

Young Lives eBook

Young Lives by Richard Le Gallienne

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HARD YOUNG HEARTS

Behind the Venetian blinds of a respectable middle-class, fifty-pound-a-year, “semi-detached,” “family” house, in a respectable middle-class road of the little north-county town of Sidon, midway between the trees of wealth upon the hill, and the business quarters that ended in squalor on the bank of the broad and busy river,—a house boasting a few shabby trees of its own, in its damp little rockeried slips of front and back gardens,—on a May evening some ten or twelve years ago, a momentous crisis of contrasts had been reached.

The house was still as for a battle. It was holding its breath to hear what was going on in the front parlour, the door of which seemed to wear an expression of being more than usually closed. A mournful half-light fell through a little stained-glass vestibule into a hat-racked hall, on the walls of which hung several pictures of those great steamships known as “Atlantic liners” in big gilt frames—pictures of a significance presently to be noted. A beautiful old eight-day clock ticked solemnly to the flickering of the hall lamp. From below came occasionally a furtive creaking of the kitchen stairs. The two servants were half way up them listening. The stairs a flight above the hall also creaked at intervals. Two young girls, respectively about fourteen and fifteen, were craning necks out of nightdresses over the balusters in a shadowy angle of the staircase. On the floor above them three other little girls of gradually diminishing ages slept, unconscious of the issues being decided between their big brother and their eldest sister on the one side, and their father and mother on the other, in the front parlour below.

That parlour, a room of good size, was unostentatiously furnished with good bourgeois mahogany. A buxom mahogany chiffonier, a large square dining-table, a black marble clock with two dials, one being a barometer, three large oil landscapes of exceedingly umbrageous trees and glassy lakes, inoffensively uninteresting, more Atlantic liners, and a large bookcase, apparently filled with serried lines of bound magazines, and an excellent Brussels carpet of quiet pattern, were mainly responsible for a general effect of middle-class comfort, in which, indeed, if beauty had not been included, it had not been wilfully violated, but merely unthought of. The young people for whom these familiar objects meant a symbolism deep-rooted in their earliest memories could hardly in fairness have declared anything positively painful in that room—except perhaps those Atlantic liners; their charges against furniture, which was unconsciously to them accumulating memories that would some day bring tears of tenderness to their eyes, could only have been negative. Beauty had been left out, but at least ugliness had not been ostentatiously called in. There was no bad taste.

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In fact, whatever the individual character of each component object, there was included in the general effect a certain indefinable dignity, which had doubtless nothing to do with the mahogany, but was probably one of those subtle atmospheric impressions which a room takes from the people who habitually live in it. Had you entered that room when it was empty, you would instinctively have felt that it was accustomed to the occupancy of calm and refined people. There was something almost religious in its quiet. Some one often sat there who, whatever his commonplace disguises as a provincial man of business, however inadequate to his powers the work life had given him to do, provincial and humiliating as were the formulae with which narrowing conditions had supplied him for expression of himself, was in his central being an aristocrat,—though that was the very last word James Mesurier would have thought of applying to himself. He was a man of business, serving God and his employers with stern uprightness, and bringing up a large family with something of the Puritan severity which had marked his own early training; and, as in his own case no such allowance had been made, making no allowance in his rigid abstract code for the diverse temperaments of his children,—children in whom certain qualities and needs of his own nature, dormant from his birth, were awakening, supplemented by the fuller-fed intelligence and richer nature of the mother, into expansive and rebellious individualities.

It was now about eleven o'clock, and the house was thus lit and alive half-an-hour beyond the rigorously enforced bed-time. An hour before, James Mesurier had been peacefully engaged on the task which had been nightly with him at this hour for twenty-five years,—the writing of his diary, in a shorthand which he wrote with a neatness, almost a daintiness, that always marked his use of pen and ink, and gave to his merely commercial correspondence and his quite exquisitely kept accounts, a certain touch of the scholar,—again an air of distinction in excess of, and unaccounted for, by the nature of the interests which it dignified.

His somewhat narrow range of reading, had you followed it by his careful markings through those bound volumes of sermons in the bookcase, bore the same evidence of inherited and inadequately occupied refinement. His life from boyhood had been too much of a struggle to leave him much leisure for reading, and such as he had enjoyed had been diverted into evangelical channels by the influence of a certain pious old lady, with whom as a young man he had boarded, and for whose memory all his life he cherished a reverence little short of saint-worship.



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The name of Mrs. Quiggins, whose portrait had still a conspicuous niche among the *lares* of the household,—a little thin silvery old widow-lady, suggesting great sadness, much gentleness, and a little severity,—had thus become for the family of James Mesurier a symbol of sanctity, with which a properly accredited saint of the calendar could certainly not, in that Protestant home, have competed. It was she who had given him that little well-worn Bible which lay on the table with his letters and papers, as he wrote under the lamplight, and than which a world full of sacred relics contains none more sacred. A business-like elastic band encircled its covers, as a precaution against pages becoming loose with much turning; and inside you would have found scarcely a chapter unpencilled,—texts underlined, and sermons of special helpfulness noted by date and preacher on the margin,—the itinerary of a devout human soul on its way through this world to the next.

The Bible and the sermons of a certain famous Nonconformist Divine of the day were James Mesurier's favourite and practically his only reading, at this time; though as a young man he had picked up a fair education for himself, and had taken a certain interest in modern history. For novels he had not merely disapproval, but absolutely no taste. Once in a specially genial mood he had undertaken to try "Ivanhoe," to please his favourite daughter,—this night in revolt against him,—and in half-an-hour he had been surprised with laughter, sound asleep. The sermon that would send him to sleep had never been written, at all events by his favourite theologian, whose sermons he read every Sunday afternoon, and annotated with that same loving appreciation and careful pencil with which a scholar annotates some classic; so true is it that it is we who dignify our occupations, not they us.

Similarly, James Mesurier presided over the destinies of a large commercial undertaking, with the air of one who had been called rather to direct an empire than a business. You would say as he went by, "There goes one accustomed to rule, accustomed to be regarded with great respect;" but that air had been his long before the authority that once more inadequately accounted for it.

Thus this night, as he sat writing, his handsome, rather small, iron-grey head bent over his papers, his face somewhat French in character, his short beard slightly pointed; distinguished, refined, severe; he had the look of a marshal of France engrossed with documents of state.

The mother, who sat in an armchair by the fire, reading, was a woman of about forty-five, with a fine blonde, aquiline face, distinctively English, and radiating intelligence from its large sympathetic lines. She was in some respects so different from her husband as at times to make children precociously wise—but nevertheless, far from knowing everything—wonder why she had ever married their father, for whom, at



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that time, it would be hypocrisy to describe their attitude as one of love. To them he was not so much a father as the policeman of home,—a personification of stern negative decrees, a systematic thwarter of almost everything they most cared to do. He was a sort of embodied “Thou shalt not,” only to be won into acquiescence by one influence,—that of the mother, whose married life, as she looked back on it, seemed to consist of little else than bringing children into the world, with a Christian-like regularity, and interceding with the father for their varying temperaments when there.

Though it might have been regarded as certain beforehand, that seven children would differ each from each other in at least as many ways, it never seems to have occurred to the father that one inflexible system for them all could hardly be wise or comfortable. But, indeed, like so many parents similarly trained and circumstanced, it is questionable whether he ever realised their possession of separate individualities till they were pleaded for by the mother, or made, as on this evening, surprising assertion of themselves.

Though this system of mediation had been responsible for the only disagreements in their married life, there had never been any long or serious difference between husband and wife; for, in spite of natures so different, they loved each other with that love which is given us for the very purpose of such situations, the love that no strain can snap, the love that reconciles all such disparities. Though Mary Mesurier had also been brought up among Nonconformists, and though the conditions of her youth, like her husband's, had been far from adequate to the demands of her nature, yet her religion had been of a gentler character, broadening instead of narrowing in its effects, and had concerned itself less with divinity than humanity. Her home life, if humble, had been genial and rich in love, and there had come into it generous influences from the outer world,—books with more of the human beat in them than is to be found in sermons; and particularly an old travelled grandfather who had been regarded as the rolling stone of his family, but in whom, at all events, failure and travel had developed a great gentleness and understanding of the human creature, which in long walks and talks with his little granddaughter somehow passed over into her young character, and proved the best legacy he could have left her. Through him too was encouraged a native love of poetry, of which in her childhood her memory acquired a stock which never failed her, and which had often cheered her lonely hours by successive cradles. She had a fine natural gift of recitation, and in evening hours when the home was particularly united in some glow of visitors or birthday celebration, she would be persuaded to recall some of those old songs and simple apologues, with such charm that even her husband, to whom verse was naturally an incomprehensible triviality, was visibly softened, and perhaps, deep in the sadness of his silent nature, moved to a passing realisation of a certain something kind and musical in life which he had strangely missed.

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This greater breadth of temperament and training enabled Mary Mesurier to understand and make allowances for the narrower and harder nature of her husband, whom she learnt in time rather to pity for the bleakness of his early days, than to condemn for their effect upon his character. He was strong, good, clever, and handsome, and exceptionally all those four good reasons for loving him; and the intellectual sympathy, the sharing of broader interests, which she sometimes missed in him, she had for some three or four years come to find in her eldest son, who, to his father's bewilderment and disappointment, had reincarnated his own strong will, in connection with literary practices and dreams which threatened to end in his becoming a poet, instead of the business man expected of him, for which development that love of poetry in one parent, and a certain love of books in both, was no doubt to some degree guiltily responsible.

James Mesurier, as we have said, was no judge of poetry; and, had he been so, a reading of his son's early effusions would have made him still more obdurate in the choice for him of a commercial career; but on general principles he was quite sufficiently firm against any but the most non-committing, leisure-hour flirtation with the Muse. The mother, while agreeing with the father's main proposition of the undesirability, nay, impossibility, of literature as a livelihood,—had not the great and successful Sir Walter himself described it as a good walking-stick, but a poor crutch; a stick applied, since its first application as an image, to the shoulders of how many generations of youthful genius,—was naturally more sympathetic towards her son's ambition, and encouraged it to the extent of helping from her housekeeping money the formation of his little library, even occasionally proving successful in winning sums of money from the father for the purchase of some book specially, as the young man would declare, necessary for his development.

As this little library had outgrown the accommodation of the common rooms, a daring scheme had been conceived between mother and son,—no less than that he should have a small room set apart for himself as a study. When first broached to the father, this scheme had met with an absolute denial that seemed to promise no hope of further consideration; but the mother, accepting defeat at the time, had tried again and again, with patient dexterity at favourable moments, till at last one proud day the little room, with its bookshelves, a cast of Dante, and a strange picture or two, was a beautiful, significant fact—all ready for the possible visitation of the Muse.



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In such ways had the mother negotiated the needs of all her children; though the youth of the rest—save the eldest girl, whose music lessons had meant a battle, and whose growing attractiveness for the boys of the district, and one in particular, was presently to mean another—made as yet but small demands. In one question, however, periodically fruitful of argument, even the youngest was becoming interested,—the question of the visits to the household of the various friends and playmates of the children. To these, it must be admitted, James Mesurier was apt to be hardly less of a figure of fear than to his own children; for, apart from the fact that such inroads from without were apt to disturb his few quiet evening hours with rollicking and laughter, he, being entirely unsocial in his own nature, had a curious idea that the family should be sufficient to itself, and that the desire for any form of entertainment outside it was a sign of dissatisfaction with God's gifts of a good home, and generally a frivolity to be discouraged.

As a boy he had grown up without companions, and as a man had remained lonely, till he had met in his wife the one comrade of his days. What had been good enough for their father should be good enough for his children, was a formula which he applied all round to their bringing up, curiously forgetful, for a man at heart so just, of the pleasure one would have expected it to be to make sure that the errors of his own training were not repeated in that of his offspring. But, indeed, there was in him constitutionally something of the Puritan suspicion of, and aversion from, pleasure, which it had never occurred to him to consider as the end of, or, indeed, as a considerable element of existence. Life was somehow too serious for play, spiritually as well as materially; and much work and a little rest was the eternal and, on the whole, salutary lot of man.

Such were some of the conditions among which the young Mesuriers found themselves, and of which their impatience had become momentarily explosive this February evening.

For some days there had been an energetic simmer of rebellion among the four elder children against a new edict of early rising which was surely somewhat arbitrary. Early rising was one of James Mesurier's articles of faith; and he was always up and dressed by half-past six, though there was no breakfast till eight, and absolutely no necessity for his rising at that hour beyond his own desire. There was still less, indeed none at all, for his children to rise thus early; but nevertheless he had recently decreed that such, for the future, must be the rule. The rule fell heaviest upon the sisters, for the elder brother had always enjoyed a certain immunity from such edicts. His sense of justice, however, kindled none the less at this final piece of tyranny. He blazed and fumed indignantly on behalf of his sisters, in the sanctuary of that little study,—a spot where the despot seldom set foot; and out of this comparatively trivial cause had sprung a mighty resolution, which he and she whom he proudly honoured as "sister and friend" had, after some girding of the loins, repaired to the front parlour this evening to communicate.



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They had entered somewhat abruptly, and stood rather dramatically by the table on which the father was writing,—the son with dark set face, in which could be seen both the father and mother, and the daughter, timid and close to him, resolutely keeping back her tears, a slim young copy of the mother.

“Well, my dears?” said the father, looking up with a keen, rather surprised glance, and in a tone which qualified with some severity the “my dears.”

The son had had some exceedingly fine beginnings in his head, but they fled ignominiously with the calm that was necessary for their successful delivery, and he blurted at once to the point.

“We have come to say that we are no longer comfortable at home, and have decided to leave it.”

“Henry,” exclaimed the mother, hastily, “what do you mean, how can you be so ungrateful?”

“Mary, my dear,” interrupted the father, “please leave the matter to me.” Then turning to the son: “What is this you are saying? I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

“I mean that Esther and I have decided to leave home and live together; because it is impossible for us to live here any longer in happiness—”

“On what do you propose to live?”

“My salary will be sufficient for the present.”

“Sixty pounds a year!”

“Yes!”

“And may I ask what is wrong with your home? You have every comfort—far more than your mother or father were accustomed to.”

“Yes, indeed!” echoed the mother.

“Yes, we know you are very good and kind, and mean everything for our good; but you don’t understand other needs of our natures, and you make no allowance for our individualities—”

“Indeed! Individualities—I should like you to have heard what my father would have said to talk about individualities. A rope’s end would have been his answer to that—”

“It would have been a very silly one, and no argument.”



“It would have been effective, at all events.”

“Not with me—”

“Well, please don’t bandy words with me, sir. If you,” particularly addressing his son, “wish to go—then go; but remember that once you have left your father’s roof, you leave it for ever. As for your sister, she has no power to leave her mother and father without my consent, and that I shall certainly withhold till she is of a proper age to know what is best for herself—”

“She will go then without your consent,” defiantly answered the son.

“Oh, Henry, for shame!” exclaimed Mrs. Mesurier.

“Mother dear, I’m sorry,—we don’t mean to be disrespectful or undutiful,—but father’s petty tyrannies are more than we can bear. He objects to the friends we care for; he denies us the theatre—”

“Most certainly, and shall continue to do so. I have never been inside a theatre in my life; nor, with my consent, shall any child of mine enter one of them.”



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“You can evidently know little about them then, and you’d be a much finer man if you had,” flashed out the son.

“Your sitting in judgment on your father is certainly very pretty, I must say,”—answered the father,—“very pretty; and I can only hope that you will not have cause to regret it some future day. But I cannot allow you to disturb me,” for, with something of a pang, Henry noticed signs of agitation amid the severity of his parent, though the matter was too momentous for him to allow the indulgence of pity.

“You have been a source of much anxiety to your mother and me, a child of many prayers;” the father continued. “Whether it is the books you read, or the friends you associate with, that are responsible for your strange and, to my thinking, impious opinions, I do not know; but this I know, that your influence on your sister has not of late been for good, and for her sake, and the sake of your young sisters, it may perhaps be well that your influence in the home be removed—”

“Oh, James,” exclaimed the wife.

“Mary, my dear, you must let me finish. If Henry will go, go he shall; but if he still stays, he must learn that I am master in this house, and that while I remain so, not he, but I shall dictate how it is to be carried on.”

It was at this point that Esther ventured to lift the girlish tremor of her voice.

“But, father, if you’ll forgive my saying so, I think it would be best for another reason for us to go. There are too many of us. We haven’t room to grow. We get in each other’s way. And then it would ease you; it would be less expense—”

“When I complain of having to support my children, it will be time to speak of that—”

“But you have complained,” hotly interrupted the son; “you have reproached us many a time for what we cost you for clothes and food—”

“Yes, when you have shown yourselves ungrateful for them, as you do to-night—”

“Ungrateful! For what should we be grateful? That you do your bare duty of feeding and clothing us, and even for that, expect, in my case at all events, that I shall prove so much business capital invested for the future. Was it we who asked to come into the world? Did you consult us, or did you beget us for anything but your own selfish pleasure, without a thought—”

Henry got no further. His father had grown white, and, with terrible anger pointed to the door.

“Leave the room, sir,” he said, “and to-morrow leave my house for ever.”



The son was not cowed. He stood with an unflinching defiance before the father, in whom he forgot the father and saw only the tyrant. For a moment it seemed as if some unnatural blow would be struck; but so much of pain was spared the future memory of the scene, and saying only, "It is true for all that," he turned and left the room. The sister followed him in silence, and the door closed.

Mother and father looked at each other. They had brought up children, they had suffered and toiled for them,—that they should talk to them like this! Mrs. Mesurier came over to her husband, and put her arm tenderly on his shoulder.

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“Never mind, dear. I’m sure he didn’t mean to talk like that. He is a good boy at heart, but you don’t understand each other.”

“Mary dear, we will talk no more of it to-night,” he replied; “I will try and put it from me. You go to bed. I will finish my diary, and be up in a few minutes.”

When he was alone, he sat still a little while, with a great lonely pain on his face, and almost visibly upon it too the smart of the wounded pride of his haughty nature. Never in his life had he been spoken to like that,—and by his own son! The pang of it was almost more than he could bear. But presently he had so far mastered himself as to take up his pen and continue his writing. When that was finished, he opened his Bible and read his wonted chapter. It was just the simple twenty-third psalm: “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.” It was his favourite psalm, and always had a remarkable tranquillising effect upon him. James Mesurier’s faith in God was very great. Then he knelt down and prayed in silence,—prayed with a great love for his disobedient children; and, when he rose from his knees, anger and pain had been washed away from his face, and a serenity that is not of this world was there instead.

CHAPTER II

CONCERNING THOSE “ATLANTIC LINERS” AND AN OLD DESK

Of all battles in this complicated civil warfare of human life, none is more painful than that being constantly waged from generation to generation between young and old, and none, it would appear, more inevitable, or indeed necessary. “The good gods sigh for the cost and pain,” and as, growing older ourselves, we become spectators of such a conflict, with eyes able to see the real goodness and truth of both combatants, how often must we exclaim: “Oh, just for a little touch of sympathetic comprehension on either side!”

And yet, after all, it is from the older generation that we have a right to expect that. If that vaunted “experience” with which they are accustomed to extinguish the voice of the young means anything, it should surely include some knowledge of the needs of expanding youth, and be prepared to meet them, not in a spirit of despotic denial, but in that of thoughtful provision. The young cannot afford to be generous, even if they possess the necessary insight. It would mean their losing their battle,—a battle very necessary for them to win.

Sometimes it would seem that a very little kindly explanation on the part of the elder would set the younger at a point of view where greater sympathy would be possible. The great demand of the young is for some form of poetry in their lives and surroundings; and it is largely the fault of the old if the poetry of one generation is almost invariably the prose of the next.



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Those “Atlantic liners” are an illustration of my meaning. To the young Mesuriers they were hideous chromo-lithographs in vulgar gilt frames, arbitrary defacements of home; but undoubtedly even they would have found a tolerant tenderness for them, had they realised that they represented the poetry—long since renounced and put behind him—of James Mesurier’s life. He had come of a race of sea-captains, two of his brothers had been sailors, and deep down in his heart the spirit of romance answered, with voice fresh and young as ever, to any breath or association of the sea. But he seldom, if ever, spoke of it, and only in an anecdote or two was it occasionally brought to mind. Sometimes his wife would tease him with the vanity which, on holidays by the sea, would send him forth on blustering tempestuous nights clad in a greatcoat of blue pilot-cloth and a sealskin cap, and tell how proud he was on one occasion, as he stood on the wharf, at being addressed as “captain,” and asked what ship he had brought into port. Even the hard heart of youth must soften at such a reminiscence.

Then scattered about the house was many a prosaic bit of furniture which was musical with memories for the parents,—memories of their first little homes and their early struggles together. This side-board, now relegated to the children’s play-room, had once been their *piece de resistance* in such and such a street, twelve years ago, before their children had risen up and—not called them blessed.

A few years, and the light of poetry will be upon these things for their children too; but, meanwhile, can we blame them that they cannot accept the poetry of their elders in exchange for that of their own which they are impatient to make? And when that poetry is made and resident in similar concrete objects of home—how will it seem, one wonders, to their children? This old desk which Esther has been allowed to appropriate, and in a secret drawer of which are already accumulating certain love-letters and lavender, will it ever, one wonders, turn to lumber in younger hands? For a little while she leans her sweet young bosom against it, and writes scented letters in a girlish hand to a little red-headed boy who has these past weeks begun to love her. Can it be possible that the desk on which Esther once wrote to her little Mike will ever hear itself spoken of as “this ugly old thing”? Let us hope not.

CHAPTER III

OF THE LOVE OF HENRY AND ESTHER

Father and son had both meant what they said; and even the mother, for whom it would be the cruellest wrench of all, knew that Henry was going to leave home. Not literally on the morrow, for the following evening he had appeared before his father to apologise for the manner—carefully for the manner, not *the matter*,—in which he had spoken to him the evening before, and asked for a day or two in which to make his arrangements for departure. James Mesurier was too strong a man to be resentful, and he accepted his

son's apology with a gentleness that, as each knew, detracted nothing from the resolution which each had come to.



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“My boy,” he said, “you will never have such good friends as your father and mother; but it is best that you go out into the world to learn it.”

There is something terribly winning and unnerving to the blackest resolution, when the severity of the strong dissolves for a brief moment into tenderness. The rare kind words of the stern, explain it as we will, and unjust as the preference must surely be, one values beyond the frequent forgivenesses of the gentle. Mary Mesurier would have laid down her life in defence of her son’s greatest fault, and James Mesurier would as readily have court-martialled him for his smallest, and yet, somehow, a kind word from him brought the tears to his son’s eyes.

He had no longer the heart to stimulate the rebellion of Esther, as he felt it his duty to do; and, to her disappointment, he announced that, on the whole, it would perhaps be best for him to go alone.

“It would almost kill poor mother,” he said; “and father means well after all,” he added.

“I’m afraid it would break father’s heart,” said Esther.

So these two young people agreed to spare their parents, though—let it not be otherwise imagined—at a great sacrifice. The little paper on which they had carefully worked out their housekeeping, skilfully allotting so much for rent, butcher’s meat, milk, coals, and washing, and making “everything” come most optimistically to *L59 17s. 9d.* a year, would be of no use now, at all events for the present. Their little Charles and Mary Lamb dream must be laid aside—for, of course, they had thought of Charles and Mary Lamb; and indeed, out beyond this history of a few youthful years, their friendship was to prove itself far from unworthy of its famous model.

Yet at this time it was of no great antiquity; for, but a very few years back, Henry had been a miniature tyrant too, and ruled it over his kingdom of six sisters with all the hideous egoism of a pampered “son and heir.” Although in the very middle class of society into which Henry Mesurier was born, the dignity of eldest son is one but very contingently connected with tangible inheritance, it is none the less vigorously kept up; and, no doubt, without any consciousness of partiality, Henry Mesurier, from his childhood, had been brought up to regard himself as a sort of young prince, for whom all the privileges of home were, by divine right, reserved. For example, he took his meals with his parents fully five years before any of his sisters were allowed to do so; and for retention of this privilege, when at length the democratic measure of its extension to his two elder sisters was proposed, he fought with the bitterest spirit of caste. Indeed, few oligarchs have been more wildly hated than Henry Mesurier up to the age, say, of fourteen. That was the age of his last thrashing, and it was in the gloomy dusk of that momentous occasion, as he lay alone with smarting back in the twilight of an unusually early bed-time, that a possible new view of woman—as a creature of like passions and privileges—presented itself to him.



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His thrashing had been so unjustly severe, that even the granite little hearts of his sisters had been softened; and Esther, managing to secrete a cake that he loved from the tea that was lost to him, stole with it to the top of the house, where he writhed amid lonely echoes and shadows.

She had brought it to him awkwardly, by no means sure of its reception, but sure in her heart that she would hate him for ever, if he missed the meaning of the little solatium. But fortunately his back was far too sore, and his spirit too broken to remember his pride, and he accepted the offering with gratitude and tears.

“Kiss me, Esther,” he had said; and a wonderful thrill had gone through the little girl at this strange softness in the mighty, while the dawn of a wonderful pity for the lot of woman had, unconsciously, broken in the soul of the boy.

“Kiss me again, Esther,” he had said, and, with the tears that mingled in that kiss, an eternal friendship was baptized.

Henry rose on the morrow a changed being. The grosser pretensions of the male had fallen from him for ever, and there was at first something almost awe-inspiring to his sisters in the gentle solicitude for them and their rights and pleasures which replaced the old despotism. From that time, Esther and he became closer and closer companions, and as they more and more formed an oligarchy of two, a rearrangement of parties in the little parliament of home came about, to be upset again as Dot and Mat qualified for admission into that exclusive little circle.

So soon as Henry had a new dream or a new thought, he shared it with Esther; and freely as he had received from Carlyle, or Emerson, or Thoreau, freely he passed it on to her. For the gloomiest occasion he had some strengthening text, and one of the last things he did before he left home was to make for her a little book which he called “Faith for Cloudy Days,” consisting of energising and sustaining phrases from certain great writers,—as it were, a bottle of philosophical phosphates against seasons of spiritual cowardice or debility. There one opened and read: “*Sudden the worst turns best to the brave*” or Thoreau’s “*I have yet to hear a single word of wisdom spoken to me by my elders,*” or again Matthew Arnold’s

*“Tasks in hours of insight willed
May be through hours of gloom fulfilled.”*

James Mesurier knew nothing of all this; but if he had, he might have understood that after all his children were not so far from the kingdom of heaven.

CHAPTER IV

OF THE PROFESSIONS THAT CHOOSE, AND MIKE LAFLIN

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However we may hint at its explanation by theories of inheritance, it still remains curious with what unerring instinct a child of character will from the first, and when it is so evidently ignorant of the field of choice, select, out of all life's occupations and distinctions, one special work it hungers to do, one special distinction that to it seems the most desirable of earthly honours. That Mary Mesurier loved poetry, and James Mesurier sermons, in face of the fact that so many mothers and fathers have done the same with no such result, hardly seems adequate to account for the peculiar glamour which, almost before he could read, there was for Henry Mesurier in any form of print. While books were still being read to him, there had already come into his mind, unaccountably, as by outside suggestion, that there could be nothing so splendid in the world as to write a book for one's self. To be either a soldier, a sailor, an architect, or an engineer, would, doubtless, have its fascinations as well; but to make a real printed book, with your name in gilt letters outside, was real romance.

At that early day, and for a long while after, the boy had no preference for any particular kind of book. It was an entirely abstract passion for print and paper. To have been the author of "The Iliad" or of Beeton's "Book of Household Recipes" would have given him almost the same exaltation of authorship; and the thrill of worship which came over him when, one early day, a man who had actually had an article on the sugar bounties accepted by a commercial magazine was pointed out to him in the street, was one he never forgot; nor in after years did he ever encounter that transfigured contributor without an involuntary recurrence of that old feeling of awe. No subsequent acquaintance with editorial rooms ever led him into materialistic explanations of that enchanted piece of work—a newspaper. The editors might do their best—and succeed surprisingly—in looking like ordinary mortals, you might even know the leader-writers, and, with the very public, gaze through gratings into the subterranean printing-rooms,—the mystery none the less remained. No exposure of editorial staffs or other machinery could destroy the sense of enchantment, as no amount of anatomy or biology can destroy the mystery of the human miracle.

So I suppose Nature first makes us in love with the tools we are to use, long before we have a thought upon what we shall use them. Perhaps the first desire of the born writer is to be a compositor. Out of the love of mere type quickly evolves a love of mere words for their own sake; but whether we shall make use of them as a historian, novelist, philosopher, or poet, is a secondary consideration, a mere afterthought. To Henry Mesurier had already come the time when the face of life began to wear a certain aspect, the peculiar attraction of which for himself he longed to fix, a certain mystical importance attaching to the commonest



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every-day objects and circumstances, a certain ecstatic quality in the simplest experiences; but even so far as it had been revealed, this dawning vision of the world seemed only to have come to him, not so much to find expression, as to mock him with his childish incapacity adequately to use the very tools he loved. He would hang for hours over some scene in nature, caught in a woodland spell, like a nympholept of old; but when he tried to put in words what he had seen, what a poor piece of ornamental gardening the thing was! There were trees and birds and grass, to be sure; but there was nothing of that meaning look which they had worn, that look of being tiptoe with revelation which is one of the most fascinating tricks of the visible world, and which even a harsh town full of chimneys can sometimes take on when seen in given moments and lights. And it was astonishing to see into what lifeless imitative verse his most original and passionate moments could be transformed.

Still some unreasonably indulgent spirit of the air, that had evidently not read his manuscripts, whispered him to be of good cheer: the lifeless words would not always be lifeless, some day the birds would sing in his verses too. This sense of failure did not, it must be said, immediately follow composition; for, for a little while the original expression of the thing seen reinforced with reflected significance its pale copy. It was only some weeks after, when the written copy was left to do all the work itself, that its foolish inadequacy was exposed.

“However, there is one consolation, they are not worse than Keats and Shelley wrote at the same age,” he said to himself, as he looked through a bundle of the poor things the evening before his room was to be dismantled. “Indeed, they couldn’t be,” he added, with a smile. Fortunately he was but nineteen as yet; would he venture on a like comparison were he twenty-five?

Yes, his little room was to be dismantled on the morrow,—this first little private chapel of his spirit. This fair order of shelves, this external harmony answering to an inner harmony of his spirit, were to be broken up for ever. Often as he had sat in the folioed lamplit nook which was, as it were, the very chancel of the little church, and gazed in an ecstasy at the books, each with a great shining name of fame upon its cover, it had seemed as though he had put his very soul outside him, externalised it in this little corner of books and pictures. His soul shivered, as one who must go houseless awhile, at the thought that to-morrow its home would be no more. When and how would be its reincarnation? More magnificent, maybe, but never this again. It was sacrilege,—was it not ingratitude too? When once more the books and the pictures began to form into a new harmony, there would be no mother’s love to help the work go on....

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But as he mused in this no doubt sentimental fashion, the door opened and the little red-headed Mike entered. His was a little Flibbertigibbet of a face, already lined with the practice of mimicry; and there was in it a very attractive blending of tenderness and humour. Mike was also one of those whom life at the beginning had impressed with the delight of one kind of work and no other. When a mere imp of a boy, the heartless tormentor of a large and sententious stepmother, the despair of schoolmasters, the most ingenious of truants, a humorous ragamuffin invulnerable to punishment, it was already revealed to him that his mission in life was to be the observation and reproduction of human character, particularly in its humorous aspects. To this end Nature had gifted him with a face that was capable of every form of transformation, and at an early age he hastened to put it in training. All day long he was pulling faces. As an artist will sketch everything he comes across, so Mike would endeavour to imitate any characteristic expression or attitude, animate or inanimate, in the world around him. Dogs, little boys, and grotesque old men were his special delight, and of all his elders he had, it goes without saying, a private gallery of irreverently faithful portraits.

In addition to his plastic face, Nature had given him a larynx which was capable of imitating every human and inhuman sound. To squeak like a pig, bark like a dog, low like a cow, and crow like a cock, were the veriest juvenilia of his attainments; and he could imitate the buzzing of a fly so cunningly that flies themselves have often been deceived. It was this delight in imitation for its own sake, and not so much that he had been caught by the usual allurements of the theatre, that he looked upon the career of an actor as his natural and ultimate calling. It was already privately whispered in the little circle that Mike would some day go on the stage. But don't tell that as yet to old Mr. Laflin, whatever you do.

There was a good deal more in Mike than pulling faces, as Esther recently, and Henry before her, had discovered. His acting was some day to stir the hearts of audiences, because he had instincts for knowing human nature inside as well as out, knew the secret springs of tears, as well as the open secrets of laughter; and it was rather on this common ground of a rich "many-veined humanity" that these two had met and become friends, rather than on any real community of tastes and ideas. Yet Mike loved books too, and had an excellent taste in them, though perhaps he had hardly loved them, had not Henry and Esther loved them first, and it is quite certain, and quite proper, that he never found a page of any book so fascinating as the face of some lined and battered human being. Over that writing he was never found asleep.

There was one other literary matter on which he held a very personal and unshakable opinion,—Henry Mesurier's future as a poet; and on this he came just in the nick of time to cheer him this evening.



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“The next move will be to London, old fellow,” he said; “and then you’ll soon see my prophecies come true. My opinion mayn’t be worth much, but you know what it is. You’ll be a great writer some day, never fear.”

“Thank you, dear old boy. And you know what I think about your acting, don’t you?”

Then it was that Esther appeared, and Henry made some transparent excuse to leave them awhile together.

“You dear old thing,” said Esther, kissing him, “now don’t stay away too long.”

CHAPTER V

Of the love of Esther and Mike, and
the Mesurier law in regard to
“Sweethearts”

I’m afraid Esther was little more than fourteen when she had first seen and fallen in love with Mike. She had heard much of him from her brother; but, for one reason or another, he had never been to the house. One evening, however, at a concert, Henry had told her to look in a certain direction and she would see Mike.

“I don’t suppose you’ll call him good looking,” he said.

So Esther had looked round, and seen the pretty curly red hair and the eager little wistful humorous face for the first time.

“Why, he’s got a lovely little face!” she said, blushing deeply for no reason at all,—except perhaps that there had seemed something pleading and shelter-seeking in that little face, something that cried out to be “mothered,” and that instantly there had welled up in her heart a great warm wish that some day she might be that for it and more.

And at the same instant it had occurred to the boy, that the face thus turned to him for a moment was the loveliest face he had ever seen, the only lovely face he would ever care to see. But with that thought, too, had come a curious pang of hopelessness into his heart. For Esther Mesurier was one of those girls who are the prizes of men. With all those pretty tall fellows about her, it was unlikely indeed that she would care for a little red-headed, face-pulling ragamuffin like him! And yet if she never could care for him,—never, never at all, what a lonely place the world would be!

When, after the concert, Henry looked round to introduce Mike to his sister, he had somehow slipped away and was nowhere to be seen.



However, it was not long after this that Mike paid a visit to Henry's study one evening, and, coming ostensibly to look at his books, once more saw his sister, and spoke to her a brief introductory word. His interest in literature became positively remarkable from this time; and the enthusiasm with which his actor's mind reflected, and, no doubt in all good faith, mimicked the various philosophical and literary enthusiasms of his friend, was, though neither realised it, a sure earnest of his future. More and more frequent visits to that study became necessary for its gratification; and, in the course of one of



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them, Mike confessed to Henry that he loved his sister, previously piling upon himself many anticipatory terms of ignominy for daring to do so presumptuous a thing. Henry, however, was so taken with the idea that, in his singleness of mind, he suffered no pang of retrospective suspicion of his friend's love for himself. Pending Esther's decision,—and of her mind in the matter, he had something more than a glimmering,—he welcomed Mike with gladness as a prospective brother-in-law, and, as soon as he found an opportunity, left them alone together, returning quite a long time afterwards—to find them extraordinarily happy, it would appear, at his safe return.

Esther and Mike had thus been fortunate enough to get that important question of a mate settled quite early in life, and to be saved from those arduous and desolating experiments in being fitted with a heart which so many less happy people have to go through. But this happy fact was as yet a secret beyond this strict circle of three; for, strange as it may sound, the beautiful attraction of a girl for a boy, the beautiful worship of a boy for a girl, were matters not even mentionable as yet in the Mesurier household. For a child, particularly a girl, under twenty to speak of having a "sweetheart" was an offence which had a strong savour of disgust in it, even for Mrs. Mesurier, broad-minded as in most matters she was.

So far as the only decent theory of the relations of the sexes was involuntarily explicit, by virtue of certain explosions on the subject, it was something like this: That, at a certain age, say twenty-one, or, for leniency, twenty, as it were on the striking of a clock, the young girl, who previously had been profoundly and inexpressibly unconscious that the male being existed, would suddenly sit up wide awake in an attitude of attention to offers of marriage; and that, similarly, the young man, who had meanwhile lived with his eyes shut and his senses asleep, would jump up also at the striking of a clock, and, as it were, with hilarity, say, "It is high time I chose a wife," and thereupon begin to look about, among the streets and tennis-parties known to him, for that impossible paragon,—a wife to satisfy both his parents.

One or two of Henry's earliest troubles and most drastic punishments had come of a propensity to "sweethearts," developed at an indecorously early age, and in fact at the time of which I write he could barely recall the name of Miss This or Miss The Other by the association of ancient physical pangs suffered for their sake. The greatest danger to such contraband passions was undoubtedly the post; for, in the Mesurier household, a more than Russian censorship was exercised over the incoming and—as far as it could be controlled—the outgoing mail. One old morning, at family breakfast, which the subsequent events of the evening were to fix on his mind, Henry Mesurier had grown white with fear, as the stupid maid had handed him a fat letter addressed in a sprawling school-girl's hand.

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“Who is your letter from, Henry?” asked the father.

Henry blushed and boggled.

“Pass it over to me.”

Resistance was worse than useless. As in war-time a woman will see her husband set up against a wall and shot before her face, as a conspirator sees the hands of the police close upon papers of the most terrible secrecy, so did Henry watch that scented little package pass with a sense of irrevocable loss into the cold hands of his father. The father opened it, placed a little white enclosure by the side of his coffee-cup for further inspection, and then read the letter—full of “darlings” and “for evers”—with the severe attention he would have given a business letter. Then he handed it across to the mother without a word, but with the look one doctor gives another in discovering a new and terrible symptom in a patient on whom they are consulting. While the mother read, the father opened the little packet, and out rolled a tiny plait of silky brown hair tied into a loop with a blue ribbon.

“Disgusting!” exclaimed the father and mother, simultaneously, to each other, as though the boy was not there.

“I am shocked at you, Henry,” said the mother.

“I shall certainly write to the forward little girl’s parents,” said the father.

“Oh, don’t do that, father,” exclaimed the boy, in terror, and half wondering if so sweet a thing could really be so criminal.

“Don’t dare to speak to me,” said the father. “Leave the breakfast-table. I will see you again this evening.”

Henry knew too well what the verb “to see” signified under the circumstances, and the day passed in such apprehensive gloom that it was a positive relief, when evening had at last come, to feel a walking-cane about him, at once more snaky and more notched than any previously applied to his stubborn young frame. Not to cry was, of course, a point of honour; and as the infuriating absence of tears inflamed the righteous anger of the parent, the stick splintered and broke with a crash, in which accident Henry learned he was responsible for a double offence.

“I wouldn’t have broken that stick for five pounds,” said the father, his interest suddenly withdrawn from his son; “it was given to me by my old friend Tarporley,” which, as can be imagined, was a mighty satisfaction to the sad small soul, smarting, not merely from the stick, but from the sense that life held something stupid in its injustice, in that he was thus being mauled for the most beautiful exalted feeling that had ever visited his young heart.

Those dark ages of oppression were long since passed for Henry and Esther, when Mike began to steal in of an evening to see Esther, and they were only referred to now and again, anecdotally, as the nineteenth century looks back at the days of the Holy Inquisition; but still it was wise to be cautious, for an interdict against Mike's coming to the house was quite within possibility, even in this comparatively enlightened epoch; and that would have been even more effective than James Mesurier's old friend Tarporley's stick of sacred memory.



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CHAPTER VI

THE BEGINNING OF THE END OF HOME

Recalling for another moment or two the ancient affair of the heart described in the last chapter, it may pertinently be added that James Mesurier fulfilled his threat on that occasion, and had in fact written to the "forward little girl's" parents. Could he have seen the rather amused reception of his letter, he would have realised with sorrow that an age of parental leniency, little short of degeneration, was in certain quarters unmistakably supplanting the stern age of which he was in a degree an anachronistic survival. That forward little girl's parents chanced to know James Mesurier enough by sight and reputation to respect him, while they smiled across to each other at his rather quaint disciplinarianism. Could Henry Mesurier have seen that smile, he would not only have felt reassured as to the fate of his little sweetheart, but have understood that there were temperate zones of childhood, as well as arctic, when young life waxed gaily to the sound of laughter and other musical accompaniments.

This revelation, however, was deferred some few years, till he became acquainted with the merry family of which Mike Laflin was the characteristic expression. Old Mr. Laflin was a little, jolly, bald-headed gentleman, bubbling over with mirth, who liked to have young people about him, and in his quips and cranks was as young as, and much cleverer than, any of them. It almost startled Henry on his first introduction to this family of two daughters and two brothers, where the father was rather like a brother grown prematurely bald, and the stepmother supplied with monumental dignity that element of solemnity without which no properly regulated household is complete, to notice the *camaraderie* which prevailed amongst them all. Jokes were flying about from one to another all the time, and the father made a point of capping them all. This was home in a liberal sense which the word had never meant to Henry. Doubtless, it had its own individual restrictions and censorships; but its surface was at all events debonair, and it was serviceable to Henry as revealing the existence of more genial social climates than that in which he had been nurtured—though in making the comparison with his own atmosphere, he realised that this *bonhomie* was nothing more important than a grace.

Perhaps, nay, very surely, the seriousness, even the severity of, his own training, had been among the very conditions needed to make him what he some day hoped to be, though they had seemed so purposely inimical. Had James Mesurier's religion been more free and easy, a matter less personally assured and momentous, his son's almost oppressive sense of the spiritual significance of existence had been less radiant and constantly supporting. Life might have gained in superficial liveableness; but it would have lost in intensity, in real importance, and with that loss would have gone too Henry's chance of being a poet." The poet in a golden clime was born!"—once and again, maybe, but more often he comes from a land of iron and tears.

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It is in the nature of things that Henry should begin to appreciate the services of his home to his development at the moment when he was leaving it. And the mere pang of the parting from it, when one day the hour for parting had surely come, was much more deep and complicated than he could have dreamed. As in our bodies we become conscious of certain vital centres, certain dependencies of relation and harmony, only when they have suffered shock, so often in life we may go along unconscious of the vital dependencies of our human relationships, till the moment comes to strain or sever them. Then a thousand hidden nerves quiver at the discovering touch of the knife. Henry's leaving home, though it had been originally the suggestion of violent feeling, was not to be an actual severance. His father's "leave my house for ever" had owed something to the rhetoric of anger, and the expulsion and cutting off which it had implied had since been so softened as practically to have disappeared. Henry was certainly not leaving his father's house for ever, but merely going into lodgings with a friend, with full privileges to visit his own home as often as he chose.

Still, he was, all the same, leaving home, and he was the first to leave it. The mother, at all events, knew that this was the beginning of the end, knew that, with her first-born's departure (desertion, she may have called it), a new era had commenced for the home, —the era of disintegration. For twenty years and more it had been all building and building; now it would be all just pulling down again; and there was a dreary sound as of demolition and wind-driven rain in her ears.

Oh, tragic love of mothers! Of no love is the final loss and doom so inevitably destined. The husband may desert the wife, but the son is sure to desert his mother—must, for nature demands the desertion. Put not your trust in princes—and yet put it rather in princes, oh, fond and doting parents, than in the blue-eyed flower of childhood for which year after year, with labours infinite, you would buy all the sunshine of the world.

Henry's pang at leaving home was mainly the pang of parting with his mother. It seemed more than a mere physical parting. It was his childhood that was parting from her for ever. When he came to see them he would be something different,—a man, an independent being. As long ago physically, now spiritually, the umbilical cord had been cut.

With Esther and Dot and Mat the parting was hardly a parting, as it was rather a promise of their all meeting together some day in a new place of freedom, which there was a sense of his going out to prepare for them. Their way would be his way, as the mother's could not; for theirs was the highway of youth, which, sooner or later, they would all take together, singing in the morning sun.

The three younger sisters, the as yet unopened buds of the family flower, took Henry's departure with the surface tears and the central indifference of childhood. When a family is so large, it practically includes two generations in itself; and these three girls

were really to prove a generation so different in characteristics from their four elders as to demand a separate chronicle to themselves.



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Thus as Henry drove away amid his trunks from the home of his father (genealogical poverty denies us the romantic grandiloquence of the plural), it was his mother's farewell arms and farewell tears, and his farewell promises to her, of which he was mainly conscious. He had promised "to take care of himself," and particularly to beware of damp sheets, and then he too had burst into tears. Indeed, it was generally a tearful business, after which everybody was glad to retire into corners to subside privately and dry themselves.

Henry crouched in the corner of his cab with fully half his cry to finish out; and, curiously, all the time a sad little story from an old holiday in the country kept haunting him. It was at once a fact and a fable concerning a happy little family of swallows, whose sudden tragedy he had seen with his own boyish, pitying eyes.

In a little vinery attached to an old country house which the Mesuriers had rented for a month or so for certain successive summers, two swallows had built their nest, and, in due course, there were three young swallows to keep them company. It was understood that the door of the vinery must be left open, that the parent swallows might fly to and fro for food; but by some accident it chanced that the door was one day closed, and the vinery not visited again for several days. When at last the door was opened again, the sight that met young eyes was one Henry had never forgotten. Three little starved swallows, hardly bigger than butterflies, lay upon the floor, and from the nest above hung the long horse-hairs with which the parents had vainly sought to anchor them safely to the home. But still sadder details were forthcoming, when the children, who had been wondering what had become of the parents, had suddenly discovered their wasted bodies in the grass a yard or two away from the vinery door. A few days ago this had been a happy, thriving home, and now it was absolutely desolated, done away with for ever. It needed no exceptional imagination or sympathy to conceive the agonised longing of the parents, as they had dashed themselves again and again upon that cruel, unyielding door, hearing the piteous cries of their young ones within, and the anguish in which their exhausted little lives had at last gone out. The young swallows had died for lack of food; but the old ones had died—for love. Had some other hand brought them food, would the young ones have missed the old ones like that?

CHAPTER VII

A LINK WITH CIVILISATION

On the afternoon following Henry's departure, Esther went out for a walk, and she came presently to a pretty little house half hidden in its big garden. A well-kept lawn, richly bathed in sunlight, flashed through the trees; and, opening the gate and following the tree-shaded path along one side of the house, Esther presently mounted to a small

terrace, where, as she had hoped, she came upon a dainty little lady watering her flowers.



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“Why, Esther, it’s you! How sweet of you! I was just dying to see you!” exclaimed the little lady, turning a pretty, but somewhat worn, and brilliantly sad face from her gardening. “Just let me finish this thirsty bed, and then you must give me a kiss. There!”

Then the two embraced; and as Mrs. Myrtilla Williamson held Esther at arm’s length and looked at her admiringly,—

“How pretty you look to-day!” she exclaimed, generously. “That new hat’s a great success. Didn’t I tell you mauve was your colour? Turn round. Yes, dear, you look charming. Where in the world, I wonder, did you all get that grand look of yours from?—I don’t mean your good looks merely, but that look of distinction. Your father and mother have it too; but where did *they* get it from? You’re a puzzle-family—all of you. But wouldn’t you like a cup of tea? Come in,” and she led the way indoors to a tiny, sweet-smelling boudoir on the left of the hall, of which a dainty glimpse, with its books and water-colours and bibelots, was to be caught from the terrace.

Everything about Myrtilla Williamson was scrupulously, determinedly dainty, from the flowered tea-gown about her slim, girlish figure,—her predilection for that then novel and suspected garment was regarded as a sure mark of a certain Parisian levity by her neighbours,—to her just a little “precious” enunciation. In France, in the seventeenth century, she would almost certainly have been a visitor at the Hotel Rambouillet, and to-day she was mysteriously and disapprovingly spoken of as “aesthetic.” She had a look as if she had tripped out of a Japanese fan, and slept at night in a pot-pourri jar. And she had brains, those good things—brains.

Her name was very like her life, one-half of which might be described as Myrtilla, the other half as Williamson. She was Myrtilla during the day, dabbling with her water-colours, her flowers, or her books; but at six o’clock each afternoon, with the sound of aggressive masculine boots in the hall, her life suddenly changed with a sigh to Williamson. The Williamson half of her life was so clumsily, so grotesquely ill-matched with the Myrtilla half that it was, and probably will always remain, a mystery why she had ever attempted so tasteless and inconvenient an addition,—a mystery, however, far from unique in the history of those mysteriously stupid unhappy marriages with evident boors which refined and charming women will, it is to be feared, go on making to the end of the human chapter.

It was perhaps a day hardly less interesting for Myrtilla than for the young people themselves when she had first met Henry and Esther Mesurier. Before, in the dull bourgeois society into which Williamson had transplanted her from London, she had found none with whom she dared be her natural Myrtilla. There she was expected to be Williamson to the bone. Henry and Esther, however, were only too grateful for Myrtilla, through whom was to come to them the revelation



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of some minor graces of life for which they had the instincts, but on which they had lacked instruction; and who, still more important, at least for Henry, was to be their first fragile link with certain strenuous new northern writers, translations of whom in every tongue had just then descended, Gothlike, upon Europe, to the great energising of its various literatures. She it was too who first handed them the fretted golden key to the enchanted garden of the Pre-Raphaelites, and the striking head of the young Dante in sepia, which had hung in a sort of shrine-recess in Henry's study, had been copied for him from Rossetti's sketch by Myrtilla's own hand.

She had, too, one of the most precious gifts for friendship, the gift of unselfish and diligent and progressive appreciation of all a friend's good points. She never flattered; but she never missed the smallest opportunity for praise. She was one of those rare people who make you feel happy in yourself, who send you away somehow dignified, profitably raised in your own esteem; just as others have a mysterious power of dejecting you in your proudest moments. If you had any charm, however shy, Myrtilla Williamson would find it, and send you away with a great gush of gratitude to her because it had been found at last. This was perhaps the greatest charm of her clever letters; they were all about "you,"—not, of course, that you didn't want to hear about her. But frequently all she told you of herself was her name. Perhaps she would write in the half-hour that remained between, say, a visit from Esther and the arrival of Williamson, to fix in a few intimate vivid words the charm of their afternoon together, and tell Esther in some new gratifying way what she was to her and why and how she was it; or when Henry had been there—even more carefully in the absence of Williamson—to read her his new poem, she would write him a long letter of literary criticism, just perceptibly vibrating with the emotion she might have felt for the romantic young poet, whom she allowed to call himself her "cavaliere servente," had she not been Williamson as well as Myrtilla, and had she not, as she somewhat unscientifically declared, been old enough to be his mother.

"Well," she said, as they sipped their tea, "so Henry's really gone. He slipped round to bid me a sort of good-bye yesterday, and told me the whole story. On the whole, I'm glad, though I know how you'll miss each other. But I'm sorriest for your mother. Yes, yes, I'm sorry for her. You must try to make it up to her, dear child. I think just that, above all things, would make me fear to be a mother. One can do without children," and there was a certain implication in the conversational atmosphere that children of the name of Williamson had been mercifully spared the world; "but when once they have come into one's life, it must be terrible to see them go out again. I should like to come round and have a little talk with your mother. I wonder if she'd care to see me?"



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“So long as you don’t come in your tea-gown,” said Esther, with a laugh.

“Cruel child!” and then with a way she had of suddenly finding something she wanted to hear of among the interests of her friends, “Now,” she said, “tell me something about Mike. I suppose the course of true love runs as smoothly as ever. Happy children! Give him my love when you see him, won’t you?”

Esther told all there was to tell about Mike up-to-date, and wished she could have repaid her friend’s sympathetic interest with a request for something similar about Williamson. But it was tacitly understood that there was nothing further to be said on that subject, and that the news of Myrtilla’s life could hardly again take any more excitingly personal form than the bric-a-brac excitements of art or literature,—though indeed art and literature were, to be just to them, far more than bric-a-brac in the life of Myrtilla Williamson. They were, indeed, it was easy to see, a very sustaining religion for the lonely little woman who, having no children to study, and having completed her studies of Williamson, was driven a good deal upon the study and development of herself. The Williamson half of the day provided her fully with opportunities for the practice of all the philosophy she was likely to acquire from writers ancient and modern, and for the absorption of all the consolation history and biography was likely to afford in the stories of women similarly circumstanced. It is to be feared that Myrtilla not only wore tea-gowns in advance of her time, but was also somewhat prematurely something of a “new” woman; but this was a subject on which she really did very little to “poison” Esther’s “young mind.” Esther’s young mind, in common with those of her two subsequent sisters, was little in need of “poisoning” from outside on such subjects. Indeed, it was a curious phenomenon to observe how all these young minds, sprung from a stock of such ancient, unquestioning faith, had, so to say, been born “poisoned;” or, to state the matter less metaphorically, had all been born with instincts for the most pitiless and effortless reasoning on all subjects human and divine.

As the hour approached when poor Myrtilla must change back to Williamson, Esther rose to say good-bye.

“Come again soon, dear girl; you don’t know the good you do me.”

The good, dear woman was entirely done by her unwearied, sympathetic discussion of the affairs and dreams of Esther, Mike, and Henry.

“Oh, here is a wonderful new book I intended to talk to you about. You can take it with you; I have finished it. Come next week and tell me what you think of it.”

As Esther walked down the path, Myrtilla watched her, and, as she passed out of the gate, waved her a final kiss of parting, and turned indoors. There seemed something ever so sad about her dainty back as it disappeared into the doorway.

“Poor little woman!” said Esther to herself, as she looked to see the title of the book she was carrying. It included a curious Russian name, the correct pronunciation of which she foresaw she must ask Myrtilla on their next meeting. It was “The Journal of Marie Bashkirtseff.”



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CHAPTER VIII

A RHAPSODY OF TYRE

Sidon, the stage of the moving events so far recorded, though it makes much of possessing a separate importance, is really a cross-river residential suburb of Tyre, the great seaport in which all the ships of the world come to and fro. During the day Sidon is virtually emptied of its men-folk, and is given up to perambulators and feminine activities generally; for the men have streamed across the ferries that bridge the sunny, boisterous river, to the docks and offices of Tyre.

Though Tyre is not a very old city, it is not so new as to be denied a few of those associations known as "historical." Tyre had once the honour to be taken by Prince Rupert, and long before that its nucleus had existed as a monk's ferry, by which travellers were rowed across the river to the monastery and posting-house at Sidon. Sometimes of an evening Henry and Mike would think of those far-off times as they looked over the ferry-boat at the long lines of river lights, with their restless heaving reflections; and sometimes they could picture to themselves the green sloping banks of the virgin fields, and hear the priory bell calling to them out of the darkness. But such were the faintest of their visions; and they loved the river banks best as they are to-day, with their Egyptian walls and swarming lights and tangled ships.

And whoso should think that that sordid commercial city, given up to all the prose of trade day by day, is not a poet at heart, has never seen her strange smile at evening when the shops are shut, and the offices empty, and the men who know her not gone home. For then across the crowded roofs softly comes a strange sweetness, and deep down among the gloomy wynds of deserted warehouses, still as temples, sudden fairies of sunset dance and dazzle, and touch the grimy walls with soft hands. In lonely back rooms, full of desks and dust, haunted lights of evening stand like splendid apparitions; and sometimes, if you lingered at the top of High Street, beneath the dark old church, and the moon was out on the left of the steeple and the sunset dying on the right, dying beyond the tangled masts and fading from the river, you would forget you were a city clerk, and you would wonder why the world was so beautiful, why the moon was made of pearl, and what it was that called to you out of yonder golden sea; and your heart would fill with a strange gladness, and you would call back to those unearthly voices, "I am yours, yours, all yours!"

Thus would this town of bales and merchants, of office-desks and stools, make poets at evening that she might stone them at noon. For, of course, she would have forgotten it all in the morning; and it were well not to remind her with your dreaming eyes of her last night's softness. She will look back at you with stony misunderstanding, and her new lover Reality will sharply box your ears.



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It is no use reminding the Exchange that it looked like a scene from Romeo and Juliet in the moonlight. It dare not admit it. But wait patiently till the evening. Tyre will be yours again with the sunset. She pretends all day that it is the Mayor in the gilded coach and the pury merchantmen she cares for; but it is really you, a poor shabby poet, she loves all the time, for you only does she wear her gauzy silks at evening!

CHAPTER IX

A PENITENTIARY OF THE MATHEMATICS

Yes, Mike was some day to be another Kean, and Henry was to prove a serious rival to Shakespeare; but, meanwhile, they were clerks in the offices of Tyre.

Of the rigours, and therefore too the truancies and humours of the lot official, Mike was comparatively so comfortably circumstanced as to have little knowledge. His father was the king of a little flourishing prison of desks, and Mike was one of the heirs-apparent. Consequently, his lot, though dull, was seldom bitter; and many mitigations of it were within his privilege. With Henry it was different. He was a humble unit among twenty other slaves, chained to that modern substitute for the galleys, the desk; and, in a wicked bargain, he had contracted to give his life-blood from nine in the morning till six in the evening, for sixty pounds a year, with an occasional "rise," which, after thirty years' service, might end in your having reached a proud annual three hundred for the rest of your maimed and narrowed days.

Henry had come to the office straight from school, at the age of sixteen; and, though classrooms breathe an air sufficiently frigid and suggestive of inhuman interests and unmeaning discipline, the icy air of that office had at first almost taken his breath. The place was so ridiculously serious! There might conceivably be interests in the world worthy of so abject an absorption, so bleaching an obeisance of the individual; but Henry, with the dews of certain classics still upon him, remembered that anything really Olympian in its importance is always strong enough to smile. It is a lesser strength that must make the muscular effort of severity. True dignities, as often as possible, stand at ease. But here indeed were no true strengths and dignities,—only prison-strengths and prison-dignities. Here the majesties, the occupations, the offences, were alike frivolities, fantastically changed about into solemnities.

That first impression of abject bowed heads and chains rattled beneath desks, was roughly correct. For all that was human in a man, this was a prison. These men who bent over foolish papers were evidently convicts of the most desperate character; so, at all events, you would judge when occasionally one or other of the prison-governors, known as "partners," passed among them with the lash of his eye. Such faint human twittering as may have grown up amongst even these poor exiles would suddenly die

into a silence white with fear, as when the shadow of a hawk falls across the song of smaller birds.



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No human relations are acknowledged here. Outside, you may be a husband wonderfully beloved and tragically important; you may be a man whose courage has been medalled your brave breast; you may be a passionate and subtle musician in your private hours; you may even on Sundays be a much appreciated vessel of the divine: but all such distinctions are not current here; here they are foreign coin, diplomas unacknowledged in this barbarous realm of ink and steel. The more ignorant, the more narrow, the more mean, the more unnatural, you can contrive to be, the better will be your lot in this sad monastery of Mammon. When the door hissed behind you, with that little patent pneumatic device, you ceased to be a human being, and began to be—the human machine. All the vitality you have stored within that pale body you are expected to exhaust here,—you have sold it, don't you remember, for sixty or three hundred pounds a year; you are not expected to have any left over for pleasures. That will be robbery. Masters suffer much from peculation indeed in this way; but a machine is in course of invention which shall put an end to this, by the application of which to your heart the task-master will know whether or not you have spent every available heart-beat in his slavery during the day, or whether you are endeavouring, you miserable thief, to steal home with a little remnant of it for your children at night.

This was the theory of the office, as Henry once heard it expressed, with a cynicism more brief and direct from the lips of one of his task-masters; but it must be admitted that in certain respects his experience was extreme. There are offices which are the ears and eyes of activities absorbingly and even romantically human. To be in a shipping-office is not perhaps to be the rose, but it is to live near it,—the great rose of the sea. You are, so to say, a land-sailor, a supercargo left on shore. Your office-windows are lashed with hurricanes; your talk is frequently of cyclones. The names of far romantic isles are constantly on your lips, and your bills of lading are threepenny romances in themselves. Strange produce of distant lands are your daily concern, and the four winds meet at your counter with a savour of tar. For all you know, a pirate may claim your attention any minute of the day.

Or, again, to be, say, in a corn-merchant's, a clearing-house of the fruitful earth. There at your telephone you may hear the corn-fields whispering to you, hear the wheat waving in the wind, and the thin chatter of oats. Or you may sell butter and cheese in an office that smells of farms. However removed, you are an indirect agent of the earth, a humble go-between of the seasons and the eternal needs of man.



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Or, once more, you may be one of the thousand clerks of a great manufacturer, and be humbly related to one of the arts or crafts that gladden the eye or add to the comforts of man. Or even, though you may be denied so close an association with the elements, or the arts, you may be the pen to some subtle legal confidante of human nature. Your office may be stored with records of human perversity and whimsicality. You may be the witness to fantastic wills, or assist in the administration of the estates of lunatics. At all events, you will come within hearing of the human passions. Misers will visit you at times, and beautiful ladies in mourning deep as their distress; and from your desk you will catch a glimpse of the sombre pageantry of litigious man.

Though it is true that a certain far-off flavour of these legal excitements occasionally enlivened the business to which Henry had been sacrificially indentured, for the most part it was an abstract parasitical thing which had succeeded in persuading other businesses, more directly fed from the human spring, of its obliging usefulness in relieving them of detachable burdens. In fact, it had no activity or interest of its own to account for, so it proposed, in default of any such original reason for existence, to look after the accounts of others, as a self-constituted body of financial police. For those engaged in it, except those who had been born mentally deformed, or those who had become unnaturally perverted by long usage, it was a sort of penitentiary of the mathematics.

CHAPTER X

THE GRASS BETWEEN THE FLAG-STONES

Yes, it was a curiously unreal world; and, for the first day or two, as Henry, bent, lonely and bewildered, over his desk, studied it furtively with questioning eyes, it seemed to him as though he had strayed into some asylum for the insane, where fantastic interests and mock honours take the place of the real interests and honours of sane human beings.

Part of the business of the firm consisted in the collection of house-rents, frequently entailing visits from tenants and questions of repairs. A certain Mr. Smith, a wiry little grey-headed man, with a keen face and a decisive manner, looked after this branch; and the gusto with which he did it was one of Henry's earliest and most instructive amazements. House-repairs were quite evidently his poetry, and he never seemed so happy as when passionately wrangling with a tenant on some question of drains. The words "cesspool" and "wet-trap"—words to which I don't pretend to attach any meaning—seemed to be particular favourites of his. In fact, an hour seldom passed without their falling from his lips. But Mr. Smith's great opportunity was a gale. For that always meant an exciting harvest of dislodged chimney-pots, flying slates, and smashed skylights, which would impart an energetic interest to his life for days.



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Again, in Henry's department—for the office was cut into two halves, with about ten clerks in each, the partners having, of course, their own private offices, from which they might dart out at any moment—there was a certain little fussy chief clerk who was obviously a person of very mysterious importance. He was frequently away, evidently on missions of great moment, for always on his return he would be closeted immediately with one or other of the partners, who in turn seemed to consider him important too, and would sometimes treat him almost like one of themselves, actually condescending to laugh with him now and again over some joke, evidently as mysterious as all the rest. This Mr. Perkins seldom noticed the juniors in his department, though occasionally he would select one of them to accompany him on one of his missions to clients of the firm; and they would start off together, as you may see a plumber and his apprentice sometimes in the streets,—the proud master-plumber in front, and the little apprentice plumber behind, carrying the lead pipe and the iron smelting-pot.

Now, did Mr. Smith really take such a heart-interest in cesspools and wet-traps as he appeared to do? and did Mr. Perkins really think he mattered all that?

These were two of the earliest questions which Henry asked himself, and as time brought the answers to them, and kindred questions, there were unexpected elements of comfort for the heart of the boy, longing so desperately in that barren place for any hint of the human touch. One day Mr. Smith startled him by mentioning Dickens, and even Charles Lamb. It was a kindly recognition of Mesurier's rumoured interest in literature. Henry looked at him in amazement. "Oh, you read then!" he exclaimed. Of anything so human as reading he had suspected no one in that office.

Then as to the great Mr. Perkins, the time came when he was to prove very human indeed. For, dying suddenly one day, his various work had to pass into other hands; and, bit by bit, it began to leak out that those missions had not been so industriously devoted to the interests of the firm, nor been so carefully executed, as had been imagined. For Mr. Perkins, it transpired, had been fond of his pleasures, could appreciate wine, and liked an occasional informal holiday. So, posthumously, he began to wear for Henry a faint halo of humanity.

Indeed, it did not take Henry many days to realise that, as grass will force its way even between the flag-stones in a prison-yard, no little humanity contrived to support its existence even in this dead place. By degrees, he realised that these apparently colourless and frigid figures about him had each their separate individuality, engaging or otherwise; that their interests were by no means centred on the dull pages before them; and that, for the most part, they were very much in a like case with himself. Although thus immured from the world of realities, they still maintained, in vigorous activity, many healthy outdoor interests, and were quite keen in their enthusiasm for, and remarkably instructed in, the latest developments of horse-racing, football, and prize-fighting.

Likewise, they had retained an astonishingly fresh and unimpaired interest in women, and still enjoyed the simple earth-born pleasures of the glass and the pipe.



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As he understood this, Henry began to feel more at home; and, as the characters of his associates revealed themselves, he began to see that there were amongst them several pleasant and indeed merry fellows, and that, after all, fortune might have thrown him into much worse company. They, on their side, making like discoveries in him, he presently found himself admitted to their freemasonry, and initiated into their many secret ways of mitigating their lot, and shortening their long days. Thus, this chill, stern world of automata, which, on first sight, looked as if no human word or smile or jest could escape the detection of its iron laws, revealed, when you were once inside it, an under-world of pleasant escapes and exciting truantries, of which, as you grew accustomed to the risks and general conditions of the life, you were able skilfully to avail yourself.

The main principle of these was to seem to spend twice as much time on each task as it needed, that you might have the other half for such private uses as were within your reach,—to elongate dinner-hours at both ends so adroitly, and on such carefully selected propitious occasions, that the elongation, or at least the whole extent of it, would pass unobserved; and, in general, to gain time, any waste ends of five minutes or quarter hours, on all possible occasions. If the reader calls this shirking and robbery, he must. Technically, no doubt, it was; but these clerks, without so formulating it, merely exercised the right of all oppressed beings liberally to interpret to their own advantage, where possible, the terms of an unjust contract which grinding economic conditions had compelled them to make. They had been forced to promise too much in exchange for too little, and they equalised the disparity where they could.

Whether they spent the time thus hoarded in a profitable fashion, is a question of personal definition. It was usually expended in companies of twos or threes, with a pipe and a pot of beer and much spirited talk, in the warm corners of adjacent taverns; and, so long as you don't drink too much, there has perhaps been invented none pleasanter than that old-fashioned way of spending an hour. Certainly, it was the way for ale to taste good, and a pipe to seem the most satisfying of all earthly consolations. It was almost worth the bondage to enjoy the keen relish of the escape.

By degrees, though the youngest there, Henry came to be allowed a certain leadership in these sorties of the human element. He made it his business to stimulate these unthrifty instincts, and to fan the welcome sparks of natural idleness; and so successfully that at times there seemed to have entered with him into that gloomy place a certain Bacchic influence, which now and again would prompt his comrades to such daring clutches of animated release, that the spirit of it even pervaded the penetralia of the senior partner's office, with the result that some mishap of truancy



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would undo the genial work of months, and precipitate upon them for a while the rigours of a ten-fold discipline. It was after such an occasion that, in writing to James Mesurier as to the progress of his son, old Mr. Septimus Lingard had paid Henry one of the proudest compliments of his young days. "I fear that we shall make little of your son Henry," he wrote. "His head seems full of literature, and he is so idle that he is demoralising the whole office."

It took Henry more than a year to win that testimonial; but the odds had been so great against him that the wonder is he was ever able to win it at all. Mr. Lingard wrote "demoralise." It was his way of saying "humanise."

CHAPTER XI

HUMANITY IN HIGH PLACES

One day, however, Henry was to make the still more surprising discovery, that not only were the clerks human beings, but that one of the partners—only one of them—was also human. He made this discovery about the senior partner, whose old-world figure and quaint name, Septimus Searle Lingard, had, in spite of his severity, attracted him by a certain musty distinction.

A stranger figure than Septimus Searle Lingard has seldom walked the streets of any town. Though not actually much over sixty, you would have said he must be a thousand; his abnormally long, narrow, shaven face was so thin and gaunt and hollowed, and his tall, upright figure was so painfully fragile, that his black broadcloth seemed almost too heavy for the worn frame inside it. And nothing in the world else was ever so piercingly solemn as his keen weary old eyes. With his tall silk hat, his thin white hair, his long white face, long black frock-coat, and black trousers, he looked for all the world like a distinguished skeleton. Henry could never be quite sure whether he was to be classed as a "character," or as a genuine personality. One thing was certain, that, sometime or other, or many times, in his life he had done something, or many things, which had won for him a respect as deep as his solemnity of aspect; and certainly, if gravity of demeanour goes for anything, all the owls of all the ages in collaboration could not have produced an expression of time-honoured wisdom so convincing. Sometimes his old lantern-jaws would emit an uncanny cackle of a laugh, and a ghastly flicker of humour play across his parchment features; but these only deepened the general sense of solemnity, as the hoot of a night-bird deepens the loneliness of some desolate hollow among the hills.

It was this strange old ghost of a man that was to be the next to turn human, and it came about like this. Right away at the top of the building was a lonely room where the

sun never shone, in which were stored away the old account-books, diaries, and various dead-and-done-with documents of the firm; and here too was deposited, from time to time, various wreckage of the same kind from other businesses whose last offices had been done by the firm, and whose records were still preserved, in the unlikely event of any chance resurrection of claim upon, or interest in, their long forgotten names.



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Here crumbled the last relics of many an ambitious enterprise,—great ledgers, with their covers still fresh, lay like slabs, from which, if you wiped away the dust, the gilded names of foundered companies would flash as from gaudy tombstones; letter-books bursting with letters that no eye would read again so long as the world lasted; yellow title-deeds from which all the virtue had long since exhaled, and to which no dangling of enormous seals could any longer lend a convincing air of importance. Here everything was dead and dusty as an old shoe. The dry bones in the valley of Askelon were as children skipping in the morning sun compared with the dusty death that mouldered and mouldered in this lonely locked-up room,—this catacomb of dead businesses.

It was seldom necessary to visit this room; but occasionally Henry would find an excuse to loiter an hour there, for there was a certain dreary romance about the place, and the almost choking smell of old leather seemed to promise all sorts of buried secrets. It cannot be said that the place ever adequately gratified the sense of mystery it excited; but, after all, to excite the sense of mystery is perhaps better than to gratify it, and, considering its poor material, this room was quite a clever old mysteriarch.

One day, however, Henry came upon some writing that did greatly interest him, though it was almost contemporary. It was old Mr. Septimus Lingard's diary for the year preceding, which he had got hold of,—not his private diary, but the entirely public official diary in which he kept account of the division of his days among his various clients—for the most part an unexciting record. But at the end of the book, on one of the general memoranda pages, Henry noticed a square block of writing which, to his surprise, proved to be a long quotation from a book which the old man had been reading,—on the Immortality of the soul!

Had old Mr. Septimus Lingard a soul too, a soul that troubled him maybe, a soul that had its moving memories, and its immortal aspirations? Yes, somewhere hidden in that strange legal document of a body, there was evidently a soul. Mr. Lingard had a soul!

But wait a moment, here was an addition of the old man's own! The passage quoted had been of death and its possible significance, and it was just a sigh, a fear, the old man had breathed after it: *How high has the winding-sheet encompassed my own bosom!*

Solemn as were the words in themselves, they seemed doubly so in that lonely room; and Henry was glad to lock the door and return to the comparatively living world downstairs. But from that moment old Mr. Lingard was transfigured in his eyes. Beneath all the sternness of his exterior, the grimness of the business interests which seemed to absorb him, Henry had discovered the blessed human spring. And he came too to wear a certain pathos and sanctity in Henry's eyes, as he remembered how old a



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man he was, and that secretly all this time, while he seemed so busy with this public company and another, he was quietly preparing to die. From this moment tasks done for him came to have a certain joy in them. For his sake, as it were, he began to understand how you might take a pride in doing well something that, in your opinion, was not worth doing; and one day when the old man, well satisfied with some work he had done, patted him kindly on the back and said, "We'll make a business man of you after all!" the tears started to his eyes, and for a moment he almost hoped that they would.

CHAPTER XII

DAMON AND PYTHIAS

By an odd coincidence, the night which had seen Henry and Esther confront their father, had seen, in another household in which the young people counted another member of their secret society of youth, a similar but even less seemly clash between the generations. Ned Hazell would be a poet too, and a painter as well, and perhaps a romantic actor; but his father's tastes for his son's future lay in none of these directions, and Ned was for the present in cotton. Now the elder Mr. Hazell was a man of violently convivial habits, and the *bonhomie*, with which he was accustomed to enliven bar-parlours up till eleven of an evening, was apt to suffer a certain ungenial transformation as he reached his own front door. There the wit would fail upon his lips, the twinkle die out of his glance, and an unaccountable ferocity towards the household that was waiting up for him take their place. When possible, he would fix upon some trivial reason to give an air of plausibility to this curious change in him; but if that were not forthcoming, he would, it appeared, fly into a violent rage for just that very reason.

However, on this particular night, Heaven had provided him with an heroic occasion. His son, he discovered, was for once out later than his father. In what haunt of vice, or low place of drinking, he was at the moment ensnared, no one better than his father could imagine. The opportunity was one not to be missed. The outraged parent at last realised that he had borne with him long enough, borne long enough with his folderols of art and nonsense; and so determined was he on the instant that he would have no more of it, that, with a quite remarkable energy, he had thereupon repaired to his son's room, opened the window, and begun vigorously to throw his pretty editions, his dainty water-colours, his drawers full of letters, his cast of the Venus of Milo, out on to the lawn, upon which at the moment a heavy rain was also falling.

In the very whirlwind of his righteous vandalism his son had returned, and, being a muscular, hot-blooded lad, had taken his father by the throat, called him a drunken beast, and hurled him to the floor, where he pinned him down with a knee on his chest,

and might conceivably have made an end of him, but for the interference of mother and sisters, who succeeded at last in getting the dazed and somewhat sobered parent to bed.



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Having raked together from the sodden *debris* beneath his window some disfigured remains of his poor treasures, Ned Hazell had left the house in the early hours of the morning, in good earnest for ever.

When he confided the excitements of the night to Henry at lunch next day, and heard in return his friend's news, nothing could be more plain than that they should set up lodgings together; and it was, therefore, to the rooms of which Ned was already in possession that Henry's cab had toppled with his various belongings, after those tearful farewells at his father's door. Esther followed presently to help make the place straight and dainty for the two boys, and having left them, late that evening, with flowers in all the jars, and the curtains as they should be, they were fairly launched on their new life together.

In Mike Henry had a staunch friend and an admirer against all comers, and in Henry Mike had a friend and admirer no less loyal; but their friendship was one for which an on-looker might have found it less easy to give reasons than for that of Henry and Ned. Mike and Henry loved each other, it would appear, less for any correspondence in dispositions or tastes, as just because they were Mike and Henry. Right away down in their natures there was evidently some central affinity which operated even in spite of surface contradictions. There was much of this intrinsic quality in the affection of Henry and Ned also, but it was much more to be accounted for by evident mutual sympathies. It was largely the impassioned fellowship of two craftsmen in love with the same art. Both had their literary ambitions; but, irrespective of those, they both loved poetry. Yes, how they loved it! Ned was perhaps particularly a born appreciator; and it was worth seeing how the tears would come into his fine eyes, as his voice shook with tenderness over a fine phrase or a noble passage. They had discovered some of the most thrilling things in English literature together, at that impressionable age when such things mean most to us. Together they had read Keats for the first wonderful time; together learned Shakespeare's Sonnets by heart; together rolled out over tavern-tables the sumptuous cadences of De Quincey. Wonderful indeed, and never to be forgotten, were those evenings when, the day at last over, they would leave their offices behind them, and, while the sunset was turning the buildings of Tyre into enchanted towers, and a clemency of release breathed upon its streets, steal to the quiet corner of their favourite tavern; to drink port and share their last new author, or their own latest rhymes, and then to emerge again, with high calm hearts and eloquent eyes, beneath the splendid stars.

All the arts within their reach they thus shared together,—pictures, music, theatres,—in a fine comradeship. Together they had bravoed the great tragedians, and together hopelessly worshipped the beautiful faces, enskied and sainted, of famous actresses. In fact, they were the Damon and Pythias of Tyre.



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CHAPTER XIII

DAMON AND PYTHIAS AT THE THEATRE

Once, long before the beginning of this story, Damon and Pythias were sitting in a theatre together, with the wonderful overture just beginning to steal through their senses.

Ah, violins, whither would you take their souls? You call to them like the voice of one waiting by the sea, bathed in sunset. What are these wonderful things you are whispering to their souls? You promise—ah, what things you promise, strange voices of the string!

Oh, sirens, have pity! Their hearts are pure, their bodies sweet as apples. Oh, be faithful, betray them not, beautiful voices of the wondrous world!

The overture had succeeded. Their souls had followed it over the footlights, and, floating in the limelight, shone there awaiting the fulfilment of the promise.

The play was "Pygmalion and Galatea," and at the appearance of Galatea they knew that the overture had not lied. There, in dazzling white flesh, was all it had promised; and when she called "Pyg-ma-lion!" how their hearts thumped!—for they knew it was really them she was calling.

"Pyg-ma-lion! Pyg-ma-lion!"

It was as though Cleopatra called them from the tomb.

Their hands met. They could hear each other's blood singing. And was not the play itself an allegory of their coming lives? Did not Galatea symbolise all the sleeping beauty of the world that was to awaken, warm and fragrant, at the kiss of their youth? And somewhere, too, shrouded in enchanted quiet, such a white white woman waited for their kiss. In a vision they saw life like the treasure cave of the Arabian thief; and they said to their beating hearts that they had the secret of the magic word, that the "open Sesame" was youth.

No fall of the curtain could hide the vision from their young eyes. It transfigured the faces of their fellow-playgoers, crowding from the pit; it made another stage of the embers of the sunset, a distant bridge of silver far down the street. Then they took it with them to the tavern; and to write of the solemn libations of that night would be to laugh or cry. Only youth can be so radiantly ridiculous.



They had found their own corner. Turning down the gas, the fire played at day and night with their faces. Imagine them in one of the flashes, solemnly raising their glasses, hands clasped across the table, earnest gleaming eyes holding each other above it.

“Old man, some day, somewhere, a woman like that!”

But there was still a sequel. At home at last and in bed, how could Damon sleep! It seemed as if he had got into a rosy sunset cloud in mistake for his bed. The candle was out, and yet the room was full of rolling light.



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It was no use; he must get up. So, striking a light, he was presently deep in the composition of a fiery sonnet. It was evidently that which had caused all the phosphorescence. But a sonnet is a mere pill-box; it holds nothing. A mere cockle-shell,—and, oh, the raging sea it could not hold! Besides being confessedly an art-form, duly licenced to lie, it was apt to be misunderstood. It could not say in plain words, “Meet me at the pier to-morrow at three in the afternoon;” it could make no assignation nearer than the Isles of the Blest, “after life’s fitful fever.” Therefore, it seemed well to add a postscript to that effect in prose.

But then, how was she to receive it? There was nothing to be hoped from the post, and Damon’s home in Sidon was three miles from the ferry. Likewise, it was now nearing three in the morning. Just time to catch the half-past three boat, run up to the theatre, a mile away, and meet the return boat. So down, down through the creaking house, carefully, as though he were a Jason picking his way among the coils of the sleeping dragon; and soon he was shooting through the phantom streets, like Mercury on a message through Hades.

At last the river came in sight, growing slate-colour in the earliest dawn. He could see the boat nuzzling up against the pier, and snoring in its sleep. He said to himself that this was Styx and the fare an obolus. As he jumped on board, with hot face and hotter heart, Charon clicked his signal to the engines; the boat slowly snuffled itself half awake, and shoved out into the sleepy water.

As they crossed, the light grew, and the gas-lamps of Tyre beacons with fading gleam. Overhead began a restlessness in the clouds, as of a giant drowsily shuffling off some of his bedclothes; but as yet he slept, and only the silver bosom of his spouse, the moon, was uncovered.

When they landed, the streets of Tyre were already light, but empty, as though they had got up early to meet some one who had not arrived. Damon sped through them like a sea-gull that has the harbour to itself, and was not long in reaching the theatre. How desolate the play-bills looked that had been so companionable but three or four hours before! And there was her photograph! Surely it was an omen.

“Ah, my angel! See, I am bringing you my heart in a song. ‘All my heart in this my singing!’”

He dropped the letter into the box; but, as he turned away, momentarily glancing up the long street, he caught sight of an approaching figure that could hardly be mistaken. Good Heavens! it was Pythias, and he too was carrying a letter.

CHAPTER XIV

CONTRIBUTIONS TOWARDS A GENEALOGY

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The egregious Miss Bashkirtseff did not greatly fascinate Esther. Her egotism was too hard, too self-bounded, even for egotism, and there was generally about her a lack of sympathy. Her passion for fame had something provincial in its eagerness, and her broadest ideals seemed to become limited by her very anxiety to compass them. Even her love of art seemed a form of snobbery. In all these young Mesuriers there was implicit,—partly as a bye-product of the sense of humour, and partly as an unconscious mysticism,—a surprising instinct for allowing the successes of this world their proper value and no more. Even Esther, who was perhaps the most worldly of them all, and whose ambitions were largely social, as became a bonny girl whom nature had marked out to be popular, and on whom, some day when Mike was a great actor,—and had a theatre of his own!—would devolve the cares of populous “at home” days, bright after-the-performance suppers, and all the various diplomacies of the popular wife of fame,—even Esther, however brilliant her life might become, would never for a moment imagine that such success was a thing worth winning, at the expense of the smallest loss to such human realities as the affection she felt for Mike and Henry. To love some one well and faithfully, to be one of a little circle vowed to eternal fidelity one to the other,—such was the initial success of these young lives; and it was to make them all their days safe from the dangers of more meretricious successes.

All the same, though the chief performer in Marie Bashkirtseff’s “Confessions” interested her but little, the stage on which for a little while she had scolded and whimpered did interest her—for should it not have been her stage too, and Henry’s stage, and Dot’s stage, father’s and mother’s stage too? You had only to look at father to realise that nature had really meant him for the great stage; here in Sidon, what was he but a god in exile, bending great powers and a splendid character upon ridiculously unimportant interests? Indeed, was not his destiny, more or less, their destiny as a family? Henry would escape from it through literature, and she through Mike. But what of Dot, what of Mat, not yet to speak of “the children”?

All she envied Marie Bashkirtseff was her opportunity. Great Goddess Opportunity! So much had come to Marie in the cradle, and came daily to a hundred thousand insignificant aristocratic babes, to approach which for the Mesuriers, even ten years too late, meant convulsions of the home, and to attain which in any satisfactory degree was probably impossible. French, for example, and music! Why, if so disposed, Marie Bashkirtseff might have read old French romances at ten, and to play Chopin at an earlier age was not surprising in the opportunitied, so-called “aristocratic” infant. Oh, why had they not been born like the other Sidonians, whose natures and ideals had been mercifully calculated to the meridian of Sidon!



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Why didn't they think the Proudfoots and the Wilkinsons and the Wagstaffs, and other local nobody-somebodies, people of importance, and why did they think the mayor a ludicrous upstart, and the adjacent J.P. a sententious old idiot? Far better to have rested content in that state of life to which God had called them. To talk French, or to play Chopin! What did it matter? In one sense nothing, but in another it mattered like other convenient facilities of life. To the immortal soul it mattered nothing, but to the mortal social unit it made life the easier, made the passage of ideas, the intercourse of individualities, the readier, and, in general, facilitated spiritual and intellectual, as well as social, communication. To be first-rate in your instincts, in all your fibres, and third-rate in your opportunities,—that was a bitter indignity of circumstance.

This sub-conscious sense of aristocracy—it must be observed, lest it should have been insufficiently implied—was almost humorously dissociated in the minds of the young Mesuriers from any recorded family distinctions. In so far as it was conscious, it was defiantly independent of genealogy. Had the Mesuriers possessed a coat-of-arms, James Mesurier would probably have kept it locked up as a frivolity to be ashamed of, for it was a part of his Puritanism that such earthly distinctions were foolishness with God; but, as a matter of fact, between Adam and the immediate great-grandparents of the young Mesuriers, there was a void which the Herald's office would have found a difficulty in filling. This it never occurred to them to mind in the least.

It was one of Henry's deep-sunken maxims that "a distinguished product implied a distinguished process," and that, at all events, the genealogical process was only illustratively important. It would have been interesting to know how they, the Mesuriers, came to be what they were. In the dark night of their history a family portrait or two, or an occasional reference in history, would have been an entertaining illumination—but, such not being forthcoming, they were, documentally, so much the less indebted to their progenitors. Yet if they had only been able to claim some ancestor with a wig and a degree for the humanities, or some beautiful ancestress with a romantic reputation! One's own present is so much more interesting for developing, or even repeating, some one else's past. And yet how much better it was to be as they were, than as most scions of aristocratic lineage, whose present was so often nothing and their past everything. How humiliating to be so pathetically inadequate an outcome of such long and elaborate preparation,—the mouse of a genealogical mountain! Yes, it was immeasurably more satisfactory to one's self-respect to be Something out of Nothing, than Nothing out of Everything. Here so little had made so much; here so much had made—hardly even a lord. It was better for your circumstances to be inadequate for you, than you to be inadequate for your circumstances.



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Henry had amused himself one day in making a list of all their “ancestors” to whom any sort of worldly or romantic distinction could attach, and it ran somewhat as follows:—

(1) A great-grandmother on the father’s side, fabled to live in some sort of a farm-house chateau in Guernsey, who once a year, up till two years ago, when she died, had sent them a hamper of apples from Channel Island orchards. Said “chateau” believed by his children to descend to James Mesurier, but the latter indifferent to the matter, and relatives on the spot probably able to look after it.

(2) A great-grandfather on the mother’s side given to travel, a “rolling-stone,” fond of books and talk, and rich in humanity. Surviving still in a high-nosed old silhouette.

(3) A grand-uncle on the father’s side who was one of Napoleon’s guard at St. Helena!

(4) A grandfather on the mother’s side, who used to design and engrave little wooden blocks for patterns on calico-stuffs, and whose little box of delicate instruments, evidently made for the tracing of lines and flowers, was one of the few family heirlooms.

(5) A grandmother on the father’s side of whom nothing was known beyond the beautiful fact that she was Irish.

(6) A grandfather on the father’s side who was a sea-captain, sailing his own ship (barque “the Lucretia”) to the West Indies, and who died of yellow fever, and was buried, in the odour of romance, on the Isthmus of Panama.

(7) An uncle who had also been a sea-captain, and who, in rescuing a wrecked crew from an Australian reef, was himself capsized, and after a long swim finally eaten by a shark,—said shark being captured next day, and found to contain his head entire, two gold rings still in his ears, which he wore for near-sightedness, after the manner of common sailors, and one of which, after its strange vicissitudes, had found a resting-place in the secretaire of his brother, James Mesurier.

Such was the only accessible “ancestry” of the Mesuriers, and it is to be feared that the last state of the family was socially worse than the first. James Mesurier was unapproachably its present summit, its Alpine peak; and he was made to suffer for it no little by humble and impecunious relatives. Still, whatever else they lacked, Henry Mesurier loved to insist that these various connections were rich in character, one or two of them inexhaustible in humour; and their rare and somewhat timorous visits to the castle of their exalted relative, James Mesurier, were occasions of much mirthful embarrassment to the young people. Here the reader is requested to excuse a brief parenthetical chapter by way of illustration, which, if he pleases, he may skip without any loss of continuity in the narrative, or the least offence in the world to the writer. This present chapter will be found continued in chapter sixteen.

CHAPTER XV



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MERELY A HUMBLE INTERRUPTION AND ILLUSTRATION OF THE LAST

Some peaceable afternoon when Mrs. Mesurier was enjoying a little doze on the parlour sofa, and her three elder daughters were snatching an hour or two from housework—they had already left school—for a little private reading, the drowsy house would suddenly be awakened by one loud wooden knock at the door.

“Now, whoever can that be!” the three girls would impatiently exclaim; and presently the maid would come to Miss Esther to say that there was an old man at the door asking for Mrs. Mesurier.

“What’s his name, Jane?”

“He wouldn’t give it, miss. He said it would be all right. Mrs. Mesurier would know him well enough.”

“Whoever can it be? What’s he like, Jane?”

“He looks like a workman, miss,—very old, and rather dotey.”

“Who can it be? Go and ask him his name again.”

Esther would then arouse her mother; and the maid would come in to say that at last the old man had been persuaded to confide his name as Clegg—Samuel Clegg.

“Tell the missus it’s Samuel Clegg,” the old man had said, with a certain amusing conceit. “She’ll be glad enough to see Samuel Clegg.”

“Why!” said Mrs. Mesurier, “it’s your father’s poor old uncle, Mr. Clegg. Now, girls, you mustn’t run away, but try and be nice to him. He’s a simple, good, old man.”

Mrs. Mesurier was no more interested in Mr. Clegg than her daughters; but she had a great fund of humanity, and an inexhaustible capacity for suffering bores brilliantly.

“Why, I never!” she would say, adapting her idiom to make the old man feel at home, as he was presently ushered in, chuntering and triumphant; “you don’t mean to say it’s Uncle Clegg. Well, we are glad to see you! I was just having a little nap, and so you must excuse my keeping you waiting.”

“Ay, Mary. It’s right nice of you to make me so welcome. I got a bit misdoubtful at the door, for the young maid seemed somehow a little frightened of me; but when I told the name it was all right. ‘Samuel Clegg,’ I said. ‘She’ll be glad enough to see Samuel Clegg,’ I said.”



“Glad indeed,” murmured Mrs. Mesurier, “I should think so. Find a chair for your uncle, Esther.”

“Ay, the name did it,” chuckled the old man, who as a matter of fact was anything but a humble old person, and to whom the bare fact of existence, and the name of Clegg, seemed warrant enough for thinking quite a lot of yourself.

“I’m afraid you don’t remember your old uncle,” said the old man to Esther, looking dimly round, and rather bewildered by the fine young ladies. Actually, he was only a remote courtesy uncle, having married their father’s mother’s sister.

“Oh, of course, Uncle Clegg,” said Esther, a true daughter of her mother; “but, you see, it’s a long time since we saw you.”

“And this is Dorcas. Come and kiss your uncle, Dorcas. And this is Matilda,” said Mrs. Mesurier.



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“Ay,” said the old man, “and you’re all growing up such fine young ladies. Deary me, Mary, but they must make you feel old.”

“We were just going to have some tea,” said Esther; “wouldn’t you like a cup, uncle?”

“I daresay your uncle would rather have a glass of beer,” said Mrs. Mesurier.

“Ay, you’re right there, Mary,” answered the old man, “right there. A glass of beer is good enough for Samuel Clegg. A glass of beer and some bread and cheese, as the old saying is, is good enough for a king; but bread and cheese and water isn’t fit for a beggar.”

All laughed obligingly; and the old man turned to a bulging pocket which had evidently been on his mind from his entrance.

“I’ve got a little present here from Esther,” he said,—“Esther” being the aunt after whom Mike’s Esther had been named,—bringing out a little newspaper parcel. “But I must tell you from the beginning.

“Well, you know, Mary,” he continued, “I was feeling rather low yesterday, and Esther said to me, ‘Why not take a day off to-morrow, Samuel, and see Mary, it’ll shake you up a bit, and I’ll be bound she’s right glad to see you?’ ‘Why, lass!’ I said, ‘it’s the very thing. See if I don’t go in the morning.’

“So this morning,” he continued, “she tidies me up—you know her way—and sends me off. But before I started, she said, ‘Here, Samuel, you must take this, with my love, to Mary.’ I’ve kept it wrapped up in this drawer for thirty years, and only the other day our Mary Elizabeth said, ‘Mother, you might give me that old jug. It would look nice in our little parlour.’” “But no!” I says, “Mary Elizabeth, if any one’s to have that jug, it’s your Aunt Mary.”

“How kind of her!” murmured Mrs. Mesurier, sympathetically.

“Yes, those were her words, Mary,” said the old man, unfolding the newspaper parcel, and revealing an ugly little jug of metallically glistening earthenware, such as were turned out with strange pride from certain English potteries about seventy years ago. It seemed made in imitation of metal,—a sort of earthenware pewter; and evidently it had been a great aesthetic treasure in the eyes of Mrs. Clegg. Mrs. Mesurier received it accordingly.

“How pretty,” she said, “and how kind of Aunt Esther! They don’t make such things nowadays.”

“No, it’s a vallyble relic,” said the old man; “but you’re worthy of it, Mary. I’d rather see you have it than any of them. My word, but I’m glad I’ve got it here safely. Esther would



never have forgiven me.' Now, Samuel,' she said, as I left, 'mind you get home before dark, and don't sit on the jug, whatever you do.'"

Meanwhile the "young ladies" were in imminent danger of convulsions; and, at that moment, further to enhance the situation, an old lady of the neighbourhood, who occasionally dropped in for a gossip, was announced. She was a prim little lady, with "Cranford" curls, and a certain old-world charm and old-world vanity about her, and very deaf. She too was a "character" in her way, but so different from old Mr. Clegg that the entertainment to be expected from their conjunction was irresistible even to anticipate.



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"This is Mr. Clegg, an uncle of Mr. Mesurier," said poor Mrs. Mesurier, by way of introduction.

"Howd'ye do, marm?" said Mr. Clegg, without rising.

Mrs. Turtle bowed primly. "Are you sure, my dear, I don't interrupt?" she said to Mrs. Mesurier; "shall I not call in some other day?"

"Oh, dear, no!" said Mrs. Mesurier. "Esther, get Mrs. Turtle a little whisky and water."

"Oh, my dear!" exclaimed Mrs. Turtle, "only the least little drop in the world, Esther dear. My heart, you know, my dear. Even so short a walk as this tires me out."

Mrs. Mesurier responded sympathetically; and then, by way of making himself pleasant, Mr. Clegg suddenly broke in with such an extraordinary amenity of old-world gallantry that everybody's hair stood on end.

"How old do you be?" he said, bowing to the new-comer.

"I beg your pardon," said Mrs. Turtle, putting her hand to her ear; "but I'm slightly deaf."

"How old do you be?" shouted the old man.

Though not unnaturally taken aback at such an unwonted conception of conversational intercourse, Mrs. Turtle recovered herself with considerable humour, and, bridling, with an old-world shake of her head, said,—

"What would you take me for?"

"I should say you were seventy, if you're a day," promptly answered the old man.

"Oh, dear, no!" replied Mrs. Turtle, with some pique; "I was only sixty last January."

"Well, you carry your age badly," retorted the old man, not to be beaten.

"What does he say, my dear?" said the poor old lady turning to Mrs. Mesurier.

"You carry your age badly," shouted the determined old man; "she should see our Esther, shouldn't she, Mary?"

The silence here of the young people was positively electric with suppressed laughter. Two of them escaped to explode in another room, and Esther and her mother were left to save the situation. But on such occasions as these Mrs. Mesurier grew positively great; and the manner in which she contrived to "turn the conversation," and smooth over the terrible hiatus, was a feat that admits of no worthy description.



Presently the old man rose to go, as the clock neared five. He had promised to be home before dark, and Esther would think him “benighted” if he should be late. He evidently had been to America and back in that short afternoon.

“Well, Mary, good-bye,” he said; “one never knows whether we shall meet again. I’m getting an old man.”

“Eh, Uncle Clegg, you’re worth twenty dead ones yet,” said Mrs. Mesurier, reassuringly.

“What a strange old gentleman!” said Mrs. Turtle, somewhat bewildered, as this family apparition left the room.

“Good-bye, Uncle Clegg,” Esther was heard singing in the hall. “Good-bye, be careful of the steps. Good-bye. Give our love to Aunt Esther.”

Then the door would bang, and the whole house breathe a gigantic sigh of humorous relief.



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(This was the kind of thing girls at home had to put up with!)

“Well, mother, did you ever see such a funny old person?” said Esther, on her return to the parlour.

“You mustn’t laugh at him,” Mrs. Mesurier would say, laughing herself; “he’s a good old man.”

“No doubt he’s good enough, mother dear; but he’s unmistakably funny,” Esther would reply, with a whimsical thought of the family tree. Yes, they were a distinguished race!

CHAPTER XVI

CHAPTER FOURTEEN CONCLUDED

No, the Mesuriers had absolutely nothing to hope for from their relations,—nothing to look back upon, less to look forward to. Most families, however poor and even *bourgeois*, had some memories to dignify them or some one possible contingency of pecuniary inheritance. At the very least, they had a ghost-story in the family. You seldom read the biographies of writers or artists without finding references, however remote, to at least one person of some distinction or substance. To have had even a curate for an ancestor, or a connection, would have been something, some frail link with gentility.

Now if, instead of being a rough old sea-captain of a trading ship, Grandfather Mesurier had only been a charming old white-headed admiral living in London, and glad, now and again, to welcome his little country granddaughters to stay with him! He would probably have been very dull, but then he would have looked distinguished, and taken one for walks in the Park, or bought one presents in the Burlington arcade. At least old admirals always seemed to serve this indulgent purpose in stories. At all events, he would have been something, some possible link with an existence of more generous opportunities. Dot and Mat would then at least have seen a nice boy or two occasionally, and in time got married as they deserved to be, and thus escape from this little provincial theatre of Sidon. Who could look at Dot and think that anything short of a miracle—a miracle like Esther’s own meeting with Mike—was going to find her a worthy mate in Sidon; and, suppose the miracle happened once more in her case, what of Mat and all the rest? To be the wife of a Sidonian town-councillor, at the highest,—what a fate!

Henry and she had often discussed this inadequate outlook for their younger sisters, quite in the manner of those whose positions of enlargement were practically achieved. The only thing to be done was for Henry to make haste to win a name as a writer, and Mike to make his fortune as an actor. Then another society would be at once opened to

them all. Yes, what wonders were to take place then, particularly when Mike had made his fortune!—for the financial prospects of the young people were mainly centred in him. Literature seldom made much money—except when it wasn't literature. Henry hoped to



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be too good a writer to hope to make money as well. But that would be a mere detail, when Mike was a flourishing manager; for when that had come about, had not Henry promised him that he would not be too proud to regard him as his patron to the extent of accepting from him an allowance of, say, a thousand a year. No, he positively wouldn't agree to more than a thousand; and Mike had to be content with his promising to take that.

Meanwhile, what could girls at home do, but watch and wait and make home as pretty as possible, and, by the aid of books and pictures, reflect as much light from a larger world into their lives as might be.

On Henry's going away, the three girls had promptly bespoken the reversion of his study as a little sitting-room for themselves. Here they concentrated their books, and some few pictures that appealed to tastes in revolt against Atlantic liners, but not yet developed to the appreciation of those true classics of art—to which indeed they had yet to be introduced. Such half-way masters as Leighton, Alma-Tadema, Sant, and Dicksee were as yet to them something of what Rossetti and Burne-Jones, and certain old Italian masters, were soon to become. In books, they had already learnt from Henry a truer, or at all events a more strenuous, taste; and they would grapple manfully with Carlyle and Browning, and presently Meredith, long before their lives had use or understanding for such tremendous nourishment.

One evening, as they were all three sitting cosily in Henry's study,—as they still faithfully called it,—Esther was reading "Pride and Prejudice" aloud, while Dot and Mat busied themselves respectively with "macrame" work and a tea-cosy against a coming bazaar. Esther's tasks in the house were somewhat illustrated by her part in the trio this evening. Her energies were mainly devoted to "the higher nights" of housekeeping, to the aesthetic activities of the home,—arranging flowers, dusting vases and pictures, and so on,—and the lightness of these employments was, it is to be admitted, an occasionally raised grievance among the sisters. To Dot and Mat fell much more arduous and manual spheres of labour. Yet all were none the less grateful for the decorative innovations which Esther, acting on occasional hints from her friend Myrtilla Williamson, was able to make; and if it were true that she hardly took her fair share of bed-making and pastry-cooking, it was equally undeniable that to her was due the introduction of Liberty silk curtains and cushions in two or three rooms. She too—alas, for the mistakes of young taste!—had also introduced painted tambourines, and swathed the lamps in wonderful turbans of puffed tissue paper. Was she to receive no credit for these services? Then it was she who had dared to do battle with her mother's somewhat old-fashioned taste in dress; and whenever the Mesurier sisters came out in something specially pretty or fashionable, it was due to Esther.



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Well, on this particular evening, she was, as we have said, taking her share in the housework by reading “Jane Austen” aloud to Dot and Mat; when the door suddenly opened, and James Mesurier stood there, a little aloof,—for it was seldom he entered this room, which perhaps had for him a certain painful association of his son’s rebellion. Perhaps, too, the picture of this happy little corner of his children—a world evidently so complete in itself, and daily developing more and more away from the parent world in the front parlour—gave him a certain pang of estrangement. Perhaps he too felt as he looked on them that same dreary sense of disintegration which had overtaken the mother on Henry’s departure; and perhaps there was something of that in his voice, as, looking at them with rather a sad smile, he said,—

“You look very comfortable here, children. I hope that’s a profitable book you are reading, Esther.”

“Oh, yes, father. It’s ‘Jane Austen,’ you know.”

“Well, I’m sorry to interrupt you, but I want a few words with Dorcas. She can join you again soon.”

So Dot, wondering what was in store for her, rose and accompanied her father to the front parlour, where Mrs. Mesurier was peacefully knitting in the lamplight.

“Dorcas, my dear,” he said, when the door was closed, “your mother and I have had a serious talk this evening on the subject of your joining the church. You are now nearly sixteen, and of an age to think for yourself in such matters; and we think it is time that you made some profession of your faith as a Christian before the world.”

The Church James Mesurier referred to was that branch of the English Nonconformists known as Baptists; and the profession of faith was the curious rite of baptism by complete immersion, the importance claimed for which by this sect is, perhaps, from a Christian point of view, made the less disproportionate by another condition attaching to it,—the condition that not till years of individual judgment have been reached is one eligible for the sacred rite. With that rationalism which religious sects are so skilful in applying to some unimportant point of ritual, and so careful not to apply to vital questions of dogma, the Baptists reasonably argue that to baptise an unthinking infant, and, by an external rite which has no significance except as the symbol of an internal decision, declare him a Christian, is nothing more than an idolatrous mummery. Wait till the child is of age to choose for him or herself, to understand the significance of the Christian revelation and the nature of the profession it is called upon to make; then if, by the grace of God, it chooses aright, let him or her be baptised. And for the manner of that baptism, if symbols are to be made use of by the Christian church,—and it is held wise among the Baptists to make use of few, and those the most central,—should they not be designed as nearly after the fashion set



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forth in the Bible itself as is possible? The “Ordinance” of the Lord’s Supper—as it is called amongst them—follows the procedure of the Last Supper as recorded in the Gospels; should not, therefore, the rite of baptism be in its details similarly faithful to authority? Now in Scripture, as is well known, baptisms were complete immersions, symbolic alike of the washing away of sin, and also of the dying to this world and the resurrection to the Life eternal in Christ Jesus.

So much theology was bred in the bone of all the young Mesuriers; and the youngest of them could as readily have capitulated these articles of belief as their father, who once more briefly summarised them to-night for the benefit of his daughter. He ended with something of a personal appeal. It had been one of the griefs of his life that Henry and Esther had both refused to join their father’s church, though Esther always dutifully attended it every Sunday morning; and it was thinking of them, though without naming them, that he said,—

“I met Mr. Trotter yesterday,”—Mr. Trotter was the local Baptist minister, and Dot remarked to herself that her father was able to pronounce his name without the smallest suspicion that such a name, as belonging to a minister of divine mysteries, was rather ludicrous, though indeed Baptist ministers seemed always to have names like that!—“and he asked me when some of my young ladies were going to join the church. I confess the question made me feel a little ashamed; for, you know, my dear, out of our large family not one of you has yet come forward as a Christian.”

“No, father,” said Dot, at last.

“I hope, my dear, you are not going to disappoint me in this matter.”

“No indeed, father,” said Dot, whose nature was pliable and sympathetic, as well as fundamentally religious; “but I’m afraid I haven’t thought quite as much about it as I should like to, and, if you don’t mind, I should like to have a few days to think it out.”

“Of course, my dear. That is a very right feeling; for the step is a solemn one, and should not be taken without reverent thought. You cannot do better than to talk it over with Mr. Trotter. If you have any difficulties, you can tell him; and I’m sure he would be delighted to help you. Isn’t it so, mother? Well, dear,” he continued, “you can run away now; but bear in mind what I have said, and I shall hope to hear that you have made the right choice before long. Kiss me, dear.”

And so, with something of a lump in her throat, Dot returned to the interrupted “Jane Austen.”

“Whatever did father want?” asked the two girls, looking up as she entered the room.



“What do you think?” said Dot. “He wants me to be baptised!”

CHAPTER XVII

DOT'S DECISION



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Now, in thus appealing to Dot, her father had appealed to just the one out of all his children who was least likely to disappoint him. To Dot and Henry had unmistakably been transmitted the largest share of their father's spirituality. Esther was not actively religious, any more than she was actively poetic. Hers was one of those composite, admirably balanced natures which include most qualities and faculties, but no one in excess of another. Such make those engaging good women of the world, who are able to understand and sympathise with the most diverse interests and temperaments; as it is the characteristic of a good critic to understand all those various products of art, which it would be impossible for him to create. Thus Esther could have delighted a saint with her sympathetic comprehension, as she could have healed the wounds of a sinner by her comprehensive sympathy; but it was certain she would never be, in sufficient excess, spiritually wrought or sensually rebellious to be one or the other. She was beautifully, buoyantly normal, with a happy, expansive, enjoying nature, glad in the sunlight, brave in the shadow, optimistically looking forward to blithe years of life and love with Mike and her friends, and not feeling the necessity of being anxious about her soul, or any other world but this. She was not shallow; but she merely realised life more through her intelligence than through her feelings. To have become a Baptist would have offended her intelligence, without bringing any satisfaction to spiritual instincts not, in any event, clamorous.

As for Henry, it was not only activity of intelligence, but activity of spirituality, that made it impossible for him to embrace any such narrow creed as that proposed to him; and, for the present, that spiritual activity found ample scope for itself in poetry.

Dot's, however, was an intermediate case. With an intelligence active too, she united a spirituality torturingly intense, but for which she had no such natural creative outlet as Henry. With her loss of the old creed,—in discarding which these three sisters had followed the lead of their brother with a curious instinctiveness, almost, it would seem, independent of reasoning,—her spirituality had been left somewhat bleakly houseless, and she had often longed for some compromise by which she could reconcile her intelligence to the acceptance of some established home of faith, whose kindly enclosing walls should be more genially habitable to the soul than the cold, star-lit spaces which Henry declared to be sufficient temple.

Perhaps Esther's commiseration of her sisters' narrow opportunities was, so far as it related to Dot, a little unnecessary, for indeed Dot's ambitions were not social. By nature shy and meditative, and with her religious bias, had she been born into a Catholic family, she might not improbably have found the world well lost in a sisterhood. The Puritan conscience had an uncomfortable preponderance in the deep places of her nature, and, far down in her soul, like her father, she would ask herself if pleasure could be the end of life—was there not something serious each of us could and ought to do, to justify his place in the world? Were we not all under some mysterious solemn obligation to do something, however little, in return for life?



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Mat, on the other hand, had no such scruples. She was more like Esther in nature, with a touch of cynicism curling her dainty lip, arising, perhaps, from an early divination that she was to lack Esther's opportunities. Perhaps it was because she was the pessimist—the quite cheerful pessimist—of the family, that she was by far the cleverest and most industrious at the housework. If it was her fate to be Cinderella, she might as well make the best of it, with a cynical endurance and good-humour, and be Cinderella with a good grace. Probably the only glass slipper in the family had already fallen to Esther. Never mind, though her good looks might fade with being a good girl at home, year by year, what did it matter, after all? Nothing mattered in the end. And thus, out of a great indifference, Mat developed a great unselfishness; and if you could name one special angel in the house of the Mesuriers, she was unmistakably Mat.

In addition to her religious promptings, Dot had lately developed a great sympathy for her father. Standing a little aside from the conflict between him and Henry, she was able to divine something of the feelings of both; and she had now and again caught a look of loneliness on her father's face that made her ready to do almost anything to please him.

Of course the question was one for general consultation. She knew what Henry would say. It didn't much matter anyhow, he would say, but it was a pity. How was intellectual freedom to be won, if those who had seen the light should thus deliberately forego it, time after time, from such merely sentimental reasons? And when she saw Henry, that was just what he did say.

"But," she said, "it would make father so happy."

"Yes, I know," he answered; "and it would be very beautiful of you. Besides, of course, in one way it's only a matter of symbolism; but then, on the other hand, it's symbolism hardened into dogmatism that has done all the mischief. Do it, dear, if you like; I hardly know what to say. As you say, it will make father happy, and I shall quite understand."

Dot was one of those natures that like to seek, and are liable to take, advice; so, after seeing Henry, she thought she would see what Mr. Trotter had to say; for, in spite of his unfortunate name, Mr. Trotter was a gentle, cultivated mind, and was indeed somewhat incongruously, perhaps in a mild way Jesuitically, circumstanced as a Baptist minister. Henry and he were great friends on literary matters; and Dot and he had had many talks, greatly helpful to her, on spiritual things. In fact, Chrysostom Trotter was one of those numerous half-way men between the old beliefs and their new modifications, which the continuous advance of scientific discovery and philosophical speculation on the one hand, and the obstinate survival of Christianity on the other, necessitate—if men of spiritual intuitions who are not poets and artists are to earn their living. There was nothing

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you could say to Chrysostom Trotter, provided you said it reverently, that would startle him. He knew all that long ago and far more. For, though obliged to trade in this backwater of belief, he was in many respects a very modern mind. You were hardly likely to know your Herbert Spencer as intimately as he, and all the most exquisite literature of doubt was upon his shelves. Though you might declare him superficially disingenuous, you could not, unless you were some commonplace atheist or materialist, gainsay the honest logic of his position.

“You believe that the world, that life, is a spiritual mystery?” he would say.

“Yes.”

“You do not for a moment think that any materialistic science has remotely approached an adequate explanation of its meaning?”

“Certainly not.”

“You believe too that, however it comes about, and whatever it means, there is an eternal struggle in man between what, for sake of argument, we will call the higher and lower natures?”

“Yes.”

“Well, then, this spiritual mystery, this struggle, are hinted at in various media of human expression, in an ever-changing variety of human symbols. Art chiefly concerns itself with the sexual mystery, with the wonderful love of man and woman, in its explanation of which alone science is so pitifully inadequate. Literature more fully concerns itself with the mystery of man’s indestructibly instinctive relation to what we call the unseen,—that is, the Whole, the Cosmos, God, or whatever you please to call it. But more than literature, religion has for centuries concerned itself with these considerations, has consciously and industriously sought to make itself the science of what we call the soul. It has thrown its observations, just as poetry and art have thrown their observations, into symbolic forms, of which Christianity is incomparably the most important. You don’t reject the revelation of human love because Hero and Leander are probably creations of the poet’s fancy. Will you reject the revelation of divine love, because it chanced, for its greater efficiency in winning human hearts, to have found expression in a similar human symbolism? Personally, I hold that Christ actually lived, and was literally the Son of God; but, were the human literalness of his divine story discredited, the eternal verities of human degeneration, and a mysterious regeneration, would be no whit disproved. Externally, Christianity may be a symbol; essentially, it is a science of spiritual fact, as really as geology is a science of material fact.



“And as for its miraculous, supernatural, side,—are the laws of nature so easy to understand that we should find such a difficulty in accepting a few divergencies from them? He who can make laws for so vast a universe may surely be capable of inventing a few comparatively trivial exceptions.”

Not perhaps in so many words, but in some such spirit, would Chrysostom Trotter argue; and it was in some such fashion that he talked in his charmingly sympathetic way with Dorcas Mesurier, one afternoon, as she had tea with him in a study breathing on every hand the man of letters, rather than the minister of a somewhat antiquated sect.



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“My dear Dorcas,” he said, “you know me well enough—you know me perhaps better than your father knows me—know me well enough to believe that I wouldn’t urge you to do this thing if I didn’t think it was right *for you*—as well as for your father and me. But I know it is right, and for this reason. You are a deeply religious nature, but you need some outward symbol to hold on to,—you need, so to say, the magnetising association of a religious organisation. Henry can get along very well, as many poets have, with his birds and his sunsets and so forth; but you need something more authoritative. It happens that the church I represent, the church of your father, is nearest to you. You might, with all the goodwill in the world, so far as I am concerned, embrace some other modification of the Christian faith; but here is a church, so to say, ready for you, familiar by long association, endeared to your father. You believe in God, you believe in the spiritual meaning of life, you believe that we poor human beings need something to keep our eyes fixed upon that spiritual meaning—well, dear Dorcas,” he ended, abruptly, “what do you think?”

“I’ll do it,” said Dot.

“Good girl,” said the minister; “sometimes it is a form of righteousness to waive our doubts for those who are at once so dear and good as your father. And don’t for a moment think that it will leave you just where you are. These outward acts are great energisers of the soul. Dear Dorcas, I welcome you into one of God’s many churches.”

So it was that Dot came to be baptised; and, to witness the ceremony, all the Mesuriers assembled at the chapel that Sunday evening,—even Henry, who could hardly remember when he used to sit in this still-familiar pew, and scribble love-verses in the back of his hymn-book during the sermon.

To the mere mocker, the rite of baptism by immersion might well seem a somewhat grotesque antic of sectarianism; but to any one who must needs find sympathy for any observance into which, in whatsoever forgotten and superseded time, has passed the prayerful enthusiasm of man, the rite could hardly fail of a moving solemnity. As Chrysostom Trotter ordered it, it was certainly made to yield its fullest measure of impressiveness. To begin with, the chapel was quite a comely edifice inside and out; and its ministerial end, with its singers’ gallery backed by great organ pipes, and fronted by a handsome pulpit, which Mr. Trotter had dared to garnish with chrysanthemums on each side of his Bible, had a modest, sacerdotal effect. Beneath the pulpit on ordinary occasions stood the Communion-table; but on evenings when the rite of baptism was prepared, this table, and a boarding on which it stood, were removed, revealing a tiled baptistry,—that is, a tiled tank, about eight feet long, and six wide, with steps on each side descending into about four feet of water.

Towards the close of the service, the minister would leave his pulpit, and, during the singing of a hymn, would presently emerge from his vestry in a long waterproof garment. As the hymn ended, some “sister” or “brother” that night to be admitted into

the church, would timidly join him at the baptistry side, and together they would go down into the water.



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Holding the hands of the new communicant, the minister, in a solemn voice, would say, "Sister," or "Brother, on confession of your faith in our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, I baptise thee in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost."

Then the organ would strike up a triumphant peal, and, to the accompaniment of its music and the mellow plashing of the water, the sister or brother would be plunged beneath the symbolic wave.

Great was the excitement, needless to say, in the Mesurier pew, as little Dot at last came forth from the vestry, and, stealing down into the water, took the minister's outstretched hands.

"There she is! There's Dot!" passed round the pew, and the hardest young heart, whoever it belonged to, stopped beating, to hear the minister's words. They seemed to come with a special personal tenderness,—

"Sister, on confession of your faith in our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, I baptise thee in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost."

Once more the organ triumphant, and the mellow splashing of the water.

Dear little Dot, she had done it!

"Did you see father's face?" Esther whispered to Henry.

Yes; perhaps none of them would ever do such a beautiful thing as Dot had done that night. At least there was one of James Mesurier's children who had not disappointed him.

CHAPTER XVIII

MIKE AND HIS MILLION POUNDS

The most exquisite compliment a man has ever paid to him is worded something like this: "Well, dear, you certainly know how to make love;" and this compliment is always the reward, not of passion however sustained, or sentiment however refined, but of humour whimsically fantasticating and balancing both. It is the gentle laugh, not violating, but just humanising, that very solemn kiss; the quip that just saves passion from toppling over the brink into bathos, that mark the skilful lover. No lover will long be successful unless he is a humourist too, and is able to keep the heart of love amused. A lover should always be something of an actor as well; not, of course, for the purpose of feigning what he does not feel, but so that he may the better dramatise his sincerity!



Mike had therefore many advantages over those merely pretty fellows whose rivalry he had once been modest enough to fear. He was a master of all the child's play of love; and to attempt to describe the fancies which he found to vary the game of love, would be to run the risk of exposing the limitations of the literary medium. No words can pull those whimsical faces, or put on those heart-breaking pathetic expressions, with which he loved to meet Esther after some short absence. Sometimes he would come into the room, a little forlorn sparrow of a creature, signifying, by a dejection in which his very clothes took part, that he was out in the east wind of circumstance and no one in the world cared a shabby feather for him. He would stand shivering in a corner, and look timorously from side to side, till at last he would pretend she had warmed him with her kisses, and generally made him welcome to the world.



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Sometimes he would come in with his collar dismally turned up, and an old battered hat upon his head, and pretend that he hadn't had a meal—of kisses—for a whole week; and occasionally he would come blowing out his cheeks like a king's trumpeter, to announce that Mike Laflin might be at any moment expected. But for the most part these impersonations were in a minor key, as Mike had soon discovered that the more pathetic he was, the more he was hugged and called a "weenty," which was one of his own sad little names for himself.

One of his "long-run" fairy-tales, as he would call them, was that each morning as he went to business, he really started out in search of a million pounds, which was somewhere awaiting him, and which he might break his shins over at any moment. It might be here, it might be there, it might come at any hour of the day. The next post might bring it. It might be in yonder Parcel Delivery van,—nothing more probable. Or at any moment it might fall from heaven in a parachute, or be at that second passing through the dock-gates, wearily home from the Islands of Sugar and Spice. You never could tell.

"Well, Mike," said Esther, one evening, as he came in, hopping in a pitifully wounded way, and explaining that he had been one of the three ravens sitting on a bough which the cruel huntsman had shot through the wing, *etc.*, "have you found your million pounds to-day?"

"No, not my million pounds," said Mike. "I'm told I shall find them to-morrow."

"Who told you?"

"The Weenty."

"You silly old thing! Give me a kiss. Are you a dear? Tell me, aren't you a dear?"

"No-p! I'm only a poor little houseless, roofless, windowless, chimney-less, Esther-less, brainless, out-in-the-wind-and-the-snow-and-the-rain, Mike!"

"You're the biggest dear in the world!"

"No, I'm not. I'm the littlest!"

"Suppose you found your million pounds, Mike?"

"Suppose! Didn't I tell you I'm sure of it to-morrow?"

"Well, when you find it to-morrow, what will you do with it?"

"I'll buy the moon."



“The moon?”

“Yes; as a present for Henry.”

“Wouldn’t it be rather dear?”

“Not at all. Twenty thousand would buy it any time this last hundred years. But the worst of it is, no one wants it but the poets, and they cannot afford it. Yet if only a poet could get hold of it, why what a literary property it would be!”

“You silly old thing!”

“No! but you don’t seem to realise that I’m quite serious. Think of the money there would be for any poet who had acquired the exclusive literary rights in the moon! Within a week I’d have it placarded all over, ‘Literary trespassers will be prosecuted!’ And then I’ve no doubt Henry would lend me the Man in the Moon for my Christmas pantomimes.”

“After all, it’s not a bad idea,” said Esther.



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“Of course it’s not,” said Mike; “but be careful not to mention it to Henry just yet. I shouldn’t like to disappoint him—for, of course, before we took any final steps in the purchase, we’d have to make sure that it wasn’t, as some people think, made of green cheese.”

“But never mind about the moon. Tell us how you got on with The Sothern.”

The Sothern was an amateur dramatic club in Tyre which took itself very seriously, and to which Mike was seeking admission, as a first step towards London management. He had that day passed an examination before three of the official members, solemn and important as though they had been the Honourable Directors of Drury Lane, and had been admitted to membership in the club, with the promise of a small part in their forthcoming performance.

“Oh, that’s good!” said Esther. “What were they like?”

“Oh, they were all right,—rather humorous. They gave me ‘Eugene Aram’ to read—Me reading ‘Eugene Aram’!—and a scene out of ‘London Assurance,’ which was, of course, better. Naturally, not one of the men was the remotest bit like himself. One was a queer kind of Irving, another a sad sort of Arthur Roberts, and the other was—shall we say, a Tyrian Wyndham.”

Actors, like poets, have provincial parodists of their styles in even greater numbers, so adoringly imitative is humanity. Some day, Mike would have his imitators,—boys who pulled faces like his, and prided themselves on having the Laflin wrinkles; just as it was once the fashion for girls to look like Burne-Jones pictures, or young poets to imitate Mr. Swinburne.

“Yes, I’ve got my first part. I’ve got it in my pocket,” said Mike.

“Oh, really! That’s splendid!” exclaimed Esther, with delight.

“Wait till you see it,” said Mike, bringing out a French’s acting edition of some forgotten comedy. “Yes; guess how many words I’ve got to say! Just exactly eleven. And such words!”

“Well, never mind, dear. It’s a beginning.”

“Certainly, it’s a beginning,—the very beginning of a beginning.”

“Come, let me see it, Mike. What are you supposed to be?”

At last Mike was persuaded to confess the humble little *role* for which the eminent actors who had consented to be his colleagues had cast him. He was to be the comic boy of a pastry-cook’s man, and his distinguished part in the action of the piece was to



come in at a certain moment with the pie that had been ordered, and, as he delivered it, he was to remark, "That's a pie as is a pie, is that there pie!"

"Oh, Mike, what a shame!" exclaimed Esther. "How absurd! Why, you're a better actor with your little finger than any one of them with their whole body."

"Ah, but they don't know that yet, you see."

"Any one could see it if they looked at your face half-a-minute."

"I wanted to play the part of Snodgrass; but they couldn't think of giving me that, of course. So, do you know what I pretended, to comfort myself? I pretended I was Edward Kean waiting in the passages at Drury Lane, with all the other fine fellows looking down at the shabby little gloomy man from the provinces. That was conceit for you, wasn't it?"



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The pathos of this was, of course, irresistible to Esther, and Mike was thereupon hugged and kissed as he expected.

“Never mind,” he said, “you’ll see if I don’t make something of the poor little part after all.”

And, thereupon, he described what he laughingly called his “conception,” and how he proposed to dress and make up, so vividly that it was evident that the pastry-cook’s boy was already to him a personality whose actions and interests were by no means limited to his brief appearance on the stage, but who, though accidentally he had but few words to speak before the audience, was a very voluble and vital little person in scenes where the audience did not follow him.

“Yes, you see I’ll do something with it. The best of a small part,” said Mike, speaking as one of experience, “is that it gives you plenty of opportunity for making the audience wish there was more of it.”

“From that point of view, you certainly couldn’t have a finer part,” laughed Esther.

Then for a moment Mike skipped out of the room, and presently knocked, and, putting in a funny face, entered carrying a cushion with alacrity.

“That’s a pie as is a pie, is that there pie!” he fooled, throwing the cushion into Esther’s lap, where presently his little red head found its way too.

“How can you love such a silly little creature?” he said, looking up into Esther’s blue eyes.

“I don’t know, I’m sure,” said Esther; “but I do,” and, bending down, she kissed the wistful boy’s face. Was it because Esther was in a way his mother, as well as his sweetheart, that she seemed to do all the kissing?

Thus was Mike’s first part rehearsed and rewarded.

CHAPTER XIX

ON CERTAIN ADVANTAGES OF A BACKWATER

Though from a maritime point of view, Tyre was perhaps the chief centre of conjunction for all the main streams of the world, from the point of view of literature and any other art, it was an admitted backwater. Take what art you pleased, Tyre was a dunce. Even to music, the most persuasive of the arts, it was deaf. Surely, of all cities, it had not been built to music. It possessed, indeed, one private-spirited town-councillor, who insisted on presenting it with nude sculptures and mysterious paintings which it furiously



declined. If Tyre was to be artistically great, it must certainly be with a greatness reluctantly thrust upon it.

Still Henry and Ned had sense enough to be glad that they had been born there. It was from no mere recognition of an inexpensively effective background; perhaps they hardly knew why they were glad till later on. But, meanwhile, they instinctively laid hold of the advantages of their limitations. Had they been London-born and Oxford-bred, they would have been much more fashionable in their tastes; but their very isolation, happily, saved them from the passing



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superstitions of fashion; and they were thus able to enjoy the antiquities of beauty with the same freshness of appetite as though they had been novelties. If Henry was to meet Ned some evening with the announcement that he had a wonderful new book to share with him, it was just as likely to be Sir Philip Sidney's "Astrophel and Stella," as any more recent publication—though, indeed, they contrived to keep in touch with the literary developments of the day with a remarkable instinct, and perhaps a juster estimate of their character and value than those who were taking part in them; for it is seldom that one can be in the movement and at the centre as well.

As a matter of fact, there was little that interested them, or which at all events didn't disappoint and somewhat bewilder. The novel was groaning under the thralldom of realism; poetry, with one or two exceptions, was given up to bric-a-brac and metrical ingenuity. To young men for whom French romanticism was still alive, who were still content to see the world through the spiritual eyes of Shelley and Keats, and who had not yet learned to belittle Carlyle, there seemed a strange lack of generosity and, indeed, vitality in the literary ideals of the hour. The novel particularly seemed barren and unprofitable to them, more and more an instrument of science than a branch of literature. Laughter had deserted it, as clearly as romance or pathos, and more and more it was becoming the vehicle of cynical biology on the one hand, and Unitarian theology on the other. Besides, strangest of all, men were praised for lacking those very qualities which to these boys had seemed essential to literature. The excellences praised were the excellences of science, not literature. In fact, there seemed to be but one excellence, namely, accuracy of observation; and to write a novel with any eye to beauty of language was to err, as the writer of a scientific treatise would err who endeavoured to add charm and grace to the sober record of his investigations. Dull sociological analysts reigned in the once laughing domain of Cervantes, of Fielding and Thackeray, of Dumas and Dickens, of Hugo and Gautier and George Sand.

Were they born too late? Were they anachronisms from the forgotten age of romanticism, or were they just born in time to assist at the birth of another romantic, idealistic age? Would dreams and love and beautiful writing ever come into fashion again? Would the poet be again a creature of passion, and the novelist once more make you laugh and cry; and would there be essayists any more, whose pages you would mark and whose phrases you would roll over and over again on your tongue, with delight at some mysterious magic in the words?

History may be held to have answered these questions since then, much in favour of those young men, or at all events is engaged in answering them; but, meanwhile, what a miraculous refreshment in a dry and thirsty land was the new book Henry Mesurier had just discovered, and had eagerly brought to share with Ned in their tavern corner one summer evening in 1885.



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Ned was late; but when Henry had sipped a little at his port, and turned to the new-born exquisite pages, he hardly noticed how the minutes were going by as he read. Presently he had come to the end of the first volume, the only one he had with him, and he raised his eyes from the closing page with that exquisite exaltation, that beatific satisfaction of mind and spirit,—even almost one might say of body,—which for the lover of literature nothing in the world like a fine passage can bring.

He turned again to the closing sentences: *“Yes; what was wanting was the heart that would make it impossible to witness all this; and the future would be with the forces that would beget a heart like that. His favourite philosophy had said, Trust the eye. Strive to be right always, regarding the concrete experience. Never falsify your impressions. And its sanction had been at least effective here, in saying: It is what I may not see! Surely, evil was a real thing; and the wise man wanting in the sense of it, where not to have been, by instinctive election, on the right side was to have failed in life.”*

The passage referred to the Roman gladiatorial shows, and to the philosophic detachment by which Marcus Aurelius was able to see and yet not to see them; and the whole book was the spiritual story of a young Roman's soul, a priestlike artistic temperament, born in the haunted twilight between the setting sun of pagan religion and philosophy and the dawn of the Christian idea. The theme presented many fascinating analogies to the present time; and in the hero's "sensations and ideas" Henry found many correspondences with his own nature. In him, too, was united that same joy in the sensuous form, that same adoration of the spiritual mystery, the temperaments in one of artist and priest. He, too, in a dim fashion indeed, and under conditions of culture less favourable, had speculated and experimented in a similar manner upon the literary art over which as yet he had acquired—how crushingly this exquisite book taught him—such pathetically uncertain mastery. That impassioned comradeship in books beautiful, was it not to-day Ned's and his, as all those years before it had been that of Marius and Flavian?

And where in the world was Ned? How he would kindle at a passage like this: *“To keep the eye clear by a sort of exquisite personal alacrity and cleanliness, extending even to his dwelling-place; to discriminate, ever more and more exactly, select form and colour in things from what was less select; to meditate much on beautiful visible objects, on objects, more especially, connected with the period of youth,—on children at play in the morning, the trees in early spring, on young animals, on the fashions and amusements of young men; to keep ever by him, if it were but a single choice flower, a graceful animal or sea-shell, as a token and representation of the whole kingdom of such things; to avoid jealously, in his way through the world, everything repugnant to sight; and, should any circumstance tempt him to a general converse in the range of such objects, to disentangle himself from that circumstance at any cost of place, money, or opportunity: such were, in brief outline, the duties recognised, the rights demanded, in this new formula of life.”*



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And again, what gleaming single phrases, whole counsels of existence in a dozen words! He must copy out some of them for Esther. This, for example: *“Not pleasure, but fulness, completeness of life generally,”* or this: *“To be able to make use of the flower when the fruit, perhaps, was useless or poisonous”* or again this: *“To be absolutely virgin towards a direct and concrete experience”*—and there were a hundred more.

Then for the young craftsman what an insight into, what a compassionate, childish remembrance of the moods and the little foolish accidents of creation: *“His dilettanteism, his assiduous preoccupation with what might seem but the details of mere form or manner, was, after all, bent upon the function of bringing to the surface, sincerely and in their integrity, certain strong personal intuitions, certain visions or apprehensions of things as being, with important results, in this way rather than that—-apprehensions which the artistic or literary expression was called upon to follow, with the exactness of wax or clay, clothing the model within it. Flavian, too, with his fine, clear mastery of the practically effective, had early laid hold of the principle, as axiomatic in literature: That ‘to know when one’s self is interested, is the first condition of interesting other people’”* And once more: *“As it oftenest happens also, with natures of genuinely poetic quality, those piecemeal beginnings came suddenly to harmonious completeness among the fortunate incidents, the physical heat and light, of one singularly happy day.”*

And, over all, what a beauty! a beauty at once so sensuous and so spiritual—the beauty of flowering laurel, the beauty of austerity aflower. Here the very senses prayed. Surely this was the most beautiful prose book ever written! It had been compared, he saw, with Gautier’s *“Mademoiselle de Maupin;”* but was not the beauty of that masterpiece, in comparison with the beauty of this, as the beauty of a leopard-skin to the beauty of a statue of Minerva, withdrawn in a grove of ilex.

Still Ned delayed, and, meanwhile, the third glass of port had come and gone, and at length, reluctantly, Henry emerged from his tavern-cloister upon the warm brilliancy of the streets. All around him the lights beacons, and the women called with bright eyes. But to-night there was no temptation for him in these things. They but recalled another exquisite quotation from his new-found treasure, which he stopped under a lamp to fix in his memory: *“And, as the fresh, rich evening came on, there was heard all over Rome, far above a whisper, the whole town seeming hushed to catch it distinctly, the living, reckless call to ‘play,’ from the sons and daughters of foolishness to those in whom their life was still green—Donec virenti canities abest! Donec virenti canities abest! Marius could hardly doubt how Cornelius would have taken the call. And as for himself, slight as was the burden of positive moral obligation with which he had entered Rome, it was to no wasteful and vagrant affections, such as these, that his Epicureanism had committed him.”*



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But what could have happened to Ned?

CHAPTER XX

THE MAN IN POSSESSION

One morning, two or three months after Henry had left home, old Mr. Lingard came to him as he sat bent, drearily industrious, over some accounts, and said that he wished him in half-an-hour's time to go with him to a new client; and presently the two set out together, Henry wondering what it was to be, and welcoming anything that even exchanged for a while one prison-house for another.

"I am taking you," said the old man, as they walked along together, "to a firm of carriers and carters whose affairs have just come into our hands; there is a dispute arisen between the partners. We represent certain interests, as I shall presently explain to you, and you are to be *our* representative,—our man in possession," and the old gentleman laughed uncannily.

"You never expected to be a man in possession, did you?"

Henry thrilled with a sense of awful intimacy, thus walking and even jesting with his august employer.

"It may very likely be a long business," the old man continued; "and I fear may be a little dull for you. For you must be on the spot all day long. Your lunch will be served to you from the manager's house; I will see to that. Actually, there will be very little for you to do, beyond looking over the day-book and receipts for the day. The main thing is for you to be there,—so to say, the moral effect of your presence,"—and the old gentleman laughed again. Then, with an amused sympathy that seemed almost exquisite to Henry, he chuckled out, looking at him, from one corner of his eye, like a roguish skeleton—

"You'll be able to write as much poetry as you like. I see you've got a book with you. Well, it will keep you awake. I don't mind that,—or even the poetry,—so long as you don't forget the day-book."

"Thank you, sir," said Henry, almost hysterically.

"I suppose," the old man continued, presently, and in all he said there was a tone of affectionate banter that quite won Henry's heart, "that you're still as set on literature as ever. Well, well, far be it from me to discourage you; but, my dear boy, you'll find out that we can't live on dreams." (Henry thought, but didn't dare to say, that it was dreams alone that made it possible to live at all.) "I suppose you think I'm a dried-up old fellow enough. Well, well, I've had my dreams too. Yes, I've had my dreams,"—Henry thought of what he had discovered that day in the old man's diary,—"and I've written my verses



to my lady's eyebrow in my time too. Ah, my boy, we are all young and foolish once in our lives!" and it was evident what a narrow and desperate escape from being a poet the old man had had.

They had some distance to walk, for the stables to which they were bound were situated in an old and rather disreputable part of the town. "It's not a nice quarter," said Mr. Lingard, "not particularly salubrious or refined," as bad smells and dirty women began to cross their path; "but they are nice people you've got to deal with, and the place itself is clean and nice enough, when you once get inside."



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“Here we are,” he said, presently, as they stopped short of an old-fashioned house, set in a high red-brick wall which seemed to enclose quite a considerable area of the district. In the wall, a yard or two from the house, was set a low door, with a brass bell-pull at the side which answered to Mr. Lingard’s summons with a far-off clang. Soon was heard the sound of hob-nailed boots, evidently over a paved yard, and a big carter admitted them to the enclosure, which immediately impressed them with its sense of country stable-yard cleanliness, and its country smell of horses and provender. The stones of the courtyard seemed to have been individually washed and scoured, and a small space in front of a door evidently leading to the house was chalked over in the prim, old-fashioned way.

“Is Mr. Flower about?” asked Mr. Lingard; and, as he asked the question, a handsome, broad-shouldered man of about forty-five came down the yard. It was a massive country face, a little heavy, a little slow, but exceptionally gentle and refined.

“Good-morning, Mr. Lingard.”

“Good-morning, Mr. Flower. This is our representative, Mr. Mesurier, of whom I have already spoken to you. I’m sure you will get on well together; and I’m sure he will give you as little trouble as possible.”

Henry and Mr. Flower shook hands, and, as men sometimes do, took to each other at once in the grasp of each other’s hands, and the glances which accompanied it.

Then the three walked further up the yard, to the little office where Henry was to pass the next few weeks; and as Mr. Lingard turned over books, and explained to Henry what he was expected to do, the sound of horses kicking their stalls, and rattling chains in their mangers, came to him from near at hand with a delightful echo of the country.

When Mr. Lingard had gone, Mr. Flower asked Henry if he’d care to look at the horses. Henry sympathetically consented, though his knowledge of horse-flesh hardly equalled his knowledge of accounts. But with the healthy animal, in whatever form, one always feels more or less at home, as one feels at home with the green earth, or that simple creature the sea.

Mr. Flower led the way to a long stable where some fifty horses protruded brown and dappled haunches on either hand. It was all wonderfully clean and sweet, and the cobbled pavement, the straw beds, the hay tumbling in sweet-scented bunches into the stalls from the loft overhead, made you forget that around this bucolic enclosure swarmed and rotted the foulest slums of the city, garrets where coiners plied their amateur mints, and cellars where murderers lay hidden in the dark.

“It’s like a breath of the country,” said Henry, unconsciously striking the right note.



“You’re right there,” said Mr. Flower, at the same moment heartily slapping the shining side of a big chestnut mare, after the approved manner of men who love horses. To thus belabour a horse on its hinder-parts would seem to be equivalent among the horse-breeding fraternity to chucking a buxom milkmaid under the chin.



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“You’re right there,” he said; “and here’s a good Derbyshire lass for you,” once more administering a sounding caress upon his sleek favourite.

The horse turned its head and whinnied softly at the attention; and it was evident it loved the very sound of Mr. Flower’s voice.

“Have you ever been to Derbyshire?” asked Mr. Flower, presently, and Henry immediately scented an idealism in the question.

“No,” he answered; “but I believe it’s a beautiful county.”

“Beautiful’s no name for it,” said Mr. Flower; “it’s just a garden.”

And as Henry caught a glance of his eyes, he realised that Derbyshire was Mr. Flower’s poetry,—the poetry of a countryman imprisoned in the town,—and that when he died he just hoped to go to Derbyshire.

“Ah, there are places there,—places like Miller’s Dale, for instance,—I’d rather take my hat off to than any bishop,”—and Henry eagerly scented something of a thinker; “for God made them for sure, and bishops—well—” and Mr. Flower wisely left the rest unsaid.

Thus they made the tour of the stables; and though Henry’s remarks on the subject of slapped horse-flesh had been anything but those of an expert, it was tacitly agreed that Mr. Flower and he had taken to each other. Nor, as he presently found, were Mr. Flower’s interests limited to horses.

“You’re a reader, I see,” he said, presently, when they had returned to the office. “Well, I don’t get much time to read nowadays; but there’s nothing I enjoy better, when I’ve got a pipe lit of an evening, than to sit and listen to my little daughter reading Thackeray or George Eliot.”

Of course Henry was interested.

“Now there was a woman who knew country life,” Mr. Flower continued. “‘Silas Marner,’ or ‘Adam Bede.’ How wonderfully she gets at the very heart of the people! And not only that, but the very smell of country air.”

And Mr. Flower drew a long breath of longing for Miller’s Dale.

Henry mentally furbished up his George Eliot to reply.

“And ‘The Mill on the Floss’?” he said.



“And ‘Scenes from Clerical Life,’” said Mr. Flower. “There are some rare strokes of nature there.”

And so they went on comparing notes, till a little blue-eyed girl of about seventeen appeared, carrying a dainty lunch for Henry, and telling Mr. Flower that his own lunch was ready.

“This is my daughter of whom I spoke,” said Mr. Flower.

“She who reads Thackeray and George Eliot to you?” said the Man in Possession; and, when they had gone, he said to himself “What a bright little face!”

CHAPTER XXI

LITTLE MISS FLOWER

Little Miss Flower continued to bring Henry his lunch with great punctuality each day; and each day he found himself more and more interested in its arrival, though when it had come he ate it with no special haste. Indeed, sometimes it almost seemed that it had served its purpose in merely having been brought, judging by the moments of reverie in which Henry seemed to have forgotten it, and to be thinking of something else.



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Yes, he had soon begun to watch for that bright little face, and it was hardly to be wondered at; for, particularly come upon against such a background, the face had something of the surprise of an apparition. It seemed all made of light; and when one o'clock had come, and Henry heard the expected footsteps of his little waiting-maid, and the tinkle of the tray she carried, coming up the yard, her entrance was as though some one had carried a lamp into the dark office. Surely it was more like the face of a spirit than that of a little human girl, and you would almost have expected it to shine in the dark. When you got used to the light of it, you realised that the radiance poured from singularly, even disproportionately, large blue eyes, set beneath a broad white brow of great purity, and that what at first had seemed rays of light around her head was a mass of sunny gold-brown hair which glinted even in shadow.

Strange indeed are the vagaries of the Spirit of Beauty! From how many high places will she turn away, yet delight to waste herself upon a slum like this! How fantastic the accident that had brought such a face to flower in such a spot!—and yet hardly more fantastic, he reflected, than that which had sown his own family haphazard where they were. Was it the ironic fate of power to be always a god in exile, turning mean wheels with mighty hands; and was Cinderella the fable of the eternal lot of beauty in this capriciously ordered world?

Yes, what chance wind, blowing all the way from Derbyshire, had set down Mr. Flower with his little garden of girls in this uncongenial spot? For by this Henry had made the acquaintance of the whole family: Mr. and Mrs. Flower and four daughters in all,—all pretty girls, but not one of the others with a face like that,—which was another puzzle. How is it that out of one family one will be chosen by the Spirit of Beauty or genius, and the others so unmistakably left? There could be no doubt as to whom had been chosen here.

One day the step coming up the yard at one o'clock seemed to be different, and when the door opened it was another sister who had brought his lunch that day. Her eldest sister was ill, she explained, and in bed; and it was so for the next day, and again the next. Could it be possible that Henry had watched so eagerly for that little face, that he missed it so much already?

The next morning he bought some roses on his way through town, and begged that they might be allowed to brighten her room; and the next day surely it was the same light little tread once more coming up the yard. Joy! she was better again. She looked pale, he said anxiously, and ventured to say too that he had missed her. As she blushed and looked down, he saw that she wore one of his roses in her bosom.



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He had already begun to lend her books, which she returned, always with some clever little criticism, often girlishly naive, but never merely conventional. There were brains under her bright hair. One day Henry had run out of literature, and asked her if she could lend him a book. Anything,—some novel he had read before; it didn't matter. Oh, yes, he hadn't read George Eliot for ever so long. Had she "The Mill on the Floss"? Yes, it had been a present from her father. She would bring that. As she lingered a moment, while Henry looked at the book, his eye fell upon a name on the title-page: "Angel Flower."

"Is that your name, Miss Flower?" he said.

"Yes; father wrote it there. My real name is Angelica; but they call me Angel, for short," she answered, smiling.

"Are you surprised?" said Henry, suddenly blushing like a girl, as though he had never ventured on such a small gallantry before. "Angelica! How did you come to get such a beautiful name?"

"Father loves beautiful names, and his grandmother was called Angelica."

"I wonder if I might call you Angelica?" presently ventured Henry, in a low voice.

"Do you think you know me well enough?" said Angelica, with a little gasp, which was really joy, in her breath.

Henry didn't answer; but their eyes met in a long, still look. In each heart behind the stillness was a storm of indescribable sweetness. Henry leaned forward, his face grown very pale, and impulsively took Angelica's hand,—

"I think, after all, I'd rather call you Angel," he said.

CHAPTER XXII

MIKE'S FIRST LAURELS

The gardens of Sidon had a curious habit of growing laurel-trees; laurels and rhododendrons were the only wear in shrubs. Rhododendrons one can understand. They are to the garden what mahogany is to the front parlour,—the *bourgeoisie* of the vegetable kingdom. But the laurel,—what use could they have for laurel in Sidon? Possibly they supplied it to the rest of the world,—market-gardeners, so to say, to the Temple of Fame; it could hardly be for home consumption. Well, at all events, it was a peculiarity fortunate for Esther's purpose, as one morning, soon after breakfast, she went about the garden cutting the glossiest branches of the distinguished tree. As she filled her arms with them, she recalled with a smile the different purpose for which,



dragged at the heels of one of Henry's enthusiasms, she had gathered them several years before.

At that period Henry had been a mighty entomologist; and, as the late summer came on, he and all available sisters would set out, armed with butterfly-nets and other paraphernalia, just before twilight, to the nearest woodland, where they would proceed to daub the trees with an intoxicating preparation of honey and rum,—a temptation to which moths were declared in text-books to be incapable of resistance.



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Then, as night fell, Henry would light his bull's-eye, and cautiously visit the various snares. It was a sight worth seeing to come upon those little night-clubs of drunken and bewildered moths, hanging on to the sweetness with tragic gluttony,—an easy prey for Henry's eager fingers, which, as greedy of them as they of the honey, would seize and thrust them into the lethal chamber, in the form of a cigar-box loosely filled with bruised laurel leaves, which hung by a strap from his shoulder.

It was for such exciting employment that Esther had once gathered laurel leaves. And, once again, she remembered gathering them one Shakespeare's birthday, to crown a little bust in Henry's study. The sacred head had worn them proudly all day, and they all had a feeling that somehow Shakespeare must know about it, and appreciate the little offering; just as even to-day one might bring roses and myrtle, or the blood of a maiden dove to Venus, and expect her to smile upon our affairs of the heart.

But it was for a dearer purpose that Esther was gathering them this morning. That coming evening Mike was to utter his first stage-words in public. The laurel was to crown the occasion on which Mike was to make that memorable utterance: "That's a pie as is a pie, is that there pie!"

Now while Esther was busily weaving this laurel into a wreath, Henry was busily weaving the best words he could find into a sonnet to accompany the wreath. When Angel duly brought him his lunch, it was finished, and lay about on his desk in rags and tatters of composition. Angel was going to the performance with her sisters,—for all these young people were fond of advertising each other, and he had soon told her about Mike,—so she was interested to hear the sonnet. Whatever other qualities poetry may lack, the presence of generous sincerity will always give it a certain value, to all but the merely supercilious; and this sonnet, boyish in its touches of grandiloquence, had yet a certain pathos of strong feeling about it.

Not unto him alone whom loud acclaim
Declares the victor does the meed belong,
For others, standing silent in the throng,
May well be worthier of a nobler fame;
And so, dear friend, although unknown thy name
Unto the shouting herd, we would give tongue
To our deep thought, and the world's great among
By this symbolic laurel thee proclaim.

And if, perchance, the herd shall find thee out
In coming time, and many a nobler crown
To one they love to honour gladly throw;
Wilt thou not turn thee from their eager shout,



And whisper o'er these leaves, then sere and brown:
'Thou'rt late, O world! love knew it long ago?'

The reader will probably agree with Angel in considering the last line the best. But, of course, she thought the whole was wonderful.

"How wonderful it must be to be able to write!" she said, with a look in her face which was worth all the books ever written.



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“And how wonderful even to have something written to one like that!”

“Surely that must have happened to you,” said Henry, slyly.

“You’re only laughing at me.”

“No, I’m not. You don’t know what may have been written to you. Poems may quite well have been written to you without your having heard of them. The poet mayn’t have thought them worthy of you.”

“What nonsense! Why, I don’t know any poets!”

“Oh!” said Henry.

“I mean, except you.”

“And how do you know that I haven’t written a whole book full of poems to you? I’ve known you—how long now?”

“Two months next Monday,” said Angel, with that chronological accuracy on such matters which seems to be a special gift of women in love. Men in love are nothing like so accurate.

“Well, that’s long enough, isn’t it? And I’ve had nothing else to do, you know.”

“But you don’t care enough about me?”

“You never know.”

“But tell me really, have you written something for me?”

“Ah, you’d like to know now, wouldn’t you?”

“Of course I would. Tell me. It would make me very happy.”

“It really would?”

“You know it would.”

“But why?”

“It would.”

“But you couldn’t care for the poetry, unless you cared for the poet?”



“Oh, I don’t know. Poetry’s poetry, isn’t it, whoever makes it? But what if I did care a little for the poet?”

“Do you mean you do, Angel?”

“Ah, you want to know now, don’t you?”

“Tell me. Do tell me.”

“I’ll tell you when you read me my poem,” and as Angel prepared to run off with a laugh, Henry called after her,—

“You will really? It’s a bargain?”

“Yes, it’s a bargain,” she called back, as she tripped off again down the yard.

* * * * *

Mike’s *debut* was as great a success as so small a part could make it; and the main point about it was the excitement of knowing that this was an actual beginning. He had made them all laugh and cry in drawing-rooms for ever so long; but to-night he was on the stage, the real stage—real, at all events, for him, for Mike could never be an amateur. Esther’s eyes filled with glad tears as the well-loved little figure popped in, with a baker’s paper hat on his head, and delivered the absurd words; and if you had looked at Henry’s face too, you would have been at a loss to know which loved the little pastry-cook’s boy best.

When Mike returned to his dressing-room, a mysterious box was awaiting him. He opened it, and found Esther’s wreath and Henry’s sonnet.

“God bless them,” he said.

No doubt it was very childish and sentimental, and old-fashioned; but these young people certainly loved each other.

As Mike had left the stage, Henry had turned round and smiled at some one a few seats away. Esther had noticed him, and looked in the same direction.



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“Who was that you bowed to, Henry?”

“I’ll tell you another time,” he said; for he had a good deal to tell her about Angel Flower.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE MOTHER OF AN ANGEL

The Man in Possession was becoming more and more a favourite at Mr. Flower’s. One day Mr. Flower, taking pity on his loneliness, suggested that he might possibly prefer to have his lunch in company with them all down at the house. Henry gladly embraced the proposal, and thus became the daily honoured guest of a family, each member of which had some simple human attraction for him. He had already won the heart of simple Mrs. Flower, few and brief as had been his encounters with her, and that heart she had several times coined in unexpected cakes and other dainties of her own making; but when he thus became partially domiciled with the family, she was his slave outright. There was a reason for this, which will need, and may perhaps excuse, a few lines entirely devoted to Mrs. Flower, who, on her own peculiar merits, deserves them.

Perhaps to introduce Eliza Flower in this way is to take her more seriously than any of her affectionate acquaintance were able to do. For, somehow, people had a bad habit of laughing at Mrs. Flower, though they admitted she was the hardest-working, best-hearted little housewife in the world. Housewife in fact she was *in excelsis*, not to say *ad absurdum*. No little woman who worked herself to skin-and-bone to keep things straight, and the home comfortable, was ever a more typical “squaw.” Whatever her religious opinions, which, one may be sure, were inflexibly orthodox, there can be no question that Mr. Flower was her god, and, as the hymn says, heaven was her home. To serve God and Mr. Flower were to her the same thing; and there can be little doubt that a god who had no socks to darn, or linen to keep spotless, was a god whom Mrs. Flower would have found it impossible to conceive.

A more complete and delighted absorption in the physical comforts and nourishments of the human creature than Mrs. Flower’s, it would be impossible for dreamer to imagine. Such an absolute adjustment between a being of presumably infinite aspirations and immortal discontents and its environment, is a happiness seldom encountered by philosophers. To think of death for poor Mrs. Flower was to conceive a homelessness peculiarly pathetic; unless, indeed, there are kitcheners to superintend, beds to make, rooms to “turn out,” and four spring-cleanings a year in heaven. Of what use else was the bewildering gift of immortality to one who was touchingly mortal in all her tastes? Indeed, Henry used to say that Mrs. Flower was the most convincing argument against the immortality of the soul that he had ever met.



Yet, though it was quite evident that there was nothing in the world else she cared so much to do, and though indeed it was equally evident that she was one of the best-natured little creatures in the world, she did not deny herself a certain more or less constant asperity of reference to occupations which kept her on her feet from morning till night, and made her the slave of the whole house, in spite of four big idle daughters. And she with rheumatism too, so bad that she could hardly get up and down stairs!



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Probably nothing so much as Henry's respectful sympathy for this immemorial rheumatism had contributed to win Mrs. Flower's heart. As to the precise amount of rheumatism from which Mrs. Flower suffered, Henry soon realised that there seemed to be an irreverent scepticism in the family, nothing short of heartless; for rheumatism so poignantly expressive, so movingly dramatised, he never remembered to have met. Mrs. Flower could not walk across the floor without grimaces of pain, or piteous indrawings of her breath; and yet demonstrations that you might have thought would have softened stones, left her unfeeling audience not only unmoved, but apparently even unobservant. From sheer decency, Henry would flute out something to show that her suffering was not lost on him; but it is to be feared the young ones would only wink at each other at this sign of unsophistication.

"Oh, you unfeeling child!" Mrs. Flower would exclaim, as sometimes she caught them exchanging comments in this way. "And your father, there, is just as bad," she would say, impatient to provoke somebody.

This remark would probably prompt Mr. Flower to the indulgence of a form of matrimonial banter which was not unlike the endearments he bestowed upon his horses, and which, when you knew that he loved the little quaint woman with all his heart, you were able to translate into more customary modes of affection.

"Yes, indeed," he would say, "it's evidently time I was looking out for some active young woman, Eliza—when you begin limping about like that. It's a pity, but the best of us must wear out some day—"

This superficially heartless pleasantry he would deliver with a sweeping wink at Henry and his four girls; but Mrs. Flower would see nothing to laugh at, for humour was not her strong point.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Ralph," she said, "before the children. I was once young and active enough to take your fancy, anyhow. Mr. Mesurier, won't you have a little more spinach? Do; it's fresh from the country this morning. You mustn't mind Mr. Flower. He's fond of his joke; and, whatever he likes to say, he'd get on pretty badly without his old Eliza."

"Gracious, no!" Mr. Flower would retort. "Don't flatter yourself, old girl. I've got my eye on two or three fine young women who'll be glad of the job, I assure you;" but this, perhaps, proving too much for poor Mrs. Flower, whose tears were never far away, and apt to require smelling-salts, he would change his tone in an instant and say, dropping into his Derbyshire "thous,"—

"Nonsense, lass, can't thee take a bit of a joke? Come now, come. Don't be silly. Thou knowest well enough what thou art to me, and so do the girls. See, let's have a drive



out to Livingstone Cemetery this afternoon. Thou'rt a bit out o' sorts. It'll cheer thee up a bit."

And so Mrs. Flower would recover, and harmony would be restored, and nobody would wink for a quarter of an hour. Certainly it was a quaint little mother for an Angel.



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CHAPTER XXIV

AN ANCIENT THEORY OF HEAVEN

"When are you going to read me my poem?" said Angelica, one day.

"When are you going to tell me what I asked?" replied Henry.

"Whenever you read me my poem," retorted Angelica.

"All right. When would you like to hear it?"

"Now."

"But I haven't got it with me to-day."

"Can't you remember it?"

"No, not to-day."

"When will you bring it?"

"I'll tell you what. Come with me to Woodside Meadows on Saturday afternoon. Your father won't mind?"

"Oh, no; father likes you."

"I'm glad, because I'm very fond of him."

"Yes, he's a dear; and he's got far more in him than perhaps you think, under his country ways. If you could see him in the country, it would make you cry. He loves it so."

"Yes, I could tell that by the way he talked of Derbyshire the first day we met. But you'll come on Saturday?"

"Yes, I'll come."

* * * * *

Angel! Yes, it was the face of an angel; but, bright as it had seemed on that dark background, it seemed almost brighter still as it moved by Henry's side among the green lanes. He had never known Angel till then, never known what primal ecstasy her nature was capable of. In the town, her soul was like a flame in a lamp of pearl; here in the country, it was like a star in a vase of dew. To be near trees, to touch their rough



barks, to fill one's hands with green leaves, to hear birds, to listen to running water, to look up into the sky,—oh, this was to come home!—and Angel's joy in these things was that of some wood-spirit who you might expect any moment, like Undine, to slip out of your hands in some laughing brook, or change to a shower of blossom over your head.

“Oh, how good the country is! I wish father were here. I could eat the grass. And I just want to take the sky in my arms.” As she swept across meadow and through woodland, with the eagerness of a child, greedily hastening from room to room of some inexhaustible palace, her little tense body seemed like a transparent garment fluttering round the flying feet of her soul.

At length she flung herself down, almost breathless, at the grassy foot of a great tree.

“I suppose you think I'm mad,” she said. “And really I think I must be; for why should mere green grass and blue sky and a few birds make one so happy?”

“Why should anything make us happy?”

“Or sad?”

“But now you're going to read my poem,” she said, presently.

“Yes; but something has to happen before I can read it,” said Henry, growing unaccountably serious; “for it is in the nature of a prophecy, or at all events of an anticipation. You have to fulfil that prophecy first.”

“It seems to me a very mysterious poem. But what have I to do?”



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“I don’t know whether you can do it.”

“Well, what is it? Try me.”

“Oh, Angel, I care nothing about poems. Can’t you see how I love you? That’s all poetry will ever mean to me. Just to say over and over again, ‘I love Angel.’ Just to find new and wonderful ways of saying that—”

“Listen, Henry. I’ve loved you from the first moment I saw you that day talking to father, and I shall love you till I die.”

“Dear, dear Angel!”

“Henry!”

Then Henry’s arms enfolded Angel with wonderful love, and her fresh young lips were on his, and the world faded away like a dream within a dream.

* * * * *

“Now perhaps you can read me your poem,” said Angel, after a while; and she noticed a curious something different in her way of speaking to him, as in his way of speaking to her,—something blissfully homelike, as it were, as though they had sat like this for ever and ever, and were quite used to it, though at the same time it remained thrillingly new.

“It’s only a silly little childish rhyme,” said Henry; “some day I’ll write you far better.”

Then, coming close to Angel, he whispered,—

This is Angelica,
Fallen from heaven,
Fallen from heaven
Into my arms.

Will you go back again,
Little Angelica,
Back up to heaven,
Out of my arms!

“No,” said Angelica,
“Here is my heaven,
Here is my heaven,
Here in your arms.



“Not out of heaven,
But into my heaven,
Here have I fallen,
Here in your arms.”

CHAPTER XXV

THE LAST CONTINUED, AFTER A BRIEF INTERVAL

After the long happy silence which followed Henry's recitation of his verses, Angel at length spoke,—

“Shall I tell *you* something now?” she said. “I'm almost ashamed to, for I know you'll laugh at me, and call me superstitious.”

“Go on, little child,” said Henry.

“You remember the day,” said Angel, in a hushed little impressive voice, “I first saw you in father's office?”

Henry was able to remember it.

“Well, that was not the first time I had seen you.”

“Really, Angel! Why didn't you tell me before? Where was it, then? In the street, or where?”

“No, it was much stranger than that,” said Angel. “Do you believe the future can be foretold to us?”

“Oh, it was in a dream, you funny Angel; was that it?” said Henry, whose rationalism at this period was the chief danger to his imagination.

“No, not a dream. Something stranger than that.”

“Oh, well, I give it up.”

“It was like this,” Angel continued; “there's a strange old gipsy woman who lives near us
—”



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“Oh, I see, your hand—palmistry,” said Henry, with a touch of gentle impatience.

“Henry, dear, I said you would laugh at me. I won’t tell you now, if you’re going to take it in that spirit.”

Henry promptly locked up his reason for the moment, with apologies, and professed himself open to conviction.

“Well, mother sometimes helps this poor old woman, and, one day, when she happened to call, Alice and Edith and I were in the kitchen helping mother. ‘God bless you, lady,’ she said,—you know how they talk,—‘you’ve got a kind heart; and how are all the young ladies? It’s time, I’m thinking, they had their fortunes told.’ ‘Oh, yes,’ we all said, ‘tell us our fortunes, mother,’—we always called her mother. ‘I’ll tell you yours, my dear,’ she said, taking hold of my hand. ‘Your fortunes are too young yet, ladies,’ she said to Alice and Edith; ‘come to me in a year’s time and, maybe, I’ll tell you all about him.’”

“You dear!” said Henry, by way of interruption.

“Then,” continued Angel, “she took me aside, and looked at my hand; and she told me first what had happened to me, and then what was to come. What she told me of the past”—as if dear Angel, whose life was as yet all future, could as yet have had any past to speak of!—“was so true, that I couldn’t help half believing in what she said of the future. Now you’re laughing again!”

“No, indeed, I’m not,” said Henry, perfectly solemn.

“She told me that just before I was twenty, I would meet a young man with dark hair and blue eyes, very unexpectedly,—I shall be twenty in six weeks,—and that he would be my fate. But the strangest is yet to come. ‘Would you like to see his face?’ she said. She made me a little frightened; but, of course, I said, ‘Yes,’ and then she brought out of her pocket a sort of glass egg, and told me to look in it, and tell her what I saw. So I looked, but for a long time I could see nothing; but suddenly there seemed to be something moving in the centre of the glass, like clouds breaking when the sun is coming out; and presently I could see a lamp burning on a table; and then round the lamp shelves of books began to grow out of the mist; then I saw a picture hanging in a recess, a bowed head with a strange sort of head-dress on it, a dark thin face, very sad-looking—”

“Why, that must have been my Dante!” said Henry, astonished in spite of himself.

The exclamation was a “score” for Angel; and she continued, with greater confidence, “And then I seemed to see some one sitting there; but, though I tried and tried, I couldn’t catch sight of his face. I told the old woman what I saw. ‘Wait a minute,’ she said, ‘then try again.’ So I waited, and presently tried again. This time I hadn’t so long to wait

before I saw a room again; but it was quite different, a big desk ran along in front of a window, and there were two tall office-stools. 'Why, it's father's office,' I said.



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'Go on looking,' said the old woman, 'and tell me what you see.' In a moment or two, I saw some one sitting on one of the stools, first dimly and then clearer and clearer. 'Why,' I almost cried out, for I felt more and more frightened, 'I see a young man sitting at a desk, with a pen behind his ear.' 'Can you see him clearly?' 'Yes,' I said; 'he's got dark curly hair and blue eyes.' 'You're sure you won't forget his face? You'd know him if you saw him again?' 'Indeed, I would,' I said. 'All right,' said the old woman, 'you can give me back the crystal. You keep a look out for that young man,—you will see him some day, mark my words, and that young man will be your fate.'

"Now, surely, you won't deny that was strange, will you?" asked Angel, in conclusion. "And I shall never forget the start it gave me that day when I came in, quite unsuspecting, with your lunch-tray, and saw you talking to father, with your pen behind your ear, and your blue eyes and dark hair. Now, isn't it strange? How can one help being superstitious after a thing like that?"

"Are you quite sure it was I?" Henry asked, quizzically. "It appears to me that any presentable young man with a pen behind his ear would have answered nearly enough to the vision. You would hardly have been quite sure of the colour of the eyes, would you, now, if the old woman hadn't mentioned it first, as she looked at your hand?"

"You are horrid!" said Angel; "I wish I hadn't told you now. But it wasn't merely the colour of the eyes. It was the look in them."

"Look again, and see if you haven't made a mistake. Look very carefully," said Henry.

"I won't," said Angel; "I think you're cruel."

"Angel, if you'll only look, and say you are quite sure, I'll believe every word the old woman said."

At last Angel was persuaded to look, and to look again, and the old woman's credit rose at each look.

"Yes, Henry, whatever happens, I know it is true. My life is in your hands."

Those are solemn words for one human being to hear uttered by another; and a shiver of new responsibility involuntarily ran through Henry's veins.

"May the hands be always strong and clean enough to hold so precious a gift," he answered, gravely.

"Are you sad, dear?" asked Angel, presently, with a sort of divination.



“Not sad, dear, but serious,” he answered.

“Have I turned to a responsibility so soon?”

“You strange, wise child, I believe you are a witch.”

“Oh, I was right then.”

“Right in one way, but perhaps wrong in another. Don’t you know that some responsibilities are the most dearly coveted of mortal honours? But then we shouldn’t be worthy of them, if they didn’t make us feel a little serious. Can’t you imagine that to hear another say that her life is in one’s hands makes one feel just a little solemn?”

“But isn’t your life in mine, Henry?” asked Angel, simply.

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“Of course it is, dear,” answered Henry.

And then the moon began to rise through the trees, pouring enchantment over the sleeping woods, and the meadows half-submerged in lakes of mist.

Angel drew close to Henry, and watched it with big eyes.

“What a wonderful world it is! How beautiful and how sad!” she said, half to herself.

“Yes; there is nothing in the world so sad as beauty,” answered Henry.

“If only to-night could last forever! If only we could die now, sitting just like this, with the moon rising yonder.”

“But we shall have many nights like this together,” said Henry.

“No; we shall never have this night again. We may have other wonderful nights, but they will be different. This will never come again.”

Henry instinctively realised that here was a mystical side to Angel’s nature which, however it might charm him, was not to be indiscriminately encouraged, and he tried to rally her out of her sadness, but her feeling was too much his own for him to persist; and as the moonlight moved in its ascension from one beautiful change to another, now woven by branches and leaves into weird tapestries of light and darkness, now hanging like some golden fruit from the boughs, and now uplifted like a lamp in some window of space, they sat together, alike held by the ancient spell; and, presently, Henry so far lost himself in it as to quote some lines entirely in Angel’s mood:

“She dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die;
And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips
Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh,
Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips:
Ay, in the very temple of Delight
Veiled Melancholy has her sov’ran shrine,
Though seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue
Can burst Joy’s grape against his palate fine;
His soul shall taste the sadness of her might,
And be among her cloudy trophies hung.”

“What wonderful lines!” said Angel; “who wrote them? Are they your own?”

“Ah, Angel, what would I give if they were! No, they are by John Keats. You must let me give you his poems.”



Presently, the moonlight began to lose its lustre. It grew pale, and, as it were, anxious; dark billows of clouds threatened to swallow up its silver coracle, and presently the world grew suddenly black with its submergence, the woods and meadows disappeared, and Henry and Angel began playfully to strike matches to see each other's faces. Thus they suddenly flared up to each other out of the darkness, like Rembrandts seen by lightning, and then they were lost again, and were only voices fumbling for each other in the dark.

Yet, even so, lips and arms found each other without much difficulty, and when they began to think of the last train, and fear they would miss it, but waited for just one last good-night kiss under their sacred tree, the world suddenly lit up again, for the moon had triumphed over its enemies, and come out just in time to give them its blessing.



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CHAPTER XXVI

CONCERNING THE BEST KIND OF WIFE FOR A POET

We are apt sometimes to complain that so much of importance in our lives is at the dispensation of accident, yet how often too are we compelled to confess that some of the happiest and most fruitful circumstances of our lives are due to the far-seeing diplomacies of chance.

Among no set of circumstances is this more true than in the fateful relations of men and women. While, in a blind sort of way, we may be said to choose for ourselves the man or woman with whom we are to share the joys and sorrows of our years, yet the choice is only superficially ours. Frequently our brains, our antecedent plans, have no part in the decision. The woman we choose appears at the wrong time, in the wrong place, in an undesirable environment, with hair and eyes and general complexion different in colour from what we had predestined for ourselves, short when we had made up our minds for tall, and tall when we had hoped for short. Yet, in spite of all our preconceptions, we choose her. This is not properly a choice in which the intelligence confessedly submits to violence. It is the compulsion of mysterious instincts that know better than our brains or our tastes.

Now had she been asked beforehand, Esther might not have sketched out a Mike as the ideal of her maiden dreams, nor indeed might Henry have described an Angelica, any more than perhaps Mike an Esther, or Angelica a Henry. Yet chance has only to place Esther and Mike, and Angelica and Henry in the same room together for less than a minute of time, and they fly into the arms of each other's souls with an instant recognition. This is a mystery which it will take more than biology to explain.

A young man's dreams of the woman he will some day marry are apt to be meretricious, or at all events conventional. A young poet, especially, is likely to err in the direction of paragons of beauty, or fame, or romance. Perhaps he dreams of a great singer, or an illustrious beauty, ignorant of the natural law which makes great singers and illustrious beauties, in common with all artists, incapable of loving really any one but themselves. Or perhaps it will be some woman of great and exquisite culture. But chance knows that women of great and exquisite culture are usually beings lacking in those plastic elemental qualities which a poet, above all men, needs in the woman he shall love. Their very culture, while it may seem to broaden, really narrows them, limits them to a caste of mind, and, for an infinite suggestiveness, substitutes a few finite accomplishments.

Critics without understanding have wondered now and again at attachments such as that of Heine for his Mathilde. Yet in some ways Mathilde was the type of wife best suited for a poet. She was just a wondering child, a bit of unspoiled chaos. She meant

as little intellectually, and as much spiritually, as a wave of the sea, a bird of the air, a star in the sky.



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Another great poet always kept in his room a growing plant in a big tub of earth, and another tub full of fresh water. With the fire going, he used to say that he had the four elements within his four walls; and to people unaccustomed to talk with the elements these no doubt seemed dull and even remarkable companions,—like Heine's Mathilde.

Now Angel, though far more than a goose intellectually, having, indeed, a very keen and subtle mind, was only secondarily intellectual, being primarily something far more important. You no more asked of her to be intellectual, than you expect a spirit to be mathematical. She was just a dream-child, thrilling with wonder and love before the strange world in which she had been mysteriously placed,—a dream-child and an excellent housewife in one, as full of common-sense on the one hand, as she was filled with fairy "nonsense" on the other. She was just, in fact, the wife for a poet.

The interest taken in each other by Angel and the Man in Possession had not been unobserved by Angel's family. Her sisters had teased her considerably on the subject.

"Why have you changed the way of wearing your hair, Angel?" they would say, "Does Mr. Mesurier like it that way?" or, "My word! we are getting smart and particular, now a certain gentleman has come into the office!" or again, "How small your writing is nowadays, Angel! What have you changed it for? I like your big old writing best; but I suppose—" and then they would retreat to a safe distance to finish—"Mr. Mesurier isn't of the same opinion!"

Sometimes Esther would start in pursuit, and playful scimmages would ensue, the hilarious uproar of which would turn poor Mrs. Flower's brain.

Mrs. Flower had certainly not been unobservant, and one may perhaps suspect that those cakes and other delicacies which she had so often sent up the yard, had not been sent entirely without those ulterior designs which every thoughtful mother may becomingly cherish for her daughters.

After Angel and Henry's excursion to the country together, Henry felt that some official announcement of the state of his heart was demanded of him, and lost no time in finding Mr. Flower alone for that tremulous purpose. However, it was soon over. There were no questions of *dots* and marriage settlements to discuss. Genealogically, both sides were about equally distinguished, and, socially, belonged to that large undefined class called "respectable"—though it must not be supposed that, when so minded, families of that "respectable" zone do not occasionally make nice distinctions. "Do you know what you are asking for?" once said a retired tradesman's wife in Sidon to her daughter's suitor. "Do you know that both Katie's grandfathers were mayors?"

But there were no traditional mayoralties to keep these two young hearts asunder. It was understood on both sides that they had nothing to bring but each other, and they asked nothing better. Angel was going to marry a poet, and Henry a fairy; and not only

they themselves, but the whole family, was more than satisfied. Mr. Flower was undisguisedly pleased, and the tears stood in his eyes as he gripped Henry's hand.



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"I've liked you," he said, "since the first time we shook hands. There was something honest about your grip I liked, and I go a good deal by these things. It is not many men I would trust with my little Angel; for when you take her, you take her father's great treasure. Guard her well, dear lad, guard her well."

CHAPTER XXVII

THE BOOK OF ANGELICA

The first duty of a poet's wife is to inspire him. When she ceases to do that—but that is a consideration which need not occupy us in this unsophisticated story. We have already seen that Angelica in this respect early began her wifely duties towards Henry; and that little song he read in chapter twenty-five was but one of many he had written to her in his capacity of man in possession.

The feminine inspirations of his early youth had been numerous, but mediocre in quality. Even in love, as in all else, his opportunities had been second and even third-rate. He had broken his boy's heart, time after time, for some commonplace, little provincial miss who knew not "the god's wonder or his woe." But, at last, in circumstances so unforeseen, the maiden of the Lord had been revealed to him, and with the revelation a great impulse of metrical expression had come upon the young poet. All day long rhythms and fancies were effervescing within him, till at length he had quite a publishable mass of verse for which, it is to be feared, Angelica must be counted responsible.

Of these he was busily making a surreptitious fair copy one morning, when old Mr. Septimus Lingard suddenly visited his seclusion, with the announcement that his task there was at an end, so that he might now return to his regular office. Though, of course, Henry had realised that the present happy arrangement could not go on for ever, the news brought temporary desolation to the two young lovers. For four months their days had been spent within a few yards of each other; and though Angel's excursions up the yard to Henry's desk could not be many, or long, each day, yet each was conscious that the other was near at hand. When Angel sang at her housework, it was from the secure sense that Henry was close by. Their separation was little more than that of a husband and wife working in different rooms of the same house. But now their meetings would have to be arranged out somewhere in a cold world, little considerate of the convenience of lovers, and, for whole days of warm proximity, they would have to exchange occasional snatched precarious hours.

Well, the only thing to do was for Henry to work away at their dream of a home together—home together, however little, just four walls to love each other in, away from the gaze of prying eyes, none daring to make them afraid. How that home was to be compassed was far from clear in either of their minds; but vaguely it was felt that it would be brought



about by the powerful enchantments of literature. Henry had recently had one of Angel's poems accepted by a rather good magazine, and the trance of joy in which for fully two hours he had sat gazing at that, his first, proof-sheet, was hardly less rapturous than that into which he had fallen after seeing Angel for the first time,—so dear are the emblems of his craft to the artist, at the beginning, and still at the end, of his career.



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So Henry had to finish the fair copy of his poems at home in his lodgings of an evening, for so ambitious a private enterprise could not be carried on in his own office without perilous interruptions. He was making the copy with especial care, in the form of a real book; and when it was made, he daintily bound it in vellum with his own hands. Then he wrapped it lovingly in tissue paper, and kept it by him two or three days, in readiness for Angel's birthday, on the morning of which day he hid it in a box of flowers and sent it to Angel. The sympathetic reader can imagine her delight, as she discovered among the flowers a dainty little white volume, bearing the title-page, "The Book of Angelica, by Henry Mesurier. Tyre, 1886. Edition limited to one copy."

Now this little book presently began to enjoy a certain very carefully limited circulation among Angel's friends. Of course they were not allowed to take it away. They were only allowed to look at it now and again for a few minutes, Angel anxiously standing by to see that they did not soil her treasure. Sometimes Mr. Flower would ask Angel to show it to one of the family friends; and thus one evening it came beneath the eyes of a little Scotch printer who had a great love for poetry and some taste in it.

"The man's a genius," he said, with all that authority with which a strong Scotch accent mysteriously endows the humblest Scot.

"The man's a genius," he repeated; "his poems must be printed."

Henry had already found that this was easier said than done, for he had already tried several London publishers who professed their willingness to publish—at his expense. This little Scotch printer, however, was to prove more venturesome. He forthwith communicated a proposal to Henry through the Flowers. If Henry would provide him with a list of a certain number of friends he could rely on for subscriptions, he would take the risk of printing an edition, and give Henry half the profits,—a proposal as generous as it was rash. Angel communicated the offer in an excited little letter, with the result that Mr. Leith and Henry met one morning in the bar-parlour of "The Green Man Still," and parted an hour or so after in a high state of friendship, and deeply pledged together to a mutual adventure of three hundred copies of a book to be called "The Book of Angelica," and to be printed in so dainty a fashion that the mere outside should attract buyers.

Mr. Leith worked under difficulties, for his business, small as it was, was much saddled with pecuniary obligations which it but inadequately supported. His printing of Henry's poems was really a work of sheer idealism which none but a Scotsman, or perhaps an Irishman, would have undertaken; and it was a work that might at any moment be interrupted by bailiffs, empowered to carry away the presses and the very types over which Henry loved to hang in his spare hours, trying to read in the lines of mysteriously carved metal, his "Madrigal to Angelica singing," or his "Sonnet on first beholding Angelica."



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Then Mr. Leith was of a convivial disposition; and Henry and he must have spent more hours drinking to the success of the little book than would have sufficed to print it twice over. However, the day did at last come when it was a living, breathing reality, and when Angel and Henry sat with tears of joy over the little new-born "Book of Angelica." Was it not, they told each other, the little spirit-child of their love? How wonderful it all was! How wonderful their future was going to be!

"What does it feel like?" said Henry, playfully recalling their old talk, "to have a book written all about one's self?"

"It is to feel the happiest and proudest girl in the world."

That all the other young people were hardly less happy and excited about the little book goes without saying. Mike spent quite a large sum in copies, and for a while employed his luncheon-hour in asking at book-shops with a nonchalant air, as though he had barely heard of the author, if they sold a little book called "The Book of Angelica." Mrs. Mesurier seemed to see her faith in her boy beginning to be justified; and when James Mesurier opened his local paper one morning, and found a long and appreciative article on a certain "fellow-townsmen," he cut it out to paste in his diary. Perhaps the lad would prove right, after all.

CHAPTER XXVIII

WHAT COMES OF PUBLISHING A BOOK

It is only just to Tyre to acknowledge that it behaved quite sympathetically towards the young poet thus discovered in its midst. Its newspapers reviewed him with marked kindness,—a kindness which in a few years' time, when he had long since grown out of his baby volume, he was obliged to set to the credit of the general goodness of human nature, rather than to the poetic quality of his own verses. In many unexpected quarters also he met with recognition which, if not always intelligent, was at least gratifying. For praise, or at least some form of notice, is breath in the nostrils of the young poet. He hungers to feel that his personality counts for something, though it be merely to anger his fellow-men. It was perhaps no very culpable vanity on his part to be pleased that people began to point him out in the streets, and whisper that that was the young poet; and that distant acquaintances seemed more ready to smile at him than before. Now and again one of these would stop him to say how pleased he had been to see the kind article about him in *The Tyrian Daily Mail*, and that he intended to buy "the work" as soon as possible. Henry smiled to himself, to hear his frail little flower of a volume spoken of as a "work," as though it had been the Encyclopaedia Britannica; and he rather wondered what that would-be purchaser would make of it, as he turned over pages of which so large a proportion was reserved for a spotless frame of margin. No



doubt he would decide that the margin had been left for the purpose of making notes,—
making notes on those abstruse rose-petals of boyish song!



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Even in far-away London,—which was as yet merely a sounding name to these young people,—hard-worked reviewers, contemptuously disposing of batches of new poetry in a few lines, found a kind word or two to say for the little provincial volume; and, through one agency or another, Mr. Leith, within six weeks of the publication, was able to announce that the edition was exhausted and that there was something like forty pounds profit to share between them.

That poetry could be exchanged for real money, Henry had heard, but had never hoped to work the miracle in his own case. It was like selling moonlight, or Angelica's smiles. Was it not, indeed, Angelica's smiles turned from one kind of gold into another? One more change they should undergo, and then return to her from whom they had come. From minted gold of the realm they should change into the gold of a ring, and thus Angel should wear upon her finger the ornament of her own smiles. Setting aside a small proportion of his gains to buy Esther and Mike, Dot and Mat and his mother, a little memorial present each, he then spent the rest on Angel's ring. Angel pretended to scold him for his extravagance; but, as no woman can resist a ring, her remonstrance was not convincing, and then, as Henry said, was it not their betrothal ring, and, therefore, one of the legitimate expenses of love?

Three other acknowledgments his poems brought him. The first was a delightful letter from Myrtilla Williamson. How much men of talent owe to the letters of women has never been sufficiently acknowledged, as the debt can never be adequately repaid. Of the many branches of woman's unselfishness, this is perhaps the most important to the world. Always behind the flaming renown of some great soldier, statesman, or poet, there is a woman's hand, or the hands, maybe, of many women, pouring, unseen, the nutritive oil of praise.

This letter Henry, in the gladness of his heart, ingenuously showed to Angel, with the result that it provoked their first quarrel. With the charms of a child, Angel, it now appeared, united also the faults. She had it in her to be bitterly and unreasonably jealous. She read the letter coldly.

"You seem very proud of her praise," she said; "is it so very valuable?"

"I value it a good deal, at all events," answered Henry.

"Oh, I see!" retorted Angel; "I suppose my praise is nothing to hers."

"Angel dear, what *do* you mean?"

"Oh, nothing, of course; but I'm sure you must regret caring for an ignorant girl like me, when there are such clever, talented women in the world as your Mrs. Williamson. I hate your learned women!"



“Angel, I’m surprised you can talk like that. Because we love each other, are we to have no other friends?”

“Have as many as you like, dear. Don’t think I mind. But I don’t want to see their letters.”

“Very well, Angel,” answered Henry, quietly. He was making one of those discoveries of temperament which have to be made, and have to be accepted, in all close relationships. This was evidently one of Angel’s faults. He must try to help her with it, as he must try and let her help him with his.

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The second was a letter, forwarded care of his printer, by one of the London reviews which had noticed his verses. It was from a rising young London publisher who, it appeared from an envelope enclosed, had already tried to reach him direct at Tyre. "Henry Mesurier, Esqre, Author of 'The Book of Angelica,' Tyre," the address had run, but the post-office of Tyre had returned it to the sender, with the words "Not known" officially stamped upon it.

He was as yet "not known," even in Tyre! "In another five years he shall try again," said Henry, savagely, to himself, "and we shall see whether it will be 'not known' then!"

The letter expressed the writer's pleasure in the extracts he had seen from Mr. Mesurier's book, and hoped that when his next book was ready, he would give the writer an opportunity of publishing it. Fortune was beginning already to smile.

But the third acknowledgment was something more like a frown, and was, at all events, by far the most momentous outcome of Henry's first publication. One morning, soon after Mr. Leith had paid over to him his twenty pounds profit, he found himself unexpectedly requested to step into "the private office." There, at Mr. Lingard's table, he found the three partners seated in solemn conclave, as for a court-martial. Mr. Lingard, as senior partner, was the spokesman.

"Mr. Mesurier," he began, "the firm has been having a very serious consultation in regard to you, and has been obliged, very reluctantly, I would have you believe, to come to a painful conclusion. We gladly acknowledge that during the last few months your work has given us more satisfaction than at one time we expected it to give. But, unfortunately, that is not all. Your attention to your duties, we admit, has been very satisfactory. It is not a sin of omission, but one of commission, of which we have to complain. What we have to complain of as business men is a matter which perhaps you will say does not concern us, though on that point we must respectfully differ from you. Mr. Mesurier, you have recently published a book."

Henry drew himself up haughtily. Surely that was nothing to be ashamed of.

"It is quite a pretty little book," continued Mr. Lingard, with one of his grim smiles. "It contains some quite pretty verses. Oh, yes, I have seen it," and Henry noticed a copy of the offending little volume lying, like a rose, among some legal papers at Mr. Lingard's left hand; "but its excellence as poetry is not to the point here. Our difficulty is that you are now branded so unmistakably as a poet, that it is no use our any longer pretending to our clients that you are a clerk. So long as you were only suspected of being a poet," and the old man smiled again, "it did not so much matter; but now that all Tyre knows you, by your own act and deed, as a poet, the case is different. We can no longer, without risk of losing confidence with our clients, send an acknowledged poet to inspect their books—though, personally, we may have every faith in your capacity. No doubt they will be glad enough to buy your books in the future; but they will be nervous

of trusting you with theirs at the moment.” And the old man laughed heartily at his own humour.



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“You mean, then, sir, that you will have no further need for my services?” said Henry, looking somewhat pale; for it is one thing to hate the means of one’s livelihood, and another to exchange it for none.

“I’m afraid, my dear lad, that that is what it comes to. We are, I hope you will believe, exceedingly sorry to come to such a conclusion, both for our own sakes and yours, as well as that of your father,—who is an old and valued friend of ours; but we are able to see no other way out of the difficulty. Of course, you will not leave us this minute; but take what time you need to look round and arrange your future plans; and so far as we are concerned, we shall part from you as good friends and sincere well-wishers.”

The old man held out his hand, and Henry took it, with a grateful sense of the friendly manner in which Mr. Lingard had performed a painful task, and a certain recognition that, after all, a poet must be something of a nuisance to business-men.

When he returned to his desk, he sat for a long time thoughtful, divided in mind between exultation that he was soon to be free to take the adventurous highway of literature, and anxiety as to where in a month’s time his preliminary meals were to come from.

Yet, after all, the main thing was to be free of this servitude. Out of freedom all things might be hoped.

Still, as Henry looked round at the familiar faces of his fellow-clerks, and realised that in a month’s time his comradeship with them would be at an end, he was surprised to feel a certain pang of separation. Mere custom has so great a part in our affections, that though a routine may have been dull and distasteful, if it has any extenuating circumstances at all, we change it with a certain irrational regret. After all, his office-life was associated with much contraband merriment; and, unconsciously, his associates had taken a valuable part in his training, humanised him in certain directions, as he had humanised them in others. They had saved him from diletanteism, and whatever he wrote in future would owe something warm and kindly to the years he had spent with them.

His very desk took on a pathetic expression, as of a place that was so soon to know him no more for ever; and Mr. Smith, wrangling over wet-traps and cesspools at the counter, just as on the first day he had heard him, almost moved him to tears. Perhaps in ten years’ time, were he to come back, he would find him still at his post, fervidly engaged in the same altercations, with only a little additional greyness at the temples to mark the lapse of time.

And Jenkins would still be sitting in the little screened-off cupboard, with “cashier” painted on the glass window. As three o’clock approached, he would still be heard loudly counting his cash and shovelling the gold into wash-leather bags, and the silver into little paper-bags marked L5 apiece, in a wild rush to reach the bank before it closed.



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And would the same good fellows, a little more serious, because long since married, be cracking jokes and loafing near the fire-guard, in some rare safe hour, of the afternoon when all the partners were out, to make a spring for the desks, as the carefully learnt tread of one or another of those partners followed the opening of the front door.

The very work that he hated seemed to wear an unwonted look of tenderness. Who would keep the books he had kept—with something of his father's neatness; who would look after the accounts of "the Rev. Thomas Salthouse," or take charge of "Ex'ors James Shuttleworth, Esqre"?

Of course, it was absurd—absurd, perhaps, just because it was human. For was he not going to be free, free to fulfil his dreams, free to follow those voices that had so often called him from beyond the sunset? Soon he would be able to cry out to them, with literal truth, "I am yours, yours—all yours!" And in those ten years which were to pass so invariably for Mr. Smith, and for Jenkins and the rest, what various and dazzling changes might be, must be, in store for him. Long before the end of them he must have written masterpieces and become famous, and Angel and he be long settled together in their paradise of home.

Henry was pleased to find that his chums were to miss him no less than he was to miss them. As an unofficial master of their pale revels, his place would not be easy to fill; and he was much touched, when, a day or two before the end of the month, which was the time mutually agreed upon for Henry to look round, they intimated their desire to give a little dinner in his honour at "The Jovial Clerks" tavern.

Henry was nothing loth, and the evening came and went with no little emotion and no little wine, on either side. He had bidden good-bye to his employers in the afternoon, and Mr. Lingard had shaken his hand, and admonished him as to his future with something of paternal affection.

Toward the close of the dinner, Bob Cherry, who acted as chairman, rose, with an unaccustomed blush upon his cheek, to propose the toast of the evening. They had had the honour and pleasure, he said, to be associated for several years past with a gentleman to whom that evening they were to say good-bye. No better fellow had ever graced the offices of Lingard and Fields, and his would be a real loss to the gaiety of their little world. They understood that he was a poet; and indeed had he not already published a charming volume with which they were all acquainted!—still this made no difference to them. Certain high powers might object, but they liked him none the less; and whether he was a poet or not, he was certainly a jolly good fellow, and wherever his new career might take him, the good wishes of his old chums would certainly follow him. The chairman concluded his speech by requesting his acceptance of a copy of the "Works of Lord Macaulay," as a small remembrance of the days they had spent together.



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The toast having been seconded and drunk with resounding cordiality, Henry responded in a speech of mingled playfulness and emotion, assuring them, on his part, that though they might not be poets, he thought no worse of them for that, but should always remember them as the best fellows he had ever known. The talk then became general, and tender with reminiscence. After all, what a lot of pleasant things those hard years had given them to remember! So they kept the evening going, and it was not till an early hour of the following day that this important volume of Henry's life was finally closed.

CHAPTER XXIX

MIKE'S TURN TO MOVE

While Henry had been busily engaged in winning Angelica and writing and printing his little book, Mike's fortunes had not been idle. Meanwhile, the Sothern Dramatic Club had given two more performances, in which his parts had been considerable, and been played by him with such success as to make the former pieman's apprentice one of the chief members of the club. Mike and his friends therefore became more and more eager for him to try his talents on the great stage. But this was an experiment not so easy to make.

However unknown a writer may be, he can still at least write his book in his obscurity, and, when done, bring it to market, with a reasonable hope of its finding a publisher; moreover, though he may remain for years unappreciated, his writings still go on fighting for him till his due recognition is won. He has not to find his publisher before he begins to write. Yet it is actually such a disability under which the unproved and often the proved actor must labour. Unless some one engages him to act, and provides an audience for him, he has no opportunity of showing his powers. And such opportunities are difficult to find, unless you are a dissolute young lord, or belong to one of the traditional theatrical families,—whose members are brought up to the stage, as the sons of a lawyer are brought up to law. For the avenues to the stage are blocked by perhaps more frivolous incompetents than any other profession. Any idle girl with good looks, and any idle gentleman with something of a good carriage, deem themselves qualified for one of the most arduous of the arts.

Mike's plan had been to try every considerable actor that came to Tyre, who might possibly have a vacant place in his company; but he had tried many in vain. While one or two were unable to see him at all, most of them treated him with a kindness remarkable in men daily besieged by the innumerable hopeless. They gave him good advice; they wished him well; but already they had long lists of experienced applicants waiting their turn for the coveted vacancy. At last, however, there came to Tyre a famous romantic actor who was said to be more sympathetic towards the youthful aspirant than the other heads of his profession, and as, too, he was rumoured to be

vulnerable on the side of literature, Mike and Henry agreed to make a joint attack upon him. Mike should write a brief note asking for an interview, and Henry should follow it up with another letter to the same effect, and at the same time send him a copy of "The Book of Angelica."



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The plan was carried out. Both letters and the book were sent, and the young men awaited with impatience the result. Henry had adopted a very lofty tone. "In granting my friend an interview," he had said, "you may be giving his first chance to an actor of genius. Of course you may not; but at least you will have had the satisfaction of giving to possible genius that benefit of the doubt which we have a right to expect from the creator of ——," and he named one of the actor's most famous roles.

A cordial answer came by return, enclosing two stalls for the following evening, when, said the great actor, he would be glad to see Mr. Laflin during or after the performance. The two young men were in their places as the curtain rose, and it goes without saying that their enthusiasm was unequalled in the audience. Between the third and fourth acts there was a considerable interval, and early in the performance it had been notified to Mike that the great actor would see him then. So when the time came, with a whispered "good luck" from Henry, he left his place and was led through a little mysterious iron door at the back of the boxes, on to the stage and into the great man's dressing-room. Opening suddenly out of the darkness at one side of the stage, it was more like a brilliantly lighted cave hung with mirrors than a room. Mirrors and lights and laurel wreaths with cards attached, and many photographs with huge signatures scrawled across them, and a magnificent being reading a book, while his dresser laced up some high boots he was to wear in the following act,—made Mike's first impression. Then the magnificent being looked up with a charming smile.

"Good-evening, Mr. Laflin. I am delighted to see you. I hope you will excuse my rising."

He said "Mr. Laflin" with a captivating familiarity of intonation, as though Mike was something between an old friend and a distinguished stranger.

"So you are thinking of joining our profession. I hope you liked the performance. I saw you in front, or at least I thought it was you. And your friend? I hope he will come and see me some other time. I have been delighted with his poems."

There is something dazzling and disconcerting to an average layman about an actor's dressing-room, even though the dressing-room be that of an intimate friend. He feels like a being on the confines of two worlds and belonging to neither, awkwardly suspended 'twixt fact and fancy. The actor for a while has laid aside his part and forgotten his wig and his make-up. As he talks to you, he is thinking of himself merely as a private individual; whereas his visitor cannot forget that in appearance he is a king, or an eighteenth-century dandy, or—though you know him well enough as a clean-shaven young man of thirty—a bowed and wrinkled greybeard. The visitor's voice rings thin and hesitating. It cannot strike the right pitch, and generally he does himself no sort of justice.



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Perhaps, however, it was because Mike had been born for this world in which now for the first time he found himself, that he suffered from none of this embarrassment; perhaps, too, it was some half-conscious instinct of his own gifts that made him quite self-contained in the presence of acknowledged distinction, so self-contained that you might have thought he had no reverence. As he had passed across the stage, he had eyed that mysterious behind-the-scenes rather with the eye of a future stage-manager, than of a youth all whose dreams converged at this point, and at this moment.

One touch of the poetry of contrast caught his eye, of which custom would probably have made him unobservant. In an alcove of the stage, a "scene-dock," as Mike knew already to call it, a beautiful spirit in gauze and tights was silently rehearsing to herself a dance which she had to perform in the next act. Softly and silently she danced, absorbed in the evolutions of her lithe young body, paying as little heed to the rough stage-hands who hurried scenery about her on every side, as those hardened stage-hands paid to her dancing. Henry or Ned would probably have fallen madly in love with her on the spot. To Mike, she was but a part of the economy of the stage; and had she been Cleopatra herself, eyes filled to overflowing with the beauty of Esther would have taken no more intimate note of her. So, it is said, painters and sculptors regard their models with cold, artistic eyes.

This self-possession enabled Mike to show to the best advantage; and while they talked, the great actor, with an eye accustomed to read faces, soon made up his mind about him.

"I believe you and your friend are right, Mr. Laflin," he said. "I am much mistaken if you are not a born actor. But if you are that, you will not need to be told that the way is long and difficult, nor will you mind that it is so. Every true artist rather loves than fears the drudgery of his art. It is one of the tests of his being an artist. Art is undoubtedly the pleasantest of all work; but it is work for all that, and none of the easiest. Perhaps it is the pleasantest because it is the hardest. So if you really want to be an artist, you won't object to beginning your journey to the top right away at the bottom."

"Anywhere at all, sir," said Mike, his heart beating at this hint of what was coming.

"Well, in that case," continued the other, "I can perhaps do something, though a very little, for you."

Mike eagerly murmured his gratitude.

"I'm sorry to say I have no vacancy in my own company at present; but would you be willing to take a part in my Christmas pantomime? I may say that I myself began life as harlequin."

"I will gladly take anything you can offer me," said Mike.

“Shall we call it settled then? But I sha’n’t need you for another four months. Meanwhile I will have a contract made out and sent to you—”



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“Curtain rising for fourth act, sir,” cried the call-boy, putting his head in at the door at that moment.

“You see I shall have to say good-bye,” said the good-natured manager, rising and moving towards the door; “but I shall look forward to seeing you in October. My good wishes to your friend;” and so the happiest person in that theatre slipped back to his seat by the side of a friend who was surely as happy at his good news as though it had been his own.

Meanwhile Esther had been counting the hours till ten, when she made a pretence of going to bed with the rest. But there was no sleep for her till she had heard Mike’s news. Her bedroom looked out from the top of the house into the front garden, and she had arranged to have a lamp burning at the window, so that Mike, on his way home, should understand that all was safe for a snatched five minutes’ talk in the porch. She sat trying to read till about midnight, when through her half-opened windows came the soft whistle she had been waiting for. Turning down the lamp to show that she had heard, she stole down through the quiet house and cautiously opened the front door, fastened, it seemed, with a hundred bolts and chains.

“Is that you, Mike?”

For answer two arms, which she didn’t mistake for a burglar’s, were thrown round her.

“Esther, I’ve found my million pounds.”

“Oh, Mike! He’s really going to help you?”

And here there is no further necessity for eaves-dropping. All persons except Mike and Esther will please leave the porch.

CHAPTER XXX

UNCHARTERED FREEDOM

On the morning after the dinner with which he bade farewell to Messrs. Lingard and Fields, Henry awoke at his usual hour to a very unusual feeling. For the first time in his life he could stay in bed as long as he pleased.

On the other side of the room Ned Hazell lay sleeping the deep sleep of the unpunctual clerk; and Henry, when he had for a moment or two dwelt upon his own happiness, took a malicious joy in arousing him.

“Ned,” he shouted, “get up! You’ll be late for the office.”



Ned gave out a deep sound, something between a snore, a moan, and an imprecation.

“Ned!” his tormentor persisted, drawing the clothes warmly round him, in a luxury of indifference to the time of day.

Ned presently began rubbing his head vigorously, which was one of his preliminaries of awakening, and then mournfully raised himself in bed, a pillar of somnolence.

“You might let a fellow have his sleep out,” he said; “why don’t you get up yourself?—oh, I remember, you’re a literary gentleman from to-day. That’s why you’re so mighty ready to root me out,” and he aimed a pillow at Henry’s bed in derision.

Yes, Henry was free, an independent gentleman of time and space. The clock might strike itself hoarse, yet, if he wished, he might go on staying in bed. He was free! His late task-masters had no jurisdiction here. It would even be in his power here to order Mr. Fields out of the room, and, if he refused, forcibly to eject him into the street. Why didn’t Mr. Fields appear to gratify him in this matter?



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So he indulged his imagination, while Ned dressed in haste, with the fear of the tyrant evident upon him. Poor fellow, he would have to choose between two cups of coffee and two eggs and five minutes late! Probably he would split the difference, bolt one cup of coffee and one egg, and arrive two and a half minutes late. Henry watched him with compassion; and when he had gone his ways, himself rose languidly and dressed indolently, as with the aid of an invisible valet. At length he sauntered down to breakfast, and sent out for a morning paper, which he on no account ever read. He could imagine no more insulting waste of time. He looked it through, but found no reference to the real significance of the day.

Breakfast over, he wondered what he should do with himself, how he should spend the day. His clear duty was to begin being a great man on the spot, and work at being a great man every day punctually from nine till six. But where should he begin? Should he sit down in a business-like way and begin his long romantic poem, or should he write an essay, or again should he make a start on his novel?

Romantic poems, he felt, however, are only well begun on special days not easy to define; essays are only written on days when we have determined to be idle,—and this, after the opening flirtation with indolence, must be a busy day,—and it is not every day that one can begin a novel. He might arrange his books, but really they were very well arranged already. Or suppose he went out for a walk. Walking quickened the brain. He might go and look in at the Art Gallery, where he hadn't been for a long while, and see the new picture the morning paper was talking about. It was by a painter whose poems he already knew and loved. That might inspire him. So, by an accident of idleness, he presently found himself standing rapt before the most wonderful picture he had ever seen,—a picture to see which, he said to himself, men would make pilgrimages to Tyre, when Tyre was a moss-grown, ruinous seaport, from which the traffic of the world had long since passed away.

Henry at this time had visited none of the great galleries and, except in a few reproductions, knew nothing of the great Italian masters. Therefore to him this picture was Italy, the Renaissance, and Catholicism, all concentrated into one enthralling canvas. But it was something greater than that. It was the terrible meeting of Youth and Love and Death in one tremendous moment of infinite loss. Infinite passion and infinite loss were here pictured, in a medium which combined all that was spiritual and all that was sensual in a harmony of beauty that was in the same moment delirium and peace. The irresistible cry of the colour to the senses, the spherical call of the theme and its agony to the soul. Beatrice dead, and Dante taken in a dream across the strewn poppies of her death-chamber, to look his last on the sleeping face, yet a little smiling in the after-glow



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of life; her soul already carried by angels far over the curved and fluted roofs of the Florentine houses, on its way to Paradise. Little Beatrice! Not till they meet again in Paradise shall he see again that holy face. In a dream of loss he gazes upon her, as the angels lift up the flower-garnished sheet; and not only her face, but every detail of that room of death is etched in tears upon his eyes,—the distant winding stair, the pallid death-lamps, the intruding light of day. All Passion and all Loss, all Youth, all Love, and all Death met together in an everlasting requiem of tragic colour.

Henry sat long before this picture, enveloped, as it were, in its rich gloom, as the painted profundity of a church absorbs one in its depths. And with the impression of its solemn beauty was blent a despairing awe of the artist who, of a little coloured earth, had created such a masterpiece of vitality, thrown on to a thin screen of canvas so enduringly palpable, so sumptuous, and so poignantly dominating a reflection of his visions. What a passionate energy of beauty must have been in this man's soul; what a constant fury of meditation upon things divine!

When Henry came back to himself, his first thought was to share it with Angel. Little soul, how her face would flame, how her body would tremble with the wonder of it! In the minutiae, the technicalities of appreciation, Angel, like Henry himself, might be lacking; but in the motive fervour of appreciation, who was like her! It was almost painful to see the joy which certain simple wonders gave her. Anything intense or prodigal in nature, any splendidly fluent outpouring of the elements,—the fierce life of streaming fire, water in gliding or tumultuous masses, the vivid gold of crocus and daffodil spouting up through the earth in spring, the exquisite liquidity of a bird singing, —these, as with all elemental poetic natures, gave her the same keen joy which we fable for those who, in the intense morning of the world, first heard them; fable, indeed, for why should we suppose that because ears deaf a thousand years heard the nightingale too, it should therefore be less new for those who to-night hear it for the first time? Rather shall it be more than less for us, by the memories transmitted in our blood from all the generations who before have listened and gone their way.

So Henry sought out Angel, and they both stood in front of the great picture for a long while without a word. Presently Angel put the feeling of both of them into a single phrase,—

“Henry, dear, we have found our church.”

And indeed for many months henceforth this picture was to be their altar, their place of prayer. Often hereafter when their hopes were overcast, or life grew mean with little cares, they would slip, singly, or together, into that gallery, and—

“let the beauty of Eternity
Smooth from their brows the little frets of time.”



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Thus Henry's first day of freedom had begun auspiciously with the unexpected discovery of an inalienable possession of beauty. Yet the little cares were not far off, waiting their time; and that night, Henry lay long awake asking himself what he was going to do? Whence was to come the material gold and silver by which this impetuous spirit was to be sustained? A sum not exceeding five pounds represented his accumulated resources, and they would not last longer than—five pounds. He needed little, but that little he needed emphatically. Soon a new book and other literary projects would keep him going, but—meanwhile! How were the next two or three months to be bridged? Return to his father's house, he neither would, nor perhaps, indeed, could.

So he lay awake a long while, fruitlessly thinking; but, just before he slept, a thought that made him laugh himself awake suggested itself: "Why not go and ask Aunt Tipping to take pity on you?"

So he went to sleep, resolved, if only for the fun of it, to pay a visit to Aunt Tipping on the morrow.

CHAPTER XXXI

A PREPOSTEROUS AUNT

No doubt it has been surmised from what has gone before, that when Henry said to himself that he would go and see Aunt Tipping, he did not propose to himself a visit to the country seat of some quaint old lady of quality. Baronial towers and stately avenues of ancestral elm did not make a picturesque background for his thoughts as he recalled Aunt Tipping.

Poor kind Aunt Tipping, it is a shame to banter her memory even in so obvious a fashion; for if ever there was a kind heart, it was hers. In fact she possessed, in a degree that amounted to genius, one of the rarest of human qualities,—unconditional pity for the unhappy human creature. Within her narrow and squalid sphere, she was never known to fail of such succour as was hers to give to misfortune, however well-merited, or misery however self-made.

No religion or philosophy has ever yet been merciful enough to human weakness. Matilda Tipping repaired the lack so far as she went. In fact, she had unconsciously realised that weakness *is* human nature. It would be difficult to fix upon an offence that would disqualify you for Aunt Tipping's pity. To the prodigalities of the passions, and the appetites disastrously indulged, she was accustomed by a long succession of those sad and shady lodgers to whom it was part of her precarious livelihood to let her rooms, and, not infrequently, to forgive them their rent. That men and women should drink too much, and love too many, was, her experience told her, one of those laws of nature that seemed to make a good deal of unnecessary inconvenience in mortal affairs, but

against which mere preaching or punishment availed nothing. All that was to be done was, so far as possible, to repair their ravages in particular instances, and heal the wounds of human passion with simple human kindness.



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Of two vessels, one for honour and the other for dishonour, surely nature never made so complete a contrast as Matilda Tipping and her sister, Mary Mesurier. Both country girls, born in a humble, though defiantly respectable, stratum of society, the ways of the two sisters had already parted in childhood. Mary was studious, neat, and religious; Matilda was tomboyish, impatient of restraint, and fond of unedifying associates.

“Your aunt never aspired,” Mrs. Mesurier would say of Aunt Tipping sometimes to her children; and, while still a child, she had often reproached her with her fondness for gossiping with companions “beneath her.” Matilda could never be persuaded to care for books. She was naturally illiterate, and even late in life had a fixed aversion to writing her own letters; whereas, at the age of seven, Mary had been public scrivener for the whole village. But with these regrettable instincts, from the first Matilda had also manifested a whimsical liveliness, an unconquerable lightheartedness which made you forgive her anything, and for which, poor soul, she had use enough before she was done with life. At seventeen, added to good looks, of which at fifty there was scarcely a trace in the thin and meanly worn face, this vivacity had proved a tragic snare. A certain young capitalist—known as a great gentleman—of that countryside had pounced down on the gay and careless young Matilda, and had at once provided her life with its formative tragedy and its deathless romance. Even at fifty, hopelessly buried among the back streets and pawnshops of life, heaven still opened in the heart of Matilda Tipping at the mention of the name of William Allsopp. For several years she had lived with the Mesuriers, as general help to her sister, between whom and her, in spite of surface disparities, there was an indissoluble bond of affection; till, at thirty-five or so, she had suddenly won the heart of a sad old widower of fifty-five, named Samuel Tipping.

Samuel Tipping was no ordinary widower. As you looked at his severe, thoughtful face, surmounted by a shock of beautiful white hair, you instinctively respected him; and when you heard that he lived by cobbling shoes by day and playing a violin in the Theatre Royal orchestra by night, occasionally putting off his leather apron to give a music lesson in the front parlour of an afternoon, you respected him all the more. There had been but one thing against Mr. Tipping’s eligibility for marriage, Matilda Tipping would tell you, even years after, with a lowering of her voice: he was said to be an “atheist,” and a reader of strange books. Yet he seemed a quiet, manageable man, and likely—again in Mrs. Tipping’s phrase—to prove a “good provider;” so she had risked his heterodoxy, which indeed was a somewhat fanciful objection on her part, and made him, as he declared with his dying breath, the best of wives.



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It chanced that when Henry, in pursuance of his over-night resolve, made his way the following afternoon through a dingy little street, and knocked on the door of a dingy little house, bearing upon a brass plate the legend "Boots neatly repaired," Mr. Tipping was engaged in giving one of those very music lessons. A dingy little maid-of-all-work opened the door, and said that Mrs. Tipping was out shopping, but would be back soon. From the front parlour came the lifeless tum-tumming of the piano, and Mr. Tipping's voice gruffly counting time to the cheerless five-finger exercises of a very evident beginner.

"One—two—three! One—two—three! One—two—three!" went Mr. Tipping's voice, with an occasional infusion of savagery.

"But Mr. Tipping is at home?" said Henry. "I will wait till he is disengaged. I will make myself comfortable in the kitchen," (Henry knew his way about at Aunt Tipping's, and remembered there was only one front parlour) adding, with something of pride, "I'm Mrs. Tipping's nephew, you know."

Presently the torture in the front parlour was at an end; and, as Mr. Tipping was about to turn upstairs to the little back room where he mended his shoes, Henry emerged upon him from the kitchen. They had had some talks on books and the general misgovernment of the universe,—for Mr. Tipping really was something of an "atheist,"—on Henry's occasional visits, and were no strangers to each other.

"Why, Henry, lad, whoever expected to see you! Your aunt's out at present; but she'll be back soon. Come into the parlour."

"If you don't mind, Uncle Tipping, I'd rather come upstairs with you. I love the smell of the leather and the sight of all those sharp little knives, and the black, shiny 'dubbin,' do you call it? And we can have a talk about books till aunt comes home."

"All right, lad. But it's a dusty place, and there's hardly a corner to sit down in."

So up they went to a little room where, in a chaos of boots mended on one hand, and boots to mend on the other, sheets of leather lying about, in one corner a great tubfull of water in which the leather was soaked,—an old boyish fascination of Henry's,—Mr. Tipping spent the greater part of his days. He sat on a low bench near a window, along which ran a broad sill full of tools. On this, too, lay an opened book, into which Mr. Tipping would dip now and again, when he could safely leave the boot he was engaged upon to the mechanical skill of his hands. At one end of the tool-shelf was a small collection of books, a dozen or so shabby volumes, though these were far from constituting Mr. Tipping's complete library.

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Mr. Tipping belonged to that pathetic army of book-lovers who subsist on the refuse of the stalls, which he hunted not for rare editions, but for the sheer bread of life, or rather the stale crusts of knowledge. His tastes were not literary in the special sense of the word. For belles-lettres he had no fancy, and fine passages, except in so far as they were controversial, left him cold. His mind was primarily scientific, secondarily philosophic, and occasionally historic. Travels and books of physical science were the finds for which, mainly, he rummaged the stalls. At the moment his pet study was astronomy; and a curious apparatus in one of the corners, which Henry had noticed as he entered, was his sad attempt to rig up a telescope for himself.

"It's not so bad as it looks," he said, pointing it out; "but then," he added, with a smile half sad and half humorous, "there are not many stars to be seen from Tichborne Street."

It was a touching characteristic of the type of bookman to which Mr. Tipping belonged, that the astronomy from which he was reading by no means embodied the latest discoveries. In fact, it narrowly escaped being eighteenth-century science, for it was dated very early in the eighteen hundreds. But an astronomy was an astronomy to Mr. Tipping; and had Copernicus been born late enough, he would most certainly have imbibed Ptolemaic doctrines with grateful unsuspection. Indeed, had it been put to him: "This astronomy after Copernicus at half-a-crown, and this after Ptolemy for sixpence," his means alone would have left him no choice. It is so the old clothes of the mind, like the old clothes of the body,—superseded science, forgotten philosophy,—find a market, and a book remains a book, with the power of comforting or diverting some indigent, poor soul, so long as the stitching holds it together.

Presently there was a knock at the front door.

"There's your aunt," said Mr. Tipping; and, as the door opened, the little maid-of-all-work was to be heard whispering her mistress that a young gentleman who said he was her nephew had come and was upstairs with "the master."

"Well, I never!" exclaimed Mrs. Tipping, immediately starting upstairs towards the open door of the cobblery.

Henry was standing on the threshold, and the warm-hearted little woman gave him a hearty hug of welcome.

"Well, I *am* glad to see you! And how are they all at home?" and she ran over the list, name for name. "We mustn't forget your father. But he's a hard 'un and no mistake," said the aunt, putting on a mimic expression of severity.

"He's an upright man, is James Mesurier," said Mr. Tipping, rather severely.



“Oh, yes, yes; we know that, crosspatch. I’m saying nothing against him. He’s good at heart, I know; but he’s a little hard on the surface—like some other folks I know,” making a face at her husband. “But you must come down and talk to me a bit, lad; you’ll have had enough of him and his old books. You never saw the like of him! Here he sits day after day over his musty books, and you can hardly get him away for his meals. He’s no company for any one.”



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“Talk of something you can understand, lass,” retorted the husband, in a voice that took any unkindness from the words, rather like a father than a husband. “You don’t ail much for lack of company, I’m sure.”

“Now if it was only a good novel,” his wife persisted; “but nothing but travels, geographies, and such like. Last thing he’s taken up with is the stars. I suppose he’s been telling you about them—” and she said this half as though it were a new form of lunacy Mr. Tipping had developed, and half as though he had been opening up new realms of knowledge—original but useless. She was far indeed from understanding that lonely mind and its tragedy, thirsting so hopelessly for knowledge, and to die athirst. She heard him knock, knock all day upstairs; but the knocking told her nothing of his loneliness. He was just a good, hard-working, rather cross old man, unaccountably fond of printed matter, whom she liked to be good to, and if in her time that knocking upstairs should stop for ever—well! she wasn’t one to meet trouble half way, but she would miss it a good deal, old man as he was.

She was herself nearing fifty; but her slim little wiry body and her elfish, wrinkled face, never still, but ever alive with the same vivacity that years ago had attracted William Allsopp, made her seem younger than her years; and her husband treated her as though she were still a child, a wilful child.

“Eh, Matilda,” he said, “you’re just a child. No more nor less,—just a child. The years haven’t tamed you one bit—”

“Get out with you and your old stars!” she said, laughing. “Henry, come along and have a talk with your old aunt.”

Though invincibly cheerful through it all, Aunt Tipping was always in trouble, if not for herself, for somebody else. To-day, it was for herself, though it was but a minor reverse in the guerilla warfare of her life. A distressed lodger who had just left had begged her to accept, in lieu of rent, the pawn-ticket of a handsome clock which had been hers in happier days; and Mrs. Tipping, moved as she always was by any tale of woe, however elaborate, had consented. Nor in her world was such a way of settling accounts very exceptional, for pawn-tickets were there looked upon as legitimately negotiable securities. Indeed, Aunt Tipping was seldom without a selection of such securities upon her hands; and, if a neighbour should chance to be in need, say, of a new set of chimney ornaments, as likely as not Aunt Tipping had in her purse a pledge for the very thing. This she would sell at a reasonable profit, which would probably amount to but a small proportion of the original debt for which she had accepted it. It was not a lucrative business, though there were occasional “bargains” in it.

In that word “bargains,” all the active romance of Aunt Tipping’s life was now centred. In all departments of the cast-off and the second-hand she was a daring speculator; and a spirited “auction” now and again exhilarated her as much as a fortnight by the sea. That



house which she fought so desperately to keep tidy and respectable, had been furnished almost entirely in this way. There was hardly an article in it that had not already lived other lives in other houses, before it had been picked up, "dirt cheap," by Aunt Tipping.



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But this afternoon her confidence in human nature had received a cruel wound. When, after an hour's weary drag to a remote end of the town, she had arrived at the pawnshop where was preserved the handsome clock of the distressed lady, and had confidently presented the ticket and the necessary money, the man had looked awhile perplexed. They had no such clock, he said. And then, as he further examined the ticket, a light broke in upon him.

"My dear lady," he said, "look here. The year on this ticket has been changed."

So indeed it had, and poor Aunt Tipping was at least a year too late.

"Did you ever hear of such treatment?" she said to Henry; "and such a nice lady she was. 'I shall never forget your goodness to me, Mrs. Tipping,' she said as she went away, 'never, if I live to be a hundred.' I'll 'goodness' her, if ever I catch her. Cheating honest folks like that! Such people oughtn't to be allowed. I don't know how people can behave so!"

Aunt Tipping's indignation seldom outlived a few plaintive words of this sort; and had the offending lady of the clock appeared next moment, and given some Arabian Nights' explanation, there is little doubt that Aunt Tipping would have forgiven her on the spot. A tendency to do so was already active in her next remark,—

"Well, poor soul, we mustn't be too hard on her. We never know what we may be brought to ourselves." For it was Aunt Tipping's unformulated axiom that, whatever cock-and-bull stories misfortune may tell, there is always some truth in human misery.

When Henry had told Aunt Tipping his story, and ventured to hint a suggestion that, if it should not be inconvenient for her, he would like to take sanctuary with her for a month or two, till he got his hopes into working order, her little sharp face fairly gleamed with delight. You would have thought that he was bringing her some great benefit, instead of proposing to take something from her. That he should have thought of *her*, such a little humble aunt; that, added to the love she had for any one with any tincture of her family's blood running in their veins, plus her general weakness for any one in trouble, brought tears to her eyes that made her look quite young again.

"I should think so indeed!" she said. "The best your poor old auntie's got is yours with all her heart—Ah, your father never understood you. You've got too much of our side of the family in you. You're a bit wild, you know, lad; but you're none the worse for that, eh?"

There is no need to say that Aunt Tipping's understanding of the tastes and ambitions which had driven Henry momentarily to take refuge with her was of the vaguest; but all she needed to know of such a situation was that: here on the one hand was something

somebody very much wanted to do, and here on the other were certain stern powers ranked against his doing it. That was enough for her. Her



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sympathy with all forms of revolt was instantaneous. For law and order, as such, she had an instinctive antipathy, as in all contests whatsoever her one general rule was: "Side with the weaker." And it cannot but have been perceived that so much sympathy with weakness could hardly have been in the gift of weakness. No; Aunt Tipping was entirely impersonal in these charities of feeling, and it was because there was so much sterling honesty and strength hidden in her little wiry frame, that she could afford so much succour to those who were neither honest nor strong.

"Well, it was nice of you to think of your poor old aunt," she repeated again and again; and then she remarked on the good fortune which had caused the vacation of the front room over the parlour, her grievance against the lady of the handsome clock quite forgotten.

"It's a nice airy room," she said; and then she began planning how she might best arrange it for his comfort.

"Dear little aunt," said Henry, taking the little wisp of a woman into his arms, "you're the salt of the earth."

* * * * *

"Why ever didn't I think of it before!" exclaimed Aunt Tipping, presently. "I've got the very gentleman to help you with your writing."

"Indeed," said Henry, somewhat sceptical.

"Yes; he's down there in the back parlour. They say he's a great writer," continued Aunt Tipping; "but he's not very well the last day or two, and doesn't see anybody. To tell the truth, poor gentleman," she confided, lowering her voice, "he's just a little too fond of his glass. But he's as good and kind a gentleman as ever stepped, and always regular with his rent every Monday morning."

There was usually something mysterious about Aunt Tipping's lodgers. At their best, she had known them as elaborately wronged bye-products of aristocracy. Many of them were lawful expectants of illegally delayed fortunes, and at the very least they always drank romantically.

Thus it was that to the somewhat amused surprise of his family, Henry came to take up his abode for a while with Aunt Tipping, and that his books and the cast of Dante, and the sketch of the young Dante done in sepia by Myrtilla Williamson's own fair hand, came to find themselves in the incongruous environment of Tichborne Street.



CHAPTER XXXII

THE LITERARY GENTLEMAN IN THE BACK PARLOUR

Aunt Tipping proved not so ludicrously out of it after all in regard to the literary gentleman in the back parlour. Henry had hardly known what to expect; but certainly he had pictured no one so interesting as Ashton Gerard proved to be. For a dark den smelling strongly of whisky and water, and some slovenly creature of the under-world crouched in a dirty armchair over the fire, he found instead a pleasant little room, very neatly kept, with books, two or three good pictures,

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and general evidence of cultivated tastes; and on Mr. Gerard's refined sad face, which, being shaven, and surmounted by a tuft of vigorous curly hair, once black but now curiously splashed with vivid flakes of white, retained something of boyish beauty even at forty, you looked in vain for the marks of one who was in the grip of an imperious vice. Only by the marked dimness and weariness of his blue eyes, which gave the face a rather helpless, dreamy expression, might the experienced observer have understood. So to speak, the ocular will had gone out of them; they no longer grasped the visible, but glided listlessly over it; nor did they seem to be looking on things invisible. They were the eyes of the drowned.

Mr. Gerard had exceedingly gentle manners. It was easy to understand that a landlady would worship him. He gave little trouble, asked for the most necessary service as though it were a courtesy, and never forgot an interest in Aunt Tipping's affairs. On bright days he revealed a vein of quite boyish gaiety; and in his talk with Henry he flashed out a strange paradoxical humour, too often morbid in its themes, which, as usually the case with such humour, was really sadness coming to the surface in a jest.

It soon transpired that a favourite subject of his talk was that very weakness which most men would have been at pains to hide.

"So you're going to be a poet, Mr. Mesurier," he said. "Well, so was I once, so was I—but," he continued, "all too early another Muse took hold of me, a terrible Muse—yet a Muse who never forsakes you—" and he laid his hand on a decanter which stood near him on the table,—“yes, Mr. Mesurier, the terrible Muse of Drink! You may be surprised to hear me talk so; yet were this laudanum instead of brandy, there would seem to you a certain element of the poetic in the service of such a Muse. Drinks with Oriental or unfamiliar names have a romantic sound. Thus Alfred de Musset as the slave to absinthe sounds much more poetic than, say, Alfred de Musset as a slave to rum or gin, or even this brandy here. Yet this, too, is no less the stuff that dreams are made of; and the opium-eater, the absinthe-sipper, the brandy-drinker, are all members of the same great brotherhood of tragic idealists—”

He talked deliberately; but there was a smile playing at the corners of the mouth which took from his talk the sense of a painful self-revelation, and gave it the air of a playful fantasia upon a paradox that for the moment amused him.

"Idealists! Yes," he continued; "for what few understand is that drink is an idealism—and," he presently added with a laugh, "and, of course, like all idealisms, it has its dangers."

With a monomaniac, conversation is apt to limit itself to monologue; so, while Henry was greatly interested in this odd talk, it left him but little to say.

“I’m afraid I shock you a little, Mr. Mesurier, perhaps even—disgust you,” said Mr. Gerard.



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“Indeed, no!” exclaimed Henry; “but both the subject and your way of treating it are, I confess, a little new to me.”

“You are surprised to find one who is what is popularly known as a drunkard not so much ashamed of as interested in himself; isn’t that it? Well, that comes of the introspective literary temperament. It is only the oyster fascinated by the pearl that is killing it.”

“You should write some ‘Confessions’ after the manner of De Quincey,” said Henry.

“Indeed, I’ve often thought of it, for there’s so much that needs saying on the subject. There is nothing with which we are at once so familiar and of which we know so little. For example”—and now he was quite plainly off again—“for example, the passion for, I might say the dream of, drink is usually regarded as a sensual appetite, a physical indulgence. No doubt in its first crude stages it often is so; but soon it becomes something much more strange and abstract. It becomes a mysterious command, issuing we know not whence. It is hardly a desire, and it is not so much a joyless, as a quite colourless, obedience to an imperious necessity, decreed by some unknown will. You might well imagine that I like the taste of this brandy there, as a child is greedily fond of sweetstuff; but it would be quite a mistake. For my own personal taste, there is no drink like a cup of tea; it is the demon, the strange will that has imposed itself upon me, that has a taste for brandy.

“I sometimes wonder whether we poor drunkards are not the victims of disembodied powers of the air who, by some chance, have contracted a craving for earthly liquors, and can only satisfy that craving by fastening themselves upon some unhappy human organism. At times there comes an intermission of the command, as mysterious almost as the command itself. For weeks together we give no thought to our tyrant. We grow gay and young and innocent again. We are free,—so free, we seem to have forgotten that we were ever enslaved. Then suddenly one day we hear the call again. We cry for mercy; we throw ourselves on our knees in prayer. We clutch sacred relics; we conjure the aid of holy memories; we say over to ourselves the names of the dead we have loved: but it is all in vain—surely we are dragged to the feet of that inexorable will, surely we submit ourselves once more to the dark dominion.”

Henry listened, fascinated, and a little frightened.

“The longer I live, the more I grow convinced that this is no mere fancy, but actual science,” Mr. Gerard continued; “for, again, you might well imagine that one drinks for the dreams or other illusory effects it is said to produce. At first, perhaps, yes; but such effects speedily pass away, they pass away indeed before the tyranny has established itself, while it would still be possible to shake it off. No, the dreams of drink are poor things, not worth having at the best. Indeed, there are no dreams worth having, believe me, but those of youth and health and spring-water.”

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And Mr. Gerard passed for awhile in silence into some hidden country of his lost dreams.

Henry gazed at him with a curious wonder. Here was a man evidently of considerable gifts, a man of ideals, of humour, a man witty and gentle, who surely could have easily made his mark in the world, and yet he had thrown all away for a mechanical habit which he himself did not pretend to be a passion,—a mere abstract attraction: as though a man should say, “I care not for the joys or successes of this world. My destiny is to sit alone all day and count my fingers and toes, count them over and over and over again. There is not much pleasure in it, and I should be glad to break off the habit,—but there it is. It is imposed upon me by a will stronger than mine which I must obey. It is my destiny.”

“Yes, idealists!” said Mr. Gerard, presently coming back from his dreams to his great subject, with a laugh. “That reminds me of a story a business friend of mine told me the other day. A clerk in his office was an incorrigible drunkard. He was quite alone in the world, and had no one dependent upon him. The firm had been lenient to him, and again and again forgiven his outbreaks. But one morning they called him in and said: ‘Look here, Jones, we have had a great deal of patience with you; but the time has come when you must choose between the drink and the office.’ To their surprise, Jones, instead of eagerly promising reform, looked up gravely, and replied, ‘Will you give me a week to think it over, sir? It is a very serious matter.’ Drink was all the poor fellow had outside his drudgery; was it to be expected that he should thus lightly sacrifice it?—

“But, to talk about something else, your aunt, Mrs. Tipping, who has a great idea of my literary importance, has a notion that I may be of some help to you, Mr. Mesurier. Well, I’ll tell you the whole extent of my present literary engagements, and you are perfectly at liberty to laugh. At the present time I do the sporting notes for the *Tyrian Daily Mail*, and I write the theological reviews for *The Fleet Street Review*. These apparently incongruous occupations are the relics of an old taste for sport, which as a boy in the country I had ample opportunity for indulging, and of an interrupted training for the Church—’twixt then and now there is an eventful gap which, if you don’t mind, we won’t sadden each other by filling—Let us fill our glasses and our pipes instead; and, having failed so entirely myself, I will give you minute directions how to succeed in literature.”

Mr. Gerard’s discourse on how to succeed in literature was partly practical and partly ironical, and probably too technical to interest the general reader, who has no intention of being a great or a little writer, and who perhaps has already found Mr. Gerard’s previous discourse a little too special in its character. Suffice it that Henry heard much to remember, and much to laugh over, and that Mr. Gerard concluded with a practical offer of kindness.



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"I don't know how much use it may be to you," he said; "but if you care to have it, I should be very glad to give you a letter to the editor of *The Fleet Street Review*. He has, I think, a certain regard for me, and he might send you a book to do now and again. At all events, it would be something."

Henry embraced the offer gratefully; and it occurred to him that in a day or two's time there was a five days' excursion running from Tyre to London and back, for half-a-guinea. Why not take it, and expend his last five pounds in a stimulating glimpse of the city he some day hoped to conquer? He could then see his friend the publisher, present his letter to the editor, and perhaps bring home with him some little work and a renewed stock of hopes.

So, before they parted that night, Mr. Gerard wrote him the letter.

CHAPTER XXXIII

"THIS IS LONDON, THIS IS LIFE"

Thus it was that, all unexpectedly, Henry found himself set down one autumn morning at the homeless hour of a quarter-to-seven, in Euston station. He was going to stay in some street off the Strand, and chartered a hansom to take him there. Few great cities are impressive in the neighbourhood of their railway termini. You enter them, so to speak, by the back door; and London waves no banners of bright welcome to the stranger who first enters it by the Euston Road.

But there was an interesting church presently, and on a dust-cart close by Henry read "Vestry of St. Pancras."

"Can that be the St. Pancras' Church," he said to himself, "where Mary Wollstonecraft lies buried, and Browning was married?"

Then as they drove along through Bloomsbury, the name "Great Coram Street" caught his eye, and he exclaimed with delight: "Why, that's where Thackeray lived for a time!"

Great Coram Street is little accustomed to create such excitement in the breast of the passer-by. But to the stranger London is necessarily first a museum, till he begins to love it as a home, and, in addition to dead men's associations, begins to people it with memories of his own. When you have lived awhile in Gray's Inn, you grow to forget that Bacon's ghost is your fellow-tenant; and it is the kind-hearted provincial who from time to time lays those flowers on Goldsmith's tomb. When you are caught in a block on Westminster Bridge, with only five minutes to get to Waterloo, you forget to say to yourself: "Ah, this is the bridge on which Wordsworth wrote his famous sonnet." You usually say something quite different.



The mere names of the streets,—how laden with immemorial poetry they were! “Chancery Lane!” How wonderful! Yet the poor wretch standing outside the public-house at the corner seemed to derive small consolation from the fact that he was starving in Chancery Lane.

But to Henry, as yet, London was an extended Westminster Abbey, and every other street was Poet’s Corner. He had hardly patience to breakfast, so eager was he to be out in the streets; and while he ate, his eyes were out of the windows all the time, and his ears drinking in all the London morning sounds like music. At the foot of the street ran the Thames; he had caught a thrilling glimpse of it as he stepped from his cab, and had had a childish impulse to rush down to it before entering his hotel.



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At last, free of food and baggage, light of heart, and brimming over with youth, he stepped into the street. It was but little past eight o'clock. He had just heard the hour chimed, in various tones of sweetness and solemnity, from several mellow clocks, evidently hidden high in the air in his near vicinity. For two or three hours there would be no editor or publisher to be seen, and meanwhile he had London to himself. He stepped out into it as into a garden,—a garden of those old-time flowers in which antiquity has become a perfume full of pictures.

Yes, there was the Thames! "Sweet Themmes, run softly till I end my song!" he quoted to himself. Chaucer's, Spenser's, Elizabeth's Thames!

It was a bright morning and the river gleamed to advantage. The tall tower of Westminster glittered richly in the sun, and the long front of Somerset House wore a lordly smile. The embankment gardens sparkled and rustled in morning freshness. Henry drew in the air of London as though it had been a rose. Here was the Thames at the foot of the street, and there at the head was the Strand, a stream of omnibuses and cabs, and city-faring men and women. The Temple must be somewhere close by. Of course it was here to his left. But he would first walk quietly by the Thames side to Westminster, and then come back by the Strand. As he walked, he stepped lightly and gently, as though reverent to the very stones of so sacred a city, and all the time from every prospect and every other street-corner came streaming like strains of music magnetic memories,—"streets with the names of old kings, strong earls, and warrior saints." If for no other reason, how important for the future of a nation is it to preserve in such ancient cities as London and Oxford the energising spectacle of a noble and strenuous antiquity; for there are no such inspirers of young men as these old places! So much strength and youth went into them long ago that even yet they have strength and youth to give, and from them, as from the strong hills, pours out an inexhaustible potency of bracing influence.

At last Henry found himself back at the top-end of his street. He had walked the Strand with deliberate enjoyment. Fleet Street he still reserved, but, as according to the tower of Clement Danes it was only just ten o'clock, it seemed still a little early to attack his business. A florist's close by suggested a charming commonplace way of filling the time. He would buy some flowers and carry them to Goldsmith's grave. Why Goldsmith's grave should thus be specially honoured, he a little wondered. He was conscious of loving several writers quite as well. But it was a Johnsonian tradition to love Goldy, and the accessibility of his resting-place made sentiment easy.

He repented this momentary flippancy of thought as he stood in the cloistered corner where Goldsmith sleeps under the eye of the law; and, when he laid his little wreath on the worn stone, it was a genuine offering. From it he turned away to his own personal dreams.



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By eleven he had found his friend the publisher, in a dainty little place of business crammed with pottery, Rowlandsons, and books, and more like a curiosity-shop than a publishing-house, for the publisher proved an enthusiast in everything that was beautiful or curious, and had indeed taken to publishing from that rare motive in a publisher,—the love of books, rather than the love of money. He was aiming to make his little shop the rallying-point of all the young talent of the day, and as young talent has never too many publishers on the look-out for it, his task was not difficult, though it was one of those real services to literature which such publishers and booksellers have occasionally done in our literary history, with but scant acknowledgment.

Henry was pleased to find that he looked upon him to make one of his little band of youth; and as the publisher understood the art of encouragement, Henry already felt it had been worth while to come to London just to see him. He knew the editor to whom Henry had a letter and volunteered him another. The afternoon would be the best time; meanwhile, they must lunch together. He smiled when Henry suggested the Cheshire Cheese. Henry had a sort of vague idea that literary men could hardly think of taking their meals anywhere else. There had been an attempt to bring it into fashion again, the publisher said; but it had come to nothing—though he, for one, loved those old chop-houses, with their tankards, and their sanded floors. So to the Cheshire Cheese they repaired, and drank to a long friendship in foaming pewters of porter.

“Alas!” said Henry, “we are fallen on smaller times. Once it was ‘the poet’s pint of port.’ Now we must be content with the poetaster’s half-a-pint of porter!”

“You must come to my rooms to-night,” said the publisher, “and be introduced to some of our young men. I have one or two of our older critics coming too.”

Henry’s fortune was evidently made.

He found the editor in a dim back room at the top of a high building, so lost in a world of books and dust that at first Henry could hardly make him out, writing by a window with his back to the door. Then an alert head turned round to him, and a rather peevish gesture bade him be seated, while the editor resumed his work. This hardly came up to Henry’s magnificent dreams of the editorial dignity. Perhaps he had a vague idea that editors lived in palaces, and sat on thrones.

Presently the editor put down his pen with an exclamation of satisfaction; and the first impression of peevishness vanished in the cordiality with which he now turned to his visitor.

“You must excuse my absorption. It was a rather tough piece of proof-reading. A subject I’m rather interested in,—new Welsh dictionary. Don’t suppose it’s in your line, eh, eh?”—and the tall, spare man laughed a boyish laugh like a mischievous bird, and tossed his head at the jest.



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His face was small and sallow and tired; but the dark eyes were full of fun and kindness. Presently, he rose and began to walk up and down the room with a curious, prancing walk, rolling himself a cigarette, and talking away in a rapid, jerky fashion with his continual, “eh, eh?” coming in all the time.

“Poor Gerard! So you know him? How is he now?” and he lowered his voice with the suggestion of a mutual confidence, and stopped in his walk till Henry should answer. “Poor Gerard! And he might have been—well, well,—never mind. We were together at King’s. Brilliant fellow. So you know Gerard. Dear me! Dear me!”

Then he turned to the subject of Henry’s visit.

“Well, my poor boy, nothing will satisfy you but literature? You are determined to be a literary man, eh, eh?” Then he stopped in front of Henry and laid his hand kindly on his shoulder, “Is it too late to say, ‘Go back while there is yet time’? Perhaps—of course—you’re going to be a very great man,” and he broke off into his walk again, with one of his mischievous laughs. “But unless you are, take my word, it’s a poor game—Yet, I suppose, it’s no use talking. I know, wasted breath, wasted breath—Well, now, what can you do? and, by the way, you won’t grow fat on *The Fleet Street Review*. Ten shillings a column is our magnificent rate of payment, and we can hardly afford that—”

Then he began pulling out one book and another from the piles of all sorts that lay around him. “I suppose, like the rest, you’d better begin on poetry. There’s a tableful over there—go and take your pick of it, unless, of course, you’ve got some special subject. You’re not, I suppose, an authority on Assyriology, eh, eh?”

Henry feared not, and then a new fit of industry came upon the editor, and he begged Henry to take a look at the books while he ran through another proof for the post.

That dusty table—evidently the rubbish-heap of the room—was Henry’s first object-lesson in the half tragical, half farcical, over-production of modern literature. Such a mass of foolishness and ineptitude he had never conceived of; such pretentiousness too—and while he made various melancholy reflections upon human vanity, what should he unearth suddenly from the heap, but his own little volume. He could but half suppress a cry of recognition.

“What’s that?” asked the editor, not turning round. “Found anything?”

“No,” said Henry; “nothing—for a moment I thought I had.”

Presently he had made a small pile of the most promising volumes, and turned to take his leave. The editor took up one or two of them carelessly.



“Not much here, I’m afraid,” he said. “Never mind; see what you can make of them. Not more than three columns at the most, you know. And come and see me again. I’m glad to have seen you.”

“Oh,” said Henry, on the point of leaving, and laying his hand on his own little book, “may I take this one too? It’s not worth reviewing, but it rather interested me just now.”



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“God bless me, yes, certainly,” said the editor; “you’re welcome to the lot, if you care to bring a hand-cart. Good-bye, good-bye.”

And Henry slipped his poor little neglected volume into his pocket. On how many dusty tables, he wondered, was it then lying ignominiously disregarded. Well, the day would come! Meanwhile, he had his first batch of books for review.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE WITS

There now remained the gathering of wits fixed for the evening. His publisher had asked him to dinner, but he had declined, from a secret and absurd desire to dine at “The Cock.” This he gratified, and with his mind full of the spacious times of the early Victorians, he turned into the publisher’s little room about nine o’clock to meet some of the later.

There was no great muster as yet. Some half-a-dozen rather shy young men spasmodically picked up strange drawings or odd-looking books, lying about on the publisher’s tables, struggled maidenly with cigars, sipped a little whisky and soda; but little was said.

Among them a pale-faced lad of about fifteen, miraculously self-possessed, stood with his back to the chimney-piece. But soon others began to turn in, and by ten the room was as full of chatter and smoke as it could hold. Not least conspicuous among the talkers was the pale-faced boy of fifteen. Henry had been sitting near to him, and had been suddenly startled by his unexpectedly breaking out into a volley of learning, delivered in a voice impressively deliberate and sententious.

“What a remarkable boy that is!” said Henry, innocently, to the publisher.

“Yes; but he’s not quite a boy,—though he’s young enough. A curious little creature, morbidly learned. A friend of mine says that he would like to catch him and keep him in a bottle, and label it ‘the learned homunculus.’”

“What dialect is it he is talking in?” said Henry; “I don’t remember to have heard it before.”

The publisher smiled: “My dear fellow, you must be careful what you say. That is what we call ‘the Oxford voice.’”

“How remarkable!” said Henry, his attention called off by a being with a face that half suggested a faun, and half suggested a flower,—a small, olive-skinned face crowned with purple black hair, that kept falling in an elflock over his forehead, and violet eyes set



slant-wise. He was talking earnestly of fairies, in a beautiful Irish accent, and Henry liked him. The attraction seemed mutual, and Henry found himself drawn into a remarkable relation about a fairy-hill in Connemara, and fairy lights that for several nights had been seen glimmering about it; and how at last he—that is, the narrator—and a particularly hard-headed friend of his had kept watch one moonlit night, with the result that they had actually seen and talked with the queen of the fairies and learned many secrets of the ——. The narrator here made use of a long, unpronounceable Irish word, which Henry could not catch.



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"I should have explained some of these phenomena to you," whispered the publisher presently, noticing that Henry looked a little bewildered. "This is a young Irish poet, who, in the intervals of his raising the devil, writes very beautiful lyrics that he may well have learned from the fairies. It is his method to seem mad on magic and such things. You will meet with many strange methods here to-night. Don't be alarmed if some one comes and talks to you about strange sins. You have come to London in the 'strange sins' period. I will explain afterwards."

He had hardly spoken when a pallid young man, with a preternatural length and narrowness of face, began to talk to him about the sins of the Borgias.

"I suppose you never committed a murder yourself?" he asked Henry, languidly.

"No," said Henry, catching the spirit of the foolishness; "no, not yet. I am keeping that —" implying that he was reserving so extreme a stimulant till all his other vices failed him.

Presently there entered a tall young man with a long, thin face, curtained on either side with enormous masses of black hair, like a slip of the young moon glimmering through a pine-wood.

At the same moment there entered, as if by design, his very antithesis: a short, firmly built, clerkly fellow, with a head like a billiard-ball in need of a shave, a big brown moustache, and enormous spectacles.

"That," said the publisher, referring to the moon-in-the-pine-wood young man, "is our young apostle of sentiment, our new man of feeling, the best-hated man we have; and the other is our young apostle of blood. He is all for muscle and brutality—and he makes all the money. It is one of our many fashions just now to sing 'Britain and Brutality.' But my impression is that our young man of feeling will have his day,—though he will have to wait for it. He would hasten it if he would cut his hair; but that, he says, he will never do. His hair, he says, is his battle-cry. Well, he enjoys himself—and loves a fight, though you mightn't think it to look at him."

A supercilious young man, with pink cheeks, and a voice which his admirers compared to Shelley's, then came up to Henry and asked him what he thought of Mallarme's latest sonnet; but finding Henry confessedly at sea, turned the conversation to the Empire ballet, of which, unfortunately, Henry knew as little. The conversation then languished, and the Shelley-voiced young man turned elsewhere for sympathy, with a shrug at your country bumpkins who know nothing later than Rossetti.

In the thick of the conversational turmoil, Henry's attention had from time to time been attracted by the noise proceeding from a blustering, red-headed man, with a face of fire.



“Who is that?” at last he found opportunity to ask his friend.

“That is our greatest critic,” said the publisher.

“Oh!” said Henry, “I must try and hear what he is saying. It seems important from the way he is listened to.”



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So Henry listened, and heard how the fire-faced man said the word “damn” with great volubility and variety of cadence, and other words to the same effect, and how the little group around him hung upon his words and said to each other, “How brilliant!” “How absolute!”

Henry turned to his friend. “The only word I can catch is the word ‘damn,’” he said.

“That,” said the publisher, with a laugh, “is the master-word of fashionable criticism.”

Presently a little talkative man came up, and said that he hoped Mr. Mesurier was an adherent of the rightful king.

“Oh, of course!” said Henry.

“And do you belong to any secret society?” asked the little man.

Henry couldn’t say that he did.

“Well, you must join us!” he said.

“I suppose there won’t be a rising just yet?” asked Henry, realising that this was the Jacobite method.

“Not just yet,” said the little man, reassuringly. So Henry was enrolled.

* * * * *

And so it went on till past midnight, when Henry at last escaped, to talk it all over with the stars. The evening had naturally puzzled him, as a man will always be puzzled who has developed under the influence of the main tendencies of his generation, and who finds himself suddenly in a backwater of fanciful reaction. Henry, in his simple way, was a thinker and a radical, and he had nourished himself on the great main-road masters of English literature. He had followed the lead of modern philosophers and scientists, and had arrived at a mystical agnosticism,—the first step of which was to banish the dogmas of the church as old wives’ tales. He considered that he had inherited the hard-won gains of the rationalists. But he came to London and found young men feebly playing with the fire of that Romanism which he regarded as at once the most childish and the most dangerous of all intellectual obsessions. In an age of great biologists and electricians, he came upon children prettily talking about fairies and the philosopher’s stone. In one of the greatest ages of English poetry, he came to London to find young English poets falling on their knees to the metrical mathematicians of France. In the great age of democracy, a fool had come and asked him if he were not a supporter of the house of Stuart, a Jacobite of charades. But only once had he heard the name of Milton; it was the learned boy of fifteen who had quoted him,—a lifelong debt of gratitude; and never once had he heard the voice of simple human feeling, nor heard



one speak of beauty, simply, passionately, with his heart in his mouth; nor of love with his heart upon his sleeve. Much cleverness, much learning, much charm, there had been, but he had missed the generous human impulse. No one seemed to be doing anything because he must. These were pleasant eddies, dainty with lilies and curiously starred water-grasses, but the great warm stream of English literature was not flowing here.



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As he neared his hotel, he thought of his morning visit to Goldsmith's tomb, and ten-fold he repented the little half-sneer with which he had bought the flowers. In a boyish impulse, he rang the Temple bell, and found his way again to the lonely corner. His flowers were lying there in the moonlight, and again he read: "Here lies Oliver Goldsmith."

"Forgive me, Goldy," he murmured. "Well may men bring you flowers,—for you wrote, not as those yonder; you wrote for the human heart."

CHAPTER XXXV

BACK TO REALITY

It was good to get back to reality, with Angel's blue eyes, Mike's laugh, and Esther's common sense.

"Let me look deep into them, Angel—deep—deep. It is so good to get back to something true."

"Are they true?" said Angel, opening them very wide.

"Something that will never forsake one, something we can never forsake! Something in all the wide world's change that will never change. Something that will still be Angel even in a thousand years."

"I hope to be a real angel long before that," said Angel, laughing.

"Do you think you can promise to be true so long, Angel?" asked Henry.

"Dear, you know that so long as there is one little part of me left anywhere in the world, that part will be true to you.—But come, tell me about London. I'm afraid you didn't enjoy it very much."

"Oh, yes, I loved London,—that is, old London; but new London made me a little sad. I expect it was only because I didn't quite understand the conditions."

"Perhaps so," said Angel. "But tell me,—did you go to the Zoo?"

"You dear child! Yes! I went out of pure love for you."

"Now you needn't be so grown up. You know you wanted to go just for yourself as well. And you saw the monkey-house?"

"Yes."



“And the lions?”

“Yes.”

“And the snakes?”

“Yes!”

“Oh, I’d give anything to see the snakes! Did they eat any rabbits when you were there, —fascinate them, and then draw them slowly, slowly in?”

“Angel, what terrible interests you are developing! No, thank goodness, they didn’t.”

“Why, wouldn’t it fascinate you to see something wonderfully killed?” asked Angel. “It is dreadful and wicked, of course. But it would be so thrillingly real.”

“I think I must introduce you to a young man I met in London,” said Henry, “who solemnly asked me if I had ever murdered anyone. You savage little wild thing! I suppose this is what you mean by saying sometimes that you are a gipsy, eh?”

“Well, and you went to the Tower, and Westminster Abbey, and everything, and it was really wonderful?”

“Yes, I saw everything—including the Queen.”

For young people of Tyre and Sidon to go to London was like what it once was to make the pilgrimage to Rome.



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Mike created some valuable nonsense on the occasion, which unfortunately has not been preserved, and Esther was disgusted with Henry because he could give no intelligible description of the latest London hats; and all examined with due reverence those wonderful books for review.

In Tichborne Street Aunt Tipping had taken advantage of his absence to enrich his room with a bargain in the shape of an old desk, which was the very thing he wanted. Dear old Aunt Tipping! And Gerard, it is to be feared, took a little more brandy than usual in honour of his young friend's adventures in the capital.

These excitements over, Henry sat down at his old desk to write his first review; and there for the present we may leave him, for he took it very seriously and was dangerous to interrupt.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE OLD HOME MEANWHILE

More than a year had now gone by since Henry left home, and meanwhile, with the exception of Dot's baptism, there had been no exciting changes to record. Perhaps uneventfulness is part of the security of a real home. Every morning James Mesurier had risen at half-past six,—though he no longer imposed that hour of rising upon his daughters,—breakfasted at eight, and reached his office at nine. Every evening during those months, punctually at half-past six his latch-key had rattled in the front-door lock, and one or other of his daughters had hurried out at the sound to bid him welcome home.

"Home at last, father dear!" they had said, helping him off with his coat; and sometimes when he felt bright he would answer,—

"Yes, my dear, night brings crows home."

"Home again, James!" his wife would say, as he next entered the front parlour, and bent down to kiss her where she sat. "It's a long day. Isn't it time you were pulling in a bit? Surely some of the younger heads should begin to relieve you."

"Responsibility, Mary dear! We cannot delegate responsibility," he would answer.

"But we see nothing of you. You just sacrifice your whole life for the business."

If he were in a good humour, he might answer with one of his rare sweet laughs, and jokingly make one of his few French quotations: "*Telle est la vie!* my dear, *Telle est la vie!* That's the French for it, isn't it, Dot?"



James Mesurier was just perceptibly softening. Perhaps it was that he was growing a little tired, that he was no longer quite the stern disciplinarian we met in the first chapter; perhaps the influence of his wife, and his experiences with his children, were beginning to hint to him what it takes so long for a strong individual nature to learn, that the law of one temperament cannot justly or fruitfully be enforced as the law of another.

The younger children—Esther and Dot and Mat used sometimes to say to each other—would grow up in a more clement atmosphere of home than had been Henry's and theirs. Already they were quietly assuming privileges, and nothing said, that would have meant beatings for their elders. For these things had Henry and Esther gladly faced martyrdom. Henry had looked on the Promised Land, but been denied an entrance there. By his stripes this younger generation would be healed.



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The elder girls hastened to draw close to their father in gratitude, and home breathed a kinder, freer air than ever had been known before. Between Esther and her father particularly a kind of comradeship began to spring up, which perhaps more than ever made the mother miss her boy.

But, all the same, home was growing old. This was the kindness of the setting sun!

Childless middle age is no doubt often dreary to contemplate, yet is it an egoistical bias which leads one to find in such limitation, or one might rather say preservation, of the ego, a certain compensation? The childless man or woman has at least preserved his or her individuality, as few fathers and mothers of large families are suffered to do. By the time you are fifty, with a family of half a dozen children, you have become comparatively impersonal as "father" or "mother." It is tacitly recognised that your life-work is finished, that your ambitions are accomplished or not, and that your hopes are at an end.

The young Mesuriers, for example, were all eagerly hastening towards their several futures. They were garrulous over them at every meal. But to what future in this world were James and Mary Mesurier looking forward? Love had blossomed and brought forth fruit, but the fruit was quickly ripening, and stranger hands would soon pluck it from the boughs. In a very few years they would sit under a roof-tree bared of fruit and blossom, and sad with falling leaves. They had dreamed their dream, and there is only one such dream for a lifetime; now they must sit and listen to the dreams of their children, help them to build theirs. They mattered now no longer for themselves, but just as so much aid and sympathy on which their children might draw. Too well in their hearts they knew that their children only heard them with patience so long as they talked of their to-morrows. Should they sometimes dwell wistfully on their own yesterdays, they could too plainly see how long the story seemed.

Telle est la vie! as James Mesurier said, and, that being so, no wonder life is a sad business. Better perhaps be childless and retain one's own personal hopes and fears for life, than be so relegated to history in the very zenith of one's days. If only this younger generation at the door were always, as it assumes, stronger and better than its elder! but, though the careless assumption that it is so is somewhat general, history alone shows how false and impudent the assumption often is. Too often genius itself must submit to the silly presumption of its noisy and fatuous children, and it is the young fool who too often knocks imperiously at the door of wise and active middle age.



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That all this is inevitable makes it none the less sad. The young Mesuriers were neither fools nor hard of heart; and sometimes, in moments of sympathy, their parents would be revealed to them in sudden lights of pathos and old romance. They would listen to some old love-affair of their mother's as though it had been their own, or go out of their way to make their father tell once more the epic of the great business over which he presided, and which, as he conceived it, was doubtless a greater poem than his son would ever write. Yet still even in such genuine sympathy, there was a certain imaginative effort to be made. The gulf between the generations, however hidden for the moment, was always there.

Yet, after all, James and Mary Mesurier possessed an incorruptible treasure, which their children had neither given nor could take away. To regard them as without future would be a shallow observation,—for love has always a future, however old in mortal years it may have grown; and as they grew older, their love seemed to grow stronger. Involuntarily they seemed to draw closer together, as by an instinct of self-preservation. Their love had been before their children; were they to be spared, it would still be the same love, sweeter by trial, when their children had passed from them. In this love had been wise for them. Some parents love their children so unwisely that they forget to love each other; and, when the children forsake them, are left disconsolate. One has heard young mothers say that now their boy has come, their husbands may take a second place; and often of late we have heard the woman say: "Give me but the child, and the lover can go his ways." Foolish, unprophetic women! Let but twenty years go by, and how glad you will be of that rejected lover; for, though a son may suffice for his mother, what mother has ever sufficed for her son?

But though sometimes, as they looked at their parents, the young Mesuriers caught a glimpse of the infinite sadness of a life-work accomplished, yet it failed to warn them against the eager haste with which they were hurrying on towards a like conclusion. Too late they would understand that all the joy was in the doing; too soon say to themselves: "Was it for this that our little world shook with such fiery commotion and molten ardours, that this present should be so firm and insensitive beneath our feet? This habit—why, it was once a passion! This fact—why, it was once a dream!"

Oh, why shake off youth's fragile blossoms with the very speed of your own impatience! Why make such haste towards autumn! Who ever thought the ruddiest lapful of apples a fair exchange for a cloud of sunlit blossom? Whose maturity, however laden with prosperity or gilded with honour, ever kept the fairy promise of his youth? For so brief a space youth glitters like a dewdrop on the tree of life, glitters and is gone. For one desperate instant of perfection it hangs poised, and is seen no more.



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But, alas! the art of enjoying youth with a wise economy is only learnt when youth is over. It is perhaps too paradoxical an accomplishment to be learnt before; for a youth that economised itself would be already middle age. It is just the wasteful flare of it that leaves such a dazzle in old eyes, as they look back in fancy to the conflagration of fragrant fire which once bourgeoned and sang where these white ashes now slowly smoulder towards extinction.

When Mike has a theatre of his own and can send boxes to his friends, when Henry maybe is an editor of power, when Esther and Angel are the enthroned wives of famous men, and the new heaven and the new earth are quite finished,—will they never sigh sometimes to have the making of them all over again? Then they will have everything to enjoy, so there will be nothing left to hope for. Then there will be no spice of peril in their loves, no keen edge that comes of enforced denial; and the game of life will be too sure for ambition to keep its savour. “There is no thrill, no excitement nowadays,” one can almost fancy their saying, and, like children playing with their bricks, “Now let us knock it all down, and build another, one. It will be such fun.”

However, these are intrusive, autumnal thoughts in this book of simple youth, and our young people knew them not. They were far indeed from Esther’s mind as she talked with Dot of the future one afternoon. Instead, her words were full of impatience with the slow march of events, and the enforced inactivity of a girl’s life at home.

“It is so much easier for the boys,” she was saying. “There is something for them to do. But we can do nothing but sit at home and wait, darn their socks, and clap our hands at their successes. I wish I were a man!”

“No, you don’t,” said Dot; “for then you couldn’t marry Mike. And you couldn’t wear pretty dresses—Oh! and lots of things. I don’t much envy a man’s life, after all. It’s all very well talking about hard work when you haven’t got to do it; and it’s not so much the work as the responsibility. It must be such a responsibility to be a man.”

“Of course you’re right, Dot—but, oh! this waiting is so stupid, all the same. If only I could be doing something—anything!”

“Well, you *are* doing something. Is it nothing to be all the world to a man?” said Dot, wistfully; “nothing to be his heaven upon earth? Nothing to be the prize he is working for, and nothing to sustain and cheer him on, as you do Mike, and as Angel cheers Henry? Would Henry have been the same without Angel, or Mike the same without you? No, the man’s work makes more noise, but the woman’s work is none the less real and useful because it is quiet and underground.”

“Dear Dot, what a wise old thing you’re growing! But you know you’re longing all the time for some work to do yourself. Didn’t you say the other day that you seemed to be wasting your life here, making beds and doing housework?”



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“Yes; but I’m different. Don’t you see?” retorted Dot, sadly. “I’ve got no Mike. Your work is to help Mike be a great actor, but I’ve got no one to help be anything. You may be sure I wouldn’t complain of being idle if I had. I think you’re a bit forgetful sometimes how happy you are.”

“Poor old Dot! you needn’t talk as if you’re such a desperate old maid,—you’re not twenty yet. And I’m sure it’s a good thing for you that you haven’t got any of the young men about here—to help be aldermen! Wait till you come and stay with us in London, then you’ll soon find some one to work for, as you call it.”

“I don’t know,” said Dot, thoughtfully; “somehow I think I shall never marry.”

“I suppose you mean you’d rather be a nun or something serious of that sort.”

“Well, to tell the truth, I have been thinking lately if perhaps I couldn’t do something,—perhaps go into a hospital, or something of that sort.”

“Oh, nonsense, Dot! Think of all the horrible, dirty people you’d have to attend to. Ugh!”

“Christ didn’t think of that when He washed the feet of His disciples,” said little Dot, sententiously.

“Why, Dot, how dreadfully religious you’re getting! You want a good shaking! Besides, isn’t it a little impious to imply that the apostles were horrible, dirty people?”

“You know what I meant,” said Dot, flushing.

“Yes, of course, dear; and I think I know where you’ve been. You’ve been to see that dear Sister Agatha.”

“You admit she’s a dear?”

“Of course I do; but I don’t know whether she’s quite good for you.”

“If you’d only seen her among the poor little children the other day, how beautiful and how happy she looked, you might have thought differently,” said Dot.

“Oh, yes, dear; but then you mustn’t forget that her point of view is different. She’s renounced the world; she’s one of those women,” Esther couldn’t resist adding, maliciously, “who’ve given up hope of man, and so have set all their hopes on God.”

“Esther, that’s unworthy of you—though what if it is as you say, is it so great a failure after all to dedicate one’s self to God rather than to one little individual man?”



“Oh, come,” said Esther, rather wilfully misunderstanding, and suddenly flushing up, “Mike is not so little as all that!”

“Why, you goose, how earthly you are! I never thought of dear Mike—though it would have served you right for saying such a mean thing about Sister Agatha.”

“Forgive me. I know it was mean, but I couldn’t resist it. And it is true, you’ll admit, of some of those pious women, though I withdraw it about Sister Agatha.”

“Of course I couldn’t be a sister like Sister Agatha,” said Dot, “without being a Catholic as well; but I might be a nurse at one of the ordinary hospitals.”

“It would be dreadfully hard work!” said Esther.



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“Harder than being a man, do you think?” asked Dot, laughing.

“For goodness’ sake, don’t turn Catholic!” said Esther, in some alarm. “*That* would break father’s heart, if you like.”

A horror of Catholicism ran in the very marrow of these young people. It was one of the few relics of their father’s Puritanism surviving in them. Of “Catholics” they had been accustomed to speak since childhood as of nightmares and Red Indians with bloody scalps at their waists; and perhaps that instinctive terror of the subtle heart of Rome is the religious prejudice which we will do well to part with last.

Dot had not, indeed, contemplated an apostacy so unnatural; but beneath these comparatively trivial words there was an ever-growing impulse to fulfil that old longing of her nature to do something, as the Christians would say, “for God,” something serious, in return for the solemn and beautiful gift of life. By an accident, she had met Sister Agatha one day in the house of an old Irish servant of theirs, who had been compelled to leave them on account of ill-health, and on whom she had called with a little present of fruit. She had been struck by the sweetness of the Sister’s face, as the Sister had been struck by hers. Sister Agatha had invited Dot to visit her some day at the home for orphan children of which she had charge; and, with some misgiving as to whether it was right thus to visit a Catholic, whether even it was safe, Dot had accepted. So an acquaintance had grown up and ripened into a friendship; and Sister Agatha, while making no attempt to turn the friendship to the account of her church, was a great consolation to the lonely, religious girl.

Dot retained too much rationalism ever to become a Catholic, but the longing to do something grew and grew. At a certain moment, with each new generation of girls, there comes an epidemical desire in maiden bosoms to dedicate their sweet young lives to the service of what Esther called “horrible dirty people.” At these periods the hospitals are flooded with applications from young girls whom the vernal equinox urges first to be mothers, and, failing motherhood, nurses. Just before she met Henry, Angel had done her best to miss him by frantic endeavours to nurse people whom the hospital doctors decided she was far too slight a thing to lift,—for unless you can lift your patients, not to say throw them about, you fail in the muscular qualifications of a hospital nurse. Dot, as we have seen, was impelled in this direction from no merely sentimental impulse, unless the religious impulse, which paradoxically makes nuns of disappointed mothers, may so be called. Perhaps, unacknowledged, deep down in her heart, she longed to be the nurse—of one little wonderful child. Had this been granted her, it is probable that the maimed and the halt would have had less attraction for her pitying imagination. As it was, however, she persuaded herself that she loved them. Was it because, at the moment, no one else seemed to need her love?



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CHAPTER XXXVII

STAGE WAITS, MR. LAFLIN

Esther's impatience was to be appeased, perhaps a little to her regret after all, by an unexpected remission of the time appointed between Mike and his first real engagement. Suddenly one day came an exciting letter from the great actor, saying that he saw his way to giving him a part in his own London company, if he could join him for rehearsal in a week's time.

Here was news! At last a foundation-stone of the new heaven was to be laid! In a week's time Mike would be working at one of the alabaster walls. Perhaps in two years' time, perhaps even in a year, with good fortune, the roof would be on, the door wreathed with garlands, and a modest little heaven ready for occupation.

Now all that remained was to make the momentous break with the old life. Old Mr. Laflin had been left in peaceful ignorance of the mine which must now be exploded beneath his evening armchair. Mike loved his father, and this had been a dread long and wisely postponed. But now, when the moment for inevitable decision had come, Mike remembered, with a certain shrinking, that responsibility of which Dot had spoken,—the responsibility of being a man. It was his dream to be an actor, to earn his bread with joy. To earn it with less than joy seemed unworthy of man. Yet there was another dream for him, still more, immeasurably more, important—to be Esther's husband. If he stayed where he was, in slow revolutions of a dull business, his father's place and income would become his. If he renounced that certain prospect, he committed himself to a destiny of brilliant chances; and for the first time he realised that among those chances lurked, too, the chance of failure. Esther must decide; and Henry's counsel, too, must be taken. Mike thought he knew what the decision and the counsel would be; and, of course, he was not mistaken.

"Why, Mike, how can you hesitate?" said Esther. "Fail, if you like, and I shall still love you; but you don't surely think I could go on loving a man who was frightened to try?"

That was a little hard of Esther, for Mike's fear had been for her sake, not his own. However, that and the even more vehement counsel of Henry had the desired bracing effect; and Mike nerved himself to deal the necessary blow at his father's tranquillity.

As the writer of this book takes no special joy in heart-breaking scenes with fathers, the painful and somewhat violent scene with Mr. Laflin is here omitted, and left to the imagination of any reader with a taste for such unnatural collisions. Any one over thirty will agree that all the reason was on Mr. Laflin's side, as all the instinct was on his son's. Luckily for Mike, the instinct was to prove genuine, and his father to live to be prouder of his rebellion than ever he would have been of his obedience.

This scene over, it was only a matter of days—five alone were left—before Mike must up and away in right good earnest.



Waiting the breeze, shall anchor when it blows;
Yes! when a thirsty summer-flower shall close
Against the rain; or when, in reaping days,
The husbandman shall set his fields ablaze.

Nay, take your breeze, drink in your strengthening rain,
And, while you can, make harvest of your grain;
The land is fair to which that breeze shall blow.
The flower is sweet the rain shall set aglow,
The grain be rich within your garner gates—

Stage waits! Stage waits! and we must loosen now your
hand,
And miss your face's gold in all our land;
But yet we know that in a little while
You come again a conqueror, so smile
Godspeed, not parting, and, with hearts elate,

We wait_.



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Yes, for the second time the die was cast. Henry was already afoot on the adventure perilous. Now it was Mike's turn. These young people had passionately invoked those terrible gods who fulfil our dreams, and already the celestial machinery was beginning to move in answer. Perhaps it just a little took their breath, to see the great wheels so readily turning at the touch of their young hands; but they were in for it now, and with stout hearts must abide the issue.

This was to be Esther and Mike's first experience of parting, and their hearts sickened at the thought. Love surely does well in this world, so full of snares and dangers, to fear to lose from its eyes for a moment the face of its beloved; and in this respect the courage of love is the more remarkable. How bravely it takes the appalling risks of life! To separate for an hour may mean that never as long as the world lasts will love hear the voice it loves again. "Good-bye," love has called gaily so often, and waved hands from the threshold, and the beloved has called "good-bye" and waved, and smiled back—for the last time. And yet love faces the fears, not only of hours, but of weeks and months; weeks and months on seas bottomless with danger, in lands rife with unknown evils, dizzily taking the chances of desperate occupations. And the courage is the greater, because, finally, in this world, love alone has anything to lose. Other losses may be more or less repaired; but love's loss is, of its essence, irreparable. Other fair faces and brave hearts the world may bring us, but never that one face! Alas! for the most precious of earthly things, the only precious thing of earth, there is no system of insurance. The many waters have quenched love, and the floods drowned it,—yet in the wide world is there no help, no hope, no recompense.

The love that bound this little circle of young people together was so strong and warm that it had developed in them an almost painful sensibility to such risks of loss. So it was that expressions of affection and outward endearments were more current among them than is usual in a land where manners, from a proper fear of exaggeration, run to a silly extreme of unresponsiveness. They never met without showing their joy to be again together; never parted without that inner fear that this might be their last chance of showing their love for each other.

"You all say good-bye as if you were going to America!" Myrtilla Williamson had once said; "I suppose it's your Irish grandmother." And no doubt the *empressement* had its odd side for those who saw only the surface.

Thus for those who love love, who love to watch for it on human faces, Mike's good-bye at the railway station was a sight worth going far to see.

"My word, they seem to be fond of each other, these young people!" said a lady standing at the door of the next carriage.



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Mike was leaning through the window, and Esther was pressing near to him. They murmured low to each other, and their eyes were bright with tears. A little apart stood a small group, in which Henry and Angel and Ned were conspicuous, and Mike's sisters and Dot and Mat were there. A callous observer might have laughed, so sad and solemn they were. Mike's fun tried a rally; but his jests fell spiritless. It was not so much a parting, one might have thought, as a funeral. Little was said, but eyes were eloquent, either with tears, or with long strong glances that meant undying faithfulness all round; and Mike knew that Henry's eyes were quoting "*Allons!* after the great Companions, and to belong to them!"

Henry's will to achieve was too strong for him to think of this as a parting; he could only think of it as a glorious beginning. There is something impersonal in ambition, and in the absorption of the work to be done the ambitious man forgets his merely individual sensibilities. To achieve, though the heavens fall,—that was Henry's ambition for Mike and for himself.

No one really believed that the train would have the hard-heartedness to start; but at last, with deliberate intention, evidently not to be swayed by human pity, the guard set the estranging whistle to his lips, cold and inexorable as Nero turning down the thumb of death, and surely Mike's sad little face began to move away from them. Hands reached out to him, eyes streamed, handkerchiefs fluttered,—but nothing could hold him back; and when at last a curve in the line had swallowed the white speck of his face, they turned away from the dark gulf where the train had been as though it were a newly opened grave.

A great to-do to make about a mere parting!—says someone. No doubt, my dear sir! All depends upon one's standard of value. No doubt these young people weighed life in fantastic scales. Their standard of value was, no doubt, uncommon. To love each other was better than rubies; to lose each other was bitter as death. For others other values,—they had found their only realities in the human affections.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

ESTHER AND HENRY ONCE MORE

Yes, Mike had really gone. Henceforth for ever so long, he would only exist for Esther in letters, or as a sad little voice at the end of a wire. It had been arranged that Henry should take Esther with him for dinner that evening to the brightest restaurant in Tyre. He was a great believer in being together, and also in dinner, as comforters of your sad heart. Perhaps, too, he was a little glad to feel Esther leaning gently upon him once more. Their love was too sure and lasting and ever-present to have many opportunities of being dramatic. Nature does not make a fuss about gravitation. One of the most wonderful and powerful of laws, it is yet of all laws the most retiring. Gravitation



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never decks itself in rainbows, nor does it vaunt its undoubted strength in thunder. It is content to make little show, because it is very strong; yet you have always to reckon with it. It is undemonstrative, but it is always there. The love of Esther and Henry was like that. It has made little show in this history, but few readers can have missed its presence in the atmosphere. It might go for weeks without its festival; but there it was all the time, ready for any service, staunch for any trial. It was one of the laws which kept the little world I have been describing slung safely in space, and securely shining.

It was, indeed, something like a perfect relationship,—this love of Esther and Henry. Had the laws of nature permitted it, it is probable that Mike and Angel would have been forced to seek their mates elsewhere. As it was, though it was thus less than marriage, it was more than friendship—as the holy intercourse of a mother and a son is more than friendship. Freed from the perturbations of sex, it yet gained warmth and exhilaration from the unconscious presence of that stimulating difference. Though they were brother and sister, friend and friend, Henry and Esther were also man and woman. So satisfying were they to each other, that when they sat thus together, the truth must be told, that, for the time at all events, they missed no other man or woman.

“I have always you,” said Esther.

“Do I still matter, then?” said Henry. “Are you sure the old love is not growing old?”

“You know it can never grow old. There is only one Mike; but there is only one Henry too. It’s a good love to have, Harry, isn’t it? It makes one feel so much safer in the world.”

“Dear little Esther! Do you remember those old beatings, and that night you brought me the cake? Bless you!”—and Henry reached his hand across the table, and laid it so kindly on Esther’s that a hovering waiter retreated out of delicacy, mistaking the pair for lovers. It was a mistake that was often made when they were together; and they had sometimes laughed, when travelling, at the kind-hearted way passengers on the point of entering their carriage had suddenly made up their minds not to disturb the poor newly-married young things.

“And how we used to hate you once!” said Esther; “one can hardly understand it now. Do you remember how on Sunday afternoons you would insist on playing at church, and how, with a tablecloth for a surplice, you used to be the minister? How you used to storm if we poor things missed any of the responses!”

“The monstrous egoism of it all!” said Henry, laughing. “It was all got up to give me a stage, and nothing else. I didn’t care whether you enjoyed it or not. What dragons children are!”



“Dragons of the prime, that tare each other in their slime,” quoted Esther. “Yes, we tore each other, and no mistake—”

“Well, I’ve made up for it since, haven’t I?” said Henry. “I hope I’m a humble enough brother of the beautiful to please you nowadays.”



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“You’re the truest, most reliable thing in the world,” said Esther; “I always think of you as something strong and true to come to—”

“Except Mike!”

“No, not even except Mike. We’ll call it a draw—dear little Mike! To think of him going further and further away every minute! I wonder where he is by now. He must have reached Rugby long since.”

At that moment the waiter ventured to approach with a silver tray. A telegram,—it was indeed a telegram of tears and distance from Mike, given in at Rugby. Even so long parted and so far away, Mike was still true. He had not yet forgotten!

These young people were great extravagants of the emotional telegram. They were probably among the earliest to apply electricity for heart-breaking messages. Some lovers feel it a profanation thus to reveal their souls beneath the eye of a telegraph-operator; but the objection of delicacy ceases if you can regard the operator in his actual capacity as a part of the machine. French perhaps is an advisable medium; though, if the operator misunderstands it, your love is apt to take strange forms at its destination, and if he understands it, you may as well use English at once.

“Dear Mike! God bless him!” and they pledged Mike in Esther’s favourite champagne. The wives of great actor-managers must early inure themselves to champagne.

“But if you’re jealous of Mike,” said Esther, presently, taking up the dropped thread of their talk; “what about Angel?”

“Of course it was only nonsense,” said Henry. “I know you love Angel far too much to be jealous of her, as I love Mike; and that’s just the beautiful harmony of it all. We are just a little impregnable world of four,—four loving hearts against the world.”

“How clever it was of you to find Angel!”

“I found Mike, too!” said Henry, laughing.

“Oh, yes, I know; but then I discovered you.”

“Ah, but a still higher honour belongs to me, for I discovered you,” retorted Henry. “When you consider that I discovered three such wonderful persons as you and Angel and Mike, don’t you think, on the whole, that I’m singularly modest?”

“Do you love me?” said Esther, presently, quite irrelevantly.

“Do you love *me*?”



“I asked first.”

“Well, for the sake of argument, let us say ‘yes.’”

“How much?”

“As big as the world.”

“Oh, well, then, let’s have some Benedictine with the coffee!” said Esther.

“I’ve thought of something better, more ‘sacramental,’” said Henry, smiling, “but you couldn’t conscientiously drink it with me. It’s the red drink of perfect love. Will you drink it with me?”

“Of course I will.”

So the waiter brought a bottle bearing the beautiful words, “*Parfait Amour.*”

“It’s like blood,” said Esther; “it makes me a little frightened.”

“Would you rather not drink it?” asked Henry. “You know if you drink it with me, you must drink it with no one else. It is the law of it that we can only drink it with one.”



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“Not even with Mike?”

“Not even with Mike.”

“What of Angel?”

“I will drink it with no one but you as long as I live.”

“I will drink it then.”

They held up their glasses.

“Dear old Esther!”

“Dear old Henry!”

And then they laughed at their solemnity. It was deeply sworn!

When Esther reached home that evening, she found a further telegram from Mike, announcing his arrival at Euston; and she had scarcely read it when she heard her father’s voice calling her. She went immediately to the dining-room.

“Esther, dear,” he said, “your mother and I want a word with you.”

“No, James, you must speak for yourself in this,” said Mrs. Mesurier, evidently a little perturbed.

“Well, dear, if I must be alone in the matter, I must bear it; I cannot shrink from my duty on that account.” Then, turning to Esther, “I called you in to speak to you about Mike Laflin—”

“Yes, father,” exclaimed Esther, with a little gasp of surprise.

“I met Mr. Laflin on the boat this morning, and was much astonished and grieved to hear of the rash step his son has chosen to take. The matter has evidently been kept from me,”—strictly speaking, it had; “I understand, though on that again I have not been consulted, that you and Mike have for some time been informally engaged to each other. Now you know my views on the theatre, and I am sure that you must see that Mike’s having taken such a step must at once put an end to any such idea. Your own sense of propriety would, I am sure, tell you that, without any words from me—”

“Father!” cried Esther, in astonishment.



“You know that I considered Mike a very nice lad. His family is respectable; and he would have come into a very comfortable business, if he hadn’t taken this foolish freak into his head—”

“But, father, you have laughed at his recitations, yourself, many a time, here of an evening. What difference can there be?”

“There is the difference of the theatre, the contaminating atmosphere, the people it attracts, the harm it does—your father, as you know, has never been within a theatre in his life; is it likely that he can look with calmness upon his daughter marrying a man whose livelihood is to be gained in a scandalous and debasing profession?”

“Father, I cannot listen to your talking of Mike like that. If it is wrong to make people innocently happy, to make them laugh and forget their troubles, to—to—well, if it’s wrong to be Mike—I’m sorry; but, wrong or right, I love him, and nothing will ever make me give him up.”

Mrs. Mesurier here interrupted, “I told you, James, how it would be. You cannot change young hearts. The times are not the same as when you and I were young; and, though I’m sure I don’t want to go against you, I think you are too hard on Esther. Love is love after all—and Mike’s one of the best-hearted lads that ever walked.”



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“Thank you, mother,” said Esther, impulsively, throwing her arms round her mother’s neck, and bursting into tears, “I—I will never give—give—him up.”

“No, dear, no; now don’t distress yourself. It will all come right. Your father doesn’t quite understand.” And then a great tempest of sobbing came over Esther, and swept her away to her own room.

The father and mother turned to each other with some anger.

“James, I’m surprised at your distressing the poor child like that to-night; you might have known she would be sensitive, with Mike only gone to-day! You could surely have waited till to-morrow.”

“I am surprised, Mary, that you can encourage her as you did. You cannot surely uphold the theatre?”

“Well, James, I don’t know,—there are theatres and theatres, and actors and actors; and there have been some very good men actors after all, and some very bad men ministers, if it comes to that,” she added; “and theatre or no theatre, love’s love in spite of all the fathers and mothers in the world—”

“All right, Mary, I would prefer then that we spoke no more on the matter for this evening,” and James Mesurier turned to his diary, to record, along with the state of the weather, and the engagements of the day, the undutiful conduct of Esther, and a painful difference with his wife.

Strange, that men who have themselves loved and begotten should thus for a moment imagine that a small social prejudice, or a narrow religious formula, can break the purpose of a young and vigorous passion. Do they realise what it is they are proposing to obstruct? This is love—*love*, my dear sir, at once the mightiest might, and the rightest right in the universe! This is—Niagara—the Atlantic—the power of the stars—and the strength of the tides. It is all the winds of the world, and all the fires of the centre. You surely cannot be serious in asking it to take, in exchange, some obsolete objection against its beloved!

CHAPTER XXXIX

MIKE AFAR

This collision with her father braced up Esther’s nerves, and made Mike’s absence easier to bear. Her father made no more allusion to it. He was entering that period when fathers, however despotic, content themselves with protest, where once they have governed by royal proclamation. He was losing heart to contend with his children. They



must go their own ways—though it must not be without occasional severe and solemn warnings on his part.

Mike and Esther wrote to each other twice a week. They had talked of every day, but a wise instinct prompted them to the less romantic, but likely the more enduring arrangement. It would be none the less open to them to write fourteen letters a week if they wished, but to have had to admit that one letter a day was a serious tax, not only on one's other occupations, including idleness, but also on the amount of subject-matter available, would have been a dangerous correction of an impulsive miscalculation.



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Second-rate London lodgings are not great cheerers of the human spirit, and Mike was very lonely in his first letter or two; but, as the rehearsals proceeded, it was evident that he was taking hold of his new world, and the letter which told of his first night, and of his own encouraging success in it, was buoyant with the rising tide of the future. His chief had affectionately laid his hand on his shoulder, as he came off from his scene, and, in the hearing of the whole company, prophesied a great future for him.

Mike had been born under a lucky star; and he had hardly been in London two months when accident very perceptibly brightened it. The chief comedian in the company fell ill; and though Mike had had so little experience, his chief had so much confidence in his native gift, that he cast him for the vacant part. Mike more than justified the confidence, and not only pleased him, but succeeded in individualising himself with the audience. He had only played it for a week, when one Saturday evening the audience, after calling the manager himself three times, set up a cry for "Laflin." The obsequious attendant pretended to consider it as a fourth call for the manager, and made as if to move the curtain aside for him once more; but, with a magnanimity rare indeed in a "star" of his magnitude, "No, no!" he said; "it is Mr. Laflin they want. Quick, lad, and take your first call."

So little Mike stepped before the curtain, and made his first bow to an affectionate burst of applause. What happy tears would have glittered in Esther's eyes had she been there to see it, and in Henry's too, and particularly, perhaps, in excitable Angel's!

Even so soon was the blossom giving promise of the fruit.

CHAPTER XL

A LEGACY MORE PRECIOUS THAN GOLD

Meanwhile, Henry plodded away at Aunt Tipping's, working sometimes on a volume of essays for the London publisher, and sometimes on his novel, now and again writing a review, and earning an odd guinea for a poem; and now and again indulging in a day of richly doing nothing. Otherwise, one day was like another, with the many exceptions of the days on which he saw Angel or Esther. With Ned, he spent many of his evenings; and he soon formed the pleasant habit of dropping in on Gerard, last thing before bedtime, for a smoke and half an hour's chat.

There is always a good deal of youth left in any one who genuinely loves youth; and Gerard always spoke of his youth as Adam, in his declining years, might have spoken of Paradise. For him life was just youth—and the rest of it death.



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“After thirty,” he would say, “the happiest life is only history repeating itself. I am no cynic,—far from it; but the worst of life is the monotony of the bill of fare. To do a thing once, even twice, is delightful—perhaps even a third time is successfully possible; but to do it four times, is middle age. If you think of it, what is there to do after thirty that one ought not to have achieved to perfection before? You know the literary dictum, that the poet who hasn’t written a masterpiece before he is thirty will never write any after. Of course, there are exceptions; I am speaking of the rule. In business, for example, what future is there for the man who has not already a dashing past at thirty? Of course, the bulk, the massive trunk and the impressive foliage of his business, must come afterwards; but the tree must have been firmly rooted and stoutly branched before then, and able to go on growing on its own account. The work, in fact, must have been done.

“Take perhaps the only thing really worth doing in life,” and Gerard perceptibly saddened. “That is, marrying a woman you love, or I should say *the* woman, for you only really *love* one woman—I’m old-fashioned enough to think that,—well, I say, marrying the woman you love, and bringing into the world that miracle of miracles,—a child that shall be something of you and all her: that certainly is something to have done before thirty, and not to be repeated, perhaps, more than once before or after. She will want a boy like you, and you will have a girl like her. That you may easily accomplish before thirty. Afterwards, however, if you go on repeating each other, what do you do but blur the individuality of the original masterpieces—though,” pursued Gerard, laughing, always ready to forget his original argument in the seductiveness of an unexpected development of it, “though, after all, I admit, there might be a temptation sometimes to improve upon the originals. ‘Agnes, my dear,’ we might say, ‘I’m not quite satisfied yet with the shade of Eva’s hair. It’s nearly yours, but not quite. It’s an improvement on Anna’s, whose eyes now are exactly yours. Eva’s, unfortunately, are not so faithful. I’m afraid we’ll have to try again.’

“No, but seriously,” he once more began, “for a really vital and successful life there is no adequate employment of the faculties after thirty, except, of course, in the repetition of former successes. No; I even withdraw that,—not the repetition, only the conservation, the feeding, of former successes. The success is in the creation. When a world is once created, any fool can keep it spinning.



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“Man’s life is at least thirty years too long. Two score years is more than enough for us to say what we were sent here to say; and if you’ll consider those biographies in which you are most interested, the biographies of great writers, you cannot but bear me out. What, for instance, did Keats and Shelley and Burns and Byron lose by dying, all of them long before they were forty,—Keats even long before he was thirty; and what did Wordsworth and Coleridge gain by living so long after? Wordsworth and Coleridge didn’t even live to repeat themselves, else, of course, one would have begged them to go on living for ever; for some repetitions, it is admitted, are welcome,—for instance, won’t you have a little more whisky?”

Henry always agreed so completely with Gerard’s talk, or at least so delighted in it, that he had little scope of opportunity to say much himself; and Gerard was too keen a talker to complain of a rapt young listener.

“How old are you?” he said, presently.

“Twenty-two next month.”

“Twenty-two! How wonderful to be twenty-two! Yet I don’t suppose you’ve realised it in the least. In your own view, you’re an aged philosopher, white with a past, and bowed down with the cares of a future. Just you stay in bed all day to-morrow, and ponder on the wonderfulness of being twenty-two!

“I’m forty-two. You’re beginning—I’m done with. And yet, in some ways, I believe I’m younger than you—though, perhaps, alas! what I consider the youth in me is only the wish to be young again, the will to do and enjoy, without the force and the appetite. But, by the way, when I say I’m forty-two, I mean that I’m forty-two in the course of next week, next Thursday, in fact, and if you’ll do me that kindness, I should be grateful if you would join me that evening in celebrating the melancholy occasion. I’ve got a great mind to enlist your sympathy in a little ancient history, if it won’t be too great a tax upon your goodness; but I’ll think it over between now and then.”

Gerard’s birthday had come; and the ancient history he had spoken of had proved to be a chapter of his own history, the beauty and sadness of which had made an impression upon Henry, to be rendered ineffaceable a very few days after in a sudden and terrible manner.

One early morning about four, just as it was growing light, he had suddenly awakened with a strong feeling that some one was bending over him. He opened his eyes, to see, as he thought, Gerard hastily leaving his bedside.

“Gerard!” he cried, “what’s the matter?” but the figure gave no answer, faded away down the long room, and disappeared. Henry sat up in bed and struck a light, his heart beating violently. But there was no one there, and the door was closed. It had evidently



been one of those dreams that persist on the eye for a moment after waking. Yet it left him uneasy; and presently he wondered if Gerard could be ill. He determined to see; so, slipping on his dressing-gown, he crossed the landing to Gerard's room, and, softly knocking, opened the door and put in his head.



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“Gerard, old chap, are you all right?—Gerard—”

There was no answer, and the room seemed unaccountably still. He listened for the sound of breathing, but he couldn't hear it.

“Gerard!” he cried, again louder, but there was still no answer; and then, with the silence, a chill terror began to creep through his blood. He had never yet seen death; and perhaps if he had the terror in his thought would not have been lessened. With a heart that had almost stopped beating, and knees that shook beneath him, he pushed open the door and walked over to the bed. It was still too dark to see more than outlines and masses of white and black; but even so he could see that the stillness with which Gerard was lying was the stillness of death.

His next thought was to rouse Aunt Tipping; and together the two bent over the dead face.

“Yes, he's gone,” said Aunt Tipping; “poor gentlemen, how beautiful he looks!” and they both gazed in silence upon the calm, smiling face.

“Well, he's better off,” she said, presently, leaning over him, and softly pressing down the lids of his eyes.

Henry involuntarily drew away.

“Dear lad, there's nothing to be frightened of,” said his aunt. “He's as harmless as a baby.”

Then she took a handkerchief from a drawer, and spread it gently over the dead man's face. To Aunt Tipping the dead were indeed as little children, and inspired her with a strange motherly tenderness. Many had been the tired silent ones whose eyes she had closed, and whose limbs she had washed against their last resting place. They were so helpless now; they could do nothing any more for themselves.

Later in the day, Henry came again and sat long by the dead man's side. It seemed uncompanionable to have grown thus suddenly afraid of him, to leave him thus alone in that still room. And as he sat and watched him, he gave to his memory a solemn service of faithful thought. Thus it was he went over again the words in which Gerard had made him the depository, the legatee, of his most sacred possession.

Gerard had evidently had some presentiment of his approaching end.

“I am going,” he had said, “to place the greatest confidence in you one man can place in another, pay you the greatest compliment. I shall die some day, and something tells me that that divine event is not very far off. Now I have no one in the world who cares an old ‘J’ pen for me, and a new one is perhaps about as much as I care for any one—with



one exception, and that is a woman whom I shall never see again. She is not dead, but has been worse than dead for me these ten years. I am optimist enough to believe that her old love for me still survives, making sweet the secret places of her soul. Never once in all these years to have doubted her love has been more than most marriages; but were I to live for another ten years, and still another, I would believe in it still.



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But the stars were against us. We met too late. We met when she had long been engaged to a friend of her youth, a man noble and true, to whom she owed much, and whom she felt it a kind of murder to desert. It was one of those fallacious chivalries of feeling which are the danger of sensitive and imaginative minds. Religion strengthened it, as it is so apt to strengthen any form of self-destruction, short of technical suicide. There was but a month to their marriage when we met. For us it was a month of rapture and agonies, of heaven shot through with hell. I saw further than she. I begged her at least to wait a year; but the force of my appeal was weakened by scruples similar to her own. To rob another of his happiness is an act from which we may well shrink, though we can clearly see that the happiness was really destined for us, and can never be his in any like degree. During this time I had received from her many letters, letters such as a woman only writes in the May-morning of her passion; and one day I received the last. There was in it one sentence which when I read it I think my heart broke, 'Do you believe,' it ran, 'in a love that can lie asleep, as in a trance, in this world, to awaken again in another, a love that during centuries of silence can still be true, and be love still in a thousand years? If you do, go on loving me. For that is the only love I dare give you. I must love you no more in this world.'

"Each morning as I have risen, and each night as I have turned to sleep, those words have repeated themselves again and again in my heart, for ten years. It was so I became the Ashton Gerard you know to-day. Since that day, we have never met or written to each other. All I know is that she is still alive, and still with him, and never would I disturb their peace. When I die, I would not have her know it. If love *is* immortal, we shall meet again—when I am worthier to meet her. Such reunions are either mere dreams, or they are realities to which the strongest forces of the universe are pledged."

Henry's only comment had been to grip Gerard's hand, and give him the sympathy of silence.

"Now," said Gerard, once more after a while, "it is about those letters I want to speak to you. They are here," and he unlocked a drawer and drew from it a little silver box. "I always keep them here. The key of the drawer is on this ring, and this little gold key is the key of the box itself. I tell you this, because I have what you may regard as a strange request to make.

"I suppose most men would consider it their duty either to burn these letters, or leave instructions for them to be buried with them. That is a gruesome form of sentiment in which I have too much imagination to indulge. Both my ideas of duty and sentiment take a different form. The surname of the writer of these letters is nowhere revealed in them, nor are there any references in them by which she could



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ever be identified. Therefore the menace to her fair fame in their preservation is not a question involved. Now when the simplest woman is in love, she writes wonderfully; but when a woman of imagination and intellect is caught by the fire of passion, she becomes a poet. Once in her life, every such woman is an artist; once, for some one man's unworthy sake, she becomes inspired, and out of the fulness of her heart writes him letters warm and real as the love-cries of Sappho. Such are the letters in this little box. They are the classic of a month's passion, written as no man has ever yet been able to write his love. Do you think it strange then that I should shrink from destroying them? I would as soon burn the songs of Shelley. They are living things. Shall I selfishly bury the beating heart of them in the silence of the grave?

"So, Mesurier," he continued, affectionately, "when I met you and understood something of your nature, I thought that in you I had found one who was worthy to guard this treasure for me, and perhaps pass it on again to some other chosen spirit—so that these beautiful words of a noble woman's heart shall not die—for when a man loves a woman, Mesurier, as you yourself must know, he is insatiable to hear her praise, and it is agony for him to think that her memory may suffer extinction. Therefore, Mesurier,—Henry, let me call you,—I want to give the memory of my love into your hands. I want you to love it for me, when perhaps I can love it no more. I want you sometimes to open this box, and read in these letters, as if they were your own; I want you sometimes to speak softly the name of 'Helen,' when my lips can speak it no more."

Such was the beautiful legacy of which Henry found himself the possessor by Gerard's death. Early on that day he had remembered his promise to his dead friend, and had found the silver box, and locked it away among his own most sacred things. Some day, in an hour and place upon which none might break, he would open the little box and read Helen's letters, as Gerard had wished. Already one sentence was fixed unforgettably upon his mind, and he said it over softly to himself as he sat by Gerard's silent bed: "Do you believe in a love that can lie asleep, as in a trance in this world, to awaken again in another,—a love that during centuries of silence can still be true, and be love still in a thousand years? If you do, go on loving me. For that is the only love I dare give you; I must love you no more in this world."

Strange dreams of the indomitable dust! Already another man's love was growing dear to him. Already his soul said the name of "Helen" softly for Gerard's sake.

CHAPTER XLI

LABORIOUS DAYS

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With Gerard's death, Henry began to find Aunt Tipping's too sad a place to go on living in. It had become haunted; and when new people moved into Gerard's rooms, it became still more painful for him. It was as though Gerard had been dispossessed and driven out. So he cast about for some new shelter; and, one day, chance having taken him to the shipping end of the city, he came upon some old offices which seemed full of anxiety to be let. Inquiring of a chatty little housekeeper's wife, he discovered, away at the echoing top of the building, a big, well-lighted room, for which she thought the owner would be glad to take ten pounds a year. That whole storey was deserted. Henry made up his mind at once, and broke the news to Aunt Tipping that evening. It was the withering of one of her few rays of poetry, and she struggled to keep him; but when she saw how it was, the good woman insisted that he should take something from her towards furnishing. Receiving was nothing like so blessed as giving for Aunt Tipping. That old desk,—yes, she had bought it for him,—that he must certainly take, and think of his old aunt sometimes as he wrote his great books on it; and some bed-linen she could well afford. She would take no denial.

Angel and Esther were then called in to help him in the purchase of a carpet, a folding-bed, an old sofa, and a few chairs. A carpenter got to work on the bookshelves, and in a fortnight's time still another habitation had been built for the Muse,—a habitation from which she was not destined to remove again, till she and Angel and Henry all moved into one house together,—a removal which was, as yet, too far off to be included in this history.

Ten pounds a year, a folding-bed, and a teapot!—this was Henry's new formula for the cultivation of literature. He had so far progressed in his ambitions as to have arrived at the dignity of a garret of his own, and he liked to pretend that soon he might be romantically fortunate enough to sit face to face with starvation. He knew, however, that it would be a starvation mitigated by supplies from three separate, well-larded homes. A lad with a sweetheart and a sister, a mother and an aunt, all in love with him, is not likely to become an authority on starvation in its severest forms.

A stern law had been passed that Henry's daytime hours were to be as strictly respected as those of a man of business; yet quite often, about eleven o'clock in the morning, there would come a heavenly whisper along the passage and a little knock on the door, soft as a flower tapping against a window-pane.

"Thank goodness, that's Angel!

"Angel, bless you! How glad I am to see you! I can't get on a bit with my work this morning."



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“Oh, but I haven’t come to interrupt you, dear. I sha’n’t keep you five minutes. Only I thought, dear, you’d be so tired of pressed beef and tinned tongue, and so I thought I’d make a little hot-pot for you. I bought the things for it as I came along, and it won’t take five minutes, if Mrs. Glass [the housekeeper] will only lend me a basin to put it in, and bake it for you in her oven. Now, dear, you mustn’t—you know I mustn’t stay. See now, I’ll just take off my hat and jacket and run along to Mrs. Glass, to get what I want. I’ll be back in a minute. Well, then, just one—now that’s enough; good-bye,” and off she would skip.

If you want to know how fairies look when they are making hot-pot, you should have seen Angel’s absorbed little shining face.

“Now, do be quiet, Henry. I’m busy. Why don’t you get on with your work? I won’t speak a word.”

“Angel, dear, you might just as well stay and help me to eat it. I sha’n’t do any work today, I know for certain. It’s one of my bad days.”

“Now, Henry, that’s lazy. You mustn’t give way like that. You’ll make me wish I hadn’t come. It’s all my fault.”

“No, really, dear, it isn’t. I haven’t done a stroke all morning—though I’ve sat with my pen for two hours. You might stay, Angel, just an hour or two.”

“No, Henry; mother wants me back soon. She’s house-cleaning. And besides, I mustn’t. No—no—you see I’ve nearly finished now—see! Get me the salt and pepper. There now—that looks nice, doesn’t it? Now aren’t I a good little housewife?”

“You would be, if you’d only stay. Do stay, Angel. Really, darling, it will be all the same if you go. I know I shall do nothing. Look at my morning’s work, and he brought her a sheet of paper containing two lines and a half of new-born prose, one line and a half of which was plentifully scratched out. To this argument he added two or three persuasive embraces.

“It’s really true, Henry? Well, of course, I oughtn’t; but if you can’t work, of course you can’t. And you must have a little rest sometimes, I know. Well, then, I’ll stay; but only till we’ve finished lunch, you know, and we must have it early. I won’t stay a minute past two o’clock, do you hear? And now I’ll run along with this to Mrs. Glass.”

When Angel had gone promptly at three, as likely as not another step would be heard coming down the passage, and a feminine rustle, suggesting a fuller foliage of skirts, pause outside the door, then a sort of brotherly-sisterly knock.

“Esther! Why, you’ve just missed Angel; what a pity!”



“Well, dear, I only ran up for half-a-minute. I was shopping in town, and I couldn’t resist looking in to see how the poor boy was getting on. No, dear, I won’t take my things off. I must catch the half-past three boat, and then I’ll keep you from your work?”

Esther always said this with a sort of suggestion in her voice that it was just possible Henry might have found some new way of both keeping her there and doing his work at the same time; as though she had said, “I know you cannot possibly work while I am here; but, of course, if you can, and talking to me all the time won’t interfere with it—well, I’ll stay.”



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“Oh, no, you won’t really. To tell the truth, I’ve done none to-day. I can’t get into the mood.”

“So you’ve been getting Angel to help you. Oh, well, of course, if Angel can be allowed to interrupt you, I suppose I can too. Well, then, I’ll stay a quarter of an hour.”

“But you may as well take your things off, and I’ll make a cup of tea, eh? That’ll be cosey, won’t it? And then you can read me Mike’s last letter, eh?”

“Oh, he’s doing splendidly, dear! I had a lovely letter from him this morning. Would you really care to hear a bit of it?”

And Esther would proceed to read, picking her way among the endearments and the diminutives.

“I *am* glad, dear. Why, if he goes on at this rate, you’ll be able to get married in no time.”

“Yes; isn’t it splendid, dear? I am so happy! What I’d give to see his little face for five minutes! Wouldn’t you?”

“Rather. Perhaps he’ll be able to run up on Bank Holiday.”

“I’m afraid not, dear. He speaks of it in his letter, and just hopes for it; but rather fears they’ll have to play at Brighton, or some other stupid seaside place.”

“That’s a bother. Yes, dear old Mike! To think of him working away there all by himself—God bless him! Do you know he’s never seen this old room? It struck me yesterday. It doesn’t seem quite warmed till he’s seen it. Wouldn’t it be lovely to have him here some night?—one of our old, long evenings. Well, I suppose it will really come one of these days. And then we shall be having you married, and going off to London in clouds of glory, while poor old Henry grubs away down here in Tyre.”

“Well, if we do go first, you will not be long after us, dear; and if only Mike could make a really great hit, why, in five years’ time we might all be quite rich. Won’t it be wonderful?”

Then the kettle boiled, and Henry made the tea; and when it had long since been drunk, Esther began to think it must be five o’clock, and, horrified to find it a quarter to six, confessed to being ashamed of herself, and tried to console her conscience by the haste of her good-bye.

“I’m afraid I’ve wasted your afternoon,” she said; “but we don’t often get a chat nowadays, do we? Good-bye, dear. Go on loving me, won’t you?”



After that, Henry would give the day up as a bad job, and begin to wonder if Ned would be dropping in that evening for a smoke; and as that was Ned's almost nightly custom about eight o'clock, the chances of Henry's disappointment were not serious.

CHAPTER XLII

A HEAVIER FOOTFALL

One morning, as Henry was really doing a little work, a more ponderous step broke the silence of his landing, a heavy footfall full of friendship. Certainly that was not Angel, nor even the more weighty Esther, though when the knock came it was little and shy as a woman's.



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Henry threw open the door, but for a moment there was no one to be seen; and then, recalling the idiosyncrasy of a certain new friend whom by that very token he guessed it might be, he came out on to the landing, to find a great big friendly man in corpulent blue serge, a rough, dark beard, and a slouched hat, standing a few feet off in a deprecating way,—which really meant that if there were any ladies in the room with Mr. Mesurier, he would prefer to call another time. For though he had two or three grownup daughters of his own, this giant of a man was as shy of a bit of a thing like Angel, whom he had met there one day, as though he were a mere boy. He always felt, he once said in explanation, as though he might break them in shaking hands. They affected him like the presence of delicate china, and yet he could hold a baby deftly as an elephant can nip up a flower; and to see him turn over the pages of a delicate *edition de luxe* was a lesson in tenderness. For this big man who, as he would himself say, looked for all the world like a pirate, was as insatiable of fine editions as a school-girl of chocolate creams. He was one of those dearest of God's creatures, a gentle giant; and his voice, when it wasn't necessary to be angry, was as low and kind as an old nurse at the cradle's side.

Henry had come to know him through his little Scotch printer, who printed circulars and bill-heads, for the business over which Mr. Fairfax—for that was his name—presided. By day he was the vigorous brain of a huge emporium, a sort of Tyrian Whiteley's; but day and night he was a lover of books, and you could never catch him so busy but that he could spare the time mysteriously to beckon you into his private office, and with the glee of a child, show you his last large paper. He not only loved books; but he was rumoured liberally to have assisted one or two distressed men of genius well-known to the world. The tales of the surreptitious goodness of his heart were many; but it was known too that the big kind man had a terribly searching eye under his briery brows, and could be as stern towards ingratitude as he was soft to misfortune. Henry once caught a glimpse of this as they spoke of a mutual friend whom he had helped to no purpose. Mr. Fairfax never used many words, on this occasion he was grimly laconic.

"Rat-poison!" he said, shaking his head. "Rat-poison!" It was his way of saying that that was the only cure for that particular kind of man.

It was evident that his generous eye had seen how things were with Henry. He had subscribed for at least a dozen copies of "The Book of Angelica," and in several ways shown his interest in the struggling young poet. As has been said, he had seen Angelica one day, and his shyness had not prevented his heart from going out to these two young people, and the dream he saw in their eyes. He had determined to do what he could to help them, and to-day he had come with a plan.



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"I hope you're not too proud to give me a hand, Mr. Mesurier, in a little idea I've got," he said.

"I think you know how proud I am, and how proud I'm not, Mr. Fairfax," said Henry. "I'm sure anything I could do for you would make me proud, if that's what you mean."

"Thank you. Thank you. But you mustn't speak too fast. It's advertising—does the word frighten you? No? Well, it's a scheme I've thought of for a little really artistic and humorous advertising combined. I've got a promise from one of the most original artists of the day, you know his name, to do the pictures; and I want you to do the verses—at, I may say, your own price. It's not, perhaps, the highest occupation for a poet; but it's something to be going on with; and if we've got good posters as advertisements, I don't see why we shouldn't have good humorous verse. What do you think of it?"

"I think it's capital," said Henry, who was almost too ready to turn his hand to anything. "Of course I'll do it; only too glad."

"Well, that's settled. Now, name your price. Don't be frightened!"

"Really, I can't. I haven't the least idea what I should get. Wait till I have done a few of the verses, and you can give me what you please."

"No, sir," said Mr. Fairfax; "business is business. If you won't name a figure, I must. Will you consider a hundred pounds sufficient?"

"A hundred pounds!" Henry gasped out, the tears almost starting to his eyes.

Mr. Fairfax did not miss his frank joy, and liked him for his ingenuousness.

"All right, then; we'll call it settled. I shall be ready for the verses as soon as you care to write them."

"Mr. Fairfax, I will tell you frankly that this is a great deal to me, and I thank you from my heart."

"Not a word, not a word, my boy. We want your verses, we want your verses. That's right, isn't it? Good verses, good money! Now no more of that," and the good man, in alarm lest he should be thanked further, made an abrupt and awkward farewell.

"It will keep the lad going a few months anyhow," he said to himself, as he tramped downstairs, glad that he'd been able to think of something; for, while the scheme was admirable as an advertisement, and would more than repay Messrs. Owens' outlay, its origin had been pure philanthropy. Such good angels do walk this world in the guise of bulky, quite unpoetic-looking business-men.



“One hundred pounds!” said Henry, over and over again to himself. “One hundred pounds! What news for Angel!”

He had soon a scheme in his head for the book, which entirely hit Mr. Fairfax’s fancy. It was to make a volume of verse celebrating each of the various departments of the great store, in metres parodying the styles of the old English ballads and various poets, ancient and modern, and was to be called, “Bon Marche Ballads.”

“Something like this, for example,” said Henry, a few days later, pulling an envelope covered with pencil-scribble from his pocket. “This for the ladies’ department,—



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*"Oh, where do you buy your hats, lady?
And where do you buy your hose?
And where do you buy your shoes, lady?
And where your underclothes?"*

*"Hats, shoes, and stockings, everything
A lady's heart requires,
Quality good, and prices low,
We are the largest buyers!"*

"The stock we bought on Wednesday last
Is fading fast away,
To-morrow it may be too late—
Oh, come and buy to-day!"—

Mr. Fairfax fairly trumpeted approval. "If they're all as good as that," he said; "you must have more money. Yes, you must. Well, well,—we'll see, we'll see!" And when the "Bon Marche Ballads" actually appeared, the generous creature insisted on adding another fifty pounds to the cheque.

As many were afterwards of opinion that Henry never again did such good work as these nonsense rhymes, written thus for a frolic,—and one hundred and fifty pounds,—and as copies of the "Bon Marche Ballads" are now exceedingly scarce, it may possibly be of interest to quote two or three more of its preposterous numbers. This is a lyric illustrative of cheese, for the provision department:—

*"Are you fond of cheese?
Do you sometimes sigh
For a really good
Gorgonzola? Try,*

*"Try our one-and-ten,
Wonderfully rotten,
Tasted once, it never can
Be again forgotten_!"*

Here is "a Ballad of Baby's Toys:"—

*"Oh, give me a toy" the baby said—
The babe of three months old,—
Oh, what shall I buy my little babee,
With silver and with gold?"*



"I would you buy a trumpet fine,
And a rocking-horse for me,
And a bucket and a spade, mother,
To dig beside the sea."

"But where shall I buy these pretty things?"
The mother's heart inquires.
"Oh, go to Owens!" cried the babe;
"They are the largest buyers." _

The subject of our last selection is "Melton Mowbray," which bore beneath its title due apologies to Mr. Swinburne:—

*"Strange pie, that is almost a passion,
O passion immoral, for pie!
Unknown are the ways that they fashion,
Unknown and unseen of the eye,
The pie that is marbled and mottled,
The pie that digests with a sigh:
For all is not Bass that is bottled,
And all is not pork that is pie."*

Of all the goodness else that Henry and Angel were to owe in future days to Mr. Fairfax, there is not room in this book to write. But that matters little, for is it not written in the Book of Love?

CHAPTER XLIII

STILL ANOTHER CALLER

One afternoon the step coming along the corridor was almost light enough to be Angel's, though a lover's ear told him that hers it was not. Once more that feminine rustle, the very whisper of romantic mystery; again the little feminine knock.



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Daintiness and Myrtilla!

“Well, this is lovely of you, Myrtilla! But what courage! How did you ever dare venture into this wild and savage spot,—this mountain-fastness of Bohemia?”

“Yes, it was brave of me, wasn’t it?” said Myrtilla, with a little laugh, for which the stairs had hardly left her breath. “But what a climb! It is like having your rooms on the Matterhorn. I think I must write a magazine article: ‘How I climbed the fifty-thousand stairs,’ with illustrations,—and we could have some quite pretty ones,” she said, looking round the room.

“That big skylight is splendid! As close, dear lad, to the stars as you can get it? Are you as devoted to them as ever?”

“Aren’t you, Myrtilla?”

“Oh, yes; but they don’t get any nearer, you know.”

“It’s awfully good to see you again, Myrtilla,” said Henry, going over to her and taking both her hands. “It’s quite a long time, you know, since we had a talk. It was a sweet thought of you to come. You’ll have some tea, won’t you?”

“Yes, I should love to see you make tea. Bachelors always make such good tea. What pretty cups! My word, we are dainty! I suppose it was Esther bought them for you?”

Henry detected the little trap and smiled. No, it hadn’t been Esther.

“No? Someone else then? eh! I think I can guess her name. It was mean of you not to tell me about her, Henry. I hear she’s called Angel, and that she looks like one. I wish I could have seen her before I went away.”

“Going away, Myrtilla? why, where? I’ve heard nothing of it. Tell me about it.”

The atmosphere perceptibly darkened with the thought of Williamson.

“Well!” she said, in the little airy melodious way she had when she was telling something particularly unhappy about herself—a sort of harpsichord bravado—“Well, you know, he’s taken to fancying himself seriously ill lately, and the doctors have aided and abetted him; and so we’re going to Davos Platz, or some such health-wilderness—and well, that’s all!”

“And you I suppose are to nurse the—to nurse him?” said Henry, savagely.

“Hush, lad! It’s no use, not a bit! You won’t help me that way,” she said, laying her hand kindly on his, and her eyes growing bright with suppressed tears.



“It’s a shame, nevertheless, Myrtila, a cruel shame!”

“You’d like to say it was a something-else shame, wouldn’t you, dear boy? Well, you can, if you like: but then you must say no more. And if you really want to help me, you shall send me a long letter now and again, with some of your new poems enclosed; and tell me what new books are worth sending for? Will you do that?”

“Of course, I will. That’s precious little to do anyhow.”

“It’s a good deal, really. But be sure you do it.”

“And, of course, you’ll write to me sometimes. I don’t think you know yet what your letters are to me. I never work so well as when I’ve had a letter from you.”



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“Really, dear lad, I don’t fancy you know how happy that makes me to hear.”

“Yes, you take just the sort of interest in my work I want, and that no one else takes.”

“Not even Angel?” said Myrtilla, slyly.

“Angel, bless her, loves my work; and is a brave little critic of it; but then it isn’t disloyal to her to say that she doesn’t know as much as you. Besides, she doesn’t approach it in quite the same way. She cares for it, first, because it is mine, and only secondly for its own sake. Now you care for it just for what it is—”

“I care for it, certainly, for what it’s going to be,” said Myrtilla, making one of those honest distinctions which made her opinion so stimulating to Henry.

“Yes, there you are. You’re artistically ambitious for me; you know what I want to do, even before I know myself. That’s why you’re so good for me. No one but you is that for me; and—poor stuff as I know it is—never write a word without wondering what you will think of it.”

“You’re sure it’s quite true,” said Myrtilla; “don’t say so if it isn’t. Because you know you’re saying what I care most to hear, perhaps, of anything you could say. You know how I love literature, and—well, you know too how fond I am of you, dear lad, don’t you?”

Literary criticism had kindled into emotion; and Henry bent down, and kissed Myrtilla’s hand. In return she let her hand rest a moment lightly on his hair, and then, rather spasmodically, turned to remark on his bookshelves with suspicious energy.

At that moment another step was heard in the corridor, again feminine. Henry knew it for Angel’s; and it may be that his expression grew a shade embarrassed, as he said:

“I believe I shall be able to introduce you to Angel after all—for I think this is she coming along the passage.”

As Henry opened the door, Angel was on the point of throwing her arms round his neck, when, noticing a certain constraint in his manner of greeting, she realised that he was not alone.

“We were just talking of you, dear,” said Henry. “This is my friend, Mrs. Williamson,—‘Myrtilla,’ of whom you’ve often heard me speak.”

“Oh, yes, I’ve often heard of Mrs. Williamson,” said Angel, not of course suffering the irony of her thought to escape into her voice.



“And I’ve heard no less of Miss Flower,” said Mrs. Williamson, “not indeed from this faithless boy here,—for I haven’t seen him for so long that I’ve had to humble myself at last and call,—but from Esther.”

Myrtilla loved the transparent face, pulsing with light, flushing or fading with her varying mood, answering with exquisite delicacy to any advance and retreat of the soul within. But an invincible prejudice, or perhaps rather fear, shut Angel’s eyes from the appreciation of Myrtilla. She was sweet and beautiful, but to the child that Angel still was she suggested malign artifice. Angel looked at her as an imaginative child looks at the moon, with suspicion.



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So, in spite of Myrtila's efforts to make friends, the conversation sustained a distinct loss in sprightliness by Angel's arrival.

Myrtila, perhaps divining a little of the truth, rose to go.

"Well, I'm afraid it's quite a long good-bye," she said.

"Oh, you're going away?" said Angel, with a shade of relief involuntarily in her voice.

"Oh, yes, perhaps before we meet again, you and Henry will be married. I'm sure I sincerely hope so."

"Thank you," said Angel, somewhat coldly.

"Well, good-bye, Henry," said Myrtila,—it was rather a strangled good-bye,—and then, in an evil moment, she caught sight of the Dante's head which, hidden in a recess, she had not noticed before. "I see you're still faithful to the Dante," she said; "that's sweet of you,—good-bye, good-bye, Miss Flower, Angel, perhaps you'll let me say, good-bye."

When she had gone there seemed a curious constraint in the air. You might have said that the consistency of the air had been doubled. Gravitation was at least twice as many pounds as usual to the square inch. Every little movement seemed heavy as though the medium had been water instead of air. As Henry raised his hands to help Angel off with her jacket, they seemed weighted with lead.

"No, thank you," said Angel, "I won't take it off. I can't stay long."

"Why, dear, what do you mean? I thought you were going to stay the evening with me. I've quite a long new chapter to read to you."

"I'm sorry, Henry,—but I find I can't."

"Why, dear, how's that? Won't you tell me the reason? Has anything happened?"

Angel stood still in the middle of the room, with her face as firmly miserable as she could make it.

"Won't you tell me?" Henry pleaded. "Won't you speak to me? Come, dear—what's the matter?"

"You know well enough, Henry, what's the matter!" came an unexpected flash of speech.

"Indeed, I don't. I know of no reason whatever. How should I?"



“Well, then, Mrs. Williamson’s the matter!—’Myrtilla,’ as you call her. Something told me it was like this all along, though I couldn’t bear to doubt you, and so I put it away. I wonder how often she’s been here when I have known nothing about it.”

“This is the very first time she has ever set foot in these rooms,” said Henry, growing cold in his turn. “I’ll give you my word of honour, if you need it.”

“I don’t want to hear any more. I’m going. Good-bye.”

“Going, Angel?” said Henry, standing between her and the door. “What can you mean? See now,—give your brains a chance! You’re not thinking in the least. You’ve just let yourself go—for no reason at all. You’ll be sorry to-morrow.”

“Reason enough, I should think, when I find that you love another woman!”

“I love Myrtilla Williamson! It’s a lie, Angel—and you ought to be ashamed to say it. It’s unworthy of you.”



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“Why have you never told me then who made that sketch of Dante for you? I suppose I should never have known, if she hadn’t let it out. I asked you once, but you put me off.”

Henry had indeed prevaricated, for Angel had chanced to ask him just after Myrtila’s letter about his poems.

“Well, I’ll be frank,” said Henry. “I didn’t tell you, just because I feared an unreasonable scene like this—”

“If there had been nothing in it, there was nothing to fear; and, in any case, why should she paint pictures for you, if she doesn’t care for you?—No, I’m going. Nothing will persuade me otherwise. Henry, please let pass, if you’re a gentleman—” and poor little Angel’s face fairly flamed. “No power on earth will keep me here—”

“All right, Angel—” and Henry let her have her way. Her feet echoed down the stairs, further and further away. She was gone; and Henry spent that evening in torturingly imagining every kind of accident that might happen to her on the way home. Every hour he expected to be suddenly called to look at her dead body—his work. And so the night passed, and the morning dawned in agony. So went the whole of the next day, for he could be proud too—and the fault had been hers.

Thus they sat apart for three days, poles of determined silence. And then at last, on the evening of the third day, Henry, who was half beside himself with suspense, heard, with wild thankfulness, once more the little step in the passage—it seemed fainter, he thought, and dragged a little, and the knock at the door was like a ghost’s.

There, with a wan smile, Angel stood; and with joy, wordless because unspeakable, they fell almost like dead things into each other’s arms. For an hour they sat thus, and never spoke a word, only stroking each other’s hands and hair. It was so good for each to know that the other was alive. It took so long for the stored agony in the nerves to relax.

“I haven’t eaten a morsel since Wednesday,” said Angel, at last.

“Nor I,” said Henry.

“Henry, dear, I’m sorry. I know now I was wrong. I give you my word never to doubt you again.”

“Thank you, Angel. Don’t let us even think of it any more.”

“I couldn’t live through it again, darling.”

“But it can never happen any more, can it?”



“No!—but—if you ever love any woman better than you love me, you’ll tell me, won’t you? I could bear that better than to be deceived.”

“Yes, Angel, I promise to tell you.”

“Well, we’re really happy again now—are we? I can hardly believe it—”

“You didn’t see me outside your house last night, did you?”

“Henry!”

“Yes, I was there. And I watched you carry the light into your bedroom, and when you came to the window to draw down the blind, I thought you must have seen me. Yes, I waited and waited, till I saw the light go out and long after—”



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“Oh, Henry—you do love me then?”

“And we do know how to hate each other sometimes, don’t we, child?” said Henry, laughing into Angel’s eyes, all rainbows and tears.

CHAPTER XLIV

THE END OF A BEGINNING

And now blow, all ye trumpets, and, all ye organs, tremble with exultant sound! Bring forth the harp, and the psaltry, and the sackbut! For the long winter of waiting is at an end, and Mike is flying north to fetch his bride. Now are the walls of heaven built four-square, and to-day was the roof-beam hung with garlands. ’Tis but a small heaven, yet is it big enough for two,—and Mike is flying north, flying north, through the midnight, to fetch his bride.

Henry and the morning meet him at Tyre. Blessings on his little wrinkled face! The wrinkles are deeper and sweeter by a year’s hard work. He has laughed with them every night for full twelve months, laughed to make others laugh. To-day he shall laugh for himself alone. The very river seems glad, and tosses its shaggy waves like a faithful dog; and over yonder in Sidon, where the sun is building a shrine of gold and pearl, Esther, sleepless too, all night, waits at a window like the morning-star.

Oh, Mike! Mike! Mike! is it you at last?

Oh, Esther, Esther, is it you?

Their faces were so bright, as they gazed at each other, that it seemed they might change to stars and wing together away up into the morning. Henry snatched one look at the brightness and turned away.

“She looked like a spirit!” said Mike, as they met again further along the road.

“He looked like a little angel,” said Esther, as she threw herself into Dot’s sympathetic arms.

A few miles from Sidon there stood an old church, dim with memories, in a churchyard mossy with many graves. It was hither some few hours after that unwonted carriages were driving through the snow of that happy winter’s day. In one of them Esther and Henry were sitting,—Esther apparelled in—but here the local papers shall speak for us: “The bride,” it said, “was attired in a dress of grey velvet trimmed with beaver, and a large picturesque hat with feathers to match; she carried a bouquet of white chrysanthemums and hyacinths.”



“The very earth has put on white to be your bridesmaid!” said Henry, looking out on the sunlit snow.

“After all, though, of course, I’m sad in one way,” said Esther, more practical in her felicitations, “I’m glad in another that father wouldn’t give me away. For it was really you who gave me to Mike long ago; wasn’t it?—and so it’s only as it should be that you should give me to him to-day.”

“You’ll never forget what we’ve been to each other?”

“Don’t you know?”

“Yes, but our love has no organs and presents and prayer-books to bind it together.”

“Do you think it needs it?”



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“Of course not! But it would be fun for us too some day to have a marriage. Why should only one kind of love have its marriage ceremony? When Mike’s and your wedding is over, let’s tell him that we’re going to send out cards for ours!”

“All right. What form shall the ceremony take—*Parfait Amour*?”

“You haven’t forgotten?”

“I shall forget just the second after you—not before—and, no, I won’t be mean, I’ll not even forget you then.”

“Kiss me, Esther,” said Henry.

“Kiss me again, Esther,” he said. “Do you remember?”

“The cake and the beating?”

“Yes, that was our marriage.”

* * * * *

When all the glory of that happy day hung in crimson low down in the west, like a chariot of fire in which Mike and Esther were speeding to their paradise, Henry walked with Angel, homeward through the streets of Tyre, solemn with sunset. In both that happy day still lived like music richly dying.

“Well,” said Angel, in words far too practical for such a sunset, “I am so glad it all went off so well. Poor dear Mrs. Mesurier, how bonny she looked! And your dear old Aunt Tipping! Fancy her hiding there in the church—”

“Of course we’d asked her,” said Henry; “but, poor old thing, she didn’t feel grand enough, as she would say, to come publicly.”

“And your poor father! Fancy him coming home for the lunch like that!”

“After all, it was logical of him,” said Henry. “I suppose he had made up his mind that he would resist as long as it was any use, and after that—gracefully give in. And he was always fond of Mike.”

“But didn’t Esther cry, when he kissed her, and said that, since she’d chosen Mike, he supposed he must choose him too. And Mike was as good as crying too?”

“I think every one was. Poor mother was just a mop.”

“Well, they’re nearly home by now, I suppose.”



“Yes, another half-hour or so.”

“Oh, Henry, fancy! How wonderful for them! God bless them. I *am* glad!”

“I wonder when we shall get our home,” said Henry, presently.

“Oh, Henry, never mind us! I can’t think of any one but them to-day.”

“Well, dear, I didn’t mean to be selfish—I was only wondering how long you’d be willing to wait for me?”

“Suppose I were to say ‘for ever!’ Would that make you happy?”

“Well, I think, dear—I might perhaps arrange things by then.”

THE END