

TOLD  
BY AN IDIOT

by  
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Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more ; it is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing . . .

(W. SHAKESPEARE.)

L'histoire, comme une idiote, mécaniquement se répète.  
(Paul Morand, *Fermé la nuit.*)

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PART II. FIN-DE-SIÈCLE

PART III. EDWARDIAN

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First Period : Circus

Second Period : Smash

Third Period : Débris

**PART I**  
**VICTORIAN**



## I

### A FAMILY AT HOME

ONE evening, shortly before Christmas, in the days when our forefathers, being young, possessed the earth,—in brief, in the year 1879,—Mrs. Garden came briskly into the drawing-room from Mr. Garden's study and said in her crisp, even voice to her six children, "Well, my dears, I have to tell you something. Poor papa has lost his faith again."

Poor papa had very often lost his faith during the fifty years of his life. Sometimes he became, from being an Anglican clergyman, a Unitarian minister, sometimes a Roman Catholic layman (he was, by nature, habit and heredity, a priest or minister of religion, but the Roman Catholic church makes trouble about wives and children), sometimes some strange kind of dissenter, sometimes a plain agnostic, who believed that there lived more faith in honest doubt than in half the creeds (and as to this he should know, for on quite half the creeds he was by now an expert). On his last return to Anglicanism, he had accepted a country living.

Victoria, the eldest of the six children, named less for the then regnant queen than for papa's temporary victory over unbelief in the year of her birth, 1856, spoke sharply. She was twenty-three, and very pretty, and saw no reason why papa should be allowed so many more faiths and losses of faith in his career than the papas of others.

"*Really*, mamma . . . it is too bad of papa. I

knew it was coming ; I said so, didn't I, Maurice ? His sermons have been so funny lately, and he's been reading Comte all day in his study instead of going out visiting, and getting all kinds of horrid pamphlets from the Rationalist Press Association, and poring over an article in the *Examiner* about 'A Clergyman's Doubts.' And I suppose St. Thomas's Day has brought it to a head." (Victoria was High Church, so knew all about saints' days.) "And now we shall have to leave the vicarage, just when we've made friends with all sorts of nice people with tennis courts and ball-rooms. Papa *should* be more careful, and it *is* too bad."

Maurice, the second child (named for Frederick Denison) who was at Cambridge, and a firm rationalist, having fought and lost the battle of belief while a freshman, inquired, cynically, but not undutifully, and with more patience than his sister, "What is he going to be this time ?"

"An Ethicist," said Mrs. Garden, in her clear, non-committal voice. "We are joining the Ethical Society."

"Whatever's that ?" Vicky crossly asked.

"It has no creeds but only conduct" . . . ("And I," Vicky interpolated, "have no conduct but only creeds.") . . . "and a chapel in South Place, Finsbury Pavement, and a magazine which sometimes has a poem by Robert Browning. It published that one about a man who strangled a girl he was fond of with her own hair on a wet evening. I don't know why he thought it specially suitable for the Ethical Society Magazine. . . . They meet for worship on Sundays."

"Worship of what, mamma ?"

"Nobility of character, dear. They sing ethical hymns about it."

Vicky gave a little scream.

Mrs. Garden looked at Stanley, her third daughter (named less for the explorer than for the Dean, whom



Mr. Garden had always greatly admired) and found, as she had expected, Stanley's solemn blue eyes burning on hers. Stanley was, in fancy, in the South Place Ethical Chapel already, singing the ethical hymns . . .

" Fall, fall, ye ancient litanies and creeds !  
Not prayers nor curses deep  
The power can longer keep  
That once ye kept by filling human needs.

Fall, fall, ye mighty temples to the ground !  
Not in their sculptured rise  
Is the real exercise  
Of human nature's brightest power found.

'Tis in the lofty hope, the daily toil,  
'Tis in the gifted line,  
In each far thought divine,  
That brings down heaven to light our common soil.

'Tis in the great, the lovely and the true,  
'Tis in the generous thought  
Of all that man has wrought,  
Of all that yet remains for man to do . . ."

Stanley had read this and other hymns in a little book her papa had.

" Then I suppose," said Rome, the second daughter, who knew of old that papa must always live near a place of worship dedicated to his creed of the moment, " then I suppose we are moving to Finsbury Pavement." Rome had been named less for the city than for the church, of which papa had been a member at the time of her birth, twenty years ago ; and, after all, if Florence, why not Rome ? Rome looked clever. She had a white, thin face, and vivid blue-green eyes, like the sea beneath

rocks; and she thought it very original of papa to believe so much and so often. Her own mind was sceptical.

Vicky's brow smoothed. Moving to London. There was something in that. Though, of course, it mustn't be Finsbury Pavement; she would see to that.

Irving, the youngest but one (named less for the actor than to commemorate the brief period when papa had been an Irvingite, and had believed in twelve living apostles who must all die and then would come the Last Day), said, "Golly, what a lark!" Irving was sixteen, and was all for a move, all for change, of residence, if not of creed. He was an opportunist and a realist, and made the best of the vagaries of circumstance. He was destined to do well in life. He was not, like Maurice, sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought, nor, like Vicky, caught in the mesh of each passing fashion, nor, like Stanley, an ardent hunter of the Idea, nor, like Rome, a critic. He was more like (only he had more enterprise and initiative) his younger sister, Una, a very calm and jolly schoolgirl, named less for her who braved the dragon than for the One Person in whom papa had believed at the time of her birth (One Person not in the Trinitarian, but in the Unitarian, sense).

"Three hundred a year less," remarked Rome, from the couch whereon she lay (for her back was often tired) and looked ironically at Vicky, to see how she liked the thought of that.

Vicky's smooth cheek flushed. She had forgotten about money.

"Oh *really* . . . Oh, I do think papa is too bad. Mamma, *must* he lose it just this winter—his faith, I mean? Can't he wait till next?"

Mamma's faint (was it also ironic, or merely patient?) movement of the eyebrows meant that it was too late: papa's faith was already lost.

"By next winter he may have found it again," Rome suggested.

"Well, even if so," said Vicky, "who's going to go on giving him livings every time? . . . Oh, yes, mamma, I know all the bishops love him, but there is a limit to the patience of bishops. . . . Does the Ethical Society have clergymen or anything?"

"I believe they have elders. Papa may become an elder."

"That's no use. Elders aren't paid. Don't you remember when he was a Quaker elder, when we were all little? I'm sure it's not a paid job. We shall be loathsomely poor again, and have to live without any fun or pretty things. And I dare say it's low class, too. Papa never bothers about that, of course. He'd follow General Booth into the Army, if he thought he had a call."

"I trust that I should, Vicky."

Papa had entered the room, and stood looking on them all, with his beautiful, distinguished, melancholy face (framed in small side whiskers), and his deep blue eyes like Stanley's. Vicky's ill-humour melted away, because papa was so gentle and so beautiful and so kind. And, after all, London was London, even with only six hundred a year.

"Mamma has told you our news, I see," said papa, in his sweet, mellow voice. He looked and spoke like a papa out of Charlotte M. Yonge, though his conduct with regard to the Anglican church was so different.

"Yes, Aubrey, I've told them," said mamma.

"I hope you won't mind, papa," said Vicky saucily, "if I go to church at St. Albans, Holborn. I'm a ritualist, not an ethicist."

"Indeed, Vicky, I should be very sorry if you did not all follow your own lights, wherever they lead you."

Papa's broad-mindedness amounted to a disease,

Vicky sometimes thought. A queer kind of clergyman he was. What would Father Stanton and Father Mackonochie of St. Albans think of him? Father Mackonochie, who was habitually flung into jail because he would face east when told to face north—as important as all that, he felt it.

“Well, my darlings,” papa went on in his nice voice, “I must apologise to you all for this—this disturbance of your lives and mine. I would have spared it you if I could. But I have been over and over the ground, and I see no other way compatible with intellectual honesty. Honesty must come first. . . . Your mother and I are agreed.”

Of course; they always were. From Anglicanism to Roman Catholicism, from Catholicism to Quakerism, from Quakerism to Unitarianism, Postivism, Baptistism (yes, they had once sunk, to Vicky’s shame, as low as that in the social scale, owing chiefly to the influence of Charles Spurgeon), and back to Anglicanism again—through everything, mamma, silent, resigned and possibly ironic, had followed papa. And little Stanley had seen the idea behind all papa’s religions and tumbled headlong after him, and Maurice had grimly decided that it was safer to abjure all creeds, and Rome had critically looked on, with her faint, amused smile and her single eyeglass, and Irving and Una had been led, heedless and incurious, to each of papa’s places of worship in turn, but had understood none of them. They had not the religious temperament. Nor had Vicky, who attended her ritualistic churches from æsthetic fancy and a flair for being in the fashion, for seeing and hearing some new thing. *She* didn’t care which way priests faced, though she did enjoy incense. Vicky was a gay soul, and preferred dances and lawn tennis and young men to religion. Stanley, too, was gay—as merry as a grig,

papa called her—but she had a burning ardour of mind and temper that made the world for her a place of exciting experiments. She now thought it worthy and honourable to be poor, for she had been reading William Morris and Ruskin and Socialism, as intelligent young women did in those days, and was all for handicrafts and the one-man job. She was eighteen, and had had her first term at Somerville College, Oxford, which had just been founded and had twelve members.

Irving, always practical, said, "When are we going to move? And where to?"

"In February," said mamma. "Probably we shall live in Bloomsbury. We have heard of a house there."

"Bloomsbury," said Vicky. "That's not so bad."

Sitting down at the piano, she began softly to play and sing.

Papa sat by the fire, his thin hand on mamma's, his thoughtful face pale and uplifted, as if he had made the Great Sacrifice once more, as indeed he had. Stanley sat on a cushion at his feet, and leant her dark head against his knee. She was a small, sturdy girl, and she wore a frock of blue, hand-embroidered cloth, plain and tight over the shoulders and breast, high-necked, with white ruching at the throat, and below the waist straighter than was the fashion, because Mr. Morris said that ripples and flounces wasted material and ruined line. Vicky, sinuous and green, rippled to the knees like running water. Irving sat on a Morris-chintz chair, reading *The Moonstone*; Maurice on a Liberty cretonne sofa, reading a leader in yesterday's *Observer*.

"It is, unfortunately, impossible to conceal from ourselves that the condition of Ireland, never perceptibly improved by the announcement of the projected remedy for her distress and discontents, has for

some weeks gone steadily from bad to worse. The state of things which exists there is, for all practical purposes, indistinguishable from civil war. The insurrectionary forces arrayed against law and order are not, indeed, drilled and disciplined bodies; but what they lack in this respect they make up for in numbers and in recklessness."

Such was the sad state of Ireland in December, 1879, as sometimes before, as sometimes since. Or, anyhow, such was its state according to the *Observer*, a paper with which Maurice seldom, and Stanley never, agreed. Stanley put her faith in Mr. Gladstone, and Maurice in no politicians, though he appreciated Dizzy as a personality. Papa had always voted Liberal and Gladstone, but thought that the latter lacked religious tolerance.

Maurice turned to another leader, which began, "In these troubled times . . ." And certainly they *were* troubled, as times very nearly always, perhaps quite always, are. The *Observer* told news of the Basuto war, the Russian danger in Afghanistan, Land League troubles, danger of war with Spain, trouble in Egypt, trouble in Bulgaria, trouble in Midlothian (where Mr. Gladstone was speaking against the government), trouble of all sorts, everywhere. What a world! Stanley, an assiduous student of it, sometimes almost gave it up in despair; but never quite, for she always thought of something one ought to do, or join, or help, which might avert shipwreck. Just now it was handicrafts, and the restoration of beauty to rich and poor.

## MAMMA AND HER CHILDREN

MAMMA, sitting with papa's hand in hers, watched them all, with her quiet gray eyes looking through pince-nez, and her slight smile. Pretty Vicky, singing "My Queen," with the lamplight shining on her mass of chestnut hair parted Rossetti-wise in the middle, her pink cheeks, her long white neck, her graceful, slim, flowing form, her æsthetic green dress (for Vicky was bitten with the æsthetic craze). Pretty Vicky. She loved gaiety and parties and comfort so much, it was a shame to cut down her dress allowance, as would be necessary. Perhaps Vicky would get engaged very soon, though, to one of her æsthetic or worldly young men. Vicky was not one of those sexless, intellectual girls, like Rome, with her indifference, or Stanley, with her funny talk of platonic friendships. To Vicky a young man *was* a young man, and no platonic about it. Sometimes mamma was afraid that Vicky, for all her æstheticism, was a little *fast*; she would go out for long day expeditions alone with the young man of the moment, and laugh when her mother said, doubtfully, "Vicky, when *I* was young . . ."

"When *you* were young, mamma dear," Vicky would say, caressing and mocking, "you were an early Victorian. Or even a Williamite. Papa, prunes, prisms! I'm a late Victorian, and we do what we like."

"A *mid*-Victorian, I hope, dear," mamma would loyally interpolate, but Vicky would fling back, "Oh, mamma, H.M. has reigned forty-two years now! You don't think she's going to reign for eighty-four! Late Victorian, that's what we are. *Fin-de-siècle*. Probably the world will end very soon, it's gone on so long, so

let's have a good time while we can. We're only young once. I feel, mamma, at the very end of the road, and as if nothing mattered but to live and dance and play while we can, because the time's so short. Clergymen say it's a sign of the world coming to an end, all these wars and disturbances everywhere, and unbelief, and women and trains being so fast in their habits, and young men so effeminate."

Thus Vicky, mocking and gay and absurd. Her mother's keen, near-sighted gray eyes strayed from her round the pretty lamplit room, which was partly Liberty and Morris, with its chintzes and wallpapers and cretonnes, and blue china plates over the door (that was the children) and partly mid-Victorian, with its chiffoniers and papier-maché and red plush chairs, and Dicksee's "Harmony" hanging over the piano. On the table lay the magazines—the *Nineteenth Century*, the *Cornhill*, the *Saturday Review*, the *Spectator*, and the *Examiner*, with the article by Samuel Butler on "A Clergyman's Doubts." They had made the vicarage so pretty, it would be hard to leave it for a dingy London house. It was a pity (though hardly surprising) that the Anglican church could find no place for Aubrey during the intervals when he could not say the creed. Aubrey was so modern. Mrs. Garden's own father, also a clergyman, believed in the Established Church and the Bible, and agreed with the writer of the Book of Genesis (and Bishop Ussher, its commentator) that the world had been created in the year 4004 B.C., and that Adam and Eve had been created shortly afterwards, full of virtue, and had fallen; and so on, through all the Bible books. . . . After all, the scriptures *were* written (and even marginally annotated) for our learning. . . . But Mrs. Garden's papa had begun being a clergyman when religion had been more settled, before Darwin and Huxley and Herbert Spencer



had revolutionised science. You didn't expect an able modern Oxford man like Aubrey to be an Early Victorian clergyman.

Maurice on the Liberty sofa snorted suddenly over what he was reading, and mamma smiled at him. The dear, perverse, violent boy! He was always disagreeing with every one. Mamma's eyes rested gently on her son's small, alert head, with its ruffled top locks of light, straight hair, like a cock canary's crest, its sharp, long chin and straight, thin lips. Maurice was like mamma's brothers had been, in the fifties, only they had worn peg-top trousers and long, fair whiskers that stood out like fans. Maurice wore glasses, and looked pale, as if he had read too much; not like young Irving, sprawling in an easy chair with *The Moonstone*, beautiful and dark and pleased. Nor like Stanley, who, though she read and thought and often talked cleverly like a book, had high spirits and was full of fun. Little Stanley, with her round, childish face above the white ruching, her big forehead and blunt little nose, and deep, ardent, grave blue eyes. What a child she was for enthusiasms and ideas and headlong plans! And her talk about platonic friendships and women's rights and social revolution and bringing beauty into common life. The New Girl. If Vicky was one kind of New Girl (which may be doubted), Stanley was another, even newer. . . . There shot into mamma's mind, not for the first time, a question—had girls always been new? She remembered in her own youth the older people talking about the New Girl, the New Woman. Were girls and women really always newer than boys and men, or was it only that people noticed it more, and said more about it? Elderly people wrote to the papers about it. "The Girl of the Period," in the *Saturday Review*—fast, painted, scanty of dress (where are our fair, demure