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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE CALL OF THE TOWN: A TALE OF LITERARY LIFE ***

THE CALL OF THE TOWN

The Call of the Town A Tale of Literary Life

BY

J. A. HAMMERTON

AUTHOR OF

"J. M. BARRIE AND HIS BOOKS," "LORD ROSEBERY," "TONY'S
HIGHLAND TOUR," ETC.

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THE CALL OF THE TOWN

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CHAPTER I

"THE PROUD PARENT"

IF you happen to be riding a bicycle you arrive somewhat unexpectedly in the little Ardenshire village of Hampton Bagot, and are through it in a flash, before you quite realise its existence. But in the unlikely event of your having business or pleasure there, you approach the place more leisurely in the carrier's cart from the little station which absurdly bears the name of the village, though two miles distant.

The ancient Parish Church, with its curious old chained library and bits of Saxon masonry, "perfectly unique," as Mr. Godfrey Needham, the vicar, used to say, and the one wide street of quaint old houses, with their half-timbered fronts, remain to this day much as they were, no doubt, when good Queen Bess ruled England. But the thirsty cyclist, whose throat may happen to be parched at this particular stage of his journey, is a poor substitute for the old-time stage-coach which made Hampton Bagot a place of change. Somehow, the village continues to exist, though its few hundred people scrape their livings in ways that are not obvious to the casual visitor. The surrounding district is richly pastoral, plentifully sprinkled with cosy farm-houses, and here, perhaps, we have the reason why Hampton continues under the sun.

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If you wandered along the few hundred yards of street, and noted the various substitutes for shops, in which oranges and sweets and babies' clothing mingle familiarly with hams and shoe-laces, you would be struck by the more pretentious exterior of one which bears in crudely-painted letters the legend, EDWARD JOHN CHARLES, and underneath, in smaller characters, the words POST OFFICE. The building, a two-storied one, with the familiar blackened timbers supporting high-pitched gables, and a bay-window of lozenged glass, was, at the time of which I write, the place of next importance in the village to the "Wings and Spur." Behind this window, and by peering closely, one could see dusty packets of writing-paper and fly-blown envelopes, a few cheap books, clay and briar pipes, tobacco, and some withered-looking cigars. Below the window, after diligent search, a slit for the admission of letters might be found.

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But while the place itself would easily have been passed over, not so the figure at the door; for there, most days of the week and most hours of the day, stood the portly form of Edward John Charles himself.

It was as though the legend overhead referred to the man beneath, and the smile usually on his face spoke of contentment with himself and the world at large. His face was ruddy and clean-shaven, as he chose to coax his whisker underneath his chin, where it sprouted so amply that the need to wear a collar or a tie did not exist; certainly, was not recognised.

Somewhat under medium height, and of more than medium girth, Edward John Charles was by no means an unpleasant figure to the eye, and if the commonplace caste of face and prominent ears did not suggest any marked intellectual gifts, the net result of a casual survey was "a good-natured sort." He had a habit of concealing his hands mysteriously underneath his coat-tails as he stood at the door beneath the staring sign, and his coat had absorbed something of its owner's nature, for by the perch of the tails one could guess his mood. They were flapped nervously when the wearer was displeased; they opened into a wide and settled V inverted when he was in the full flavour of his satisfaction; and happily that was their most common condition. Indeed, the coat-tails of Edward John Charles were as eloquent as the stumpy appendage of the Irish terrier usually to be seen at the door with him.

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Edward John stood in his familiar place this morning, and surveyed placidly the one and only street of Hampton Bagot.

The street does not belong to Hampton at all, but is only so many yards of a great highway to London. If you asked a Hampton man where it led to, he would say to Stratford, as that is the end

of his world. That he is spending his life on a main-travelled road that goes on and on until it is lost in the multitudinous streets of modern Babylon has never occurred to him. Stratford is his *ultima thule*, the objective of his longest travels.

But Edward John was no ordinary man, despite his common exterior, and it was in the list of his distinctions that he had in his early manhood spent two days in London. To him, the road on which he looked out for so many hours each day was one of the tentacles thrown out by the mighty City to drag the sons of Nature into its gluttonous maw.

"It ain't got me, 'oweever," he reflected, as he contentedly wagged his tails; "but as for 'Enry, why, 'oo knows?"

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And really, what London would have done with Edward John we cannot guess, nor have we at present any idea of what it will do with 'Enry.

At this particular moment you would scarcely have credited the postmaster-bookseller-tobacconist with such philosophic reflections; for he seemed to be chiefly interested in watching with a critical eye a dawdling creature by the name of Miffin, the inefficient tailor across the way.

Edward John pursed his lips and flapped his coat-tails in stern disapproval of that sluggard's method of removing the single shutter which covered his window as a protection from the sun's rays, rather than a barrier to thieves, the latter being unknown in Hampton. Miffin made the mere act of withdrawing a bolt a function of five or ten minutes' duration, exchanging courtesies with every possible creature in the neighbourhood, from schoolboys to cats, while engaged in the operation. He would even call across to Edward John on the state of the day, and secretly wonder when the postmaster ever did a stroke of work, while in the mind of the latter certain wise maxims about ants and sluggards from the Book of Proverbs were suggesting themselves as peculiarly applicable to Mr. Miffin.

Presently, as Edward John turned his glance along the village street towards the Parish Church, which sat on a leafy knoll to the west, with a reproving eye on all Hampton, he saw the Rev. Godfrey Needham hastening eastward at a brisk pace.

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The sight was no unusual one. Mr. Needham never moved unless in a whirl, the looseness of his clerical garb helping him to create quite a little gust of energy as he hurried by with his good-hearted greetings to his admiring parishioners. Such haste in a man of sixty was unaccountable, especially when one was fully alive to his appearance. He looked as if he had suddenly awakened after going to sleep a century before, and was in a hurry to make up lost time. Thin-faced, with prominent nose, and eyes red at the rims, blinking behind spectacles; he wore a rusty clerical hat and clothes of ancient cut and material, his trousers terminating a good three inches above his low shoes and disclosing socks, formerly white. The fact that his legs remotely suggested a pair of calipers added to the quaintness of the figure he presented while in full stride down the village street.

The moment Mr. Needham swung into view, the coat-tails of the postmaster were violently agitated, and his face broadened into a smile as he turned quickly into the doorway and called:

"'Enry, 'ere quick. 'Ere's the passon!"

Back in the shade and coolness of the shop the person thus addressed had been eagerly engaged in dipping into several volumes just brought that morning by the carrier from Birmingham, for it was Mr. Edward John Charles's great privilege to be the medium of obtaining books for several of the county gentry in the neighbourhood of Hampton, and these were always feverishly fingered by his son Henry before being despatched to their purchasers.

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This same Henry was esteemed by his fond parent a perfect marvel of learning, and nothing delighted more the postmaster than to present him on all available occasions for the vicar's admiration.

In response to the summons, Henry issued into the sunlight of the open door, and craning his neck beyond the projecting window, beheld the advancing figure of the vicar. But the vicar, rusty and time-soiled though he seemed, was still well-oiled mentally, and had taken in at a glance the manoeuvres at the Post Office door. Knowing that he would have to fight his way past, he slowed down and approached with a pleasant "Good-morning" to Edward John and a bright smile for Henry, who was his favourite among the lads of the village.

"Well, Henry," he said, as if opening fire, "how do the studies progress?"

"'Enry," returned the postmaster, before the lad had time to answer, "is making wonnerful progress, simply wonnerful. I reckon all the prizes at the school this term are as good as 'is," and the coat-tails opened into a particularly expanded V. "And as for Latin, vicar," he continued, "I shouldn't be surprised if 'e was soon upsides with yourself! 'E's at it every night. Oh, 'e do study, I can tell you."

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Mr. Needham smiled at this parental puffery, and answered somewhat timidly:

"Ah, my dear Mr. Charles, I am afraid I have credit for more Latin than I possess. Nothing is so hard for a scholar as to live up to his reputation."

He even glanced furtively down the street, debating whether he should clap on full sail forthwith, and resume his voyage before the postmaster's prodigy could gratify Edward John by

giving him a Latin poser. Only for a moment did he hesitate, however, and recovering his self-confidence, Mr. Needham continued brazenly:

"But, after all, one does not master Latin so soon as that. Henry, I am afraid, will still have much to learn of the classic tongue."

"But won't you try me, sir?" blurted out the youthful subject of discussion. "I should really like to be tested."

"Come now, do, Mr. Needham," urged the postmaster teasingly, his face shining with pleasure in delighted anticipation of the coming battle of wits. "Tackle 'im on Virgil; tackle 'im on Virgil. Put 'im through 'is paces, do, and let's see what's in the led."

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"Nothing would give me greater pleasure, Mr. Charles; but I am pressed this morning, and must not delay further. Some other day, perhaps, I shall see how he stands in the classics, but really I must be off. Good morning, Mr. Charles; good morning, Henry!"

So saying, the vicar beat a retreat, and as Edward John watched the breeze-blown frock-coat and the twinkling calipers disappear eastward, he cherished the suspicion that the Rev. Godfrey Needham really did not know so much of Latin after all. Nor did the shrewd Mr. Charles arrive at a wrong conclusion. The dear old vicar's reputation as a Latinist rested almost entirely on the fact that it was his custom when showing a visitor through the Parish Church of Hampton Bagot to point to several memorials in the chancel, and after asking if the visitor knew Latin, to glibly recite the inscriptions in that tongue, and follow this up by condescending to give their English equivalents. It was a harmless vanity, and was typical of many little corners in the quaint character of this good man.

Miffin had now accomplished the elaborate ceremony of opening his inefficient shop, and sniffing contemptuously as he retired indoors at the presumptuous Mr. Charles, whose encounter with the vicar he had carefully overheard, he had the satisfaction of seeing the portly form of Edward John disappear inside the Post Office, presumably for the purpose of doing a little business.

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"And now, 'Enry," said the proud parent, still chuckling at the obvious retreat of the vicar, "it is time for school, my boy. Remember, *tempus fugits*. Yes, my word, *tempus do fugit*."

Thus admonished, the rising hope of the postmaster shouldered his satchel and set out schoolward.

Henry Charles was in almost every sense a direct contrast to his father. Taller than the latter already, although not yet sixteen years of age, he was lean and sallow of appearance, with long, narrow, ungainly features, redeemed from plainness only by the intensity of his glowing brown eyes. By several years the oldest lad at the church school, where Mr. Arnold Page retailed his somewhat limited store of learning to some forty scholars, Henry was the scandal of the village. To the good folk of Hampton it seemed almost a temptation of Providence to keep a lad at school after he was twelve years of age, and to them Henry was a byword for laziness and the possibilities of a shameful end. Often would the postmaster's cronies assure him that he could hope for no good to come of such conduct. At the "Wings and Spur" almost any evening "that long, lanky, lumbering lout of a good-for-nothing, 'Enry Charles," was quoted in conversation as an example of the follies a man could commit who had once gone so far out of his natural station as to visit London and admire "book-larnin'."

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"It's downright sinful, I calls it, to keep a led at school arter twelve years of age, when 'e moite be earnin' three shillin' a week a-doin' of some honest werk."

This was the opinion enunciated more than once by Mr. Miffin in the taproom of the inn, and always assented to with acclamation by the company.

But Henry was sublimely unconscious of the interest he created, and his father was stoutly determined in the course he would pursue. So the youth continued to read all the books that came his way, to dream dreams of lands that lay beyond eye-scope of Hampton Bagot. If the main road through the village went to Stratford-on-Avon, it did not stay there for Henry, and when it did go there it carried his thoughts to the home of his favourite author.

It was, perhaps, the very fact of Hampton's nearness to the shrine of Shakespeare that set the postmaster's boy thinking of books and the life of letters. Already he dwelt in an enchanted land whither none else in Hampton had ever wandered, and from the printed page he had built up for himself a city of his own—a city with the familiar name of London. There, as his father had told him—for had not Edward John trod its streets for two whole days?—lived the great men of letters, their busy pens plying on countless sheets of paper, and, like the touch of magic wands, conjuring up for their holders fame and fortune.

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Edward John Charles was truly a phenomenon—a bookseller in the tiniest way, who had become imbued with some idea of the dignity of literature, and esteemed its exponents in inverse ratio to his own unlettered condition; thought of his scanty schooling being the one shadow which ever darkened his brow.

To this fairy London, this home of learning, this emporium of all the graces, Henry Charles looked forward in his day-dreams, while his neighbours lamented his father's folly in not setting him to hoe potatoes, or at least to sell ounces of shag.

"The led is struck on books; it's books with 'im mornin', noon, an' night, and I ain't the man to stand in 'is way," quoth Edward John, in expostulation with a friendly neighbour who advised him to put Henry to work. "I don't know what 'e's going to be, or what's in 'im; but whatever it is, the led shall 'ave his chance."

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And when Edward John Charles said a thing he meant it.

CHAPTER II

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HENRY LEAVES HOME

It had been ever the habit of Edward John Charles that when he made up his mind to do a thing, that thing was as good as done. How else would it have been possible for a man to rise to the onerous and honoured position of postmaster at Hampton Bagot? For some time he had been tending to the conclusion that Henry would soon require to make a move if he was ever to rise in the world. Not that the postmaster was influenced by the opinions of the village gossips, brutally frank and straightforward though these were. He prided himself on being above such trifles, though, if the truth be told, the Post Office was the veritable centre of the local gossip-mongering.

But the last encounter with Mr. Needham, and Henry's shyly audacious offer to stand an examination at the hands of the vicar, confirmed the portly Mr. Charles in the opinion that his youthful prodigy had outgrown all the possibilities of Hampton Bagot. Had not Mr. Page confessed there was really nothing more he could teach the studious Henry? Did he not admit that after a few lessons in Latin Henry shot ahead so fast he soon outstripped the learning of his tutor? Surely, then, further delay in starting him upon the battle of life were only wasting his sweetness on the desert air of Hampton Bagot, as Mr. Charles, in one of his literary moods, would say. Besides, the supposed laziness of the youth was a growing scandal to the community; and after all, even the postmaster could not afford altogether to ignore public opinion.

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It will have been gathered by now that although to every outward appearance an intensely commonplace, podgy personality, Edward John Charles possessed within his ample bosom the qualities which made him curiously different from the ruck of village humanity. It would be a fair assumption that in all the countless hamlets of sweet Ardenshire there lived not another parent who could contemplate with equanimity a bookish strain in the blood of any of his offspring.

The literary taste has ever been discouraged in these parts of the green Midlands, and such stray books as the postmaster sold to the village folk were bought chiefly for the gilt on their covers, which rendered them eyeable objects for the parlour table. He himself had not read a dozen books in all his prosperous life, and perhaps his loud interest in literature was nothing better than affectation, springing from the accident of his becoming the most convenient agent for supplying the "county people" in the neighbourhood with their literary goods. Beginning in affectation, his pretended admiration of books and bookmen had fostered a serious love for them in his son, and Edward John was just the man to boldly face the consequences.

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When his mind was made up on the necessity of translating Henry to a new field in which his dazzling qualities could radiate with ampler freedom than in the narrow confines of Hampton Bagot, his thoughts turned to his friend, Mr. Ephraim Griggs, who represented literature in the very stronghold of its greatest captain, and already he saw Henry a busy assistant in the well-known second-hand book-shop at Stratford-on-Avon. A word from him to Mr. Griggs, and the golden gates of Bookland would swing wide open to the glittering Henry!

So, without a hint of his mission and its weighty issues, the carrier's waggon creaked with the added weight of Edward John Charles a few mornings later, on its way to Stratford.

For all who are willing to work without monetary reward there is no lack of opportunity, and Mr. Griggs readily consented to receive Henry into his business as a second assistant. The die was cast, and in the evening the postmaster returned mysteriously happy. Although an inveterate gossip, he could be tantalisingly silent when it suited his mood, and as he surveyed the village street from his accustomed post that evening, there was nothing but the usual serenity of his face and the satisfactory cock of his coat-tails to give a clue to the sweet thoughts dancing in his brain.

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When the entire Charles family were seated at the supper-table, the auspicious moment had arrived for Edward John to disclose his hand. Whatever he thought fit to arrange would be good. Mrs. Charles, a thin little person, who worshipped her ample husband from afar, and spent her life in cleaning the five living rooms which constituted their household, never removing the curl-papers from her hair until after tea, was certain to applaud his every opinion, while the three girls, the eldest of whom bore the burden of the business on her shoulders, could be depended upon for reserve support.

When Mr. Charles had detailed the arrangements he had made, whereby Henry was to enter the business of Mr. Ephraim Griggs, there was unanimous approval.

"I've always said, 'Enry, that you'd 'ave your chance, and 'ere it is," said Mr. Charles, brushing

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some crumbs of cheese from his whisker. "There is no sayin' what this may lead to. Some of the greatest men in the world 'ave started lower down the ladder than that."

"Yes, dad," responded the delighted Henry. "Why, Shakespeare himself used to hold horses for gentlemen in London."

"Just look at that," beamed Mr. Charles on his worshipping family. "Shakespeare uster 'old 'osses. You'll never need to do that, my boy."

"And his father was only a woolstapler, dad!" panted the youth.

"A common woolstapler! Think on't! And me in the book-line—in a small way, p'raps—but in the book-line, for all that."

And the thought that a woolstapler's son who had been fain to tend horses for a penny, and in the end had achieved deathless fame which brought admirers from the ends of the earth to his humble birthplace in Stratford-on-Avon, made Edward John look around his own little house, and wonder how many years it would be before the world was trooping to Hampton Bagot to gaze on the early home of Henry Charles. Hampton was only a few miles from Stratford, and Henry would never be so low as the holding of horses.

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We can but dimly realise the joy with which Henry received the news of the opening his father had made for him. To a lad of his temperament he already saw himself a chartered libertine in the realms of literature, roving from book to book on the crowded shelves of Mr. Griggs; here following the doughty deeds of some of Sir Walter's heroes, taking a hand, perchance, in the rescue of his heroines, and anon communing with such glorious company as Addison and Lamb and Hazlitt. Had he not read and re-read, and remembered every chapter of that classic work of which his father had sold as many as seven copies in six months to the Hamptonians—"Famous Boyhoods," by Uncle Jim? Within the gold-encrusted covers of that enchanting book had he not learned how Charles Dickens used to paste labels on jam-pots before he found fame and fortune in a bottle of ink? Was not he aware that Robert Burns had been a ploughman, and were not ploughmen in Hampton Bagot as common as hay-ricks and as poor as mice? Had not Oliver Goldsmith been hard put to it often to find a dinner, while Henry Charles had never lacked a meal? And had not Dr. Johnson, who received a ludicrously large sum of money for making a dictionary, lived in a garret? Emphatically, Henry Charles had reason to look the future in the face clear-eyed, and to bless Uncle Jim for giving him those inspiring facts. Moreover, a famous author had said: "In the lexicon of youth there is no such word as fail." Had not Henry copied these lines in atrocious handwriting till they swam before his eyes, and had not his schoolmaster assured him his penmanship was the worst he had ever witnessed, and were not all great authors wretched penmen? True, he still had doubts as to what "the lexicon of youth" might be.

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Unlike his father, Henry was not a talkative person, and, indeed, it was one of the black marks against him in popular opinion that he did not make himself as sociable as he might have done with the lads of Hampton. But weighted with such news, the need to noise it abroad was pressing, and as soon as he could slip away from the supper-table he was publishing the intelligence wherever a chance opening could be found.

In five minutes it had the village by the ears, and the inefficient Miffin, ironing a coat at the moment it reached him, paused in his operation to deliver himself of a sceptical sniff and some adverse opinions on puffed-up fools who were eternally talking of book-larnin' and things quite above them, instead of attending to their business.

"In moi opinion," and he stated it with engaging frankness, "Edward John would do a sight better to let his long-legged lout stick at 'ome and sell nibs and sealin'-wex and postage-stemps, like his fifteen-stone father."

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But really, Miffin's opinion did not count for much, although on this occasion it cost him dear, as he had left the heated iron lying on the coat, to its eternal destruction.

Elated with the prospect which the magic wand of his father had swung open to his sight—those fields of fair renown through which he was about to wander—Henry had soon exhausted the possibilities of the village, and found himself tramping the field-path towards Little Flixton, in the hope of meeting some returning villagers, to whom he could unbosom the startling news at first hand, and have the joy of surprising them into congratulations.

The meadows had been lately cut, and the smell of new-mown hay hung sensuously in the air. Never would he forget that evening in all the years that were to be. Although the hay-fields had been to him a commonplace of life since he could toddle, they would never smell as they did that night, and would never be so sweet again. After all, it is our sense of smell that treasures for us most vividly the impressions of our life. The memory of all our great moments is aided largely by our nostrils.

In one of these meadows, sloping down from a wooded mound, Henry espied a white-frocked girlish figure seated among the hay in the soft gloaming. It was Eunice Lyndon, the granddaughter of old Carne, the sexton, who, as he told you himself, had held that post for "two-an'-forty year." Eunice's mother, old Carne's only daughter, whom many remembered as the "Rose of Hampton," had died of consumption, and there were some who thought that the shadow of this dread complaint hung over the girl also.

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Now, as a rule, Henry had a poor opinion of girls. They were all very well in their way, of

course, but could never hope to shine in the world like men. This evening, however, he was so brimful of his news that he was glad to tell it to anybody. He had even told Maggs, the blacksmith, though the latter had been over-free with cider at the "Wings and Spur."

Henry crossed the slope of the meadow towards Eunice, who held a long stalk of grass in her hand, and was intent upon watching a green caterpillar worming its way up it.

"Oh, Henry," she cried out, a pretty blush mounting to her cheeks as he approached, "just look at this fellow!"

Henry glanced down disdainfully at the caterpillar. Such trifles were altogether beneath his notice in that great hour.

"Listen, Eunice," he began, flinging himself down beside her. "I have news for you."

"News!" she echoed, still intent upon the caterpillar. "Isn't it a lovely green?"

"I'm going away."

She raised her head, and two violet eyes, with a puzzled expression, were dreamily fixed upon him, half-questioning.

"Going away! Where to?... Oh, there, I've lost it!" as the caterpillar fell among the grass.

"To Stratford first," Henry answered in a lordly way; "afterwards—London, I daresay."

Eunice was profoundly impressed. London! Wasn't that a risky undertaking? She knew it to be a wonderful place when one got there, but had heard it was crowded with people who did terrible things. Mr. Jukes, the landlord of the "Wings and Spur," had been to London on some law business not long ago, and could talk of nothing else since. Indeed, Edward John Charles had felt Mr. Jukes's rivalry very keenly; for the innkeeper's visit being of later date than his, the glory of it was fresher to the Hampton mind.

Henry, conscious that he had taken her breath away, gathered up his knees and fell to dreaming of London. The shadows of evening crept softly upon them as they sat there; the trees on the high ground behind them rustled gently in the light summer breeze; and somehow, the whole scene—the sloping meadow, the darkening hedgerows, the shadowy outline of the country beyond—mingled strangely with his dreams of the future. Years afterwards, when the quiet, peaceful life of Hampton was a dear thing of the past to him, the scent of new-mown hay recreated that evening in every detail, and he saw again the rose-flushed lass who had sat in silent wonder by his side.

Mr. Charles was of opinion that the sooner his son was started on his upward course the better. Henry, therefore, was withdrawn from school, and immediate preparations made for his departure—preparations in which Edward John took no manual part, but which, judging by the poise of his coat-tails, went forward to his mind. Mrs. Charles even forgot to take the curl-papers out of her hair for two whole days before the eventful morning.

On the eve of the day appointed for Henry's departure Mr. Page called in to wish him good-bye. A little later the vicar flashed for a moment into the dingy interior of the shop and shook hands with him.

"Remember, my dear Henry, *labor omnia vincit improbus*, as the Latinists say," using one of his few but favourite Latin phrases, and rolling it lovingly like a chocolate-cream 'twixt tongue and palate. "And remember also, my dear Henry, that *les belles actions cachées sont les plus estimables*," pronouncing atrociously a phrase he had picked up a few hours before, "which means, my dear young friend, that you should do good by stealth, and blush to find it fame."

Henry blushed forthwith.

"And let me present you with a little keepsake. It is a copy of my new book, my poem on Queen Victoria, which the *Midland Agricultural News* has described in terms of praise that I hope I am too modest to quote. I have signed it with my autograph, and I trust you will lay to heart its lessons."

The poem in question was a sixteen-page pamphlet in a gaudy cover. It enjoyed a large circulation by gratuitous distribution. To the vicar's great regret, he had found at the end of a dictionary the French phrase about beautiful actions too late to be incorporated in his verses.

Henry was profoundly moved, but like all great people in their great moments, he was deplorably commonplace.

"I thank you, sir," was all his genius prompted. He was gravelled for a Latin snatch to cap the vicar's, and the Rev. Godfrey Needham stood supreme.

"Eh, but *tempus do fugit*, passon," Edward John broke in at this juncture. "It's only loike yesterday that 'Enry was a-startin' school, and 'ere 'e's a-goin' out into the great world to carve out a name for hisself—'oo knows 'e ain't?"

"With youth all things are possible." returned Mr. Needham. "We shall be proud of Henry yet. He certainly has my best wishes for his success. *Sursum corda*, my friend, as the Latin hath it. And to you, Henry, *Deus vobiscum*. Good-bye!"

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"Good-bye, and thank you, sir," said the overwhelmed Henry.

In a moment more the white-socked calipers had carried Mr. Needham out of Henry's life for some years to come.

When the great morning arrived, the whole house was turned upside down. The village itself was agitated. Henry was quite the hero of the moment, despite the sniffing disapproval of Miffin. But one can't destroy a coat and retain a friendly feeling for the cause of the catastrophe.

"Merk moi werds," he said to his apprentice, as together they watched from behind the door the preparations across the street. "Young Che'les will never do nowt. He'll come to a bed end, and Ed'ard John will rue this day. Merk moi werds." And he emphasised his wisdom with a skinny forefinger.

Henry's mother cried over him a little, and impressed upon him that the three pots of blackberry jam—her own making—were at the bottom of his trunk, away from the shirts and linen, in case of accident. His sisters, one by one, threw their arms around him, and said commonplace things to him to hide the less common thoughts in their mind.

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At length Henry took his seat on the carrier's waggon, after receiving a luminous impression of London—modern London, not the Edward-John London—from Mr. Jukes of the "Wings and Spur," and drove away, turning his face from his friends to avoid a silly inclination to cry. As the carrier cracked his whip while his horses gathered pace down the street, his passenger looked back to the old familiar house and signalled to the group still standing by the door; but for all the high hopes that beckoned him along this road that ran to London he was sorry to go.

When they were passing the cottage of old Carne, and a sweet face lit by two violet eyes looked out between the dimity curtains, while a girl's hand rattled pleasantly on the window, Henry smiled and waved his arm. But he was dimly conscious he had lost something he could not define. It had to do with tears on a woman's wrinkled face.

CHAPTER III

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THE REAL AND THE IDEAL

It was a perfect day in "the sweet o' the year" when the carrier's waggon creaked along the highway to Stratford with Henry Charles perched beside the red-faced driver.

There is, perhaps, no county in all England so full of charm in spring-time and the early summer as leafy Ardenshire. The road on which the hope of Hampton travelled is typical of many in that fair countryside. Gleaming white in the morning sunshine, it lies snug between high banks of prodigal growth, bramble and trailing arbutus, backed by green bushes, among which the massy white clots of elder-blossom look like snowy souvenirs of the winter that has fled, with here and there a strong note of colour struck by swaying foxgloves. The lanes that steal away from the highway are often as beautiful as those of glorious Devon, and all bear promise that if the wanderer will but come with them he will surely find the veritable

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"Bank whereon the wild thyme blows,
Where oxlip and the nodding violet grows;
Quite over-canopy'd with luscious woodbine,
With sweet musk-roses, and with eglantine."

But it was not of the wild beauties by the way that Henry thought as onward creaked the waggon. Nor was it for long that the picture of his mother's face and the light of violet eyes occupied his mind. His thoughts ran forward swifter than ever the train would go which in later years was to bring Hampton Bagot within half-an-hour's journey of Stratford.

Twice before had he travelled this same way, and both times to the same place. But now all was changed. The carrier would crack his whip on his homeward way that evening and sing his snatches of song, but not for Henry.

For the first time in his life the youth would stretch himself upon an unfamiliar bed, and hear voices that had never spoken to him before. He would tread the streets where once the steps of the immortal bard had been as common as his own comings and goings at the Hampton Post Office. Till now he had dreamed what life might be in a town larger than his native hamlet, and this night he would begin to know, to live it.

The wayside wild flowers, so recently part and parcel of his daily life, paled before his eyes when he thought of the temple of books toward which his course was bent. The smell of the new bindings, and the mouldy suggestions of old volumes, were sweeter to him for the moment than the scented hedgerows. Already he had built up for himself the figure of his Mr. Ephraim Griggs.

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A man of medium height, somewhat bent in the back, high forehead, intelligent face, eyes aided with spectacles in their constant task of examining the treasures stacked around.

His hair? Grey—yes, of course, it must be grey; thin to baldness on the top, but abundant at the

back of the head. Clothes? Old-fashioned, no doubt; negligent, certainly; yet not altogether slovenly.

He saw the figure, vivid as life, moving about the shop, talking with innocent display of erudition to some wealthy customer, or half reluctantly selling a costly volume from his shelves.

This dream-companion kept him company all the way, and it was only in a listless fashion that he chatted with the carrier, to whom books were no better than common lumber.

Stratford was reached early in the afternoon, and as the waggon rumbled over the Clopton Bridge, Henry thought that the scene presented here by the soft flowing Avon, with the spire of Shakespeare's Church softly etched on the sky, and the strange masonry of the world-famed Memorial Theatre in the middle distance, was the fairest man could see.

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The thoughtfulness of his father had arranged for Henry a lodging near to Rother Street, and thither the carrier undertook to drive him before stopping at the market-hall to distribute his goods. On the way up the broad and pleasant High Street Henry was excited, for there, to his joy, he beheld the name of Ephraim Griggs upon a window well stocked with books—smaller, perhaps, and dustier than he had pictured it in his own mind.

Mrs. Filbert, the landlady with whom Edward John had arranged for Henry's board and lodging, was a widow of more than middle age, who had brought up a considerable family, most of whom were now "doing for themselves." In summertime she often let her best rooms to visitors, but nothing rejoiced her more than the prospect of a permanent lodger. She was fortunate already in having one who came under that description, and whose acquaintance we may make in due time.

Mrs. Filbert was a motherly soul, and set Henry at his ease at once when she took him to the little bedroom he was to share with one of her sons, a lad about his own age. Nor would she allow him to fare forth into the town until he had disposed of some dinner she had kept for him, suspecting that his means did not run to the luxury of a meal at one of the country inns on the way from Hampton.

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When Henry had freed himself from the motherly attentions of Mrs. Filbert, and again found himself in the High Street, it was late afternoon. With a beating heart he walked direct to the shop of Mr. Griggs, but as his engagement commenced the next morning, he did not intend to present himself to his future employer that afternoon.

His purpose was merely a preliminary inspection of the place, for on his two previous visits to Stratford the establishment which had suddenly become his centre of interest had not been noticed by him.

The window was dustier than he had supposed from his sight of it while passing with the carrier, and many of the books that were offered for sale were disappointingly commonplace. As for the collection in the window-box, labelled in crude blue letters, "All in this row 2*d.* each," he was amazed that Mr. Griggs should exhibit them. For the most part they were old school-books, and he remembered, with a sudden sense of wealth unreckoned, that he had quite a number at home as good as these. He was not aware that only a summer ago a sharp visitor had picked up from this bundle a volume which he sold in London for £9.

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Timidly did Henry peep in at the doorway, which was narrower than he had expected, and a trifle shabby so far as painting was concerned.

So much as he could see of the shop inside accorded but little better with his mental picture of the place. Books were there in abundance, many of them presenting some degree of order, and as many more seemingly in hopeless confusion.

He got a glimpse of a counter, at which he supposed the business of the place was transacted, but the inadequate back view of the figure of a young man bending at a desk in a gloomy corner was the only thing suggesting life.

His first peep assuredly was not what he had looked forward to, but who knew to what hidden chambers of interest the door at the far side of the front shop gave access?

Afraid to further pursue his inspection, Henry moved away somewhat hurriedly when the young man at the desk showed signs of moving towards the door, having probably scented a customer.

He wandered next to Shakespeare's Church, lingering on the way at the Memorial, then fresh from the hands of the builders, and loudly out of harmony with everything else in Stratford. Anon he was peeping in at the old Grammar School and the Guild Hall, and tea-time found him loitering around the Birthplace, with half a desire to set out then and there to Anne Hathaway's Cottage.

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The business of dealing in Shakespeare's memory had not yet developed into Stratford's staple industry, nor had local boyhood begun to earn precarious pennies by waylaying visitors and rehearsing to them in parrot fashion the leading dates in the life of the poet. But the principal show-place of the town had long been attracting pilgrims from the ends of the earth, and for the first time in his life Henry heard the English language produced with strong nasal accompaniment by a group of brisk-looking young men and women issuing from the shrine in Market Street.

There was little sleep for him that night, nor was the unusual circumstances of his sharing a bed with another youth the cause of it. He wondered at his ability to peep in at Mr. Griggs's door without entering precipitately and avowing himself the new assistant. But his father's instructions on this point had been explicit. He had to present himself at the proper hour of the morning; neither early nor late, but at the hour precisely. It would have been unbusiness-like to stroll in the previous afternoon, and if business-like habits were not acquired now they never would be.

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But Henry had read so recently the wonderful story of "Monte Cristo," and was so impressed by the hero's habit of keeping his appointments to the second, that he required no advice on this point.

"Suppose I go down in the morning and enter the shop when the market-clock is striking the fifth note of nine. That would be a good start to make!"

Thus he thought, and thus he did. But alas! the new Monte Cristo found no appreciative audience awaiting him.

For a moment he stood at the counter in the middle of the shop, with half a mind to run away. His entry had been unheralded, unobserved. No one was visible. But hesitating whether to knock on the counter, as customers at Hampton Post Office were wont to do, or take down a book until someone appeared, he became aware of certain sounds issuing from behind a wooden partition which enclosed a corner of the shop.

Henry shuffled his feet noisily, and plucked up courage to rap on the counter, for the market-clock had ceased its striking by quite a minute, and no one had witnessed his romantic punctuality.

In answer to the knocking there appeared from behind the partition a youngster of some twelve years, who seemed to have been disturbed in some pleasant but undutiful occupation. On seeing that the person at the counter was merely a youth, just old enough to make a boy wish to be his age, but not old enough to inspire him with respect, the youngster, without a word of inquiry or apology, stooped down and lifted on to the counter a little bull pup, which he stroked with all the pride of a fancier, challenging Henry with his eyes to produce its equal.

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Loftily indifferent to the behaviour of the boy, and secretly wondering if Monte Cristo had ever been so absurdly received on any of the occasions when he opened a door as the clock struck the appointed hour of meeting, Henry said, with a touch of indignation in his voice:

"I am the new assistant, and I wish to see Mr. Griggs."

The boy gave a whistle of surprise, and eyed Henry boldly. Hastily stowing away the pup in some secret receptacle under the counter, he proceeded to the side-door, taking a backward glance at the new assistant, and disclosing under his snub nose a very wide and smiling mouth.

"Shop!" bawled the lad, as he opened the door.

Without another word, and leaving the door ajar, he went and perched himself on a stool, from which position he brazenly surveyed the new assistant.

Henry waited, quailing somewhat under the searching gaze of this juvenile servitor in the temple of literature. He surveyed at leisure the walls so thickly stacked with dusty volumes, and wondered why the youngster was not cleaning them or arranging the bundles on the floor, instead of sitting on the stool swaying his legs idly.

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How different it all was from what he had expected! The books were there and in abundance, yet they were heaped about more like potatoes in a greengrocer's than things worthy of respect. It was difficult to connect this youthful dog-fancier with literary pursuits, and Henry could only hope that Mr. Griggs in his person would make up for what his establishment had lost in contrast with his ideal picture of it.

It was some little time before the shuffle of slip-shod feet was heard behind the back-door. The new assistant grew expectant. The shuffle suggested the approach of the venerable book-lover himself. There was a pause, during which Henry's heart thumped against his bosom, and then a large and tousled head was thrust inquiringly beyond the door, in a way that suggested a desire to conceal the absence of a collar and tie.

The head belonged to Mr. Ephraim Griggs, dealer in second-hand books and prints.

"Oh, it's young Charles, is it?" said Mr. Griggs, displaying a little more of his person, and showing that he was in the act of drying his hands. "Just come in here, will you?" he went on, jerking his head back towards the passage. "I want your advice."

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Wondering on what subject he might be capable of advising the veteran, he went through to the passage, where Mr. Griggs, having finished with the towel, offered him a cold and flabby hand.

Henry felt tempted to laugh, and probably a little inclined to cry, when he stood before his employer, and found that his mental portrait of the man tallied in no particular with the person facing him.

There was little of the book-worm about Mr. Griggs. He did not even wear spectacles; an

offence which Henry found hardest to forgive. Not so tall as Edward John, nor yet so stout, he was a long-bearded fellow, with a nasty habit of breathing heavily through his nose, as if that organ were clogged with dust from his books. As he stood before Henry he was in his shirt-sleeves, and, judging by the latter, the garment as a whole was ready for the wash. His waistcoat was glossy with droppings of snuff; his trousers, Henry noticed, were very baggy at the knees and appeared to be a size too large for him; while his feet were encased in ragged carpet slippers.

Evidently Mr. Griggs was in some trouble, and while Henry was speculating as to what the cause of his anxiety might be, the learned bookseller said, somewhat anxiously, and in a thin, wheezy voice:

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"Tell me, do you know anythink about poultry?"

"Poultry!" gasped Henry.

"Yes," replied Mr. Griggs, with a solemnity which struck the new assistant as absurdly pathetic. "Hens," he explained further; "my best one is down with croup or somethink o' the kind. Your father has taken a many prizes with his birds, and I thought you might know all about 'em. I've never had great success with 'em myself. Come outside and tell me what you think."

Without waiting for a reply, the bookseller shuffled through the passage into a back-yard, and the youth followed as one in a dream.

The yard was almost entirely devoted to poultry, and if Mr. Griggs was an amateur at the pursuit, he had at least prepared for it in no mean way, three sides of the place being taken up with wired hen-runs and a wooden house for his stock. In a compartment by itself, gasping and choking, lay the object of the old man's solicitude.

"The finest layer I ever had," he declared despondingly. "An egg a day as reg'lar as clockwork. I'd rather lose two of the others."

His sorrow deepened when Henry said that he had never seen a hen in that state before, and did not know what was wrong with it.

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"Then I'll be forced to ask old John Shakespeare, the grocer, what to do; although I 'ate the man, and don't want to be beholden to him for anythink. But he's our champion breeder, and what must be, must be."

Shakespeare, grocer, hens! Henry doubted seriously if his ears were doing their duty, but there was no mistaking the anxiety of Mr. Ephraim Griggs. He could not have been more perturbed if his wife had been dangerously ill. His wife? That reminded Henry that he had heard his father say Mrs. Griggs had been dead these many years. Perhaps that was why the bookseller was so untidy.

"You had better go back to the shop, my lad," said he, in a voice which meant he was now resigned to the worst, "and take a look round. I'll be in there directly."

When Henry returned to the shop he found that Mr. Pemble, the senior assistant, had arrived; but for the moment that young gentleman was so engrossed with the study of his features in a broken looking-glass that he did not notice Henry's entrance. Mr. Pemble's anxiety seemed to be centred around the tardy growth of an incipient moustache, which, when an illuminating ray of sunshine fell upon his upper lip, was readily visible to the naked eye.

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A somewhat prim and characterless person, with more teeth than his mouth seemed able to accommodate, Mr. Pemble was the *bête noir* of Jenks, the dog-loving shop-boy, who, with a sly wink to Henry and an expressive grimace, indicated unmistakably his opinion of the senior assistant.

This was a sign to the new-comer that if he cared to make common cause against Mr. Pemble, Jenks was with him to the death; but Henry, either in his rustic simplicity or his lofty indifference to the youngster, did not respond, and waited for Mr. Pemble to languidly acknowledge his presence.

"Ah, you're the new assistant Mr. Griggs was speaking of," he said at length.

"Yes, sir," replied Henry, and at the delicious sound of the flattering "sir" Mr. Pemble endeavoured to tug his laggard moustache. "Mr. Griggs says I'm to have a look round until he is ready," Henry went on, casting a dubious glance at the walls and the thickly-strewn floor.

"Oh, that's all right," drawled Mr. Pemble, who now turned his attention to some small parcels that had arrived by the morning's post.

In a little while Mr. Griggs appeared, fully clothed, by the addition of a faded black morning coat and a creased white collar. He beckoned Henry into the back-parlour, which served as a sort of office and a general lumber-room.

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"Sit you down, my lad, and let's see what we have here," he said, pointing to a crazy arm-chair beside an old Pembroke table, on which a broken ink-bottle and some rusty pens lay, together with a muddle of notepaper.

The bookseller then turned to a large case of old volumes recently acquired at the sale of a

country house, and picking up several of these he flapped the dust from them, puffing and blowing like a walrus. Glancing briefly at the title-pages of the first two, he threw them in a corner with a brief but emphatic "Rubbish!" The next fished forth satisfied him better, and taking up one of his latest catalogues, he showed Henry how to write down the title and description of the book.

So he proceeded for a time, initiating the youth in the art of cataloguing, which with Mr. Griggs did not take a particularly exalted form. He eschewed such aids to ready references as alphabetical entry, and was content so long as the principal items of his stock appeared on his printed list, quite irrespective of order or value. These lists, villainously printed, were a source of unending amusement to the educated book-buyers into whose hands they fell, for every page contained the most hilarious blunders, whereby the best-known classics assumed new and surprising disguises.

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Henry took to the simple work eagerly, and displayed far greater interest than his employer did in the books that came to light as the case was gradually emptying. Now and again during the forenoon Mr. Griggs would suddenly disappear from the parlour, as his thoughts reverted to his suffering Dorking, only to return from his visit to the poultry with a gloomy shake of the head.

When dinner-time arrived, Henry and Jenks were left in charge of the shop while Mr. Pemble went home to dine, and the old bookseller shambled upstairs to some of the unknown domestic rooms. Jenks, unabashed by Henry's obvious determination not to familiarise with him, boldly asked if he knew how to play that great and universal game of boyhood called "knifey." When Henry said that he didn't, and hadn't time to think of it, Jenks was filled with disgust, for he found it a delightful pastime when the hours hung heavy on his hands, and he had been at the trouble to import a specially soft piece of wood for the purpose of playing "knifey" whenever an opportunity occurred. Failing Henry's assistance, he brazenly proceeded to engage in the pastime by himself.

The task of cataloguing occupied but little of the afternoon, and for the remainder of the day there was nothing to do but idling. Indeed, Henry found himself wondering by what means Mr. Griggs contrived to exist, as nothing seemed to matter beyond his devotion to the poultry and Mr. Pemble's frequent inspections of his upper lip.

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On the whole, the impression left by his first day at business was by no means bright, as he could not suppose there would be books to catalogue every day, and he had not seen more than half-a-dozen customers in the shop.

CHAPTER IV

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MR. TREVOR SMITH, IF YOU PLEASE

TEN days had passed, and the new assistant was more than ever at a loss to understand how a business so laxly conducted and apparently so unremunerative could provide a living for Mr. Griggs, Pemble, and Jenks. Henry knew that he, at least, was no burden on his employer's finances; but he was not yet aware that Mr. Pemble was there on a similar footing, while Jenks's labours were rewarded weekly with half-a-crown.

But this morning a bright and new star swung into his ambit, when a young man of about twenty years of age sauntered jauntily into the shop, his hat stuck on one side of his head and a cigarette drooping from his lips, where grew a moustache which must have struck envy into the soul of Mr. Pemble. The new-comer winked cheerily to Jenks, nodded a "How d'you do?" to the senior assistant, and then, to Henry's surprise, he said:

"I suppose you're the chap that Mrs. Filbert's been telling me about. We're both in the same digs."

"I beg your pardon!" Henry stammered.

"Same digs. Fellow-lodgers, don't you know."

"Oh! then you're Mr. Smith that Mrs. Filbert always talks about," answered Henry, brightening.

"That's me, my boy; but, if you please, Trevor Smith—with the accent on the Trev. There's such a beastly lot of Smiths nowadays that a fellow's got to stick up for his other name if he doesn't want to be buried in the crowd."

"I'm very pleased to meet you, Mr. Trevor Smith," replied Henry, who, it will be seen, was beginning to know something of the social graces.

"Right you are, young 'un," said the breezy one. "I'm just back from my fortnight's holidays. Been to London, don't you know. Jolly time. Thought I'd give you a shout on my way to the office. See you later, and tell you all about it. Ta-ta! I'm off. Big case on at the police court this morning."

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Mr. Smith—Mr. Trevor Smith, if you please—was indeed a person who had assumed

considerable importance in Henry's mind before he met him face to face. He was the permanent lodger by whom good Mrs. Filbert set much store.

"'E's that smart," she told Henry the first night he had stayed beneath her roof "there's no sayin' what he don't know. He writes a many fine things in the *Guardian*, specially 'is story of the Mop, which my Tommy read out quite easy-like last October."

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"He'll be a journalist, then," Henry suggested.

"Somethink o' the sort, I reckon. Leastways, e's a heditor or a reporter or somethink. The *Guardian* pays 'im to stay for it 'ere. So 'e must be clever. Oh, you'll like 'im, 'Enry. Everybody likes Mr. Trevor."

It seemed to Henry a real stroke of fortune that had brought him to the very house where one engaged in literary pursuits resided, and although keenly disappointed at the melancholy falling off in his actual experience of life under the ægis of Mr. Griggs, compared with his vision of what that was to be, he now looked forward to meeting Mr. Trevor Smith with the hope that he might point the way to better things.

The exact position of that local representative of the Fourth Estate is best defined as district reporter. The paper which employed him was published in the busy industrial centre of Wheelton, some twenty-five miles distant, where it maintained a struggling existence as the *Wheelton Guardian*.

It was the duty of Mr. Smith to write a column of notes on men and affairs in the Stratford district every week, to supply reports of the local police court proceedings, municipal meetings, and so forth, and also to canvass for advertisements, the few hundred copies of the paper sold in Stratford every week, thanks to these attractions, being mendaciously headed *Stratford Guardian*.

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What the district reporter—who occasionally hinted that he was really the editor when he saw a chance to impress a stranger thereby—called "the office," was a desk in the back premises of the news-agent and fancy-goods-shop whence the *Guardian* was distributed weekly.

Everybody did like Mr. Smith. It was part of his business to be well liked, and if there was a good deal of humbug about him, he was still excellent value to the *Guardian* for the twenty-one shillings which the proprietors of that journal paid him each week. One does not expect genius for a guinea a week; not even the ability to write English. But it is a mistake to suppose the latter is ever required of a district reporter. The essential qualifications are a working knowledge of shorthand and a good conceit of oneself. Mr. Trevor Smith was deficient in neither; certainly not in the latter quality. He was generously impressed with the magnitude of his importance, and had chosen the Miltonic motto for his "Stratford Notes and Comments":

"GIVE ME THE LIBERTY TO KNOW, TO THINK, AND TO UTTER FREELY ABOVE ALL OTHER LIBERTIES."

He took this liberty whenever he knew that the weight of local opinion tended in a certain direction. At other times he was lavish in his use of complimentary adjectives concerning every one he wrote about, from the Mayor to the town crier. No wonder he was popular.

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The notes which appeared in the *Guardian* during its reporter's holiday were from another hand, but Henry looked forward with pleasure to reading Trevor's contributions when his mighty pen was at work again. It is one of the strangest experiences that comes to the writing man—this interest of the layman in anyone who writes words that are printed. We seldom feel interested in the personality of the man who made our watch, but the fellow who wrote the report of the tea-meeting we attended last week—ah, there's something to stir the blood!

Now that they had met, these two, Henry was throbbing with excitement to hear what his new friend had to tell him of life and its wonders. Nor was Trevor loth to unclench his soul to the youth.

"By Jove, London's the place," he observed to Henry as he dug his teeth into a juicy tart—one of many received that day in Henry's weekly hamper from home. "London's the place! Just fancy, I saw the huge building of the *Morning Sunburst*, Johnnies at the door in livery, hundreds of people running out and in; and the chap that edits that paper used to be a fifteen-bob-a-week reporter on that rag the *Stratford Times*, which isn't a patch on the *Guardian*."

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"He must be very clever."

"Clever! Bless you, they reckoned him mighty small beer in Stratford," pursued the lively Trevor, helping himself to a third tart from Henry's store. "Then there's Wilkins of the *Pictorial Globe*, a glorious crib—fifteen hundred a year, I'll bet. He used to run that rocky little rag-bag the *Arden Advertiser*. You should see his office in the Strand. By gum—a palace, my boy, a palace!"

"But perhaps he knows all about pictures."

"Pictures! He doesn't know a wall-poster from a Joshua Reynolds!"

"Then how do they get these grand situations?"

"How do they get 'em! Luck, my boy. But, I say, your mater knows how to make ripping good fruit-cakes."

"I'm glad you like them," said Henry, but his thoughts were far away, where Luck the Goddess reigned. "And do you intend to go to London some day—to stay, I mean?"

"As likely as not. My time will come, ha, ha! as the heavy villain hath it. Everybody gets his chance, don't you know. For all that, there's many a jolly good journalist never gets a show in Fleet Street. But what's the row?" he exclaimed abruptly, as the noise of hurrying feet and the sound of a policeman's whistle rang out in the evening quiet.

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Stepping to the window, he saw the hand-pump and hose being wheeled along the street from the police station across the way, and a crowd of youngsters running after it.

"A fire!" he exclaimed. "I must look slippy, by Jingo! Come along with me. There's ten bob of lineage in this if I'm first on the spot, and it's a decent blaze. Worth while living near the station."

He had his hat on his head in a jiffy, and Henry hurried with him, intent on seeing the journalist at work. The fire proved to be at a brewery, and did considerable damage before it was got under. In the excitement of the scene Henry lost his friend, who flitted from point to point gleaning information, and looking quite the most important figure present. He had got ahead of Griffin, the *Times* reporter; his ten shillings for duplicating reports to the daily papers seemed likely enough. They were as good as spent already—a new hat for one thing, and some new neckties for another.

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The effect of the episode on Henry was fateful. He had been present throughout the scene, he had seen the frightened horses being rescued from the flaming stable, and had read about it all to the extent of twenty lines in next morning's *Birmingham Gazette*—twenty glowing lines from the pencil of Mr. Trevor Smith—twenty lines in which the "conflagration" burned again.

He had tasted blood. This was better fun than idling the hours away with Mr. Ephraim Griggs. The Temple of Literature had been a disappointment.

Here was Life.

CHAPTER V

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IN WHICH HENRY DECIDES

Up to the night of the fire, Henry had only been dreaming of what he wished to do in the world of work. Unless one of his age has had his fate sharply settled for him by being placed at some trade or profession—for which he is usually unsuited—by the masterful action of his parents, he has, at best, a nebulous vision of the path he will pursue.

With natural instinct, and aided by the accident of Edward John's business relations in Stratford, Henry had looked to literature through the gateway of the book-shop—of all, the most unlikely. But he had been shorn speedily of his illusions in that quarter.

A month in the establishment of Mr. Ephraim Griggs had left him wondering if he were a footstep nearer his goal than he had been before he bade farewell to Hampton. If the Temple of Literature which he had builded in his brain had not exactly crumbled into nothingness, it was no longer possible to rub shoulders with the slatternly Griggs and the insipid Pemble, and still to dream dreams such as had held his mind when he determined to fare forth an adventurer into the unknown realms of Bookland.

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The weeks dragged on wearily. So rude had been Henry's experience of the second-hand book-shop, in disgust he had almost concluded that after all there was as much glory in his father's business as in that of Mr. Griggs. Trevor Smith, however, had appeared on the scene at an opportune moment, and sent his thoughts off at a tangent.

Clearly, journalism was the high road to literature. It enabled one to get into print, and that, at least, was a great matter.

Already the agreeable Trevor could pose as Henry's literary godfather. He had allowed him to write one or two simple notes about the visit of a circus to the town and the annual flower-show, and these had actually appeared in type in the *Guardian*.

The fact that Trevor had twice borrowed half-a-crown from his fellow-lodger, and had twenty times forgotten to repay, while he had also assimilated innumerable examples of Mrs. Charles's baking, had probably something to do with his readiness in opening his columns to the youth. But that did not in the least detract from the bursting joy with which Henry read his own little paragraphs a score of times; nor did Edward John suspect that the first appearance of his young hopeful in the splendour of print was due to such adventitious aid.

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Henry's masterpiece was a letter to the editor of the *Guardian* protesting against the charge of sixpence exacted for admission to view the grave of Shakespeare. This was signed "Thespian," at the suggestion of Trevor, who never by any chance wrote of actors or of the theatre, but always of "sons of Thespis," or of "the temple of Thespis." Quite a lively correspondence ensued in the columns of the paper, and it was a great delight to Henry that he and Trevor Smith alone knew

who the correspondents were. Between them they did it all. Oh, Henry was learning what journalism meant!

"Take my word for it, Henry, journalism's your game," his merry mentor assured him. "That last par of yours about the Christ Church muffin-struggle is nearly as good as I could have done myself. You're cut out for a journalist as sure as eggs is eggs. All that you want is an opportunity to show what's in you."

Yes, only the opportunity was awaiting. And how to get it?

"Look at me," Mr. Trevor Smith continued, "I was only a common clerk in the *Guardian* office—a common clerk, mind you—but I had the sense to learn shorthand, and got the first opening as a reporter—and here I am!"

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He helped himself to a luscious pear from the stock which Henry had just received from home that day.

Indeed, these little bursts of confidence usually took place on the evening Henry's weekly hamper arrived, but he had never noticed the coincidence. A year or two later, perhaps, he might suspect there had been some connection between the events; meanwhile, his bump of observation had not been abnormally developed.

To-night the reporter appeared especially concerned for the welfare of his young friend, and it occurred to him to ask if Henry had been trying his hand at something more ambitious than mere paragraphs. He blushing admitted that he had.

"Then trot it out, my boy, and I'll tell you what it's worth in a couple of ticks," said Trevor, quite unconcerned as to the length or character of Henry's "something."

It is Nature's way that the rawest youths and maidens who desire to follow a literary career invariably commence by writing essays on aspects of life which world-worn men of fifty find impossible to discuss with any approach to ripened knowledge. Henry's unpublished manuscript now brought forth of his trunk proved to be a very long and absurdly grandiloquent essay on "Liberty."

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Neither the subject nor the wordiness of the manuscript dismayed the hopeful Trevor, who took it in his hand and ran his eyes with lightning rapidity over page after page.

"Ripping, my boy, ripping! That's the sort of stuff to make the critics sit up."

Henry thrilled and reddened, but winced a little when he heard his handiwork described as "stuff."

"Really? Do you think anybody would care to publish it?" he asked.

"Just the sort o' thing for the *Nineteenth Century* or the *Quarterly*," Trevor assured him gaily, although the rascal had never set eyes on either of these reviews. "But I should hold it back a bit until you have made your name, for the editors of these things never give an unknown man a chance."

"Still, you think I ought to persevere?"

"Don't I just! I couldn't have written stuff like that at your age for a mint of money. Take my tip, young 'un, you've got it in you to make a name; and when you're riding down Fleet Street in your carriage and pair, don't forget your humble servant who gave you the first leg-up. That phrase of yours on the last page about liberty being born among the stars and flying earthward to brighten all mankind is worthy of Carlyle at his best."

"I always liked Carlyle; but I'll try very hard to do something even better—I mean better than what I've written."

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"And, by-the-by, my dear Henry, do you think you could stretch me another half-crown? I'm rather rocky just now, but am expecting a tidy sum for lineage next week," said Trevor, in an off-hand way, and ignoring his friend's confusion, as he lifted his hat and prepared to go out.

Henry stretched the half-crown—with difficulty, for it meant a week's pocket-money—and when his companion had left he executed a wild dance round the table. Ambition had been fired within him again. He determined that not even the Slough of Despond, to which he likened the shop of Mr. Griggs, would discourage him for a day in his onward march to that City Beautiful where one's life was spent in writing fine thoughts for mankind to read and remember.

The difficulty remained: how to get the opportunity? All the copy-book maxims of his boyhood availed him nothing; all the stories of brave men who seized opportunity instead of waiting for it to turn up, inspired, encouraged, whispered of hope, but did not bring the situation to a simpler issue.

Soon after this evening he determined to induce Trevor to come down from his gorgeous generalisings to plain facts.

"It is all very well to say my essay is so good, but do you honestly think I should go on writing things like that if I wish to become a journalist?"

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It took something out of Henry to put it so bluntly. Despite the familiar manner in which Trevor

addressed him, the youth, who was naturally reticent, always spoke of him with deference due to one of older years, and especially to one who was a real live journalist. Henry, however, was gradually losing his country shyness, and the fact that Mr. Trevor Smith continued in his debt to the extent of seven-and-sixpence encouraged him to greater boldness in his dealings with that slippery gentleman.

"I confess that I have had enough of old Griggs. There is nothing to learn from him, and I do think I should like to get work on a newspaper. Is there any chance of an opening on the *Guardian* at Wheelton? I have been pegging in at my shorthand for the last three weeks, you know."

"Well, since you put it that way, and since you seem to be dead set on giving old Griggs the slip, there is one thing you could do," Trevor admitted, now that he had been asked to come down to hard facts.

"What is that?" asked Henry eagerly.

"Get your gov'nor to shell out to old Spring, and he'll take you on like a shot."

"Shell out?" said Henry, evidently not alive to Trevor's slang. "What do you mean?"

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"Why," returned his professional adviser, with a smile at the rustic ignorance, "haven't you seen advertisements in the daily papers something like this: 'The editor of a well-known provincial weekly has an opening for journalistic pupil. Moderate premium. Small salary after first six months'? There's your opportunity."

"Ah, I see the idea," said Henry, upon whom a light had dawned.

"What do you say to that?" Trevor pursued.

"Yes, that might do, and no doubt dad would 'shell out,' as you call it. But is there any such vacancy at present?"

"If there isn't, the Balmy One—that's another of our pet names for Old Springthorpe, the editor—will jolly soon make one, provided your pater is ready with the dibs. Write your gov'nor about it, and if he's open to spring twenty-five golden quid, leave the rest to me."

To Henry the suggestion seemed a good one, and he wondered that he had waited so long before getting Trevor to bring the situation to so practical an issue. The fact was, Mr. Smith rather liked the fun of patronising the youth, to say nothing of his share in the weekly hamper, and Henry's willingness to render slight but useful assistance by attending an occasional meeting on his behalf. Accordingly, he had not been anxious to lose his company too soon.

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To Edward John Charles his son's letter, with its bold proposal, came with somewhat of surprise. It had never occurred to him to couple the Press with "Literatoor," but he said at once that if Henry felt journalism was good enough for him, why, he would help him to become an editor with as much pleasure as he would have set him up in the egg-and-butter trade, had he been so minded.

Within a week the postmaster took another journey to Stratford, and thence by train to Wheelton, together with Henry, to interview Mr. Martin Springthorpe, editor of the *Wheelton Guardian*, to whom Mr. Charles carried a letter of introduction from Trevor Smith, wherein that gentleman averred he had taken great personal interest in the literary work of Henry Charles, and had even been able to make use of sundry items from his pen. He commended him to Mr. Springthorpe's best consideration.

Trevor had also taken the trouble to write privily to his chief, saying that he thought Mr. Charles would come down to the tune of five-and-twenty pounds, and not to frighten him off by asking more.

CHAPTER VI

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WHICH INTRODUCES AN EDITOR

WHEELTON, an industrial town of some importance, lies less than an hour's journey by rail from Stratford. It is not exactly a home of learning, nor has it given any distinguished men to literature or science, but it boasts four weekly newspapers and a small daily sheet, which would appear to be more than the inhabitants require in the shape of local reading matter, for, with one exception, the newspapers of the town have a hard struggle for existence.

At the time when Henry Charles and his father made their first journey thither the journalistic conditions were not quite so straitened, as the evening paper and one of the weeklies had not come to increase competition; but even then the *Guardian* was the least successful of the three.

The office of Mr. Springthorpe's journal was situated up a flight of narrow stairs, the shop on the street front having been let to a pork-butcher for the sake of the rent. On the first floor were the editor's room, the reporters' room, and another small apartment that served as the general

office, and contained a staff of one weedy young man with downy side-whiskers, and a perky little office boy.

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Up a further crazy stair the composing-room was reached, and here five men and several boys put into type what was sent from the rooms below. The printing was done in premises on the ground floor behind the pork-butcher's, extended by the addition of a rather rickety wooden outbuilding. By no means an establishment to impress a visitor with the importance of the journal here produced, or to give a beginner any exaggerated idea of the dignity of journalism. Still, the massive gilt letters proclaiming THE GUARDIAN above the pork-butcher's had the power to make Henry's blood tingle when first he saw them.

Up the stair he followed his father, with much fluttering of the heart, but reassured by the confident and cheerful look on the face of Edward John, who went about the business as outwardly calm as if he were buying a fresh stock of stationery.

The office-boy showed the visitors into a room to the left of the counter, on the door of which the pregnant word EDITOR, printed in bold letters on a slip of paper, had been pasted but recently, judging by its cleanness, as contrasted with the soiled appearance of everything else.

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The editor's room was plainly furnished, not to say shabbily, despite the fact that it figured frequently in the *Guardian* gossip columns under the attractive title of "The Sanctum." In the middle of the floor stood a large writing-table, from which the leather covering had peeled off, exposing the wood beneath like a plane tree with its bark half-shed. On the table lay, in picturesque confusion, bundles of galley-slips, clippings from newspapers, sheets of "copy" paper, all partially secured in their positions by small slabs of lead as paper-weights.

The waste-paper basket to the left of the table had overflowed, and the floor around was strewn with cut newspapers and crumpled sheets of manuscript. On the walls hung two large maps, one showing the railways of England and the other the Midland counties. Above the fireplace a printer's calendar was nailed. Three soiled and battered haircloth chairs completed the furniture of the room when we have added a damaged arm-chair, cushioned with a pile of old papers. This was the editor's chair. Its intrinsic value was probably half-a-crown, but to the regular readers of the *Guardian* it must have seemed as priceless as the gold stool of Ashanti, for they were accustomed to read two columns every week headed "From the Editor's Chair."

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The short, thick-set person, with the slightly bald head and distinctly red nose above a heavy black moustache, which trailed its way down each side of a clean-shaven chin and drooped over into space, was the editor himself. With a briar pipe, burnt at one side, stuck in his mouth, and puffing vigorously, he sat there in his shirt sleeves, and his pen flew swiftly over the sheets of paper that lay before him.

When Mr. Charles and his son entered, the editor laid down his pipe and pen, and rising from his chair, said in the most affable way:

"Ah, I am pleased to meet you, Mr. Charles; and this is your son Henry, of whose ability I have already heard."

Shaking hands with each, he pointed them to seats and resumed his own.

"So Henry is ambitious of embarking on a journalistic career," he remarked, as he lifted his pipe again; adding, "I hope you don't mind my smoking. I find a weed a great incentive to thought."

Mr. Springthorpe always spoke like a leading article, and it was noticed by those who knew him best that on the occasions when his nose was particularly ruddy and his utterance somewhat thick, his flow of language and the stateliness of his words were even more marked than when one could not detect the odour of the tap-room in his vicinity.

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"Yes, 'Enry is anxious to get on a noospaper," Mr. Charles replied. "And Mr. Trevor Smith has written this letter about him for you to read."

The editor reached out and took the letter with a great show of interest, reading it carefully, as though it were a document of much importance, while Henry sat fumbling with his hat, conscious that he had again arrived at a critical moment in his career.

"This is very nattering indeed, Mr. Charles," said the editor at length, "and I attach great weight to the opinion of Mr. Trevor Smith, who is an able and promising member of my staff."

"Then you think that 'Enry might suit you?"

"I have little doubt that he would prove a worthy addition to the ranks of journalism, and if I had any urgent need of a new member on my reportorial staff, I should willingly offer him an engagement. But, as I think I explained to you in my letter, I have not at present any pressing need for literary assistance."

Henry's face clouded as he listened, but brightened the next instant, when Mr. Springthorpe continued:

"It would, however, be a pity not to hold out the hand of encouragement to so bright a young man as your son, and I should be delighted to have the privilege of initiating him into the mysteries of newspaper work if you are prepared to pay a premium, and to let him serve the first

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six months without salary."

"There need be no difficulty about that," said Mr. Charles, "and I am prepared to pay you now a reasonable sum for any trouble you will take with him. How much would you expect?"

"Well, it all depends. I have had pupils who have paid as much as a hundred pounds." Edward John sighed, and Henry felt a tightening at the throat. "Fifty is what I usually expect." The visitors breathed more freely. "But I feel that in Henry we have a young man of peculiar aptitude, who would soon make himself a useful colleague of my other assistants; and that being so, I should be content with half the amount."

"That's a bargain, then," said Mr. Charles, entirely relieved, as he took out his cheque-book and filled up a cheque in favour of Mr. Martin Springthorpe for twenty-five pounds. "Of course, I s'pose you give 'im a salary after the first six months," he added, when he handed the cheque to the editor.

"I shall be only too happy to adequately remunerate his services when the period of probation is terminated," Mr. Springthorpe assured him, placing the precious paper carefully in his pocket-book. [Pg 76]

"And when would you like me to begin, sir?" asked Henry, who had scarcely opened his mouth since entering the room, the editor's shrewd eye for character, together with Mr. Trevor Smith's valuable testimonial, being all that Mr. Springthorpe had whereby to arrive at his flattering estimate of the young man's brightness and peculiar aptitude for journalism.

"Let me see, now—this is the 18th of July. Suppose we say that you commence your duties here on Monday, the 25th. How would that suit you?"

"That would fit in nicely, 'Enry, my lad, wouldn't it?" said Mr. Charles.

"Yes, sir," said the new reporter to the chief, who had been bought with a price. "I could start on that day, as there is nothing to keep me at Stratford."

"Do you know anything of shorthand?" the editor asked, as an afterthought.

"A little, sir; and I am studying it every night just now."

"That's right, my boy, wire in at your shorthand; a reporter is of little use without that accomplishment. To one of your ability it will be easy to acquire. I picked it up myself in a fortnight, and even now, although I seldom use it, I could still take my turn at a verbatim with the best of them." [Pg 77]

The great business completed, Mr. Charles and his son set out to look for lodgings for Henry, being recommended to the mother of one of the other reporters, who let apartments.

On the way back to Stratford, after having settled this little matter, Edward John waxed as enthusiastic as his son in picturing the possibilities which he had thus opened up for Henry. "Tis money makes the mare to go, my lad," he said. "Five-and-twenty pounds is a goodish bit out o' my savings, but I've always said you'd 'ave your chance, no matter what it cost me."

"I hope that I'll be able to prove the money hasn't been wasted, dad."

"I'm sure o' that, 'Enry—if you only wire in at your work and show the editor the stuff that's in you. Just fancy what old Miffin and the others will say when they 'ear that 'Enry Chawles is a reporter on the *Guardian*!"

"I mean to study very hard, get up my shorthand, and to write as much as ever I can when I join the staff. But of course I shan't stay in Wheelton all my life. There's better papers than the *Guardian*, you know."

"That's the true spirit, lad; always look ahead. If I hadn't been looking ahead all these years, where would the twenty-five pounds ha' come from, and the money that's to keep you for the next six months?" [Pg 78]

"I'm sure I don't know what could have been done without it. I don't think opportunities are as plentiful as we are told."

Henry had learned a little since that day he rode to Stratford with the carrier.

"Didn't think much of the office, though. Did you, 'Enry?"

"No," he admitted somewhat unwillingly, "it wasn't so fine as I had expected; but perhaps it is as good as they need."

"And nobody needs anythink better than that," which summed up in a sentence Edward John's philosophy of life and the secret of his financial soundness.

The few days remaining to Henry in Stratford went past all too slowly, despite the jubilation of Mr. Trevor Smith at the success of his promising *protégé*, and Henry's application to the study of shorthand, with which most of his time at the book-shop had been occupied of late. Mr. Griggs and Pemble he left without a pang, the former still concerned about his poultry, and the latter still cultivating his moustache; but he was sorry to say good-bye to Mrs. Filbert and the irrepressible Trevor, who would have made the success of his proposal an excuse to borrow a [Pg 79]

fourth half-crown, were it not that the memory of the unpaid three had better not be reawakened when Henry was going away.

His journey to Wheelton found him with hopes scarcely so high as those he had cherished on his way to Stratford some three months before, but he was at least fortified with some measure of that common sense which only rises in the mind as the illusions of youth begin to sink.

It was not thought necessary for him to revisit Hampton Bagot before removing to Wheelton—his face was still turned away from home. Thus far he had been marking time merely; but now he was on the march in earnest.

CHAPTER VII

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AMONG NEW FRIENDS

SATURDAY, the 23rd of July, will always remain a red-letter day in the history of Henry Charles. Even at this distance of time he could doubtless recall every feature of the day as the train that carried him steamed into the station. The languorous atmosphere of a hot summer afternoon, the steady drizzle of warm rain, the flood of water around a gutter-grating in Main Street, caused by a collection of straw and rotten leaves—even that will always appear when a vision of the day arises before his memory. The station platform had been freshly strewn with sawdust on account of the weather, and the pungent smell of that is not forgotten. Thus it is that the commonest features of our surroundings, noted under exceptional circumstances, are automatically registered for ever by our senses.

Edgar Winton, the reporter at whose home Henry was to lodge, had undertaken to meet his new colleague at the station, and pilot him to the house. But by some mischance he was not there, and the young adventurer stood for a moment lonely and disappointed, while the train in which he had travelled continued on its journey.

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His belongings, however, were not embarrassing, and for all his fragile looks Henry was still robust as any country lad. Nor did his sense of dignity come between him and the shouldering of his load up the steep and shabby main street of the town, and along sundry shabbier by-streets to the semi-genteel district of Woodland Road, where at No. 29 was the home of the Wintons.

Mrs. Winton seemed to be as amiable a landlady as good Mrs. Filbert, and more refined. Henry felt at once that so far as home-life was concerned his lines had fallen again in pleasant places. He had now risen to the dignity of a separate room, small indeed, and almost crowded with the single iron bedstead, the tiny dressing-table and chair, which, together with a few faded chromographs on the walls, made up its entire furnishing. It was on the second storey of the house, which had only two flats, and looked across a kitchen-garden to the back of a row of still smaller houses. By way of wardrobe accommodation, the back of the door was generously studded with hooks for hanging clothes. For the privilege of sleeping here Edward John had agreed to pay on behalf of his son the weekly sum of four shillings, and Mrs. Winton was to cook such food as Henry required, charging only the market prices.

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As it was late afternoon when Henry had reached his lodging, and Edgar was expected home for tea at five o'clock, Mrs. Winton's new guest, after a somewhat perfunctory toilet, descended to the parlour to await the coming of his fellow-worker. A copy of the *Guardian* for that week lay on the easy chair in which the landlady asked Henry to rest himself, and he was presently reading with close attention the weighty observations of his future chief, who spoke "From the Editor's Chair" like any pope *ex cathedra*.

Mrs. Winton having removed the vase of dusty "everlasting flowers," which stood *solus* in the middle of the faded green serge cloth that covered the oval table, and spread on the latter a cloth of snowy linen, busied herself in arranging the tea things.

Henry noted that cups and saucers were set for five, and as he only knew of four in the household, including Edgar's father and himself, he fell to wondering who the fifth might be. Undoubtedly his powers of observation had been sharpened from contact with the Stratford representative of the *Guardian*.

The preparations for the evening meal had just been completed when the outer door was opened, and Edgar, a fresh-complexioned young fellow of nineteen, arrived, full of apologies for having been unable to meet his guest, as he had been unexpectedly called upon to attend an inquest at the "Crown" Inn.

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"And an interesting case it is, by Jove!" he exclaimed brightly. "A man has shuffled off this mortal coil by—what d'you think?"

"Poison or a razor," suggested Henry, out of the fulness of his knowledge of poor humanity.

"Nothing so common for Johnnie Briggs the bookie. Everybody knows Johnnie, and he meant to make a noise when he snuffed out. Up to the eyes in debt, I fancy. He has choked himself with a leather boot-lace, and Wiggins in the High Street is as proud as Punch because it was one of his laces. Isn't it funny?"

"It's very horrible," said Henry, who could not help showing in his looks the feeling of disgust aroused within him by Edgar's levity in speaking of so bad an occurrence.

"Horrible! Why, I think it's stunning, and old Spring will be as mad as a march hare because Johnnie didn't perform his dramatic exit in time for this week's edition of the *Guardian*. The *Advertiser* will be out next Wednesday with full details, and we don't appear till Friday. It's always the way; that Wednesday rag gets all the spicy bits. But there, don't let us start talking shop all at once. I'm famished. How are you?"

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But before Henry could describe his condition, a bright young woman of some eighteen years had entered the parlour, to be introduced unceremoniously as "My sister Flo—Mr. Henry Charles."

Here, then, was number five, and a very acceptable tea-table companion, thought Henry, though the blushing and mumbling with which he said how pleased he was to meet her showed him to be as awkward in the presence of the fair sex as he was new to the jargon of journalism. He dared hardly lift his eyes to look the new-comer in the face, but on her part there was no evidence of shyness.

Over the tea-cups—for Mr. and Mrs. Winton had now come in, and all were seated at the table—Henry began to feel more at home among the family, and Mr. Winton proved to be a quiet, homely person, though Henry noticed that Edgar lost to some extent his high spirits when his father came on the scene. Evidently the Wintons were people "in reduced circumstances," for both the father and mother showed signs of superior breeding.

"I hope you will get on all right at the *Guardian*," Mr. Winton remarked. "You won't be short of work, if Edgar is a sample. He's always slogging away at something. If it's not the police courts, it's a political meeting, or a—"

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"Tea-fight, dad."

"Slang again, Eddie," put in Flo.

"Yes. Edgar delights in these flippancies; his trade seems to induce that," said Mrs. Winton. "Will you pass your cup, Mr. Charles?"

As Henry handed his cup to Flo, almost dropping it in the excitement of being dubbed "Mister," Edgar took up his mother's words, and exclaimed, with simulated indignation:

"Trade! Who calls it a trade? Remember, mater, that journalism is a profession—the Fourth Estate!"

"There's not much profession about attending inquests on suicides, and writing about the drunks and disorderlies," Flo remarked, fearless of her brother's displeasure.

"Come, come now," interposed Mr. Winton, who had not spoken since Edgar broke in upon his remarks. "You mustn't give our young friend too low an opinion of his new business," and turning to Henry, he remarked: "It is your first appointment, is it not?"

"Yes, I have only done some odds and ends for the *Guardian* when at Stratford. Of course, I'm hoping to do some good work here, but we must do the small things before we are able to do the great ones, I think."

A long speech for Henry to make before company, and not performed without an effort.

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"True, indeed, for only those who can do the little things well can do the great things well," was Mr. Winton's comment.

"And I was only joking," added Flo, looking archly at Henry, whose eyes immediately contemplated the lessening liquid in his cup. "Journalism is all very well, I'm sure, but newspaper fellows are so conceited that I think we need to take some of the side off them."

"Who's talking slang now?" from Edgar.

"Well, it may be slangy, but it's true; and I hope Mr. Charles won't fall into the habit of talking as if, because a man writes paragraphs in a printed paper, he knows more than Solomon."

"I'm afraid I know very little, Miss Winton. I'm here to learn." Oh, Henry was becoming quite a tea-table success.

"And I'm sure we hope you will find your new work up to your expectations. I have never met Mr. Springthorpe myself," said Mr. Winton, as he rose and retired to the living-room, which was half-kitchen, to smoke his evening pipe, while Flo helped her mother to clear away the tea-things and restore the dusty immortelles to their place of honour.

"The dad says he has never met Mr. Springthorpe, and a good thing for his idea of journalism. Not that old Spring doesn't strike you well enough at first meeting; but you'll soon find him out," Edgar said to Henry when they were alone in the parlour.

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"He seemed very considerate, I thought, when my father and I called on him. A little pompous, perhaps."

"Oh, you've noticed that! You'll see more of it by-and-by. But he can be wonderfully considerate

when there is a nice little premium attached to a new pupil. Your pater must have come down handsome on the spot, for the Balmy One has been swaggering around in a new frock-suit and shiny topper since you were engaged. Let me be frank with you, and tell you at once that you needn't expect anything of value out of our gorgeous chief. What you learn you'll have to pick up from Bertram and myself, and from Yardley the sub."

"I understood that I was really Mr. Springthorpe's pupil."

"You're not the first that understood that; but really it doesn't matter, for you'll get there all the same, as they say in the song. You'll have lots to do and you'll soon learn, but don't fancy old Spring is going to sit down and teach you. His duty ends when he converts your premium into clothing for the outer, and refreshment for the inner man. A good sort, but fond o' the bottle, like so many clever journalists."

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"And were you a pupil also before you became a full reporter?"

"Not on the *Guardian*. I served six months as a junior on the *Advertiser*, and received the order of the sack at the end of that time, as they had no further use for services which had begun to require a weekly fifteen bob. Luckily, the *Guardian* was in a hole at the time, both the chief reporter and his assistant having given notice, and the pupil then flourishing was a hopeless youngster, who has since returned to the business of his father, who is in the aerated water trade. So I was engaged at once, and on the noble salary of fifteen bob a week I remain to this day, although I was promised an increase at the end of twelve months, and I have been on the staff for sixteen. I occasionally pick up a bit of lineage, and that helps to pan out, you know; but I'm only hanging on until something better turns up elsewhere, and then good-bye to the *Guardian*. My ambition is Birmingham."

"Birmingham! Wouldn't you rather like to get to London?"

"Who wouldn't? But I have the sense to know I'm not cut out for Fleet Street. In any case, no London editor would look at a man from Wheelton. You must have experience on a good provincial daily before thinking of London Town."

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"I'm surprised, for Mr. Trevor Smith told me of many London editors who used to be on local papers like—our own."

"Trevor Smith is an ass. He knows as much about journalism as a monkey knows of algebra. He can't write for nuts. Most of his copy has to be rewritten by Yardley before it's fit to print."

Henry heard this unflattering description of his friend with some dismay, but remembered that Trevor had given him a very similar account of Edgar. He was beginning to know something of that brotherly feeling which always exists between fellow-craftsmen.

Winton showed himself very companionable, and in the evening took Henry for a walk round the town, in the course of which they visited the police station, where he was introduced as "the new *Guardian* man." This connection between the Press and the Police was one to which Henry would yet learn to attach much importance.

On the Sunday he attended church with Mr. Winton and Edgar in the morning, and would have gone again in the evening if Edgar and his father had been so disposed, but it seemed to be the rule of the house for the female side to attend the evening service, as in the morning they were engaged in household duties. Edgar confessed to Henry that he didn't reckon much of church-going, and only went to please the dad. He further avowed that he thought religion a lot of rot, and that most journalists were atheists. He had heard that George Augustus Sala believed in eternal punishment, but that was about all the religion he knew of among knights of the pen.

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Henry, who had been reared in the quiet atmosphere of a church-loving home, and had never listened to doubts about religion, heard Edgar's opinions with some dismay, but did not venture to dispute them. He had an uneasy feeling that the more he saw of men the less they justified his ideals, and he began to wonder whether, if he had to let slip his illusions of daily life, he would not also have to modify his religious convictions.

CHAPTER VIII

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THE YOUNG JOURNALIST

WITH the morning, however, Henry was fresh for the fray again. The prospects of his first day in active journalism swept away all doubts and misgivings.

Edgar having to attend the Monday police court, which was always fat with drunks and wife-beaters, Henry was left to make his way to the *Guardian* office himself.

On his arrival there he found the office-boy descending the stairs by using the railing as a slide, at the end of which he fell somewhat heavily on the door-mat, but picked himself up and smiled at Henry in proof that no bones were broken. Upstairs, the weedy young man with downy whiskers, who bore on his narrow shoulders the full weight of the *Guardian's* commercial affairs, was at

work on the morning's letters. He looked up as Henry entered, and inquired his business.

"Is Mr. Springthorpe in?" the new reporter asked.

The clerk was surprised for a moment to hear the editor's name mentioned thus early in the day. Then he answered:

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"No, he is rather irregular in his hours. He may not arrive till eleven or twelve to-day!"

"It's only ten o'clock now," said Henry, as though he were thinking aloud. He would never try to play Monte Cristo again, and Winton had told him that Mr. Springthorpe was never assiduous in his office attendance.

"But I expect Mr. Yardley soon," the clerk continued. "Are you Mr. Charles?"

"Yes. Shall I go to the reporters' room?"

The clerk opened the door for him, and he entered on the scene of his future labours. A long table of plain wood, cut and hacked by knives on the edges, stood in the centre of the floor, and around it were four cane-chairs, all of different shapes. The floor was covered by worn-out oilcloth, the walls were dingy, the ceilings blistered like a water-biscuit. A single gasalier, carrying two burners, hung from the roof and served to light the table, on which lay a few bundles of copy-paper, two ink-pots, and some pens. The only other furniture in the room was a small bookcase half-filled with volumes, most of which were tattered, and some without binding, having reached that condition, not so much from frequent reference as from occasional use in a game wherein the reportorial staff tried to keep two books flying round the room from hand to hand without falling—a game that was never successful. A bundle of unopened newspapers, in postal wrappers, lay at the window-end of the table, and also a few letters.

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Presently the door was opened and Mr. Wilfrid Yardley, sub-editor, stepped in. He was a man of sallow complexion, with very black hair and dark, restless eyes that suggested worry. He wore a light yellowish summer suit and a straw hat. For a moment he paused on seeing Henry, who, as he entered, was examining the literary treasures in the bookcase.

"Good morning!" he said. "You are Mr. Charles, I suppose?" and he held out his hand to Henry. "You are early. The reporters have no hours. I'm the only one on the literary staff who is chained to the desk."

He took off his hat and jacket, exchanging the latter for a ragged thing that hung on one of the pegs along the wall. Then he seated himself at the end of the table, and commenced opening the newspapers that lay there. All the while his eyes flitted about in his head as if he feared that someone would pounce on him unawares. Evidently a quiet fellow and a conscientious worker, but a trifle too nervous to have much character.

"Mr. Springthorpe has not fixed any work for you?" he said to Henry, with questioning eyebrows, while slitting an envelope.

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"No, nothing has been arranged. I suppose I'm to do anything that turns up."

"Bertram—that is our chief reporter—will want you to help him, I suppose. But I'm sure I could do with assistance. You can't learn too much, however, so just try your hand here," and he marked several items in a daily paper referring to happenings in the Midland counties. "Try to rewrite those pars, keeping in all the facts, but only using about one-third of the space in each case. Sit down in that chair there, and perhaps you'll find a pen that suits you among those, though I never can."

Henry acquitted himself very well according to Mr. Yardley, and found the latter so considerate in his advice that he immediately conceived a liking for him.

After all, Trevor Smith and Edgar Winton were raw youths, but here was a man of thirty-five at least, and there was no "side" about him. He seemed capable and intelligent. Why, then, did he stick in Wheelton? Would Henry only reach a similar post when he was his age? These thoughts came to him as he watched the earnest face of Yardley poring over reporters' copy, "licking it into shape," sucking the while at his briar pipe. Such thoughts are not pleasant, but they must come to every youth who aspires to make a success of life, and they will for a moment damp his enthusiasm, unless he has the perception which tells him that no two men's careers are alike, and that every man carries within himself the qualities that make for success or failure. But Yardley may not have thought himself a failure, and there's the rub.

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When the editor arrived he showed no overweening interest in Henry, but warmly commended him for the work he had done under the subeditor's eye, and urged him to make the most of his opportunities, without telling him how. Undoubtedly Winton had described the situation accurately to Henry—Mr. Springthorpe's interest ended when he pocketed the premium.

Bertram, the chief reporter, proved to be a person with distinct family resemblance to Trevor Smith, and was probably about twenty-eight years of age. He shared the editor's weakness for looking upon the wine when it is red, but always managed to get through the work required of him. Without possessing qualities of the slightest distinction, he had achieved a reputation in various newspaper offices as "a clever fellow if he'd only keep straight."

This is, perhaps, not peculiar to journalism, and if we inquire into the characters of many who

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are reputed to be exceptionally endowed, but imperil their success by unsteady habits, we shall find that in most cases their abilities are below the average of the steady plodder, who is seldom described as clever, simply because the shadow of unsteadiness never falls on his life as a background for the better display of such qualities as he possesses. The fact is, that your "clever fellow if he'd only keep sober" is a very ordinary fellow, whose ever-changing employers are apt to over-estimate his abilities during a decent spell of sobriety.

It is doubtful if it would be to the advantage of our story to dwell at any length on the next few months of Henry's life. The newspaper office in which he found himself was typical of hundreds in the English provinces, no better nor worse. The existence of the *Guardian* was one constant struggle to increase a small circulation and add to the advertising revenue of the paper. To the latter end the services of the reporters were frequently required, and puffs of tradesmen had to be written whenever there was a chance of securing thereby a new advertisement. All the petty details of local life had to be reported at great length, even to the wedding presents received by the daughter of an undertaker in a small way of business. These were actually displayed with the names of their donors in separate lines, following the report of the marriage ceremony, which included a full description of the bride's dress, with the name of the local dressmaker who had made it.

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The pettiness of it all was rudely borne in upon the young reporter when it came to his knowledge that the item—"Purse from Servant of Bride's Mother"—represented an expenditure of eleven-pence three-farthings on the part of a faithful domestic thirteen years of age.

As an off-set against these experiences, Henry had made one great upward move. In a moment of audacity, which he must recall with wonder, he ventured to write a leading article and to swagger the editorial "we." It so happened that when he presented this to the editor, that worthy, having had a bibulous week and being short of copy, pronounced it good, and printed it with a few alterations. As it was Mr. Springthorpe's aim to do a minimum of work each week, he generously encouraged the youth to further editorial effort, with the result that Henry "we'd" pretty frequently in the leading columns of the *Guardian*. He was the first "pupil" who had ever shown any marked ability, and Springthorpe was secretly proud of him.

As the six months wore away, Henry began to hope that he might be added to the permanent staff, but neither Bertram nor Edgar showed signs of departing, and the prospects of his receiving a salaried position remained low. To the surprise of his colleagues, however, and against all precedent, he was not ejected at the end of his six months, but actually received a salary of half-a-guinea a week, accompanied, however, by the information that he would do well to look elsewhere for a situation at his leisure.

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Now commenced a strenuous time of replying to advertisements in the *Daily News*. For a while never a sign came back from those doves of his which went forth trembling, but in the spring of the year after his going to Wheelton, there came a reply from the manager of one of the two daily papers at the large and important Midland town of Laysford, asking Henry to come and see him with reference to his application for the post of editorial assistant.

The plan of submitting specimens of his work, backed by an eloquent testimonial from Mr. Springthorpe, had at length succeeded, and to the amazement of the staff, Henry returned from the interview entitled to regard himself as assistant editor of the *Laysford Leader*. To this day the event is talked of at the office of the *Guardian*, but it is never recorded that important factors in bringing it about were the pressing need of the *Leader* to have a new assistant at a week's notice, and the growing desire of Mr. Springthorpe to save half-a-guinea on the weekly expenses of the *Guardian*. Moreover, Henry had named a salary five shillings less than the only other likely candidate.

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From such sordid circumstances do events of life-importance spring.

CHAPTER IX

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WHAT THE NECKTIE TOLD

THE grey-blue reek of Hampton Bagot is curling up into the azure sky. From the hill on which the church stands the little village lies snug like a bead on a chain—the London Road—in a jewel-case of billowy satin: green Ardenshire. A haunt of ancient peace this August day. The only noises are the pleasant rattle of a reaping-machine and the musical tinkle of an anvil, while now and again the petulant ring of a cyclist's bell reaches the ear of the lounge on the hill, and thrills some honest cottager with the hope that the ringer may rest at her house for tea.

The faint sound of a far whistle reminds us that time has passed since we last stood in Hampton's one street: a mile and a half away, the station, which is to advertise the name of the village to travelling humanity for ever, has been finished, and several times each day trains to and from Birmingham condescend to pause in their puffing progress at the tiny platform. But

most of them go squealing through, indignant at finding such a contemptible little station on *their* line. The stationmaster-porter-ticket-collector and his junior are not overworked—or else they could not play so long with the latter's terrier, who is the liveliest member of the staff. But there are a few tickets to be taken every day, a few carriage-doors to be shut, a few whistles to blow, a few throbs of importance for the young official.

We know of one passenger who is to arrive this Saturday afternoon; at least, they are expecting him at Hampton Bagot.

The station has made no difference to the village. Certainly none to the figure at the Post Office door. The smile might have been registered, the tilt of the coat-tails patented. Edward John Charles has not altered a hair, although it is almost six years since we last saw him wagging his tails here.

"You're expectin' 'im 'ome to-day, Ed'ard John, I 'ear," the inefficient Miffin observes as he crosses to the Charles establishment for an ounce of shag.

"Yes, and about time, I think. Why, he ain't been through this door for two year, and last time 'e could on'y stay four days."

"In moi opinion, them youths what goes to the cities learns to despise their 'umble 'omes," Miffin commented, with a sad fall of the eyes. "Now, if I 'ad a son 'e'd 'ave to stay at 'ome, and take up 'is fether's trade."

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"But you ain't got a son, Miffin, and that's all the difference. If there was a young Miffin, why, you're just the man to ha' been proud o' 'im makin' 'is way in the world. Mind you, Hampton ain't the on'y place under the sun."

"It'll be strange for 'Enry to come to the station," said Miffin, adroitly diverting the drift of the talk; for he was touchy on the subject of children, being as discontented because he had none as most of the village folk were because they had so many.

"He says it's going to bring 'im often back to us, and I believe he means it."

"Well, it's to be 'oped 'e'll never regret leavin' 'ome," was the last croak of the gloomy tailor, as he rammed home a charge of shag into his burnt cherry-wood pipe with his claw-like forefinger, and stepped back to his flat irons.

Edward John chuckled contentedly. Miffin was a constant entertainment to him. He had a suspicion that the tailor had been appointed by Providence to prevent his becoming unduly puffed up about his talented son.

Just in time for tea, the subject of their conversation jumped down from the butcher's gig in which he had travelled from the station. His father welcomed him with a sedate shake of the hand; his sisters three ran to him and were shyly kissed. How our sisters shoot straight into womanhood with the gathering up of their back hair and the lengthening of their frocks! A brotherly kiss after two years to a sister who may have another young man to kiss her, produces shyness in the least self-conscious of young men.

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In the parlour Henry found his mother, still the timid, withered little woman he had always known her, busy setting the tea, her curl-papers still eloquent of her household toils. He was conscious of the curl-papers for the first time as he kissed her dry lips. The near view of the papers offended some new feeling within him. He was strangely tempted to pluck them out.

There was a great change to be noted in the appearance of the only Henry. It was four years since he had left Wheelton, almost six since he went away to Stratford, and Laysford especially stamps its character on its residents.

"Bless me, 'Enry, but you're growing all to legs, like a young colt," his father remarked, as he seated himself and took a smiling survey of his son, who was given the honour of the arm-chair; a fact that marked another stage in his upward career. "All to legs, my boy!"

"But there's lots of time to fill out yet, dad. I weigh ten stone eleven."

"Mostly bones, eh?"

"But I feel all right."

"You look it, my lad; and between you an' I, I'd rather have your bones than my beef!"

"I hope you have always remembered to wear flannel next your skin, Henry?" his mother ventured to ask, in the hilarious moment which her husband was enjoying as the meed of his merry thought.

"Oh, I'm all right, mother! Don't worry about me. Wear flannel next the skin, drink cod-liver oil like water, and am never without a chest-protector on the hottest day."

His sisters laughed, but doubted their ears. Henry had never been jocular. Evidently the neat cut of his summer suit, the elegant tie, were not the only things Laysford had endowed him with.

"Your mother always was coddling you up as a boy. She forgets that you're a man now. Why, your moustache is big enough for a Frenchie. Don't it get into the tea? I never could abide a moustache. It's one of they furrin ideas."

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"My moustache is rather admired, dad," said Henry brightly, glancing slyly at his sisters.

"Hark at the lad.... By whom?"

"Ladies ... perhaps!"

Oh, Henry, you might have broken it more gently! Edward John smiled and called him "a young dog"; his mother's face clouded for a moment, and brightened; the girls understood—at least Dora, who was nineteen, and Kit, who was two years younger, understood—and laughed. Milly was only a maiden of bashful fifteen.

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"It's simply wonnerful, 'Enry, how you've smartened up since you were 'ome two years ago. Your second two years have done more for you than the first," said Edward John, buttering his bread at the tea-table.

"Glad you think so, dad. But I say, mother, it's funny to be buttering my own bread again; I haven't buttered any since I was at home last."

"When I was in London I never buttered a bit. All done for you. Wonnerful how they encourage laziness in the city." Edward John had need to remind them that he had been to London; for Henry had actually spent two summer holidays there instead of coming to Hampton, and the glory of his father's visit was in danger of being tarnished.

"Still thinking o' going to London some day for good, I suppose?" he went on.

"Oh, of course; but the fact is that the more I learn of journalism the more difficult London seems. It is all plain sailing at eighteen; but at twenty-two ... well, I'm just beginning to think I'm not a heaven-born genius, dad."

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"But it ain't what you think about yourself that matters."

"That's just what does matter—in journalism. I've learned one great thing since leaving home. The world takes a man pretty much at his own valuation. A fool who takes himself seriously is like to be taken seriously by other fools, and you know how many fools there are in England according to Carlyle."

"Well, then, if you are a fool, try it," retorted the postmaster merrily.

"But a wise man, who thinks himself a fool, is likely to be thought a fool by—"

"Wise men?"

"Perhaps by them also; but certainly by the fools, who are in the majority."

"Nonsense, my lad! Was it for this I paid that Springthorpe fellow five-and-twenty pounds?"

"Henry's only joking, dad," Dora suggested. Her sense of humour was not magnetic.

"A jest in earnest, Dora; for the more one learns the less one knows."

An amazing fellow: a veritable changeling this Henry! His mother watched him almost like a stranger.

"Rank heresy, now, you're talking. I wunner what old Mr. Needham would say to that?" exclaimed his father, who had a fear that his son had grown a trifle conceited.

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"That I had learned a lot since you wanted him to tackle me on Virgil. But I like my work for all that; in fact, because of it. It is about the only kind of work in which one is learning every day; and I'm beginning to think that the real fun of life is not the knowledge of things so much as the getting to know them."

"Well, look 'ere, 'Enry. You're dragging your poor old father out into deep waters, an' you know he can't swim. You're talking like one of your articles. For I read 'em all that you mark with blue pencil, and your mother keeps 'em, even when she's hard up for paper to light the fire."

Henry wondered in his heart if, at a pinch, she would have used one for her curl-papers. He noticed just then, for the first time in his life, that the parlour of his old home was very small; the ceiling was so low that he found himself almost choking for breath when he looked up.

Dora and her mother were clearing away the tea-dishes, and Henry went upstairs to the bedroom where he would sleep with his father. The old nest had altered in a hundred ways, although none but Henry knew that. He had once been a bird of the brood here, but he had taken wings away, and to return for a fortnight once in two years was only to realise how far his wings had carried him. Henry had been born here, the people that he loved the best of all were still living here in the old home—his old home. Yet it could never be anything but his *old* home now. We talk about returning home; but really we never do so. Once we leave the home of our boyhood and youth, we never return again. It is seldom we wish to go back to the old life; and when the wish is there, Fate is usually against its fulfilment.

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Henry Charles had certainly altered in a bewildering variety of ways since we first made his acquaintance. Then a tall, sallow youth of sixteen, ungainly in limb and not well-featured, his nose unshapely, his mouth too large, but a pair of dark eyes gleaming with spirit to light up the homeliness of the face. Now, a man—oh, the few short years, the tiny bridge across the chasm,

the bridge we never pass again!—a man: tall as a dragoon, leggy, it is true, as the shrewd eye of his father had judged; but no longer thin to veritable lantern jaws, rather a promise of ample fleshing, and a nose that had sharpened itself into an organ not uncomely of outline. This changing of the nose is one of the most curious of our few tadpole resemblances. His mouth might still be large, but a glossy moustache hides many an anti-Cupid pair of lips, which a few passes of the razor would unmask to set the dear boy flying. Henry's hair was raven black and ample—perilously near to disaster for a hero. But we must have the truth in this narrative, cost what it may.

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As he stood in the bedroom, brushing his hair and bending carefully to avoid knocking his head against the ceiling, which sloped steeply to the dormer window, where stood the looking-glass on its old mahogany table with the white linen cover, Henry presented the picture of a wholesome young Englishman, proud of brain rather than muscle, and differing therein from the ruck of his fellows, but joining hands with them again in the careful touch to his hair, the neat collar, the pretty necktie.

Now, the moment a young man begins to look to his neckties, unless he is a mere dude, there is a reason for it. Henry Charles was impossible miles from dudeism; *ergo*, there was a reason for his lingering at the looking-glass.

He had been slower than the average young man to awaken to the fact that for most male beings still unmated, there is some young lady deeply interested in his neckties and the cut of his coat. But he had awakened, and now the difficulty was to know which young lady: there seemed to be so many in Laysford who took an interest in the clever young assistant editor of the *Leader*. To be on the safe side, it was well to be observant of the sartorial conventions, even while in the inner recesses of the literary mind disdaining them.

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That is Henry's state of mind when we see him after tea at the mirror in the camceiled bedroom. If it surprises you, remember that it is four years since you met him last, and many things can happen in that time. How do we know what has happened to him? His necktie tells us something, doesn't it?

CHAPTER X

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VIOLET EYES

WHEN Henry was seated alongside the carrier that fateful morning long ago—Henry, you must be more than twenty-two!—he had to pass the cottage of old Carne the sexton, and a sweet face, jewelled with a pair of violet eyes, looked out between the curtains, a girl's hand rattled on the window-pane. The owner of these eyes had been playing with a caterpillar when Henry went round the village telling everybody he met that he was going away to Stratford—her among the rest. But surely that was ages ago! "I could never have been such a young ass," Henry would say to a certainty if you were to ask him at the mirror.

Well, here is Eunice Lyndon in proof of the fact that it was almost six years since. At all events, she says she is just nineteen, and she was thirteen then. She doesn't play with caterpillars now; but her eyes are certainly violet, though Henry probably thought they were blue, if he thought of them at all.

The six years have wrought wonders in the girl who rattled on the window when Henry went forth to the fray.

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For one thing, Eunice, who was the chum of Dora, and thus a frequent visitor in the Charles household, had discredited the croakers by continuing to live and even to strengthen, despite the fact of her mother's consumptive end. Poor Mrs. Charles, who had seldom a chance of opening her mouth on any topic, never avoided stating, as an article of her faith, that all children of consumptive parents were doomed as clearly as though their sentence had been passed by a hanging judge. It was positively an insult to her and to many another anxious mother for the progeny of consumptive parents to go on living. For such to wax strong was against Nature, and in the teeth of medical experience.

Eunice had offended Nature, diddled the doctors, and looked all the better for the offence. The pasty whiteness of her girlhood had given place to a creamy freshness, which blended perfectly with her high colour—so you see her red cheeks were not the flame of consumption, but the bloom of health. Her colour was of that intensity which seems to come from the atmosphere around the face, and to shine upon the skin as a shaft of ruby light, carried by the sunbeams through a cathedral window, glows on a marble statue.

Her features were pretty, but with no mere prettiness. They were marked by character. The nose would have been a despised model for a Grecian; the mouth not dollishly small, yet small, firm-set, the firmness being saved from shrewish suggestion by an upward ending of the lips. Eunice had a chin; a most essential quality in man and woman, sometimes unhappily omitted. A chin that said: "Yes, I mean what I say; and I mean to say what I mean." Eyes that—well, they were violet eyes, and what more can one say? A forehead not high, but wide, to carry a wealth of

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lustrous dark hair.

Eunice was no Diana in stature, for she had scarcely grown an inch in all those years since we saw her with the caterpillar. She had sprung up suddenly as a girl, and remained at the same height for womanhood to clothe her. Perhaps five feet four. But do not let us condescend upon such details. She was small, she was dainty; enough is said. Violet eyes—more than enough!

It is not to be supposed that Eunice and Henry had ever been sweethearts. That is altogether too rude a suggestion. What does a girl of thirteen think of sweethearts? A lad of sixteen? They pick up the conventional phrase, with its suggestion of friendship more intimate than everyday acquaintance, from their elders; that is all. There may possibly be a liking for each other, a liking more than for any other playmates. That is rare. The most that could be guessed about Eunice and Henry before his leaving home was that he had been more inclined to talk with her than with any other girls who came to the house, and as he, in his cubhood, had a sniff of contempt for most girls, that counted for very little. Perhaps, on second thoughts, it might be held to count for a good deal.

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When Henry had been home two summers ago, Eunice was away on one of her rare visits to an aunt in Tewksbury—in a sense, at the world's end. So Henry had rarely seen her since that peep she took at him long ago in Memoryland. He had heard of her frequently, we will suppose, in the letters from his sister Dora, and she of him from her chum.

Meanwhile, an important event had happened in her life. Old Edgar Carne, Eunice's grandfather, had died a year ago, and left his orphan grand-daughter at eighteen with the tiniest little fortune, equal to probably twenty pounds a year. For a time it seemed likely that she would leave the village and go to reside with her aunt at Tewksbury, as she had now no blood relations in Hampton Bagot, though many warm-hearted friends. Simple in her tastes, educated only to the extent of a village curriculum, which did not breed ambition, fond of domestic duties and the light work of a garden, Eunice had no clear-cut path ahead, and would have preferred to stay on among the people who had been planted around her by the hand of friendship.

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It so fell out that Fate pinned her to Hampton yet awhile. The housekeeper of the Rev. Godfrey Needham had left, and it was suggested to him by Mr. Charles that Eunice and a young serving-maid would do wonders in brightening up the vicarage, where an elderly housekeeper had only fostered frowsiness. Besides, the vicar had recently to the amazement of his parishioners, taken a little lass of nine to live with him, the orphan child of a relation of his long-dead wife. Eunice could thus be of double service to him in mothering the little one, and her sympathy could be relied upon, since she herself had been robbed of a mother's love so early. It was even whispered that the coming of little Marjorie had something to do with the old housekeeper giving notice to leave; she was "no hand wi' childer," as she herself confessed.

Mr. Needham fell in with Edward John's proposal; Eunice was delighted; and a year had testified to its wisdom. The vicarage had never been so bright in the memory of the oldest inhabitant, the vicar himself had come under the transforming hand of Eunice, and now, within hail of seventy, he was a sprucer figure than he had been since the days of his brief married happiness—forty years before. His collars were always spotless, his white ties—white. His trousers reached to his shoes at last. Perhaps his step had lost its springiness, his coat its breezy freedom; but he had gained in dignity what was lost in quaintness.

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As for Eunice herself, this one short year had carried her well into womanhood, and though only nineteen she was the counsellor of many who were older. There is a wonderful reserve of domestic gold in every young woman whose bank is run upon. At an age when a young man is watching his moustache's progress, many a young woman is grappling heroically, obscurely, with the essential things of life. Yet Eunice was doing no more than thousands of womenkind had done.

But her position as housekeeper at the vicarage, as teacher in the Sunday School, conferred certain advantages, and brought her more prominently into the life of the little village. From being "Old Carne's little girl," she had been translated into "Miss Lyndon at the vicarage." Her daily pursuits, the refining influence of her duties, quickly developed and ripened her own excellent qualities of heart and mind, and in twelve fleeting months she stood forth a woman; discreet of tongue, yet bright with happiness, resourceful, heart-free.

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Henry noted, with a thrilling interest he could scarce account for, these changes in his little friend of long ago, when she came under his eyes again at church on the Sunday following his arrival.

"How do you do, Miss Lyndon?" and "How are you, Mr. Charles? It seems a lifetime since you went away," did not suggest the sputtering fires of kindling passion.

"Yes, it takes an effort of mind sometimes to recall my Hampton days." One was almost suspicious of affectation.

"Really! That's scarcely kind to Hampton and—us."

"Ah, I am not likely to forget old friends; but I mean that the years of almost changeless life here are only the impression of a morning sky, compared with the crowded day that has followed."

Was the suspicion well founded?

"Then you've been bitten by the dog Town, and go hunting for a hair of him!"

Eunice smiled at her conceit, and Henry laughed with rising eyebrows, that said: "This young lady has improved wonderfully."

"Good, Eunice; very good! You have a turn for metaphor, I see." The "Eunice" slipped out, and immediately brought a deeper tinge of colour to the girl's cheek. The man was sallow, but his eyes looked away from her after it was out. "Do you read much, or are your duties at the vicarage engrossing?" was said with an air of friendly interest only. [Pg 118]

"Engrossing, yes. You see, I've to play little mother. One of my charges is ten and the other nearly seventy. So I feel a centenarian. But I don't get much time for reading, what with visiting in the parish and keeping the vicarage in order. No; I'm not a bit clever, and I have only a dark idea of what a metaphor is."

"Ah, you should tell that to the marines," was all that Henry could say by way of comment.

He had made obvious conversational progress in the outer world, but there was an artificial touch about his talk—a literary touch—that was not quite equal to his swimming dolphin-like, in a sea of talk, around this child of Nature.

"You are liking Laysford, I hear," the little mother said, after some paces in silence.

"Immensely! The place teems with life. You've just to stir it and behold a boiling pot of human interest."

"And how is the stirring done?"

"Ah, there you have me! That's the worst of metaphors. I must rid myself of the habit; it comes, I fancy, of too much Meredith on an empty head." [Pg 119]

"Dear me! And what is Meredith?"

"It is a man that writes things."

"Like you?"

"Not like me, I hope. He writes for all time; I for an hour—literally. But don't let's talk of writing. There are greater things to do in this world. Unless one were a Meredith."

"You didn't always think so."

"No; but I've learned young, and that's a good thing. When I read Meredith I hide my face at the thought of writing anything. But you've done very well, so far, without books, if I'm to believe your own story."

"I suppose folk lived before printing was invented?"

"I used to wonder how they did; but now I am willing to believe it possible."

"You will come and see Mr. Needham at the vicarage, while you are here, I hope? He often talks about you."

"I shall be delighted.... And you? You will give us a peep at the old house?"

"Oh, yes! Dora and I are bosom friends."

"Early next week you can look for me to have a chat with ... Mr. Needham."

"I'll be in soon ... to see Dora." [Pg 120]

They shook hands at the field path to the vicarage, and Eunice went up the hill hand-in-hand with Marjorie, whom Henry had never deigned to notice. She looked back when a few hundred yards had been covered, but the young man was stepping briskly after his father and his two younger sisters, who had gone ahead.

"How Eunice Lyndon has improved," said Henry to Dora when they sat at dinner.

"Isn't she bright? I think she is the sweetest girl I know."

"But you don't know many, Dora."

"She's made a wonnerful change on the passon. An' it was all my own idea," Edward John declared with satisfaction, as he scooped up a mouthful of green peas with his knife.

"Her mother—poor thing—died o' consumption," Mrs. Charles remarked, and sighed as though she were placing a wreath on Eunice's coffin.

"But she's the very picture of health, mother," Henry protested.

"Still, there's consumption in the family," she murmured.

"Nothing to do with her case. Doctors are now giving up the idea that the disease is hereditary," Henry said, with unnecessary emphasis, as it seemed to Edward John. [Pg 121]

"But doctors don't know everythink, 'Enry, my boy," his father remarked.

"And neither do mothers."

Whereat one of them sighed again.

The meal went on in silence for a while, and the pudding was at vanishing point when Henry broke into talk again.

"By the way, Dora, did I ever tell you that the Wintons have come to Laysford? You remember them? My old friends at Wheelton."

"You never mentioned it."

"Funny that I had forgotten. Edgar joined the *Leader* nearly six months ago as second reporter, and the whole family have removed to Laysford, when Mr. Winton got a post as cashier in a large hosiery factory."

"There was a sister, I think?"

"Yes; Flo—a jolly, dashing sort of girl."

"Pretty?"

"Extremely! One of your blonde beauties. Almost as tall as I am, and nearly my age."

"Indeed!"

"A fine puddin', mother, but just a trifle too many o' them sultanas," said Edward John.

Mrs. Charles sighed once more.

CHAPTER XI

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ONE'S FOLLY, ANOTHER'S OPPORTUNITY

WHEN Henry's holiday had ended and he stepped once again into the outer darkness that lay beyond Hampton Bagot, the words of his which kept ringing like alarm-bells in the ears of his mother and Dora were: "Flo—a jolly, dashing sort of girl." They had been spoken once only; but that was enough. The essential woman in his mother and sister pounced on them like a cat on a mouse peeping from its hole. They turned the phrase over in their mind, put it away, took it down, pecked at it; tossed it afar, and ran after it forthwith, wishful to forget it, but unable to let it go.

It might mean much, it might mean nothing. With some young men it would not have been an excuse for a second thought, but Henry was not like other young men. He was their Henry—or rather, he had been; for Mrs. Charles now watched him with something of that chagrin which must arise in the maternal bosom of the hen that has mothered a brood of ducklings when she sees them going where she cannot follow. As for Dora, she doubted if she had ever known this new Henry who spoke easily of "Flo—a jolly, dashing sort of girl."

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The phrase, careless and colloquial though it was, had all the potency of the biograph to project before the mind's eye of Mrs. Charles and of Dora pictures of a young woman who stepped out, smirked, disappeared, and came again in a new dress to do many things they disliked.

But it was not the same young woman that both of them saw, and neither of them mentioned her thoughts to the other. The figure which flashed frequently on to the screen of his mother's thoughts was that of a bold, designing creature—dangerously attractive—whose purpose was to entrap her Henry. Dora recognised her dressed for another part, in which she displayed a tendency to giggle and cast flattering eyes on a gullible young man.

Edward John saw nothing of this figure in the fairy drama of his mind, where Henry always moved close to the footlights and left the other characters in the unilluminated region of the stage.

Henry had renewed his acquaintance with the Rev. Godfrey Needham, whom he found still swimming, though with weakening stroke, in his sea of scrappy scholarship, rising manfully some times on a fine billow of Latin, but spluttering a moment later when he breasted a frothy wave of French.

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"Ah, my dear Henry, toil on, plod on, and remember always that *Hoffnung ist der Wanderstab von der Wiege bis zum grabe*, which, as you have no German, means that hope is the pilgrim's staff from the cradle to the grave. We are all pilgrims—always pilgrims—you in the sunshine, I in the frost of life."

This was his benediction; and somehow the innocent vanity of the vicar's borrowed philosophy no longer amused, but fingered tender cords in the soul of the young man.

Eunice, although she had met him several times after that walk from the church, had never said so much to him again; but "Shall we not see you again for two years?" was spoken with a touch of sadness which thrilled him into—"I shall hope to see you often in the future."

Miffin was alone among the village folk in his opinion of the new Henry. The young man's neat-fitting summer suit, his elegant necktie, even his well-made boots annoyed that worthy by their quiet advertisement of prosperity. He was one of those who resented success in others, mainly because he knew himself for a failure. Moreover, no man is pleased to see his prophecies given the lie. The tailor still blandly assured his cronies when they enlarged on the worldly progress of the postmaster's son, that the rising tide of Henry's affairs would yet turn. "Merk moi werds," said he, "them young men what goes into City life seldom do any good. They dress well, p'raps, but there's a soight o' tailors in the big towns as fail 'cause the loikes of 'Enry forgets to pay 'em."

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As for Henry himself, his brief reversion to the home of his boyhood had struck a new note in his life: a note that had only sounded falteringly before, but now rang out clear, sharp, alarming. The simple contentment which seemed to breathe in this little village soothed and comforted him, straight from the jangle of the great City, and he felt for the first day or two as if he could submit to have his wings clipped, and flutter away no more.

But soon the dulness of Hampton was the impression which refused to leave the surface of his thoughts, and he understood that, having answered with a light heart to the bugle of the town, he must continue in its fighting line though the heart was heavier. Perhaps he knew in his secret soul that this heaviness of heart followed its opening to the imperious knock of Doubt. But still he held fast to his cherished ambitions, and was as eager again for the fray as the morphomaniac for a new dose of his drug, though it was with a gnawing sense of regret that he journeyed back to Laysford.

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On his arrival there, Edgar Winton met him at the station, evidently weighted with news. The contrast between the two young men was more real than apparent. When they first met at Wheelton, Henry had presented the exterior of a raw country lad, with an eye that had only peeped at a tiny corner of life, and a knowledge of journalism that was laughably little. Edgar, on the other hand, had all the pert confidence of the City youth and the quickly-gathered cynicism of the young journalist. But there he had remained, as so many do remain from twenty-one to their last day, while the strain of seriousness in the nature of Henry, and the richness of the virgin soil in him for the City to plough, had produced a growth of character which in the intervening years had shot him far ahead of Edgar in every respect.

Whether Edgar's friendship for Henry sprang from the true root of affection, or was merely the outcome of a desire to stand well in the favour of one whose friendship would be well worth having from a business point of view, cannot be stated with confidence, but there is a fair supposition that it was of the latter quality, since natures like Edgar's are seldom capable of true friendship, though they boil and bubble with good fellowship for all who are brought into relation with them. Perhaps Edgar had learned at an early age the knack of spotting "useful men to know," which accounts for much in the success of those whose endowments are meagre.

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In any case, the broad result was the same. Henry and Edgar were friends, and if Henry had long since concluded that Edgar was of the empty-headed, rattling order of mankind, still he tolerated him, if merely because he had been one of the first designed by Fate to intimate association with him when the life-battle began. He could even have tolerated the suggestion of friendship between Trevor Smith and himself for the same reason, while knowing now in his heart that Trevor was a humbug.

The meeting between the two at the station was very cordial, and Edgar let his imp of news leap free to Henry, to work its wild way in his mind.

"You are just in the nick of time, and no mistake. If I hadn't known you would be back to-day, I should have wired you this morning—that is, of course, if a telegram could get to that benighted village of yours."

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"The nick of time? Wire? What has happened?"

"A very great deal. Oh, we've had a nice old kick-up at the *Leader*!"

"Kick-up! Have Macgregor and Jones been squabbling again?"

"The fact is, Mac has had to resign; it only took place last night, and we all suppose that you will get the crib."

"But surely Macgregor has not let one of these wretched bickerings lead to his resignation?"

"Oh dear, no! He has done a giddier thing than that, and will clear out of Laysford like a dog with its tail down. The fact is, he has been caught cheating at cards at the Liberal Club, and the *Leader* cannot afford to be edited by a cheat, don't y' know."

"What a fool the man has been; and yet something of the kind was bound to happen. Many a time his fondness for the card-playing gang at the Club has meant double work for me."

"That has been the joke since you went away, as old Mac has come rushing into the office about midnight, and vamped up a couple of leaders with the aid of his scissors and the London dailies. We heard Jones and he rowing about the character of his stuff a week ago. It seems that Sir Henry had complained."

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"Well, I am heartily sorry for his wife and family. I hope the affair may be patched up."

"No fear of that. He has got to go with a rush; and why should you be sorry if his shoes are

waiting for you?"

"Still, I am sorry. As for the shoes, I hope they won't lead my feet the same road."

Just a touch of priggishness here; but remember, Henry was young.

Truly, this was startling news. Mr. Duncan Macgregor, the editor of the *Leader*, was a journalist of excellent parts; one who had held important positions in London and the provinces, but whose fondness for the whisky of his native land had made his life a changeful one. For nearly five years he had been jogging along pretty comfortably in Laysford, to the great joy of his much-tried wife; but his position as editor of the *Leader*, which represented the dominant party in local politics, made him much sought after by scheming public men, and in the end brought his old weakness for what is ironically called "social life" to the top.

Duncan Macgregor, indeed, for nearly two years had been scamping his duties, on the pretence that by constant fraternising with the sportive element of the Liberal Club he was representing his paper in the quarter where its influence was of most importance. He had even developed a new enthusiasm for public life, and was scheming to become a Justice of the Peace and to enter Laysford Town Council. He had not been careful to note that Mr. Wilfred Jones, the general manager of the *Leader* Company, and a more important person than the editor in the eyes of the shareholders, considered that he was the natural figurehead of the concern. Mr. Jones had been elected to the magistrates' bench, and was a candidate for the next municipal election, dreaming even of venturing to contest one of the Parliamentary divisions.

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As it was due to the acute management of Mr. Jones that the *Leader* had been lifted from a languishing condition to a state of financial prosperity, and Sir Henry Field, the chairman of directors, and the other shareholders, were now enjoying an annual return for their money, it was only natural that the general manager was a more important person than the editor in their estimation. He was certainly so in his own opinion, and although a man of no intellectual attainments, he did not hesitate on various occasions to dispute with the editor about the quality of his leaders. One of Duncan Macgregor's favourite stories of these disputes related to his humorous use of the phrase, "A nice derangement of epitaphs," which Mr. Jones pointed out was sheer nonsense, as there was not another word about epitaphs in the leader! The manager had a suspicion that the editor had been looking on the whisky when it was golden, else he could not have written such twaddle. But when it happened, as it did during Henry's absence, that the leading articles were largely made up of clippings from London newspapers, linked together by a few words from the editor, Mr. Jones's criticism was based on sounder grounds.

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Edgar accompanied Henry to his rooms, where the news was discussed in all its aspects, and at length Edgar gave him a jerky and stumbling invitation to spend the evening at his home, on the ground that Henry had always been a great favourite of "the mater's," and she would like to see him after his holiday.

Now, the journalist who is engaged on a daily paper has to turn the day upside down. He is generally starting to his work when ordinary folk are enjoying their hours of ease. Like the baker, he sallies forth to his factory when the lamps are glimmering; for the newspaper must accompany the morning roll; but of the two, the printed sheet is the less essential to life, and at a pinch would be the first to go. To that extent the baker's business is the more important. This was often a saddening thought to Henry, when his eye caught the dusty figures at work in an underground bakery which he passed every evening on his way to the office. The result of the daily journalist's topsy-turvy life is practically to cut him off from social intercourse with his fellow-men who are not engaged in the same profession, and consequently he moves in a narrow groove. Even his Sundays are not sacred to him. There was a time when Henry used to hurry from evening service to his desk at the office, and set to work on a leader or some editorial notes for Monday morning's paper. Latterly he was always at his desk, but seldom at the service. Arriving home at two or three in the morning and sleeping until about noon does not put a man into the mood for cultivating friendships between two and eight p.m., supposing there were friendships to be cultivated at such absurd hours of the day.

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Thus Henry's life had been ordered since coming to Laysford; his office and his bed eating up the most of it; his afternoons being devoted to a walk in the park, or research at the public library and reading in his rooms. The only house he had ever visited was that of the Wintons, and there he had been but once on the journalist's Sunday, *i.e.*, Saturday.

It was true, no doubt, that Mrs. Winton thought highly of him, and he respected her as a very amiable landlady of past years. But Edgar could have told him—and perhaps the affected suddenness of the invitation did tell him—that it was not the matronly Mrs. Winton who had suggested his coming. Edgar had indeed been prompted by a very broad hint from his sister, whose interest in Henry had varied greatly from the first, but was now rising with the prospect of his becoming a full-fledged editor. Indeed, although there was more than one young man in Wheelton whom Flo had boasted to her girl friends of being able to turn round her little finger, the prospects of a "good match" in that limited sphere were not quite equal to her desires, and she heartily seconded the proposal to remove to Laysford. Henry had developed in interest, and there were possibilities—who knew?

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There were many reasons why Henry would have preferred to spend the evening in his own rooms. The fragrance of Hampton came back to him the moment that the train shot into Laysford, with its din of busy life. The impression of village dulness receded, and here, with the rattle of

Edgar's irresponsible tongue in his ears, and the squalid story of his editor's downfall to occupy his mind, he was fain to hark back again to the memory of that quiet existence which he felt doomed to renounce for ever. His worldly wisdom told him he need not repine at Macgregor's folly, since it brought Henry Charles his opportunity; but the philosopher in him saw the situation whole, and the squalid side of it could not be ignored. As Edgar seemed bent on carrying him off, and as he was not expected at the office until the following day, he decided to accompany young Winton to his home, hoping, perhaps, that a careless evening would brighten his thoughts.

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The chattering streams of life flowing through the main streets of the thronged city, the clatter of the tramcars, and the thousand noises that smote the ear fresh from the ancient peace of a remote village, all frightened the mind back to Hampton, the faces of his friends; and, oddly as it seemed to Henry, the face that looked oftenest into his was not one of his own home circle. None of his womenkind had violet eyes.

On reaching the house, Edgar had his usual hunt for his latchkey, and whether it was the murmur of his conversation with Henry during the operation of finding the key and applying it, or merely chance that had brought Flo in her daintiest dress and archest smile into the hall as the door was opened, cannot be well determined. Certainly there was a look of delighted surprise on her face when she exclaimed:

"Oh, Mr. Charles, is it really you?" surrendering him her hand, and allowing it to remain in his. "When did you get back?"

"Only this evening," he replied, clearly conscious that this was a most attractive young lady, and not a little flattered at the warmth of her reception. "I arrived at six o'clock."

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"How very good of you to come and see us so soon! We ought to consider ourselves flattered."

"Oh, I had nothing else to do," he murmured ineptly, and was suddenly conscious that he still held her hand. He dropped it awkwardly.

"I am sure you must have many things to do—a busy man like you."

"It is seldom I have a free evening, so I am glad to use this one in seeing my old friends." He had recovered aplomb.

"And your old friends are charmed to see you," she returned, with a look that told she could speak for one of them at least. "You are like one of the wonders we read about but seldom see. Edgar keeps us posted in news of you."

She cast down her eyes coyly, as if a sudden thought whispered that she had said too much, and led the way to the little drawing-room, Henry pleasantly thrilled with the charm of her voice and the freedom of her greeting. But strangely enough, another face which lingered in his memory glowed there again, and the thought that came to him was that its owner had not been half so cordial in her welcome to him.

CHAPTER XII

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"A JOLLY, DASHING SORT OF GIRL"

THE removing of the Wintons to Laysford had been a distinct change for the better in the fortunes of the family. Mr. Winton's situation furnished him with a comfortable income, and Edgar was now contributing appreciably to the domestic funds, while Miss Winton's music-teaching brought an acceptable addition beyond furnishing her with an ample variety of dress, in which she always displayed a bold, though a cultivated taste.

Their house was a great improvement on the little home in which Henry had lodged six years ago, though it was still a poor substitute for the luxurious residence Mr. Winton had maintained before his business failure, when Flo and Edgar were children. The old horse-hair furniture had disappeared from the dining-room, and in its place stood an elegant leather suite. Henry would find the former still doing duty in a room upstairs, which Edgar called his study. The drawing-room was the most notable indication of changed fortunes, and bore many traces of Flo's adorning hand, Edgar proudly drawing Henry's attention to some of her paintings, and thus affording her excellent excuse for becoming blushes.

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"Why, Henry, it is quite like old times to have you among us again," said Mrs. Winton, when he had entered the drawing-room.

She retained the right to his Christian name, although Flo, who had been in the habit of addressing him familiarly at Wheelton, had surrendered that, as Henry noticed, and was annoyed at himself for noticing. Mr. Winton joined in the welcome, and Henry expressed his pleasure to be among them again.

"I need not ask whether you had a good time while you were away," Mr. Winton continued. "You are looking extremely well; brown as a berry."

"Quite like a gipsy," suggested Flo, and she decided at that moment that she had always

entertained a distinct preference for the Romany type of manly beauty.

It was not altogether to her mind that the conversation swiftly drifted into the uninteresting channels of public life in Laysford, touching even the state of the hosiery trade, in which Mr. Winton was engaged. At the tea-table, however, Flo had Henry by her side, and made the talking pace with some spirit and, it must be granted, vivacity.

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It is the most natural thing in the world for a young gentleman visitor at a small family table like the Wintons' to be placed alongside the daughter of the household, but there are young ladies who contrive to make the most natural situation seem exceptional. Perhaps Miss Winton was one of these, as Henry felt when he sat down that the arrangement had more of artifice than nature in it. But while having the sense to suspect this, he was rather flattered than otherwise in his suspicion, and as with most young men of his age, a show of friendliness from a young lady reached home to that piece of vanity which we all have somewhere concealed, and sometimes, maybe, not even hidden.

He noticed in a sidelong glance, and possibly for the first time, that the profile of Miss Winton's face was distinctly good. The nose was almost Jewish, and all the better for that; the mouth perhaps too small, but that was not seen in the side view; the chin neat, and sweeping gracefully into a neck of which the owner was doubtless proud, as she had not been at pains to hide it. Nor could a fault be found with her endowment of fair hair, displayed low-coiled, and decorated with a glittering diamond clasp. The diamonds were paste, of course, but what of that? They sparkled. It must be accepted as proof of Henry's opening eyes that he noticed these things, and found himself wondering if a certain other young lady possessed such good looks. For the life of him he could not say; and he took that, foolishly, as evidence in favour of the girl by his side. His thoughts were immediately turned on himself, when Edgar exclaimed:

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"By the way, dad, I'm the first to tell Henry that he is likely to be my new boss."

"Edgar, you're hopeless," put in Flo.

"If you mean your new editor," said Mr. Winton sententiously, as he finished the carving of the cold roast, "then I'm glad to hear it, and I hope he will boss some of his good sense into you."

"Then it is really true that Mr. Macgregor is leaving?" said Mrs. Winton, with a look towards Henry.

"So Edgar tells me, but I have heard nothing official, and I have purposely kept away from the office to-night."

"You can take it from me that his going is a dead cert," resumed the irrepressible young man; adding with a glance at his father, whose philological strictness was a source of sorrow to the son, "That is, there seems to be very little doubt about the matter. And if old Mac goes, Henry is well in the running for the editorial chair, and a rocky bit of furniture that is."

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"I wonder," said Flo, leaning forward with a quizzing glance to catch Henry's eye, "if you would be a hard taskmaster, Henry?" It was difficult for the girl to go on Misting when the others Henried to their heart's content. "I am sure you could put your foot down firmly if you liked."

Henry laughed, pleased at the interest taken in him, and conscious that he was made much of in this house.

"There may never be any occasion for me to try it," he replied; "even if a vacancy does arise, my age may bar me."

"Not at all; the great Delane was scarcely twenty-four when he got the editorship of the *Times*," Edgar remarked, with the conviction that he had displayed a deep knowledge of journalistic history and settled this point.

"Besides," added Flo, "you are one of those men whose age is not written on their face. I'm sure no one could guess whether you were twenty or thirty. You could pass for any age you like to name."

"There's something in that," said Henry musingly; "but I'm afraid I must confess that I was only twenty-two last birthday."

"Great Scott! and you'll soon be bossing some chaps old enough to be your pater. The snows of four-and-twenty winters have fallen on my own cranium. It makes me sick to think of it."

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From Edgar, obviously.

All this was very sweet to Henry. At twenty-two the average man tingles with pleasure when it is suggested that he would pass for thirty, and at thirty he is secretly purchasing hair-restorers for application to the crown of his head, and plying a razor where he had been wont to cultivate a moustache. He is charmed then beyond measure when his age is guessed at twenty-two.

Mr. Winton settled down in an arm-chair in the dining-room for his after-supper snooze, and while Mrs. Winton had to turn her attention for a little to household affairs, superintending the inefficient maid-of-all-work—whose presence in the house was another mark of prosperity—the others withdrew to the drawing-room. Edgar lounged about aimlessly for a time, and then suddenly pleaded the urgency of a letter he had to write. Henry and Flo were left alone.

This sort of thing occurs often in the lives of young men who are "eligible," but it is not until they have ceased to be in that blissful condition that they suspect a woman's hand had some part in arranging these accidental openings for confidences. Flo looked certainly as innocent as a dove when Edgar withdrew to his study; but if Henry's eyes had been wide open he might have noticed that Edgar's recollection of his urgent letter was preceded by a meaning look and a contraction of the brows from his sister.

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"Now," she said softly, turning to Henry with an air of eager interest, "do tell me all about your visit to Hampton. The name of the place sounds quite romantic to me. Is it on the map?"

"I'm afraid you would search your atlas for it in vain. At best it could only be a pin-point; like that very tiny German duchy which the American traveller said he would drive round rather than pay toll to pass through. It is smaller than the Laysford market-place."

"So small as that! Then it's all the more interesting to me."

"But there's really nothing to tell about it. One day is the same as another there. Nothing ever happens. It is a veritable Sleepy Hollow."

"But there were interesting folk there. You see, I know my Washington Irving."

Flo had the shrewdness to judge this to be an effective touch, and it did not matter that her knowledge of the American author was limited to the bare fact that he had written something about a place of that name.

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"I am glad to find you have read one of my favourites," Henry replied, and the echo of an absurd "What is Meredith?" rang in his ears. It prompted him to ask, without apparent reason:

"By-the-by, have you read Meredith? He is one of the least known and greatest of living writers."

"Oh, yes, isn't he perfectly lovely?" She had a vague recollection of hearing the name somewhere.

"I am just in the middle of his latest novel, 'Beauchamp's Career.' It is positively Titanic."

"I am sure it must be interesting, and I should love to read it. But really you must tell me about this Sleepy Hollow of yours. Who did you see there?"

"My own folk, of course, and a handful of old friends."

"Anybody in par-tic-u-lar?"

Flo smiled roguishly. She had practised the smile before, and could do it to perfection.

"N-o; nobody—worth mentioning."

Henry had a suspicion that he was being teased, and he rather liked the operation.

"Really! I can scarcely believe you. But all the same, I have a fancy to see this birthplace of our budding editor. I imagine it must be a sweet little spot."

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"Perhaps it is best in imagination. You would find the actual thing deadly dull."

He felt himself drifting rudderless before a freshening breeze of talkee-talkee.

"No, no, no; I am sure I wouldn't, though you do not paint it with purple. Do you know," she went on, resting her pretty head upon her hand and glancing up sideways at him, "I'm beginning to think that they don't appreciate you properly in Hampton Bagot. A prophet has no honour in his own country, they say. But we are proud of you here."

"Perhaps that maxim is not always true, although it is biblical. In my own case, I fear there is at least one at Hampton who thinks too much of my ability."

"Ah, now you have said it. And who is that one, pray?"

"My father."

"Oh! No one else?"

"My mother and sisters, perhaps."

"I should so much like to meet your sisters. I almost feel as if I knew them already. Who knows but some day I may have a peep at your Sleepy Hollow, and tell your sisters all about you!"

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The prospect was an alarming one to Henry, and for the first time in his life he felt himself ashamed of that little home behind the Post Office door. But on the whole, the chatter of this young lady was pleasant in his ears. By no means vain of his abilities, he was still hungry for appreciation, and he had not yet learned the most difficult of all lessons: to recognise sincere admiration. It seemed to him that in Flo Winton he had found one who understood him, whose sympathetic interest in his work and ambitions could brace and hearten him in the discharge of the important duties to which there was every likelihood of his being called before he was a day older.

The return of Mrs. Winton to the drawing-room sent the talk off at an obtuse angle, and Edgar,

having finished that important letter, came in to render the remainder of the evening hopeless to Flo; but when Henry parted from her in the hall with another lingering hand-shake, he had the feeling that something like an understanding had been established between them; and it was with a springy stride and a light heart he passed out to the nearest tramway station.

The next afternoon he looked in at the office, and found the manager anxious to speak with him. It was even as Edgar had prophesied. Sir Henry Field was understood to think so highly of Henry's work that he agreed with Mr. Jones in offering him the editorship at a commencing salary of £250 a year. A bright young member of the reporting staff was named as his assistant. "If Sir Henry should ask your age," Mr. Jones advised, "you are getting on for thirty. You would pass for that, and I have confidence in you."

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Henry found himself returning to his rooms as one who walked on eggs, murmuring to himself, with comic iteration: "Two hundred and fifty a year! two hundred and fifty a year!" And he saw arising in Hampton Bagot a fine new villa, the pride of the place, to be inhabited by Edward John Charles and his family circle. Yet he had once been so proud of that quaint old house with the Post Office in front.

CHAPTER XIII

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THE PHILANDERERS

THE news was round the *Leader* office like a flash of summer lightning. The most secret transactions in the managerial room of a newspaper seem to have this strange quality of immediately becoming the common knowledge of the office-boy, without any one person being accusable of blabbing. Not only so; but in a few hours there was no journalist in Laysford, from the unattached penny-a-liner, who wrote paragraphs for London trade papers, to the editors of the rival dailies, that did not know who was the new editor of the *Leader*. Almost as soon as the news had been confirmed, Edgar had penned a flowery eulogium and posted it to that mighty organ of journalism, the *Fourth Estate*, which has whimpered from youth to age that journalists will not buy it, although they have never been averse from reading—or writing—its personal puffs. Edgar showed herein either a better judgment of Henry's character than one would have expected from him, or a little touch of innocence in one so fain to be a man of the world. It is seldom that the subjects of these gushing personal notices in the *Fourth Estate* wait for others to sing their praises; they can and do sound the loud timbrel themselves. Shyness has no part in journalism, and even the bashful young junior, who has been trying quack remedies for blushing, leaves his bashfulness outside the door of the reporters' room after his first week on the press.

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But somehow, a thick streak of rustic simplicity remained in Henry's character despite all the eye-opening and mental widening which had resulted from his City life. If Edgar had not sent that paragraph Henry never would, and if we could but peer into the inmost corner of Edgar's heart we might find that the impulse behind the writing of the absurd little puff about "a rising young journalist" was to stand well with the man who had come to greatness—as greatness was esteemed in the journalistic world of Laysford.

The news was conveyed in characteristic style to a quarter where it was eagerly hoped for.

"It's happened just as I expected," Edgar announced, when he returned home that evening. "Old Mac has got the shoot direct; no humming and hawing, but 'Out you go!'"

"I suppose you mean he has been discharged?" said Mr. Winton quietly.

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"Yes, dad, that's the long and short of it; and Henry is to be our new boss. You remember I told him we all expected it."

"So far as I recollect," his father observed sententiously, "that was how you put it."

"I am so glad to hear it," said Mrs. Winton. "Henry has got on," with an emphasis on "Henry has" and a motherly look towards Edgar, who gave no sign that the implied comparison was present in his mind.

The one whose interest was most personal had given least sign, but Flo's heart was fluttering in a way that was known only to herself. Following on the heels of her first thrill of satisfaction stepped something resembling irritation. She would have preferred that Edgar had been less eager with the news, and had left it for Henry to convey in person. What a splendid opportunity that would have been for unaffected congratulation! Out of her momentary irascible mood she threw a taunt at Edgar.

"And you, I suppose, have been appointed Henry's assistant—that would be the least they could do for such a brilliant young man."

Edgar flushed and winced. This flicked him on the raw; but his well-exercised powers of denunciation were equal to the occasion.

"No such luck for me; that Scotch ass Tait has got Henry's crib. He is one of those sly, slaving plodders, without a touch of ability."

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"I have noticed, Edgar," put in his father, "that it is the plodders who steadily push ahead."

"Oh, that's all right; but I don't like Tait." Perhaps this explained a good deal.

A sudden sense of the value of Edgar's services in her love affair with Henry filled Flo with regret for having been spiteful to her dear brother, and she at once endeavoured to save him from further unfavourable criticism by expressing the belief that Henry would doubtless help to advance him all he could. When the first opportunity offered, Flo drew Edgar again to her favourite topic, and had quite smoothed away any ruffles in her brother's temper before she reached this diplomatic point:

"Now that Henry has so much in his power, you must keep on the best of terms with him. Get him to come and see us as often as you can. Why not ask him to dine with us on Sunday next? He could stay until required at the office."

"Not much use of that, I fancy; Saturday is about the only day he is likely to come."

"Nonsense! Sunday should suit as well," with a touch of impatience.

"But you must remember, Flo, that Henry isn't like us. Unless he has changed more than I know, there is a big chunk of the go-to-meeting young man left in him; you never know when you may bump up against some of his religious principles. You remember that he used to go to church with as much pleasure as an ordinary chap goes to a music-hall. In fact, he did the thing as easily as take his dinner."

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"Yes, yes; but he is getting over those narrow-minded country ways."

"Perhaps you are right. You don't find much of that antiquated religious nonsense among us gentlemen of the Press—hem, hem!—Henry's is the only case of the kind that I have seen. But there is hope for him yet," and Edgar laughed heartily at his own wit, while Flo rewarded him with a smile as she pushed home the one point she wished to make.

"Then you think you may be able to induce him to spend Sunday with us?"

"I'll do my best. Can't say more. Usual dinner hour, I suppose?"

"Two o'clock. That gives him time for forenoon church—if he really must go."

Much to Edgar's surprise, and more to his satisfaction, the editor of the *Leader* consented with unusual readiness to honour the Wintons the following Sunday, and when the day came Henry was not at the forenoon service. He was not even annoyed at himself for having lain abed too long. His mind was filled with thoughts of the importance he had suddenly assumed in the eyes of many who had previously seemed unaware of his existence. Even the church folk, among whom he had moved for years almost unfriended, were now curiously interested in him, and the vicar had done him the remarkable honour of inviting him to dinner to meet several gentlemen prominent in the religious and social life of the city, an invitation which it had given Henry a malicious pleasure to refuse, as the memory of his cold entrances and exits through the door of Holy Trinity contrasted frigidly with this unfamiliar friendliness.

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Yet the vicar was a good man, and the church folk were in the main good people too. Henry's experience was no unusual one, nor unnatural. It was but the outcome of that pride of youth which, while one is hungry for friendship, restrains one from any show of a desire to make friends. He was not the first nor the last young man who coming from a small town or village where the church life has an intimate social side, expects something of the same in the larger communion of the city, and is chilled by what seems frosty indifference. The fault, however—if any fault there be—lies nearly always with the individual, and not with his fellow-Christians. So, or not; religion is no matter of hand-shaking and social smirks. The truth is that Henry had at last been touched by that dread complaint of Self-importance, from which before he had appeared to be immune.

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A swelling head, from the contemplation of one's importance in the great drama of life, and a heart swelling with thoughts of one young woman, are two phenomena which make the bachelor days of all men remarkably alike at one stage or another.

If "the youngest editor of any daily newspaper in England" (*vide* the *Fourth Estate*) let the church slide that Sunday morning, he devoted as much care to his personal appearance as the least devout of ladies to her Easter Sunday toilet. When he arrived at the Wintons, arrayed in a well-fitting frock-coat and glossy silk hat, there was no least lingering trace of the outward Henry we knew of old.

The dinner was very daintily served indeed; there was a touch of pleasant luxury about the meal which contrasted most favourably with the homely cuisine of Hampton Bagot, to say nothing of his lonely bachelor dinners. He knew that the hand which had set this table and superintended that meal was Flo's, and assured himself he was on the right tack. What a charming hostess she would make! How well she would entertain his friends, and do the honours of his house! It was in pure innocence of heart, and merely with a desire to agreeably tease the visitor, that Mr. Winton remarked during the meal:

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"Well, Henry, you are quite an important personage now; the next thing we shall hear is that you have blossomed out with a fine villa in Park Road, and—a wife!"

From the mother—any mother—such an observation would, in all likelihood, have been prompted by thoughts of a daughter; but not from the father—not from any father.

Flo tried not to look conscious; though under cover of her apparent indifference she stole an anxious glance at Henry, who only laughed. The laugh was not convincing of the indifference which his speech suggested:

"Plenty of time for that, Mr. Winton. I have a lot to do before I turn my thoughts to the domestic side of life. Besides, it means a year or two of saving."

Flo imagined that for one brief second the eye of their interesting visitor rested upon her as he delivered himself so to her father.

It was the first occasion since the old days at Wheelton that Henry had engaged to spend more than an hour or two at the Wintons, and the drawing-room conversation seeming to flag a little after dinner, Flo suggested a walk. The weather was alluring, and Laysford on an autumn day is one of the most lovable towns in England. Henry was nothing loth, and for the sake of appearance, Edgar was included; but before they had reached the green banks of the River Lays the obliging fellow had suddenly remembered an appointment with a friend who lived in an opposite direction, and Flo and Henry were bereft of his company for the remainder of the walk, which now lay along the grove of elms by the river-side.

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"It's really too bad of Edgar," said Flo, with a fine show of indignation when he had gone. "One can't depend on him for five minutes at a time; he's always rushing away like that."

"Never mind," replied Mr. Henry Innocent, glancing at his companion in a way that showed the situation was by no means disagreeable to him. "He will very likely be home before we get back."

"But I am afraid you will find me dull company," she said, although shining eyes and an arch smile gave flat contradiction to the words.

"I don't think you need be afraid of that."

"Really! Why?"

"Because you must know it is not the case."

Thus and thus, as in the past, now, and always, your loving couples. The gabble-gabble reads tame in print, and we will listen no further. Let them have their fill of it; their giggles, their tiffs if they may; why should the stuff be written down? But this must be said: Flo had reason to believe that the affair of her heart was making progress. She thought that Henry was coming out of his shell, and the process was of deep interest to her.

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Edgar had not returned when the couple reached home, and he was absent from the tea-table. The day had been rich indeed to Flo, and Henry was almost in as high spirits as his companion. When the evening bells pealed out for church he still dawdled in the undevotional atmosphere of the Wintons' drawing-room. Yet even for him they did not ring in vain. At their sweet sound the shutter of forgetfulness was raised from his mind, and he saw again a tiny country church perched on a green hill; a ragged file of homely folk trailing up the path and through the lych-gate, familiar faces all in the long-ago; and from the vicarage, with failing step, the grey-haired pastor of the flock, and by the old man's side the figure of a sweet woman, on which for a moment his mental vision lingered, to be rudely broken by—"A penny for your thoughts, Mr. Editor," from Flo.

The shutter came down with a rush.

CHAPTER XIV

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FATE AND A FIDDLER

IN the life of journalism—many ways the least conventional of callings, in which there remains even in our prosaic day a savour of Bohemianism—there is still the need to observe the conventions of a commercial age. An editor who familiarises with his reporters imperils his authority, for every man of his staff considers himself to be as good a craftsman as the editor; and does not the humblest junior carry in his wallet the potential quill of an editor-in-chief?

A newspaper, moreover, for all the prating about the profession of journalism, is as much a business establishment as the grocer's round the corner. *Ergo*, if the grocer has his villa, so must the editor. If the editor be a bachelor, then the dignity of his paper demands that he shall take lodging in the most pretentious neighbourhood his means will allow.

Perhaps this had not occurred to Henry until a fairly broad hint from the manager indicated what was expected of him. Perhaps, also, it was the need to move into "swagger diggings" that superinduced the aforesaid attack of "swelled head." Henry justified to himself his removal, and the increased expense entailed thereby, on the ground that his collection of books, mainly review copies, defaced by obnoxious rubber stamps—"With the publisher's compliments"—was rapidly growing beyond the accommodation of his tiny sitting-room. So to the spacious house of a certain

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Mrs. Arkwright, in the aristocratic neighbourhood of Park Road, he moved with his belongings.

His new apartments were luxurious beyond the wildest dreams of his early youth, and for that reason alone he stood in imminent danger of developing expensive tastes. Ah, these furnished apartments of our bachelor days! At an outlay comparatively small contrasted with the immediate end attained, they lift the young man into an easeful atmosphere he would fain continue when he sets up house of his own; only to find that the hire of two well-appointed rooms is child's play to the maintenance of a house on the same scale. With the more cautious the convenience of first-class apartments makes housekeeping appear formidable. And there you have the secret "love story" of many an easy bachelor.

Mrs. Arkwright's house was filled with well-paying lodgers, but as all had their separate rooms, while the landlady's family occupied the basement, there was not much common intercourse between the paying guests—for it should have been noted that Henry had now passed into a locality where the word "lodger" was taboo, and the evasive euphemism "paying guest" took its place.

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At first Henry was too much interested in himself and his regal "we" to concern himself greatly about the other lodgers, and in any case his regular absence at the office every night would almost have served for a "Box and Cox" arrangement. But sometimes, as he had been about to leave in the evening for his editorial duties, he had heard the delicious strains of a 'cello superbly played in the room above him, and although no judge of music, he felt that the unseen player must be a person of some character, for the wailing note of the music bore with it a strong individual touch. It seemed to him that this fingering of the minor chords bespoke a performer whose personality was as distinctly expressed in music as an author's soul is bared in his written words.

The unknown musician piqued his curiosity. Who was the occupant of the room overhead, whose soul gave forth that mournful note? There was something, too, in the music very soothing to him. One night he lingered, listening to the player, following the plaintive cadence of the piece till the music trailed away into silence, when he noticed with a start that it was half an hour behind the time he was usually to be found at his desk. He fancied after this evening that there was something in the room overhead he would have to reckon with.

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The identity of the unknown player could easily have been settled by consulting Mrs. Arkwright, but that lady was almost as mournful as the music, and strangely reserved, so Henry refrained for a time from mentioning the subject to her. Besides, there was a pleasant element of mystery in the thing, which appealed to his imagination. But at last curiosity came uppermost, and while she was laying his supper about eight o'clock one evening—the last meal of the day before setting out for his nightly task—he asked the landlady who occupied the room above.

"Well now, Mr. Charles," she answered, almost brightly, as though struck with some coincidence, "it is strange you should speak of him, for only this very day he was speaking to me of you."

"Indeed! Then it's a him?"

"Yes, sir; a gentleman," with a pursing of the lips.

"Young, I suppose?"

"Not much older than you, sir. But he has seen a lot of the world."

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This was accepted as an unconscious reflection on his own experience.

"Been here long?"

"About two months, sir, this time. I have had him staying with me before. He belongs to Laysford, you see. He comes and goes as the fancy takes him. Most of his time he spends in London."

"In London," said Henry, who still dreamed dreams, although he was an editor so soon. "Do you happen to know his occupation?"

"He writes, sir, I think, like you do. Leastways, he is often at it in his room upstairs, and is very particular about any of his papers being touched."

"And he was speaking to you of me, you say?"

"Yes, sir. He asked me who you were. I told him you were the editor or something of the *Leader*. He seemed quite interested, and said he would like to come down and meet you some evening, if you had no objection."

"None whatever. On the contrary, I should be very pleased to make his acquaintance; and perhaps you would be good enough to tell him so."

"I will give him your message, sir. I am sure you would like him, for he has a way of making himself liked by everybody."

"You make me quite anxious to meet him, Mrs. Arkwright. By the way, I don't think you mentioned his name."

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"It's a strange name for a gentleman, sir," replied Mrs. Arkwright, the pale ghost of a smile chasing across her worn features—"Phineas Puddephatt. We call him Mr. P. for short. His family used to be very well known in Laysford. You see, he is a gentleman of some fortune."

Henry found himself dangerously near to open laughter at mention of the egregious name, but he succeeded in commanding his features, perhaps from fear of shocking the prim Mrs. Arkwright, who had carried on a longer conversation with him than he could have believed possible from so reserved a lady. The most he could venture by way of facetiousness was:

"Then, until we meet I shall call him 'the mysterious Mr. P.'"

With the flicker of another smile the landlady left her paying guest to the enjoyment of his supper and thoughts of the comic muse who could couple the sobbing of a 'cello with Puddephatt.

A week or more went past with those two sleeping under the same roof, but a series of engagements prevented Henry from hitting off just the moment for meeting. One Saturday evening, when both were at home, the opportunity came. Noticing Henry deep in a book after supper, Mrs. Arkwright asked if he intended to remain indoors all the evening, and being answered in the affirmative, suggested that she would mention the fact to Mr. P., who was also disengaged. Henry assenting, continued with the book, a new novel that was provoking a storm of criticism, and which he had determined to review himself.

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Not long after Mrs. Arkwright had left him there came a knock at his door. To the invitation of a cheery "Come in," Mr. Phineas Puddephatt stepped across the threshold, bringing a new and powerful influence into the life of Henry Charles.

CHAPTER XV

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"THE MYSTERIOUS MR. P."

THE mysterious Mr. P. was revealed to the eye of his fellow-lodger as a man of medium height, well built, almost soldierly in the carriage of his body, with a pale, colourless face, clean shaven as an actor's, his hair, though plentiful, fast turning grey. The velvet jacket which he wore, together with the studied negligence of his necktie, were distinctly marks of affectation, if Henry had an eye for such, and it is more than possible he had. Still, the general effect of Mr. P.'s appearance must have been generally favourable to the young man who rose to greet him as he entered the room. It went some way to support the romantic picture of him which Henry had sketched out in his mind, and nothing is more flattering to our self-esteem than thus to find ourselves anticipating Nature. 'Tis easily done, however, given the fact that the unknown scrapes a fiddle. Yet why should musicians proclaim their profession in their person as plainly as any stableboy his? The amateur is even more professional in his appearance than the professional himself.

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As Mr. P. closed the door and advanced some steps to shake hands with the occupant of the room, his pale features were lit up by a smile that put Henry at his ease forthwith, for there had been a momentary revolt of shyness in the young man's mind after expressing his desire to meet the gentleman from upstairs. It was a worn man of the world and a very provincial young man who shook hands.

"You will pardon this late and informal visit, Mr. Charles," said Mr. Puddephatt, "but it has seemed so unneighbourly never to have met you before, and you are so much engaged, that I determined to take the first opportunity of passing an hour with you."

"I am indeed happy to meet you."

"The fact that you are a man of letters interests me greatly, for I too have dabbled a little with the pen, and Laysford is a dull place for the literary man, as everybody seems bent on money-grubbing."

"My own occupation is, I fear, not unsuited to an industrial town. Pray sit down and make yourself comfortable."

"Still, journalism is at least a province of literature," said the visitor, smiling.

He helped himself to a cigarette, and took the easy-chair Henry had moved forward to the fire.

"A sphere of influence, perhaps, if not quite a province," Henry replied, catching something of Mr. P.'s rather studied conversational manner, as he seated himself and toyed with his cigarette. "I am beginning to think that literature and journalism have less in common than I once supposed. Have you ever engaged in journalism?"

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"Only slightly. I have done a little in the reviews, chiefly on musical subjects. My efforts have been in the direction of fiction."

Henry had almost remarked that the name of his fellow-lodger was not familiar to him as a writer of fiction, but congratulated himself on leaving the thought unexpressed; and since the other made no further reference to his own work, Henry fancied he might be one of the rare

authors who did not care to discuss their books, and wisely refrained from inquiring too closely as to the nature of these literary efforts at which the still mysterious Mr. P. had so vaguely hinted. The latter also tacked away from the subject, and continued after a pause:

"I see you are well up-to-date, Mr. Charles, in the matter of books," his sleepy eyes brightening almost into eagerness while they scanned the heap of new novels for review lying on Henry's desk.

"That in a sense is forced on me," replied the young editor, "although my own personal taste is to blame for the extra work involved. Until I suggested it the *Leader* had paid practically no attention to books. You see, it sells for its market reports and local news—far more important things than literature." [Pg 167]

"It was always the way; the arts have hung for ages on the skirts of trade."

"The result is that I have to do all our reviews myself."

"I can assure you of at least one appreciative reader who rejoiced when the *Leader* took on the literary touch you have given it. It is said that people get the kind of journalism they are fitted for; but for my part, I believe that the colourless writing of most provincial papers is the result of lack of taste in the journalists themselves. You don't find, for instance, that the more literary *Leader* is less popular than the bald and tasteless production it used to be?"

"On the contrary, I am told it is doing better," Henry replied, with a touch of self-satisfaction which might have been modified if he had inquired more closely into the cause of the increased circulation.

A series of local tragedies, and a heated controversy on the licensing question, had probably more to do with the result than all the editor's literary taste.

"You have a book here, I notice," continued Mr. Puddephatt, singling out the novel Henry had been reading, and had laid down, with the paper-knife between its pages near to the end, "in which I am not a little interested. The critics have been denouncing it so heartily that the publisher has difficulty in keeping pace with the demand." [Pg 168]

"I'm sorry to hear it, for I mean to slate it too, and it is small consolation if that only helps to sell the thing."

Henry turned to the table and picked up the red cloth volume. It was entitled "Ashes," the name of the writer being Adrian Grant. The eyes of his guest followed his movements, and studied his face with unusual sharpness. He made a barely concealed effort to appear only languidly interested when the editor proceeded to denounce the work in good set terms.

"I certainly shall do myself the pleasure of 'letting myself go' when I sit down to give Adrian Grant my opinion of his book."

Henry had entered fully into that most delusive joy of journalism which spurs the young, raw writer on when he imagines he has some unpalatable truths to deliver. But in this case there was a worthier impulse than the common delight of attacking an author in print. Despite the influences that seemed to have been undermining the simple religious faith Henry had brought away from his native village, there still remained in him a strong abhorrence of that paganish cynicism which, expressed in fiction, tends to drag the mind into the sunless dungeons of thought and away from the glorious light of Christian truth. This book, "Ashes," was precisely of that type. Under the guise of a story pretending to reflect the manners of the time, it discussed problems which were in no sense representative of the varied whole of life, and the discussion of which appealed mainly to the morbid taste of readers who cared not a jot for art. [Pg 169]

"I shall be most interested to read your review," said Mr. P.; "and might I steal a march on your other readers by asking what impression 'Ashes' has made on you?"

"I can best describe it by saying it leaves a nasty taste in the mouth—clever, but not nice."

"Which might suggest that the author has succeeded in his task," rejoined the other, laughing and lighting a fresh cigarette, "since ashes have usually that effect. You know Moore's famous lines:

"'Dead Sea fruits that tempt the eye,
But turn to ashes on the lips?'"

"Yes, and I think that 'Dead Sea Fruits' would have been as good a title for the book. But happily for mankind, we are not in the habit of making excursions to the Dead Sea to taste its apples."

"There speaks hopeful youth. That is precisely what mankind is ever doing; that is the tragedy of life." [Pg 170]

"Surely there is more beauty than ugliness in the world, and even if there were less would it not be nobler to draw man's thoughts to the beauty rather than to the ugliness?"

"Your view of art is somewhat Philistine, don't you think? The artist's business is not with morals but with truth, and truth is not always beautiful."

"But there must be a purpose behind every work of art—a moral purpose, I mean," the younger man persisted, although he was conscious he was no match in argument against the defender of "Ashes."

Henry's opinions were still in that state of flux when a young man's thoughts take on some colouring from every influence that touches them, and are only in a very minor degree the expression of his own mind.

"The only purpose the artist need avow is to express the truth as he sees it," continued Mr. Puddephatt confidently. "I shall admit that the picture set forth in this novel is ugly, but I believe it to be true. Remember, we have the butcher's shop as well as the pastrycook's in Nature, and I fancy the former is the larger establishment."

"Admitted," Henry retorted, with lessening fervour, "but are we not told that the end of art is to please?"

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"Assuredly; to please what?—Our sense of the artistic. The Italians have a fine way of talking about 'beautiful ugliness,' and if the artist, working within the limits of his medium, proves to others that the thing he has produced—picture, statue, book—is in tune with Nature, let it be never so ugly, it must still please our artistic sense."

Henry found himself wandering in a *cul de sac* of thought. This man who opposed his mind to his could out-manceuvre him at every move. He was painfully conscious now that opinions he had thought to be his own were only unwinnowed sheaves of thought gleaned in the field of his reading. Still, he felt that with pen in hand, and no quick answer to each phrase, he could prove his case. How often does the writing man feel thus.

"But there is nothing in this book, so far as I can see," urged Henry warmly, "that tends to elevate the mind to better things. It may be true what you say of the butcher's shop, but the pastrycook's is a pleasanter place any day."

"Ah, my young friend, that way lies indigestion," the other retorted, smiling. "It is none of the artist's business to elevate; it is his function to interpret life, and you will tramp far along the dusty road of life to find anything that elevates. The fact is, when I—I mean, when Adrian Grant set himself to write that book, I believe his purpose was to attack the mawkish sentimentality of our contemporary fiction, to strike a blow at the shoddy romance which is the worst form of art. For my part, deliver me, I pray, from all writers who seek to elevate. The true watchword is 'Art for art's sake.'"

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"To me it seems rather 'Art for dirt's sake,'" Henry rejoined a little savagely, and a shadow of displeasure clouded the features of his visitor at the words. "But admitting all you say, is there no Power apart from ourselves that tends to draw our thoughts, our very souls, upward?"

"I have looked for it in vain," the other speaker replied, with a languid wave of the hand. "What about the life of our slums, for instance? Is every man and woman there a villain, a lost soul? Surely not. Yet we see every evil rampant, we see every virtue dead; vice triumphant. Who is to blame? The people: the victims? Surely not. Reason says no, a thousand times. Where is this Power you speak of when slumland exists, a horror? But in Kensington there is as little that elevates as there is in Whitechapel. The honest man loses generally in the struggle; the scoundrel flaunts himself before high heaven; he rides in mayoral furs, he swarms into Parliament, he mounts the very pulpit itself."

Henry was abashed and silent before the impassioned language of the speaker, who had suddenly flamed up and risen from his seat, pacing the room with restless strides while he declaimed and gesticulated surprisingly for one who had seemed so self-possessed, so *blasé*. Henry was silent because of his inability to understand the mystery of pain—a mystery to older heads than his.

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"I have searched the world for a principle, for a law of life," exclaimed Mr. P., stopping suddenly and looking the journalist straight in the face, "and I have never scented one."

"We are told to love one another," said Henry, almost timidly.

"Well, do you find that principle at work? I find hate, malice, inhumanity, wherever I turn my eyes. That is what I meant by the butcher's shop. I find ministers preaching the gospel of peace and buttressing the policy of war and plunder. I find hypocrisy enthroned, honesty contemned."

"But if one believes in the Word of God, is it not better to be the honest man contemned than the throned hypocrite?"

"If we find every fact of life at cross-purpose with Scripture, what then?"

"Perhaps you don't believe in the Bible?" Henry put it thus bluntly to him.

"I prefer to say that it does not convince me. It tells, for example, of a man who was guilty of a paltry fraud in attempting to cheat a small number of his fellows; and upon whom, in the very act, sudden destruction fell. He was struck down dead, we are told. Where to-day is that Power which meted out such swift and deadly punishment? Here, in this town, men lie and cheat with impunity, and on a scale which involves hundreds of innocent victims. The Divine vengeance slumbers. God—if there is a God—sleeps; or else looks on with supreme indifference to the sufferings of His creatures."

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"It is all a great mystery, I confess," returned Henry, with something very like a sigh.

The anchor of faith, which had of late been dragging, seemed almost to have slipped, and he felt himself drifting out into dark and troubled waters. This was the young man who, less than an hour ago, was vowing to trounce the author of "Ashes" for his gloomy view of life. The thought had come to him that perhaps his very faith was a mere convention of early teaching. He sat ill at ease before his visitor, whose passionate outburst had left both without further speech. It was a strange conclusion of an irresponsible gossip on the art of literature. After looking for a minute or two at Henry's book-shelves, Mr. Puddephatt said abruptly:

"I am indebted to you for a most enjoyable hour, Mr. Charles, and hope we shall see more of each other in the future."

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"I hope so too," answered Henry, at a loss for words, his brain in a whirl of distracting thought.

When the mysterious Mr. P. quitted the room, Henry felt that his lightly-chosen epithet was more suitable than ever. But it was less of the man he thought, as he now unconsciously imitated him in pacing his room, than of the ideas he had enunciated; these had instantly become detached from their originator and boiled up in Henry's mind with all the lees of youthful doubts and questionings that had been lying there. The mental ferment had a harassing effect on him. Almost for the first time in his life he felt a strange desire to turn inside out his spiritual nature and find what it consisted of. And the next instant the thought was madness to him.

"I said to him that we are told to love one another," he reflected, setting his teeth defiantly. "If we did, then evil would cease out of the world. So the religion which teaches this must be right. But we don't do so—he was right there—and if our natures are not capable of this love, what profits the advice? He's no fool; but the way seems very dark. I half wish he hadn't touched the subject."

As these thoughts were coursing through Henry's mind, the strains of a 'cello, soothing and sensuous, came from the room above, adding a dramatic touch to a memorable experience, and reminding him startlingly that he had never spoken a word to Mr. P. about his music.

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The lateness of the hour surprised Henry, who threw himself down in a chair and stared blankly at the dying embers in the grate, while the musician sounded with exquisite touch the closing bars of a nocturne.

CHAPTER XVI

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DRIFTING

WHEN Henry's review of "Ashes" appeared, it was not so violent an attack on the author as he had meant it to be. Indeed, he was half-ashamed when he read in print what he had written about that much-discussed book; in certain passages it sounded suspiciously like Mr. P.'s own phrases.

"We shall admit that it is no business of art to concern itself with morals." Where did we hear the words before? "It is, alas, only too true that life is not all sweetness: it has more than a dash of bitter." A platitude; and borrowed at that. "But we must not suppose that only beauty is true and artistic: ugliness may still be of the very essence of art." Really, the fiddler fellow might have done the review himself. No doubt, when he read it, he felt that it was mainly his.

Henry had yet to discover that the opinions he gave forth with so much pomp and circumstance had been unconsciously pilfered. The mind of every young man is an unblushing thief. It drifts into honest ways in due time, however, and when it does not, the aged plagiarist may argue that he still remains young.

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In a word, the influence of Mr. Puddephatt fell upon Henry at a most critical moment in his zigzag journey towards sober common-sense, and the modified tone of the review indicated a similar change in the inner thoughts of the young journalist—too sudden, perhaps, to be alarming.

But it was apparent that he had become unsettled in his religious convictions as the result of frequent subsequent meetings with his fellow-lodger, who exercised a conscious fascination over the younger man, and could induce Henry to reveal his inmost thoughts without himself volunteering much about his own personal history. Mr. P. was actuated, no doubt, mainly by sheer interest in his friend, and had no sinister end—as he conceived it—in view. So the friendship grew, to the no small annoyance of Flo Winton, who had frequent cause to chide her lover for giving more of his scanty leisure to Mr. P. than to one—mentioning no names—who had perhaps more claim upon it.

At the *Leader* office he was finding things less to his mind than he had hoped. Five years ago the editorship of a daily paper was a golden dream to him; a year ago, his brightest hope; to-day, a post involving much drudgery, more diplomacy and temporising; small satisfaction.

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He imagined that his case was exceptional. "If this," and "granted that," the editorship of the *Leader* was an ideal post. Minus the ifs, it was not a bed of roses. The cyclist who is bumping

along a rough road notices that his friend is wheeling smoothly on the other side, and steers across to get on the smooth track, just as his friend leaves it for the same reason reversed.

We all suppose our trials to be exceptional, and the chances are that the people we are envying are envying us. Conceivably, the editorship of the *Times* is not heavenly. There were some hundreds of ambitious journalists ready to rush for Henry's post the moment he showed signs of quitting. A newspaper that has had fifteen editors in five years will have five hundred candidates for the job when the fifteenth gives up the struggle. Henry had learned at the rate of a year a week since he became editor.

That leader yesterday had displeased the chairman of directors, as it was somewhat outspoken in favour of municipal trams, and the chairman was a shareholder in the existing company. Another director wanted to see more news from the colliery districts than the paper usually contained, and a third fancied that the City news was not full enough. Yet another, a wealthy hosiery manufacturer, who was wont to boast himself a "self-made man," pointed out that they didn't like leaders to be humorous, and he was open to bet as the heditor was wrong in saying "politics was tabu," when everybody knoo as 'ow the word was "tabooed." He'd looked it hup in the dictionary 'imself. Politics and newspaper-editorship bring us strange bedfellows.

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The simple truth was that Henry, all too soon, had learned what an editor's responsibility meant. It meant supporting the political programme of the party which the paper represented, temporising with selfish interests, humouring ignorance when it wore diamond rings, toiling for others to take the credit, and blundering for oneself to bear the blame.

Many of these worries would have been absent from the editorship of a really first-class newspaper; but first-class journals are seldom edited by young men of twenty-two or thereby. Henry had no financial control—a good thing for him, perhaps—and the manager had won the confidence of the directors through procuring dividends by cutting down expenses. He saved sixpence a week by insisting on the caretaker, who made tea for the staff every evening, buying in a less quantity of milk. He pointed out to the poor woman that she was unduly severe on scrubbing-brushes, and after refusing to sign a bill for a sixpenny ball of string required in the packing department, on the plea that "there was a deal of waste going on," he went out to dine with Sir Henry Field, the chairman of directors, to the tune of a guinea a head "for the prestige of the paper." He had even stopped the *Spectator* and the *Saturday Review*, which had been bought for the editor in the past, urging that it was dangerous to read them, as that might interfere with the editor's originality in his leaders. Besides, it saved a shilling a week, and really one didn't know what journalistic competition was coming to.

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Yet Henry had "succeeded," though he had not "arrived." Best evidence of his success was the jealousy which he created among the older members of the staff, and the contempt in which his name was held in the rival newspaper offices. But he was not satisfied. In less than a year he had ceased to thrill with pride when he was spoken of as editor of the *Leader*. The political party of which his paper was the avowed local mouthpiece had won a splendid victory at the School Board election, "thanks in no small degree to the able support of the *Leader*," the orators averred when they performed the mutual back-patting at the Liberal Club meeting. Sir Henry Field bowed his acknowledgments of the praise when he rose; and the manager of the *Leader* was much in evidence. Henry was at that moment writing away at his desk with his coat off. This is the pathetic side of journalism and of life—one man sows, another reaps.

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Nor was Henry's love affair progressing more happily than his experience of editing. The swelled head was subsiding; perhaps the swelled heart also. He heard frequently from home, and there was occasional mention of Eunice; and when his eye caught the name in his sister's letters he had a momentary twinge of a regret which he could not express, and did not quite understand.

Flo Winton had in no wise altered so far as he was capable of judging. She was still the bright, attractive young woman he had grown suddenly conscious of a few years ago. Nothing had been whispered of "engagement," but she had indicated in many unmistakable little ways that she regarded Henry's future as bound up with her own. Yet he now began to wonder if he were wise to let things drift on as they were shaping. He wondered, and let things drift. Flo was quite clear in her mind that they were "as good as engaged." She understood that the woman who hesitates is lost.

Mr. P. was away from Laysford for the winter, the second he had spent in London and on the Continent since Henry and he became acquainted, when the journalist had the first real glimpse into the mysteriousness of his friend.

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While compiling his weekly column of literary gossip for the *Leader*—a feature which more than one director had stigmatised as shameful waste of good space that might have been filled with real news or market reports—Henry found a short paragraph in the personal column of a London weekly which made him stare at the print:

"I understand that Adrian Grant, whose book 'Ashes' was so widely discussed last autumn, is the pen-name of a Mr. Phineas Pudifant, a country gentleman who is well known in certain select circles of London's literary and musical world. His previous novel, 'The Corrupter,' published two years before 'Ashes,' had a distinct artistic success; but the great popularity of his later book was as remarkable as it was unexpected and unsought. Adrian Grant is essentially a writer for art's sake, and not for so much per thousand words."

Henry doubted the evidence of his eyes as he read the startling news. The journal in which the paragraph appeared, and the *chroniqueur* responsible for it, were noted for the authoritative character of their information, and he knew that such a statement could not have been made so deliberately unless it were true to the facts. The very misspelling of the name was in its favour. There were queer names in England, but Mr. P.'s was especially odd, and even wrongly spelt it retained its peculiarity. Still, it was a tremendous strain on his mind to accept the statement as accurate. Never, so far as he could remember, had Mr. P. given him cause to couple his name with that of the author of "Ashes," but after the first shock of surprise, he began to recall how warmly his reticent friend had defended the book on the evening when they first met. It must be true, and now his wonder was that "Adrian Grant"—he began to think of him under the more euphonious name—could have suppressed "the natural man," which is in every author and prides him on the work of his pen. The mysterious Mr. P. had deepened in mystery; the more Henry's acquaintance with him progressed, the less he knew him.

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Henry was tempted to make a paragraph out of this newly acquired information, and to add thereto some references of a local nature which would have been widely quoted from the *Leader*. But he had second thoughts that the subject of the paragraph would not be pleased, and heroically he restrained himself, avoiding all mention of the matter. The ordinary person who has no means other than word of mouth for advertising abroad some choice bit of gossip that has come his way, can but vaguely estimate the personal restraint which the journalist possessed of a tit-bit of news must exercise in keeping the information to himself. It is the journalist's business to blab, and he is as fidgety as a woman with a secret. Henry, however, had the consolation that perhaps after all the statement might not be correct. There were frequent cases of coincidence in the most absurd cognomens.

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He had to nurse his mystery for the remainder of that winter and into the early summer, as Mr. P. remained away from Laysford, and his movements for a time were quite unknown even to Mrs. Arkwright, who usually received periodical cheques for reserving his rooms while he was absent. A brief note to that lady early in the year had explained that her well-paying guest would be longer in returning than he had intended, as he was making a stay of some months in Sardinia. Another paragraph with the name properly spelt had found its way into the newspaper where Henry saw the first. The second was even briefer, and merely mentioned that Mr. P. was at present staying in the Mediterranean island, "where probably some scenes in his next novel would be laid."

Doubt as to the identity of Adrian Grant had finally left Henry's mind, and he had even persuaded himself that there were many passages both in "The Corrupter" and "Ashes" which revealed the man behind the book. It is surprisingly easy to find the man in his style when you start by knowing him.

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And now the man himself was back in Laysford once more. Henry heard the strains of his 'cello before he met the player again. It was a Saturday night, and Mr. P. had come downstairs for a chat with him.

"You must have thought that I had gone away for good," he said, after warmly greeting his young friend. "I had it often on my mind to write, but I am a bad correspondent. The most of my time away I spent in Sardinia. My mother was a native of that country, and I find it most interesting."

"I had heard you were making a prolonged stay there. Indeed, I saw some mention of your movements in the *Weekly Review*."

Henry thought this an adroit remark, and fancied it must lead to a confession, but his companion merely inclined his head as if he had not quite caught the words, and went on:

"Ah, but Browning has expressed with grand simplicity the impulse that sends the wanderer back—'Oh, to be in England now that April's there!'"

The chance had gone, "conversational openings" were valueless to one pitted against Adrian Grant. Henry fumbled nervously among the commonplaces of speech, and his friend, with scarcely another reference to himself, was presently making the young journalist talk of—Henry Charles.

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"You seem to have been burning the midnight oil too assiduously, I think. A trifle paler than when I saw you last. Still grinding away, I suppose."

"Yes; it is grinding. I have moments when I think journalism sheer hack-work. The glamour of the thing is as delusive as the *ignis fatuus*."

"And there you have life itself. *Ergo*, to journalise is to live."

"I begin to believe you are right, but I could have wished to make the discovery later."

"It's never too early to know the truth. But come, you are surely thriving professionally, for I heard your study of the Brontës which you wrote for the *Lyceum* highly praised by the editor when I was in London last week."

"That is indeed welcome news. You know Swainton, then?"

"A little. You see, I have done some work for him myself. The fact is—"

"Are you Adrian Grant?"

Henry blurted out the question and eyed his friend eagerly, nervously, ashamed of his clumsiness and desperate to have done with it. Without a tremor of his eyelids the other replied:

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"Since you put it so bluntly—I am. But I have peculiar ideas of authorship, and you will search my rooms in vain for any book or article I have written. My conception of literature is an artistic expression of what life has told me. I say my say and have done with that work. I say it as it pleases my artistic sense, and I pass to some other phase of life that attracts me and asks me to express it. To the profession of letters I have no strong attachment. To live is better than to write. I know some Sardinian peasants who are kings compared with Tennyson—yes, I will say Tennyson."

Henry was dumb at the vagaries of the man.

"The craft of letters," he went on, "I know only as a branch of life, and far from the noblest."

Adrian Grant could make a thousand pounds, perhaps two, out of any novel he now cared to write. The thought flashed through Henry's mind and left confusion in its tract. What were fame, success, fortune, if one who had won them set such small store thereby?

"I have no wish to be associated with my books," he continued. "The reverse. All great art should be anonymous. Think of the precious sculptures of Greece, the work of unknown men who knew that the joy of expressing truth was immortal fame. It is a stupid convention of a stupid age that a book should bear an author's name. My own name is scarcely pleasant to eye or ear; but I do not quarrel with a scurvy trick of Fate. It tickets the man, and that is enough. My pen-name has served its purpose in securing a sort of impersonal appeal for my books, which cease to be mine once the printer has done his work. You will never, I hope, identify me with my works in anything you may write. I am taking steps to prevent such senseless twaddle about Adrian Grant as appeared in the *Weekly Review* from becoming general. Who betrayed my secret I know not."

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"You will find it difficult to contradict."

"No doubt, but once contradicted by my solicitors, who shall be able to swear to its truth?"

"But why suppress truth, since your aim is to express it?" asked Henry laughingly.

"Ah, there we have to use the word in its common commercial sense. The truth that my name is what it is, and the truth that life is an Armageddon, a phantasmagoria, have no relationship."

Mr. P. had risen to the passionate height of his unforgotten first meeting with Henry, whose mind was now swaying in a chaos of wild and whirling thought at the touch of this strange creature.

"But there," exclaimed the novelist savagely, "let us talk of simpler things," and he threw himself into the chair he had vacated to pace the room. "You say you are less enamoured of your work than you used to be. I can understand it, and I should like to help you. From what I have seen of you, the more literary work of a high-class journal would suit you better; give you the chance to express yourself—if you have anything to express—and I think you have some sense of style, though your ideas are deplorably British—that is to say, Philistine."

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"Do you really think I might succeed in London?" Henry asked, ignoring the sneer at his ideas.

"Succeed as the world accounts success, most probably. You have the dogged British quality of sticking to a thing, or you'd never have been where you are so soon. But it's soulless work churning out this political twaddle."

"I realise that, and I'm no politician; only one by force, so to speak. You see, I write for a living."

"A terrible condition, but there is worse. Well, there is some zest, at least, in getting into handgrips with London. If you've a stomach for the fray, I could help. The whole scheme of life there is different. The provinces have nothing to compare with it, as you would soon discover."

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"But I believe it would be best to try my fortune as soon as I could."

"Yes, it's well to know the worst early," and Mr. P. gave a melancholy smile. "If you care, I shall mention you to Swainton of the *Lyceum*. I have some influence with him, I fancy; and he knows you already as a promising contributor."

"I should be most grateful," said Henry, not without misgivings.

But his mind was now trained direct on London, his earliest ambition. He had made his way with surprising quickness in the provinces, and still he was not happy.

"Who is happy?" asked his friend. "Call no man happy until he is dead!—Solon was at his wisest there."

"Happiness is worth pursuing, all the same," Henry returned, lamely enough, since he allowed the pagan fallacy to pass unquestioned. "I shan't be happy till I try my luck in London; and if not then—well, we'll see."

Truly, his mind was seriously unsettled by the spell of this man's strange personality.

Henry's eyes were turned to London, but he was soon to find that there was one person who did not relish the prospect, for reasons of her own.

CHAPTER XVII

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THE WAY OF A WOMAN

"WHAT makes you think of London, when you're doing so well in Laysford?" Flo Winton asked her sweetheart, strolling one Sunday by the banks of the Lays.

"But well in Laysford may be ill in London," he replied.

"That's just it. Why not be content, and don't play the dog with the bone?"

A woman seldom sees beyond the end of her nose. Flo Winton was no doubt perfectly honest in her counsel to Henry, and entirely selfish. Let his professional chances go hang; he was doing pretty well in Laysford, and she rather fancied the town as a place to live in. Besides, "out of sight, out of mind."

"It is the reverse from the dog and the bone," returned Henry. "What I now hold is little better than the mere shadow of success, the real thing is only to be found in Fleet Street. Comfort, food, raiment, furniture, money to spend—these can be earned in the provinces, but the success I aim at must be sought in London."

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"Dear me! And what will you do with it when you've found it—if you ever do so?"

This was scarcely lover-like, and Henry felt the implied sneer; but he was determined not to be shaken from his plan. He did not answer Flo.

"Money to keep a nice home and go about a bit among the smart set of the town—isn't that success?" she continued. "You are working that way here. You're a somebody here; in London you'd be one of the crowd. At least, that's what I believe."

"And I too, Flo. Fancy being a somebody in a town whose Lord Mayor can barely sign his name, whose chief constable is a habitual drunkard, whose town clerk wouldn't be fit for devilling to a London barrister, whose whole corporation is a gang of plunderers scheming for their own ends. Fancy having to whitewash these ruffians in my leading articles. A somebody! Rather the millioneth man in London than the first in Laysford."

This looked bad for Flo; her reason for his staying was his own reason for wishing himself away. Henry was horridly honest and absurdly upright to be a newspaper editor in a thriving provincial town.

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"I tell you frankly," he went on, while Flo walked now in moody silence by his side, "I could never settle down in Laysford. Any ass with money is courted here."

"And it's the same everywhere; the same in London," she snapped.

"Perhaps; only in London you can avoid the society of the money-grubbers, and find a congenial clime where the foul element does not enter. You see, London isn't a town; it's a country, and there are communities of kindred interests within its borders."

"How do you know?"

"Well, I can gather as much from my inquiries, and from what I read."

"A lot of use that is. I know it's fearfully expensive to live in London."

"But one can make more money."

"I thought you despised money-grubbing."

"For the mere sake of the grubbing, yes. But where it costs more to live there is usually more to live for, and more means of earning the necessary cash."

"Money; you simply can't get away from it, yet you sneer at the wealthy folk here. You only wish you had half of their complaint, as the thirsty cabby said of the drunk who was supposed to be ill."

Flo laughed aridly at her simile, without looking her companion in the face. Henry felt irritated by her as never before. But his teeth were set. Both kept silence for a time.

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"Of course you never think of me," said Flo at length, trailing her sunshade among the pebbles.

"That's just what I do, though."

"How kind of you!"

The sneer froze Henry like a sudden frost.

"Men are such unselfish things, to be sure," she went on; the ice thickening rapidly.

Henry had really thought a great deal about her, and not without some misgivings. He had seen himself a successful worker in Fleet Street, with a dainty house out Hampstead way—he did not know where that might be, but he thought it was the literary quarter—and Flo looking her best as mistress of that home, with many a notable personage for guest. But he had also moments when he wondered if he were not a fool to bother his head about her, and when she said, "How kind of you!" he was glad they were not married yet. For all that, if Flo insisted, he supposed it would have to be, though there had been no arrangement in so many binding words. He was inclined to let her have to insist, however; and if she did—why, life would be ever after the making the best of a bad job. Not a healthy condition of love, it will be perceived.

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As they were nearing the Wintons' again, Henry thawed a little.

"Wouldn't you really like to live in London, Flo?" he said.

"Perhaps, and perhaps not. No doubt I would. But what I don't like—and I may as well be frank about it—is living here and you in London."

"Ah, but that need not be for long," Henry returned kindly.

"So you say. But one never knows."

She was honestly unhappy at the idea of his leaving her, and Henry, when he understood this, felt his heart rise a little in sympathy—the swelling had gone down since we last saw them together. But he did not guess that he was pleased rather by the flattering thought that she would miss him, than softened by the sentiment of leaving her behind him.

"After all," he said, "I'm not away yet."

"It's that horrid Puddy—what-you-call-him—that's to blame for stuffing your head with ideas of throwing up such a good post as you have. Take my advice, Henry, stay where you are, for a while at any rate. There's a dear, good fellow!"

But the dear, good fellow kissed Flo somewhat frigidly when he parted from her that night, and decided that Adrian Grant was right in his estimate of women as creatures who, in the mass, had no ideas beyond social comfort, no ambition higher than "society," and who were only interested in the projects of men to the extent these might advance their own selfish desires.

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"She said I never considered her. By Jove, I could wish I did not," Henry reflected, biting his moustache savagely in his mood of discontent. "I wonder what P. would think of her?"

When a man wonders what another would think of his sweetheart it is a cloudy day for the latter. When the man hesitates, the woman is lost.

Mr. P. had never encountered Miss Winton; but a few days after the frosty episode in her love-story, Henry and his friend met Flo in the market-place, and stopping, she was introduced. This not without qualms to Henry, who could scarce avoid the meeting, and was yet loth to present his friend to Flo, in view of her expressed dislike for him. But the ready courtesy and charming manner of the author-musician seemed to please her, and to Henry's surprise, her eyes, her smiles, were more for Mr. P. than for himself. She could be most attractive when she liked, this young lady who had called his friend "horrid," and was absurdly opposed to his dream of London. Henry did not know whether to be pleased or disappointed at the bearing of Miss Winton. He was glad she had not been cold to Mr. P., hurt that she was pleasant—so superfluously pleasant. On the whole, he was irritated, uneasy.

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Something in the manner of his friend contributed to this result. Not a word had been spoken in the short conversation on the pavement of the old market-place to awaken or enliven doubt or jealousy, but there was an indefinable something in Mr. P.'s manner to Flo, and his remarks when they parted from her, to indicate that he had not been favourably impressed.

A year or two ago happiness seemed such an easy thing—so simple, so difficult to escape—that by contrast, Henry's present state of querulous unrest put it as far away as a fog removes the wonted position of a prominent landmark. He had an inclination to kick somebody—himself, deservedly. Could Flo be right about settling down in Laysford, where he was a potential "somebody"? Suppose he had an opportunity to go to London now, should he take it? If the man who wrote as Adrian Grant had unsettled his mind so far as his old simple faith in God's goodness and mercy was concerned, and Stratford and Wheelton and Laysford together had muddied his pictures of journalism, and even Flo had clouded his thoughts of happiness, what was worth while? Might London be all he had painted it? Was it to be "never glad, confident morning again"?

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Such was the muddle of Henry's mind when the two returned to Mrs. Arkwright's from their afternoon stroll, and each went to his own rooms. Henry threw himself into an arm-chair and gave himself up to brooding thoughts—dark, distracting. He was not long alone, for his fellow-lodger came to his door in the space of five minutes, with a letter open in his hand and a smiling face, which betokened good news.

"How's this for a piece of fortune?" he exclaimed, stepping briskly towards Henry, and handing him the letter. "Read. It has just come with the afternoon post."

What Henry read was a brief note from Mr. Swainton of the *Lyceum*, saying, that, curiously enough, the very week he had received Mr. P.'s letter asking him if he knew of any suitable post for his friend, Mr. Charles, the editor of the *Watchman* had mentioned that he was on the lookout for a smart young journalist as assistant editor of that weekly review. He had spoken to him of Mr. Charles, and he now wrote to say that if the latter would run up to town and see Mr. Godfrey Pilkington, the gentleman in question, he might "pull off" the job. It would be worth £350 a year, he fancied.

Good news, indeed. At the magic touch of "London" Henry's doubts were dissipated. They had existed only while the prospect still seemed to be uncertain. He would have preferred an editorship; but an assistant in London was (he imagined) as good as any editor in the provinces.

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"You know the *Watchman*, I suppose?" said Mr. P., who had closely observed the young editor's delighted expression while reading the letter.

"Know it? I should think I do," he answered, with his old buoyancy of spirit. "A perfect production, the best of all the sixpenny weeklies, although it is the youngest. How can I thank you?"

"Not so fast; you've still 'to pull it off,' as Swainton says. All that I have done has been to open the door for you."

"But isn't that everything?"

"Almost, but not quite. If Henry Charles is found 'as advertised,' all will be well. Something, you see, depends on yourself."

"Get it or not, I'm eternally your debtor. Anyhow, my varied experience should be of value, though they usually hanker after university chaps on these weekly reviews. But the *Watchman* is a rare old Tory, and here I'm shrieking Radicalism at five pound a week."

"Don't let that disturb you. I fancy your politics are of no importance. It's your journalistic knowledge that's wanted. To make up the paper, arrange the book reviews, write some of them—the paragraphs and so forth. Pilkington is a society fellow who takes life easily, and wants a competent sub. That's about the situation, I should say. I believe Lord Dingleton finances the paper as a hobby."

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"In any case, it would mean a footing in London, and that is all I want."

"I am confident you'll suit, and although I advise you not to build too much on London, I believe it's worth having a try at—if only to knock on the head your romantic notions of life there. When will you go?"

"To-morrow; first train; back in the evening. Nobody the wiser if it doesn't come off."

But it did; and for good or ill, with scarce a thought of Flo, Henry returned to Laysford engaged as assistant-editor of the *Watchman*, on the understanding that he would start as soon as he could possibly get away from the *Leader*. The gentleman then assisting Mr. Pilkington was a distinguished Oxford man, oozing learning at every pore, but as incompetent a journalist as one would meet within the radius of Newspaperland.

CHAPTER XVIII

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IN LONDON TOWN

THE directors of the *Leader* were more gracious about his resignation than Henry had expected. Evidently, although quite satisfied with his work, they did not apprehend any insurmountable difficulty in securing a successor. The manager hinted (after Henry's going was certain) that rather than have had the trouble of changing editors, they might even have arranged to advance his salary—supreme proof that he had not been without his merits in the eyes of his employers. Mr. Jones, by virtue of his superior years, took leave to warn him of the gravity of the step he was taking, and assured him that at £350 a year in London he would be no better off than he was with £100 less in Laysford. For one brief moment Flo's desire that he should stay passed through his mind, but in his heart he knew that it was not entirely a matter of money, and he set his teeth on "Now or never."

When it had been arranged that he was to leave the *Leader*, the manager exhibited almost indecent haste in appointing his successor, and was careful to remind him that although, as events turned out, he would be free to go in a month's time, the Company was entitled to at least three months' notice, and possibly six. Mr. Jones had a habit of making generosity fit in with business; he did not mention that he had secured a successor who was to receive £50 a year less than Henry had been getting. At one time an editor of the *Leader* had been paid as much as £750 a year, but that was in the days of a showy start, when money went out more rapidly than it came in, and during the succeeding years the pay-books would show a steady decline in the rate of editorial salaries. By strict limitation of payments, Mr. Jones was steadily increasing the dividends of the shareholders, and steadily depreciating the standard of the staff. The day that

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Henry left, the literary touch which Adrian Grant and a limited few had noticed in the *Leader* under his editorship disappeared, and the market and police intelligence again gave the tone of the sheet.

The most serious feature of his removal was the conduct of Miss Winton, who gave him more than one bad quarter of an hour for his selfishness in actually accepting the engagement "without a single thought of her." Flo harped so steadily on this note, that Henry was half-persuaded he was indeed a shamefully selfish young man; and when he closely examined his conduct, he wondered whether the satisfaction with which he had reported his fortune to his father arose from filial affection or from downright vanity.

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The upshot of Miss Winton's exposition of his selfishness and her tearful protestations against his deserting her was a formal engagement, where only an "understanding" had existed before. This seemed to still her anxious heart, but Henry had made the proposition with none of the fervour with which more than once in fancy he had seen himself begging for her hand. In truth, his heart misgave him, and he did not mention the matter in any of his letters home. He rightly judged that such news might dull the keen edge of pleasure his London appointment would afford to his own folk at Hampton. He did not even mention it to Mr. Puddephatt. For the first time in his life he felt himself something of a dissembler. In this way his removal to London rather aggravated his state of mental unrest than modified it. His brightest dream had come true, but—

The first weeks in London, however, were so full of new sensations and agreeable distractions, that he had scarcely been a fortnight away from Laysford when it looked like a year. To walk down Fleet Street and the Strand each day, or to thread the old byways between the Embankment and Holborn, with the knowledge that no excursion train was to rush him off northward at the end of fourteen days, was a pleasure which only the provincial settling in London could enjoy. How he had longed for years to tread these pavements as a resident, and not merely as a gaping visitor. His feet gripped them while he walked, as though he thought at every stride, "Ye are firm beneath me at last, O Streets of London!"

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Fleet Street, he knew in his heart, was outwardly as shabby a thoroughfare as ever served for the main artery of a great city, but he also knew that if the buildings were mean and the crowd that surged along its pavements as common to the eye as any in the frowsiest provincial city, there was more romance behind many of these shabby windows which bore the names of journals, famous and obscure, than in stately Whitehall or in Park Lane. The hum of printing-presses from dingy basements, the smell of printer's ink from many open doors, had a charm for him which perversely recalled the scent of new-mown hay in a Hampton meadow long years before.

At first, he rarely passed a street without noting its name, an odd building without finding something to engage his interest, a man of uncommon aspect without wondering who he might be—what paper did he edit? But soon his daily walk from his lodgings in Woburn Place to the office of the *Watchman* opposite the Law Courts was performed with less attention to the common objects of the route.

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A sausage shop hard by his office, sending forth at all hours of the day a strong odour of frying fat and onions, remained the freshest of his impressions; he never passed it without thinking of its impertinence in such a quarter; but one day he discovered that it was not without claim to literary associations.

A young man with a chin that had required a shave for at least three days, wearing a shabby black mackintosh suggestive of shabbier things below, and boots much down at heel, came out of the shop with the aroma of sausage and onion strong upon him, and the fag-end of a savoury mouthful in the act of descending his throat. Something in the features of this dilapidated person struck Henry as oddly familiar, so that he glanced at him intently, and looked back, still puzzling as to who the fellow could be, when he found the shabby one looking at him, and evidently equally exercised concerning his identity. After a moment's hesitation, Henry walked back to him, and the sausage-eater flushed as he said:

"Why, Hen—Mr. Charles—can it be you? I knew you were in London, and had half a mind to call on you, but you—well—"

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The reason why was too obvious to call for explanation.

Henry himself was quite as much confused as the speaker. It was a shock to him to recognise in the person before him none other than one who had first pointed out to him the road to Journalism—"Trevor Smith, if you please."

What a change from those Stratford days, when he had talked so jauntily of fortunes made in Fleet Street, so hopefully of the coming of his own chance there. The greasy hat was worn with none of the old rakish air, but served only as a sorry covering for unkempt locks; and if London streets were paved with gold, the precious metal had worn away the heels of Trevor's boots as surely as any of the baser sorts.

It was difficult for one so transparently honest as Henry to pretend not to notice the pitiable condition of his old friend, and there was a forced cordiality in his tone when he greeted him.

"My dear fellow, I am delighted to meet you again. Odd, isn't it, that we should meet among London's millions? Come along with me to the Press Restaurant for a bit of lunch and a chat over

old times."

"Thank you very much," said Trevor, "but the fact is I have just had something to eat—"

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"Never mind that; so have I. Let it be coffee and a chat."

Together they crossed the street and sought out a remote corner of the restaurant, where, despite his protestations, Trevor submitted to adding two poached eggs on toast to the sumptuous repast he had taken at the sausage-shop.

The story he had to tell was as threadbare as his clothes; with variations, it might stand for that of fifty per cent, of Fleet Street's wrecks; the other moiety being explained by the one word, Drink.

Some two years after Henry left Wheelton the Stratford edition of the *Guardian* had been discontinued. Despite the brilliancy of the "Notes and Comments" from Trevor's pungent pen, the number of copies sold brought no profit to the proprietors, and the journalist who had demanded weekly "the liberty to know, to think, and to utter freely above all other liberties," was given the liberty to find another situation. Every effort to secure a reportership had failed, though he confessed to having answered upwards of eighty advertisements; and then, as a last resource, he had found his way to London, which calls for only those who have fought and won their fight in the provinces, but receives with every one such a waggon-load of wastrels.

"And now?" asked Henry.

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"Writing introductions about different towns for the British Directories, Limited, at half-a-crown a thousand words. Some weeks it means as much as fifteen shillings, but the job will soon be finished, and I see nothing ahead of it."

Trevor was near to weeping point, but perhaps Henry was more affected than he by the recital of his woes. Gone was every vestige of his old journalistic chatter, and in the very highway of the profession he ranked as an alien compared with the position he had held when he and Henry lodged together at Stratford. Stranger still, in dropping the old jargon of the newspaper man, he seemed to have lost even the confidence to ask a loan now that he stood more in need of it, and Henry could better spare the money.

It was left to Henry to suggest that perhaps the loan of a pound, "as between two fellow-journalists," would not be amiss. "Most men of letters," he added kindly, "have at one time or other experienced reverses of fortune. There is no hurry for repayment."

"I am most grateful; you are indeed a good friend to me," said Trevor, not without a touch of real emotion; "and if only I can get *Jinks's Weekly* to use a three-guinea article on 'A Week in a Dosshouse,' you shall have the money back soon. They took an article from me—nearly two years ago—on 'Fortunes made in Journalism.' I got four guineas for it; but it was the only thing of any length I have managed to place since coming to town."

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The odd couple parted at the restaurant door, and Trevor Smith shuffled off Strandwards without any profuse thanks, for he was one of those who, lacking both the capacity and the opportunity to succeed, when overtaken by misfortune become so shrivelled in character that they display not even the melancholy pluck necessary to mendicancy. The chances were that he and Henry would never meet again. The stout ship under full sail had sighted the derelict for a moment—that was all. Like so many of his kind, Trevor Smith was fated to sink out of sight in the dark, mysterious oubliette of London's failures.

The assistant editor of the *Watchman* returned to his office almost as sad at heart, if not more so, than the man he had left, whose heart was numbed and passionless.

The office of his paper was scarcely so elegant as he had once imagined all London editorial quarters to be. The entrance was a fairly wide slit between a barber's and a tobacconist's, the stairs as mean as those at the office of the *Wheelton Guardian*; but the first floor, occupied by the newspaper, was remarkably well furnished, Mr. Godfrey Pilkington being a gentleman of some taste, and the proprietor of the *Watchman* did not stint him in such items of expense. At first Henry had marvelled that a peer of the realm could have deigned to mount such miserable stairs or to trust his august person in elbowing between the barber's and the tobacconist's, but he soon learned that the most unpretentious accommodation on the highway of journalism may cost as much as marble halls in a provincial city.

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The editor, as Adrian Grant had hinted, was no glutton for work, and an hour or two each day appeared to satisfy his taste. Thus all the details of the *Watchman* were left to Henry, the chief articles being contributed by friends of Mr. Pilkington. A cashier, a clerk, and an advertising manager were the only members of the office staff; and as the paper was distributed by a large wholesale house, no business beyond the editorial and advertising affairs of the *Watchman* was conducted at the office. A very humdrum place, in truth, except on the rare occasions when the lordly proprietor put in an appearance, or Mr. Pilkington received some political person with an axe to grind, and an eye on the *Watchman*, as a possible grinder.

For all that, the *Watchman* made a brave show every Friday, and its articles were quoted widely in the provincial Press as representing the weighty opinion of Tory inner circles; and the more the *Watchman* was quoted the higher rose the hopes of Mr. Pilkington that Lord Dingleton would continue to bridge the monthly chasm which yawned between the income of the *Watchman*

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and the cost of its production, for—let us blab the horrid truth, as yet unknown to Henry—the paper was merely the expensive hobby of his lordship.

On returning to his office after his encounter with Trevor Smith, the young journalist was surprised and delighted to find Adrian Grant seated in his chair, and smoking the eternal cigarette.

"Thought I would just drop in to see how you were getting along," the visitor said, rising and shaking hands with his protégé. "Very comfortable quarters here," glancing round Henry's well-furnished room.

"I had just been wondering this very day when I should have the pleasure of seeing you again." The sincerity of Henry's words was apparent on his face.

"I have only run up to town for a week or two before leaving for another spell in Sardinia. I am getting restless again, and there flow the waters of Nepenthe. But the question is: How are you?"

"Pleased with my work, at least, I must say, and fascinated by London. But only to-day I have had a peep at its under side, and I fear that the less one knows of that the better for one's peace." [Pg 213]

"'See all, nor be afraid.' Surely you will let Browning advise you if that decadent Adrian Grant is too pessimistic for your healthy British taste," said the visitor, with the hint of a smile.

CHAPTER XIX

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THE PEN AND PENCIL CLUB

THE "Magpie" is, or was, a hotel of the good old-fashioned homely type, standing in a street off the Strand, in the Adelphi quarter. One must speak thus indefinitely, since the whole face of the neighbourhood has been transformed within recent years, and many a memory-laden house demolished. At the "Magpie" the era of electric bells, elevators, ostentation, had produced no effect, and within hail of many *caravansérais*, where the pomp and circumstance of King Money might have been seen in all its extravagance, the "Magpie" retained its flavour of old-time cosiness and plainness.

It was a hotel much frequented by the better class of country visitors; the London man of fashion never strayed within its portals. But here, by reason of the retired situation of the place, the accommodation of the rooms, and in some degree (we may suppose) the moderate terms, the headquarters of the Pen and Pencil Club were situated. Less than three hundred yards away, the Strand was a turgid stream of noises; here was a backwater startlingly quiet. [Pg 215]

Though certain of the vulgar upstarts, who manage to sneak into every community of proper men, not excepting literary clubland, complained that they could not get eatable food at the "Magpie," the members of the club, as a whole, did eat with some heartiness whenever they assembled around the board, which was twice a month during autumn and winter. Few of the members turned up in evening dress; the average author does not find it necessary to entirely expose his shirt-front when he sits down to his evening meal. Something of the older Bohemianism hung, like lavender in an ancient chest, about the Pen and Pencil Club; from which it will be understood that it was not exactly the Bohemianism of dirty clothes and stale beer, but rather that brotherliness which enables men of kindred tastes and interests to dispense with the artificial ceremonies of society.

Such was the spirit of the company to which Henry was introduced by his friend at the "Magpie." The buzz of talk in the club-room dazed him a little at first, and very timidly did he submit to be introduced to this celebrity and to that. Most of the members and guests assembled were standing talking familiarly, awaiting the summons to dinner.

"Let me introduce my friend Mr. Charles, of the *Watchman*, Mr. Angus St. Clair," said Mr. P., thus mentioning the name of a world-famous Scottish novelist, with whom Henry almost funk'd shaking hands. [Pg 216]

Yet Mr. Sinclair was scarcely so impressive to gaze upon as many a City clerk; far less so than any young man behind a draper's counter in Oxford Street. He was below medium height, quite without distinction of features, and wore a faded brown suit. Withal, his publishers could sell fifty thousand copies of any book he cared to write, and the Press of the Anglo-Saxon race resounded with anecdotes about him.

"Ma name's pronounced Sinkler, but they pock-puddens will ca' me St. Clair, so what can a body do, Mr. Chairles?"

Mr. Charles couldn't enlighten him; but his host suggested that the Scotch didn't know how to pronounce their own names, and weren't very particular how they treated English ones. The secretary of the club dragged Mr. Sinclair off before he could return fire to introduce him to one craving his hand-shake, and Mr. Puddephatt, who appeared to be known only as Adrian Grant among the members, said to Henry that whenever he saw Sinclair he thought of a boiled egg, because the fellow seemed so small and thin that he felt he could break his skull with a tap of a

"Ah, Mr. Grinton, how do you do?... My guest, Mr. Charles, of the *Watchman*—a coming man, my dear Grinton, a coming man."

Mr. Edward Grinton shook hands with the coming man, who was never in a more retiring mood.

"I read the *Watchman*," he said, "and like it, but I wish it wouldn't worry about my literary style. The only test of merit in novels, Mr. Charles, is sales. Ask at any bookseller if his customers care a straw for literary style. They want a story, and I give 'em what they—Ah, Tredgold! Still slogging at that play?" and Mr. Grinton turned abruptly to another member who had two plays running at London theatres, and, in Grinton's phrase, "made pots of money."

This Grinton no longer holds the bookstalls in the palm of his hand. His star has set; but at that time his stories sold enormously, and earned him a large income. They were common trash, concerned chiefly with mysterious murders, and each had a startling picture on the cover, which the publisher alleged was the chief cause of their success. He had curly hair. That was the only thing about him Henry noticed.

In turn he was next introduced to Henry Davies, the editor of the *Morning Sun*, the great Radical daily—a man who stuttered strangely, and had difficulty in saying that he was p—p—pleased to m—m—meet Mr. Ch—Ch—Charles; Mr. Frederick Fleming, the well-known dramatic critic of the *Daily Journal*; and other celebrities whom he had long worshipped from afar. The most ordinary mortals all; not one of them had the mystic touch of Adrian Grant, who seemed to Henry the most distinguished man among the company.

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"Dinner is served, gentlemen," the waiter called, in rousing tones, and instantly the babble ceased, and members and guests filed out to the dining-room.

Henry was seated next to his host, and had on his right Mr. Bone, the eminent publisher, who happened to be the guest of Grinton, the novelist. The lion lay down with the lamb in the Pen and Pencil Club.

It was the custom of the fraternity after dining to carry on a discussion on some literary topic, and to "talk shop" to their heart's content. The chairman, Mr. Diamond Jones, a highly successful literary critic, whose profound ignorance of literature's deeper depths was the standing joke of his fellow-clubmen, mentioned that they did talk shop there, but contended that "literary shop" was worth talking, as everybody was interested in it; other "shop" was only "shop," and therefore contemptible. Your literary worker has a fine disdain for every branch of life but his own.

The speaking was scarcely enthralling. It happened to turn on the subject of humour in literature, and a celebrated humorist opened the discussion with some observations which suggested (unfairly) that he knew very little of what he was talking about. Apparently he had never heard that Shakespeare was a humorist, or that Carlyle was not devoid of the quality, or that Thackeray had some of it, not to mention Dickens. Even Meredith and Hardy escaped the notice of all the speakers, who talked about most things but the topic that had been introduced. Henry concluded that the gifts of writing and oratory are seldom wedded in the one. The best speaker was a novelist, whose books were as free from humour as Ireland is from snakes. He thought that humour wasn't a high quality. Good for him that he had none, as the great reading public likes a man who is either as serious as an owl or as giddy as a Merry Andrew. Sinclair was reputedly a humorist, but it was difficult to get him to open his mouth on the subject, and when he did the company was in doubt whether to laugh or applaud.

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"Humour," he said, in his drawling Scotch accent, "is, according to Russell Lowell, the great antiseptic of leeterature. For my pairt, 'werna ma heart licht I wad dee.'" And he sat down.

Really these great guns of literature thundered no better than a twopenny cannon. Henry had heard as good at a church debating society in Wheelton. At least, the disparity was scarce appreciable, and yet the men he had listened to were, each of them, capable of great things pen in hand; most of them would have been a loadstar of interest in any large provincial city. They were best beheld at a distance and behind the glamour of their books, he thought.

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But he had reason to modify his opinion in the light of the club-room gossip which followed the dinner and discussion. He was soon tingling with delight at hearing men whose names were widely known discussing the affairs of the literary world. He felt that he stood at the very fount of those streams of gossip which flow far and wide through the channels of the Press. He knew that many a paragraph he had clipped from a London journal and printed in his column in the *Laysford Leader* had originated in the after-dinner chatter of his club, or some such coterie. "I am informed that Mr. Blank's next novel will deal with," or "My readers may be interested to know that Mr. So-and-So, the celebrated author of this or that, is about to," or again, "Mr. Such-and-Such is contemplating a holiday in Timbuctoo with a view to local colour for his next romance, which has been arranged to appear in"—he could now see that these pleasant pars, with their delightful "behind-the-scenes" flavour, grew out of meetings like this.

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After leaving the "Magpie," Adrian Grant walked with Henry as far as Long Acre, where the latter could get a 'bus Bloomsburyward.

"An interesting gathering," said the novelist; "how did it impress you?"

"Chiefly that distinguished authors are very like human beings, on the whole."

"I'm glad of that. Now you're learning. But you'll find much true camaraderie among them, if you allow for the little eccentricities of the artistic temperament, which you are sure to notice the more you know of them. I overheard a very third-rate novelist to-night telling a guest that his own books were divided into three periods; the middle one being a bridge that linked the two expressions of his mind together. Heavens! I don't suppose there's a score of people in the country who are the least concerned in his work. But he's a good fellow for all his vanity. We're all of us vain, more or less."

"I was also struck by the number of well-known people—men, I mean, whose names are discussed throughout the whole country," Henry observed. "It was difficult to realise the distinguished nature of the company. You couldn't see the wood for trees, if the simile will hold water."

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"Quite so. Should you become as famous as Maister Sinkler, you'll still find that in any club you enter there will be someone better known than yourself. That's the best of London. It brings you to your level. Where life is prolific—look at China—it is least valued. Where geniuses, or men of talent, most abound, why, it's like Gilbert's era, 'when dukes were four a penny.' At best, you're only a bit of vegetable in London's broth-pot. But it's good that it should be so. In the country you are inclined to esteem yourself too highly, and of all human follies that's the worst."

Mr. P.'s speech sounded like a literary setting of Flo's opinion: "You're a somebody here; in London you'd be one of the crowd."

They walked without speaking through the musty-smelling region of Covent Garden, and had reached Long Acre before Henry broke the silence suddenly by remarking, as if after much considering of the point:

"You said that one would find some true camaraderie among the literary set. That scarcely tallies with your rather pessimistic views of human nature in general."

"Well, after all, it's difficult to be consistent—and speak your mind. My views of human nature remain unchanged, and though, as you have said, authors are very like folk, they do have a touch of brotherliness which you will find in no other profession; certainly not in the musical, of which I know something. There may appear to be a good deal of back-biting and jealousy among literary men; but they are always ready to encourage the new man, to applaud the conscientious worker. Remember that most authors of genius have first been proclaimed by their fellows of the pen. In the nature of things it must be so. The asinine public has to be told who are the writers worth reading. Mind you, the duffer will get never a leg up, and before any one gets a lift he has to show himself worthy of it. But I suppose the same might be said of the business world as well."

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"Do you think I'm going the right way for a leg up, then?—if I may bore you with my own petty affairs."

"Not yet; but you'll soon be shaping that way. This I realise: journalism will give any moderately clever fellow a living, but even a genius will scarcely win a reputation that way. Billy Ricketts writes a book, and even if it's a bad one, Billy is for a week or two more noticed in the papers than the editor of the *Times* will be in five years. The journalist who gives his best to his paper is a pathetic figure—from the British or Henry Charles point of view, I mean, as I'm looking at the situation with your ideas to direct me, your view of success. He is probably our nearest approach to the Greek sculptors I seem to remember quoting to you once. Anonymity is essential to the true artist, I hold; and strangely, it is the newspaper man—none less artistic—who conforms to this law in England, perhaps unwillingly."

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"Of course, we'll never agree on that point," said Henry, "as I'm all for personality."

"So; that's what I know, and hence my line of reasoning. Play up your personality for all it's worth, and be happy. It's not my way; but no matter. And to do so, journalism is at best only a training school. What you must do is a book. Once you make a moderate success with a book, your precious personality has become a marketable thing in modern Philistia."

"You mean a novel, I suppose?"

"I mean a book. You're not a poet, or the song within would have rilled out long ago. *Ergo*, it's not a book of poetry. You have a literary touch, and might do well in the essay; but essays are 'off' just now, says the Ass-in-Chief of the great B. P. You haven't gone round the world on your hands and knees, or walked from Charing Cross to St. Paul's on your head—either of which achievements would have given you copy for a sensational book hot with personality, and made you the most sought-after lecturer of the day. So there remains only the novel, and the B. P. shouts for more novel, like the whimpering infant it is. Give it novel, my lad. You, as well as anybody. That the novel has become a contemptible convention of the publishing trade is not its fault. Always remember we have Meredith and Hardy and Stevenson writing novels, and you will think well of that vehicle of expression."

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"But I have no great impulse to write fiction. I'd rather write about the men who write it," Henry said.

"A pity that; for little of real value is done without the impulse. But one never knows. Try and see. The impulse may follow in the same sense that certain psychologists believe the simulation

of an emotion produces its effect. I like the idea; but am not quite ready to accept it. Reproduce the muscular expressions of sorrow or joy, and you will after a time be sorrowful or glad, says Nordau. There's something in the thought, perhaps. Similarly, determine to write a novel, and the mood for novel-writing will be induced. I don't say I agree with the theory. But it's worth a trial, and anyhow a novel is the easiest form in which to make a public appeal, to make merchandise of your personality."

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Adrian Grant's face wore its half-cynical smile as he said this, and extending his hand to Henry, he added abruptly, as his manner was: "This is your 'bus, I think; I must make for Kensington."

Henry shook hands at once with a hurried expression of thanks for his friend's kindness, and jumped on the 'bus, while Mr. P. hailed a passing hansom, and set out for his rooms in Gloucester Road.

Vague and confused were the thoughts of Henry as the 'bus lumbered its way by historic Drury Lane and across Holborn, to his door in Bloomsbury. A 'bus ride was still full of romance to him, and the glimmering lamps of London were dearer to his mind than "the swing of Pleiades"; every jingling cab that passed, every lighted window, was touched with romance in his eyes. To make this wondrous City listen to him—how the dream thrilled him! That the unknown thousands who flitted through these world-famous streets, and lived behind these lighted windows, might read what he wrote and know him for the writer—it was worth trying for. Already he had seen his book brave in bright gilt, shouldering the best of them in the book-shops of Holborn and the Strand; he could read the reviews distinctly: noticed even the size and style of the type they were set in, was gratified to find them so remarkably favourable, and—"Wob'n Plice!" shouted the conductor.

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Henry descended to asphalt, and was presently putting on his slippers in his small sitting-room in a Bloomsbury boarding-house.

CHAPTER XX

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THREE LETTERS, AND SOME OTHERS

ON the mantelpiece of his room, set on end against the little marble clock which ignored the flight of time, Henry found three letters. He examined the addresses and postmarks of each, and saw at a glance that one was from his sister Dora, another from Flo, and the third from Edgar Winton. For a moment he hesitated, undecided which to open first. Home for him had a far-off call by now, and it was with the vague sense of a dream that was past that he read Dora's fortnightly letters. Flo—hers was a more recent influence—and from a fascinating it had come to be an irksome one: the more real by that token. He burst open Edgar's letter with his forefinger, and read:

"DEAR HENRY,—I've been going to write you any time these last six weeks, but—well, old man, I'm no hand at correspondence unless it's a penny a line. Besides, I hear about you through Flo, who is quite reconciled to your absence, which the poet tells us makes the heart grow fonder. I wonder!

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"But first of all, you'll want an inside view of the dear old rickety old *Leader*. Your successor is a daisy, and no mistake. Walks into the office in knickers and a cloth cap, and shaves once a week when his beard is ready for clipping. Even Dodge, the newest junior, sneers at him, and refuses to recognise 'that josser' as editor. It's hard cheese on a youngster to run up against a weed like Steel for his first editor. Gives a low idea of our noble profession, don't you know.

"Steel's greatest feat has been to assault his wife in the street while drunk (that's Steel, not the wife, I mean, who was lushing), and get run in; but a word from 'Puggie' [Mr. Albert Scriven, the chief reporter, so called by reason of his physical appearance], who happened to be at the police station at the time, put the matter right, and 'Puggie' took our warrior to his "appy little 'ome.' It fell to my lot to vamp up the usual editorial cackle myself that night, but I've got to help the beauty most nights, as he doesn't like work. Jones knows of his little exploits, but does nothing. He's got him cheap, and that's enough for him. Besides, nobody outside the office—and nobody in it, for that matter—would believe that Steel was editor of the paper, so Jones swaggers about the town, and has taken to describing himself as 'managing editor.' Oh, we enjoy life here! there's a lot of fun in the game. Steel wonders how the paper lived through the editorship of 'a literary ass.' He isn't nuts on literature; but with a pair of scissors, some gum, and a pencil, the Johnnie can knock out leaders while you cough, and the joke is nobody seems to be a bit the worse. Hope you don't mind my telling you this; but really, do you think anybody reads leaders? I hope they don't read mine.

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"The *Leader* appeared four hours late yesterday. What do you think of that? Jones again. He's a treat. A cog-wheel of the Hoe machine burst, and there wasn't a spare one in stock, nor in the town. Though he had been warned months ago, when a similar accident happened, that the last spare wheel had been used, he

would not spend the money to stock one or two. We had to borrow one from the *Milton Daily Post*. You are well out of the hole, I can tell you.

"I read the *Watchman* every week, and think it immense; but you fly above me, old man. I'm only a country scribbler, and must admire you a long way off. I takes off my hat to you, sir.

"The mater is rather queer just now, and I hope she isn't going to kipper. But one never can tell. 'Our times are in His hand,' that's Browning, isn't it? I saw it quoted the other day, and managed to drag it into a leaderette this week. Sounds well, I think.

"Pater joins in kind regards—at least, I suppose he does, though I haven't asked him—and Flo is sending her warmest breathings direct, I understand. —Believe me, ever thine,

"EDGAR WINTON."

Henry was inclined to resent the flippant tone of the letter, the senseless slang; but he remembered that it was "only Edgar's way," and stuffed the sheets back into their envelope and into his inside pocket. Flo's letter he turned over again as he lifted it and Dora's from his knee. He opened his sister's next, and laid the other down.

It was the usual Hampton budget of uninteresting details about the doings of that little community, and Henry read it in his usual perfunctory way, scarce recollecting the people whose names were recalled by it. "Who on earth is old Gatepost? I believe she means old John Crew, the farm bailiff. I'm surprised he is only dying now. Thought he would have been dead long ago." Often his thoughts would run thus over some bit of news from Dora. She seemed to write from out the past.

"Hoping you are well, as we all are when this leaves. No more at present, from your loving Sis."

The phrase might have been stereotyped; it was Dora's one form of "drawing to a close." Indeed, she did not draw thither; she simply closed according to formula when she had spun her loose threads of news into some semblance of a web of words.

Dora's letter was presently keeping Edgar's company, with many another tattered envelope and note, in Henry's pocket.

He turned to the third of the letters with no apparent zest.

"She writes a neat hand after all," he murmured, as he scanned the superscription. A bad sign that. A man in love should be the last person to ask for an opinion of the handwriting of his sweetheart. When he can speak with deliberation on the subject or think of it with detachment, he has become critical, and the end—happy or otherwise—is not far off. Happy only if there is still time or courage to draw back.

"She writes a neat hand after all," said Henry, as he rammed his finger into the flap of the scented envelope and burst it open. "After all!" These even more than the words preceding them were suggestive.

The hour was late, and who knows but that may, to some extent, have been responsible for the blinking mood in which the young man read his sweetheart's letter? It was the typical feminine scrawl, chiefly chatter about society doings in Laysford.

"Oh, I'm becoming quite a giddy girl, dearest, and me engaged. It's too awful. Just fancy, I've been to three functions—*three!* Poor me that used to go nowhere at all. The Mellises' garden party was a very swell affair. I was there because I teach the daughter the pianoforte—and a silly thing she is. But—*don't* be angry now, Hal—who do you think took me to the Mayor's reception? Why, that terrible goose, Mr. Trentham, the Mayor's secretary. You remember him? Short, stout, fair moustache, but *always* well dressed. Fancies himself, *rather*. He has asked me to go with him to another reception, when some sort of conference comes to Laysford. I don't know what it is, but the receptions are all right. Lots of fun and the best of everything. Perhaps you wouldn't like me to go, dearest? But really you needn't be *jealous*. Trentham is *really* a goose. Only one is so dull, and then *everybody* knows I'm engaged."

Henry knew, certainly; and he had no doubt the "everybody" was not unjustified. He accepted the information without a pang of jealousy.

"Everybody knows I'm engaged." Somehow, he would not readily have confessed to delight in the fact. Trentham he did not recall as suggestive of the ungainly biped. "Rather a decent sort of chap," thought Henry. "Not much in Flo's way, I imagine." He blinked through the remainder of the letter, never dreaming—though near to dreamtime—that Trentham was wondering what Flo could see in Henry Charles. The man who can divine just why another man loves or admires one woman, or why a woman "sees anything" in another man, has yet to be born. He was certainly neither Henry Charles nor Mr. Trentham.

"Not a word from Flo about her mother," Henry reflected, on his way to bed. "Just like her—all

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about herself. I wonder if I'm an ass!"

How unreasonable men are. Why should Flo have written about anyone but herself?

It was time for Henry to wonder. But he was still wondering months later, when Trentham was not.

The fact is, this Trentham was a very fair specimen of the average bull-headed Englishman, and better than most in the eyes of Miss Winton, since he enjoyed a private income, which made him quite independent of the salary attaching to his official position. His name cropped up frequently for a time in Flo's letters to Henry, but the latter scarcely referred to it in any of his replies, from which Flo judged him jealous, and when Trentham had never a mention from her, Henry supposed him circling in some other orbit. Here, of course, he was wrong, and he might have noticed a lowering temperature in the tone of Flo's epistles. There was still need to ask himself whether he was an ass, and to answer in the affirmative. But he never thought out an answer until one day it came ready-made in a fine right-hander, which took his breath away:

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"DEAR HENRY,—I am so sorry to tell you that I cannot continue our engagement. My affections have undergone a change, and I think it best for both of us that we should not carry out the engagement. I have promised to marry Mr. Trentham, who really thought we were never engaged. I haven't worn the ring much, as I didn't care greatly for the style of it, and now return it. I feel it is best for both of us to cease our correspondence. I shall always wish you well.—Sincerely yours,

"FLO WINTON."

"An ass," undoubtedly. The thing that he had often wished had happened, yet he felt chagrined, and the sense of having been wronged leaped up at him.

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"She has made a fool of me," thought Henry, after reading the brief note, "and yet I'm glad." But he was nothing of the kind. He knew that he ought to be glad; he had hoped for this for nearly a year in the odd moments when he saw things clearly, and realised that Flo was receding from the place she had once held in his esteem. His visits to Laysford had not improved matters. He was vexed, irritated, disappointed—anything but glad. His self-esteem was wounded, and to have avoided an injury there he would have faced even the obligation he had entered into before coming to London.

"She has taken up Trentham because the creature has a bit of money," he muttered savagely, crumpling up the offending note, and then opening it out to read the fateful words again. "So much for women!" And he swept the sex aside for the perfidy of this one, though the woman's very selfishness was the saving of him.

"Delighted!" he wrote in bold letters on a postcard, and put her name and address on it. Then he tore it up, and feared he was a cad to the bargain.

Delighted! He was miserable for three days, until he could sit down and pen a sensible letter, in which he expressed the opinion that Flo had a better knowledge of her affections than he had, and that while he would never have given her the pain of breaking their engagement, he accepted the situation with some philosophy, since it did not altogether run against his own inclination.

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A silly affair enough, as he came to understand once the final letter had been posted, and even so he had a delusion that at some time he had been actually in love with Flo. One cannot tell whether she had any delusions on the same object. She was not of the kind who dream dreams.

"I'm terribly sorry, old man, that Flo has cut up this way," wrote Edgar. "I always fancied you and she were engaged, but evidently not. Trentham is a very decent sort. They're to be married soon now that the mater is all right again. Flo is nuts on 'style,' you know, and you are not—unless it's literary style. After all, perhaps it's for the best. I think everything is for the best except what happens at the *Leader* office. Steel still keeps the uneven tenor of his way. I make wonderful progress. Don't gasp when I tell you that, quite unsolicited, I got a rise of half-a-crown last week. I think I shall buy a motor-car with it. Fancy, Jones has gone in for electric light. You wouldn't know the place now—the light shows up the dirt so strongly."

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But Laysford had entirely lost interest for Henry now. To fancy one has been in love is almost as serious a condition as to be in love.

CHAPTER XXI

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"THAT BOOK"

ADRIAN GRANT had gone away to Sardinia, but he had left Henry urged to the point of writing "that book." At first Henry approached the task with but little taste, for he had the good sense to doubt whether his talent lay in the direction of creative work, as the writing of fiction is so comically miscalled. But the thing had to be done, and as well now as again. At first progress was slow, as book-reviewing for the *Watchman* kept him busy most nights at home, while sub-editorial duties

filled out all too amply his office hours. There was agony of mind in the writing of the early chapters, and he had not gone far when the rupture with Flo came to disturb his thoughts and to agitate his feelings. But it had the effect of setting him almost savagely to his novel again, and gloomy was the atmosphere he created in his chapters. It was a romance of town and country life, and was entitled provisionally, "Grey Life."

For a while after Flo's exit from his life the book went ahead rapidly; then he set it aside almost afraid to go on after reading what he had written; it was so savage, so unlike anything he had ever hoped to write. If at that time he could have been impersonal enough in his criticism, he would have seen at a glance that Adrian Grant was not only responsible for his having essayed the task, but that he had projected something of his pessimism into the mind of the writer.

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The unfolding young editor, who had meant to write such a scathing review of "Ashes," would have been as incensed by the unhealthy gloom, the wintry sadness, of "Grey Life." Of course, it is to be remembered that the said young editor had never delivered the terrible slating he intended to devote to Adrian Grant's popular work, but he had at least thought it, and believed it would have been justified, even after he had written something different. Though the morbidity of sex was entirely absent from "Grey Life," it contained a good deal that was as deserving of ban as anything in "Ashes."

When Mr. P. returned in the late autumn of the year from his sojourn in the South, he asked to be shown the manuscript, incomplete as it was; and pronounced it good.

"You've stuck almost in sight of the end," he said.

"Wrecked in port," replied Henry, laughing.

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"Not quite wrecked, but floating rudderless. There's no reason why this shouldn't hit—if you want to make a hit. But it's generally books that are published without intent to 'boom' that stumble into success. At least, it's been so with mine."

"But I'm uneasy about it all. Don't you think the picture intolerably grey?"

"None too grey, my lad—grey is the colour of life," said the man who had just come back from cloudless blue skies and gorgeous sunsets.

"Somehow I felt like that when writing, but when I read it I have an inkling that life is brighter than I have shown it to be; that it's worth while living both in country and in town."

"It's not for me to advise one who has done so well off his own bat, but I would suggest that you work the thing out to its bitter end, keeping true to the artistic impulse which will settle each of the characters for you, and without you, if you but let it have its sway."

"But it would be a bitter end for two of them."

"Precisely. For all of them, probably. It is for most of us."

"There I don't agree with you. Don't you think the bitter end is at the beginning? The book ends bitterly at the start, so to speak."

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"I do, and I don't object to that in the least. The fact is, you have subordinated your Philistine nature most wonderfully, and are in a fair way to produce a work of art, but here the Philistine part of you comes uppermost at a critical moment, and has its usual fit of remorse at a piece of genuine art. I would not have credited you with the capacity to produce such a work as this manuscript contains. That is frank, isn't it?"

"And I ought to be flattered, I suppose. But I'm not. I've been disillusioned all along the line, but surely when the illusions fall away life is not merely a corner for moping in. Besides, is it a worthy work to disillusionise others?"

"It is. It is the business of sane men to expose for what they are the fools' paradises of the world."

"Surely not. Let the fools find it out themselves; and if they never do, the better for them."

"Look here, my young friend, your best plan is to take a holiday at once and go down home for two or three weeks, to get over this mood of contrariness. I'm surprised that you've been slogging away in London all through the stifling summer. It was mere madness. You're suffering from mental clog. Shake free of Fleet Street for a week or two, and the book will finish, never fear. Whatever you do, don't have one of those maudlin, barley-sugar ends. Be true to life, and let all else go. Perhaps a visit home would supply the contrast necessary to re-start the mind."

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"I've been thinking of that this very day."

"Then my advice is: Go. You're not looking well. London is a hard task-master, and the slave who runs to the eternal crack of his whip is by way of being untimely worn out."

The idea of spending an autumn holiday at home had been with Henry for some time, even to the exclusion of plans for a visit to the Continent, and it was evidence of the influence this strange friend had over him, that so soon as he suggested it the project was distinctly forwarded.

In another week he was to be homeward-bound: heart-free, but disappointed. Successful in a sense, and a failure in the light of his inner desires. London had not brought him peace of mind,

and Hampton, he feared, would only bore him into accepting the life of the City as the lesser of two evils.

If Henry could have looked inward then he would have seen that all his uneasiness came from the dragging of the old anchor of faith which began long ago at Laysford on his first meeting with Mr. Puddephatt. That, and naught else. Edward John believed in the Bible *verbatim et litteratim*; worshipped it with the superstitious awe wherewith a sentimental woman bobs to tuppenceworth of stucco and a penn'orth of paint fashioned into a Bambino; would have believed it implicitly had the story ran that Jonah swallowed the whale; and often, indeed, expressed his readiness for that supreme test of faith.

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To Henry, as to every young man who thinks, came the inevitable collision between inherited belief and acquired knowledge. Also the inevitable wreckage. Many thousands had gone his road before him, and more will follow. To the father the roads of Knowledge and of Faith ran neatly parallel, the one narrow and the other broad; but as the son laboured at the widening of the former, the road of Faith, trodden less and less, was dwindling into a crooked and uncertain footway. It's an old, old story—why say more than that the miraculous basis of belief is a mere quicksand when Knowledge attempts to stand upon it?

But Edward John was as much a man as his son would ever be, and Henry could see that his father was as important a unit in the Kingdom of Heaven as he could hope to become. Was Ignorance, then, the kindest friend? No, there must be a way for the cultured as for the unlettered; but was it a different way?

Thus and so forth went the unrestful soul of the young man, who was even then writing his undecided mind into a novel, and by that token giving evidence of an ignorance as essential as his father's, different in kind but not in degree.

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CHAPTER XXII

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HOME AGAIN

Two days before Henry had planned to leave London for his holiday at home, Adrian Grant looked in upon him hurriedly at the *Watchman* office to ask if it were possible for him to secure accommodation at Hampton.

"You!" exclaimed Henry, in surprise, and something akin to a feeling of shame for the meagre possibilities of entertainment at his home flushed his face.

"Why not?" said his friend, with a smile. "I know less than nothing of English rural life, and it came to me as an inspiration this morning that here was a chance to try the effect of country quiet at home. I have a bit of work to finish, and most of my writing has been done abroad in drowsy places. Strange I have never tried our own rural shades, though I produce but little either in London or at Laysford."

"It's an idea, certainly," Henry observed, in a very uncertain tone. "I'm sorry my people—"

"Of course, I would not dream of troubling your folk, but I suppose there's such a thing as a village inn even in your secluded corner of earth."

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"There's the 'Wings and Spur,' to be sure, but I am doubtful of its comfort."

"It's an inn, and that's enough for one who has wandered strange roads," and the bright earnestness of the novelist proved to Henry that he really meant to carry out this whim of his.

Nor did he fail to notice a strange elation of manner in Mr. P. for which he could not satisfactorily account.

The incident, however, was the matter of a moment, and the novelist went away as hurriedly as he entered after ascertaining the train by which Henry purposed travelling from St. Pancras, leaving the journalist with the uncomfortable sense of being party to some absurd freak.

His wits were not nimble enough, thus suddenly taxed, to see all sides of the project, and he swayed between the pleasant thought of visiting his old home in the company of one so distinguished as Adrian Grant, and the dubious fear of the impression which his humble relatives might make upon this polished man of the world. His father's doubtful h's sounded uncomfortably on the ear of his memory; the prospect of his toil-worn mother entertaining such a guest, if only for an occasional meal, seemed too unlikely a thing to contemplate. He turned again to his work with the wish that Adrian Grant might stay in London, or find some other rural retreat to suit his capricious taste.

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But it was necessary to warn the folks at home, and to make the best of what might well prove an awkward business. So Henry wrote to his father that night, explaining that he was bringing a distinguished visitor to the village, and though he would reside at the inn, he would no doubt be a good deal at their house. This he did after having seriously debated with himself the idea of writing to his friend and framing a set of excuses or plausible reasons why he should not go.

Henry's ingenuity was not equal to that.

All this explains why on a certain autumn afternoon the Post Office of Hampton Bagot, and indeed the whole of the village street, exhaled an air of expectancy. There were hurried traffickings between the shop of Edward John Charles, the "Wings and Spur," the butcher's, and sundry others. Perhaps the loudest note of warning that an event of unusual interest portended was struck by the bright red necktie which Edward John Charles had donned at the urgent request of his daughters. This was truly a matter for surprise, for while he had been seen occasionally on weekdays wearing a collar, the tie had always been a Sunday vanity. His clothes, too, were his Sunday best. His appearances at the door were frequent and short, with no pleasant play of the coat-tails; and his earnest questing glances towards the road from the station, which opened into the main street of the village some little distance east of the Post Office, were foolishly unjustified before the dinner hour, as there was no possibility of the visitors arriving until the late afternoon.

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Customers at the Post Office were all condemned to a delightfully exaggerated account of the "lit'ry gent from Lunnon" who was to grace the village with his presence and suffuse Henry Charles with reflected glory, though it seemed a difficult thing to conceive the pride of Hampton as in need of glorifying. But the customers were as keen for Edward John's gossip as he to purvey it, and it is more than probable that several ounces of shag were bought that day by persons who stood in no immediate need of them, but were glad of an excuse for a chat with the postmaster. Even the snivelling Miffin shuffled across with such an excuse for a chat, and returned to tell his apprentice that he could see no reason for all this "'ow d'y' do."

"S'possin' there was a railway haccident! Stranger things 'ave 'appened, merk moi werds," said he, with a waggle of his forefinger in the direction of his junior, who, though much in use as an object for Miffin's addressing, seldom had the courage to comment upon his employer's opinions.

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At the "Wings and Spur," as the afternoon wore on, there was also the unusual excitement of despatching a creaky old gig to the station to bring up the travellers, and Edward John must needs wander down to exchange opinions with his friend Mr. Jukes as the vehicle was being got ready.

Even the aged vicar was among the callers at the Post Office, inquiring if it was certain that Henry would be at home for the next Sunday, as that day was to be memorable by the preaching of Mr. Godfrey Needham's farewell sermon, and nothing would please him better than to see among his congregation "one over whom he had watched with interest and admiration from his earliest years."

Time had dealt severely with the once quaint and sprightly figure of this good man. Since Eunice had taken him in hand he had lost his old eccentric touches of habit, but year by year age had slackened his gait and slowed him down to a grey-haired, tottering figure, who, when we first saw him, took the village street like the rising wind. He had now decided to give up the hard work of his parish and his pulpit, and this was to devolve upon an alert young curate who had recently been appointed.

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"We need new blood, Mr. Charles, even in the pulpit. And we old men must make way for the younger generation," he said sadly to his faithful parishioner.

"Aye, Mr. Needham, none o' us can stand up again' Natur'. But you're good for many a year yet to come, and I hope I am too."

"You are hale as ever, but I can say with the Psalmist: 'My days are like a shadow that declineth; and I am withered like grass.'"

"True, Mr. Needham, all flesh is grass, but it is some comfort to the grass that's withering to see the new blades a-growing around it"—a speech Edward John recalled in later years as one of his happiest efforts in the art of conversation.

"Yes, if the old grass knows that the new is its seedling. You are happy, Mr. Charles, in that way."

Edward John hitched at his uncomfortable collar and modestly fingered his necktie, while Mr. Needham proceeded to sound the praises of Henry.

"But I confess," the vicar went on to say, "I am at times troubled in my mind as to how his faith has withstood the shocks it must receive in the buffetings of City life. I trust the good seed which I strove to plant in his heart as a boy has grown up unchoked by the thistles which the distractions of the world so often sow there."

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"Oh, 'is 'eart's all right, Mr. Needham," said the postmaster cheerily, as the vicar shook hands with him, and moved slowly away towards his home.

Despite the excitement of preparation both at the Post Office and the inn, and the beguilement of gossip which brought the most improbable stories into circulation among the village folk, as, for example, that Mrs. Charles had borrowed a silver teapot from the wife of the estate agent to Sir Henry Birken; a story devoid of fact, for Edward John had paid in hard cash at Birmingham for that article, as well as a cream jug to match, making a special journey for the purpose the previous day, and thus carrying out a twenty-five-year-old promise to his patient wife—despite these excellent reasons for speeding the time, the hours wore slowly on, and the postmaster must

have covered a mile or two in his wanderings between his shop door and the corner of the street, from which a distant view of the returning vehicle might be had. It was expected back by four o'clock, and when on the stroke of five it had not returned, Mrs. Charles was sitting in gloom, with terrible pictures of railway accidents passing before her mind, gazing in a sort of mental morgue upon her dead boy.

Soon after five o'clock the gig pulled up before the door at a moment when the vigilance of the postmaster had been relaxed, and Henry had stepped into the shop before his father was there to greet him; but it had been Dora's good fortune to see him arrive while giving some finishing touches to his bedroom upstairs, and the clatter of her descent brought the whole group about him in a twinkling.

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In the excitement of the moment Henry's expected companion was forgotten, until his father asked suddenly: "And where's your lit'ry friend?"

"Oh, I've missed him somehow. He didn't turn up at St. Pancras this morning, and I've no idea what's become of him."

The news fell among them like a thunderbolt, and all but Henry immediately thought of that silver teapot and other preparations for the distinguished visitor. Edward John secretly regretted his journey to Birmingham; but Mrs. Charles was glad she had the teapot, visitor or no visitor.

Henry was not altogether sorry, if he had spoken his mind, for he had never quite reconciled himself to his friend's proposal. But he did not speak his mind, and he endeavoured to sympathise with his father's regrets at the absence of Adrian Grant, as Mrs. Charles had been straining every nerve to provide a meal worthy of the man.

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"P'raps he'll be to-morrow," said Edward John "Poor old Jukes 'll feel a bit left. He'd been building on 'aving 'im."

"I'm sorry for the trouble he has caused you all, and I hope he may yet turn up so that you won't be disappointed."

"Never mind, 'Enry, my lad, it's you we want in the first place, and right glad we are to see you. The vicar was in asking for you this afternoon. You'll know a difference on the old man. Going down the 'ill, he is. But we're all growing older every day, as the song says. You're filling out now, and that's good. I said you were growing all to legs last time. Aye, aye, 'ere you are again."

"You haven't been troubled with your chest, Henry, I hope," said Mrs. Charles, taking advantage of a moment when her husband did not seem to have a question to ask.

"Chest! dear no, mother; always wear flannel next the skin, you know," her son replied lightly.

Mrs. Charles sighed, and her lips tightened as in pain.

"What books has Mr. Grant written?" Dora asked, *à propos* of nothing.

"Some novels which I don't advise you to read," said Henry.

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"Why that? I'm growing quite literary," his sister returned. "Eunice has infected me; she's a great reader now."

At mention of the name, Henry coloured a little.

"Indeed!" he said. "She always had good taste, I think; but really I'm sick of books and writing. I think you used to do pretty well without them."

"Hearken at that," said his father. "Sick of books! It's the same all over. Old Brag the butcher used to say, leave a cat free for a night in the shop to eat all it could get, and it was safe to leave the beef alone ever after. I'm sick o' postage stamps, but we've got to sell 'em."

"I'm not so tired of my work as all that," Henry went on, "but down here I'm glad to get away from it."

We know this was scarcely true, as he had brought down his unfinished manuscript of "that book" to work at it if he felt the mood come on. He spoke chiefly to divert the conversation from the topic of Adrian Grant's novels, which he felt he could not frankly discuss in this home of simple life.

"I must call on Mr. Needham before Sunday," he added inconsequently to his father.

"Eunice is at home just now, but she's going away on a visit to her aunt at Tewksbury next week," said Dora, and Mrs. Charles watched the face of her son anxiously as his sister spoke.

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"Oh, indeed!" said Henry, without betraying any feeling.

CHAPTER XXIII

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A TRAGIC ENDING

It was on a Friday that Henry arrived at Hampton. He had expected a telegram from Adrian Grant that evening, explaining his failure to join him at St. Pancras, but no word was received. Nor did Saturday morning bring a note. But it brought the morning papers and tragic news.

Henry was seated in the garden behind his father's house—a real old-world garden, with rudely-made paths and a charming tangle of flowers—gigantic hollyhocks, bright calceolarias, sweet-smelling jasmine, stocks, early asters and chrysanthemums, growing in rich profusion and in the most haphazard manner. The jasmine climbed over the trellis-work of the summer-seat, made long years ago by the hands of Edward John before he had grown stout and lazy, and now creaking aloud to be repaired.

He had come out here with a Birmingham morning paper in his hand—a paper which made his journalistic blood boil when he thought how intolerably dull and self-sufficient it was—and he had only opened it at the London letter when he saw a name that made him fumble the sheets quickly into small compass for close reading—Adrian Grant!

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A new book by him? a bit of personal gossip? No. He read:

"The literary world will be shocked this morning to hear of the tragic death of Mr. Adrian Grant, the celebrated author of 'Ashes' and other novels, which have achieved great success in this country and America. As is well known, the name of the novelist is an assumed one, his own cognomen being the somewhat curious one of Phineas Puddephatt. He was a gentleman of private means, and peculiar in his habits. There is probably no other living writer of his eminence about whose private life less is known. He was frequently absent from this country for long periods, and cared little for the usual attractions of literary life in London. This morning (Friday) he was found dead in his apartments at Gloucester Road, Kensington, under mysterious circumstances. He had intended leaving to-day for a short stay in the country, but as he did not appear at breakfast at the usual hour, and gave no response when summoned, the door of his bedroom was opened, and he was not there, nor had his bed been slept in. Entering his study, which adjoined the bedroom, the domestics were shocked to find Mr. Grant—to give him the name he is best known by—seated on a chair, with the handle of his 'cello in his left hand and the bow held in his right, in the very act of drawing it across the strings. He was dead; and the extraordinary life-likeness of the pose added greatly to the tragic nature of the discovery. At present no explanation is forthcoming, and an inquest will be held. The deceased novelist was an accomplished performer on the 'cello, and those who knew him describe him even as a master of that instrument, and capable of having achieved as great, if not greater, distinction as a musician than as a novelist. He is believed to have been just about forty years of age."

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It seemed but yesterday that Henry read in the *Weekly Review* a paragraph about the identity of Adrian Grant, and now—this! The stabs of Fate come fast and ruthless to the young man, to rid him of youth's illusion of immortality. He sees men rise up suddenly into fame, and dreams that one day he shall do so too. Then a brief year or two glides by, and the hearse draws up at the door of Fame's latest favourite, and youth begins to understand that the bright game of life must now be played with a blinking eye on the end of all things mortal. If he also understands that the end is in truth the beginning, that "the best is yet to be," then he may be happy no less. If not, he is booked for cynicism and things unlovely.

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Adrian Grant dead! Fame, fortune his, and but half-way through life. Dead, and "mysteriously." Henry sat dumb, struck thoughtless with amazement.

"Ow d'you like them 'olly'ocks, 'Enry; ain't they tremenjous?"

The voice of his father recalled him, and the good human ring of it was sweet in his ears.

"Father, a terrible thing has happened. My friend Mr. Grant is dead."

Edward John pursed his mouth to whistle in token of blank surprise, but the scared look on Henry's face stayed him in the act, and he said "Well, well!" instead.

"Ow did it happen? Run over?"

An accident was about the only means of death to people under seventy that was known in Hampton, if we except consumption.

"Listen to this, father; it's dreadful!"

And Henry re-read the paragraph, turning also to the news columns, where the information was supplemented by the statement of a servant to the effect that the novelist had been heard playing his 'cello late in the night, and had stopped suddenly in the middle of a bar.

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"Well, well," said Edward John, "that beats all! Poor fellow, and me went up to Brum to get some things all on account of 'im."

ONE SUNDAY, AND AFTER

SUNDAY morning came sweet with the soft breath of golden autumn, and Henry awoke with the breeze whispering through his open window, "Adrian Grant is dead." For a moment it seemed that nothing else mattered, and in a moment more the need to wash and dress dispelled that gloomy thought.

"Poor Grant!" said Henry to himself, as he soused his face at the wash-stand. "Poor Grant! I wonder what he thinks of life and death to-day?" All the cynical utterances of the dead man crowded back on the memory of the living. His contempt of the spiritual life, his jaundiced views of humanity. It was terrible to think of a gifted man dying with such cold thoughts in his mind. The mysterious nature of the death also troubled Henry, and his knowledge of the man led him to suspect the use of some drug.

But these thoughts and speculations were suppressed, if not banished, by the pleasant routine of the rural morning and the going to morning church. Henry found himself searching anxiously with his eyes for Eunice Lyndon, and he was disappointed not to see her there. She was absent owing to household duties, and a pressing visit to be made to a sick member of Mr. Needham's flock.

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At the close of the service the vicar announced that his farewell sermon would be delivered in the evening, and extended a fatherly invitation to his parishioners to come and hear his last words to them.

When the clang of the evening bell shook the drowsy air of the village, it evoked an unusual response. Many a wheezing veteran and worn old woman toiled their way up the hill. Never before was the little church so full as on that peaceful autumn evening.

The entire Charles family was present, Henry sitting next to his mother; and as he looked round upon that homely congregation, nearly every face in which was familiar to him, the emotions of his boyhood stirred within him again, and he felt as if all he had passed through since then was as a troubled dream.

The slanting rays of the setting sun streamed through the western windows as Mr. Needham slowly mounted the pulpit. Every eye was raised to him as he stood there with his open Bible in his hand. What would he say? What would be his last words to them? They were these:

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"I have fought the good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness."

In coughless silence, with those listening eyes fixed upon him, the vicar began his discourse, making a brave attempt to preserve his outward calm. He dwelt upon the career of St. Paul; followed him in his wanderings, his perils of waters, his perils in the wilderness, and many trials and sufferings through which he had passed. And now, in a dungeon at Rome, with a cruel death awaiting him, as he looked back on it all the triumphant note broke from him: "I have fought the good fight."

From that the vicar turned to the career of another: a great poet, one who had all the world could offer, and who had drunk so deeply of the pleasures of life that his soul was satiated with them—Lord Byron. And when at the last, a stranger in a strange land, away from friends and kindred, he took up his pen to write, the last words which he gave to the world were these:

"My days are in the yellow leaf;
The flowers and fruits of love are gone;
The worm, the canker, and the grief
Are mine alone!"

The vicar paused; and then, with simple, touching earnestness, added:

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"Which, my brethren will be yours at the last—'the worm, the canker, and the grief,' or the crown of righteousness that fadeth not away?"

Eyes were moist, and hearts throbbed unusually among the simple-minded village folk as they filed out, but little was said; they felt they had been assisting at one of the solemn mysteries of the church, and no dubious composition, no grandiloquence of the vicar's came between them and the heart-cry of the old man.

Edward John broke the silence in which his little group walked homeward by saying: "There's a deal of truth in what the vicar said about *vanitas vanitatum*, 'Enry. Seems to me there ain't nothing much worth having in this world unless we're keepin' in mind the world that is to come."

"That is so, father," Henry assented shortly; for his mind was full of new and comforting thoughts, and his heart suffused with a tenderness he could not speak.

A great love for his father had been budding steadily when he fancied most it was withering, and it had burst almost at once into full bloom. To Mr. Needham also his point of view was suddenly and for ever changed.

Both his father and the vicar had been objects of his youthful admiration; but when there came the illuminating knowledge of the world and the intimate contact with life which journalism brings to its young professors—as they in their fond hearts fancy—both figures began to recede

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into the background, in common with others that had once been cherished; for, unwillingly it may have been, but still actually, the cynic which is in us all was raised up in Henry by the touch of a master cynic.

Frankly, he had been dangerously near the condition of a "superior person"—of all human states the most contemptible. His father's ignorant ways, the vicar's little affectations of learning, his mother's curl-papers, his sisters' dowdiness of dress—these were the things that caused them to recede to the background of the young man's mind when the young man was in the first lust of his life-experience. And all the time he was uneasily conscious that he himself was at fault, and they wholesomer bits of God's handiwork than he.

But the tragic ending of the disturber of his mind, the almost certainty of the cause, was a crushing commentary on all the philosophy which Adrian Grant had preached. Art for the sake of art, and a dose of poison when you take the fancy to be rid of your responsibilities. That was how Henry's experience of the novelist summed itself up in his mind after Mr. Needham's artless little human sermon. The vicar might be a hide-bound thinker, a mere echo of ages of hide-bound Bible interpreters, but he was a better and a bigger man than he who went out with his 'cello between his knees, thought Henry. Oh, all this prattle of those who were devoted to the arts! How futile it sounded when, as with a new revelation, the young man saw and loved at sight the good, rude health of his father and his sisters, living as bits of Nature, and standing not up to rail at Fate, but without whimpering playing their tiny parts in the drama of life.

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"But all need not be vanity, don't you think, Mr. Needham?" said Henry, when he called on the vicar next day. "All isn't vanity, I now feel sure, if we can keep green a simple faith in God's goodness to us; and surely if we only attempt to model our conduct on the life of Jesus we shall be in the way of spiritual happiness."

"My boy, you have got the drift of what I said. There's nothing in life to place above that. Surely to do these things is to fight the good fight, and learning or want of it matters nothing. All the learning, so far as I can see, brings one only to the starting-place of ignorance when we face the Eternal. Hold fast by that belief, and all will be well. Let your motto be *Servabo fidem*, or as the French hath it, *Gardez la foi*."

Henry did not smile even in his mind at the Latin and French tags. He could now accept and almost welcome these little foibles for the sake of the sheltered life the old man had led, and the white flower of simple faith which had blossomed in the garden of his soul.

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"Yes, Mr. Needham, I'm not the first who went to gather wisdom, and came back empty-handed to find it at my own door."

"Nor the last, Henry; nor the last."

Mr. Needham was not the only one at the vicarage whom Henry went to see, and during the remainder of his holiday his visits were remarkably frequent. Henry's new interest in the vicar seemed extraordinary to Edward John, though it rejoiced hearts at the Post Office in a way the postmaster did not then suspect.

Eunice was lovelier than ever, but with the first charm of loveliness to Henry, who had at length discovered that she had violet eyes, and was quite the most beautiful young woman he had ever seen.

"How blind I must have been!" said he to himself.

How blind!—nay, he had only been focussing his gaze on things so far off and vain, that the things near at hand and to be cherished he had overlooked. He had been peering at the mysteries of the heavens through a telescope, and trampling the while on the loveliness of earth. But at last with the naked eye of his heart he saw all things in a truer perspective—a heart refreshed with the re-entry of its old first, simple faith.

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"That book" was never finished. Henry read over what he had written, and had the courage to destroy it, convinced that it was gloomy and unhappy. Eunice probably had something to do with that; for he found her ardent in praise of those who wrote happy books. And when he was in the train for Fleet Street once again it was with a great contentment in his soul, and high hope of doing zestfully his daily task; for he had found that not only wisdom, but love, often lies at our own door if we but open our eyes—and our heart.

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Transcriber's Notes:

The Contents section has been modified to correspond with the actual first pages of each chapter.

The ads were moved from the front of the book to the end of the book.

Errors in punctuations were not corrected unless otherwise noted below:

On page 51, a period was added after "by himself".

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