

The Futurists

The Merriman family sat in the drawing room of Larksgrove, the morning after their return from Cornwall. Mr. Merriman, a solicitor, read the *Times*. Mrs. Merriman opened the morning post. William Merriman pretended to read a copy of *Punch*, in which was hidden a Flash Gordon comic his friend Hal had lent him. (Will's parents did not approve of comic books.) Mrs. Peake, having cleared the breakfast things, was dusting in the hall, beneath the late King's picture hung with black crêpe. Outside, an English summer sun shone on an English summer garden; on the southward vista of hedgerow, field and copse; and the distant roofs of Ditton Priors beneath the curve of Clee Hill.

Mrs. Merriman showed her husband a letter. He read it with a faint snort. "We must go, I suppose."

"We've had to decline twice, with that case of yours taking a turn and then my sciatica. I daren't say no a third time. And you needn't make such a face about it."

"She always puts me in with the most peculiar of her guests. Anarchist artists wanting to paint the Home Farm cows, Indian gurus incessantly praising Gandhi, reincarnation women who claim they were Cleopatra's parlour-maid. Or a vegetable-doctor dosing everyone with a vile substance he calls celery tonic. And I'm expected to make small talk with them."

"Besides ourselves," said Mrs. Merriman firmly, "there'll be only the Vicar and his daughters, Dr. and Mrs. Sutherland, and Lady Skelton."

"And those two Americans, who claim they're from the future."

Will was listening with interest. "Are we invited to the Abbey, Mother?"

His parents looked at him. "Your father and I are, dear," his mother replied.

"I'm not? Are you sure??" He reached for the letter, but she folded it into the envelope. She looked embarrassed. "They wouldn't be suitable company," she murmured.

"Who wouldn't? Why not?"

"William..." His father was speaking in the voice he used on dubious clients: not unkind, but equally not to be debated. "I'm afraid the answer is no."

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