

# The Eccentricity of Simon Parnacute

By Algernon Blackwood

It was one of those mornings in early spring when even the London streets run beauty. The day, passing through the sky with clouds of flying hair, touched every one with the magic of its own irresponsible gaiety, as it alternated between laughter and the tears of sudden showers.

In the parks the trees, faintly clothed with gauze, were busying themselves shyly with the thoughts of coming leaves. The air held a certain sharpness, but the sun swam through the dazzling blue spaces with bursts of almost summer heat; and a wind, straight from the haunted south, laid its soft persuasion upon all, bringing visions too fair to last—long thoughts of youth, of cowslip-meadows, white sails, waves on yellow sand, and other pictures innumerable and enchanting.

So potent, indeed, was this spell of awakening spring that even Simon Parnacute, retired Professor of Political Economy—elderly, thin-faced, and ruminating in his big skull those large questions that concern the polity of nations—formed no exception to the general rule. For, as he slowly made his way down the street that led from his apartment to the Little Park, he was fully aware that this magic of the spring was in his own blood too, and that the dust which had accumulated with the years upon the surface of his soul was being stirred by one of the softest breezes he had ever felt in the whole course of his arduous and tutorial career.

And—it so happened—just as he reached the foot of the street where the houses fell away towards the open park, the sun rushed out into one of the sudden blue spaces of the sky, and drenched him in a wave of delicious heat that for all the world was like the heat of July.

Professor Parnacute, once lecturer, now merely ponderer, was an exact thinker, dealing carefully with the facts of life as he saw them. He was a good man and a true. He dealt in large emotions, becoming for one who studied nations rather than individuals, and of all diplomacies of the heart he was rudely ignorant. He lived always at the centre of the circle—his own circle—and ec-centricity was a thing to him utterly abhorrent. Convention ruled him, body, soul and mind. To know a disordered thought, or an unwonted emotion, troubled him as much as to see a picture crooked on a wall, or a man's collar projecting beyond his overcoat. Eccentricity was the symptom of a disease.

Thus, as he reached the foot of the street and felt the sun and wind upon his withered cheeks, this unexpected call of the spring came to him sharply as something altogether out of place and illegitimate—symptom of an irregular condition of mind that must be instantly repressed. And it was just here, while the crowd jostled and delayed him, that there smote upon his ear the song incarnate of the very spring whose spell he was in the act of relegating to its proper place in his personal economy: he heard the entrancing *singing of a bird!*

Transfixed with wonder and delight, he stood for a whole minute and listened. Then, slowly turning, he found himself staring straight into the small beseeching eyes of a—thrush; a thrush in a cage that hung upon the outside wall of a bird-fancier's shop behind him.

Perhaps he would not have lingered more than these few seconds, however, had not the crowd held him momentarily prisoner in a spot immediately opposite the shop, where his head, too, was exactly on a level with the hanging cage. Thus he was perforce obliged to stand, and watch, and listen; and, as he did so, the bird's rapturous and appealing song played upon the feelings already

awakened by the spring, urging them upwards and outwards to a point that grew perilously moving.

Both sound and sight caught and held him spellbound.

The bird, once well-favoured perhaps, he perceived was now thin and bedraggled, its feathers disarranged by continual flitting along its perch, and by endless fluttering of wings and body against the bars of its narrow cage. There was not room to open both wings properly; it frequently dashed itself against the sides of its wooden prison; and all the force of its vain and passionate desire for freedom shone in the two small and glittering eyes which gazed beseechingly through the bars at the passers-by. It looked broken and worn with the ceaseless renewal of the futile struggle. Hopping along the bar, cocking its dainty little head on one side, and looking straight into the Professor's eyes, it managed (by some inarticulate magic known only to the eyes of creatures in prison) to spell out the message of its pain—the poignant longing for the freedom of the open sky, the lift of the great winds, the glory of the sun upon its lustreless feathers.

Now it so chanced that this combined onslaught of sight and sound caught the elderly Professor along the line of least resistance—the line of an untried, and therefore unexhausted, sensation. Here, apparently, was an emotion hitherto unrealized, and so not yet regulated away into atrophy.

For, with an intuition as singular as it was searching, he suddenly understood something of the passion of the wild Caged Things of the world, and realized in a flash of passing vision something of their unutterable pain.

In one swift moment of genuine mystical sympathy he *felt with* their peculiar quality of unsatisfied longing exactly as though it were his own; the longing, not only of captive birds and animals, but of anguished men and women, trapped by circumstance, confined by weakness, cabined by character and temperament, all yearning for a freedom they knew not how to reach—caged by the smallness of their desires, by the impotence of their wills, by the pettiness of their souls—caged in bodies from which death alone could finally bring release.

Something of all this found its way into the elderly Professor's heart as he stood watching the pantomime of the captive thrush—the Caged Thing;—and, after a moment's hesitation that represented a vast amount of condensed feeling, he deliberately entered the low doorway of the shop and inquired the price of the bird.

“The thrush—er—singing in the small cage,” he stammered.

“One *and* six only, sir,” replied the coarse, red-faced man who owned the shop, looking up from a rabbit that he was pushing with clumsy fingers into a box; “only one shilling *and* sixpence,”—and then went on with copious remarks upon thrushes in general and the superior qualities of this one in particular. “Been 'ere four months and sings just lovely,” he added, by way of climax.

“Thank you,” said Parnacute quietly, trying to persuade himself that he did not feel mortified by his impulsive and eccentric action; “then I will purchase the bird—at once—er——if you please.”

“Couldn't go far wrong, sir,” said the man, shoving the rabbit to one side, and going outside to fetch the thrush.

“No, I shall not require the cage, but—er—you may put him in a cardboard box perhaps, so that I can carry him easily.”

He referred to the bird as “him,” though at any other time he would have said “it,” and the change, noted surreptitiously as it were, added to his general sense of confusion. It was too late,

however, to alter his mind, and after watching the man force the bird with gross hands into a cardboard box, he gathered up the noose of string with which it was tied and walked with as much dignity and self-respect as he could muster out of the shop.

But the moment he got into the street with this living parcel under his arm—he both heard and felt the scuttling of the bird's feet—the realization that he had been guilty of what he considered an outrageous act of eccentricity almost overwhelmed him. For he had succumbed in most regrettable fashion to a momentary impulse, and had bought the bird in order to release it

“Dear me!” he thought, “how ever could I have allowed myself to do so eccentric and impulsive a thing!”

And, but for the fact that it would merely have accentuated his eccentricity, he would then and there have returned to the shop and given back the bird.

That, however, being now clearly impossible, he crossed the road and entered the Little Park by the first iron gateway he could find. He walked down the gravel path, fumbling with the string. In another minute the bird would have been out, when he chanced to glance round in order to make sure he was unobserved and saw against the shrubbery on his left—a policeman.

This, he felt, was most vexatious, for he had hoped to complete the transaction unseen. Straightening himself up, he nervously fastened the string again, and walked on slowly as though nothing had happened, searching for a more secluded spot where he should be entirely free from observation.

Professor Parnacute now became aware that his vexation—primarily caused by his act of impulse, and increased by the fact that he was observed—had become somewhat acute. It was extraordinary, he reflected, how policemen had this way of suddenly outlining themselves in the least appropriate—the least necessary—places. There was no reason why a policeman should have been standing against that innocent shrubbery, where there was nothing to do, no one to watch. At almost any other point in the Little Park he might have served some possibly useful purpose, and yet, forsooth, he must select the one spot where he was not wanted—where his presence, indeed, was positively objectionable.

The policeman, meanwhile, watched him steadily as he retreated with the obnoxious parcel. He carried it upside down now without knowing it. He felt as though he had been detected in a crime. He watched the policeman, too, out of the corner of his eye, longing to be done with the whole business.

“That policeman is a tremendous fellow,” he thought to himself. “I have never seen a constable so large, so stalwart. He must be *the* policeman of the district”—whatever that might mean—“a veritable wall and tower of defence.” The helmet made him think of a battering ram, and the buttons on his overcoat of the muzzles of guns.

He moved away round the corner with as much innocence as he could assume, as though he were carrying a package of books or some new article of apparel.

It is, no doubt, the duty of every alert constable to observe as acutely as possible the course of events passing before his eyes, yet this particular Bobby seemed far more interested than the circumstances warranted in Parnacute's cardboard box. He kept his gaze remorselessly upon it. Perhaps, thought the Professor, he heard the scutterings of the frightened bird within. Perhaps he thought it was a cat going to be drowned in the ornamental water. Perhaps—oh, dreadful idea!—he thought it was a baby!

The suspicions of an intelligent policeman, however, being past finding out, Simon Parnacute wisely ignored them, and just then passed round a corner where he was screened from this persistent observer by a dense growth of rhododendron bushes.

Seizing the opportune moment, and acting with a prompt decision born of the dread of the reappearing policeman, he cut the string, opened the lid of the box, and an instant later had the intense satisfaction of seeing the imprisoned thrush hop upon the cardboard edge and then fly with a beautiful curving dip and a whirr of wings off into the open sky. It turned once as it flew, and its bright brown eye looked at him. Then it was gone, lost in the sunshine that blazed over the shrubberies and beckoned it out over their waving tops across the river.

The prisoner was free. For the space of a whole minute, the Professor stood still, conscious of a sense of genuine relief. That sound of wings, that racing sweep of the little quivering body escaping into limitless freedom, that penetrating look of gratitude from the wee brown eyes—these stirred in him again the same prodigious emotion he had experienced for the first time that afternoon outside the bird-fanciers's shop. The release of the "caged creature" provided him with a kind of vicarious experience of freedom and delight such as he had never before known in his whole life. It almost seemed as though he had escaped himself—out of his "circle."

Then, as he faced about, with the empty box dangling in his hand, the first thing he saw, coming slowly down the path towards him with measured tread, was—the big policeman.

Something very stern, something very forbidding, hung like an atmosphere of warning about this guardian of the law in a blue uniform. It brought him back sharply to the rigid facts of life, and the soft beauty of the spring day vanished and left him untouched. He accepted the reminder that life is earnest, and that eccentricities are invitations to disaster. Sooner or later the Policeman is bound to make his appearance.

However, this particular constable, of course, passed him without word or gesture, and as soon as he came to one of the little wire baskets provided for the purpose, the Professor dropped his box into it, and then made his way slowly and thoughtfully back to his apartment and his luncheon.

But the eccentricity of which he had been guilty circled and circled in his mind, reminding him with merciless insistence of a foolish act he should not have committed, and plaguing him with remorseless little stabs for having indulged in an impulsive and irregular proceeding.

For, to him, the inevitableness of life came as a fact to which he was resigned, rather than as a force to be appropriated for the ends of his own soul; and the sight of the happy bird escaping into sky and sunshine, with the figure of the inflexible and stern-lipped policeman in the background, made a deep impression upon him that would sooner or later be certain to bear fruit.

"Dear me," thought the Professor of Political Economy, giving mental expression to this sentiment, "I shall pay for this in the long run! Without question I shall pay for it!"

## II

If it may be taken that there is no Chance, playing tricky-wise behind the scenes of existence, but that all events falling into the lives of men are the calculated results of adequate causes, then Mr. Simon Parnacute, late Professor of Political Economy in C— College, certainly did pay for his spring aberration, in the sense that he caught a violent chill which brought him to bed and speedily developed into pneumonia.

It was the evening of the sixth day, and he lay weary and feverish in his bedroom on the top floor of the building which held his little self-contained apartment. The nurse was down-stairs having her tea. A shaded lamp stood beside the bed, and through the window—the blinds being not yet drawn—he saw the sea of roofs and chimney-pots, and the stream of wires, sharply outlined against a sunset sky of gold and pink. High and thin above the dusk floated long strips

of coloured cloud, and the first stars twinkled through the April vapours that gathered with the approach of night.

Presently the door opened and some one came in softly half-way across the room, and then stopped. The Professor turned wearily and saw that the maid stood there and was trying to speak. She seemed flustered, he noticed, and her face was rather white.

“What’s the matter *now*, Emily?” he asked feebly, yet irritably.

“Please, Professor—there’s a gentleman—” and there she stuck.

“Some one to see me? The doctor again already?” queried the patient, wondering in a vague, absent way why the girl should seem so startled.

As he spoke there was a sound of footsteps on the landing outside—heavy footsteps.

“But please, Professor, sir, it’s *not* the doctor,” the maid faltered, “only I couldn’t get his name, and I couldn’t stop him, an’ he said you expected him— and I think he looks like—”

The approaching footsteps frightened the girl so much that she could not find words to complete her description. They were just outside the door now.

“—like a perliceman!” she finished with a rush, backing towards the door as though she feared the Professor would leap from his bed to demolish her.

“A *policeman!*” gasped Mr. Parnacute, unable to believe his ears. “A policeman, Emily! In my apartment?”

And before the sick man could find words to express his particular annoyance that any stranger (above all a constable) should intrude at such a time, the door was pushed wide open, the girl had vanished with a flutter of skirts, and the tall figure of a man stood in full view upon the threshold, and stared steadily across the room at the occupant of the bed on the other side.

It was indeed a policeman, and a very large policeman. Moreover, it was *the* policeman.

The instant the Professor recognized the familiar form of the man from the park his anger, for some quite unaccountable reason, vanished almost entirely; the sharp vexation he had felt a moment before died away; and, sinking back exhausted among the pillows, he only found breath to ask him to close the door and come in. The fact was, astonishment had used up the small store of energy at his disposal, and for the moment he could think of nothing else to do.

The policeman closed the door quietly and moved forward towards the centre of the room, so that the circle of light from the shaded lamp at the head of the bed reached his figure but fell just short of his face.

The invalid sat up in bed again and stared. As nothing seemed to happen he recovered his scattered wits a little.

“You are the policeman from the park, unless I mistake?” he asked feebly, with mingled pomposity and resentment.

The big man bowed in acknowledgment and removed his helmet, holding it before him in his hand. His face was peculiarly bright, almost as though it reflected the glow of a bull’s-eye lantern concealed somewhere about his huge person.

“I thought I recognized you,” went on the Professor, exasperated a little by the other’s self-possession. “Are you perhaps aware that I am ill—too ill to see strangers, and that to force your way up in this fashion—!” He left the sentence unfinished for lack of suitable expletives.

“You are certainly ill,” replied the constable, speaking for the first time; “but then—I am *not* a stranger.” His voice was wonderfully pitched and modulated for a policeman.

“Then, by what right, pray, do you dare to intrude upon me at such a time?” snapped the other, ignoring the latter statement.

“My duty, sir,” the man replied, with a rather wonderful dignity, “knows nothing of time or place.”

Professor Parnacute looked at him a little more closely as he stood there helmet in hand. He was something more, he gathered, than an ordinary constable; an inspector perhaps. He examined him carefully; but he understood nothing about differences in uniform, of bands or stars upon sleeve and collar.

“If you are here in the prosecution of your duty, then,” exclaimed the man of careful mind, searching feverishly for some possible delinquency on the part of his small staff of servants, “pray be seated and state your business; but as briefly as possible. My throat pains me, and my strength is low.” He spoke with less acerbity. The dignity of the visitor began to impress him in some vague fashion he did not understand.

The big figure in blue bowed again, but made no sign of advance.

“You come from X— Station, I presume?” Parnacute added, mentioning the police station round the corner. He sank deeper into his pillows, conscious that his strength was becoming exhausted.

“From Headquarters—I come,” replied the colossus in a deep voice.

The Professor had only the vaguest idea what Headquarters meant, yet the phrase conveyed an importance that somehow was not lost upon him. Meanwhile his impatience grew with his exhaustion.

“I must request you, officer, to state your business with dispatch,” he said tartly, “or to come again when I am better able to attend to you. Next week, no doubt—”

“There is no time *but* the present,” returned the other, with an odd choice of words that escaped the notice of his perplexed hearer, as he produced from a capacious pocket in the tail of his overcoat a notebook bound with some shining metal like gold.

“Your name is Parnacute?” he asked, consulting the book.

“Yes,” answered the other, with the resignation of exhaustion.

“*Simon* Parnacute?”

“Of course, yes.”

“And on the third of April last,” he went on, looking keenly over the top of the note-book at the sick man, “you, Simon Parnacute, entered the shop of Theodore Spinks in the Lower P— Road, and purchased from him a certain living creature?”

“Yes,” answered the Professor, beginning to feel hot at the discovery of his folly.

“A bird?”

“A bird.”

“A thrush?”

“A thrush.”

“A singing thrush?”

“Oh yes, it was a singing thrush, if you *must* know.”

“In money you paid for this thrush the sum of one shilling *and* six pennies?” He emphasized the “and” just as the bird-fancier had done.

“One and six, yes.”

“But in true value,” said the policeman, speaking with grave emphasis, “it cost you a great deal more?”

“Perhaps.” He winced internally at the memory.

He was so astonished, too, that the visit had to do with himself and not with some of his servants.

“You paid for it with your heart?” insisted the other.

The Professor made no reply. He started. He almost writhed under the sheets.

“Am I right?” asked the policeman.

“That is the fact, I suppose,” he said in a low voice, sorely puzzled by the catechism.

“You carried this bird away in a cardboard box to E— Gardens by the river, and there you gave it freedom and watched it fly away?”

“Your statement is correct, I think, in every particular. But really—this absurd cross-examination, my good man!”

“And your motive in so doing,” continued the policeman, his voice quite drowning the invalid’s feeble tones, “was the unselfish one of releasing an imprisoned and tortured creature?”

Simon Parnacute looked up with the greatest possible surprise.

“I think—well, well!—perhaps it was,” he murmured apologetically. “The extraordinary singing—it *was* extraordinary, you know, and the sight of the little thing beating its wings pained me.”

The big policeman put away his note-book suddenly, and moved closer to the bed so that his face entered the circle of lamplight.

“In that case,” he cried, “*you are my man!*”

“I am your man!” exclaimed the Professor, with an uncontrollable start.

“The man I want,” repeated the other, smiling. His voice had suddenly grown soft and wonderful, like the ringing of a silver gong, and into his face had come an expression of wistful tenderness that made it positively beautiful. It shone. Never before, out of a picture, had he seen such a look upon a human countenance, or heard such tones issue from the lips of a human being. He thought, swiftly and confusedly, of a woman, of *the* woman he had never found—of a dream, an enchantment as of music or vision upon the senses.

“Wants me!” he thought with alarm. “What have I done now? What new eccentricity have I been guilty of?”

Strange, bewildering ideas crowded into his mind, blurred in outline, preposterous in character. A sensation of cold caught at his fever and overmastered it, bathing him in perspiration, making him tremble, yet not with fear. A new and curious delight had begun to pluck at his heart-strings.

Then an extravagant suspicion crossed his brain, yet a suspicion not wholly unwarranted.

“Who are you?” he asked sharply, looking up. “Are you really only a policeman?”

The man drew himself up so that he appeared, if possible, even huger than before.

“I am a World-Policeman,” he answered, “a guardian, perhaps, rather than a detective.”

“Heavens above!” cried the Professor, thinking of madness and the crimes committed in madness.

“Yes,” he went on in those calm, musical tones that before long began to have a reassuring effect upon his listener, “and it is my duty, among many others, to keep an eye upon eccentric people; to lock them up when necessary, and when their sentences have expired, to release them. Also,” he added impressively, “as in your case, to let them out of their cages without pain—when they’ve earned it.”

“Gracious goodness me!” exclaimed Parnacute, unaccustomed to the use of expletives, but unable to think of anything else to say.

“And sometimes to see that their cages do not destroy them—and that they do not beat themselves to death against the bars,” he went on, smiling quite wonderfully. “Our duties are varied *and* numerous. I am one of a large force.”

The man learned in political economy felt as though his head were spinning. He thought of calling for help. Indeed, he had already made a motion with his hand towards the bell when a gesture on the part of his strange visitor restrained him.

“Then why do you want *me*, if I may ask?” he faltered instead.

“To mark you down; and when the time comes to let you out of your cage easily, comfortably, without pain. That’s one reward for your kindness to the bird.”

The Professor’s fears had now quite disappeared. The policeman seemed perfectly harmless after all.

“It’s *very* kind of you,” he said feebly, drawing his arm back beneath the bed-clothes. “Only—er—I was not aware, exactly, that I lived in a cage.”

He looked up resignedly into the man’s face.

“You only realize that when you get out,” he replied. “They’re all like that. The bird didn’t quite understand what was wrong; it only knew that it felt miserable. Same with you. You feel unhappy in that body of yours, and in that little careful mind you regulate so nicely; but, for the life of you, you don’t quite know what it is that’s wrong. You want space, freedom, a taste of liberty. You want to fly, that’s what you want!” he cried, raising his voice.

“I—want—to—fly?” gasped the invalid.

“Oh,” smiling again, “we World-Policemen have thousands of cases just like yours. Our field is a large one, a very large one indeed.”

He stepped into the light more fully and turned sideways.

“Here’s my badge, if you care to see it,” he said proudly.

He stooped a little so that the Professor’s beady eyes could easily focus themselves upon the collar of his overcoat. There, just like the lettering upon the collar of an ordinary London policeman, only in bright gold instead of silver, shone the constellation of the Pleiades. Then he turned and showed the other side, and Parnacute saw the constellation of Orion slanting upwards, as he had often seen it tilting across the sky at night.

“Those are my badges,” he repeated proudly, straightening himself up again and moving back into the shadow.

“And very fine they are, too,” said the Professor, his increasing exhaustion suggesting no better observation. But with the sight of those starry figures had come to him a strange whiff of the open skies, space, and wind—the winds of the world.

“So that when the time comes,” the ‘World-Policeman’ resumed, “you may have confidence. I will let you out without pain or fear just as you let out the bird. And, meanwhile, you may as well realize that you live in a cage just as cramped and shut away from light and freedom as the thrush did.”

“Thank you; I will certainly try,” whispered Parnacute, almost fainting with fatigue.

There followed a pause, during which the policeman put on his helmet, tightened his belt, and then began to search vigorously for something in his coattail pockets.

“And now,” ventured the sick man, feeling half fearful, half happy, though without knowing exactly why, “is there anything more I can do for you, Mr. World-Policeman?” He was conscious that his words were peculiar yet he could not help it. They seemed to slip out of their own accord.

“There’s nothing more you can do for *me*, sir, thank you,” answered the man in his most silvery tones. “But there’s something more I can do for *you!* And that is to give you a preliminary taste of freedom, so that you may realize you do live in a cage, and be less confused and puzzled when you come to make the final Escape.”

Parnacute caught his breath sharply—staring open-mouthed.

With a single stride the policeman covered the space between himself and the bed. Before the withered, fever-stricken little Professor could utter a word or a cry, he had caught up the wasted body out of the bed, shaken the bed-clothes off him like paper from a parcel, and slung him without ceremony across his gigantic shoulders. Then he crossed the room, and producing the key from his coat-tail pocket, he put it straight into the solid wall of the room. He turned it, and the entire side of the house opened like a door.

For one second Simon Parnacute looked back and saw the lamp, and the fire, and the bed. And in the bed he saw his own body lying motionless in profound slumber.

Then, as the policeman balanced, hovering upon the giddy edge, he looked outward and saw the network of street-lamps far below, and heard the deep roar of the city smite upon his ears like the thunder of a sea.

The next moment the man stepped out into space, and he saw that they were rising up swiftly towards the dark vault of sky, where stars twinkled down upon them between streaks of thin flying clouds.

### III

Once outside, floating in the night, the policeman gave his shoulder a mighty jerk and tossed his small burden into free space.

“Jump away!” he cried. “You’re quite safe!”

The Professor dropped like a bullet towards the pavement; then suddenly began to rise again, like a balloon. All traces of fever or bodily discomfort had left him utterly. He felt light as air, and strong as lightning.



‘The policeman . . . tossed his small burden into free space’

“Now, where shall we go to?” The voice sounded above him.

Simon Parnacute was no flyer. He had never indulged in those strange flying-dreams that form a weird pleasure in the sleep-lives of many people. He was terrified beyond belief until he found that he did not crash against the earth, and that he had within him the power to regulate his movements, to rise or sink at will. Then, of course, the wildest fury of delight and freedom he had ever known flashed all over him and burned in his brain like an intoxication.

“The big cities, or the stars?” asked the World-Policeman.

“No, no,” he cried, “the country—the open country! And other lands!”

For Simon Parnacute had never travelled. Incredible as it may seem, the Professor had never in his life been farther out of England than in a sailing-boat at Southend. His body had travelled even less than his imagination. With this suddenly increased capacity for motion, the desire to race about and see became a passion.

“Woods! Mountains! Seas! Deserts! Anything but houses and people!” he shouted, rising upwards to his companion without the smallest effort.

An intense longing to see the desolate, unfrequented regions of the earth seized him and tore its way out into words strangely unlike his normal and measured mode of speech. All his life he had paced to and fro in a formal little garden with the most precise paths imaginable. Now he wanted a trackless world. The reaction was terrific. The desire of the Arab for the desert, of the gipsy for the open heaths, the “desire of the snipe for the wilderness”—the longing of the eternal wanderer—possessed his soul and found vent in words.

It was just as though the passion of the released thrush were reproducing itself in him and becoming articulate.

“I am haunted by the faces of the world’s forgotten places,” he cried aloud impetuously. “Beaches lying in the moonlight, all forsaken in the moonlight—”

His utterance, like the bird’s, had become lyrical.

“Can this be what the thrush felt?” he wondered.

“Let’s be off then,” the policeman called back. “There’s no time *but the present*, remember.” He rushed through space like a huge projectile. He made a faint whistling noise as he went. Parnacute followed suit. The lightest desire, he found, gave him instantly the ease and speed of thought.

The policeman had taken off his helmet, overcoat and belt, and dropped them down somewhere into a London street. He now appeared as a mere blue outline of a man, scarcely discernible against the dark sky—an outline filled with air. The Professor glanced down at himself and saw that he, too, was a mere outline of a man—a pallid outline filled with the purple air of night.

“Now then,” sang out this “Bobby-of-the-World.”

Side by side they shot up with a wild rush, and the lights of London, town and suburbs, flashed away beneath them in streaming lines and patches. In a second darkness filled the huge gap, pouring behind them like a mighty wave. Other streams and patches of light succeeded quickly, blurred and faint, like lamps of railway stations from a night express, as other towns dropped past them in a series and were swallowed up in the gulf behind.

A cool salt air smote their faces, and Parnacute heard the soft crashing of waves as they crossed the Channel, and swept on over the fields and forests of France, glimmering below like the squares of a mighty chess-board. Like toys, village after village shot by, smelling of peat-smoke, cattle, and the faint windiness of coming spring.

Sometimes they passed below the clouds and lost the stars, sometimes above them and lost the world; sometimes over forests roaring like the sea, sometimes above vast plains still and silent as

the grave; but always Parnacute saw the constellations of Orion and Pleiades shining on the coat-collar of the soaring policeman, their little patterns picked out as with tiny electric lamps.

Below them lay the huge map of the earth, raised, scarred, darkly coloured, and breathing—a map *alive*.

Then came the Jura, soft and purple, carpeted with forests, rolling below them like a dream, and they looked down into slumbering valleys and heard far below the tumbling of water and the singing of countless streams.

“Glory, glory!” cried the Professor. “And do the birds know *this*?”

“Not the imprisoned ones,” was the reply. And presently they whipped across large gleaming bodies of water as the lakes of Switzerland approached. Then, entering the zones of icy atmosphere, they looked down and saw white towers and pinnacles of silver, and the forms of scarred and mighty glaciers that rose and fell among the fields of eternal snow, folding upon the mountains in vast procession.

“I think—I’m frightened!” gasped Parnacute, clutching at his companion, but seizing only the frigid air.

The policeman shouted with laughter.

“This is nothing—compared to Mars or the moon,” he cried, soaring till the Alps looked like a patch of snowdrops shining in a Surrey garden. “You’ll soon get accustomed to it.”

The Professor of Political Economy rose after him. But presently they sank again in an immense curving sweep and touched the tops of the highest mountains with their toes. This sent them instantly aloft again, bounding with the impetus of rockets, and so they careered on through the perfumed, pathless night till they came to Italy and left the Alps behind them like the shadowy wall of another world that had silently moved up close to them through space.

“Mother of Mountains!” shouted the delighted man of colleges. “And did the thrush know this too?”

“It has you to thank, if so,” the policeman answered.

“And I have you to thank.”

“No—yourself,” replied his flying guide.

And then the desert! They had crossed the scented Mediterranean and reached the zones of sand. It rose in clouds and sheets as a mighty wind stirred across the leagues of loneliness that stretched below them into blue distance. It whirled about them and stung their faces,

“Thin ropes of sand which crumble ere they bind!” cried the Professor with a peal of laughter, not knowing what he said in the delirium of his pleasure.

The hot smell of the sand excited him; the knowledge that for hundreds of miles he could not see a house or a human being thrilled him dizzily with the incalculable delight of freedom. The splendour of the night, mystical and incommunicable, overcame him. He rose, laughing wildly, shaking the sand from his hair, and taking gigantic curves into the starry space about him. He remembered vividly the sight of those bedraggled wings in the little cramped cage—and then looked down and realized that here the winds sank exhausted from the very weariness of too much space. Oh, that he could tear away the bars of every cage the world had ever known—set free all captive creatures—restore to all wild, winged life the liberty of open spaces that is theirs by right!

He cried again to the stars and winds and deserts, but his words found no intelligible expression, for their passion was too great to be confined in any known medium. The World-Policeman alone understood, perhaps, for he flew down in circles round the little Professor and laughed and laughed and laughed.

And it seemed as if tremendous figures formed themselves out of the sky to listen, and bent down to lift him with a single sweep of their immense arms from the earth to the heavens. Such was the torrential power and delight of escape in him, that he almost felt as if he could skim the icy abysses of Death itself—without being ever caught. . . .

The colossal shapes of Egypt, terrible and monstrous, passed far below in huge and shadowy procession, and the desolate Lybian Mountains drew him hovering over their wastes of stone. . . . And this was only a beginning! Asia, India, and the Southern Seas all lay within reach! All could be visited in turn. The interstellar spaces, the far planets, and the white moon were yet to know!

“We must be thinking of turning soon,” he heard the voice of his companion, and then remembered how his own body, hot and feverish, lay in that stuffy little room at the other end of Europe. It was indeed caged—the withered body in the room, and himself in the withered body—doubly caged. He laughed and shuddered. The wind swept through him, licking him clean. He rose again in the ecstasy of free flight, following the lead of the policeman on the homeward journey, and the mountains below became a purple line on the map. In a series of great sweeps they rested on the top of the Pyramid, and then upon the forehead of the Sphinx, and so onwards, touching the earth at intervals, till they heard once more the waves upon the coast-line, and soared aloft again across the sea, racing through Spain and over the Pyrenees. The thin blue outline of the policeman kept ever at his side.

“From all the far blue hills of heaven these winds of freedom blow!” he shouted into space, following it with a peal of laughter that made his guide circle round and round him, chuckling as he flew. A curious, silvery chuckle it was—yet it sounded as though it came to him through a much greater distance than before. It came, as it were, through barriers. .

The picture of the bird-fancier’s shop came again vividly before him. He saw the beseeching and frightened little eyes; heard the ceaseless pattering of the imprisoned feet, wings beating against the bars, and soft furry bodies pushing vainly to get out. He saw the red face of Theodore Spinks, the proprietor, gloating over the scene of captive life that gave him the means to live—the means to enjoy his own little measure of freedom. He saw the sea-gull drooping in its corner, and the owl, its eyes filled with the dust of the street, its feathered ears twitching;—and then he thought again of the caged human beings of the world—men, women and children, and a pain, like the pain of a whole universe, burned in his soul and set his heart aflame with yearning . . . to set them all instantly free.

And, unable to find words to give expression to what he felt, he found relief again in his strange, impetuous singing.

Simon Parnacote, Professor of Political Economy, sang in mid-heaven!

But this was the last vivid memory he knew. It all began to fade a little after that. It changed swiftly like a dream when the body nears the point of waking. He tried to seize and hold it, to delay the moment when it must end; but the power was beyond him. He felt heavy and tired, and flew closer to the ground; the intervals between the curves of flight grew smaller and smaller, the impetus weaker and weaker as he became every moment more dense and stupid. His progress across the fields of the south of England, as he made his way almost laboriously homewards, became rather a series of long, low leaps than actual flight. More and more often he found himself obliged to touch the earth to acquire the necessary momentum. The big policeman seemed suddenly to have quite melted away into the blue of night.

Then he heard a door open in the sky over his head. A star came down rather too close and half blinded his eyes. Instinctively he called for help to his friend, the world-policeman.

“It’s time, for your soup now,” was the only answer he got. And it did not seem the right answer, or the right voice either. A terror of being permanently lost came over him, and he cried out again louder than before.

“And the medicine first,” dropped the thin, shrill voice out of endless space.

It was not the policeman’s voice at all. He knew now, and understood. A sensation of weariness, of sickening disgust and boredom came over him. He looked up. The sky had turned white; he saw curtains and walls and a bright lamp with a red shade. This was the star that had nearly blinded him—a lamp merely, in a sick-room!

And, standing at the farther end of the room, he saw the figure of the nurse in cap and apron. Below him lay his body in the bed. His sensation of disgust and boredom became a positive horror. But he sank down exhausted into it—into his cage.

“Take this soup, sir, after the medicine, and then perhaps you’ll get another bit of sleep,” the nurse was saying with gentle authority, bending over him.

#### IV

The progress of Professor Parnacute towards recovery was slow and tedious, for the illness had been severe and it left him with a dangerously weak heart. And at night he still had the delights of the flying dreams. Only, by this time, he had learned to fly alone. His phantom friend, the big World-Policeman, no longer accompanied him.

And his chief occupation during these weary hours of convalescence was curious and, the nurse considered, not very suitable for an invalid : for he spent the time with endless calculations, poring over the list of his few investments, and adding up times without number the total of his savings of nearly forty years. The bed was strewn with papers and documents; pencils were always getting lost among the clothes; and each time the nurse collected the paraphernalia and put them aside, he would wait till she was out of the room, and then crawl over to the table and carry them all back into bed with him.

Then, finally, she gave up fighting with him, and acquiesced, for his restlessness increased and he could not sleep unless his beloved half-sheets and pencils lay strewn upon the counterpane within instant reach.

Even to the least observant it was clear that the Professor was hatching the preliminary details of a profound plot.

And his very first visitor, as soon as he was permitted to see anybody, was a gentleman with parchment skin and hard, dry, peeping eyes who came by special request—a solicitor, from the firm of Messrs. Costa & Delay.

“I will ascertain the price of the shop and stock-in-trade and inform you of the result at the earliest opportunity, Professor Parnacute,” said the man of law in his gritty, professional voice, as he at length took his departure and left the sick-room with the expressionless face of one to whom the eccentricities of human nature could never be new or surprising.

“Thank you; I shall be *most* anxious to hear,” replied the other, turning in his long easy-chair to save his papers, and at the same time to defend himself against the chiding of the good-natured nurse.

“I knew I should have to pay for it,” he murmured, thinking of his original sin; “but I hope,”—here he again consulted his pencilled figures—“I think I can manage it—just. Though with Consols so low—” He fell to musing again. “Still, I can always sublet the shop, of course, as

they suggest,” he concluded with a sigh, turning to appeal to the bewildered nurse and finding for the first time that she had gone out of the room.

He fell to pondering deeply. Presently the “list enclosed” by the solicitors caught his eye among the pillows, and he began listlessly to examine it. It was type-written and covered several sheets of foolscap. It was split up into divisions headed as “Lot 1, Lot 2, Lot 3,” and so on. He began to read slowly half aloud to himself; then with increasing excitement—

“50 Linnets, guaranteed not straight from the fields; *all caged.*”

“10 fierce singing Linnets.”

“10 grand cock Thrustles, *just on song.*”

“5 Pear-Tree Goldfinches, with deep, square blazes, well buttoned and mooned.”

“4 Devonshire Woodlarks, guaranteed full song; *caged three months.*”

The Professor sat up and gripped the paper tightly. His face wore a pained, intent expression. A convulsive movement of his fingers, automatic perhaps, crumpled the sheet and nearly tore it across. He went on reading, shedding rugs and pillows as though they oppressed him. His breath came a little faster.

“5 cock Blackbirds, full plumage, *lovely songsters.*”

“1 Song-Thrush, show-cage and hamper; *splendid whistler*, picked bird.”

“1 beautiful, large upstanding singing Skylark; *sings all day; been caged positively five months.*”

Simon Parnacute uttered a curious little cry. It was deep down in his throat. He was conscious of a burning desire to be rich—a millionaire; powerful—an autocratic monarch. After a pause he brought back his attention with an effort to the type-written page and the consideration of further “Lots”—

“3 cock Skylarks; can hear them 200 yards off when singing.”

“*Two hundred yards off when singing,*” muttered the Professor into his one remaining pillow. He read on, kicking his feet, somewhat viciously for a sick man, against the wicker rest at the end of the lounge chair.

“1 special, select, singing cock Skylark; guaranteed caged three months; *sings his wild note.*”

He suddenly dashed the list aside. The whole chair creaked and groaned with the violence of his movement. He kicked three times running at the wicker foot-rest, and evidently rejoiced that it was still stiff enough to make it worth while to kick again—harder.

“Oh, that I had all the money in the world!” he cried to himself, letting his eyes wander to the window and the clear blue spaces between the clouds; “all the money in the world!” he repeated with growing excitement. He saw one of London’s sea-gulls circling high, high up. He watched it for some minutes, till it sailed against a dazzling bit of white cloud and was lost to view.

“‘*Sings his wild note*’—‘*guaranteed caged three months*’—‘*can be heard two hundred yards oft.*’” The phrases burned in his brain like consuming flames.

And so the list went on. He was glancing over the last page when his eye fell suddenly upon an item that described a lot of—

“8 Linnets caged four months; *raving with song.*”

He dropped the list, rose with difficulty from his chair and paced the room, muttering to himself “raving with song, raving with song, raving with song.” His hollow cheeks were flushed, his eyes aglow.

“*Caged, caged, caged,*” he repeated under his breath, while his thoughts travelled to that racing flight across Europe, over seas and mountains.

“*Sings his wild note!*” He heard again the whistling wind about his ears as he flew through the zones of heated air above the desert sands.

“*Raving with song!*” He remembered the passion of his own cry—that strange lyrical outburst of his heart when the magic of freedom caught him, and he had soared at will through the unchartered regions of the night.

And then he saw once more the blinking owl, its eyes blinded by the dust of the London street, its feathery ears twitching as it heard the wind sighing past the open doorway of the dingy shop. And again the thrush looked into his face and poured out the rapture of its spring song.

And half-an-hour later he was so exhausted by the unwonted emotion and exercise that the nurse herself was obliged to write at his dictation the letter he sent in reply to the solicitors, Messrs. Costa & Delay in Southampton Row.

But the letter was posted that night and the Professor, still mumbling to himself about “having to pay for it,” went to bed with the first hour of the darkness, and plunged straight into another of his delightful flying dreams almost the very moment his eyes had closed.

## V

“. . . Thus, all the animals have been disposed of according to your instructions,” ran the final letter from the solicitors, “and we beg to append list of items so allotted, together with country addresses to which they have been sent. We think you may feel assured that they are now in homes where they will be well cared for.

“We still retain the following animals against your further instructions—

2 Zonure Lizards,  
1 Angulated Tortoise,  
2 Mealy Rosellas,  
2 Scaly-breasted Lorikcets.

“With regard to these we should advise. . . .

“The caged birds, meanwhile, which you intend the children shall release, are being cared for satisfactorily; and the premises will be ready for taking over as from June 1. . . .

And, with the assistance of the nurse, he then began to issue a steady stream of letters to the parents of children he knew in the country, carefully noting and tabulating the replies, and making out little white labels inscribed in plain lettering with the words “Lot 1,” “Lot 2,” and so on, precisely as though he were in the animal business himself, and were getting ready for a sale.

But the sale which took place a fortnight later on June 1 was no ordinary sale.

It was a brilliant hot day when Simon Parnacute, still worn and shaky from his recent illness, made his way towards the shop of the “retired” bird-fancier. The sale of the premises and stock-in-trade, and the high price obtained, had made quite a stir in the “Fancy,” but of that the Professor was sublimely ignorant as he crossed the street in front of a truculent motor-omnibus and stood before the dingy three-storey red-brick house.

He produced the key sent to him by Messrs. Costa & Delay, and opened the door. It was cool after the glare of the burning street, and delightfully silent. He remembered the chorus of crying birds that had greeted his last appearance. The silence now was eloquent.

“Good, good,” he said to himself, with a quiet smile, as he noticed the temporary counter built across the front room for cloaks and parcels, “very good indeed.”

Then he went up-stairs, climbing painfully, for he was still easily exhausted. There was hardly a stick of furniture in the house, nor an inch of carpet on the floor and stairs, but the rooms had been swept and scrubbed; everything was fresh and scrupulously clean, and the tenant to whom he was to sub-let could have no fault to find on that score.

In the first-floor rooms he saw with pleasure the flowers arranged about the boards as he had directed. The air was sweet and perfumed. The windows at the back—the sills deep with jars of roses—opened upon a small bit of green garden, and Parnacote looked out and saw the blue sky and the clouds floating lazily across it.

“Good, very good,” he exclaimed again, sitting down on the stairs a moment to recover his breath. The excitement and the heat of the day tired him. And, as he sat, he put his hand to his ear and listened attentively. A sound of birds singing reached him faintly from the upper part of the house.

“Ah!” he said, drawing a deep breath, and colour coming into his cheeks. “Ah! Now I hear them.”

The sound of singing came nearer, as on a passing wind. He climbed laboriously to the top floor, and then, after resting again, scrambled up a ladder through an open skylight on to the roof. The moment he put his perspiring face above the tiles a wild chorus of singing birds greeted him with a sound like a whole country-side in spring.

“If only my friend, the park policeman, could see this!” he said aloud, with a delighted chuckle, “and hear it!” He sought a precarious resting-place upon the butt of a chimney-stack, mopping his forehead.

All around him the sea of London roofs and chimneys rolled away in a black sea, but here, like an oasis in a desert, was a roof of limited extent, and not very high compared to others, converted into a perfect garden. Flowers—but why describe them, when he himself did not even know the names? It was enough that his orders had been carried out to his entire satisfaction, and that this little roof was a world of living colour, moving in the wind, scenting the air, welcoming the sunshine.

Everywhere among the pots and boxes of flowers stood the cages. And in the cages the thrushes and blackbirds, the larks and linnets, poured their hearts out with a chorus of song that was more exquisite, he thought, than anything he had ever heard. And there in the corner by the big chimney, carefully shaded from the glare, stood the large cage containing the owls.

“I can almost believe they have guessed my purpose after all,” exclaimed the Professor.

For a long time he sat there, leaning against the chimney, oblivious of a blackened collar, listening to the singing, and feasting his eyes upon the garden of flowers all about him. Then the sound of a bell ringing down-stairs roused him suddenly into action, and he climbed with difficulty down again to the hall door.

“Here they come,” he thought, greatly excited. “Dear me, I do trust I shall not make any mistakes.”

He felt in his pocket for his note-book, and then opened the door into the street.

“Oh, it’s only you!” he exclaimed, as his nurse came in with her arms full of parcels.

“Only me,” she laughed, “but I’ve brought the lemonade and the biscuits. The others will be here now any minute. It’s after three. There’s just time to arrange the glasses and plates. We must expect about fifty according to the letters you got. And mind you don’t get over-tired.”

“Oh, I’m all right!” he answered.

She ran up-stairs. Before her steps had sounded once on the floor above, a carriage-and-pair stopped at the door, and a footman came up smartly and asked if Professor Parnacute was at home.

“Indeed I am,” answered the old man, blushing and laughing at the same time, and then going down himself to the carriage to welcome the little girl and boy who got out. He bowed stiffly and awkwardly to the pretty lady in the victoria, who thanked him for his kindness with a speech he did not hear properly, and then led his callers into the house. They were very shy at first, and hardly knew what to make of it all, but once inside, the boy’s sense of adventure was stirred by the sight of the empty shop, and the counter, and the strange array of flowers upon the floor.

He remembered the letter his father had read out from Professor Parnacute a week ago.

“My Lot is No. 7, isn’t it, Mr. Professor?” he cried. “I let out a cage of linnets, and get a guinea-pig and a mealy-something-or-other as a present, don’t I?”

Mr. Parnacute, shaky and beaming, consulted his note-book hurriedly, and replied that this was “perfectly correct.”

“Master Edwin Burton,” he read out; “to release—Lot 7. To take away—one guinea-pig, and one mealy rosella.”

“I’m Lot 8, please,” piped the voice of the little girl, standing with wide-open eyes beside him.

“Oh, are you, my dear?” said he; “yes, yes, I believe you are.” He fumbled anew with the note-book. “Here it is,” he added, reading aloud again— “Miss Angelina Burton;” he peered closely in the gloom to decipher the writing; “To release—Lot 8— that’s woodlarks, my dear, you know. To take away—one angulated tortoise. Quite correct, yes; quite correct.”

He called to the nurse up-stairs to show the children their presents hidden away in boxes among the flowers—their rosella and tortoise—and then went again to the door to receive his other guests, who now began to arrive in a steady stream. To the number of twenty or thirty they came, and not one of them appeared to be much over twelve. And the majority of them left their elders at the door and came in unattended.

The marshalling of this array of youngsters among the birds and flowers was a matter of some difficulty, but here the nurse came to the Professor’s assistance with energy and experience, so that his strength was economized and the children were arranged without danger to any one.

And upon that little roof the sight was certainly a unique one. There they all stood, an extraordinary patchwork of colour for the tiles of South-west London—the bright frocks of the girls, the plumage of the birds, the blues and yellows and scarlets of the flowers; while the singing and voices sent up a chorus that brought numerous surprised faces to the windows of the higher buildings about them, and made people stop in the street below and ask themselves with startled faces where in the world these sounds came from this still June afternoon!

“Now!” cried Simon Parnacute, when all lots and owners had been placed carefully side by side. “The moment I give the word of command, open your cages and let the prisoners escape! And point in the direction of the park.”

The children stooped and picked up their cages. The voices and the singing in a hundred busy little throats ceased. A hush fell upon the roof and upon the strange gathering. The sun poured blazingly down over everything, and the Professor’s face streamed.

“One,” he cried, his voice tremulous with excitement, “two, three—and away!”



‘The . . . prisoners shot out like a cloud into the air’

There was a rattling sound of opening doors and wire bars—and then a sudden burst of half-suppressed, long-drawn “Ahhhs.” At once there followed a rush of fluttering feathers, a rapid vibration of the air, and the small host of prisoners shot out like a cloud into the air, and a moment later with a great whirring of wings had disappeared over the walls beyond the forest of chimneys and were lost to view. Blackbirds, thrushes, linnets and finches were gone in a twinkling, so that the eye could hardly follow them. Only the sea-gulls, puzzled by their sudden freedom, with wings still stiff after their cramped quarters, lingered on the edge of the roof for a few minutes, and looked about them in a dazed fashion, until they, too, realized their liberty and sailed off into the open sky to search for splendours of the sea.

A second hush, deeper even than the first, fell over all for a moment, and then the children with one accord burst into screams of delight and explanation, shouting, for all who cared to listen, the details of how their birds, respectively, had flown; where they had gone; what they thought and looked like; and a hundred other details as to where they would build their nests and the number of eggs they would lay.

And then came the descent for the presents and refreshment. One by one they approached the Professor, holding out the tickets with the number of their “lot” and the description of animal they were to receive and find a home for. The few accompanied by elders came first.

“The owls, I think?” said the pink-faced clergyman who had chaperoned other children besides his own, picking his way across the roof as the crowd tapered off down the skylight. “Two owls,” he repeated, with a smile. “In the windy towers of my belfry under the Mendips, I hope—”

“Oh, the very thing, the very place,” replied Parnacute, with pleasure, remembering his correspondent. For, of course, the owls had not been released with the other birds.

“And for my little girl you thought, perhaps, a lorikeet—”

“A scaly-breasted lorikeet, papa,” she interrupted, with a degree of excitement too intense for smiles, and pronouncing the name as she had learned it—in a single word; “*and* a lizard.”

They moved off towards the trap-door, the owl cage under the clergyman’s arm. They would receive the lorikeet and lizard down-stairs from the nurse on presenting their ticket.

“And remember,” added Parnacute slyly, addressing the child, “to comb their feathered trousers with a *very* fine comb!”

The clergyman turned a moment at the skylight as he helped the owls and children to squeeze through.

“I shall have something to say about this in my sermon next Sunday,” he said. He smiled as his head disappeared.

“Oh, but, my dear sir—” cried the Professor, tripping over a flower-pot in his pleasure and embarrassment, and just reaching the skylight in time to add, “And, remember, there are cakes and lemonade on the floor below!”

The animals had all been provided with happy homes; the last cab had driven away, and the nurse had gone to find the flower-man. Parnacute had strewn the roof with food, and with moss and hair-material for nesting, in case any of the birds returned. He stood alone and watched the sunset pour its gold over the myriad houses—the cages of the men and women of London town. He felt exhausted; the sky was soothing and pleasant to behold. . . .

He sat down to rest, conscious of a great weakness now that the excitement was over and the reaction had begun to set in. Probably he had exerted himself unduly.

His mind reverted to his first impulsive eccentricity of two months before.

“I knew I should pay for it,” he murmured, with a smile, “and I have. But it was worth it.”

He stopped abruptly and caught his breath a moment. He was thoroughly over-tired; the excitement of it all had been too much for him. He must get home as quickly as possible to rest. The nurse would be back any minute now.

A sound of wings rapidly beating the air passed overhead, and he looked up and saw a flight of pigeons wheeling by. He fancied, too, that he just caught the notes of a thrush singing far away in the park at the end of the street. He recalled the phrases of that dreadfully haunting list. “Wild singing note,” “Can be heard two hundred yards off,” “Raving with song.” A momentary spasm passed through his frame. Far up in the air the sea-gulls still circled, making their way with all the splendour of real freedom to the sea.

“To-night,” he thought, “they will roost on the marshes, or perched upon the lonely cliffs. Good, good, *very* good!”

He got up, stiffly and with difficulty, to watch the pigeons better, and to hear the thrush, and, as he did so, the bell rang down-stairs to admit the nurse and the flower-man.

“Odd,” he thought; “I gave her the key!”

He made his way towards the skylight, picking his way with uncertain tread between the flower-boxes; but before he could reach it a head and shoulders suddenly appeared above the opening.

“Odd,” he thought again, “that she should have come up so quickly—”

But he did not complete the thought. It was not the nurse at all. A very different figure followed the emerging head and shoulders, and there in front of him on the roof stood—a policeman.

It was *the* policeman.

“Oh,” said Parnacute quietly, “it’s *you!*” A wild tumult of yearning and happiness caught at his heart and made it impossible to think of anything else to say.

The big blue figure smiled his shining smile.

“One more flight, sir,” said the silvery, ringing voice respectfully, “and the last.”

The pigeons wheeled past overhead with a sharp whirring of wings. Both men looked up significantly at their vanishing outline over the roofs. A deep silence fell between them. Parnacute was aware that he was smiling and contented.

“I am quite ready, I think,” he said in a low tone. “You promised—”

“Yes,” returned the other in the voice that was like the ringing of a silver gong, “I promised—without pain.”

The Policeman moved softly over to him; he made no sound; the constellations of Orion and the Pleiades shone on his coat-collar. There was another whirring rush as the pigeons swept again overhead and wheeled abruptly, but this time there was no one on the roof to watch them go, and it seemed that their flying wedge, as they flashed away, was larger and darker than before. . . .

And when the nurse returned with the man for the boxes, they came up to the roof and found the body of Simon Parnacute, late Professor of Political Economy, lying face upwards among the flowers. The human cage was empty. Some one had opened the door.