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drive his baby car. When he tired of one he branched into another. When he could not pass out of the dust of someone else's car he stopped until it subsided. When he tired of driving he would climb the little car out to the grassy verge and sit there immobile, watching the big cars pass if it were a main road, or on the little side roads watching the bees at the flowers, cows in paddocks, the colour of wheat under the nor-west sky, and drowsing to the rise and fall of sound coming from the dust cloud that meant a tractor working in some field nearby.

ONE day — and this is the day it happened — Mr. Potts had left his little car to retire behind a hedge, as people sometimes must. When he returned he found a man groping over the door. The man, obviously, was stealing something. Mr. Potts had a sudden vision of his crank handle missing, his jack lost. The price of these articles roused him to make a move to prevent the felony. He approached the car.

He realised suddenly that he was making no sound on the grass, and he realised just as suddenly that the man might do anything if disturbed unexpectedly. It was the same embarrassing situation as came often to Mr. Potts when he had cause to call on some superior seated in a carpeted room. Mr. Potts would knock, very gently, and enter, very quietly. He would then stand on the carpet while the great man bent over his papers. Within him would rise an intolerable sense of the stupidity of his standing there, unknown, and if known, ignored. Mr. Potts would screw himself to the point of coughing. Mr. Potts would cough, and then Mr. Potts would be observed, studied, and invited to make some statement.

This invariable procedure now came into Mr. Potts's mind. He did not like to frighten the man scrambling into the car. He knew that people who were suddenly frightened were apt to react too quickly, often with violence. Mr. Potts dusted one shoe delicately against the trouser cuff on his other leg. Mr. Potts coughed. The man looked up. Observing Mr. Potts, he grinned, not very pleasantly, Mr. Potts thought.

"Good-day," said Mr. Potts. And then: "What are you doing there?"

The man grinned again. "What's that to you?"

"It's my car," said Mr. Potts. "What are you doing in it there?"

The man studied Mr. Potts, seemed satisfied with what he saw and dived one hand back into the car, still twisting back over his shoulder to keep an eye on Mr. Potts.

"Well," he said, "it might be your car, and it might not, but I need a jack, and I need some rubber solution, and I need some patches. And what's more, I need some tools." With that he brought his hand out clutching a bundle of Mr. Potts's beloved equipment.

Mr. Potts was diplomatic. "If you've had tyre trouble," he proffered, "you can borrow the things and I'll give you a hand."

The man grinned again. "No, I've not had trouble. I need just these things and I'm going to take them. So what are you going to do about that?"

MR. POTTS was quite overcome by this contretemps. He didn't know what he was going to do about that. His attitude said so, and the man grinned again, also unpleasantly, and made off.

"Police" was the first word that came into Mr. Potts's mind. But there were no police. Then he became angry. It was his car, they were his tools. These were among the very few things he really owned. "Chase him and strangle him" his mind signalled. But the man was a big man, and did not even bother to look back.

Mr. Potts watched his retreating back, dull anger rising within him. He picked up a stone, and flung it hard at that back. It hit. The man turned. "Why, you little swine," he cried. "I'll teach you." And he came at Mr. Potts.

Mr. Potts ran, and Mr. Potts found he could run quite fast. He had not gone far when he heard the sound of running feet behind him stop. He pulled up, turned round, and saw that the man had once again made off up the road.

Panting now, and roused, Mr. Potts followed him. As he passed the car the man gave it a kick. Mr. Potts raised another degree of heat in his anger. He threw another stone. Again the man turned and chased him, and again the chase ended quickly.

Out of this manifestly ridiculous situation came a series of extraordinary events.

WHEN the man chased him, Mr. Potts ran away. When the man walked away, Mr. Potts followed him. Mr. Potts armed himself with a stout stick dropped by some drover by the wayside. Mr. Potts developed the cool intention to use the stick on the thief when opportunity presented itself. But Mr. Potts was still not brave enough to chase up to the thief and crack him about the head. He preferred to wait his chance, and invoke the assistance of guile in so risky an enterprise.

After all, he had some advantages. He found soon enough that he could run as fast as the man. When he had to run away, as often happened, it was never very long before the man gave up and turned to get clear himself. And Mr. Potts had the advantage that right was on his side. The man could not overtake him to despatch him, and if he could would probably have thought twice about doing it, because by now some ploughman peering over a hedge might have seen their absurd progression along the road. He must have lost his head a little, too. He must have decided that the only thing to do was to get away from Mr. Potts before the little man could call for help. So he ran away, walked when he puffed, and occasionally made a dive back in his tracks at Mr. Potts. Mr. Potts followed him at a discreet distance, and retreated when it seemed advisable. Emboldened by his seeming advantage, he threw an occasional stone, and dodged nimbly when it was returned.

Even on a quiet Canterbury road, this could not go on for ever. It did go on for a surprisingly long time. Both men faced an impasse. Mr. Potts was not bold enough to try and finish it off with the sun shining so brightly and the world alive and gentle all around him. The man feared to finish it off in case of possible consequences.

Both must have been thinking feverishly all this time about what could best be done; Mr. Potts less feverishly than might be thought. He found himself becoming bolder and bolder. He shortened the distance between himself and his adversary. He grasped the stick more firmly.

THIS illogical situation could not last.

In broad daylight it seemed utterly operatic and unreal. Both men must have realised this, but both, stupidly, illogically, continued with the prankish game. It did seem illogical, but what was there to be done?

If it seemed absurd by day, in the light of the sun, with the Canterbury soil nourishing green grass and golden crops all round them, with birds in the hedges and flowers bright in the weeds beside the road; then by night it would become madness.

When Mr. Potts had climbed back over the hedge the sun had been bright and clear over Mt. Torlesse. It was late afternoon, and the nor-west wind was warm and dry. As evening came clouds from the inland ranges poked over the foothills and the men walked or ran along the road through gathering shadows. In the twilight the two figures almost merged with the landscape. When the sunset glowed a red blaze from the western sky descended briefly upon them and made small vermilion edges around their silhouettes against the light. With the night the wind dropped and all the heat of the soil across those miles of flat country cooled in the darkening air, condensed, and made a haze of mist that shut out the stars. It was dark. . . .

? HOW SHOULD THE STORY END?



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