The Curate's Friend by E. M. Forster

It is uncertain how the Faun came to be in Wiltshire. Perhaps he came over with the Roman legionaries to live with his friends in camp, talking to them of Lucretius, or Garganus or of the slopes of Etna; they in the joy of their recall forgot to take him on board, and he wept in exile; but at last he found that our hills also understood his sorrows, and rejoiced when he was happy. Or, perhaps he came to be there because he had been there always. There is nothing particularly classical about a faun: it is only that the Greeks and Italians have ever had the sharpest eyes. You will find him in the “Tempest” and the “Benedicite;” and any country which has beech clumps and sloping grass and very clear streams may reasonably produce him.

How I came to see him is a more difficult question. For to see him there is required a certain quality, for which truthfulness is too cold a name and animal spirits too coarse a one, and he alone knows how this quality came to be in me. No man has the right to call himself a fool, but I may say that I then presented the perfect semblance of one. I was facetious without humour and serious without conviction. Every Sunday I would speak to my rural parishioners about the other world in the tone of one who has been behind the scenes, or I would explain to them the errors of the Pelagians, or I would warn them against hurrying from one dissipation to another. Every Tuesday I gave what I called “straight talks to my lads”—talks which led straight past anything awkward. And every Thursday I addressed the Mothers’ Union on the duties of wives or widows, and gave them practical hints on the management of a family of ten.

I took myself in, and for a time I certainly took in Emily. I have never known a girl attend so carefully to my sermons, or laugh so heartily at my jokes. It is no wonder that I became engaged. She has made an excellent wife, freely correcting her husband’s absurdities, but allowing no one else to breathe a word against them; able to talk about the sub-conscious self in the drawing-room, and yet have an ear for the children crying in the nursery, or the plates breaking in the scullery. An excellent wife—better than I ever imagined. But she has not married me.

Had we stopped indoors that afternoon nothing thing would have happened. It was all owing to Emily’s mother, who insisted on our tea-ing out. Opposite the village, across the stream, was a small chalk down, crowned by a beech copse, and a few Roman earth-works. (I lectured very vividly on those earthworks: they have since proved to be Saxon). Hither did I drag up a tea-basket and a heavy rug for Emily’s mother, while Emily and a little friend went on in front. The little friend—who has played all through a much less important part than he supposes—was a pleasant youth, full of intelligence and poetry, especially of what he called the poetry of earth. He longed to wrest earth’s secret from her, and I have seen him press his face passionately into the grass, even when he has believed himself to be alone. Emily was at that time full of vague aspirations, and, though I should have preferred them all to centre in me, yet it seemed unreasonable to deny her such other opportunities for self-culture as the neighbourhood provided.

It was then my habit, on reaching the top of any eminence, to exclaim facetiously “And who will stand on either hand and keep the bridge with me?” at the same moment violently agitating my arms or casting my wide-awake eyes at an imaginary foe. Emily and the friend received my sally as usual, nor could I detect any insincerity in their mirth. Yet I was convinced that some one was present who did not think I had been funny, and any public speaker will understand my growing uneasiness.

I was somewhat cheered by Emily’s mother, who puffed up exclaiming, “Kind Harry, to carry the things! What should we do without you, even now! Oh, what a view! Can you see the dear Cathedral? No. Too hazy. Now I’m going to sit right on the rug.” She smiled mysteriously. “The downs in September, you know.”

We gave some perfunctory admiration to the landscape, which is indeed only beautiful to those who admire land, and to them perhaps the most beautiful in England. For here is the body of the great
chalk spider who straddles over our island—whose legs are the south downs and the north downs and the Chilterns, and the tips of whose toes poke out at Cromer and Dover. He is a clean creature, who grows as few trees as he can, and those few in tidy clumps, and he loves to be tickled by quickly flowing streams. He is pimpled all over with earth-works, for from the beginning of time men have fought for the privilege of standing on him, and the oldest of our temples is built upon his back.

But in those days I liked my country snug and pretty, full of gentlemen’s residences and shady bowers and people who touch their hats. The great sombre expanses on which one may walk for miles and hardly shift a landmark or meet a genteel person were still intolerable to me. I turned away as soon as propriety allowed and said “And may I now prepare the cup that cheers?”

Emily’s mother replied: “Kind man, to help me. I always do say that tea out is worth the extra effort. I wish we led simpler lives.” We agreed with her. I spread out the food. “Won’t the kettle stand? Oh, but make it stand.” I did so. There was a little cry, faint but distinct, as of something in pain.

“How silent it all is up here!” said Emily.

I dropped a lighted match on the grass, and again I heard the little cry.

“What is that?” I asked.

“I only said it was so silent,” said Emily.

“Silent, indeed,” echoed the little friend.

Silent! the place was full of noises. If the match had fallen in a drawing-room it could not have been worse, and the loudest noise came from beside Emily herself. I had exactly the sensation of going to a great party, of waiting to be announced in the echoing hall, where I could hear the voices of the guests, but could not yet see their faces. It is a nervous moment for a self-conscious man, especially if all the voices should be strange to him, and he has never met his host.

“My dear Harry!” said the elder lady, “never mind about that match. That'll smoulder away and harm no one. Tea-ee-ee! I always say—and you will find Emily the same—that as the magic hour of five approaches, no matter how good a lunch, one begins to feel a sort of——”

Now the Faun is of the kind who capers upon the Neo-Attic reliefs, and if you do not notice his ears or see his tail, you take him for a man and are horrified.

“What will he think of next!” said Emily, while the creature beside her stood up and beckoned to me. I advanced struggling and gesticulating with tiny steps and horrified cries, exorcising the apparition with my hat. Not otherwise had I advanced the day before, when Emily’s nieces showed me their guinea pigs. And by no less hearty laughter was I greeted now. Until the strange fingers closed upon me, I still thought that here was one of my parishioners and did not cease to exclaim, “Let me go, naughty boy, let go!” And Emily’s mother, believing herself to have detected the joke, replied, “Well I must confess they are naughty boys and reach one even on the rug: the downs in September, as I said before.”

Here I caught sight of the tail, uttered a wild shriek and fled into the beech copse behind.

“Harry would have been a born actor,” said Emily’s mother as I left them.
I realized that a great crisis in my life was approaching, and that if I failed in it I might permanently lose my self-esteem. Already in the wood I was troubled by a multitude of voices—the voices of the hill beneath me, of the trees over my head, of the very insects in the bark of the tree. I could even hear the stream licking little pieces out of the meadows, and the meadows dreamily protesting. Above the din—which is no louder than the flight of a bee—rose the Faun’s voice saying, “Dear priest, be placid, be placid: why are you frightened?”

“I am not frightened,” said I—and indeed I was not. “But I am grieved: you have disgraced me in the presence of ladies.”

“No one else has seen me,” he said, smiling idly. “The women have tight boots and the man has long hair. Those kinds never see. For years I have only spoken to children, and they lose sight of me as soon as they grow up. But you will not be able to lose sight of me, and until you die you will be my friend. Now I begin to make you happy: lie upon your back or run races, or climb trees, or shall I get you blackberries, or harebells, or wives——”

In a terrible voice I said to him, “Get thee behind me!” He got behind me. “Once for all,” I continued, “let me tell you that it is vain to tempt one whose happiness consists in giving happiness to others.”

“I cannot understand you,” he said ruefully. “What is to tempt?”

“Poor woodland creature!” said I, turning round. “How could you understand? It was idle of me to chide you. It is not in your little nature to comprehend a life of self-denial. Ah! if only I could reach you!”

“You have reached him,” said the hill.

“If only I could touch you!”

“You have touched him,” said the hill.

“But I will never leave you,” burst out the Faun. “I will sweep out your shrine for you, I will accompany you to the meetings of matrons. I will enrich you at the bazaars.”

I shook my head. “For these things I care not at all. And indeed I was minded to reject your offer of service altogether. There I was wrong. You shall help me—you shall help me to make others happy.”

“Dear priest, what a curious life! People whom I have never seen—people who cannot see me—why should I make them happy?”

“My poor lad—perhaps in time you will learn why. Now begone: commence. On this very hill sits a young lady for whom I have a high regard. Commence with her. Aha! your face falls. I thought as much. You cannot do anything. Here is the conclusion of the whole matter!”

“I can make her happy,” he replied, “if you order me; and when I have done so, perhaps you will trust me more.”

Emily’s mother had started home, but Emily and the little friend still sat beside the tea-things—she in her white piqué dress and biscuit straw, he in his rough but well-cut summer suit. The great pagan figure of the Faun towered insolently above them.

The friend was saying, “And have you never felt the appalling loneliness of a crowd?”
“All that,” replied Emily, “have I felt, and very much more—”

Then the Faun laid his hands upon them. They, who had only intended a little cultured flirtation, resisted him as long as they could, but were gradually urged into each other’s arms, and embraced with passion.

“Miscreant!” I shouted, bursting from the wood. “You have betrayed me.”

“I know it: I care not,” cried the little friend. “Stand aside. You are in the presence of that which you do not understand. In the great solitude we have found ourselves at last.”

“Remove your accursed hands!” I shrieked to the Faun.

He obeyed and the little friend continued more calmly: “It is idle to chide. What should you know, poor clerical creature, of the mystery of love of the eternal man and the eternal woman, of the self-effectuation of a soul?”

“That is true,” said Emily angrily. “Harry, you would never have made me happy. I shall treat you as a friend, but how could I give myself to a man who makes such silly jokes? When you played the buffoon at tea, your hour was sealed. I must be treated seriously: I must see infinities broadening around me as I rise. You may not approve of it, but so I am. In the great solitude I have found myself at last.”

“Wretched girl!” I cried. “Great solitude! O pair of helpless puppets——”

The little friend began to lead Emily away, but I heard her whisper to him: “Dear, we can’t possibly leave the basket for Harry after this: and mother’s rug; do you mind having that in the other hand?”

So they departed and I flung myself upon the ground with every appearance of despair.

“Does he cry?” said the Faun.

“He does not cry,” answered the hill. “His eyes are as dry as pebbles.”

My tormentor made me look at him. “I see happiness at the bottom of your heart,” said he.

“I trust I have my secret springs,” I answered stiffly. And then I prepared a scathing denunciation, but of all the words I might have said, I only said one and it began with “D.”

He gave a joyful cry, “Oh, now you really belong to us. To the end of your life you will swear when you are cross and laugh when you are happy. Now laugh!”

There was a great silence. All nature stood waiting, while a curate tried to conceal his thoughts not only from nature but from himself. I thought of my injured pride, of my baffled unselfishness, of Emily, whom I was losing through no fault of her own, of the little friend, who just then slipped beneath the heavy tea basket, and that decided me, and I laughed.

That evening, for the first time, I heard the chalk downs singing to each other across the valleys, as they often do when the air is quiet and they have had a comfortable day. From my study window I could see the sunlit figure of the Faun, sitting before the beech copse as a man sits before his house. And as night came on I knew for certain that not only was he asleep, but that the hills and woods were asleep also. The stream, of course, never slept, any more than it ever freezes. Indeed, the hour of darkness is really the hour of water, which has been somewhat stifled all day by the great
pulsings of the land. That is why you can feel it and hear it from a greater distance in the night, and why a bath after sundown is most wonderful.

The joy of that first evening is still clear in my memory, in spite of all the happy years that have followed. I remember it when I ascend my pulpit—I have a living now—and look down upon the best people sitting beneath me pew after pew, generous and contented, upon the worse people, crowded in the aisles, upon the whiskered tenors of the choir, and the high-browed curates and the churchwardens fingering their bags, and the supercilious vergers who turn late comers from the door. I remember it also when I sit in my comfortable bachelor refectory, amidst the carpet slippers that good young ladies have worked for me, and the oak brackets that have been carved for me by good young men; amidst my phalanx of presentation teapots and my illuminated testimonials and all the other offerings of people who believe that I have given them a helping hand, and who really have helped me out of the mire themselves. And though I try to communicate that joy to others—as I try to communicate anything else that seems good—and though I sometimes succeed, yet I can tell no one exactly how it came to me. For if I breathed one word of that, my present life, so agreeable and profitable, would come to an end, my congregation would depart, and so should I, and instead of being an asset to my parish, I might find myself an expense to the nation. Therefore in the place of the lyrical and rhetorical treatment, so suitable to the subject, so congenial to my profession, I have been forced to use the unworthy medium of a narrative, and to delude you by declaring that this is a short story, suitable for reading in the train.