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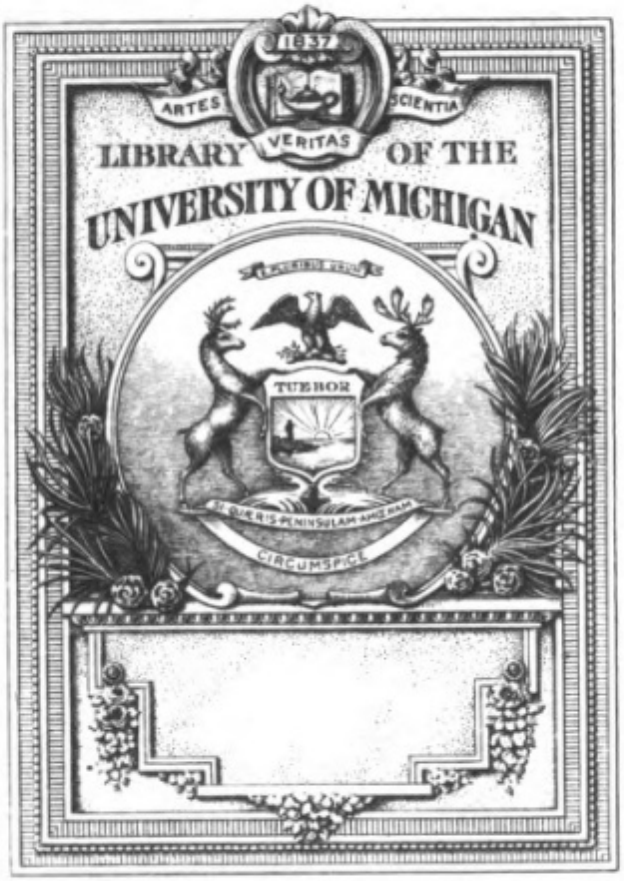

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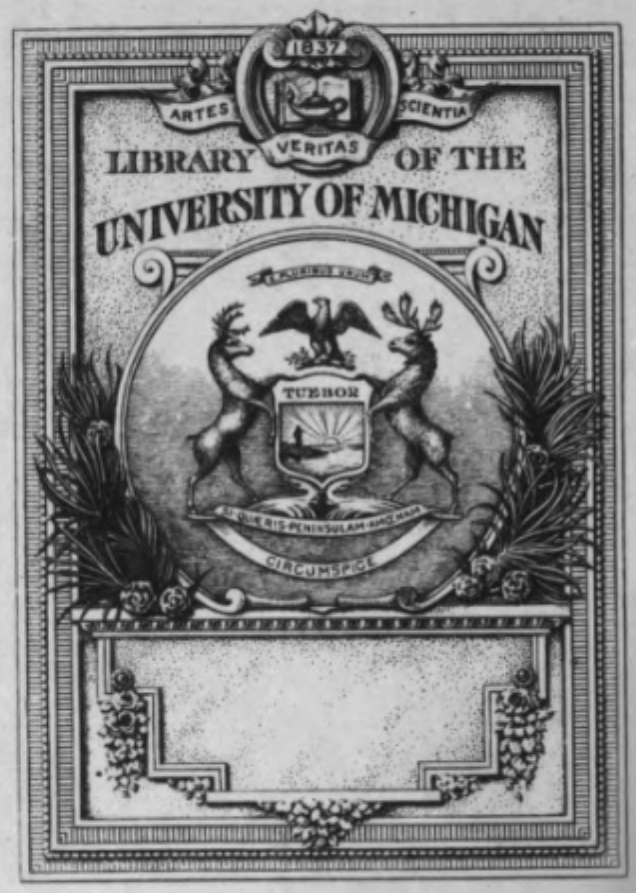

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ERS OF HARTLING

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THE PRISONERS OF HARTLING

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By
J. D. BERESFORD

THE JERVAISE COMEDY
AN IMPERFECT MOTHER

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THE PRISONERS OF HARTLING

BY

J. D. BERESFORD

'There is a sore evil which I have seen under the sun, namely, riches kept for the owners thereof to their hurt.'

Ecclesiastes v. 13.

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THE PRISONERS OF HARTLING

I

DOG'S life, old man, a dog's life; you can't get away from that."

Arthur Woodroffe's voice was quite cheerful as he framed this indictment of the life of a general practitioner in a poor neighbourhood, but his companion frowned and shook his head impatiently.

"You are still re-acting to the pernicious influences of that damnable war," he said. "You're hankering after the intoxication of saving wounded under fire; exciting stunts of that sort; Sbana and Pharpar, rivers of Damascus. You've got to learn to be content with Jordan. Risk your life in more homely ways saving the sick in Peckham. Same thing, really; only you don't get orders for it. And of course . . ." he hesitated, pushed up his gold-rimmed spectacles, and stared hard at his friend and paid assistant. "Any way, what is it you're hankering after, my good chap?" he concluded.

Woodroffe looked critically round the little room, and then at Somers glowering down at him from the hearthrug. "More space," he said briefly; "and more . . ." He seemed to jib at the word that was obviously in his mind.

"More beauty," Somers suggested.

"If you like," Woodroffe agreed carelessly.

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"Something of that sort. I'd like to get about the world a bit, too."

"As medical attendant to a hypochondriac millionaire?"

"Or some job abroad; or . . ."

"What you really want, my lad, is an independent income and lots of leisure," Somers commented.

"You can't say I've ever been a slacker, Bob," Woodroffe said.

"No, but you'd soon pick it up if you had got enough to live on without worrying."

Woodroffe considered that before he replied. "Don't believe I should. Go in for research or something. Hate having nothing to do."

"There's always hunting and golf, and bridge and billiards, and cricket, and so on," Somers said. "Life of a country gentleman. Also, you might marry and beget a family, and go in for politics. Quite a strenuous life it seems, for a lot of 'em."

"Bit of a change wouldn't it, after the life of a panel doctor in Peckham," Woodroffe remarked; "but I don't think it's my style all the same. I'd like to *do* something, something useful. And by the way, old thing, if you're taking on Nellie Mason, I'd advise you to turn in. I saw her this morning, and she's pretty near her time. Rotten job it'll be, too. But I'll take her on if you like. A fat primip like her would be good for my character."

"No, I'll take it," Somers said. "I promised her I would. She thinks you're a bit young. All the same, I'm not going to bed yet. I want to have this out with you. It's interesting, for one thing. I suppose nothing particular has upset you lately, has it? Nothing that's set your mind roving."

"I don't know. Yes. In a way. Had a letter

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this morning asking me to spend a week-end with a wealthy sort of connection of mine in Sussex—or Surrey, is it? Hartling's the name of the place."

"Never heard of it, nor of your connection with wealth," Somers said.

"It's a bit distant," Woodroffe explained. "My aunt, my mother's sister that is, married the old man's son. His name's Garvice Kenyon. Ever heard of *him?*"

Somers shook his head.

"It'd be a bit before your time," Woodroffe acknowledged. "The old chap must be about ninety. I've only seen him once. I went there to stay with my mother when I was a kid of about nine or ten. Some idea of keeping up the connection, I suppose. But after my father got that living in Yorkshire, we dropped out. I don't remember much about the place or the people. General impression of grandeur, and so on, that's all. Mighty fine place, I believe."

"How did you pick 'em up again?" Somers asked.

"Well, I haven't picked 'em up again yet," Woodroffe said. "But I sat next to old Beddington at that public dinner you took me to a fortnight ago, and in the course of conversation—the sort of tosh one does talk to your next door neighbour on those occasions—he happened to mention that he was going down to see old Kenyon. So I claimed the connection for the sake of something to say. After that Beddington talked a lot about Kenyon; in fact he told me more than I had ever heard before. And, well, I suppose in much the same sort of way he must have talked to old Kenyon about me, when he was down there. Anyhow, this morning I got a letter from my aunt—forwarded from Holt's—Beddington probably told 'em I'd been in

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the R.A.M.C.—asking me to go down there the week-end after next. She says the old man would be 'very interested to hear some of my war experiences.' Bright old bird, apparently, for ninety. Beddington said he was as fit as a flea, still, but a bit absent-minded."

"And the thought of going down there has unsettled you, has it?" Somers asked.

"Don't know that I am going," Woodroffe said. "My togs are a bit rusty for that kind of show."

"I'd almost forgotten that one felt like that at twenty-eight," commented Somers. "After the war, too. Accept the wisdom of forty-five, my dear boy, and believe me that rusty togs are quite distinguished these days."

"Makes you feel rotten, all the same," Woodroffe thought.

"But you still avoid the real issue," Somers persisted; "why this invitation has unsettled you."

"I don't know," Woodroffe said, settling himself a little deeper in his arm-chair. "I suppose if one analyses it, the thing set me thinking of—of the differences between Kenyon's position and mine. Here I am with no decent clothes, and no money; sweating myself thin over a dirty job like trying to mitigate the sickness of Peckham, while old Kenyon's got more money than he knows what to do with."

"Incipient socialism, this," Somers confided to the wall opposite.

"It isn't," Woodroffe said. "I've no sympathy with the greasy proletariat; not my line at all. It is that the whole thing has just set me wondering how I'm going to get out of it. It's no damned good pretending, my dear Bob, that I wouldn't sooner be lying snug in a clean comfortable bed

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than delivering women like Nellie Mason. And, oh! Lord, the accent is on the *clean* all the time."

"You don't mean to imply . . ." Somers began.

"My dear chap, of course I don't," Woodroffe cut in. "My bed here is clean enough for any one, but for about twelve hours of the day I am mixing with dirtiness of every sort and kind, and I had more than my fill of it in the war—lice by the yard and every sort of filth. You blooming base-wallahs never knew your blessings. Well, all I know is that I used to tell myself stories of getting clean, fantasy hot baths in exquisite surroundings, and picture myself going straight from them into brand new clothes and that sort of thing. Instead of which I've dropped straight into this. I know I'm clean all right, Bob, but I can't *feel* clean. You've got to admit now, haven't you, that ours is a dirty job, take it all round?"

Somers put his hand under his coat and scratched his left shoulder vigorously. "Oh! damn," he remarked, after a thoughtful interval.

"I might come back to it, after a couple of years or so," Woodroffe began again apologetically. "But it's becoming almost an obsession with me just now. I expect these psycho-analysis Johnnies would say I was suffering from some suppression or shock or something."

"You've definitely made up your mind to chuck this job, then?" Somers asked.

"I hadn't when we began," Woodroffe replied. "But talking to you about it seems to have cleared my mind. Honestly I'd no idea of chucking it when we started this jaw, and now it seems the only possible thing to do."

"What are you going to live on?" Somers asked.

"I've saved between four and five hundred

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pounds," Woodroffe said. "Carry me on for a bit, though I suppose it isn't worth two hundred these days. And then I might have a look round one of the colonies, Canada or New Zealand, or somewhere. It'd be cleaner than Peckham."

Somers sighed, and made a gesture of renunciation. "I'm sorry about this, Arthur," he said; "very sorry—not only because I shall lose you—though that's bad enough, but also, because, well, your attitude disappoints me."

Woodroffe hunched himself in his chair and began to fidget, touching various marks here and there on the hearthrug with the toe of his slipper.

"You've always said we ought to express ourselves," he grumbled, "and here I'm going contrary to my inclinations all the time. I haven't forgotten your yarns on that subject at the hospital eight years ago."

"My dear old chap, that's the very point," Somers replied. "That's what disappoints me. I thought you had something better to express than these calf-like yearnings for change and luxury."

Woodroffe's handsome face had taken on the expression of a sulky schoolboy. He was still intent on tracing some ideal pattern in the design of the hearthrug as he said: "Had nearly five years of it. Over four years in the Army and six months here. Don't see why in the name of God I shouldn't at least get out into some clean, decent country like Canada."

"I shan't try to stop you," Somers replied.

"All the same you're making me feel perfectly rotten about it," Woodroffe said. "Making me feel as if I were a deserter, slinking off and leaving you here. Might just as well say at once that you won't

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let me go. Of course I shan't, now I know how you feel about it."

Somers stared hard at the opposite wall, tucked his hands under his short coat-tails, and as he spoke alternately raised himself on his toes, and let himself down on his heels with an effect of emphasising his points.

"I stand reproved, Arthur," he said. "I was wrong—quite wrong. Purely selfish. I've been a bit tired lately and bad-tempered."

"Not you," Woodroffe mumbled.

"I have," Somers insisted. "I'm in a nasty mood to-night."

"I wish you'd let me take Nellie Mason," Woodroffe put in.

"I can't. I promised her, five months ago. Never mind that. We're talking about you. And I want you to go. Yes; I mean it. You ought to go. I'm a short-sighted old fool; much too wrapped up in myself and my own affairs; but now that I've heard the case stated I can see the truth. You'd only stultify and repress yourself by staying here. I know how loyal you are, and I know that at a word from me you'd go on. You mustn't. You'd do harm to yourself and to the practice by denying your impulse. As you reminded me, that's a well-established principle of mine, though I haven't thought much about it for the last five years—there's been too much to do. The point is, however, that you'll do no good to yourself or any one while you're working against the grain. *Fay ce que voudra.* It's possible that you may come a tremendous cropper, and that might do you all the good in the world. But go you must, I wouldn't keep you now if you wanted to stay."

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Woodroffe had stopped fidgeting. "But look here, Bob, old man," he said. "As a matter of fact, I can't go yet, not for a month or two."

"You can go to-morrow if you want to," Somers replied. "Bates wants a job and he'd be glad to come."

"Oh! Lord! Bates!" interjected Woodroffe.

"Yes, ohlordbates!" Somers corroborated him. "Dear old wooden-headed, persistent, patient, uninspired Bates. He's just the man I want. The panel patients'll love him, because he'll take so much trouble over 'em. It's true that he'll have to work eighteen hours a day to get through, but he likes that sort of thing. Makes him feel as if he were being some use in the world, poor chap. Oh! yes, I can do with Bates, but God! I'll miss you, Arthur."

"I'm damned if I'll go," Woodroffe announced, getting up. "Everlastingly damned if I will."

"You will, my son, because I won't keep you," Somers said. "But I don't say that I won't ever have you back. That depends, of course, on how you return to me. If you *want* to come back in two, or three, or five years' time; just turn up and say, 'Bob, I think I'd like to take up the old work again! and we'll go into partnership.' You'll be ripe for it. Now you've got to go and find out what you are fit for. You're not just now fit for this job or you wouldn't be feeling as you do about it. I know you'd stay out of friendship for me, but that's no good—no good at all. I'd sooner have ohlordbates trying to be some use in the world."

Woodroffe sat down again and stared rather gloomily at the pattern of the hearthrug. "I feel rather a swine, all the same, Bob," he said.

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"You won't in a month's time," Somers assured him.

Woodroffe contemplated that remark for a moment and then smiled rather grimly. "In a way I hope I will," he said, "and in another way I hope I won't. You needn't think it'll be a case of 'out of sight, out of mind,' Bob; but I shouldn't care to live permanently with the thought of myself as being a swine for having left you."

"You're not leaving me, my dear man, I'm sending you away for your own good and that of the practice," Somers returned.

"Comes to the same thing. It means I've failed you."

"It means that you've failed yourself," Somers corrected him. "Now I want you to go out into the world and find out where and why. You'll do it. I shall expect you back sometime."

Woodroffe sighed and got up, but his face had cleared. "I'll come back," he said; "but I'll admit it's a relief to go in a lot of ways. I—good Lord, I want more space," and he stretched out his arms as if to demonstrate how very little space there was in that small room.

Somers nodded. "That's settled," he said. "And I don't know that you could make a better beginning, Arthur, than by accepting that invitation of your rich connections for a week-end."

"Oh! ah! I'd forgotten that," Woodroffe said, looked down at the knees of his trousers, and added with a faint blush: "Might get myself some new togs out of capital? I'm sure to want 'em sooner or later. Only things are such a filthy price just now. They rook you about thirty quid for a dress suit."

"I should certainly get some new togs," Somers advised him. "Treat it as an investment."

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"Of course, if you put it like that," Woodroffe said, with a grin.

"I'll take the responsibility of letting you squander your capital," Somers replied gravely.

"Facetious old dog, you!" Woodroffe returned. "Like to pretend I'm still in leading strings, don't you?"

"Lord, you're not ready for leading strings yet," Somers said. "Wait till you're weaned before you try to walk."

Woodroffe thumped him playfully on the chest.

"Oh! go to bed," Somers growled. "I'm going to try and snatch an hour before I'm fetched for Nellie Mason; if I am fetched. Personally, I shouldn't be surprised if it wasn't for another week yet."

"Dog's life, old man, a dog's life," Woodroffe commented as he left the room.

When he had gone Somers threw himself down with a groan into the arm-chair. "I wonder how long it'll be before he comes back?" he thought. "If he'll ever come back?"

In his mind's eye he had a disgustingly clear image of the solemn, earnest face of young Bates.

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II

ARTHUR WOODROFFE'S true defence of his action in leaving Peckham did not occur to him until after he had parted with Somers.

In the course of the ten days that had passed since his sudden arrival at a decision, he had fallen into a perfect intoxication of spending. In that time he had spent over two hundred pounds.

And with that expenditure he had broken another habit of thought. His early life had always been overshadowed by the cares and threats of respectable poverty, and when his last financial responsibility had been closed by his mother's death, eighteen months earlier, he had continued to save money, with the prudent thought that he might presently need capital.

But just as he had suddenly and surprisingly realised that there was no compelling reason why he should stay on as Somers' assistant at Peckham, so, also, he had realised when he began his shopping, that he might, if he wished, do the thing in style. He was beginning a new life. He was young and competent, and he had a profession. He would let the future take care of itself.

And here was one of his fantasies coming true; he would have everything new and clean. He remembered his dream of stripping naked and plunging into a deep wide river, a sweet and rapid flood of purifying water; of swimming many miles until he came to a new land where vermin were unknown; and of walking out of the river, cool,

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and refreshed, to dress—he had never told any one that—in white silk from head to foot. Nothing but the smoothest silk would do. He had seen that silk in imagination glimmering with the sheen of a fine pearl. He smiled now at the extravagance of that fancy, but the temptation to buy an entirely new outfit was too strong to be resisted. He had deserved it. The impulse marked his real recovery from the effects of the war.

The world owed him five years of youth! That was the true defence of his action in leaving Peckham. He saw his justification with astounding clearness as he stod on Westminster Bridge looking up the river, half an hour before his train was timed to leave Charing Cross—the train that was to take him to Hartling for his promised week-end. In a re-action against his orgie of spending, he had come as far as that by tram, lugging his new kit-bag and dressing-case. The tram would have taken him on to Charing Cross, but when it had stopped close to his old hospital, he had felt an urgent desire to see the river from the old standpoint. The thought of his bags had not deterred him. He was bursting with vigour and energy that morning.

Society, the World, Life owed him five years for those he had given. The years from twenty-two to twenty-seven. He had joined up in August, 1914, had been sent down to Salisbury Plain for his training, and had been in France by the summer of next year. He had been lucky in some ways. He had not been wounded or gassed or suffered from shell-shock, and in the following winter he had been combed out and sent back to the hospital for two years to finish his training, before returning to France as a Lieutenant in the R.A.M.C. But

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looking back now, it seemed to him that he had had no relaxation in all that time. He had taken the war too seriously and the shadow of it had lain over him. If it had not been for that, he would not have joined dear old Bob Somers on the very day that he had been demobilised. He had got the habit of being strenuous and self-sacrificing and all the rest of it, and the habit, or whatever it was, had apparently dropped from him almost miraculously in the course of that conversation. It was unquestionably gone. He felt himself, unexpectedly and delightfully, not only free but also young again. He must write to Bob and explain that theory of the lost years of youth and the world's debit account. He would not be hard on his debtor. He would not exact a full repayment of the original loan. He would take only two years. After that he would go back to the strenuous habit of self-sacrifice and leave his youth behind.

He could recover the very spirit of it in this place. How often he had glanced down from the end of a ward and taken back to his work a picture of the river, of the bridge, or of the Gothic dignities of the Houses of Parliament. In retrospect those pictures were all coloured with the vivid emotions of youth. He could place some of them with the distinctness of a clearly remembered dream. There was, for instance, that wonderful morning in February, mild and clear as a day in April, associated with the thought that he was playing for his hospital in one of the "Rugger" cup ties that afternoon. Great days, those were; and in effect, he was physically little older now than he was then. He was splendidly fit.

He laid hold again of his two bags, and strode triumphantly across the bridge.

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And that mood held, even mounted, unchecked by the deliberations of the South-Eastern and Chatham train service. Indeed, the semi-torpid movements of the railway servants on the branch line to which he changed at the junction afforded a pleasant contrast to his own exuberance. He was beginning life again. Everything was coming right. He had visions of some delightful, improbable enlargement of his condition. Old Kenyon might take a fancy to him. Some one in the house, some special favourite of the old man's, might be taken seriously ill, and Arthur Woodroffe, the brilliant young general practitioner from Peckham, would work a miracle at the eleventh hour. Old Mr Kenyon's gratitude would take a practical form, and the thing was done. There were other variants of the dream, but this seemed to be the most promising.

A car was waiting for him at Hartling Station, but neither his aunt nor any of his connections by marriage had come to meet him. Arthur had his bags put into the tonneau and sat in front. He wanted to talk to some one, and found the chauffeur quite willing for conversation. They began with the obvious subject of motors and presently the chauffeur volunteered the statement that the Vauxhall in which they were riding was not their best car.

"Use this for station work and short trips mostly, sir," he said. "But Mr Kenyon always has the Rolls-Royce for going up to town. Never goes any other way. Wonderful old gentleman, Mr Kenyon, sir."

"I haven't seen him for twenty years," Arthur said. "He's getting on for ninety, isn't he?"

"Ninety-one last October, sir," the chauffeur told him, "and he'd make a good seventy in a manner of speaking. A bit absent-minded sometimes, he don't

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always hear you when you speak to him; but no doubt that's because he's thinking o' something else. He's not what you call deaf, not in the least."

"Good Lord. Wonderful!" Arthur commented. His mind was engaged in framing a tentative essay on the causes of disability in old age, more particularly with reference to arterio-sclerosis, but he reserved that as being a shade too technical. "Though there's no real reason, you know," he said, "why we shouldn't live to be a hundred or even a hundred and twenty. There's a fellow in Asia Minor who is supposed to be a hundred and fifty."

"I suppose not, sir," the chauffeur replied without enthusiasm, and added, apparently as an afterthought, "You're a doctor, I was told, sir."

Arthur nodded. "I haven't come down here professionally, though," he said.

"No, sir; I shouldn't say as Mr Kenyon had much faith in doctors . . ." The chauffeur's sentence tailed off on a high note, with an effect of there being more to come; also he reduced the pace of the car as if he had something of importance to add before they reached the house.

"I've wondered sometimes, sir," he continued, after a short pause, "whether he oughtn't to—to take advice, as they say. Them fits of absent-mindedness I was telling you about, for instance, come on very queer sometimes. It's like as if he was sound asleep with his eyes wide open. Scared me once or twice he has. I thought perhaps being a doctor you might be able to say if it was anything serious. Of course, being ninety-one . . ."

Arthur would have liked to give a ready diagnosis of this abnormal condition, but his expertise was not equal to the task, and he fell back on the usual defence of his profession.

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"Couldn't possibly say without examining him," he said. "It might be due to one of several conditions."

The car running down a slight incline with a free engine had almost stopped. The chauffeur appeared to be deep in thought.

"At Mr Kenyon's age . . ." he began tentatively

"One would not expect him to be quite the man he was at twenty-eight," Arthur supplied.

"Exactly, sir, one wouldn't," the chauffeur replied in the tone of one aroused to a consciousness of his immediate duties; and he let in the clutch and speeded up the car with an effect of turning his attention to more pressing affairs.

For the last quarter of a mile they had been running alongside a high brick wall, and as they now swerved in between a pair of wide-open iron gates, Arthur realised that the rather ugly wall was the boundary of Mr Kenyon's property.

The contrast between the outside and the inside was, as perhaps it was designed to be, sudden and startling. From the dusty side road flanked on one side by that erection of crude brickwork, he was transported without any kind of preparation into a finished and extensively cultivated garden of unusual extent and beauty. Seen from that entrance by the little lodge, the garden wonderfully displayed itself. It lay on a moderate slope, lifting up in a steady rise from the entrance gates to the climax of the house, that spread itself along the crest of the hill with an effect of dignified watchfulness. And the designer of that garden had had fine natural material to work upon other than the slope that provided the excuse for that triple tier of terraces with their shallow stone steps and low

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balustrading. He had had, for example, a fine selection of forest trees, elm, oak, and beech, with as a contrast a plantation of larches and silver birch bounding the estate on the east side. Also he had had an abundance of running water. A little river, its point of entrance hidden by the close shrubberies and plantations that shut out all sight of the ugly boundary wall on the garden side, cascaded not too artificially, out of obscurity into the sunlight, ran as a decently restrained little river for a hundred yards or so between close-cut lawns, the upper one of which was bordered by a row of graceful wych elms; and then spread itself into an irregular lake, over which the main drive to the house was carried by the spring of a slender bridge. But any catalogue of that garden's innumerable "features" must inevitably convey a false impression. Whoever had planned it, had had the genius to conceive his effect as a whole. It was arranged, composed, to display itself from the entrance lodge as a broad mass that was presented to the mind as a miniature park, abounding with natural opportunities, which had for many years been scrupulously kept, planted, and mown. And seen thus on the broad, it could not be classified as belonging either to the formal or the landscape type; rather it had the air of a diligently cultivated suburban garden enormously enlarged. There was something new, bright, almost deliberately factitious in its pretensions.

The chauffeur had but one comment to offer as they spun up the long curve of the gravel drive to the house. As they crossed the stone bridge over the pond, he pointed to the right, indicating a rough-cast and half-timbered building nearly hidden by the trees of the larch plantation into which the little river plunged out of sight.

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"Power house, sir," he explained. "We do all our own lighting and pumping by water-power. Pleased to show you over, sir, if you have time. Nice little plant we've got."

Arthur found a sense of satisfaction in the thought of the completeness of the place.

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