

BENNETT ARNOLD

THE OLD ADAM: A
STORY OF ADVENTURE

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The Old Adam: A Story of Adventure

PART I

CHAPTER I DOG-BITE

I

"And yet," Edward Henry Machin reflected as at six minutes to six he approached his own dwelling at the top of Bleakridge, "and yet-I don't feel so jolly after all!"

The first two words of this disturbing meditation had reference to the fact that, by telephoning twice to his stockbrokers at Manchester, he had just made the sum of three hundred and forty-one pounds in a purely speculative transaction concerning Rubber shares. (It was in the autumn of the great gambling year, 1910). He had simply opened his lucky and wise

mouth at the proper moment, and the money, like ripe golden fruit, had fallen into it, a gift from benign Heaven, surely a cause for happiness! And yet-he did not feel so jolly! He was surprised, he was even a little hurt, to discover by introspection that monetary gain was not necessarily accompanied by felicity. Nevertheless, this very successful man of the world of the Five Towns, having been born on the 27th of May, 1867, had reached the age of forty-three and a half years.

"I must be getting older," he reflected.

He was right. He was still young, as every man of forty-three will agree, but he was getting older. A few years ago a windfall of Three hundred and forty-one pounds would not have been followed by morbid self-analysis; it would have been followed by unreasoning instinctive elation, which elation would have endured at least twelve hours.

As he disappeared within the reddish garden wall which sheltered his abode from the publicity of Trafalgar Road, he half hoped to see Nellie waiting for him on the famous marble step of the porch, for the woman had long, long since invented a way of scouting for his advent from the small window in the bathroom. But there was nobody on the marble step. His melancholy increased. At the midday meal he had complained of neuralgia, and hence this was an evening upon which he might fairly have expected to see sympathy charmingly attired on the porch. It is true that the neuralgia had completely gone. "Still," he said to himself with justifiable sardonic gloom, "how does she

know my neuralgia's gone? She doesn't know."

Having opened the front door with the thinnest, neatest latchkey in the Five Towns, he entered his home and stumbled slightly over a brush that was lying against the sunk door-mat. He gazed at that brush with resentment. It was a dilapidated handbrush. The offensive object would have been out of place, at nightfall, in the lobby of any house. But in the lobby of his house-the house which he had planned a dozen years earlier to the special end of minimising domestic labour, and which he had always kept up to date with the latest devices-in his lobby the spectacle of a vile outworn hand-brush at tea-time amounted to a scandal. Less than a fortnight previously he had purchased and presented to his wife a marvellous electric vacuum-cleaner, surpassing all former vacuum-cleaners. You simply attached this machine by a cord to the wall, like a dog, and waved it in mysterious passes over the floor, like a fan, and the house was clean! He was as proud of this machine as though he had invented it, instead of having merely bought it; every day he enquired about its feats, expecting enthusiastic replies as a sort of reward for his own keenness; and be it said that he had had enthusiastic replies.

And now this obscene hand-brush!

As he carefully removed his hat and his beautiful new Melton overcoat (which had the colour and the soft smoothness of a damson), he animadverted upon the astounding negligence of women. There were Nellie, his wife; his mother, the nurse, the

cook, the maid-five of them; and in his mind they had all plotted together-a conspiracy of carelessness-to leave the inexcusable tool in his lobby for him to stumble over. What was the use of accidentally procuring three hundred and forty-one pounds?

Still no sign of Nellie, though he purposely made a noisy rattle with his ebon walking-stick. Then the maid burst out of the kitchen with a tray and the principal utensils for high tea thereon. She had a guilty air. The household was evidently late. Two steps at a time he rushed up-stairs to the bathroom, so as to be waiting in the dining-room at six precisely, in order, if possible, to shame the household and fill it with remorse and unpleasantness. Yet, ordinarily, he was not a very prompt man, nor did he delight in giving pain. On the contrary, he was apt to be casual, blithe, and agreeable.

The bathroom was his peculiar domain, which he was always modernising, and where his talent for the ingenious organisation of comfort and his utter indifference to esthetic beauty had the fullest scope. By universal consent admitted to be the finest bathroom in the Five Towns, it typified the whole house. He was disappointed on this occasion to see no untidy trace in it of the children's ablution; some transgression of the supreme domestic law that the bathroom must always be free and immaculate when Father wanted it would have suited his gathering humour. As he washed his hands and cleansed his well-trimmed nails with a nail-brush that had cost five shillings and sixpence, he glanced at himself in the mirror which he was splashing. A stoutish,

broad-shouldered, fair, chubby man with a short bright beard and plenteous bright hair! His necktie pleased him; the elegance of his turned-back wristbands pleased him; and he liked the rich down on his forearms.

He could not believe that he looked forty-three and a half. And yet he had recently had an idea of shaving off his beard, partly to defy time, but partly, also (I must admit), because a friend had suggested to him, wildly perhaps, that if he dispensed with a beard his hair might grow more sturdily. Yes, there was one weak spot in the middle of the top of his head where the crop had of late disconcertingly thinned. The hair-dresser had informed him that the symptom would vanish under electric massage, and that, if he doubted the bonafides of hair-dressers, any doctor would testify to the value of electric massage. But now Edward Henry Machin, strangely discouraged, inexplicably robbed of the zest of existence, decided that it was not worth while to shave off his beard. Nothing was worth while. If he was forty-three and a half, he was forty-three and a half. To become bald was the common lot. Moreover, beardless, he would need the service of a barber every day. And he was absolutely persuaded that not a barber worth the name could be found in the Five Towns. He actually went to Manchester, thirty-six miles, to get his hair cut. The operation never cost him less than a sovereign and half a day's time. And he honestly deemed himself to be a fellow of simple tastes! Such is the effect of the canker of luxury. Happily he could afford these simple tastes; for, although not rich in the

modern significance of the term, he paid income tax on some five thousand pounds a year, without quite convincing the Surveyor of Taxes that he was an honest man.

He brushed the thick hair over the weak spot, he turned down his wristbands, he brushed the collar of his jacket, and lastly his beard; and he put on his jacket-with a certain care, for he was very neat. And then, reflectively twisting his moustache to military points, he spied through the smaller window to see whether the new high hoarding of the football-ground really did prevent a serious observer from descrying wayfarers as they breasted the hill from Hanbridge. It did not. Then he spied through the larger window upon the yard, to see whether the wall of the new rooms which he had lately added to his house showed any further trace of damp, and whether the new chauffeur was washing the new motor-car with all his heart. The wall showed no further trace of damp, and the new chauffeur's bent back seemed to symbolise an extreme conscientiousness.

Then the clock on the landing struck six, and he hurried off to put the household to open shame.

II

Nellie came into the dining-room two minutes after her husband. As Edward Henry had laboriously counted these two minutes almost second by second on the dining-room clock, he was very tired of waiting. His secret annoyance was increased

by the fact that Nellie took off her white apron in the doorway and flung it hurriedly on to the table-tray which, during the progress of meals, was established outside the dining-room door. He did not actually witness this operation of undressing, because Nellie was screened by the half-closed door; but he was entirely aware of it. He disliked it, and he had always disliked it. When Nellie was at work, either as a mother or as the owner of certain fine silver ornaments, he rather enjoyed the wonderful white apron, for it suited her temperament; but as the head of a household with six thousand pounds a year at its disposal, he objected to any hint of the thing at meals. And to-night he objected to it altogether. Who could guess from the homeliness of their family life that he was in a position to spend a hundred pounds a week and still have enough income left over to pay the salary of a town clerk or so? Nobody could guess; and he felt that people ought to be able to guess. When he was young he would have esteemed an income of six thousand pounds a year as necessarily implicating feudal state, valets, castles, yachts, family solicitors, racing-stables, county society, dinner-calls, and a drawling London accent. Why should his wife wear an apron at all? But the sad truth was that neither his wife nor his mother ever *looked* rich, nor even endeavoured to look rich. His mother would carry an eighty-pound sealskin as though she had picked it up at a jumble sale, and his wife put such simplicity into the wearing of a hundred-and-eighty pound diamond ring that its expensiveness was generally quite wasted.

And yet, while the logical male in him scathingly condemned this feminine defect of character, his private soul was glad of it, for he well knew that he would have been considerably irked by the complexities and grandeurs of high life. But never would he have admitted this.

Nellie's face as she sat down was not limpid. He understood naught of it. More than twenty years had passed since they had first met-he and a wistful little creature-at a historic town-hall dance. He could still see the wistful little creature in those placid and pure features, in that buxom body; but now there was a formidable, capable, and experienced woman there too. Impossible to credit that the wistful little creature was thirty-seven! But she was. Indeed, it was very doubtful if she would ever see thirty-eight again. Once he had had the most romantic feelings about her. He could recall the slim flexibility of her waist, the timorous, melting invitation of her eyes. And now-such was human existence!

She sat up erect on her chair. She did not apologise for being late. She made no inquiry as to his neuralgia. On the other hand, she was not cross. She was just neutral, polite, cheerful, and apparently conscious of perfection. He strongly desired to inform her of the exact time of day, but his lips would not articulate the words.

"Maud," she said with divine calm to the maid who bore in the baked York ham under its silver canopy, "you haven't taken away that brush that's in the passage." Another illustration of

Nellie's inability to live up to six thousand pounds a year; she would always refer to the hall as the "passage."

"Please'm, I did, m'm," replied Maud, now as conscious of perfection as her mistress. "He must have took it back again."

"Who's 'he'?" demanded the master.

"Carlo, sir." Upon which triumph Maud retired.

Edward Henry was dashed. Nevertheless, he quickly recovered his presence of mind, and sought about for a justification of his previous verdict upon the negligence of five women.

"It would have been easy enough to put the brush where the dog couldn't get at it," he said. But he said this strictly to himself. He could not say it aloud. Nor could he say aloud the words "neuralgia," "three hundred and forty-one pounds," any more than he could say "late."

That he was in a peculiar mental condition is proved by the fact that he did not remark the absence of his mother until he was putting her share of baked ham on to a plate.

He thought, "This is a bit thick, this is!" meaning the extreme lateness of his mother for the meal. But his only audible remark was a somewhat impatient banging down of the hot plate in front of his mother's empty chair.

In answer to this banging, Nellie quietly began:

"Your mother-

(He knew instantly, then, that Nellie was disturbed about something or other. Mother-in-law and daughter-in-law lived

together under one roof in perfect amity. Nay more, they often formed powerful and unscrupulous leagues against him. But whenever Nellie was disturbed, by no matter what, she would say "your mother" instead of merely "Mother." It was an extraordinary subtle, silly, and effective way of putting him in the wrong.)

"Your mother is staying up-stairs with Robert."

Robert was the eldest child, aged eight.

"Oh!" breathed Edward Henry. He might have enquired what the nurse was for; he might have enquired how his mother meant to get her tea; but he refrained, adding simply, "What's up now?"

And in retort to his wife's "your," he laid a faint emphasis on the word "now," to imply that those women were always inventing some fresh imaginary woe for the children.

"Carlo's bitten him-in the calf," said Nellie, tightening her lips.

This, at any rate, was not imaginary.

"The kid was teasing him as usual, I suppose?" he suggested.

"That I don't know," said Nellie. "But I know we must get rid of that dog."

"Serious?"

"Of course we must," Nellie insisted, with an inadvertent heat which she immediately cooled.

"I mean the bite."

"Well-it's a bite right enough."

"And you're thinking of hydrophobia, death amid horrible

agony, and so on."

"No, I'm not," she said stoutly, trying to smile.

But he knew she was. And he knew also that the bite was a trifle. If it had been a good bite, she would have made it enormous; she would have hinted that the dog had left a chasm in the boy's flesh.

"Yes, you are," he continued to twit her, encouraged by her attempt at a smile.

However, the smile expired.

"I suppose you won't deny that Carlo's teeth may have been dirty? He's always nosing in some filth or other," she said challengingly, in a measured tone of sagacity. "And there may be blood-poisoning."

"Blood-fiddlesticks!" exclaimed Edward Henry.

Such a nonsensical and infantile rejoinder deserved no answer, and it received none. Shortly afterwards Maud entered and whispered that Nellie was wanted up-stairs. As soon as his wife had gone, Edward Henry rang the bell.

"Maud," he said, "bring me the *Signal* out of my left-hand overcoat-pocket."

And he defiantly finished his meal at leisure, with the news of the day propped up against the flower-pot, which he had set before him instead of the dish of ham.

III

Later, catching through the open door fragments of a conversation on the stairs which indicated that his mother was at last coming down for tea, he sped like a threatened delinquent into the drawing-room. He had no wish to encounter his mother, though that woman usually said little.

The drawing-room, after the bathroom, was Edward Henry's favourite district in the home. Since he could not spend the whole of his time in the bathroom, – and he could not! – he wisely gave a special care to the drawing-room, and he loved it as one always loves that upon which one has bestowed benefits. He was proud of the drawing-room, and he had the right to be. The principal object in it, at night, was the electric chandelier, which would have been adequate for a lighthouse. Edward Henry's eyes were not what they used to be; and the minor advertisements in the *Signal*, which constituted his sole evening perusals, often lacked legibility. Edward Henry sincerely believed in light and heat; he was almost the only person in the Five Towns who did. In the Five Towns people have fires in their grates-not to warm the room, but to make the room bright. Seemingly they use their pride to keep themselves warm. At any rate, whenever Edward Henry talked to them of radiators, they would sternly reply that a radiator did not and could not brighten a room. Edward Henry had made the great discovery that an efficient chandelier will brighten a room

better even than a fire; and he had gilded his radiator. The notion of gilding the radiator was not his own; he had seen a gilded radiator in the newest hotel at Birmingham, and had rejoiced as some peculiar souls rejoice when they meet a fine line in a new poem. (In concession to popular prejudice, Edward Henry had fire-grates in his house, and fires therein during exceptionally frosty weather; but this did not save him from being regarded in the Five Towns as in some ways a peculiar soul.) The effulgent source of dark heat was scientifically situated in front of the window, and on ordinarily cold evenings Edward Henry and his wife and mother, and an acquaintance if one happened to come in, would gather round the radiator and play bridge or dummy whist.

The other phenomena of the drawing-room which particularly interested Edward Henry were the Turkey carpet, the four vast easy chairs, the sofa, the imposing cigar-cabinet, and the mechanical piano-player. At one brief period he had hovered a good deal about the revolving bookcase containing the encyclopedia, to which his collection of books was limited; but the frail passion for literature had not survived a struggle with the seductions of the mechanical piano-player.

The walls of the room never drew his notice. He had chosen, some years before, a patent washable kind of wall-paper (which could be wiped over with a damp cloth), and he had also chosen the pattern of the paper, but it is a fact that he could spend hours in any room without even seeing the pattern of its paper. In the

same way, his wife's cushions and little draperies and bows were invisible to him, though he had searched for and duly obtained the perfect quality of swansdown which filled the cushions.

The one ornament of the walls which attracted him was a large and splendidly framed oil-painting of a ruined castle in the midst of a sombre forest through which cows were strolling. In the tower of the castle was a clock, and this clock was a realistic timepiece whose fingers moved and told the hour. Two of the oriel windows of the castle were realistic holes in its masonry; through one of them you could put a key to wind up the clock, and through the other you could put a key to wind up a secret musical box which played sixteen different tunes. He had bought this handsome relic of the Victorian era (not less artistic, despite your scorn, than many devices for satisfying the higher instincts of the present day) at an auction sale in the Strand, London. But it, too, had been supplanted in his esteem by the mechanical piano-player.

He now selected an example of the most expensive cigar in the cigar-cabinet, and lighted it as only a connoisseur can light a cigar-lovingly; he blew out the match lingeringly, with regret, and dropped it and the cigar's red collar with care into a large copper bowl on the centre table, instead of flinging it against the Japanese umbrella in the fireplace. (A grave disadvantage of radiators is that you cannot throw odds and ends into them.) He chose the most expensive cigar because he wanted comfort and peace. The ham was not digesting very well.

Then he sat down and applied himself to the property advertisements in the *Signal*, a form of sensational serial which usually enthralled him-but not to-night. He allowed the paper to lapse on to the floor, and then rose impatiently, rearranged the thick dark blue curtains behind the radiator, and finally yielded to the silent call of the mechanical piano-player. He quite knew that to dally with the piano-player while smoking a high-class cigar was to insult the cigar; but he did not care. He tilted the cigar upwards from an extreme corner of his mouth, and through the celestial smoke gazed at the titles of the new music-rolls which had been delivered that day, and which were ranged on the top of the piano itself.

And while he did so he was thinking:

"Why in thunder didn't the little thing come and tell me at once about that kid and his dog-bite? I wonder why she didn't! She seemed only to mention it by accident. I wonder why she didn't bounce into the bathroom and tell me at once?"

But it was untrue that he sought vainly for an answer to this riddle. He was aware of the answer. He even kept saying over the answer to himself:

"She's made up her mind I've been teasing her a bit too much lately about those kids and their precious illnesses. And she's doing the dignified. That's what she's doing! She's doing the dignified!"

Of course, instantly after his tea he ought to have gone upstairs to inspect the wounded victim of dogs. The victim was his

own child, and its mother was his wife. He knew that he ought to have gone up-stairs long since. He knew he ought now to go, and the sooner the better. But somehow he could not go; he could not bring himself to go. In the minor and major crises of married life there are not two partners but four; each partner has a dual personality; each partner is indeed two different persons, and one of these fights against the other, with the common result of a fatal inaction.

The wickeder of the opposing persons in Edward Henry, getting the upper hand of the more virtuous, sniggered. "Dirty teeth, indeed! Blood-poisoning, indeed! Why not rabies, while she's about it? I guarantee she's dreaming of coffins and mourning coaches already!"

Scanning nonchalantly the titles of the music-rolls, he suddenly saw: "Funeral March. Chopin."

"She shall have it," he said, affixing the roll to the mechanism. And added, "Whatever it is!"

For he was not acquainted with the Funeral March from Chopin's Pianoforte Sonata. His musical education had in truth begun only a year earlier, with the advertisement of the "Pianisto" mechanical player. He was a judge of advertisements, and the "Pianisto" literature pleased him in a high degree. He justifiably reckoned that he could distinguish between honest and dishonest advertising. He made a deep study of the question of mechanical players, and deliberately came to the conclusion that the "Pianisto" was the best. It was also the most costly; but one

of the conveniences of having six thousand pounds a year is that you need not deny yourself the best mechanical player because it happens to be the most costly. He bought a "Pianisto," and incidentally he bought a superb grand piano, and exiled the old cottage piano to the nursery.

The "Pianisto" was the best, partly because, like the vacuum-cleaner, it could be operated by electricity, and partly because, by means of certain curved lines on the unrolling paper, and of certain gun-metal levers and clutches, it enabled the operator to put his secret ardent soul into the music. Assuredly it had given Edward Henry a taste for music. The whole world of musical compositions was his to conquer, and he conquered it at the rate of about two great masters a month. From Handel to Richard Strauss, even from Palestrina to Debussy, the achievements of genius lay at his mercy. He criticised them with a freedom that was entirely unprejudiced by tradition. Beethoven was no more to him than Arthur Sullivan; indeed, was rather less. The works of his choice were the "Tannhäuser" overture, a potpourri of Verdi's "Aïda," Chopin's Study in Thirds-which ravished him-and a selection from "The Merry Widow," which also ravished him. So that on the whole it may be said that he had a very good natural taste.

He at once liked Chopin's Funeral March. He entered profoundly into the spirit of it. With the gun-metal levers he produced in a marvellous fashion the long tragic roll of the drums, and by the manipulation of a clutch he distilled into the

chant at the graveside a melancholy sweetness that rent the heart. The later crescendi were overwhelming. And as he played there, with the bright blaze of the chandelier on his fair hair and beard, and the blue cigar-smoke in his nostrils, and the effluence of the gilded radiator behind him, and the intimacy of the drawn window curtains and the closed and curtained door folding him in from the world, and the agony of the music grieving his artistic soul to the core-as he played there, he grew gradually happier and happier, and the zest of existence seemed to return. It was not only that he felt the elemental, unfathomable satisfaction of a male who is sheltered in solitude from a pack of women that have got on his nerves; there was also the more piquant assurance that he was behaving in a very sprightly manner. How long was it since he had accomplished anything worthy of his ancient reputation as a "card," as "the" card of the Five Towns? He could not say; but now he knew that he was being a card again. The whole town would smile and forgive and admire if it learnt that-

Nellie invaded the room. She had resumed the affray.

"Denry!" she reproached him, in an uncontrolled voice. "I'm ashamed of you! I really am!" She was no longer doing the dignified. The mask was off, and the unmistakable lineaments of the outraged mother appeared. That she should address him as "Denry" proved the intensity of her agitation. Years ago, when he had been made an alderman, his wife and his mother had decided that "Denry" was no longer a suitable name for him, and had abandoned it in favour of "Edward Henry."

He ceased playing.

"Why?" he protested, with a ridiculous air of innocence. "I'm only playing Chopin. Can't I play Chopin?"

He was rather surprised and impressed that she had recognised the piece for what it was. But of course she did, as a fact, know something about music, he remembered, though she never touched the "Pianisto."

"I think it's a pity you can't choose some other evening for your funeral marches!" she exclaimed.

"If that's it," said Edward Henry like lightning, "why did you stick me out you weren't afraid of hydrophobia?"

"I'll thank you to come up-stairs," she replied with warmth.

"Oh, all right, my dear! All right!" he cooed.

And they went up-stairs in a rather solemn procession.

IV

Nellie led the way to the chamber known as "Maisie's room," where the youngest of the Machins was wont to sleep in charge of the nurse, who, under the supervision of the mother of all three, had dominion over Robert, Ralph, and their little sister. The first thing that Edward Henry noticed was the screen which shut off one of the beds. The unfurling of the four-fold screen was always a sure sign that Nellie was taking an infantile illness seriously. It was an indication to Edward Henry of the importance of the dog-bite in Nellie's esteem. When all the chicks of the

brood happened to be simultaneously sound, the screen reposed, inconspicuous, at an angle against a wall behind the door; but when pestilence was abroad, the screen travelled from one room to another in the wake of it, and, spreading wide, took part in the battle of life and death.

In an angle of the screen, on the side of it away from the bed and near the fire (in times of stress Nellie would not rely on radiators), sat old Mrs. Machin, knitting. She was a thin, bony woman of sixty-nine years, and as hard and imperishable as teak. So far as her son knew, she had only had two illnesses in her life. The first was an attack of influenza, and the second was an attack of acute rheumatism, which had incapacitated her for several weeks. Edward Henry and Nellie had taken advantage of her helplessness, then, to force her to give up her barbaric cottage in Brougham Street and share permanently the splendid comfort of their home. She existed in their home like a philosophic prisoner of war at the court of conquerors, behaving faultlessly, behaving magnanimously in the melancholy grandeur of her fall, but never renouncing her soul's secret independence, nor permitting herself to forget that she was on foreign ground. When Edward Henry looked at those yellow and seasoned fingers which, by hard manual labour, had kept herself and him in the young days of his humble obscurity, and which, during sixty years had not been idle for more than six weeks in all, he grew almost apologetic for his wealth. They reminded him of the day when his total resources were five pounds, won in a wager, and of the

day when he drove proudly about behind a mule collecting other people's rents, and of the glittering day when he burst in on her from Llandudno with over a thousand gold sovereigns in a hat-box, – product of his first great picturesque coup, – imagining himself to be an English Jay Gould. She had not blenched even then. She had not blenched since. And she never would blench. In spite of his gorgeous position and his unique reputation, in spite of her well-concealed but notorious pride in him, he still went in fear of that ageless woman, whose undaunted eye always told him that he was still the lad Denry, and her inferior in moral force. The curve of her thin lips seemed ever to be warning him that with her pretensions were quite useless, and that she saw through him, and through him to the innermost grottoes of his poor human depravity.

He caught her eye guiltily.

"Behold the alderman!" she murmured with grimness.

That was all. But the three words took thirty years off his back, snatched the half-crown cigar out of his hand, and reduced him again to the raw, hungry boy of Brougham Street. And he knew that he had sinned gravely in not coming up-stairs very much earlier.

"Is that you, Father?" called the high voice of Robert from the back of the screen.

He had to admit to his son that it was he.

The infant lay on his back in Maisie's bed, while his mother sat lightly on the edge of nurse's bed near-by.

"Well, you're a nice chap!" said Edward Henry, avoiding Nellie's glance, but trying to face his son as one innocent man may face another, and not perfectly succeeding. He never could feel like a real father somehow.

"My temperature's above normal," announced Robert proudly, and then added with regret, "but not much!"

There was the clinical thermometer-instrument which Edward Henry despised and detested as being an inciter of illnesses-in a glass of water on the table between the two beds.

"Father!" Robert began again.

"Well, Robert?" said Edward Henry cheerfully.

He was glad that the child was in one of his rare loquacious moods, because the chatter not only proved that the dog had done no serious damage, – it also eased the silent strain between himself and Nellie.

"Why did you play the Funeral March, Father?" asked Robert; and the question fell into the tranquillity of the room rather like a bomb that had not quite decided whether or not to burst.

For the second time that evening Edward Henry was dashed.

"Have you been meddling with my music-rolls?"

"No, Father. I only read the labels."

This child simply read everything.

"How did you know I was playing a funeral march?" Edward Henry demanded.

"Oh, *I* didn't tell him!" Nellie put in, excusing herself before she was accused. She smiled benignly, as an angel woman,

capable of forgiving all. But there were moments when Edward Henry hated moral superiority and Christian meekness in a wife. Moreover, Nellie somewhat spoiled her own effect by adding with an artificial continuation of the smile, "You needn't look at *me!*"

Edward Henry considered the remark otiose. Though he had indeed ventured to look at her, he had not looked at her in the manner which she implied.

"It made a noise like funerals and things," Robert explained.

"Well, it seems to me, *you* have been playing a funeral march," said Edward Henry to the child.

He thought this rather funny, rather worthy of himself, but the child answered with ruthless gravity and a touch of disdain, for he was a disdainful child, without bowels:

"I don't know what you mean, Father." The curve of his lips (he had his grandmother's lips) appeared to say, "I wish you wouldn't try to be silly, Father." However, youth forgets very quickly, and the next instant Robert was beginning once more, "Father!"

"Well, Robert?"

By mutual agreement of the parents, the child was never addressed as "Bob" or "Bobby," or by any other diminutive. In their practical opinion a child's name was his name, and ought not to be mauled or dismembered on the pretext of fondness. Similarly, the child had not been baptised after his father, or after any male member of either the Machin or the Cotterill family.

Why should family names be perpetuated merely because they were family names? A natural human reaction, this, against the excessive sentimentalism of the Victorian era!

"What does 'stamped out' mean?" Robert enquired.

Now Robert, among other activities, busied himself in the collection of postage-stamps, and in consequence his father's mind, under the impulse of the question, ran immediately to postage-stamps.

"Stamped out?" said Edward Henry, with the air of omniscience that a father is bound to assume. "Postage-stamps are stamped-out-by a machine-you see."

Robert's scorn of this explanation was manifest.

"Well," Edward Henry, piqued, made another attempt, "you stamp a fire out with your feet." And he stamped illustratively on the floor. After all, the child was only eight.

"I knew all that before," said Robert coldly. "You don't understand."

"What makes you ask, dear? Let us show Father your leg." Nellie's voice was soothing.

"Yes," Robert murmured, staring reflectively at the ceiling. "That's it. It says in the encyclopedia that hydrophobia is stamped out in this country-by Mr. Long's muzzling order. Who is Mr. Long?"

A second bomb had fallen on exactly the same spot as the first, and the two exploded simultaneously. And the explosion was none the less terrible because it was silent and invisible. The

tidy domestic chamber was strewn in a moment with an awful mass of wounded susceptibilities. Beyond the screen the *nick-nick* of grandmother's steel needles stopped and started again. It was characteristic of her temperament that she should recover before the younger generations could recover. Edward Henry, as befitted his sex, regained his nerve a little earlier than Nellie.

"I told you never to touch my encyclopedia," said he sternly. Robert had twice been caught on his stomach on the floor with a vast volume open under his chin, and his studies had been traced by vile thumb-marks.

"I know," said Robert.

Whenever anybody gave that child a piece of unsolicited information, he almost invariably replied, "I know."

"But hydrophobia!" cried Nellie. "How did you know about hydrophobia?"

"We had it in spellings last week," Robert explained.

"The deuce you did!" muttered Edward Henry.

The one bright fact of the many-sided and gloomy crisis was the very obvious truth that Robert was the most extraordinary child that ever lived.

"But when on earth did you get at the encyclopedia, Robert?" his mother exclaimed, completely at a loss.

"It was before you came in from Hillport," the wondrous infant answered. "After my leg had stopped hurting me a bit."

"But when I came in Nurse said it had only just happened!"

"Shows how much *she* knew!" said Robert, with contempt.

"Does your leg hurt you now?" Edward Henry enquired.

"A bit. That's why I can't go to sleep, of course."

"Well, let's have a look at it." Edward Henry attempted jollity.

"Mother's wrapped it all up in boracic wool."

The bed-clothes were drawn down and the leg gradually revealed. And the sight of the little soft leg, so fragile and defenceless, really did touch Edward Henry. It made him feel more like an authentic father than he had felt for a long time. And the sight of the red wound hurt him. Still, it was a beautifully clean wound, and it was not a large wound.

"It's a clean wound," he observed judiciously. In spite of himself, he could not keep a certain flippant harsh quality out of his tone.

"Well, I've naturally washed it with carbolic," Nellie returned sharply.

He illogically resented this sharpness.

"Of course he was bitten through his stocking?"

"Of course," said Nellie, re-enveloping the wound hastily, as though Edward Henry was not worthy to regard it.

"Well, then, by the time they got through the stocking, the animal's teeth couldn't be dirty. Every one knows that."

Nellie shut her lips.

"Were you teasing Carlo?" Edward Henry demanded curtly of his son.

"I don't know."

Whenever anybody asked that child for a piece of information,

he almost invariably replied, "I don't know."

"How, you don't know? You must know whether you were teasing the dog or not!" Edward Henry was nettled.

The renewed spectacle of his own wound had predisposed Robert to feel a great and tearful sympathy for himself. His mouth now began to take strange shapes and to increase magically in area, and beads appeared in the corners of his large eyes.

"I-I was only measuring his tail by his hind leg," he blubbered, and then sobbed.

Edward Henry did his best to save his dignity.

"Come, come!" he reasoned, less menacingly. "Boys who can read encyclopedias mustn't be cry-babies. You'd no business measuring Carlo's tail by his hind leg. You ought to remember that that dog's older than you." And this remark, too, he thought rather funny, but apparently he was alone in his opinion.

Then he felt something against his calf. And it was Carlo's nose. Carlo was a large, very shaggy and unkempt Northern terrier, but owing to vagueness of his principal points, due doubtless to a vagueness in his immediate ancestry, it was impossible to decide whether he had come from the north or the south side of the Tweed. This aging friend of Edward Henry's, surmising that something unusual was afoot in his house, and having entirely forgotten the trifling episode of the bite, had unobtrusively come to make enquiries.

"Poor old boy!" said Edward Henry, stooping to pat the dog.

"Did they try to measure his tail with his hind leg?"

The gesture was partly instinctive, for he loved Carlo; but it also had its origin in sheer nervousness, in sheer ignorance of what was the best thing to do. However, he was at once aware that he had done the worst thing. Had not Nellie announced that the dog must be got rid of? And here he was fondly caressing the bloodthirsty dog! With a hysterical movement of the lower part of her leg, Nellie pushed violently against the dog, – she did not kick, but she nearly kicked, – and Carlo, faintly howling a protest, fled.

Edward Henry was hurt. He escaped from between the beds, and from that close, enervating domestic atmosphere where he was misunderstood by women and disdained by infants. He wanted fresh air; he wanted bars, whiskies, billiard-rooms, and the society of masculine men about town. The whole of his own world was against him.

As he passed by his knitting mother, she ignored him and moved not. She had a great gift of holding aloof from conjugal complications.

On the landing he decided that he would go out at once into the major world. Half-way down the stairs he saw his overcoat on the hall-stand, beckoning to him and offering release.

Then he heard the bedroom door and his wife's footsteps.

"Edward Henry!"

"Well?"

He stopped and looked up inimically at her face, which

overhung the banisters. It was the face of a woman outraged in her most profound feelings, but amazingly determined to be sweet.

"What do you think of it?"

"What do I think of what? The wound?"

"Yes."

"Why, it's simply nothing. Nothing at all. You know how that kid always heals up quickly. You won't be able to find the wound in a day or two."

"Don't you think it ought to be cauterised at once?"

He moved downwards.

"No, I don't. I've been bitten three times in my life by dogs, and I was never cauterised."

"Well, I *do* think it ought to be cauterised." She raised her voice slightly as he retreated from her. "And I shall be glad if you'll call in at Dr. Stirling's and ask him to come round."

He made no reply, but put on his overcoat and his hat, and took his stick. Glancing up the stairs, he saw Nellie was now standing at the head of them, under the electric light there, and watching him. He knew that she thought he was cravenly obeying her command. She could have no idea that before she spoke to him he had already decided to put on his overcoat and hat and take his stick and go forth into the major world. However, that was no affair of his.

He hesitated a second. Then the nurse appeared out of the kitchen with a squalling Maisie in her arms, and ran up-stairs.

Why Maisie was squalling, and why she should have been in the kitchen at such an hour instead of in bed, he could not guess; but he could guess that if he remained one second longer in that exasperating minor world he would begin to smash furniture, and so he quitted it.

V

It was raining slightly, but he dared not return to the house for his umbrella. In the haze and wet of the shivering October night, the clock of Bleakridge Church glowed like a fiery disk suspended in the sky; and, mysteriously hanging there, without visible means of support, it seemed to him somehow to symbolise the enigma of the universe and intensify his inward gloom. Never before had he had such feelings to such a degree. It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that never before had the enigma of the universe occurred to him. The side gates clicked as he stood hesitant under the shelter of the wall, and a figure emerged from his domain. It was Bellfield, the new chauffeur, going across to his home in the little square in front of the church. Bellfield touched his cap with an eager and willing hand, as new chauffeurs will.

"Want the car, sir? Setting in for a wet night!"

"No, thanks."

It was a lie. He did want the car. He wanted the car so that he might ride right away into a new and more interesting world, or at

any rate into Hanbridge, centre of the pleasures, the wickedness, and the commerce of the Five Towns. But he dared not have the car. He dared not have his own car. He must slip off, noiseless and unassuming. Even to go to Dr. Stirling's he dared not have the car. Besides, he could have walked down the hill to Dr. Stirling's in three minutes. Not that he had the least intention of going to Dr. Stirling's. No! His wife imagined that he was going; but she was mistaken. Within an hour, when Dr. Stirling had failed to arrive, she would doubtless telephone, and get her Dr. Stirling. Not, however, with Edward Henry's assistance!

He reviewed his conduct throughout the evening. In what particular had it been sinful? In no particular. True, the accident to the boy was a misfortune, but had he not borne that misfortune lightly, minimised it, and endeavoured to teach others to bear it lightly? His blithe humour ought surely to have been an example to Nellie! And as for the episode of the funeral march on the "Pianisto," really, really, the tiresome little thing ought to have better appreciated his whimsical drollery!

But Nellie was altered; he was altered; everything was altered. He remembered the ecstasy of their excursion to Switzerland. He remembered the rapture with which, on their honeymoon, he had clasped a new opal bracelet on her exciting arm. He could not possibly have such sensations now. What was the meaning of life? Was life worth living? The fact was, he was growing old. Useless to pretend to himself that it was not so. Both he and she were growing old. Only, she seemed to be placidly content, and

he was not content. And more and more the domestic atmosphere and the atmosphere of the district fretted and even annoyed him. To-night's affair was not unique, but it was a culmination. He gazed pessimistically north and south along the slimy expanse of Trafalgar Road, which sank northwards in the direction of Dr. Stirling's, and southwards in the direction of joyous Hanbridge. He loathed and despised Trafalgar Road. What was the use of making three hundred and forty-one pounds by a shrewd speculation? None. He could not employ three hundred and forty-one pounds to increase his happiness. Money had become futile for him. Astounding thought! He desired no more of it. He had a considerable income from investments, and also at least four thousand a year from the Five Towns Universal Thrift Club, that wonderful but unpretentious organisation which now embraced every corner of the Five Towns; that gorgeous invention for profitably taking care of the pennies of the working classes; that excellent device, his own, for selling the working classes every kind of goods at credit prices after having received part of the money in advance!

"I want a change!" he said to himself, and threw away his cigar.

After all, the bitterest thought in his heart was perhaps that on that evening he had tried to be a "card," and, for the first time in his brilliant career as a "card," had failed. He, Henry Machin, who had been the youngest mayor of Bursley years and years ago; he, the recognised amuser of the Five Towns; he, one of the

greatest "characters" that the Five Towns had ever produced-he had failed of an effect!

He slipped out on to the pavement, and saw, under the gas-lamp, on the new hoarding of the football-ground, a poster intimating that during that particular week there was a gigantic attraction at the Empire Music Hall at Hanbridge. According to the posters, there was a gigantic attraction every week at the Empire, but Edward Henry happened to know that this week the attraction was indeed somewhat out of the common. And to-night was Friday, the fashionable night for the bloods and the modishness of the Five Towns. He looked at the church clock, and then at his watch. He would be in time for the "second house," which started at nine o'clock. At the same moment an electric tram-car came thundering up out of Bursley. He boarded it, and was saluted by the conductor. Remaining on the platform, he lit a cigarette, and tried to feel cheerful; but he could not conquer his depression.

"Yes," he thought, "what I want is change-and a lot of it too!"

CHAPTER II

THE BANK-NOTE

I

Alderman Machin had to stand at the back, and somewhat towards the side, of that part of the auditorium known as the Grand Circle at the Empire Music Hall, Hanbridge. The attendants at the entrance and in the lounge, where the salutation "Welcome" shone in electricity over a large Cupid-surrounded mirror, had compassionately and yet exultingly told him that there was not a seat left in the house. He had shared their exultation. He had said to himself, full of honest pride in the Five Towns: "This music-hall, admitted by the press to be one of the finest in the provinces, holds over two thousand five hundred people. And yet we can fill it to overflowing twice every night! And only a few years ago there wasn't a decent music-hall in the entire district!"

The word "progress" flitted through his head.

It was not strictly true that the Empire was or could be filled to overflowing twice every night, but it was true that at that particular moment not a seat was unsold; and the aspect of a crowded auditorium is apt to give an optimistic quality to

broad generalisations. Alderman Machin began instinctively to calculate the amount of money in the house, and to wonder whether there would be a chance for a second music-hall in the dissipated town of Hanbridge. He also wondered why the idea of a second music-hall in Hanbridge had never occurred to him before.

The Grand Circle was so-called because it was grand. Its plush fauteuils cost a shilling, no mean price for a community where seven pounds of potatoes can be bought for sixpence, and the view of the stage therefrom was perfect. But the alderman's view was far from perfect, since he had to peer as best he could between and above the shoulders of several men, each apparently, but not really, taller than himself. By constant slight movements to comply with the movements of the rampart of shoulders, he could discern fragments of various advertisements of soap, motor-cars, whisky, shirts, perfume, pills, bricks, and tea, for the drop-curtain was down. And, curiously, he felt obliged to keep his eyes on the drop-curtain, and across the long intervening vista of hats and heads and smoke, to explore its most difficult corners again and again, lest, when it went up, he might not be in proper practice for seeing what was behind it.

Nevertheless, despite the marked inconveniences of his situation, he felt brighter, he felt almost happy in this dense atmosphere of success. He even found a certain peculiar and perverse satisfaction in the fact that he had as yet been recognised by nobody. Once or twice the owners of shoulders had turned and

deliberately glared at the worrying fellow who had the impudence to be all the time peeping over them and between them; they had not distinguished the fellow from any ordinary fellow. Could they have known that he was the famous Alderman Edward Henry Machin, founder and sole proprietor of the Thrift Club, into which their wives were probably paying so much a week, they would most assuredly have glared to another tune, and they would have said with pride afterwards, "That chap Machin o' Bursley was standing behind me at the Empire to-night." And though Machin is amongst the commonest names in the Five Towns, all would have known that the great and admired Denry was meant. It was astonishing that a personage so notorious should not have been instantly "spotted" in such a resort as the Empire. More proof that the Five Towns was a vast and seething concentration of cities, and no longer a mere district where everybody knew everybody.

The curtain rose, and, as it did so, a thunderous, crashing applause of greeting broke forth-applause that thrilled and impressed and inspired; applause that made every individual in the place feel right glad that he was there. For the curtain had risen on the gigantic attraction which many members of the audience were about to see for the fifth time that week; in fact, it was rumoured that certain men of fashion, whose habit was to refuse themselves nothing, had attended every performance of the gigantic attraction since the second house on Monday.

The scene represented a restaurant of quiet aspect, into which

entered a waiter bearing a pile of plates some two feet high. The waiter being intoxicated, the tower of plates leaned this way and that as he staggered about, and the whole house really did hold its breath in the simultaneous hope and fear of an enormous and resounding smash. Then entered a second intoxicated waiter, also bearing a pile of plates some two feet high; and the risk of destruction was thus more than doubled-it was quadrupled, for each waiter, in addition to the risks of his own inebriety, was now subject to the dreadful peril of colliding with the other. However, there was no catastrophe.

Then arrived two customers, one in a dress suit and an eyeglass, and the other in a large violet hat, a diamond necklace, and a yellow satin skirt. The which customers, seemingly well used to the sight of drunken waiters tottering to and fro with towers of plates, sat down at a table and waited calmly for attention. The popular audience, with that quick mental grasp for which popular audiences are so renowned, soon perceived that the table was in close proximity to a lofty sideboard, and that on either hand of the sideboard were two chairs, upon which the two waiters were trying to climb in order to deposit their plates on the top-most shelf of the sideboard. The waiters successfully mounted the chairs, and successfully lifted their towers of plates to within half an inch of the desired shelf, and then the chairs began to show signs of insecurity. By this time the audience was stimulated to an ecstasy of expectation, whose painfulness was only equalled by its extreme delectability. The sole unmoved persons in the

building were the customers awaiting attention at the restaurant table.

One tower was safely lodged on the shelf. But was it? It was not! Yes? No! It curved; it straightened; it curved again. The excitement was as keen as that of watching a drowning man attempt to reach the shore. It was simply excruciating. It could not be borne any longer, and when it could not be borne any longer, the tower sprawled irrevocably, and seven dozen plates fell in a cascade on the violet hat, and so, with an inconceivable clatter, to the floor. Almost at the same moment the being in the dress suit and the eye-glass-becoming aware of the phenomena-slightly unusual even in a restaurant, dropped his eye-glass, turned round to the sideboard, and received the other waiter's seven dozen plates in the face and on the crown of his head.

No such effect had ever been seen in the Five Towns, and the felicity of the audience exceeded all previous felicities. The audience yelled, roared, shrieked, gasped, trembled, and punched itself in a furious passion of pleasure. They make plates in the Five Towns. They live by making plates. They understand plates. In the Five Towns a man will carry not seven but twenty-seven dozen plates on a swaying plank for eight hours a day, up steps and down steps, and in doorways and out of doorways, and not break one plate in seven years! Judge, therefore, the simple but terrific satisfaction of a Five Towns' audience in the hugeness of the calamity. Moreover, every plate smashed means a demand for a new plate and increased prosperity for the Five Towns.

The grateful crowd in the auditorium of the Empire would have covered the stage with wreaths if it had known that wreaths were used for other occasions than funerals; which it did not know.

Fresh complications instantly ensued which cruelly cut short the agreeable exercise of uncontrolled laughter. It was obvious that one of the waiters was about to fall. And in the enforced tranquillity of a new dread, every dyspeptic person in the house was deliciously conscious of a sudden freedom from indigestion, due to the agreeable exercise of uncontrolled laughter, and wished fervently that he could laugh like that after every meal. The waiter fell; he fell through the large violet hat and disappeared beneath the surface of a sea of crockery. The other waiter fell too, but the sea was not deep enough to drown a couple of them. Then the customers, recovering themselves, decided that they must not be outclassed in this competition of havoc, and they overthrew the table and everything on it, and all the other tables, and everything on all the other tables. The audience was now a field of artillery which nothing could silence. The waiters arose, and, opening the sideboard, disclosed many hundreds of unsuspected plates of all kinds, ripe for smashing. Niagaras of plates surged on to the stage. All four performers revelled and wallowed in smashed plates. New supplies of plates were constantly being produced from strange concealments, and finally the tables and chairs were broken to pieces, and each object on the walls was torn down and flung in bits on to the gorgeous general debris, to the top of which clambered the violet

hat, necklace, and yellow petticoat, brandishing one single little plate, whose life had been miraculously spared. Shrieks of joy in that little plate played over the din like lightning in a thunder-storm. And the curtain fell.

It was rung up fifteen times, and fifteen times the quartette of artists, breathless, bowed in acknowledgment of the frenzied and boisterous testimony to their unique talents. No singer, no tragedian, no comedian, no wit, could have had such a triumph, could have given such intense pleasure. And yet none of the four had spoken a word. Such is genius!

At the end of the fifteenth call the stage-manager came before the curtain and guaranteed that two thousand four hundred plates had been broken.

The lights went up. Strong men were seen to be wiping tears from their eyes. Complete strangers were seen addressing each other in the manner of old friends. Such is art!

"Well, that was worth a bob, that was!" muttered Edward Henry to himself. And it was. Edward Henry had not escaped the general fate. Nobody, being present, could have escaped it. He was enchanted. He had utterly forgotten every care.

"Good evening, Mr. Machin," said a voice at his side. Not only he turned, but nearly every one in the vicinity turned. The voice was the voice of the stout and splendid managing director of the Empire, and it sounded with the ring of authority above the rising tinkle of the bar behind the Grand Circle.

"Oh! How d'ye do, Mr. Dakins?" Edward Henry held out a

cordial hand, for even the greatest men are pleased to be greeted in a place of entertainment by the managing director thereof. Further, his identity was now recognised.

"Haven't you seen those gentlemen in that box beckoning to you?" said Mr. Dakins, proudly deprecating complimentary remarks on the show.

"Which box?"

Mr. Dakins' hand indicated the stage-box. And Henry, looking, saw three men, one unknown to him; the second, Robert Brindley, the architect, of Bursley; and the third, Dr. Stirling.

Instantly his conscience leapt up within him. He thought of rabies. Yes, sobered in the fraction of a second, he thought of rabies. Supposing that, after all, in spite of Mr. Long's muzzling order, as cited by his infant son, an odd case of rabies should have lingered in the British Isles, and supposing that Carlo had been infected! Not impossible! Was it providential that Dr. Stirling was in the auditorium?

"You know two of them?" said Mr. Dakins.

"Yes."

"Well, the third's a Mr. Bryany. He's manager to Mr. Seven Sachs." Mr. Dakins' tone was respectful.

"And who's Mr. Seven Sachs?" asked Edward Henry absently. It was a stupid question.

He was impressively informed that Mr. Seven Sachs was the arch-famous American actor-playwright, now nearing the end of a provincial tour which had surpassed all records of provincial

tours, and that he would be at the Theatre Royal, Hanbridge, next week. Edward Henry then remembered that the hoardings had been full of Mr. Seven Sachs for some time past.

"They keep on making signs to you," said Mr. Dakins, referring to the occupants of the stage-box.

Edward Henry waved a reply to the box.

"Here! I'll take you there the shortest way," said Mr. Dakins.

II

"Welcome to Stirling's box, Machin!" Robert Brindley greeted the alderman with an almost imperceptible wink. Edward Henry had encountered this wink once or twice before; he could not decide precisely what it meant; it was apt to make him reflective. He did not dislike Robert Brindley, his habit was not to dislike people; he admitted Brindley to be a clever architect, though he objected to the "modern" style of the fronts of his houses and schools. But he did take exception to the man's attitude towards the Five Towns, of which, by the way, Brindley was just as much a native as himself. Brindley seemed to live in the Five Towns like a highly cultured stranger in a savage land, and to derive rather too much sardonic amusement from the spectacle of existence therein. Brindley was a very special crony of Stirling's, and had influenced Stirling. But Stirling was too clever to submit unduly to the influence. Besides, Stirling was not a native; he was only a Scotchman, and Edward Henry considered

that what Stirling thought of the district did not matter. Other details about Brindley which Edward Henry deprecated were his necktie, which, for Edward Henry's taste, was too flowing, his scorn of the "Pianisto" (despite the man's tremendous interest in music), and his incipient madness on the subject of books—a madness shared by Stirling. Brindley and the doctor were forever chattering about books, and buying them.

So that, on the whole, Dr. Stirling's box was not a place where Edward Henry felt entirely at home. Nevertheless, the two men, having presented Mr. Bryany, did their best, each in his own way, to make him feel at home.

"Take this chair, Machin," said Stirling, indicating a chair at the front.

"Oh, I can't take the front chair!" Edward Henry protested.

"Of course you can, my dear Machin," said Brindley sharply. "The front chair in a stage-box is the one proper seat in the house for you. Do as your doctor prescribes."

And Edward Henry accordingly sat down at the front, with Mr. Bryany by his side; and the other two sat behind. But Edward Henry was not quite comfortable. He faintly resented that speech of Brindley's. And yet he did feel that what Brindley had said was true, and he was indeed glad to be in the front chair of a brilliant stage-box on the grand tier, instead of being packed away in the nethermost twilight of the Grand Circle. He wondered how Brindley and Stirling had managed to distinguish his face among the confusion of faces in that distant obscurity; he, Edward

Henry, had failed to notice them, even in the prominence of their box. But that they had distinguished him showed how familiar and striking a figure he was. He wondered, too, why they should have invited him to hobnob with them. He was not of their set. Indeed, like many very eminent men, he was not to any degree in anybody's set. Of one thing he was sure, – because he had read it on the self-conscious faces of all three of them, – namely, that they had been discussing him. Possibly he had been brought up for Mr. Bryany's inspection as a major lion and character of the district. Well, he did not mind that; nay, he enjoyed that. He could feel Mr. Bryany covertly looking him over. And he thought: "Look, my boy! I make no charge." He smiled and nodded to one or two people who with pride saluted him from the stalls. It was meet that he should be visible there on that Friday night!

"A full house!" he observed, to break the rather awkward silence of the box, as he glanced round at the magnificent smoke-veiled pageant of the aristocracy and the democracy of the Five Towns crowded together, tier above gilded tier, up to the dim roof where ragged lads and maids giggled and flirted while waiting for the broken plates to be cleared away and the moving pictures to begin.

"You may say it!" agreed Mr. Bryany, who spoke with a very slight American accent. "Dakins positively hadn't a seat to offer me. I happened to have the evening free. It isn't often I do have a free evening. And so I thought I'd pop in here. But if Dakins hadn't introduced me to these gentlemen, my seat would have

had to be a standing one."

"So that's how they got to know him, is it?" thought Edward Henry.

And then there was another short silence.

"Hear you've been doing something striking in rubber shares, Machin?" said Brindley at length.

Astonishing how these things got abroad!

"Oh, very little, very little!" Edward Henry laughed modestly. "Too late to do much! In another fortnight the bottom will be all out of the rubber market!"

"Of course I'm an Englishman-" Mr. Bryany began.

"Why 'of course'?" Edward Henry interrupted him.

"Hear! Hear! Alderman. Why 'of course'?" said Brindley approvingly, and Stirling's rich laugh was heard. "Only it does just happen," Brindley added, "that Mr. Bryany did us the honour to be born in the district."

"Yes. Longshaw," Mr. Bryany admitted, half proud and half apologetic, "which I left at the age of two."

"Oh, Longshaw!" murmured Edward Henry with a peculiar inflection, which had a distinct meaning for at least two of his auditors.

Longshaw is at the opposite end of the Five Towns from Bursley, and the majority of the inhabitants of Bursley have never been to Longshaw in their lives, have only heard of it, as they hear of Chicago or Bangkok. Edward Henry had often been to Longshaw, but, like every visitor from Bursley, he instinctively

regarded it as a foolish and unnecessary place.

"As I was saying," resumed Mr. Bryany, quite unintimidated, "I'm an Englishman. But I've lived eighteen years in America, and it seems to me the bottom will soon be knocked out of pretty nearly all the markets in England. Look at the Five Towns!"

"No, don't, Mr. Bryany!" said Brindley. "Don't go to extremes."

"Personally, I don't mind looking at the Five Towns," said Edward Henry. "What of it?"

"Well, did you ever see such people for looking twice at a five-pound note?"

Edward Henry most certainly did not like this aspersion on his native district. He gazed in silence at Mr. Bryany's brassy and yet simple face, and did not like the face either.

And Mr. Bryany, beautifully unaware that he had failed in tact, continued: "The Five Towns is the most English place I've ever seen, believe me! Of course it has its good points, and England has her good points; but there's no money stirring. There's no field for speculation on the spot, and as for outside investment, no Englishman will touch anything that really is good." He emphasised the last three words.

"What d'ye do yeself, Mr. Bryany?" inquired Dr. Stirling.

"What do I do with my little bit?" cried Mr. Bryany. "Oh, I know what to do with my little bit. I can get ten per cent. in Seattle, and twelve to fifteen in Calgary, on my little bit; and security just as good as English railway stock-*and* better."

The theatre was darkened, and the cinematograph began its reckless twinkling.

Mr. Bryany went on offering to Edward Henry, in a suitably lowered voice, his views on the great questions of investment and speculation; and Edward Henry made cautious replies.

"And even when there is a good thing going at home," Mr. Bryany said, in a wounded tone, "what Englishman'd look at it?"

"I would," said Edward Henry with a blandness that was only skin-deep, for all the time he was cogitating the question whether the presence of Dr. Stirling in the audience ought or ought not to be regarded as providential.

"Now, I've got the option on a little affair in London," said Mr. Bryany, while Edward Henry glanced quickly at him in the darkness, "and can I get anybody to go into it? I can't."

"What sort of a little affair?"

"Building a theatre in the West End."

Even a less impassive man than Edward Henry would have started at the coincidence of this remark. And Edward Henry started. Twenty minutes ago he had been idly dreaming of theatrical speculation, and now he could almost see theatrical speculation shimmering before him in the pale shifting rays of the cinematograph that cut through the gloom of the mysterious auditorium.

"Oh!" And in this new interest he forgot the enigma of the ways of Providence.

"Of course, you know, I'm in the business," said Mr. Bryany.

"I'm Seven Sachs's manager." It was as if he owned and operated Mr. Seven Sachs.

"So I heard," said Edward Henry, and then remarked with mischievous cordiality: "And I suppose these chaps told you I was the sort of man you were after. And you got them to ask me in, eh, Mr. Bryany?"

Mr. Bryany gave an uneasy laugh, but seemed to find naught to say.

"Well, what is your little affair?" Edward Henry encouraged him.

"Oh, I can't tell you now," said Mr. Bryany. "It would take too long. The thing has to be explained."

"Well, what about to-morrow?"

"I have to leave for London by the first train in the morning."

"Well, some other time?"

"After to-morrow will be too late."

"Well, what about to-night?"

"The fact is, I've half promised to go with Dr. Stirling to some club or other after the show. Otherwise we might have had a quiet confidential chat in my rooms over the Turk's Head. I never dreamt-" Mr. Bryany was now as melancholy as a greedy lad who regards rich fruit at arm's length through a plate-glass window, and he had ceased to be patronising.

"I'll soon get rid of Stirling for you," said Edward Henry, turning instantly towards the doctor. The ways of Providence had been made plain to Edward Henry. "I say, Doc!" But the Doctor

and Brindley were in conversation with another man at the open door of the box.

"What is it?" said Stirling.

"I've come to fetch you. You're wanted at my place."

"Well, you're a caution!" said Stirling.

"Why am I a caution?" Edward Henry smoothly protested. "I didn't tell you before because I didn't want to spoil your fun."

Stirling's mien was not happy.

"Did they tell you I was here?" he asked.

"You'd almost think so, wouldn't you?" said Edward Henry in a playful, enigmatic tone. After all, he decided privately, his wife was right: it was better that Stirling should see the infant. And there was also this natural human thought in his mind: he objected to the doctor giving an entire evening to diversions away from home; he considered that a doctor, when not on a round of visits, ought to be forever in his consulting-room, ready for a sudden call of emergency. It was monstrous that Stirling should have proposed, after an escapade at the music-hall, to spend further hours with chance acquaintances in vague clubs! Half the town might fall sick and die while the doctor was vainly amusing himself. Thus the righteous layman in Edward Henry!

"What's the matter?" asked Stirling.

"My eldest's been rather badly bitten by a dog, and the missis wants it cauterized."

"Really?"

"Well, you bet she does!"

"Where's the bite?"

"In the calf."

The other man at the door having departed, Robert Brindley abruptly joined the conversation at this point.

"I suppose you've heard of that case of hydrophobia at Bleakridge?" said Brindley.

Edward Henry's heart jumped.

"No, I haven't," he said anxiously. "What is it?"

He gazed at the white blur of Brindley's face in the darkened box, and he could hear the rapid clicking of the cinematograph behind him.

"Didn't you see it in the *Signal*?"

"No."

"Neither did I," said Brindley.

At the same moment the moving pictures came to an end, the theatre was filled with light, and the band began to play, "God Save the King." Brindley and Stirling were laughing. And indeed, Brindley had scored, this time, over the unparalleled card of the Five Towns.

"I make you a present of that," said Edward Henry. "But my wife's most precious infant has to be cauterized, Doctor," he added firmly.

"Got your car here?" Stirling questioned.

"No. Have you?"

"No."

"Well, there's the tram. I'll follow you later. I've some business

round this way. Persuade my wife not to worry, will you?"

And when a discontented Dr. Stirling had made his excuses and adieux to Mr. Bryany, and Robert Brindley had decided that he could not leave his crony to travel by tram-car alone, and the two men had gone, then Edward Henry turned to Mr. Bryany:

"That's how I get rid of the doctor, you see."

"But *has* your child been bitten by a dog?" asked Mr. Bryany, acutely perplexed.

"You'd almost think so, wouldn't you?" Edward Henry replied, carefully non-committal. "What price going to the Turk's Head now?"

He remembered with satisfaction, and yet with misgiving, a remark made to him, a judgment passed on him, by a very old woman very many years before. This discerning hag, the Widow Hullins by name, had said to him briefly, "Well, you're a queer 'un!"

III

Within five minutes he was following Mr. Bryany into a small parlour on the first floor of the Turk's Head, a room with which he had no previous acquaintance, though, like most industrious men of affairs in metropolitan Hanbridge, he reckoned to know something about the Turk's Head. Mr. Bryany turned up the gas (the Turk's Head took pride in being a "hostelry," and, while it had accustomed itself to incandescent mantles on the ground

floor, it had not yet conquered a natural distaste for electricity) and Edward Henry saw a smart despatch-box, a dress suit, a trouser-stretcher, and other necessities of theatrical business life at large in the apartment.

"I've never seen this room before," said Edward Henry.

"Take your overcoat off and sit down, will you?" said Mr. Bryany as he turned to replenish the fire from a bucket. "It's my private sitting-room. Whenever I am on my travels, I always take a private sitting-room. It pays, you know. Of course I mean if I'm alone. When I'm looking after Mr. Sachs, of course we share a sitting-room."

Edward Henry agreed lightly:

"I suppose so."

But the fact was that he was much impressed. He himself had never taken a private sitting-room in any hotel. He had sometimes felt the desire, but he had not had the "face," as they say down there, to do it. To take a private sitting-room in a hotel was generally regarded in the Five Towns as the very summit of dashing expensiveness and futile luxury.

"I didn't know they had private sitting-rooms in this shanty," said Edward Henry.

Mr. Bryany, having finished with the fire, fronted him, shovel in hand, with a remarkable air of consummate wisdom, and replied:

"You can generally get what you want if you insist on having it, even in this 'shanty.'"

Edward Henry regretted his use of the word "shanty." Inhabitants of the Five Towns may allow themselves to twit the historic and excellent Turk's Head, but they do not extend the privilege to strangers. And in justice to the Turk's Head, it is to be clearly stated that it did no more to cow and discourage travellers than any other provincial hotel in England. It was a sound and serious English provincial hotel; and it linked century to century.

Said Mr. Bryany:

"Merica's the place for hotels."

"Yes, I expect it is."

"Been to Chicago?"

"No, I haven't."

Mr. Bryany, as he removed his overcoat, could be seen politely forbearing to raise his eyebrows.

"Of course you've been to New York?"

Edward Henry would have given all he had in his pockets to be able to say that he had been to New York, but, by some inexplicable negligence, he had hitherto omitted to go to New York, and, being a truthful person, except in the gravest crises, he was obliged to answer miserably:

"No, I haven't."

Mr. Bryany gazed at him with amazement and compassion, apparently staggered by the discovery that there existed in England a man of the world who had contrived to struggle on for forty years without perfecting his education by a visit to New York.

Edward Henry could not tolerate Mr. Bryany's look. It was a look which he had never been able to tolerate on the features of anybody whatsoever. He reminded himself that his secret object in accompanying Mr. Bryany to the Turk's Head was to repay Mr. Bryany-in what coin he knew not yet-for the aspersions which at the music-hall he had cast upon England in general and upon the Five Towns in particular, and also to get revenge for having been tricked into believing, even for a moment, that there was really a case of hydrophobia at Bleakridge. It is true that Mr. Bryany was innocent of this deception, which had been accomplished by Robert Brindley, but that was a detail which did not trouble Edward Henry, who lumped his grievances together-for convenience.

He had been reflecting that some sentimental people, unused to the ways of paternal affection in the Five Towns, might consider him a rather callous father; he had been reflecting, again, that Nellie's suggestion of blood-poisoning might not be as entirely foolish as feminine suggestions in such circumstances too often are. But now he put these thoughts away, reassuring himself against hydrophobia anyhow, by the recollection of the definite statement of the Encyclopedia. Moreover, had he not inspected the wound-as healthy a wound as you could wish for?

And he said in a new tone, very curtly:

"Now, Mr. Bryany, what about this little affair of yours?"

He saw that Mr. Bryany accepted the implied rebuke with the deference properly shown by a man who needs something

towards the man in possession of what he needs. And studying the fellow's countenance, he decided that, despite its brassiness and simple cunning, it was scarcely the countenance of a rascal.

"Well, it's like this," said Mr. Bryany, sitting down opposite Edward Henry at the centre table, and reaching with obsequious liveliness for the despatch-box.

He drew from the despatch-box, which was lettered "W.C.B.," first a cut-glass flask of whisky, with a patent stopper, and then a spacious box of cigarettes.

"I always travel with the right sort," he remarked, holding the golden liquid up to the light. "It's safer, and it saves any trouble with orders after closing-time. These English hotels, you know-!"

So saying, he dispensed whisky and cigarettes, there being a siphon and glasses, and three matches in a match-stand, on the table.

"Here's looking!" he said, with raised glass.

And Edward Henry responded, in conformity with the changeless ritual of the Five Towns:

"I looks!"

And they sipped.

Whereupon Mr. Bryany next drew from the despatch-box a piece of transparent paper.

"I want you to look at this plan of Piccadilly Circus and environs," said he.

Now there is a Piccadilly in Hanbridge; also a Pall Mall, and a Chancery Lane. The adjective "metropolitan," applied to

Hanbridge is just.

"London?" questioned Edward Henry. "I understood London when we were chatting over there." With his elbow he indicated the music-hall, somewhere vaguely outside the room.

"London," said Mr. Bryany.

And Edward Henry thought:

"What on earth am I meddling with London for? What use should I be in London?"

"You see the plot marked in red?" Mr. Bryany proceeded. "Well, that's the site. There's an old chapel on it now."

"What do all these straight lines mean?" Edward Henry inquired, examining the plan. Lines radiated from the red plot in various directions.

"Those are the lines of vision," said Mr. Bryany. "They show just where an electric sign at the corner of the front of the proposed theatre could be seen from. You notice the site is not in the Circus itself-a shade to the north." Mr. Bryany's finger approached Edward Henry's on the plan and the clouds from their cigarettes fraternally mingled. "Now you see by those lines that the electric sign of the proposed theatre would be visible from nearly the whole of Piccadilly Circus, parts of Lower Regent Street, Coventry Street, and even Shaftesbury Avenue. You see what a site it is-absolutely unique."

Edward Henry asked coldly:

"Have you bought it?"

"No," Mr. Bryany seemed to apologise, "I haven't exactly

bought it; but I've got an option on it."

The magic word "option" wakened the drowsy speculator in Edward Henry. And the mere act of looking at the plan endowed the plot of land with reality. There it was. It existed.

"An option to buy it?"

"You can't buy land in the West End of London," said Mr. Bryany sagely. "You can only lease it."

"Well, of course," Edward Henry concurred.

"The freehold belongs to Lord Woldo, now aged six months."

"Really!" murmured Edward Henry.

"I've got an option to take up the remainder of the lease, with sixty-four years to run, on the condition I put up a theatre. And the option expires in exactly a fortnight's time."

Edward Henry frowned, and then asked:

"What are the figures?"

"That is to say," Mr. Bryany corrected himself, smiling courteously, "I've got half the option."

"And who's got the other half?"

"Rose Euclid's got the other half."

At the mention of the name of one of the most renowned star actresses in England, Edward Henry excusably started.

"Not *the*-?" he exclaimed.

Mr. Bryany nodded proudly, blowing out much smoke.

"Tell me," asked Edward Henry, confidentially, leaning forward, "where do those ladies get their names from?"

"It happens in this case to be her real name," said Mr. Bryany.

"Her father kept a tobacconists' shop in Cheapside. The sign was kept up for many years, until Rose paid to have it changed."

"Well, well!" breathed Edward Henry, secretly thrilled by these extraordinary revelations. "And so you and she have got it between you?"

Mr. Bryany said:

"I bought half of it from her some time ago. She was badly hard up for a hundred pounds, and I let her have the money." He threw away his cigarette half-smoked, with a free gesture that seemed to imply that he was capable of parting with a hundred pounds just as easily.

"How did she *get* the option?" Edward Henry inquired, putting into the query all the innuendo of a man accustomed to look at great worldly affairs from the inside.

"How did she get it? She got it from the late Lord Woldo. She was always very friendly with the late Lord Woldo, you know." Edward Henry nodded. "Why, she and the Countess of Chell are as thick as thieves! You know something about the countess down here, I reckon?"

The Countess of Chell was the wife of the supreme local magnate.

Edward Henry answered calmly, "We do."

He was tempted to relate a unique adventure of his youth, when he had driven the countess to a public meeting in his mule-carriage; but sheer pride kept him silent.

"I asked you for the figures," he added in a manner which

requested Mr. Bryany to remember that he was the founder, chairman, and proprietor of the Five Towns Universal Thrift Club, one of the most successful business organisations in the Midlands.

"Here they are," said Mr. Bryany, passing across the table a sheet of paper.

And as Edward Henry studied them he could hear Mr. Bryany faintly cooing into his ear: "Of course Rose got the ground-rent reduced. And when I tell you that the demand for theatres in the West End far exceeds the supply, and that theatre rents are always going up; when I tell you that a theatre costing £25,000 to build can be let for £11,000 a year, and often £300 a week on a short term-" And he could hear the gas singing over his head; and also, unhappily, he could hear Dr. Stirling talking to his wife and saying to her that the bite was far more serious than it looked, and Nellie hoping very audibly that nothing had "happened" to him, her still absent husband. And then he could hear Mr. Bryany again:

"When I tell you-"

"When you tell me all this, Mr. Bryany," he interrupted with the ferocity which in the Five Towns is regarded as mere directness, "I wonder why the devil you want to sell your half of the option if you *do* want to sell it. Do you want to sell it?"

"To tell you the truth," said Mr. Bryany as if up to that moment he had told naught but lies, "I do."

"Why?"

"Oh, I'm always travelling about, you see. England one day, America the next." Apparently he had quickly abandoned the strictness of veracity. "All depends on the governor's movements. I couldn't keep a proper eye on an affair of that kind."

Edward Henry laughed:

"And could I?"

"Chance for you to go a bit oftener to London," said Mr. Bryany, laughing too. Then, with extreme and convincing seriousness, "You're the very man for a thing of that kind. And you know it."

Edward Henry was not displeased by this flattery.

"How much?"

"How much? Well, I told you frankly what I paid. I made no concealment of that, did I now? Well, I want what I paid. It's worth it!"

"Got a copy of the option, I hope!"

Mr. Bryany produced a copy of the option.

"I am nothing but an infernal ass to mix myself up in a mad scheme like this," said Edward Henry to his soul, perusing the documents. "It's right off my line, right bang off it. But what a lark!" But even to his soul he did not utter the remainder of the truth about himself, namely, "I should like to cut a dash before this insufferable patroniser of England and the Five Towns."

Suddenly something snapped within him, and he said to Mr. Bryany:

"I'm on!"

Those words and no more!

"You are?" Mr. Bryany exclaimed, mistrusting his ears.

Edward Henry nodded.

"Well, that's business anyway," said Mr. Bryany, taking a fresh cigarette and lighting it.

"It's how we do business down here," said Edward Henry, quite inaccurately; for it was not in the least how they did business down there.

Mr. Bryany asked, with a rather obvious anxiety:

"But when can you pay?"

"Oh, I'll send you a cheque in a day or two." And Edward Henry in his turn took a fresh cigarette.

"That won't do! That won't do!" cried Mr. Bryany. "I absolutely must have the money to-morrow morning in London. I can sell the option in London for eighty pounds, I know that."

"You must have it?"

"Must!"

They exchanged glances. And Edward Henry, rapidly acquiring new knowledge of human nature on the threshold of a world strange to him, understood that Mr. Bryany, with his private sitting-room and his investments in Seattle and Calgary, was at his wits' end for a bag of English sovereigns, and had trusted to some chance encounter to save him from a calamity. And his contempt for Mr. Bryany was that of a man to whom his bankers are positively servile.

"Here," Mr. Bryany almost shouted, "don't light your cigarette

with my option!"

"I beg pardon," Edward Henry apologised, dropping the document which he had creased into a spill. There were no matches left on the table.

"I'll find you a match."

"It's of no consequence," said Edward Henry, feeling in his pockets. Having discovered therein a piece of paper, he twisted it and rose to put it to the gas.

"Could you slip round to your bank and meet me at the station in the morning with the cash?" suggested Mr. Bryany.

"No, I couldn't," said Edward Henry.

"Well, then, what-?"

"Here, you'd better take this," the Card, reborn, soothed his host, and, blowing out the spill which he had just ignited at the gas, he offered it to Mr. Bryany.

"What?"

"This, man!"

Mr. Bryany, observing the peculiarity of the spill, seized it and unrolled it, not without a certain agitation.

He stammered:

"Do you mean to say it's genuine?"

"You'd almost think so, wouldn't you?" said Edward Henry. He was growing fond of this reply, and of the enigmatic playful tone that he had invented for it.

"But-"

"We may, as you say, look twice at a fiver," continued Edward

Henry, "but we're apt to be careless about hundred-pound notes in this district. I daresay that's why I always carry one."

"But it's burnt!"

"Only just the edge, not enough to harm it. If any bank in England refuses it, return it to me, and I'll give you a couple more in exchange. Is that talking?"

"Well, I'm dashed!" Mr. Bryany attempted to rise, and then subsided back into his chair. "I am simply and totally dashed!" He smiled weakly, hysterically.

And in that instant Edward Henry felt all the sweetness of a complete and luscious revenge.

He said commandingly:

"You must sign me a transfer. I'll dictate it."

Then he jumped up.

"You're in a hurry?"

"I am. My wife is expecting me. You promised to find me a match." Edward Henry waved the unlit cigarette as a reproach to Mr. Bryany's imperfect hospitality.

IV

The clock of Bleakridge Church, still imperturbably shining in the night, showed a quarter to one when he saw it again on his hurried and guilty way home. The pavements were drying in the fresh night wind, and he had his overcoat buttoned up to the neck. He was absolutely solitary in the long, muddy perspective of

Trafalgar Road. He walked because the last tram-car was already housed in its shed at the other end of the world, and he walked quickly because his conscience drove him onwards. And yet he dreaded to arrive, lest a wound in the child's leg should have maliciously decided to fester in order to put him in the wrong. He was now as apprehensive concerning that wound as Nellie herself had been at tea-time.

But in his mind, above the dark gulf of anxiety, there floated brighter thoughts. Despite his fears and his remorse as a father, he laughed aloud in the deserted street when he remembered Mr. Bryany's visage of astonishment upon uncreasing the note. Indubitably, he made a terrific and everlasting impression upon Mr. Bryany. He was sending Mr. Bryany out of the Five Towns a different man. He had taught Mr. Bryany a thing or two. To what brilliant use had he turned the purely accidental possession of a hundred-pound note! One of his finest inspirations-an inspiration worthy of the great days of his youth! Yes, he had had his hour that evening, and it had been a glorious one. Also, it had cost him a hundred pounds, and he did not care; he would retire to bed with a net gain of two hundred and forty-one pounds instead of three hundred and forty-one pounds, that was all.

For he did not mean to take up the option. The ecstasy was cooled now, and he saw clearly that London and theatrical enterprises therein would not be suited to his genius. In the Five Towns he was on his own ground; he was a figure; he was sure of himself. In London he would be a provincial, with

the diffidence and the uncertainty of a provincial. Nevertheless, London seemed to be summoning him from afar off, and he dreamt agreeably of London as one dreams of the impossible East.

As soon as he opened the gate in the wall of his property, he saw that the drawing-room was illuminated and all the other front rooms in darkness. Either his wife or his mother, then, was sitting up in the drawing-room. He inserted a cautious latch-key into the door, and entered the silent home like a sinner. The dim light in the hall gravely reproached him. All his movements were modest and restrained; no noisy rattling of his stick now.

The drawing-room door was slightly ajar. He hesitated, and then, nerving himself, pushed against it.

Nellie, with lowered head, was seated at a table, mending, the image of tranquillity and soft resignation. A pile of children's garments lay by her side, but the article in her busy hands appeared to be an undershirt of his own. None but she ever reinforced the buttons on his linen. Such was her wifely rule, and he considered that there was no sense in it. She was working by the light of a single lamp on the table, the splendid chandelier being out of action. Her economy in the use of electricity was incurable, and he considered that there was no sense in that either.

She glanced up with a guarded expression that might have meant anything.

He said:

"Aren't you trying your eyes?"

And she replied:

"Oh, no!"

Then, plunging, he came to the point:

"Well, doctor been here?"

She nodded.

"What does he say?"

"It's quite all right. He did nothing but cover up the place with a bit of cyanide gauze."

Instantly, in his own esteem, he regained perfection as a father. Of course the bite was nothing! Had he not said so from the first? Had he not been quite sure throughout that the bite was nothing?

"Then why did you sit up?" he asked, and there was a faint righteous challenge in his tone.

"I was anxious about you. I was afraid-"

"Didn't Stirling tell you I had some business?"

"I forget-"

"I told him to, anyhow-important business."

"It must have been," said Nellie in an inscrutable voice.

She rose and gathered together her paraphernalia, and he saw that she was wearing the damnable white apron. The close atmosphere of the home enveloped and stifled him once more. How different was this exasperating interior from the large jolly freedom of the Empire Music Hall, and from the whisky, cigarettes, and masculinity of that private room at the Turk's Head!

"It was!" he repeated grimly and resentfully. "Very important! And I'll tell you another thing, I shall probably have to go to London."

He said this just to startle her.

"It will do you all the good in the world," she replied angelically, but unstartled. "It's just what you need." And she gazed at him as though his welfare and felicity were her sole preoccupation.

"I meant I might have to stop there quite a while," he insisted.

"If you ask me," she said, "I think it would do us all good."

So saying she retired, having expressed no curiosity whatever as to the nature of the very important business in London.

For a moment, left alone, he was at a loss. Then, snorting, he went to the table and extinguished the lamp. He was now in darkness. The light in the hall showed him the position of the door.

He snorted again. "Oh, very well then!" he muttered. "If that's it! I'm hanged if I don't go to London! I'm hanged if I don't go to London!"

CHAPTER III

WILKINS'S

I

The early adventures of Alderman Machin of Bursley at Wilkins' Hotel, London, were so singular and to him so refreshing that they must be recounted in some detail.

He went to London by the morning express from Knype, on the Monday week after his visit to the music-hall. In the meantime he had had some correspondence with Mr. Bryany, more poetic than precise, about the option, and had informed Mr. Bryany that he would arrive in London several days before the option expired. But he had not given a definite date. The whole affair, indeed, was amusingly vague; and, despite his assurances to his wife that the matter was momentous, he did not regard his trip to London as a business trip at all, but rather as a simple freakish change of air. The one certain item in the whole situation was that he had in his pocket a quite considerable sum of actual money, destined-he hoped but was not sure-to take up the option at the proper hour.

Nellie, impeccable to the last, accompanied him in the motor to Knype, the main-line station. The drive, superficially pleasant,

was in reality very disconcerting to him. For nine days the household had talked in apparent cheerfulness of Father's visit to London, as though it were an occasion for joy on Father's behalf, tempered by affectionate sorrow for his absence. The official theory was that all was for the best in the best of all possible homes, and this theory was admirably maintained. And yet everybody knew-even to Maisie-that it was not so; everybody knew that the master and the mistress of the home, calm and sweet as was their demeanour, were contending in a terrific silent and mysterious altercation, which in some way was connected with the visit to London. So far as Edward Henry was concerned, he had been hoping for some decisive event-a tone, gesture, glance, pressure-during the drive to Knype, which offered the last chance of a real concord. No such event occurred. They conversed with the same false cordiality as had marked their relations since the evening of the dog-bite. On that evening Nellie had suddenly transformed herself into a distressingly perfect angel, and not once had she descended from her high estate. At least daily she had kissed him-what kisses! Kisses that were not kisses! Tasteless mockeries, like non-alcoholic ale! He could have killed her, but he could not put a finger on a fault in her marvellous wifely behaviour; she would have died victorious.

So that his freakish excursion was not starting very auspiciously. And, waiting with her for the train on the platform at Knype, he felt this more and more. His old clerk Penkethman was there to receive certain final instructions on Thrift Club

matters, and the sweetness of Nellie's attitude towards the ancient man, and the ancient's man's naïve pleasure therein, positively maddened Edward Henry. To such an extent that he began to think: "Is she going to spoil my trip for me?"

Then Brindley came up. Brindley, too, was going to London. And Nellie's saccharine assurances to Brindley that Edward Henry really needed a change just about completed Edward Henry's desperation. Not even the uproarious advent of two jolly wholesale grocers, Messieurs Garvin and Quorrall, also going to London, could effectually lighten his pessimism.

When the train steamed in, Edward Henry, in fear, postponed the ultimate kiss as long as possible. He allowed Brindley to climb before him into the second-class compartment, and purposely tarried in finding change for the porter; and then he turned to Nellie, and stooped. She raised her white veil and raised the angelic face. They kissed, – the same false kiss, – and she was withdrawing her lips. But suddenly she put them again to his for one second, with a hysterical clinging pressure. It was nothing. Nobody could have noticed it. She herself pretended that she had not done it. Edward Henry had to pretend not to notice it. But to him it was everything. She had relented. She had surrendered. The sign had come from her. She wished him to enjoy his visit to London.

He said to himself:

"Dashed if I don't write to her every day!"

He leaned out of the window as the train rolled away, and

waved and smiled to her, not concealing his sentiments now; nor did she conceal hers as she replied with exquisite pantomime to his signals. But if the train had not been rapidly and infallibly separating them, the reconciliation could scarcely have been thus open. If for some reason the train had backed into the station and ejected its passengers, those two would have covered up their feelings again in an instant. Such is human nature in the Five Towns.

When Edward Henry withdrew his head into the compartment, Brindley and Mr. Garvin, the latter standing at the corridor door, observed that his spirits had shot up in the most astonishing manner, and in their blindness they attributed the phenomenon to Edward Henry's delight in a temporary freedom from domesticity.

Mr. Garvin had come from the neighbouring compartment, which was first-class, to suggest a game at bridge. Messieurs Garvin and Quorrall journeyed to London once a week and sometimes oftener, and, being traders, they had special season-tickets. They travelled first-class because their special season-tickets were first-class. Brindley said that he didn't mind a game, but that he had not the slightest intention of paying excess fare for the privilege. Mr. Garvin told him to come along and trust in Messieurs Garvin and Quorrall. Edward Henry, not nowadays an enthusiastic card-player, enthusiastically agreed to join the hand, and announced that he did not care if he paid forty excess fares. Whereupon Robert Brindley grumbled enviously that it was "all

very well for millionaires..." They followed Mr. Garvin into the first-class compartment; and it soon appeared that Messrs. Garvin and Quorrall did in fact own the train, and that the London and North Western Railway was no more than their wash-pot.

"Bring us a cushion from somewhere, will ye?" said Mr. Quorrall casually to a ticket-collector who entered.

And the resplendent official obeyed. The long cushion, rapt from another compartment, was placed on the knees of the quartette, and the game began. The ticket-collector examined the tickets of Brindley and Edward Henry, and somehow failed to notice that they were of the wrong colour. And at this proof of their influential greatness, Messieurs Garvin and Quorrall were both secretly proud.

The last rubber finished in the neighbourhood of Willesden, and Edward Henry, having won eighteen pence halfpenny, was exuberantly content, for Messrs. Garvin, Quorrall, and Brindley were all renowned card-players. The cushion was thrown away, and a fitful conversation occupied the few remaining minutes of the journey.

"Where do you put up?" Brindley asked Edward Henry.

"Majestic," said Edward Henry. "Where do you?"

"Oh! Kingsway, I suppose."

The Majestic and the Kingsway were two of the half-dozen very large and very mediocre hotels in London which, from causes which nobody, and especially no American, has ever been

able to discover, are particularly affected by Midland provincials "on the jaunt." Both had an immense reputation in the Five Towns.

There was nothing new to say about the Majestic and the Kingsway, and the talk flagged until Mr. Quorrall mentioned Seven Sachs. The mighty Seven Sachs, in his world-famous play, "Overheard," had taken precedence of all other topics in the Five Towns during the previous week. He had crammed the theatre and half emptied the Empire Music Hall for six nights; a wonderful feat. Incidentally, his fifteen hundredth appearance in "Overheard" had taken place in the Five Towns, and the Five Towns had found in this fact a peculiar satisfaction, as though some deep merit had thereby been acquired or rewarded. Seven Sachs's tour was now closed, and on the Sunday he had gone to London, en route for America.

"I heard *he* stops at Wilkins's," said Mr. Garvin.

"Wilkins's your grandmother!" Brindley essayed to crush Mr. Garvin.

"I don't say he *does* stop at Wilkins's," said Mr. Garvin, an individual not easy to crush, "I only say I heard as he did."

"They wouldn't have him!" Brindley insisted firmly.

Mr. Quorrall at any rate seemed tacitly to agree with Brindley. The august name of Wilkins's was in its essence so exclusive that vast numbers of fairly canny provincials had never heard of it. Ask ten well-informed provincials which is the first hotel in London, and nine of them would certainly reply, the Grand

Babylon. Not that even wealthy provincials from the industrial districts are in the habit of staying at the Grand Babylon! No! Edward Henry, for example, had never stayed at the Grand Babylon, no more than he had ever bought a first-class ticket on a railroad. The idea of doing so had scarcely occurred to him. There are certain ways of extravagant smartness which are not considered to be good form among solid wealthy provincials. Why travel first-class (they argue), when second is just as good and no one can tell the difference once you get out of the train? Why ape the tricks of another stratum of society? They like to read about the dinner-parties and supper-parties at the Grand Babylon; but they are not emulous, and they do not imitate. At their most adventurous they would lunch or dine in the neutral region of the grill-room at the Grand Babylon. As for Wilkins's, in Devonshire Square, which is infinitely better known among princes than in the Five Towns, and whose name is affectionately pronounced with a "V" by half the monarchs of Europe, few industrial provincials had ever seen it. The class which is the back-bone of England left it serenely alone to royalty and the aristocratic parasites of royalty.

"I don't see why they shouldn't have him," said Edward Henry, as he lifted a challenging nose in the air.

"Perhaps you don't, Alderman!" said Brindley.

"I wouldn't mind going to Wilkins's," Edward Henry persisted.

"I'd like to see you," said Brindley, with curt scorn.

"Well," said Edward Henry, "I'll bet you a fiver I do." Had he not won eighteen pence half-penny? And was he not securely at peace with his wife?

"I don't bet fivers," said the cautious Brindley. "But I'll bet you half a crown."

"Done!" said Edward Henry.

"When will you go?"

"Either to-day or to-morrow. I must go to the Majestic first, because I've ordered a room and so on."

"Ha!" hurled Brindley, as if to insinuate that Edward Henry was seeking to escape from the consequences of his boast.

And yet he ought to have known Edward Henry. He did know Edward Henry. And he hoped to lose his half-crown. On his face and on the faces of the other two was the cheerful admission that tales of the doings of Alderman Machin, the great local card, at Wilkins's-if he succeeded in getting in-would be cheap at half a crown.

Porters cried out "Euston!"

II

It was rather late in the afternoon when Edward Henry arrived in front of the façade of Wilkins's. He came in a taxicab, and though the distance from the Majestic to Wilkins's is not more than a couple of miles, and he had had nothing else to preoccupy him after lunch, he had spent some three hours in the business

of transferring himself from the portals of the one hotel to the portals of the other. Two hours and three-quarters of this period of time had been passed in finding courage merely to start. Even so, he had left his luggage behind him. He said to himself that, first of all, he would go and spy out Wilkins's; in the perilous work of scouting he rightly wished to be unhampered by impedimenta; moreover, in case of repulse or accident, he must have a base of operations upon which he could retreat in good order.

He now looked on Wilkins's for the first time in his life; and he was even more afraid of it than he had been while thinking about it in the vestibule of the Majestic. It was not larger than the Majestic; it was perhaps smaller; it could not show more terra cotta, plate glass, and sculptured cornice than the Majestic. But it had a demeanour ... and it was in a square which had a demeanour... In every window-sill-not only of the hotel, but of nearly every mighty house in the square-there were boxes of bright-blooming flowers. These he could plainly distinguish in the October dusk, and they were a wonderful phenomenon-say what you will about the mildness of that particular October! A sublime tranquillity reigned over the scene. A liveried keeper was locking the gate of the garden in the middle of the square as if potentates had just quitted it and rendered it forever sacred. And between the sacred shadowed grove and the inscrutable fronts of the stately houses, there flitted automobiles of the silent and expensive kind, driven by chauffeurs in pale grey or dark purple,

who reclined as they steered, and who were supported on their left sides by footmen who reclined as they contemplated the grandeur of existence.

Edward Henry's taxicab in that square seemed like a homeless cat that had strayed into a dog-show.

At the exact instant when the taxicab came to rest under the massive portico of Wilkins's, a chamberlain in white gloves bravely soiled the gloves by seizing the vile brass handle of its door. He bowed to Edward Henry, and assisted him to alight on to a crimson carpet. The driver of the taxi glanced with pert and candid scorn at the chamberlain, but Edward Henry looked demurely aside, and then in abstraction mounted the broad carpeted steps.

"What about poor little me?" cried the driver, who was evidently a ribald socialist, or at best a republican.

The chamberlain, pained, glanced at Edward Henry for support and direction in this crisis.

"Didn't I tell you I'd keep you?" said Edward Henry, raised now by the steps above the driver.

"Between you and me, you didn't," said the driver.

The chamberlain, with an ineffable gesture, wafted the taxicab away into some limbo appointed for waiting vehicles.

A page opened a pair of doors, and another page opened another pair of doors, each with eighteen-century ceremonies of deference, and Edward Henry stood at length in the hall of Wilkins's. The sanctuary, then, was successfully defiled, and up

to the present nobody had demanded his credentials! He took breath.

In its physical aspects Wilkins's appeared to him to resemble other hotels-such as the Majestic. And so far he was not mistaken. Once Wilkins's had not resembled other hotels. For many years it had deliberately refused to recognise that even the Nineteenth Century had dawned, and its magnificent antique discomfort had been one of its main attractions to the elect. For the elect desired nothing but their own privileged society in order to be happy in a hotel. A hip bath on a blanket in the middle of the bedroom floor richly sufficed them, provided they could be guaranteed against the calamity of meeting the unelect in the corridors or at *table d'hôte*. But the rising waters of democracy-the intermixture of classes-had reacted adversely on Wilkins's. The fall of the Emperor Maximilian of Mexico had given Wilkins's sad food for thought long, long ago, and the obvious general weakening of the monarchical principle had most considerably shaken it. Came the day when Wilkins's reluctantly decided that even it could not fight against the tendency of the whole world, and then, at one superb stroke, it had rebuilt and brought itself utterly up-to-date.

Thus it resembled other hotels. (Save possibly in the reticence of its advertisements! The Majestic would advertise bathrooms as a miracle of modernity, just as though common dwelling-houses had not possessed bathrooms for the past thirty years. Wilkins's had superlative bathrooms, but it said nothing about

them. Wilkins's would as soon have advertised two hundred bathrooms as two hundred bolsters; and for the new Wilkins's a bathroom was not more modern than a bolster.) Also, other hotels resembled Wilkins's. The Majestic, too, had a chamberlain at its portico, and an assortment of pages to prove to its clients that they were incapable of performing the simplest act for themselves. Nevertheless, the difference between Wilkins's and the Majestic was enormous; and yet so subtle was it that Edward Henry could not immediately detect where it resided. Then he understood. The difference between Wilkins's and the Majestic resided in the theory which underlay its manner. And the theory was that every person entering its walls was of royal blood until he had admitted the contrary.

Within the hotel it was already night.

Edward Henry self-consciously crossed the illuminated hall, which was dotted with fashionable figures. He knew not whither he was going, until by chance he saw a golden grille with the word "Reception" shining over it in letters of gold. Behind this grille, and still further protected by an impregnable mahogany counter, stood three young dandies in attitudes of graceful ease. He approached them. The fearful moment was upon him. He had never in his life been so genuinely frightened. Abject disgrace might be his portion within the next ten seconds.

Addressing himself to the dandy in the middle, he managed to articulate:

"What have you got in the way of rooms?"

Could the Five Towns have seen him then, as he waited, it would hardly have recognised its "card," its character, its mirror of aplomb and inventive audacity, in this figure of provincial and plebeian diffidence.

The dandy bowed.

"Do you want a suite, sir?"

"Certainly!" said Edward Henry. Rather too quickly, rather too defiantly; in fact, rather rudely! A habitu  would not have so savagely hurled back in the dandy's teeth the insinuation that he wanted only one paltry room.

However, the dandy smiled, accepting with meekness Edward Henry's sudden arrogance, and consulted a sort of pentateuch that was open in front of him.

No person in the hall saw Edward Henry's hat fly up into the air and fall back on his head. But in the imagination of Edward Henry, that was what his hat did.

He was saved. He would have a proud tale for Brindley. The thing was as simple as the alphabet. You just walked in and they either fell on your neck or kissed your feet.

Wilkins's indeed!

A very handsome footman, not only in white gloves but in white calves, was soon supplicating him to deign to enter a lift. And when he emerged from the lift another dandy-in a frock-coat of Paradise-was awaiting him with obeisances. Apparently it had not yet occurred to anybody that he was not the younger son of some aged king.

He was prayed to walk into a gorgeous suite consisting of a corridor, a noble drawing-room (with portrait of His Majesty of Spain on the walls), a large bedroom with two satinwood beds, a small bedroom, and a bathroom, all gleaming with patent devices in porcelain and silver that fully equalled those at home.

Asked if this suite would do, he said it would, trying as well as he could to imply that he had seen better. Then the dandy produced a note-book and a pencil, and impassively waited. The horrid fact that he was un-elect could no longer be concealed. "E. H. Machin, Bursley," he said shortly, and added: "Alderman Machin." After all, why should he be ashamed of being an alderman?

To his astonishment the dandy smiled very cordially, though always with profound respect.

"Ah, yes!" said the dandy. It was as though he had said: "We have long wished for the high patronage of this great reputation." Edward Henry could make naught of it.

His opinion of Wilkins's went down.

He followed the departing dandy up the corridor to the door of the suite in an entirely vain attempt to enquire the price of the suite per day. Not a syllable would pass his lips. The dandy bowed and vanished. Edward Henry stood lost at his own door, and his wandering eye caught sight of a pile of trunks near to another door in the main corridor. These trunks gave him a terrible shock. He shut out the rest of the hotel and retired into his private corridor to reflect. He perceived only too plainly that his

luggage, now at the Majestic, never could come into Wilkins's. It was not fashionable enough. It lacked elegance. The lounge suit that he was wearing might serve, but his luggage was totally impossible. Never before had he imagined that the aspect of one's luggage could have the least importance in one's scheme of existence. He was learning, and he frankly admitted that he was in an incomparable mess.

III

At the end of an extensive stroll through and round his new vast domain, he had come to no decision upon a course of action. Certain details of the strange adventure pleased him—as for instance the dandy's welcoming recognition of his name; that, though puzzling, was a source of comfort to him in his difficulties. He also liked the suite; nay more, he was much impressed by its gorgeousness, and such novel complications as the forked electric switches, all of which he turned on, and the double windows, one within the other, appealed to the domestic expert in him; indeed, he at once had the idea of doubling the window of the best bedroom at home; to do so would be a fierce blow to the Five Towns Electric Traction Company, which, as everybody knew, delighted to keep everybody awake at night and at dawn by means of its late and its early tram-cars. However, he could not wander up and down the glittering solitude of his extensive suite for ever. Something must be done. Then he had

the notion of writing to Nellie; he had promised himself to write to her daily; moreover, it would pass the time and perhaps help him to some resolution.

He sat down to a delicate Louis XVI desk on which lay a Bible, a Peerage, a telephone-book, a telephone, a lamp, and much distinguished stationery. Between the tasselled folds of plushy curtains that pleated themselves with the grandeur of painted curtains in a theatre, he glanced out at the lights of Devonshire Square, from which not a sound came. Then he lit the lamp and unscrewed his fountain pen.

"My dear wife--"

That was how he always began, whether in storm or sunshine. Nellie always began, "My darling husband"; but he was not a man to fling darlings about. Few husbands in the Five Towns are. He thought "darling," but he never wrote it, and he never said it, save quizzingly.

After these three words the composition of the letter came to a pause. What was he going to tell Nellie? He assuredly was not going to tell her that he had engaged an unpriced suite at Wilkins's. He was not going to mention Wilkins's. Then he intelligently perceived that the note-paper and also the envelope mentioned Wilkins's in no ambiguous manner. He tore up the sheet and searched for plain paper. Now, on the desk there was the ordinary hotel stationery, mourning stationery, cards, letter-cards, and envelopes for every mood; but not a piece that was not embossed with the historic name in royal blue. The which

appeared to Edward Henry to point to a defect of foresight on the part of Wilkins's. At the gigantic political club to which he belonged, and which he had occasionally visited in order to demonstrate to himself and others that he was a club-man, plain stationery was everywhere provided for the use of husbands with a taste for reticence. Why not at Wilkins's also?

On the other hand, why should he not write to his wife on Wilkins's paper? Was he afraid of his wife? He was not. Would not the news ultimately reach Bursley that he had stayed at Wilkins's? It would. Nevertheless, he could not find the courage to write to Nellie on Wilkins's paper.

He looked around. He was fearfully alone. He wanted the companionship, were it only momentary, of something human. He decided to have a look at a flunkey, and he rang a bell.

Immediately, just as though wafted thither on a magic carpet, from the court of Austria, a gentleman in waiting arrived in the doorway of the drawing-room, planted himself gracefully on his black silk calves, and bowed.

"I want some plain note-paper, please."

"Very good, sir." Oh! Perfection of tone and of mien!

Three minutes later the plain note-paper and envelopes were being presented to Edward Henry on a salver. As he took them, he looked enquiringly at the gentleman in waiting, who supported his gaze with an impenetrable, invulnerable servility. Edward Henry, beaten off with great loss, thought: "There's nothing doing here just now in the human companionship line," and

assumed the mask of a hereditary prince.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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