

THE IMMORTAL GUINEA-PIG

By RONALD MACDONALD

ILLUSTRATED BY JOHN CAMPBELL

BECKINGTON VILLAGE suspected Madely Towers, and vaguely feared the fine house with the splendid gardens and the grim wall enclosing them. "The Red Lion" faces the graceful stone bridge which crosses the Iflet, and from Madely Towers into Beckington there is no way but the bridge, unless you walk two miles round.

So the landlord of "The Red Lion" saw almost everyone who came from or went to the old country house—turned ten years ago into a sanatorium—for the railway-station was on the same side of the Iflet as the inn.

There was scarce an inmate of the Towers but would, in the course of a week, come walking over the bridge which crossed the deep-rushing little river. Now and again one would stop, order something, and drink it under the inquisition of five or six pairs of eyes. But in none of Dr. Anson's patients could "The Red Lion" find a hole to pick. The men drank little and talked pleasantly; and the younger of them, though they seldom stayed long at the Towers, always left it looking stronger and happier.

Of the women, except that they did not drink at "The Red Lion," the same things might be said; they left Dr. Anson's a little fatter, a little browner, and a great deal happier, if looks were to be trusted, than when they came.

The older patients, however, stayed longer; some three or four, Odgers, the landlord, was ready to swear, had been there since Anson took the house. And it was the elder men and women who gave the inn and the village that sense of the unknown and the unaccountable which had ripened into suspicion.

That the young and jaded should in this mild yet stimulating air become younger, happier, and keener was all in the course of Nature; but that the decrepit, the fat, and

the senile should, in the course whether of a few months or fewer years, grow erect, lose grossness, and come alive again to the world around them, was—well, it savoured of witchcraft, the black art of which the tradition yet lingers in some parts of that county.

Many in Beckington thought, and all Beckington had some perception of the notion as Beckington's united opinion, that Dr. Anson was up to no good, and was playing a queer game—working a spell or deviltry of some kind on the people who would have seemed, to you or me, to have got nothing but healing from him.

Yet almost every man in Beckington who did not himself owe something to the wisdom and kindness of Dr. Anson, knew two or three others who did. But that lean figure, that brown face, those thin lips, the alert gait and the ready ear seemed, to the rustic mind, to consort ill with the "in-turned" expression of the eyes.

"However kind and clever he be," Sam Odgers would say, "it always seems like as if it was some other chap, not you, as he's doing it for."

After heavy rain in the first week of August had come splendid summer weather. Odgers himself had brought out the ale which Tompkins, from Boulger's End Farm, was drinking.

Tompkins, lowering the pewter from his face, saw right in front of him, coming down the hill on the other side of the river, a little old lady. He pointed across the bridge with the tankard.

"Who's she?" he asked.

"Looks like Mrs. Anson—doctor's mother, up to Madely," said Odgers. "She's too old to be running, let alone the heat."

"And never hat nor bonnet on her head!" exclaimed Tompkins.

The figure drew nearer, running with the pitiable, flat-footed trot of an old woman.

Tompkins dropped the pewter mug into the road, gathered the reins in a short grip, and snatched his whip from the socket on the splashboard.

"She'll do herself a hurt," he said, and struck his horse, for the first time almost in his life galloping a dog-cart downhill. Something told him not to let the woman reach the bridge, and his very zeal undid him. The trotting figure and the galloping horse met near the far end of the bridge. He could see the face now—desperate, if not mad. To avoid crushing her against the wall with his near wheel, Tompkins drew out a little. The woman trotted by him, helping her pace with hands that scrambled like rats along the breast-high parapet.

He divined that she did not mean to cross the bridge, and it seemed to him an age before he succeeded in stopping and turning the cart, heading the horse back towards the inn. In reality, he had done it all in the shortest possible time, but, as he came abreast of her, the little old woman had her second knee on the parapet, and was struggling to her feet for the leap into the water.

Tompkins jumped from his seat in time only to grasp a handful of her skirt as she went over. A jagged piece of black stuff in his hand was all he gained by it. A downward glance showed him some clothes and a grey head bobbing and twisting down the quick water.

He ran back to the end of the bridge she had come from, vaulted the fence where it met the parapet, and ran along the grass bank till he had distanced the grey head, now almost submerged. He judged his time, flopped in, and swam. In spite of the stream he was strong enough to reach its middle as she came down to him, now under water. Somehow he got the poor, dragged head over his shoulder, and then, with only one arm at work, had all he could do to keep the two mouths free. Feebly but doggedly he was swimming for the Beckington bank, and wondering how long he would hold out if he could not break through the mid strength of the current, when he heard a shout, and next moment felt the slap of a line falling across his shoulders. He caught the rope with his free hand—Odgers was at its other end—and in a minute and a half Tompkins and his burden were ashore.

They carried the little woman up through

"The Red Lion" paddock to the inn, not knowing whether she were dead or alive.

Mrs. Odgers met them at the back door, screaming: she had seen death approaching, she thought, through the apple trees.

But "Shut thy mouth!" said Odgers; and when she saw the grey, dragged head between his arms, she was not only silent, but became again the efficient woman her husband knew.

They carried the helpless body to the landlady's room. Mrs. Odgers, knowing nothing of artificial respiration, began at once to strip the wizened little form, sending the men from the room as if modesty were more than life.

Odgers ran to the kitchen to fill bottles with hot water.

Tompkins helped himself to spirits in the deserted bar, and remembered his horse and trap. As he went out into the road, he saw that a small crowd had already gathered, in the midst of which was Dr. Anson's motor-car, and the Doctor, asking what had happened.

He left the car, meeting Tompkins on the steps.

"Upstairs," said Tompkins, pointing the way. And then, after a moment's hesitation, "They do say it's Mrs. Anson, sir," he added.

"Fetch the lady from my car," said Anson, and leapt up the stairs.

A woman in a silk dust-coat was already getting out. She was of graceful figure, pale of face, with large brown eyes. The crowd watched her speak with Tompkins and then enter the house.

"Doctor herself," he heard one man say to another. "My sister's courtin' with the second gardener at the Towers. She've got letters after her name—same's a man. She's his assistant—not so much with the patients, gardener says, as in the other games."

"Games—what games?" asked Tompkins.

"How sh'd I know? There's the rabbits in their hutches, and rats and guinea-pigs. Stinkin' vermin, all of 'em—but I pities 'em."

An hour later, when they brought old Mrs. Anson, wrapped in blankets, and with the dragged hair decently hidden, down to the car, Tompkins was again there. Having risked something in getting her out of the water, he had a modest curiosity to see that she lived. He was pleased by the tenderness of her son, and of the lady who was also a doctor, in securing her comfort. A little

flutter inside him rather hoped that somebody would say "Thank you." Yet he kept himself and his glass religiously aloof.

became awkwardness when Tompkins felt, in moving, the coat and trousers which neither belonged to nor fitted him.

Dr. Anson gave him his hand.

"My debt is too great for words, Mr. Tompkins," he said. "May I come and see you at Boulger's End?" Then he turned to the white face framed in blanket and silk handkerchief.

"Mother," he said, "this is Mr. Tompkins. He saved your life at the risk of his own."

The eyes in the pale face had been half closed.

Now they came wide open and met those of the blushing Tompkins.



"I came to tell you how I felt—felt your delicacy, and how I think you have just that sympathetic spirit of a sportsman which my husband loved finding in a man."

Anson, on the point of starting, leaned over and seemed to ask a question of Sam Odgers. Answering, Odgers glanced at Tompkins and beckoned him. Modesty

In a voice very low, but so exquisitely clear that the words were heard by at least half a dozen of the villagers as well as by Sam Odgers and his wife, Mrs. Anson spoke.

"I shall never forgive him," she said. And the delicate old face twitched as the eyes closed.

No comment was possible. Anson started his car, nodding, with a deprecating smile, at Tompkins. The lady who was, they said, also a doctor, looked back also to nod and smile, and Tompkins thought the smile made her beautiful.

Beckington discovered as many explanations as it invented versions of the facts. Tompkins, who was not Beckington proper, said nothing. Of true Beckington men, Odgers said the least. But his office did once or twice force him to give an opinion; it seemed like as if the poor lady had been tired of being alive, and that was a thing as could happen easy enough, without no witchcraft nor foul play in it. Seemed a pity like, he said softly once—to the Reverend Mr. Merridew—that he and Tompkins had been looking over river when she came ambling down to the bridge. And Mr. Merridew, though nodding sympathetically, said something formal of bearing the burdens laid upon us. To which Sam Odgers replied that there might be burdens, so to speak, outside of the bargain. What bargain, Merridew did not ask. But Odgers continued, as if explanation were incumbent, whether asked or not:

"I've always looked at the whole thing, you see, sir, as a bargain 'tween me and summat that I—well, that I just has to guess at. And part of that bargain—way I look at it, you see, Mr. Merridew—part of that bargain is—"

Odgers was shy. So was Merridew, but he managed to nod encouragement.

"The days of our years are three-score years and ten—it says that somewheres, you know, Mr. Merridew," Odgers explained. "And summat more—saying, like, if you do happen to get the long pull, you'll mebbe find it a drop over what you needed."

"Well?" asked Merridew guardedly, but quickly suspicious of what the man meant to convey.

Odgers looked him straight in the eyes for the first time that day. "Ever kept guinea-pigs, parson?" he asked.

"When I was a little boy, but not for long. The little beasts were always dying. I had six once, and a thunderstorm killed three."

"Oldest I ever knew," said Odgers, with a certain grim significance, "was six years. I'm not saying you mightn't get one to live

seven—p'raps even eight—but they've got a guinea-pig up to Madely Towers what'll be nineteen years come Christmas."

Mr. Merridew went home feeling rather sick. And Odgers, knowing his man, never asked him not to repeat what he had said.

Dr. Anson came, as he had promised, to see Tompkins. Though both were simple-minded men, and though each had the best manners of his class, there was constraint on both sides, to which Tompkins, at the end of the interview, gave partial expression.

Modestly, even diffidently, Anson had taken from the car a beautifully-made, old-fashioned hunting-crop, asking the farmer to keep it in memory of his gratitude.

Tompkins demurring inarticulately—

"It was my father's," said Anson. "He was a great man after the hounds. He and my mother—well, such devotion as theirs seems to me a very rare thing, Mr. Tompkins. He has been dead ten years. I'd like you to take it as from him."

Poor Tompkins had a feeling "above himself." He turned flaming red in the face, and his hands were behind his back.

"Can't be done, Dr. Anson," he said. Then, seeing the pain and astonishment on the other man's face, he took the desperate venture of comforting him with the truth: "I'm thinking, if things were that way with him, your father, sir, would like enough have as little thanks for what I did as your mother had."

Anson was a gentleman, and accepted the honesty of the explanation, doing his best to hide the pain it gave him. He laid the whip on the seat of the car, assured the unhappy Tompkins of at least a son's gratitude, shook hands with him warmly, and drove away.

Three days later the car came again, but this time it brought Mrs. Anson herself.

Tompkins was there when she came, and her face wore an expression of contrition so gentle and appealing that he helped her out very tenderly.

He led her into his stiff and stuffy parlour and put her into its best chair.

"You're a kind man, as well as a very brave one, Mr. Tompkins," she said. "I want you to forgive me—my ingratitude."

"If what I did seemed an injury, ma'am, rather than a good turn—" he began. But she interrupted him.

"It was a good turn," she said. "Suicide is wicked. I've always been taught so, and believed it, so I seem to have no excuse."

"They do say 'tis the Lord knows the excuses," murmured Tompkins, much embarrassed.

"I hope so," she answered simply. "My son told me, Mr. Tompkins, why you refused to accept from him a thing which he and I prize very much. The whip belonged to one of the most famous cross-country riders in the shires—Major James Anson, my husband."

Tompkins made the mouth of a man about to whistle in astonishment, but checked himself at the cost of a small hiss.

"'Tis a fine whip, and a fine man they say he was, ma'am. Did you do me the honour to come here to-day to make me take it?"

"No, I came to tell you how I felt—felt your delicacy, and how I think you have just that sympathetic spirit of a sportsman which my husband loved finding in a man."

Tompkins was struck to the heart with pleasure, but did not speak.

"And also," she went on, in her clear, thin voice, with such beauty of pronunciation as Tompkins had not heard since the old Taverner family, driven out by the Death Duties, had parted with Madely Towers—"and also, Mr. Tompkins, I came because I wanted to tell you how it all happened."

"D'you think, ma'am, as that's wise? It's mostly best to let them things lie. I can see you're a good, kind lady, and I can believe in a heavy trouble without even trying to guess what it might be. It hasn't hurt me, ma'am, what you said, 'cept that I've been wishing whiles that I'd not interfered. But—"

"But there's no time to ask questions, is there, when a crazy old woman is trying to take headers off a bridge? You'll have to listen to me, please. So fill your pipe, Mr. Tompkins, and sit down—there."

She pointed to a chair facing hers, and Tompkins obeyed, even to taking his pipe out of his pocket. But after her first words he forgot to fill it.

"My son, Dr. Philip Anson, earned high distinction at Cambridge," she said, "and afterwards in the hospital and the examinations in London. But his love for his father made him content with a country practice in our part of Leicestershire, so that they might see each other almost every day. But after my husband's death Philip chose this place, Madely Towers, as best suited for carrying out what he called his life's work. What that was I did not understand

at the time, and I was surprised when I found that this new place, so far from our old house, was just only a kind of sanatorium. I could not bring myself to leave the place where his father and I had been so happy together. For the first two or three years of my widowhood I was fairly content. Philip came often to see me, and, as my health seemed rapidly declining, I believed I should soon join his father. My friends used sometimes to speak of me as a saint, alluding to the resignation with which I endured my ailments. I used to laugh secretly over that, because every twinge of sciatica, every cold in the head, every attack of influenza, was counted as a step towards—towards my husband, Mr. Tompkins. Only I wanted to see my son married first."

She paused a moment, as if asking whether he understood.

Tompkins nodded gravely.

"Two years ago I nearly died of pneumonia. Philip came to me, nursed me, and brought me here. He told me he believed he could make me quite strong again, and I submitted to his treatment and to staying on here the more willingly that I didn't believe all the doctors in the world could keep me from dying very soon, and also because there was a lady in his house working with him, whom I liked very much, and whom I hoped he would marry."

"Well, I saw a good many patients come and go, and I wasn't surprised when they got well in such clever hands. But some of the old ones stayed on and on, and seemed to grow, not only stronger, but younger. One day I questioned Miss Sylvia Clive—Dr. Clive, they call her—and she told me that there wasn't a man in the world who'd been so successful in averting and combating the first stages of senile decay as Dr. Anson. She is very sweet and kind, and, somehow, the phrase 'senile decay' didn't frighten me so much as if she'd said he knew how to keep people from growing old. But some little time after that I was talking to one of the patients—a Mr. Blyfield, a gentleman who has been there for six years. He's eighty years old next month."

"I've seen Mr. Blyfield," said Tompkins, "and talked to him. I'd have given him a bare sixty."

And he saw a slender shudder run over the old woman's body.

"That—that," she said very softly, "is the horror of it. An old man that isn't old enough can become as ghastly as a child that won't grow up. Well, I was talking to

Mr. Blyfield, when he suddenly laughed in a very queer way.

"'Ma'am,' he said, 'it's immortality he's after. Your son's jumped ahead of Metchnikoff as far as Stephenson outpaced Jamie Watt. We keep it quiet here, we old ones, because we want to play the game with Dr. Anson. Man's a long liver, anyhow, and takes a bit of observing. But I was an awful case of senile decay at seventy-four, ma'am. They had a man and two women to feed, wash, and brush me. A doll, ma'am, I was, with too little sawdust in my calico veins. Look at me now!' he said, and threw out his chest and waggled that dreadful white beard. Mr. Tompkins, so that he gave me an awful fit of shuddering.

"Then the old gentleman—for you must understand, Mr. Tompkins, that he is a gentleman in a sort of way; he is always gentle and considerate to me. I mustn't forget that, because my son and Miss Clive were always so busy in the annex—"

Here honest Tompkins interrupted to ask what an annex might be.

"They call it the annex—the great wide shed where there are all sorts of rooms where all sorts of queer things are being done all day, and where all the nice young men look always so anxious," explained Mrs. Anson. "Miss Clive and my son were so much in the annex, and amongst the cages where all the strange animals are kept—"

"Animals? What animals?"

"Rats, rabbits, and guinea-pigs," replied the old lady, "one or two horses that don't work, and a few dogs."

Tompkins laughed as if relieved of anxiety.

"But those are common animals enough, ma'am," he said.

"They are strange ones—at Madely Towers, in the wire hutches and cages and stalls," persisted Mrs. Anson.

"Why?"

"They don't die, Mr. Tompkins," she replied, and the pretty, gentle old face was full of horror. "This Mr. Blyfield was very kind and attentive, and I liked him till he started this subject. And I couldn't keep him off it, and it frightened me. At first I thought he was crazy, but I found there were one or two others who believed at least that their lives were being indefinitely prolonged. The Doctor didn't like it being talked about, they said, and had never professed more than to have gone further than any other physician in the successful

treatment of old age as a disease. Mr. Blyfield said that was certainly the philosophic way to regard it. There are many diseases, he said, and they all lead to death. Old age is just the commonest of them—that's all.

"I found I had no difficulty in avoiding this kind of talk with the others, but Mr. Blyfield became tiresome. So at last I told him that the subject didn't interest me. He became much excited, and said it ought to interest me very much, because I was one of them—had undergone the same treatment that he and the others had been through. This I denied, but when he described it as far as he had been permitted to understand it, I believed he was right. It made me very unhappy, Mr. Tompkins, to think that I might have to—to go on and on—"

Tompkins, his face full of sympathy, nodded to show that he understood.

"Of course I didn't believe all that Mr. Blyfield hoped. That would have been too horrible. I asked Miss Clive to explain it all to me, but got so little out of her that at last I went to my son. We had never quarrelled before, Mr. Tompkins, and it was very dreadful."

Then she forgot that Farmer Tompkins was so far from being of her own people that he was not even of her class, and spoke to him as her intimate in a common humanity.

"I don't mean that *he* quarrelled; it was I that quarrelled with my son, because he had healed me, Mr. Tompkins—healed me so well that he couldn't even tell me when I was likely to die. I walked out of his study, out of the grounds into the road, miserable because I had hurt him, and miserable because Mr. Blyfield's horrid hope had become my worst fear. I went a little mad, I suppose, with the desire of death. I found myself running down the hill to the bridge, hoping to get into the cool water before I fainted.

"Then I saw an enemy in a chariot, galloping down the other hill towards me. I saw you pull your horse to save me from being crushed. I knew you'd come back after me, and I was determined to get over the edge before you could catch me. I did. And even now I can't think how you managed to get me alive out of that strong little river."

Tompkins told her how he and Odgers had accomplished the ungrateful rescue.

"That was very brave and clever of you both," she said. Her mouth smiled seriously

and her eyes shone, Tompkins thought, like a girl's.

There followed a pause which did not make Tompkins uncomfortable. For this simple old lady had put him at peace with himself as well as with her.

At last she said :

"What am I to do, Mr. Tompkins?"

"Ma'am," he answered, "you've no right to take it into your own hands."

"But I must go away some day to Major Anson—you do see that, don't you?"

"Seems to you that that was one of the rules of the game, when you began playing, don't it, ma'am?" he asked.

Mrs. Anson nodded her head like a bird pecking.

"It's quite extraordinary, Mr. Tompkins," she said, "how well you understand."

"May I ask—without offence, ma'am—may I ask your age?"

"I am just seventy," she replied.

"Even cricket, ma'am," said Tompkins diffidently, "has a printed book of the rules. The Bible's been printed a long time. It don't say when you've a right to declare the innings closed—to be sure it don't. But it does say you may expect seventy overs, and that anything beyond that's a bit too much. And the language not being what you might call precise and lawyer-like, it leaves me, anyhow, ma'am, with a notion that, if the match was pulled out by some trick of stopping the sun and no night coming between, I'd say there was a most unsportsmanlike Joshua in league with a bad umpire, and, dash it, I'd draw the stumps!"

Apart from his ambiguous service of pulling her out of the Iffet, Tompkins and Mrs. Anson had something in common: she had been the wife of a gentleman famous for his lofty interpretation of the rules of the game, and the farmer was captain of the cricket team which practised and sometimes even played a match in one of his own fields.

"You mean, Mr. Tompkins, that when I find it running into the hundred and fifth year or so, I may say: 'Tisn't fair! Shan't play any more!'"

"That's what I mean, ma'am," said Tompkins.

"Who's to fix the time?"

"It's between you and the Lord, ma'am," said Tompkins.

"What would you do," she asked, almost gaily, "if you caught me jumping into the Iffet again? I'm afraid it wouldn't be

good for your high reputation just to stand and look on, would it?"

"I think I should do the same as before," he answered. "I couldn't leave my job, you see, ma'am, to another chap. But I don't think I'd need to hold your head quite so high out of the water."

The little old lady laughed aloud and rose from her chair.

"I'm so glad I came to see you," she said. "I wanted only your forgiveness, and you've given me your sympathy. I feel better for meeting a gentleman who quite understands. Will you please put me in the car?"

When she was seated, Tompkins, tucking the rug round her, saw the riding-crop which had belonged to the late Major Anson lying in the other corner. He picked it up.

"I should like to keep it, ma'am—if I may?" he said.

"Oh, thank you!" she cried eagerly. "Dr. Anson will be so glad when I tell him." Then, just as the car was moving, she leaned towards him and said softly: "I'm going to be quite reasonable, thanks to you, Mr. Tompkins."

For seven years Anson and Merridew, the parson, had been friends.

On the Saturday night after Tompkins had accepted the gift of the hunting-crop, Merridew had fallen asleep over the preparation of the next morning's sermon, and was jerked from a charming dream of fly-fishing in Heaven by a tapping on the glass of his study window. He opened it and let in Dr. Anson.

After one glance at his visitor's face, instead of asking what he came for, Merridew made much of him, pushing him down into the big chair, finding the box with three remaining cigars in it, and fetching whisky from the dining-room.

"I don't take it," said Anson, looking kindly at the tumbler which Merridew offered him.

"You doctors," said the host, "think you know everything. If you want to talk to me, my good man, you'll swallow that. If there's a man in the world knows what another man ought to drink, and how much, I do. It's part of my job."

Having cut the last but two of his cigars, he almost put it in his guest's mouth, and struck a match for him.

"I got those at a City dinner," he said. "I have known them soften the pangs of confession."

Anson laughed softly.

"You've come to confess, haven't you?" asked Merridew.

"Something like it," admitted Anson,

scent of his boyhood. He swallowed a mouthful from the tumbler.

"Good whisky," he said. "I came to talk to you, anyhow."



"You've been thinking so much of life that you've forgotten about living."

still smiling. He had lived with patients, women, and subordinate male assistants so long and so exclusively that to hear a man jest of drink and tobacco brought back a

"Why me?" asked Merridew.

"Because you're an outsider. I'm disposed to tell you things I can't at present speak of to another man of science, also

because I know you have a long head and a sound heart. I don't know whether you taken any interest in bacteriology."

Merridew glanced at his visitor whimsically.

"I read a little, in a slovenly kind of way," he said—"Metchnikoff, for instance."

"That'll make it easier for me. Even at Cambridge prolongation of life was my hobby. It became my passion in general practice. By the time I was free, and rich enough to make it the work of my life, I was already ahead of Metchnikoff. I've had him to use, but I never published word that could help him. But nine years ago, just after I came here, I seemed at a deadlock. Then suddenly the key was pushed into my hand by what they call chance. The discovery was really a by-product of the bacteriological research which never ceases in my laboratories."

"Was it a serum or an anti-toxin?" asked Merridew.

"Neither. Just a modification, permanent and reproductive, you understand—a modified form of the *bacillus coli*. It has the extraordinary property, to put the matter in popular language of neutralising, in definite mathematical proportion, the work of the whole group of the bacteria of putrefaction."

"And so, I suppose, if introduced into the human system, of arresting the self-poisoning which Metchnikoff writes of—auto-intoxication, what?—caused by the absorption into the blood of the products of putrefaction?"

Anson nodded. "That'll do," he said.

"Doesn't he say, too, that the phagocytes are over-stimulated by these same products until they prey upon the specific cells of the tissues?"

"H'm!" grunted Anson. "We'd better leave that. Amounts to a pious opinion."

"But your—your mutated bacillus?"

"Oh, I'm not going to tell you his history, nor how I got him," said Anson. "Not even the assistant who first put me on his track knows that I cared for him and used him. I alone—I and Miss Clive alone know the whole story. Nobody else on earth. She and I have to do the cultivation."

"Is the world ever to know?" asked Merridew.

"That's what I've come here about," said Anson: "not to give you the description, name, and address of what you'd probably call my microbe, but to tell you a little of what has been accomplished by his means."

"Sam Odgers," said Merridew, "believes

you have a living guinea-pig born nineteen years ago. Old Blyfield has been heard to declare that he's going to live for ever."

"Blyfield's a fool. Too old when I took him in hand. Listen."

And he told at length the story of his mother—the same story which Farmer Tompkins had heard from Mrs. Anson two days before.

"She is happier now," he said in conclusion. "I have told her that I had no design of putting off death altogether. I just used the best means I had to save the life of the person dearest to me on earth. It's the first time, isn't it, parson, that it's been thought criminal to do that?"

"She has discontinued the treatment, I suppose," said Merridew.

"Oh, yes. That is, I have promised never to apply it again. But I haven't data enough yet, Merridew, to say when I think it probable she will die. My bacillus seems, for a modification, to be extraordinarily hardy and consistent. It persists in reproduction."

"You mean, don't you," said Merridew modestly, "that, the supply of immigrants being cut off, you haven't yet history enough to foretell when the early-settler stock will die out?"

"Something like that," said Anson. "So that's where I am with my dear little mother. And that brings me to my own personal difficulty. Miss Clive and I are—attached."

"The ascetic in love!" murmured the parson. Anson's face flushed so that it seemed as if he had spoken.

"Well, my dear man," said Merridew, excusing himself, "you are ascetic, and with better excuse than many a saint. You deny yourself for an idea—for a work to be done. You forget yourself too long, instead of remembering yourself too much and too often. And it isn't only yourself, Anson, that you've been forgetting. That charming Miss Clive is a woman. Women hate waste—particularly waste of time. You've been thinking so much of life that you've forgotten about living. Well?"

"We had agreed," continued Anson awkwardly, "to marry after we had subjected ourselves to the treatment. Having begun this series of experiments in a philosophic spirit—what the newspapers call the scientific spirit—and not at all in the philanthropic nor in the sociological frame of mind, it seemed our duty to prolong our own lives as far as possible, in order to get the greater opportunity of observing and

recording the facts. Now, my few years' work on many animals and a small number of human beings has led me to assume empirically that the best time to start the treatment would be the moment, could one find it, when the human organism begins, as they say, to go down hill, or just before. For each of us—Miss Clive and me—I believe that time has arrived. Neither of us wishes to give up a great idea, but there are—well, hesitations.

"If my work has been worth while, I ought to give myself the chance of observing my method tried upon infancy, upon manhood, and upon the eve of senility. Results on the lower animals begin to show, and, before our 'seventy years and odd' were run, would give us some good records. But with man there's a thing—something that seems more in your line, though I've always ruled your craft out of my business—with man, something rushes in from outside and queers things. My bacillus—what you called my mutated bacillus—has worked splendidly in the physiological area on four—no, five human subjects, although only exhibited after the definite inception of senility. Psychologically, however, things with those five are in a muddle. My mother's case you know. Her body is actually younger already, and that very thing drove her to doing what she did. Blyfield—well, I couldn't certify him deranged, but I'm afraid he's got a bee in his bonnet. I believe he thinks seas couldn't drown, rocks couldn't crush, nor bullets drill mortal holes in him. The other three men will soon, I think, get just tired. You know your Gulliver?"

"Rather," said Merridew.

"Well, those three old fellows are all right now, but when I imagine another thirty years added to their score, I think of the Struldbrugs in the country of Luggnag."

"Naturally," said Merridew.

"I'm divided between a feeling that I ought to go on and a great distaste. I daren't hand over this knowledge undigested to the world, and I can't gather enough data to get at the whole practical truth of it, unless I live to be at least a hundred and thirty years old with undiminished faculties. Miss Clive consents to whatever course I may choose. Perhaps we ought to go on; but my mother has given me an old-fashioned remorse, Blyfield makes me angry, though his folly is, no doubt, my fault, and the other three begin to make me sick. Tell me which to do: follow out my plans for

me and Sylvia in our prime, you know, or drop the whole thing."

"Drop it," said Merridew. "Hide it. Destroy your cultures and your records, Anson, and get married next week. There's a renewing of life that's greater than the prolongation your brilliant head has invented. If you live long enough to do your best for your children, you've done everything. It's a thing I've never seen done yet."

"What?"

"The best for the new ones."

Anson sat silent, nursing the last quarter of his cigar.

"Protoplasm," he murmured at last, "is potentially immortal. It's only in these communities of particles of protoplasm which we call organisms that death seems to reign. There's no reason why man *need* die," he said, his problem turning round on him just when he would have been rid of it.

"Go and live, then," said the parson.

Merridew preached next morning in Beckington Church—rather well, he thought—on the Resurrection.

He wished Anson had been there to hear him. Towards the end of the sermon he caught sight of Miss Clive and little Mrs. Anson; at the back of the nave he could just distinguish the round face of Sam Odgers.

He was quicker than usual in removing his surplice. He wanted to speak with Odgers, whose church-going was infrequent.

Merridew liked his people to stand about and gossip after church. But there were ways and ways of doing this, as of all other things. To-day, as he hurried round to the west door of the church, and before he could see the little crowd between porch and lych-gate, he became aware of an excitement dominated by a loud voice quite out of tune with the usual decorous murmur.

Turning the corner, he saw a forest of heads bent backwards.

The clamant voice came from above.

It came from a man perched in an angle of the church roof—an old man with red cheeks and a flowing white beard, which wagged foolishly as he shouted to the crowd below. It was Blyfield, Anson's patient.

"How did I get here?" he was asking rhetorically, as if the question had been asked. "That's what you'd like to know, isn't it? The means is no matter. Why am I here? Because I am above you all. You little church mice have to crawl inside

for your faint, superstitious hunting after immortality. I am here on the roof, because I am immortal already."

Someone cried clearly from the crowd :

"Come down, old man !"

And just then Dr. Anson, coming through the lych-gate, began to make his way through the press round the porch and among the tombstones.

He found himself stopped shoulder to shoulder with Odgers of "The Red Lion."

"You look up to Him you've never seen to make you live for ever. I look down now," roared the madman, "on him that has given me the life eternal !"

And he pointed a definite finger at Anson.

"Yours that you don't know you think greater than yourselves—without beginning and without end. Mine had a beginning, he will have an end. For he has given me the immortality he will not share with me. I cannot die ! I live and live ! Admire me—look on me—praise me !"

Then the stupefied villagers heard Anson's voice.

"Mr. Blyfield," it said, "come down !"

"How ?" asked the pink cheeks and silly beard, wagging furiously.

"As you went up."

"I flew. I am one of the immortals !"

"Don't fly down, old man," said a kindly humorist. "You'd maybe hurt yourself."

"Go down by the stair of the tower," called Anson, his voice like a slow bell.

"Stair ! Tower ! Hurt myself ! See my immortality ! I come to you, friends !"

And the crowd, holding its breath, saw him creep down to the gutter for a foothold. Under the confused roar of remonstrance, Anson heard in his ear : "Old fool !"

"Curse me, not him, Mr. Odgers," he answered.

Then Blyfield cried, "I cannot die !" and leapt.

For a horrid moment he twirled in the air, then fell, breaking his back very decently across the gravestone which seemed to have crept too familiarly close to the church.

When Merridew had dispersed the crowd, and the decent dispositions had been made, Odgers, perhaps not by accident, was once more at Anson's elbow. They were on the bridge, peering down in the stiff, steady eddies. Afterwards Anson remembered the

place ; it proved that Odgers had gone by his own house.

"Don't take it hard, sir," said the publican.

"I played with things I didn't understand," said Anson.

"Gosh, sir, I once made a fool drunk—a fool that put me on edge, like. I wanted to see what'd happen."

"What did happen ?" asked the other dully.

"He weren't no worse, sir, and I don't know," said Sam, "as he wasn't a bit wiser."

"Where's the comparison ?" asked Anson, wretched and irritable.

"Oh, well, sir," said Odgers softly, "Mr. Blyfield set great store by his immortalness, didn't he ? Seems to me like as if he'd taken by accident a sort of short cut to it. Alive, he were pretty dead. But now—well, did you hear Mr. Merridew's sermon, sir ?"

Anson shook his head.

"Better after the parson. He *did* put it loosid."

Before they parted, Anson shook hands with the innkeeper.

"And look here, sir," said Odgers, before his grasp relaxed, "do you kill that gashly guinea-pig. It gets on my nerves to know it's in the county."

* * * * *

A fortnight later Madely Towers was to let.

A week after that Dr. Philip Anson married Miss Sylvia Clive. They took old Mrs. Anson abroad with them.

Three years later Merridew rode his old cob up to Tompkins, watching the reaping of his most forward field.

"I've had news," said the priest.

Tompkins nodded and said "Ay !" expectantly.

"Old Mrs. Anson," said Merridew. "Her little grandson fell into a pond. She waded in, and must have had just strength enough to heave him out on the bank, and then fainted back into the water. Anyhow, they found her drowned, and the wet baby howling on the grass."

Tompkins smiled. He wanted to laugh.

"She was a sweet old lady," he said slowly. "I'm glad she carried her bat out."