Andrew Caldecott

Fires Burn Blue

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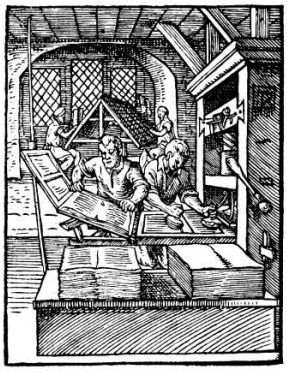
Enriched edition. A Fantastical Tale of Power and Magic in 'Fires Burn Blue'

*In this **enriched edition**, we have carefully created added value for your reading experience.*



Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Jacob Sloane

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An Exchange of Notes

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1

Edmund Touchwood having died a widower and without male issue, Telming Hall in the autumn of 1910 was the home of his only daughter, Mrs Parlington. Her Christian name, Letitia, she ascribed to an apocryphal sneeze by a godmother at her baptism. She much disliked it; but, as such names will, it stuck to her like a burr; and Letitia she was called, though not to her face, by all and sundry in the neighbourhood. An energetic, capable and kindly, if rather managing woman, she gardened, beagled, cycled, served on the Rural District Council and Board of Guardians, sketched in water-colour, and played the organ in church. Dr Holmbush described her intellectual interests as middle-brow. Although of general good temper she could on certain subjects, music for instance, be argumentative and touchy. Indeed, her seat at the church organ was occupied on the express understanding that, while the choice of hymns lay with the rector, it was for her to determine the tunes. Her language on this point had been blunt. 'The words of half your hymns, Rector, are tosh. That's your lookout, of course; but I refuse to play toshy tunes.' In a matter of months she had the choir on her side, and within a year or two the congregation also; the rector being left in lonely lament for rejected 'old favourites'.

Another subject on which Letitia could speak harshly and hotly was spiritualism. Her aversion to it was not from disbelief in spirits but from belief in them. She ever

maintained that her husband, who had been killed in the Boer War, appeared to her before her receipt of the War Office telegram. She saw him standing in uniform at the foot of her bed. He looked at her, smiled sadly and was gone. In that moment, she averred, was established complete and eternal understanding between them. His smile showed that he had no cause for fear; its sadness that he was sorry at the ending of their earthly companionship. There was no reason for him to reappear; nor did he. Her theory was that if a departing spirit (she emphasised the present participle) had a message to give, he or she would give it. Once departed (again an emphasis on the tense of the participle) he or she would be quit of earthly connections and worries. If table-rappers and so-called mediums ever really managed to put a call through, it would be an unwarranted and generally unheeded interruption; like a telephone call after one is snugly abed. Small wonder, she said, that the answers they got, if genuine, were such tosh. Séances were, more often than not, charged with fraud on the quick; and always with insult to the dead.

These views, thus trenchantly expressed, gave offence to Miss Godwinstowe, founder of the Telmington Psychic Circle, without commending themselves to out-and-out sceptics. The rector, however, fancied that he found in them a reflection of his own.

'I'm so glad, Mrs Parlington,' he confided, 'that you share my conviction that apparitions of the dying are just simulacra without power of speech.'

'I've never said that; or thought it. My husband had no need to talk, nor I to hear. Our converse was total and

complete without it.'

'Ah! Exactly so, exactly so!' nervously assented the rector, anxious to avoid any disagreement.

'But if,' continued Letitia, 'he had felt speech necessary, he would certainly have spoken. And don't you forget, Rector, that if you were to choose toshy hymns for my funeral you would certainly find me a talkative ghost.'

The rector deprecated this sudden turn towards levity. 'You are more likely to be at my obsequies than I at yours, Mrs Parlington; but really we oughtn't to speak lightly of grave matters, ought we? Dear me, how the days draw in to be sure! I must be getting home, for I forgot to put any oil in my bicycle lamp.'

'You were a bit hard on the foolish virgins in your sermon last Sunday, I thought. Well, goodbye, and look out for those loose stones by the lodge; they're dangerous.'

She watched him free-wheeling down the drive.

'How difficult it must be to be a parson,' she mused half-aloud. 'The little man means well.'

2

The Reverend Septimus Tardell did mean well. Nor, as too often is the case, was well-meaning mated with ill-reasoning or tactless scheming. His main present problem was how to remedy a division of his parishioners into two camps. Division perhaps was a wrong term to apply to two groups which, although Telmington was geographically their common ground, and its church should have been so spiritually, had never really come together. An improved bus time-table and the incipient vogue of private cars had led to speculative building on the fringes of the village and to an

invasion not only of regular week-enders, but even of daily-breaders who went up to London by the nine-three from Shallowford and returned by the six-eighteen. Such households had no roots in the countryside; they professed a liking for rural scenery and quiet, but their mental landscape remained essentially urban. As a result there was no neighbourliness, worth the word, between what the postmistress called 'our old people' and 'that new set'. Polite calls paid by the former on the latter were as politely returned; but at that it ended. The gulf of mutual disinterest was unbridged. In church such newcomers as attended slunk shyly to seats at the extreme west end, rather than incur inquisitive glances from pew-holders of long standing. In vain did the rector periodically proclaim that all seats were free, and exhort his congregation to sit as near as conveniently possible to the pulpit. He might as well have bade water mix with oil. Things could not be put right by a homily. Nevertheless he felt in duty and conscience bound to do something to prevent permanent cleavage. The age was yet to come when a parson's job would connote an intensive specialism in church services with occasional sick-calls in the wake of the district nurse. Mr Tardell felt and knew himself still to be an influential personage. Though he had but two maids and a bicycle, did he not reside in a twelve-bedroomed rectory with stabling for six horses? The popular estimate of the importance of an office, as banks and business houses have long found out, is often in proportion to the size of its premises. In 1910 rector and rectory, vicar and vicarage, still counted for much in the

rural social fabric. The parish looked to the parson not merely for ministry but for leadership.

Mr Tardell was a systematic man. He kept, for instance, a notebook docketed 'Parish Memoranda & Agenda', which we find him perusing, pencil in hand, on the morning after his call on Mrs Parlington. The two pages open before him contain notes upon the various village societies and clubs. He is going to place a tick against any that might be made use of for the breaking down of social and cultural barriers. *Telmington Cricket Club.* A promising field, no doubt—but wait a bit though; weren't they talking of playing on Sundays? Well, Charles Dickens had approved of it (a strong Dickensian, Mr Tardell) and it was bound to come, anyway. So a tick. *Query.* Why no football club? Play on the rectory field was unorganised and spasmodic. *Mem:* get hold of young Towling and suggest that he start one. Hockey too, perhaps. *Telmington Horticultural Society.* Their annual flower show was excellent and some of the new people were already exhibitors. A tick. *Query:* why not two or three shows a year—spring, summer and Michaelmas? *Mem:* suggest this to Colonel Bratton. *Working Men's Club.* Useful, but not for the present purpose; no newcomers in this category. *Telmington Psychic Circle.* The rector reddened and frowned. Just as Miss Godwinstowe's séances had ceased to attract the curious in such matters, some village wag had given the circle a new lease of notoriety by painting 'Licensed to Retail Spirits' above her front door in Church Street. Worse still, Miss Tisdale (easily his best Sunday-school teacher) was reported to be attending its meetings. No tick against this item! *Philharmonic Club.*

Moribund, alas, since the Gurdstones left Telmington. A chorus and orchestra would be the very thing to rope in quite a lot of people, new and old. *Two* ticks! The difficulty was how to go about it. Mrs Parlington had quite enough to do already, running the church choir. Besides, a choral society would need tact rather than tyranny! He mustn't hurt her feelings, though; and there would be no harm in asking her to be patroness, in view of her position as the Lady of Telming Hall. Patronesses are ornamental, not executive. The right person to resuscitate the club would undoubtedly be Dr Wrenshall, retired organist of Wintonbury Cathedral, who had just come to live at Fretfield Grange. The Mus.Doc. and F.R.C.O. after his name would look well on the club's programmes—if only he would take the job on. Anyhow, he couldn't object to being asked.

The rector called at Fretfield Grange, and later at Telming Hall, that very afternoon. Dr Wrenshall agreed to serve, subject to reconsideration, should there emerge an insufficiency of singers or instrumentalists; and to the stipulation that he alone should choose all works to be practised or performed. Mrs Parlington also consented to be patroness, with a promise (that the rector thought it prudent to extract) that, if ever she had suggestions or criticisms to make about the music or its rendering, they should be tendered privately to Dr Wrenshall and not bruited in the course of practice or rehearsal. Dr Wrenshall, the rector pointed out, was accustomed to a highly disciplined choir; so care must be taken not to upset him. 'Naturally,' Mrs Parlington rejoined, 'and, from what I've heard from friends

at Wintonbury, one thing that he won't stand at any price is toshy tunes. So you'd better be careful yourself, Rector!'

A public meeting to promote the revival of the Telmington Philharmonic Club was largely and enthusiastically attended, both by old inhabitants and by newcomers. Dr Wrenshall was elected President and Conductor; Mrs Parlington, by acclamation, as patroness. Next Sunday morning Mr Tardell preached on 'Music in the Bible'. Mrs Trimshaw, wife of the people's churchwarden and an ex-governess, remarked that the dear Rector's learning seemed quite cyclopaedic. So indeed it was, in the sense that the sermon had been lifted straight out of an encyclopaedia.

3

In the course of the next two years the Telmington Philharmonic Club increased both in membership and in competency. Dr Wren shall told the orchestra that they had begun by playing with scores, and were now learning to play them. He refused all requests for a concert during the first formative eighteen months; but agreed to conduct a public performance in celebration of the club's second birthday. In the meanwhile Mr Tardell had made the acquaintance of Sir Cuthbert Kewbridge, the composer, and had obtained for the club the privilege of being the first to render his Poem for Chorus and Orchestra entitled *Northern Lights.* The music was still in manuscript; for Sir Cuthbert wished to hear the effect of certain passages before authorising their publication. A good deal of copying of the voice parts had to be done; and Mrs Parlington, with her usual helpfulness and energy, produced most of the copies. As a result she claimed to know the whole thing backwards, and to have

discovered what she characterised as weak spots. Her criticisms receiving no encouragement from Dr Wrenshall, she finally focused her faultfinding on one particular note in the soprano part.

'The treble F in the third bar of line five on page twenty-three should certainly be A,' she protested. 'I feel it in my bones that Sir Cuthbert couldn't have meant F; it makes tosh of the whole passage. You simply must write to him, Dr Wrenshall, and get his permission to alter it.'

'What do you say, Rector?' asked Dr Wrenshall, after scrutinising the note and bar in question. 'I think there's something in what Mrs Parlington says; but you know the composer, and I don't; so, if anybody's going to write to him, it should obviously be you.'

'I fancy, Wrenshall, that he might feel it almost an impertinence. After all, he's coming down to hear our little concert with the express purpose of detecting any imperfections in his composition. Personally I would not dream of trespassing on the field of his artistic creation or musical judgment.'

Mr Tardell's voice, and face, reflected considerable satisfaction at having been able thus obliquely to squash Letitia—had she not dubbed his favourite hymn-tunes tosh?—and she was quick to perceive it.

'Very well,' she retorted, 'he shall hear what he undoubtedly meant to write, and not what he has miswritten. I shall sing A fortissimo; and you know, Rector, what my fortissimo can be.'

'But, my dear lady, you could not do that, you know, without injustice to Dr Wrenshall, who is taking such pains

to secure an exact rendition.'

'I shall merely make a mistake, and Dr Wrenshall can apologise for me afterwards to Sir Cuthbert if he thinks it necessary. But I bet you half a crown, Rector, that Sir Cuthbert won't think it a mistake.'

'As you are aware,' Mr Tardell spoke in a tone of reproval, 'I do not bet, even in joke. If I did, I would certainly take yours. But if you are set on such an improper course, Mrs Parlington, I sincerely trust that you will say nothing of it to the other singers.'

'Of course not,' she replied tartly; 'I've already given you my word on that. Well, I must be off now to catch the post; these new collection times are most inconvenient.'

As she left the room Dr Wrenshall smiled and shrugged his shoulders. 'Temperamental,' he said, turning to the still ruffled rector, 'very much so. Yet she has been of tremendous assistance in copying out all these parts; and an intentional mistake will be a change from the unintentional ones of other singers. I doubt, too, whether Kewbridge will notice just a single voice on the A, whatever her fortissimo. So don't let it worry you unduly.'

'No; but I hate indiscipline. She won't stand it herself from the church choir.'

Dr Wrenshall smiled again. 'Quite right too,' he murmured, sitting down to the piano.

4

The evening of the concert arrived. Seated in the front row, next to Sir Cuthbert Kewbridge, Mr Tardell viewed the packed hall with a full sense of satisfaction. The new and old strata of his parishioners were pleasantly intermingled both

on the platform and in the auditorium. The Philharmonic Club had indeed attracted all who were musically inclined; many acquaintances had been made, and not a few friendships formed. Dr Wrenshall moreover informed him that both choir and orchestra had developed a team spirit, and that he anticipated a highly creditable performance. The rector's sole cause for anxiety had been removed by Mrs Parlington's departure for Wolmingham some days previously, to help look after an old school-friend who had been taken suddenly and seriously ill. She expected to be away for ten days at least, and had asked Miss Tisdale to deputise for her at the church organ. Mr Tardell intended during the interval to ask the latter to play some of his old favourites; but, looking round the hall, he could see no sign of her. Then with a frown he remembered that it was Thursday, and that she was probably at the Psychic Circle. Miss Godwinstowe, he had been told, refused to put off their weekly séance, holding that the Philharmonic Club should have chosen some other day for its concert. How typical of her!

In the first half of the programme choir and orchestra amply justified Dr Wrenshall's expectations of them. The items were unambitious, and their execution such as to give the performers confidence in their ability later on to render *Northern Lights* not unworthily of the composer's presence.

The rector had just begun to inform Sir Cuthbert that the resuscitation of the Philharmonic Club had been his own idea, when he was annoyingly interrupted by a message to the effect that Miss Tisdale particularly wanted a word with him at the outer door. Excusing himself to Sir Cuthbert he

made his way down the gangway and, without the usual courtesy of bidding her good evening, asked abruptly what it was she wanted.

'I supposed that you would have been at the Psychic Circle,' he added sarcastically.

'Well, yes, Rector,' she replied, 'and that's why I've run up here to see you.'

'What do you mean by "that's why"?'

'Well, Miss Godwinstowe thought it only fair that somebody should tell you: before it's too late!'

'Tell me what?'

'That there's some spirit trying to get through to you. We don't know who it is; but it's someone.'

The wind blew icily in at the doorway, but it was not so cutting as Mr Tardell's reply.

'You can tell Miss Godwinstowe that you have delivered her message. She knows what I think of such things. I must now be hurrying back to Sir Cuthbert. He will be wondering where I've gone. Good night, Miss Tisdale.'

Back inside the vestibule he muttered an angry 'Preposterous!' and on regaining his seat was disappointed to find Sir Cuthbert no longer there but in conversation with the leader of the orchestra. He was also perturbed by the dimness of the footlights. The village gasworks were notorious for reducing pressure without warning. If it went any lower, the singers and instrumentalists would hardly see their notes. He was just about to say so to the returning Sir Cuthbert when a rap of the conductor's baton transformed the buzz of conversation into a tense silence of expectancy.

The rector had reproved churchwarden Trimshaw, at the dress rehearsal, for describing the music of the short overture to *Northern Lights* as 'snaky'. Snakiness, he had observed, was not a word in the vocabulary of musical criticism. Now, as he listened to it this evening, he admitted to himself that certain passages, in the violin parts particularly, had a reptilian quality. It gave him a vague feeling of discomfort, which was aggravated by a draught of cold air that began to chill the back of his neck and the bald patch on his head. Somebody must have opened the east window, which he had given orders to keep closed. He hoped he would not catch cold. It might be his imagination, but the gas jets seemed to him to burn lower than ever; and, as the singers rose for the opening chorus, he began scanning their faces to see whether any of them had difficulty in seeing their music. Apparently not; but, he reflected, probably they knew it all by heart after so much practice and rehearsal. Then all of a sudden his gaze became riveted on the vacant row which separated trebles from altos. Mrs Parlington was standing there; and, he thought, looking not at the conductor or her music but pointedly at him. Drat the woman! She must have rushed down for the concert and caught the three-eighteen from London. Now, of course, she would sing that threatened A! She appeared to be saving up for it, too, for her mouth was closely shut and her lips motionless. It seemed to him an age before the crucial passage came. But come at last it did. A brief half-second before the conductor's beat the closed lips opened, but only narrowly. From them he seemed to hear momentarily a faint note as of a pitch-pipe or

tuning-fork; and then, to his consternation, the whole three rows of sopranos burst out on A, fortissimo. Horrified, he glanced anxiously at Sir Cuthbert. The composer's head was thrown back; his eyes were closed; and his lips bore the suggestion of a smile. Had he noticed? It seemed not; but, surely, he must have? Much puzzled, Mr Tardell turned his eyes nervously back to the platform, and again found it hard to believe them. Mrs Parlington had gone! He looked carefully at each row of singers, but there was no sign of her. How cold that draught was! He dug his hands deep into his trousers pockets for warmth, bringing his finger-nails into sharp contact with coins and a bunch of keys. The lights were burning more brightly now, but his feeling of anxiety persisted. He was not enjoying the music or attempting to follow it. He was, indeed, hardly conscious of the ending of the final chorus or of the burst of applause that followed. It was Sir Cuthbert's movement towards the platform steps, in answer to cries of 'Composer', that brought him back to full alertness.

'I have been delighted,' Sir Cuthbert was saying, 'by this performance of my most recent work. I most gratefully felicitate both choir and orchestra on its excellent interpretation, and I congratulate them—and not only them, but all music-lovers in this neighbourhood—on having in Dr Wrenshall a trainer and conductor who will lead this Philharmonic Club ever further along the never-ending road to musical perfection**[1q]**. You, Ladies and Gentlemen of the audience, will be interested to hear that we have had an example of his superlative musicianship this very evening. In making my final manuscript of *Northern Lights* I made a

careless mistake, when copying the treble part from my rough draft. I wrote an F instead of an A. I noticed the error only this morning, while refreshing my memory of certain passages which I particularly wanted to hear in actual performance; and I felt most unhappy, as the mistake entirely ruined a climax in the second chorus. I felt that it would be unfair to mention the matter to Dr Wrenshall at the eleventh hour, when there was no possibility of further rehearsal, and decided to grin and bear the result of my own carelessness. Imagine, therefore, my relief and delight when that A rang out so triumphantly from the trebles. He had rehearsed right, though I had written wrong. I am grateful beyond words. In conclusion I must thank you all very warmly for the kind reception that you've given to my little work, which I shall always associate with Telmington and its kind people. Thank you all again.'

Sir Cuthbert stepped down from the platform amid loud clapping and, on his way to resume his seat before the singing of the National Anthem, stooped to pick up something from the floor at Mr Tardell's feet.

'You've lost half a crown, I think, Rector? A hole in a trousers pocket perhaps.'

Mr Tardell's thoughts were apparently elsewhere; for his reply was most inconsequent.

'Oh! no, I never take bets,' he said.

5

The news of Mrs Parlington's death in the Eldonhall train smash was in the newspapers next morning. She was travelling back to Wolmingham from a day's visit to her lawyer in London and was in the carriage next behind the

engine that was completely telescoped. Her neck was broken and death must have been instantaneous. Shortly after breakfast Dr Wrenshall called on three of his leading sopranos, to enquire why they had sung A instead of F and so won him unmerited commendation from Sir Cuthbert. The first replied that she didn't know that she had sung A; the second that she supposed that she had just followed the others; and the third that the higher note seemed somehow to be in the air and she simply had to sing it.

He then walked up to the rectory, where he saw the doctor's dogcart standing outside the gate.

'You can go in for a minute or so,' Dr Holmbush said, 'but the rector's running a high temperature and has passed a sleepless night. He wants to see you though, about something to do with last night's concert; and he'd better get it off his chest, if he doesn't take too long about it.'

Dr Wrenshall listened sympathetically, but incredulously, to the rector's account of what he had seen and heard in the village hall. The fever had probably already been on him, Dr Wrenshall surmised, and given rise to delirious fancies. The silly message from the Psychic Circle might have suggested them perhaps. Back in his own house, despite such scepticism, Dr Wrenshall took the trouble to look in his newspaper again for the exact time of the Eldonhall accident, and to compare it with that of the interval in last evening's concert.

'Not that it signifies anything,' he muttered to himself on finding that they more or less tallied, 'but I'm very sorry that we've lost Letitia. They'll miss her a lot here.'

They did. No previous Telmington funeral had been so largely attended. Among very many wreaths the most noteworthy was one from Dr Wrenshall. It was in the shape of a capital A. The rector recovered in time to officiate, but still looked poorly. The prefatory sentences and a psalm were sung; but there were no hymns.

Cheap and Nasty

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1

Moonlight, and curtains not back yet from the cleaners! That was why Tom Cromley was still awake at one o'clock of this cold November night; and how he was able to see his wife, Kathleen, rise suddenly in her bed and sit rigidly upright. Tired, and in no mood for conversation, he continued to lie still and pretended sleep. He watched her nevertheless until, again suddenly, she thrust an arm across the narrow space between their beds and clutched his eiderdown. It slipped across him and a corner of it brushed his face.

'Hullo, Kitty, what's up?' he asked in cross surprise.

'Hush, Tom! Can't you hear it?'

'Hear what?'

'That moaning, groaning noise. Listen—there!'

'Oh that? Why, it's only the hot-water pipes. They're bound to grunt and growl a bit at first. We started the stove going only a few hours ago, and there are probably air locks. One can't expect perfection on a trial run. All the same, the radiators are piping hot; which is the main thing. You did a fine stroke of business, Kitty, in getting the stove so cheap; and this house too. We couldn't have found a nicer one at double the price. Now lie down and go to sleep again, darling, and don't keep your ears waiting for noises, or you'll begin imagining them.'

'I'll try, Tom, and I'm so thankful you like our new home. It has been great fun, really, getting it all fixed up; but I wish