

THE DIVINE FIRE

related to Mr. Rickman the young man about town. And that made four. Besides these four there was a fifth, the serene and perfect intelligence, who from some height immeasurably far above them sat in judgement on them all. But for his abnormal sense of humour he would have been a Mr. Rickman of the pure reason, no good at all. As it was, he occasionally offered some reflection which was enjoyed but seldom acted upon.

And underneath these Mr. Rickmans, though inextricably, damnably one with them, was a certain apparently commonplace but amiable young man, who lived in a Bloomsbury boarding-house and dropped his aitches. This young man was tender and chivalrous, full of little innocent civilities to the ladies of his boarding-house; he admired, above all things, modesty in a woman, and somewhere, in the dark and unexplored corners of his nature, he concealed a prejudice in favour of marriage and the sanctities of home.

That made six, and no doubt they would have pulled together well enough; but the bother was that any one of them was liable at any moment to the visitation of the seventh—Mr. Rickman the genius. There was no telling whether he would come in the form of a high god or a demon, a consolation or a torment. Sometimes he would descend upon Mr. Rickman in the second-hand department, and attempt to seduce him from his allegiance to the Quarterly Catalogue. Or he would take up the poor journalist's copy as it lay on a table, and change it so that its own editor wouldn't know it again. And sometimes he would swoop down on the little bookseller as he sat at breakfast on a Sunday morning, in his nice frock coat and clean collar, and wrap his big flapping wings round him, and carry him off to the place where the divine ideas come from leaving a silent and to all appearances idiotic young gentleman in his place. Or he would sit down by that young gentleman's side and shake him out of his little innocences and complacencies, and turn all his little jokes into his own incomprehensible humour. And then the boarding-house would look uncomfortable and say to itself that Mr. Rickman had been drinking.

In short, it was a very confusing state of affairs, and one that made it almost impossible for Mr. Rickman to establish