ANTIC HAY

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My men like satyrs grazing on the lawns
Shall with their goat-feet dance the antic hay.

Marlowe

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CHAPTER I

GUMBRIL, Theodore Gumbril Junior, B.A.Oxon., sat in his oaken stall on the north side of the School Chapel and wondered, as he listened through the uneasy silence of half a thousand schoolboys to the First Lesson, pondered, as he looked up at the vast window opposite, all blue and jaundiced and bloody with nineteenth-century glass, speculated in his rapid and rambling way about the existence and the nature of God.

Standing in front of the spread brass eagle and fortified in his convictions by the sixth chapter of Deuteronomy (for this first Sunday of term was the Fifth after Easter), the Reverend Pelvey could speak of these things with an enviable certainty. "Hear, O Israel," he was booming out over the top of the portentous Book: "the Lord our God is one Lord."

One Lord; Mr. Pelvey knew; he had studied theology. But if theology and theosophy, then why not theography and theometry, why not theognomy, theotrophy, theotomy, theogamy? Why not theophysics and theo-chemistry? Why not that ingenious toy, the theotrope or wheel of gods? Why not a monumental theodrome?

In the great window opposite, young David stood like a cock, crowing on the dunghill of a tumbled giant. From the middle of Goliath's forehead there issued, like a narwhal's budding horn, a curious excrescence. Was it the embedded pebble? Or perhaps the giant's married life.

" . . . with all thine heart," declaimed the Reverend Pelvey, " and with all thy soul, and with all thy might."

No, but seriously, Gumbril reminded himself, the problem was very troublesome indeed. God as a sense of warmth about the heart, God as exultation, God as tears in the eyes, God as a rush of power or thought—that was all right. But God as truth, God as 2+2=4—that wasn't so clearly all right. Was there any chance of their being the same? Were there bridges to join the two worlds? And could it be that the Reverend Pelvey, M.A., foghorning away from behind the imperial bird, could it be that he had an answer and a clue? That was hardly believable. Particularly if one knew Mr. Pelvey personally. And Gumbril did.

" And these words which I command thee this day," retorted Mr. Pelvey, " shall be in thine heart."

Or in the heart, or in the head? Reply, Mr. Pelvey, reply. Gumbril jumped between the horns of the dilemma and voted for other organs.

" And thou shalt teach them diligently to thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up."

Diligently to thy children. . . . Gumbril remembered his own childhood; they had not been very diligently taught to him. ' Beetles, black beetles '—his father had a really passionate feeling about the clergy. Mumbo-jumbery was another of his favourite words. An atheist and an anti-clerical of the strict old school he was. Not that, in any case, he gave himself much time to think about these things; he was too busy being an unsuccessful architect. As for Gumbril's mother, her diligence had not

been dogmatic. She had just been diligently good, that was all. Good; good? It was a word people only used nowadays with a kind of deprecating humorousness. Good. Beyond good and evil? We are all that nowadays. Or merely below them, like earwigs? I glory in the name of earwig. Gumbril made a mental gesture and inwardly declaimed. But good in any case, there was no getting out of that, good she had been. Not nice, not merely *molto simpatica*—how charmingly and effectively these foreign tags assist one in the great task of calling a spade by some other name!—but good. You felt the active radiance of her goodness when you were near her. . . . And that feeling, was that less real and valid than two plus two?

The Reverend Pelvey had nothing to reply. He was reading with a holy gusto of "houses full of all good things, which thou filledst not, and wells digged, which thou diggedst not, vineyards and olive trees, which thou plantedst not."

She had been good and she had died when he was still a boy; died—but he hadn't been told that till much later—of creeping and devouring pain. Malignant disease—oh, *caro nome*!

"Thou shalt fear the Lord thy God," said Mr. Pelvey.

Even when the ulcers are benign; thou shalt fear. He had travelled up from school to see her, just before she died. He hadn't known that she was going to die, but when he entered her room, when he saw her lying so weakly in the bed, he had suddenly begun to cry, uncontrollably. All the fortitude, the laughter even, had been hers. And she had spoken to him. A few words only; but they had contained all the wisdom he needed to live by. She had told him what he was, and what he should try to be, and

how to be it. And crying, still crying, he had promised that he would try.

"And the Lord commanded us to do all these statutes," said Mr. Pelvey, "for our good always, that he might preserve us alive, as it is at this day."

And had he kept his promise, Gumbril wondered, had he preserved himself alive?

"Here endeth the First Lesson." Mr. Pelvey retreated from the eagle, and the organ presaged the coming *Te Deum*.

Gumbril hoisted himself to his feet; the folds of his B.A. gown billowed nobly about him as he rose. He sighed and shook his head with the gesture of one who tries to shake off a fly or an importunate thought. When the time came for singing, he sang. On the opposite side of the chapel two boys were grinning and whispering to one another behind their lifted Prayer Books. Gumbril frowned at them ferociously. The two boys caught his eye and their faces at once took on an expression of sickly piety; they began to sing with unction. They were two ugly, stupid-looking louts, who ought to have been apprenticed years ago to some useful trade. Instead of which they were wasting their own and their teacher's and their more intelligent comrades' time in trying, quite vainly, to acquire an elegant literary education. The minds of dogs, Gumbril reflected, do not benefit by being treated as though they were the minds of men.

"O Lord, have mercy upon us: have mercy upon us."

Gumbril shrugged his shoulders and looked round the chapel at the faces of the boys. Lord, indeed, have mercy upon us! He was disturbed to find the sentiment echoed on a somewhat different note in the Second Lesson, which was drawn from the twenty-third chapter of St. Luke.

"Father, forgive them," said Mr. Pelvey in his unvaryingly juicy voice; "for they know not what they do." Ah, but suppose one did know what one was doing? suppose one knew only too well? And of course one always did know. One was not a fool.

But this was all nonsense, all nonsense. One must think of something better than this. What a comfort it would be, for example, if one could bring air cushions into chapel! These polished oaken stalls were devilishly hard; they were meant for stout and lusty pedagogues, not for bony starvelings like himself. An air cushion, a delicious pneu.

"Here endeth," boomed Mr. Pelvey, closing his book on the back of the German eagle.

As if by magic, Dr. Jolly was ready at the organ with the *Benedictus*. It was positively a relief to stand again; this oak was adamantine. But air cushions, alas, would be too bad an example for the boys. Hardy young Spartans! it was an essential part of their education that they should listen to the word of revelation without pneumatic easement. No, air cushions wouldn't do. The real remedy, it suddenly flashed across his mind, would be trousers with pneumatic seats. For all occasions; not merely for church-going.

The organ blew a thin Puritan-preacher's note through one of its hundred nostrils. "I believe . . ." With a noise like the breaking of a wave, five hundred turned towards the East. The view of David and Goliath was exchanged for a Crucifixion in the grand manner of eighteen hundred and sixty. "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." No, no, Gumbril preferred to look at the grooved stonework rushing smoothly up on either side of the great east window towards the vaulted roof; preferred

to reflect, like the dutiful son of an architect he was, that Perpendicular at its best—and its best is its largest—is the finest sort of English Gothic. At its worst and smallest, as in most of the colleges of Oxford, it is mean, petty, and, but for a certain picturesqueness, almost wholly disgusting. He felt like a lecturer : next slide, please. " And the life everlasting. Amen." Like an oboe, Mr. Pelvey intoned : " The Lord be with you."

For prayer, Gumbril reflected, there would be Dunlop knees. Still, in the days when he had made a habit of praying, they hadn't been necessary. " Our Father . . ." The words were the same as they were in the old days ; but Mr. Pelvey's method of reciting them made them sound rather different. Her dresses, when he had leaned his forehead against her knee to say those words—those words, good Lord ! that Mr. Pelvey was oboeing out of existence—were always black in the evenings, and of silk, and smelt of orris root. And when she was dying, she had said to him : " Remember the Parable of the Sower, and the seeds that fell in shallow ground." No, no. Amen, decidedly. " O Lord, show thy mercy upon us," chanted oboe Pelvey, and Gumbril trombone responded, profoundly and grotesquely : " And grant us thy salvation." No, the knees were obviously less important, except for people like revivalists and housemaids, than the seat. Sedentary are commoner than genuflectory professions. One would introduce little flat rubber bladders between two layers of cloth. At the upper end, hidden when one wore a coat, would be a tube with a valve : like a hollow tail. Blow it up—and there would be perfect comfort even for the boniest, even on rock. How did the Greeks stand marble benches in their theatres ?

The moment had now come for the Hymn. This being the first Sunday of the Summer term, they sang that special hymn, written by the Headmaster, with music by Dr. Jolly, on purpose to be sung on the first Sundays of terms. The organ quietly sketched out the tune. Simple it was, uplifting and manly.

One, two, three, four ; one, two THREE—4.
One, two-and three-and four-and ; One, two THREE—4.
ONE—2, THREE—4 ; ONE—2—3—4,
and-ONE—2, THREE—4 ; ONE—2—3—4.
One, two-and three, four ; One, two THREE—4.

Five hundred flawed adolescent voices took it up. For good example's sake, Gumbril opened and closed his mouth ; noiselessly, however. It was only at the third verse that he gave rein to his uncertain baritone. He particularly liked the third verse ; it marked, in his opinion, the Headmaster's highest poetical achievement.

(*f*) For slack hands and (*dim.*) idle minds
(*mf*) Mischief still the Tempter finds.
(*ff*) Keep him captive in his lair.

At this point Dr. Jolly enriched his tune with a thick accompaniment in the lower registers, artfully designed to symbolize the depth, the gloom and general repulsiveness of the Tempter's home.

(*ff*) Keep him captive in his lair.
(*f*) Work will bind him. (*dim.*) Work is (*pp*) prayer.

Work, thought Gumbril, work. Lord, how passionately he disliked work ! Let Austin have his swink to him reserved ! Ah, if only one had work of one's own, proper

work, decent work—not forced upon one by the griping of one's belly! Amen! Dr. Jolly blew the two sumptuous jets of reverence into the air; Gumbril accompanied them with all his heart. Amen, indeed.

Gumbril sat down again. It might be convenient, he thought, to have the tail so long that one could blow up one's trousers while one actually had them on. In which case, it would have to be coiled round the waist like a belt; or looped up, perhaps, and fastened to a clip on one's braces.

"The nineteenth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, part of the thirty-fourth verse." The Headmaster's loud, harsh voice broke violently out from the pulpit. "All with one voice for the space of about two hours cried out, Great is Diana of the Ephesians."

Gumbril composed himself as comfortably as he could on his oaken seat. It was going to be one of the Headmaster's real swingeing sermons. Great is Diana. And Venus? Ah, these seats, these seats!

Gumbril did not attend evening chapel. He stayed at home in his lodgings to correct the sixty-three Holiday Task Papers which had fallen to his share. They lay, thick piles of them, on the floor beside his chair: sixty-three answers to ten questions about the Italian Risorgimento. The Risorgimento, of all subjects! It had been one of the Headmaster's caprices. He had called a special master's meeting at the end of last term to tell them all about the Risorgimento. It was his latest discovery.

"The Risorgimento, gentlemen, is the most important event in modern European history." And he had banged the table; he had looked defiantly round the room in search of contradictors.

But nobody had contradicted him. Nobody ever did;

they all knew better. For the Headmaster was as fierce as he was capricious. He was for ever discovering something new. Two terms ago it had been singeing; after the hair-cut and before the shampoo, there must be singeing.

"The hair, gentlemen, is a tube. If you cut it and leave the end unsealed, the water will get in and rot the tube. Hence the importance of singeing, gentlemen. Singeing seals the tube. I shall address the boys about it after chapel to-morrow morning; and I trust that all house-masters"—and he had glared around him from under his savage eyebrows—"will see that their boys get themselves regularly singed after cutting."

For weeks afterwards every boy trailed behind him a faint and nauseating whiff of burning, as though he were fresh from hell. And now it was the Risorgimento. One of these days, Gumbril reflected, it would be birth control, or the decimal system, or rational dress.

He picked up the nearest batch of papers. The printed questions were pinned to the topmost of them.

"Give a brief account of the character and career of Pope Pius IX, *with dates wherever possible*."

Gumbril leaned back in his chair and thought of his own character, with dates. 1896: the first serious and conscious and deliberate lie. Did you break that vase, Theodore? No, mother. It lay on his conscience for nearly a month, eating deeper and deeper. Then he had confessed the truth. Or rather he had not confessed; that was too difficult. He led the conversation, very subtly, as he thought, round through the non-malleability of glass, through breakages in general, to this particular broken vase; he practically forced his mother to repeat her question. And then, with a burst of tears, he had answered,

yes. It had always been difficult for him to say things directly, point-blank. His mother had told him, when she was dying. . . . No, no; not that.

In 1898 or 1899—oh, these dates!—he had made a pact with his little cousin, Molly, that she should let him see her with no clothes on, if he would do the same by her. She had fulfilled her part of the bargain; but he, overwhelmed at the last moment by a passion of modesty, had broken his promise.

Then, when he was about twelve and still at his preparatory school, in 1902 or 1903 he had done badly in his exams., on purpose; he had been frightened of Sadler, who was in the same form, and wanted to get the prize. Sadler was stronger than he was, and had a genius for persecution. He had done so badly that his mother was unhappy; and it was impossible for him to explain.

In 1906 he had fallen in love for the first time—ah, much more violently than ever since—with a boy of his own age. Platonic it had been and profound. He had done badly that term, too; not on purpose, but because he had spent so much time helping young Vickers with his work. Vickers was really very stupid. The next term he had 'come out'—*Staphylococcus pyogenes* is a lover of growing adolescence—with spots and boils all over his face and neck. Gumbril's affection ceased as suddenly as it had begun. He finished that term, he remembered, with a second prize.

But it was time to be thinking seriously of Pio Nono. With a sigh of disgusted weariness, Gumbril looked at his papers. What had Falarope Major to say of the Pontiff? "Pius IX was called Ferretti. He was a liberal before he was a Pope. A kindly man of less than average intelli-

gence, he thought that all difficulties could be settled by a little goodwill, a few reforms and a political amnesty. He wrote several encyclicals and a syllabus." Gumbril admired the phrase about less than average intelligence; Falarope Major should have at least one mark for having learnt it so well by heart. He turned to the next paper. Higgs was of opinion that "Pius the Ninth was a good but stupid man, who thought he could settle the Risorgimento with a few reforms and a political armistice." Beddoes was severer. "Pius IX was a bad man, who said that he was infallible, which showed he had a less than average intelligence." Sopwith Minor shared the general opinion about Pio's intelligence, and displayed a great familiarity with the wrong dates. Clegg-Weller was voluminous and informative. "Pius IX was not so clever as his prime minister, Cardinal Antonelli. When he came to the tiara he was a liberal, and Metternich said he had never reckoned on a liberal pope. He then became a conservative. He was kindly, but not intelligent, and he thought Garibaldi and Cavour would be content with a few reforms and an amnesty." At the top of Garstang's paper was written: "I have had measles all the holidays, so have been unable to read more than the first thirty pages of the book. Pope Pius IX does not come into these pages, of the contents of which I will proceed to give the following précis." And the précis duly followed. Gumbril would have liked to give him full marks. But the business-like answer of Appleyard called him back to a better sense of his duty. "Pius IX became Pope in 1846 and died in 1878. He was a kindly man, but his intelligence was below the . . ."

Gumbril laid the paper down and shut his eyes. No, this was really impossible. Definitely, it couldn't go on,

it could not go on. There were thirteen weeks in the summer term, there would be thirteen in the autumn and eleven or twelve in the spring ; and then another summer of thirteen, and so it would go on for ever. For ever. It wouldn't do. He would go away and live uncomfortably on his three hundred. Or, no, he would go away and he would make money—that was more like it—money on a large scale, easily ; he would be free and he would live. For the first time, he would live. Behind his closed eyes, he saw himself living.

Over the plushy floors of some vast and ignoble Ritz slowly he walked, at ease, with confidence : over the plushy floors and there, at the end of a long vista, there was Myra Viveash, waiting, this time, for him ; coming forward impatiently to meet him, his abject lover now, not the cool, free, laughing mistress who had lent herself contemptuously once to his pathetic and silent importunity and then, after a day, withdrawn the gift again. Over the plushy floors to dine. Not that he was in love with Myra any longer : but revenge is sweet.

He sat in his own house. The Chinese statues looked out from the niches ; the Maillols passionately meditated, slept, and were more than alive. The Goyas hung on the walls, there was a Boucher in the bathroom ; and when he entered with his guests, what a Piazzetta exploded above the dining-room mantelpiece ! Over the ancient wine they talked together, and he knew everything they knew and more ; he gave, he inspired, it was the others who assimilated and were enriched. After dinner there were Mozart quartets ; he opened his portfolios and showed his Daumiers, his Tiepolos, his Canaletto sketches, his drawings by Picasso and Lewis, and the purity of his naked

Ingres. And later, talking of Odalisques, there were orgies without fatigue or disgust, and the women were pictures and lust in action, art.

Over the empty plains forty horses impelled him towards Mantua: rubadub—adubadub, with the silencer out. Towards the most romantic city in all the world.

When he spoke to women—how easily and insolently he spoke now!—they listened and laughed and looked at him sideways and dropped their eyelids over the admission, the invitation, of their glance. With Phyllis once he had sat, for how long? in a warm and moonless darkness, saying nothing, risking no gesture. And in the end they had parted, reluctantly and still in silence. Phyllis now was with him once again in the summer night; but this time he spoke, now softly, now in the angry breathless whisper of desire, he reached out and took her, and she was naked in his arms. All chance encounters, all plotted opportunities recurred; he knew, now, how to live, how to take advantage of them.

Over the empty plains towards Mantua, towards Mantua, he slid along at ease, free and alone. He explored the horrors of Roman society; visited Athens and Seville. To Unamuno and Papini he conversed familiarly in their own tongues. He understood perfectly and without effort the quantum theory. To his friend Shearwater he gave half a million for physiological research. He visited Schoenberg and persuaded him to write still better music. He exhibited to the politicians the full extent of their stupidity and their wickedness; he set them working for the salvation, not the destruction, of humanity. Once in the past when he had been called upon to make a public speech, he had felt so nervous that he was sick; the thousands

who listened to him now bent like wheat under the wind of his eloquence. But it was only by the way and occasionally that he troubled himself to move them. He found it easy now to come to terms with every one he met, to understand all points of view, to identify himself with even the most unfamiliar spirit. And he knew how everybody lived, and what it was like to be a mill girl, a dustman, an engine-driver, a Jew, an Anglican bishop, a confidence-trickster. Accustomed as he was to being swindled and imposed upon without protest, he now knew the art of being brutal. He was just dressing down that insolent porter at the Continental, who had complained that ten francs wasn't enough (and had got, as a matter of historic fact, another five in addition), when his landlady gave a knock, opened the door and said : " Dinner's ready, Mr. Gumbril."

Feeling a little ashamed at having been interrupted in what was, after all, one of the ignobler and more trivial occupations of his new life, Gumbril went down to his fatty chop and green peas. It was the first meal to be eaten under the new dispensation ; he ate it, for all that it was unhappily indistinguishable from the meals of the past, with elation and a certain solemnity, as though he were partaking of a sacrament. He felt buoyant with the thought that at last, at last, he was doing something about life.

When the chop was eaten, he went upstairs and, after filling two suit-cases and a Gladstone bag with the most valued of his possessions, addressed himself to the task of writing to the Headmaster. He might have gone away, of course, without writing. But it would be nobler, more in keeping, he felt, with his new life, to leave a justification behind—or rather not a justification, a denouncement. He picked up his pen and denounced.