamiliar blossom of forget-me-not blue. Then the colour was broken by an increasing number of tall, pure white spikes that finally ousted the blue altogether from the bed. On the opposite side of the way these same spikes were mingled with masses of plants bearing seed-pods equally strange to Mr. Barnstaple, which varied through a series of blues and mauves and purples to an intense crimson. Beyond this gloriously coloured foam of flowers spread flat meadows on which creamy cattle were grazing. Three close at hand, a little startled perhaps by Mr. Barnstaple's sudden apparition, chewed the cud and regarded him with benevolently speculative eyes. They had long horns and dewlaps like the cattle of South Europe and India. From these benign creatures Mr. Barnstaple's eyes went to a long line of flame-shaped trees, to a colonnade of white and gold, and to a background of snow-clad mountains. A few tall, white clouds were sailing across a sky of dazzling blue. The air impressed Mr. Barnstaple as being astonishingly clear and sweet.

Except for the cows and the little group of people standing by the Limousine Mr. Barnstaple could see no other living creature. The motorists were standing still and staring about them. A sound of querulous voices came to him.

A sharp crepitation at his back turned Mr. Barnstaple's attention round. By the side of the road in the direction from which conceivably he had come were the ruins of what appeared to be a very recently demolished stone house. Beside it were two large apple trees freshly twisted and riven, as if by some explosion, and out of the centre of it came a column of smoke and this sound of things catching fire. And the contorted lines of these shattered apple trees helped Mr. Barnstaple to realize that some of the flowers by the wayside near at hand were also bent down to one side as if by the passage of a recent violent gust of wind. Yet he had heard no explosion nor felt any wind.

He stared for a time and then turned as if for an explanation to the Limousine. Three of these people were now coming along the road towards him, led by a tall, slender, grey-headed gentleman in a felt hat and a long motoring dust-coat. He had a small upturned face with a little nose that scarce sufficed for the springs of his gilt glasses. Mr. Barnstaple restarted his engine and drove slowly to meet them.

As soon as he judged himself within hearing distance he stopped and put his head over the side of the Yellow Peril with a question. At the same moment the tall, grey-headed gentleman asked practically the same question: "Can you tell me at all, sir, where we *are*?"

## SECTION 2

"Five minutes ago," said Mr. Barnstaple, "I should have said we were on the Maidenhead Road. Near Slough."

"Exactly!" said the tall gentleman in earnest, argumentative tones. "Exactly! And I maintain that there is not the slightest reason for supposing that we are not still on the Maidenhead Road."

The challenge of the dialectician rang in his voice.

"It doesn't *look* like the Maidenhead Road," said Mr. Barnstaple.

"Agreed! But are we to judge by appearances or are we to judge by the direct continuity of our experience? The Maidenhead Road led to this, was in continuity with this, and therefore I hold that this is the Maidenhead Road."

"Those mountains?" considered Mr. Barnstaple.

"Windsor Castle ought to be there," said the tall gentleman brightly as if he gave a point in a gambit.

"*Was* there five minutes ago," said Mr. Barnstaple.

"Then obviously those mountains are some sort of a camouflage," said the tall gentleman triumphantly, "and the whole of this business is, as they say nowadays, a put-up thing."

"It seems to be remarkably well put up," said Mr. Barnstaple.

Came a pause during which Mr. Barnstaple surveyed the tall gentleman's companions. The tall gentleman he knew perfectly well. He had seen him a score of times at public meetings and public dinners. He was Mr. Cecil Burleigh, the great Conservative leader. He was not only distinguished as a politician; he was eminent as a private gentleman, a philosopher and a man of universal intelligence. Behind him stood a short, thick-set, middle-aged young man, unknown to Mr. Barnstaple, the natural hostility of whose appearance was greatly enhanced by an eye-glass. The third member of the little group was also a familiar form, but for a time Mr. Barnstaple could not place him. He had a

clean-shaven, round, plump face and a well-nourished person and his costume suggested either a High Church clergyman or a prosperous Roman Catholic priest.

The young man with the eye-glass now spoke in a kind of impotent falsetto. "I came down to Taplow Court by road not a month ago and there was certainly nothing of this sort on the way then."

"I admit there are difficulties," said Mr. Burleigh with gusto. "I admit there are considerable difficulties. Still, I venture to think my main proposition holds."

"*You* don't think this is the Maidenhead Road?" said the gentleman with the eye-glass flatly to Mr. Barnstaple.

"It seems too perfect for a put-up thing," said Mr. Barnstaple with a mild obstinacy.

"But, my dear Sir!" protested Mr. Burleigh, "this road is *notorious* for nursery seedsmen and sometimes they arrange the most astonishing displays. As an advertisement."

"Then why don't we go straight on to Taplow Court now?" asked the gentleman with the eye-glass.

"Because," said Mr. Burleigh, with the touch of asperity natural when one has to insist on a fact already clearly known, and obstinately overlooked, "Rupert insists that we are in some other world. And won't go on. That is why. He has always had too much imagination. He thinks that things that don't exist *can* exist. And now he imagines himself in some sort of scientific romance and out of our world altogether. In another dimension. I sometimes think it would have been better for all of us if Rupert had taken to writing romances — instead of living them. If you, as his secretary, think that you will be able to get him on to Taplow in time for lunch with the Windsor people —"

Mr. Burleigh indicated by a gesture ideas for which he found words inadequate.

Mr. Barnstaple had already noted a slow-moving, intent, sandy-complexioned figure in a grey top hat with a black band that the caricaturists had made familiar, exploring the flowery tangle beside the Limousine. This then must be no less well-known person than Rupert Catskill, the Secretary of State for War.

For once Mr. Barnstaple found himself in entire agreement with this all too adventurous politician. This *was* another world. Mr. Barnstaple got out of his car and addressed himself to Mr. Burleigh. "I think we may get a lot of light upon just where we are, Sir, if we explore this building which is burning here close at hand. I thought just now that I saw a figure lying on the slope close behind it. If we could catch one of the hoaxers —"

He left his sentence unfinished because he did not believe for a moment that they were being hoaxed. Mr. Burleigh had fallen very much in his opinion in the last five minutes.

All four men turned their faces to the smoking ruin.

"It's a very extraordinary thing that there isn't a soul in sight," remarked the eye-glass gentleman searching the horizon.

“Well, I see no harm whatever in finding out what is burning,” said Mr. Burleigh and led the way, upholding an intelligent, anticipatory face, towards the wrecked house between the broken trees.

But before he had gone a dozen paces the attention of the little group was recalled to the Limousine by a loud scream of terror from the lady who had remained seated therein.

### SECTION 3

“Really this is too much!” cried Mr. Burleigh with a note of genuine exasperation. “There must surely be police regulations to prevent this kind of thing.”

“It’s out of some travelling menagerie,” said the gentleman with the eye-glass. “What ought we to do?”

“It looks tame,” said Mr. Barnstaple, but without any impulse to put his theory to the test.

“It might easily frighten people very seriously,” said Mr. Burleigh. And lifting up a bland voice he shouted: “Don’t be alarmed, Stella! It’s probably quite tame and harmless. Don’t *irritate* it with that sunshade. It might fly at you. *Stel-la!*”

“It” was a big and beautifully marked leopard which had come very softly out of the flowers and sat down like a great cat in the middle of the glass road at the side of the big car. It was blinking and moving its head from side to side rhythmically, with an expression of puzzled interest, as the lady, in accordance with the best traditions of such cases, opened and shut her parasol at it as rapidly as she could. The chauffeur had taken cover behind the car. Mr. Rupert Catskill stood staring, knee-deep in flowers, apparently only made aware of the creature’s existence by the same scream that had attracted the attention of Mr. Burleigh and his companions.

Mr. Catskill was the first to act, and his act showed his mettle. It was at once discreet and bold. “Stop flopping that sunshade, Lady Stella,” he said. “Let me — I will — catch its eye.”

He made a detour round the car so as to come face to face with the animal. Then for a moment he stood, as it were displaying himself, a resolute little figure in a grey frock coat and a black-banded top hat. He held out a cautious hand, not too suddenly for fear of startling the creature. “Poosy!” he said.

The leopard, relieved by the cessation of Lady Stella’s sunshade, regarded him with interest and curiosity. He drew closer. The leopard extended its muzzle and sniffed.

“If it will only let me stroke it,” said Mr. Catskill, and came within arm’s length.

The beast sniffed the extended hand with an expression of incredulity. Then with a suddenness that sent Mr. Catskill back several paces, it sneezed. It sneezed again much more violently, regarded Mr. Catskill reproachfully for a moment and then leapt lightly over the flower-bed and made off in the direction of the white and golden

colonnade. The grazing cattle in the field, Mr. Barnstaple noted, watched its passage without the slightest sign of dismay.

Mr. Catskill remained in a slightly expanded state in the middle of the road. "No animal," he remarked, "can stand up to the steadfast gaze of the human eye. Not one. It is a riddle for your materialist. . . . Shall we join Mr. Cecil, Lady Stella? He seems to have found something to look at down there. The man in the little yellow car may know where he is. Hm?"

He assisted the lady to get out of the car and the two came on after Mr. Barnstaple's party, which was now again approaching the burning house. The chauffeur, evidently not wishing to be left alone with the Limousine in this world of incredible possibilities, followed as closely as respect permitted.



## CHAPTER THE THIRD

### THE BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE

#### SECTION 1

The fire in the little house did not seem to be making headway. The smoke that came from it was much less now than when Mr. Barnstaple had first observed it. As they came close they found a quantity of twisted bits of bright metal and fragments of broken glass among the shattered masonry. The suggestion of exploded scientific apparatus was very strong. Then almost simultaneously the entire party became aware of a body lying on the grassy slope behind the ruins. It was the body of a man in the prime of life, naked except for a couple of bracelets and a necklace and girdle, and blood was oozing from his mouth and nostrils. With a kind of awe Mr. Barnstaple knelt down beside this prostrate figure and felt its still heart. He had never seen so beautiful a face and body before.

“*Dead,*” he whispered.

“Look!” cried the shrill voice of the man with the eye-glass. “Another!”

He was pointing to something that was hidden from Mr. Barnstaple by a piece of wall. Mr. Barnstaple had to get up and climb over a heap of rubble before he could see this second find. It was a slender girl, clothed as little as the man. She had evidently been flung with enormous violence against the wall and killed instantaneously. Her face was quite undistorted although her skull had been crushed in from behind; her perfect mouth and green-grey eyes were a little open and her expression was that of one who is still thinking out some difficult but interesting problem. She did not seem in the least dead but merely disregarded. One hand still grasped a copper implement with a handle of glass. The other lay limp and prone.

For some seconds nobody spoke. It was as if they all feared to interrupt the current of her thoughts.

Then Mr. Barnstaple heard the voice of the priestly gentleman speaking very softly behind him. “What a *perfect* form!” he said.

“I admit I was wrong,” said Mr. Burleigh with deliberation. “I have been wrong. . . . These are no earthly people. Manifestly. And ergo, we are not on earth. I cannot imagine what has happened nor where we are. In the face of sufficient evidence I have never hesitated to retract an opinion. This world we are in is not our world. It is something —”

He paused. “It is something very wonderful indeed.”

“And the Windsor party,” said Mr. Catskill without any apparent regret, “must have its lunch without us.”

“But then,” said the clerical gentleman, “what world *are* we in, and how did we get here?”

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