BENNETT ARNOLD

A GREAT MAN: A FROLIC

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Bennett A.

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
HIS BIRTH

On an evening in 1866 (exactly eight hundred years after the Battle of Hastings) Mr. Henry Knight, a draper's manager, aged forty, dark, clean-shaven, short, but not stout, sat in his sitting-room on the second-floor over the shop which he managed in Oxford Street, London. He was proud of that sitting-room, which represented the achievement of an ideal, and he had a right to be proud of it. The rich green wall-paper covered with peonies in full bloom (poisoning by arsenical wall-paper had not yet been invented, or Mr. Knight's peonies would certainly have had to flourish over a different hue) matched the magenta table-cloth of the table at which Mr. Knight was writing, and the magenta table-cloth matched the yellow roses which grew to more than exhibition size on the Axminster carpet; and the fine elaborate effect thus produced was in no way impaired, but rather enhanced and invigorated, by the mahogany bookcase full of imperishable printed matter, the horsehair sofa netted in a system of antimacassars, the waxen flowers in their glassy domes on the marble mantelpiece, the Canterbury with its spiral columns, the rosewood harmonium, and the posse of chintz-protected chairs. Mr. Knight, who was a sincere and upright man, saw beauty in this apartment. It uplifted his soul, like soft music in the gloaming, or a woman's face.

Mr. Knight was writing in a large book. He paused in the act of composition, and, putting the pen between his teeth, glanced through the pages of the volume. They were filled with the drafts of letters which he had addressed during the previous seven years to the editors of various newspapers, including the *Times*, and several other organs great then but now extinct. In a space underneath each letter had been neatly gummed the printed copy, but here and there a letter lacked this certificate of success, for Mr. Knight did not always contrive to reach his public. The letters were signed with pseudonyms, such as A British Citizen, Fiat Justitia, Audi Alteram Partem, Indignant, Disgusted, One Who Knows, One Who Would Like to Know, Ratepayer, Taxpayer, Puzzled, and Pro Bono Publico – especially Pro Bono Publico. Two letters, to a trade periodical, were signed A Draper's Manager of Ten Years' Standing, and one, to the *Clerkenwell News*, bore his own real name.

The letter upon which he was now engaged was numbered seventy-five in the series, and made its appeal to the editor of the *Standard*. Having found inspiration, Mr. Knight proceeded, in a hand distinguished by many fine flourishes:

> ' … It is true that last year we only paid off some four millions, but the year before we paid, I am thankful to say, more than nine millions. Why, then, this outcry against the allocation of somewhat less than nine millions out of our vast national revenue towards the further extinction of the National Debt? *It is not the duty of the State, as well as of the individual, to pay its debts?* In order to support the argument with which I began this communication, perhaps you will permit me, sir, to briefly outline the history of the National Debt, our national shame. In 1688 the National Debt was little more than six hundred thousand pounds…'

After briefly outlining the history of the National Debt, Mr. Knight began a new paragraph thus:

> 'In the immortal words of Shakspere, wh – '

But at this point he was interrupted. A young and pleasant woman in a white apron pushed open the door.

'Henry,' she called from the doorway.

'Well?'

'You'd better go now.'

'Very well, Annie; I'll go instantly.'

He dropped the pen, reduced the gas to a speck of blue, and in half a minute was hurrying along Oxford Street. The hour was ten o'clock, and the month was July; the evening favoured romance. He turned into Bury Street, and knocked like fate at a front-door with a brass tablet on it, No. 8 of the street.

'No, sir. He isn't in at the moment, sir,' said the maid who answered Mr. Knight's imperious summons.

'Not in!' exclaimed Mr. Knight.

'No, sir. He was called away half an hour ago or hardly, and may be out till very late.'

'Called away!' exclaimed Mr. Knight. He was astounded, shocked, pained. 'But I warned him three months ago!'

'Did you, sir? Is it anything very urgent, sir?'

'It's – ' Mr. Knight hesitated, blushing. The girl looked so young and innocent.

'Because if it is, master left word that anyone was to go to Dr. Christopher's, 22, Argyll Street.'

'You will be sure to tell your master that I came,' said Mr. Knight frigidly, departing.

At 22, Argyll Street he was informed that Dr. Christopher had likewise been called away, and had left a recommendation that urgent cases, if any, should apply to Dr. Quain Short, 15, Bury Street. His anger was naturally increased by the absence of this second doctor, but it was far more increased by the fact that Dr. Quain Short happened to live in Bury Street. At that moment the enigma of the universe was wrapped up for him in the question, Why should he have been compelled to walk all the way from Bury Street to Argyll Street merely in order to walk all the way back again? And he became a trinity consisting of Disgusted, Indignant, and One Who Would Like to Know, the middle term predominating. When he discovered that No. 15, Bury Street, was exactly opposite No. 8, Bury Street, his feelings were such as break bell-wires.

'Dr. Quain Short is at the Alhambra Theatre this evening with the family,' a middle-aged and formidable housekeeper announced in reply to Mr. Knight's query. 'In case of urgency he is to be fetched. His box is No. 3.'

'The Alhambra Theatre! Where is that?' gasped Mr. Knight.

It should be explained that he held the stage in abhorrence, and, further, that the Alhambra had then only been opened for a very brief period.

'Two out, and the third at the theatre!' Mr. Knight mused grimly, hastening through Seven Dials. 'At the theatre, of all places!'

A letter to the *Times* about the medical profession was just shaping itself in his mind as he arrived at the Alhambra and saw that a piece entitled *King Carrot* filled the bill.

'*King Karrot!*' he muttered scornfully, emphasizing the dangerously explosive consonants in a manner which expressed with complete adequacy, not only his indignation against the entire medical profession, but his utter and profound contempt for the fatuities of the modern stage.

The politeness of the officials and the prompt appearance of Dr. Quain Short did something to mollify the draper's manager of ten years' standing, though he was not pleased when the doctor insisted on going first to his surgery for certain requisites. It was half-past eleven when he returned home; Dr. Quain Short was supposed to be hard behind.

'How long you've been!' said a voice on the second flight of stairs, 'It's all over. A boy. And dear Susan is doing splendidly. Mrs. Puddiphatt says she never saw such a – '

From the attic floor came the sound of a child crying shrilly and lustily:

'Aunt Annie! Aunt Annie! Aunt *Annie*!'

'Run up and quieten him!' Mr. Knight commanded. 'It's like him to begin making a noise just now. I'll take a look at Susan – and my firstborn.'

CHAPTER II
TOM

In the attic a child of seven years was sitting up in a cot placed by the side of his dear Aunt Annie's bed. He had an extremely intelligent, inquisitorial, and agnostical face, and a fair, curled head of hair, which he scratched with one hand as Aunt Annie entered the room and held the candle on high in order to survey him.

'Well?' inquired Aunt Annie firmly.

'Well?' said Tom Knight, determined not to commit himself, and waiting wanly for a chance, like a duellist.

'What's all this noise for? I told you I specially wanted you to go to sleep at once to-night.'

'Yes,' said Tom, staring at the counterpane and picking imaginary bits off it. 'And you might have known I shouldn't go to sleep after *that*!'

'And here it's nearly midnight!' Aunt Annie proceeded. 'What do you want?'

'You – you've left the comb in my hair,' said Tom. He nearly cried.

Every night Aunt Annie curled Tom's hair.

'Is it such a tiny boy that it couldn't take it out itself?' Aunt Annie said kindly, going to the cot and extracting the comb. 'Now try to sleep.' She kissed him.

'And I've heard burglars,' Tom continued, without moving.

'Oh no, you've not,' Aunt Annie pronounced sharply. 'You can't hear burglars every night, you know.'

'I heard running about, and doors shutting and things.'

'That was Uncle Henry and me. Will you promise to be a good boy if I tell you a secret?'

'I shan't *promise*,' Tom replied. 'But if it's a good secret I'll try – hard.'

'Well, you've got a cousin, a little boy, ever so little! There! What do you think of that?'

'I knew someone had got into the house!' was Tom's dispassionate remark. 'What's his name?'

'He hasn't any name yet, but he will have soon.'

'Did he come up the stairs?' Tom asked.

Aunt Annie laughed. 'No,' she said.

'Then, he must have come through the window or down the chimney; and he wouldn't come down the chimney 'cause of the soot. So he came through the window. Whose little boy is he? Yours?'

'No. Aunt Susan's.'

'I suppose she knows he's come?'

'Oh yes. She knows. And she's very glad. Now go to sleep. And I'll tell Aunt Susan you'll be a good boy.'

'You'd better not,' Tom warned her. 'I don't feel sure. And I say, auntie, will there come any more little boys to-night?'

'I don't think so, dear.' Aunt Annie smiled. She was half way through the door, and spoke into the passage.

'But are you sure?' Tom persisted.

'Yes, I'm sure. Go to sleep.'

'Doesn't Aunt Susan want another one?'

'No, she doesn't. Go to sleep, I say.'

''Cause, when I came, another little boy came just afterwards, and he died, that little boy did. And mamma, too. Father told me.'

'Yes, yes,' said Aunt Annie, closing the door. 'Bee-by.'

'I didn't promise,' Tom murmured to his conscience. 'But it's a good secret,' he added brazenly. He climbed over the edge of the cot, and let himself down gently till his feet touched the floor. He found his clothes, which Aunt Annie invariably placed on a chair in a certain changeless order, and he put some of them on, somehow. Then he softly opened the door and crept down the stairs to the second-floor. He was an adventurous and incalculable child, and he desired to see the baby.

Persons who called on Mr. Henry Knight in his private capacity rang at the side-door to the right of the shop, and were instructed by the shop-caretaker to mount two flights of stairs, having mounted which they would perceive in front of them a door, where they were to ring again. This door was usually closed, but to-night Tom found it ajar. He peeped out and downwards, and thought of the vast showroom below and the wonderful regions of the street. Then he drew in his head, and concealed himself behind the plush portière. From his hiding-place he could watch the door of Uncle Henry's and Aunt Susan's bedroom, and he could also, whenever he felt inclined, glance down the stairway.

He waited, with the patience and the fatalism of infancy, for something to happen.

After an interval of time not mathematically to be computed, Tom heard a step on the stairs, and looked forth. A tall gentleman wearing a high hat and carrying a black bag was ascending. In a flash Tom recollected a talk with his dead father, in which that glorious and gay parent had explained to him that he, Tom, had been brought to his mother's room by the doctor in a black bag.

Tom pulled open the door at the head of the stairs, went outside, and drew the door to behind him.

'Are you the doctor?' he demanded, staring intently at the bag to see whether anything wriggled within.

'Yes, my man,' said the doctor. It was Quain Short, wrenched from the Alhambra.

'Well, they don't want another one. They've got one,' Tom asserted, still observing the bag.

'You're sure?'

'Yes. Aunt Annie said particularly that they didn't want another one.'

'Who is it that has come? Do you know his name? Christopher – is that it?'

'I don't know his name. But he's come, and he's in the bedroom now, with Aunt Susan.'

'How annoying!' said Dr. Quain Short under his breath, and he went.

Tom re-entered, and took up his old position behind the portière.

Presently he heard another step on the stair, and issued out again to reconnoitre. And, lo! another tall gentleman wearing another high hat and carrying another black bag was ascending.

'This makes three,' Tom said.

'What's that, my little man?' asked the gentleman, smiling. It was Dr. Christopher.

'This makes three. And they only want one. The first one came ever such a long time ago. And I can tell you Aunt Susan was very glad when he did come.'

'Dear, dear!' exclaimed Dr. Christopher. 'Then I'm too late, my little man. I was afraid I might be. Everything all right, eh?'

Tom nodded, and Dr. Christopher departed.

And then, after a further pause, up came another tall gentleman, high hat, and black bag.

'This is four,' said Tom.

'What's that, Tommy?' asked Mr. Henry Knight's regular physician and surgeon. 'What are you doing there?'

'One came hours since,' Tom said. 'And they don't want any more.' Then he gazed at the bag, which was larger and glossier than its predecessors. 'Have you brought a *very* nice one?' he inquired. 'They don't really want another, but perhaps if it's *very*– '

It was this momentary uncertainty on Tom's part that possibly saved my hero's life. For the parents were quite inexperienced, and Mrs. Puddiphatt was an accoucheuse of the sixties, and the newborn child was near to dying in the bedroom without anybody being aware of the fact.

'A very nice what?' the doctor questioned gruffly.

'Baby. In that bag,' Tom stammered.

'Out of the way, my bold buccaneer,' said the doctor, striding across the mat into the corridor.

At two o'clock the next morning, Tom being asleep, and all going well with wife and child, Mr. Henry Knight returned at length to his sitting-room, and resumed the composition of the letter to the editor of the *Standard*. The work existed as an artistic whole in his head, and he could not persuade himself to seek rest until he had got it down in black-and-white; for, though he wrote letters instead of sonnets, he was nevertheless a sort of a poet by temperament. You behold him calm now, master once more of his emotions, and not that agitated, pompous, and slightly ridiculous person who lately stamped over Oxford Street and stormed the Alhambra Theatre. And in order to help the excellent father of my hero back into your esteem, let me point out that the imminence and the actuality of fatherhood constitute a somewhat disturbing experience, which does not occur to a man every day.

Mr. Knight dipped pen in ink, and continued:

> ' … who I hold to be not only the greatest poet, but also the greatest moral teacher that England has ever produced,
>
> > '"To thine own self be true,
> > And it must follow, as the night the day,
> > Thou canst not then be false to any man."
>
> 'In conclusion, sir, I ask, without fear of contradiction, are we or are we not, in this matter of the National Debt, to be true to our national selves?
> *'Yours obediently,*
> *'A Conscientious Taxpayer.'*

The signature troubled him. His pen hovered threateningly over it, and finally he struck it out and wrote instead: 'Paterfamilias.' He felt that this pseudonym was perhaps a little inapposite, but some impulse stronger than himself forced him to employ it.

CHAPTER III
HIS CHRISTENING

'But haven't I told you that I was just writing the very name when Annie came in to warn me?'

Mr. Knight addressed the question, kindly and mildly, yet with a hint of annoyance, to his young wife, who was nursing their son with all the experience of three months' practice. It was Sunday morning, and they had finished breakfast in the sitting-room. Within an hour or two the heir was to be taken to the Great Queen Street Wesleyan Methodist Chapel for the solemn rite of baptism.

'Yes, lovey,' said Mrs. Knight. 'You've told me, time and again. But, oh Henry! Your name's just Henry Knight, and I want his to be just Henry Knight, too! I want him to be called after you.'

And the mother, buxom, simple, and adoring, glanced appealingly with bright eyes at the man who for her epitomized the majesty and perfections of his sex.

'He will be Henry Knight,' the father persisted, rather coldly.

But Mrs. Knight shook her head.

Then Aunt Annie came into the room, pushing Tom before her. Tom was magnificently uncomfortable in his best clothes.

'What's the matter, Sue?' Aunt Annie demanded, as soon as she had noticed her sister's face.

And in a moment, in the fraction of a second, and solely by reason of Aunt Annie's question, the situation became serious. It jumped up, as domestic situations sometimes do, suddenly to the temperature at which thunderstorms are probable. It grew close, heavy, and perilous.

Mrs. Knight shook her head again. 'Nothing,' she managed to reply.

'Susan wants – ' Mr. Knight began suavely to explain.

'He keeps on saying he would like him to be called – ' Mrs. Knight burst out.

'No I don't – no I don't!' Mr. Knight interrupted. 'Not if you don't wish it!'

A silence followed. Mr. Knight drummed lightly and nervously on the table-cloth. Mrs. Knight sniffed, threw back her head so that the tears should not fall out of her eyes, and gently patted the baby's back with her right hand. Aunt Annie hesitated whether to speak or not to speak.

Tom remarked in a loud voice:

'If I were you, I should call him Tom, like me. Then, as soon as he can talk, I could say, "How do, Cousin Tom?" and he could say back, "How do, Cousin Tom?"'

'But we should always be getting mixed up between you, you silly boy!' said Aunt Annie, smiling, and trying to be bright and sunny.

'No, you wouldn't,' Tom replied. 'Because I should be Big Tom, and of course he'd only be Little Tom. And I don't think I'm a silly boy, either.'

'Will you be silent, sir!' Mr. Knight ordered in a voice of wrath. And, by way of indicating that the cord of tension had at last snapped, he boxed Tom's left ear, which happened to be the nearest.

Mrs. Knight lost control of her tears, and they escaped. She offered the baby to Aunt Annie.

'Take him. He's asleep. Put him in the cradle,' she sobbed.

'Yes, dear,' said Aunt Annie intimately, in a tone to show how well she knew that poor women must always cling together in seasons of stress and times of oppression.

Mrs. Knight hurried out of the room. Mr. Knight cherished an injury. He felt aggrieved because Susan could not see that, though six months ago she had been entitled to her whims and fancies, she was so no longer. He felt, in fact, that Susan was taking an unfair advantage of him. The logic of the thing was spread out plainly and irrefutably in his mind. And then, quite swiftly, the logic of the thing vanished, and Mr. Knight rose and hastened after his wife.

'You deserved it, you know,' said Aunt Annie to Tom.

'Did I?' The child seemed to speculate.

They both stared at the baby, who lay peacefully in his cradle, for several minutes.

'Annie, come here a moment.' Mr. Knight was calling from another room.

'Yes, Henry. Now, Tom, don't touch the cradle. And if baby begins to cry, run and tell me.'

'Yes, auntie.'

And Aunt Annie went. She neglected to close the door behind her; Tom closed it, noiselessly.

Never before had he been left alone with the baby. He examined with minute care such parts of the living organism as were visible, and then, after courageously fighting temptation, and suffering defeat, he touched the baby's broad, flat nose. He scarcely touched it, yet the baby stirred and mewed faintly. Tom began to rock the cradle, at first gently, then with nervous violence. The faint mew became a regular and sustained cry.

He glanced at the door, and decided that he would make a further effort to lull the ridiculous agitation of this strange and mysterious being. Bending down, he seized the baby in both hands, and tried to nurse it as his two aunts nursed it. The infant's weight was considerable; it exceeded Tom's estimate, with the result that, in the desperate process of extracting the baby from the cradle, the cradle had been overset, and now lay on its beam-ends.

'Hsh – hsh!' Tom entreated, shooing and balancing as best he could.

Then, without warning, Tom's spirit leapt into anger.

'Will you be silent, sir!' he demanded fiercely from the baby, imitating Uncle Henry's tone. 'Will you be silent, sir!' He shook the infant, who was astounded into a momentary silence.

The next thing was the sound of footsteps approaching rapidly along the passage. Tom had no leisure to right the cradle; he merely dropped the baby on the floor by the side of it, and sprang to the window.

'You naughty, naughty boy!' Aunt Annie shrieked. 'You've taken baby out of his cradle! Oh, my pet! my poor darling! my mumsy! Did they, then?'

'I didn't! I didn't!' Tom asserted passionately. 'I've never stirred from here all the time you were out. It fell out itself!'

'Oh!' screamed Aunt Annie. 'There's a black place on his poor little forehead!'

In an instant the baby's parents were to the rescue, and Tom was declaring his innocence to the united family.

'It fell out itself!' he repeated; and soon he began to think of interesting details. 'I saw it. It put its hand on the edge of the cradle and pulled up, and then it leaned to one side, and then the cradle toppled over.'

Of course the preposterous lie was credited by nobody.

'There's one thing!' said Mrs. Knight, weeping for the second time that morning. 'I won't have him christened with a black forehead, that I won't!'

At this point, Aunt Annie, who had scurried to the kitchen for some butter, flew back and anointed the bruise.

'It fell out itself!' Tom said again.

'Whatever would the minister think?' Mrs. Knight wondered.

'It fell out itself!' said Tom.

Mr. Knight whipped Tom, and his Aunt Annie put him to bed for the rest of the day. In the settled opinion of Mrs. Knight, Tom was punished for attempting to murder her baby. But Mr. Knight insisted that the punishment was for lying. As for the baptism, it had necessarily to be postponed for four weeks, since the ceremony was performed at the Great Queen Street Chapel only on the first Sunday in the month.

'I never touched it!' Tom asseverated solemnly the next day. 'It fell out itself!'

And he clung to the statement, day after day, with such obstinacy that at length the three adults, despite the protests of reason, began to think that conceivably, just conceivably, the impossible was possible – in regard to one particular baby. Mrs. Knight had often commented on the perfectly

marvellous muscular power of her baby's hand when it clutched hers, and signs were not wanting to convince the parents and the aunt that the infant was no ordinary infant, but indeed extraordinary and wonderful to the last degree.

On the fourth day, when Tom had asserted for about the hundredth time, 'It fell out itself,' his Aunt Susan kissed him and gave him a sweetmeat. Tom threw it away, but in the end, after much coaxing, he consented to enjoy it. Aunt Susan detected the finger of Providence in recent events, and one night she whispered to her husband: 'Lovey, I want you to call him what you said.'

And so it occurred, at the christening, that when the minister leaned over the Communion-rail to take the wonder-child from its mother's arms, its father whispered into the minister's ear a double name.

'Henry Shakspere – ' began the minister with lifted hand.

And the baby smiled confidently upwards.

CHAPTER IV
AGED TWELVE

'Quick! He's coming!'

It was Aunt Annie who uttered the dramatic whisper, and as she did so she popped a penknife on to an empty plate in front of an empty chair at the breakfast-table. Mr. Knight placed a silver watch and also, separately, a silver chain by the side of the weapon; and, lastly, Mrs. Knight had the happy inspiration of covering these articles with the empty slop-basin.

The plotters sat back in their chairs and tried to keep their guilty eyes off the overturned basin. 'Two slices, Annie?' said Mr. Knight in a loud tone, elaborately casual. 'Yes, please,' said Aunt Annie. Mrs. Knight began to pour out coffee. They all three looked at each other, joyous, naughty, strategic; and the thing of which they were least conscious, in that moment of expectancy, was precisely the thing that the lustrous trifles hidden beneath the basin were meant to signalize: namely, the passage of years and the approach of age. Mr. Knight's hair was grey; Mrs. Knight, once a slim bride of twenty-seven, was now a stout matron of thirty-nine, with a tendency to pant after the most modest feats of stair-climbing; and Aunt Annie, only the other day a pretty girl with a head full of what is wrongly called nonsense, was a spinster – a spinster. Fortunately, they were blind to these obvious facts. Even Mr. Knight, accustomed as he was to survey fundamental truths with the detachment of a philosopher, would have been shocked to learn that his hair was grey. Before the glass, of a morning, he sometimes remarked, in the tone of a man whose passion for candour permits him to conceal nothing: 'It's *getting* grey.'

Then young Henry burst into the room.

It was exactly twelve years since he had been born, a tiny, shapeless, senseless, helpless, toothless, speechless, useless, feeble, deaf, myopic creature; and now he was a school-boy, strong, healthy, big, and clever, who could define a dodecahedron and rattle off the rivers of Europe like a house on fire. The change amounted to a miracle, and it was esteemed as such by those who had spent twelve years chiefly in watching it. One evening, in the very earliest stages, while his mother was nursing him, his father had come into the darkened chamber, and, after bending over the infant, had struck a match to ignite a cigar; and the eyes of the infant had blinked in the sudden light. '*See how he takes notice!* the mother had cried in ecstatic wonderment. And from that moment she, and the other two, had never ceased to marvel, and to fear. It seemed impossible that this extraordinary fragment of humanity, which at first could not be safely ignored for a single instant night or day, should survive the multitudinous perils that surrounded it. But it did survive, and it became an intelligence. At eighteen months the intelligence could walk, sit up, and say 'Mum.' These performances were astounding. And the fact that fifty thousand other babies of eighteen months in London were similarly walking, sitting up, and saying 'Mum,' did not render these performances any the less astounding. And when, half a year later, the child could point to a letter and identify it plainly and unmistakably – 'O' – the parents' cup was full. The mother admitted frankly that she had not expected this final proof of understanding. Aunt Annie and father pretended not to be surprised, but it was a pretence merely. Why, it seemed scarcely a month since the miraculous child had not even sense enough to take milk out of a spoon! And here he was identifying 'O' every time he tried, with the absolute assurance of a philologist! True, he had once or twice shrieked 'O' while putting a finger on 'Q,' but that was the fault of the printers, who had printed the tail too small.

After that the miracles had followed one another so rapidly, each more amazing than the last, that the watchers had unaffectedly abandoned themselves to an attitude of permanent delighted astonishment. They lived in a world of magic. And their entire existence was based on the tacit assumption – tacit because the truth of it was so manifest – that their boy was the most prodigious

boy that ever was. He went into knickerbockers. He learnt hymns. He went to school – and came back alive at the end of the first day and said he had enjoyed it! Certainly, other boys went to school. Yes, but there was something special, something indefinable, something incredible, about Henry's going to school that separated his case from all the other cases, and made it precious in its wonder. And he began to study arithmetic, geometry, geography, history, chemistry, drawing, Latin, French, mensuration, composition, physics, Scripture, and fencing. His singular brain could grapple simultaneously with these multifarious subjects. And all the time he was growing, growing, growing. More than anything else it was his growth that stupefied and confounded and enchanted his mother. His limbs were enormous to her, and the breadth of his shoulders and the altitude of his head. It puzzled her to imagine where the flesh came from. Already he was as tail as she, and up to Aunt Annie's lips, and up to his father's shoulder. She simply adored his colossal bigness. But somehow the fact that a giant was attending the Bloomsbury Middle School never leaked out.

'What's this?' Henry demanded, mystified, as he sat down to breakfast. There was a silence.

'What's what?' said his father gruffly. 'Get your breakfast.'

'Oh my!' Henry had lifted the basin.

'Had you forgotten it was your birthday?' Mrs. Knight asked, beaming.

'Well, I'm blest!' He had in truth forgotten that it was his birthday.

'You've been so wrapped up in this Speech Day business, haven't you?' said Aunt Annie, as if wishful to excuse him to himself for the extraordinary lapse.

They all luxuriated in his surprise, his exclamations, his blushes of delight, as he fingered the presents. For several days, as Henry had made no reference to his approaching anniversary, they had guessed that he had overlooked it in the exciting preparations for Speech Day, and they had been anticipating this moment with the dreadful joy of conspirators. And now they were content. No hitch, no anticlimax had occurred.

'I know,' said Henry. 'The watch is from father, and you've given me the chain, mother, and the knife is from Aunt Annie. Is there a thing in it for pulling stones out of horses' hoofs, auntie?' (Happily, there was.)

'You must make a good breakfast, dear; you've got a big day before you,' enjoined his mother, when he had thanked them politely, and assumed the watch and chain, and opened all the blades and other pleasant devices of the penknife.

'Yes, mother,' he answered obediently.

He always obeyed injunctions to eat well. But it would be unfair to Henry not to add that he was really a most obedient boy – in short, a good boy, a nice boy. The strangest thing of all in Henry's case was that, despite their united and unceasing efforts, his three relatives had quite failed to spoil him. He was too self-possessed for his years, too prone to add the fanciful charm of his ideas to no matter what conversation might be proceeding in his presence; but spoiled he was not.

The Speech Day which had just dawned marked a memorable point in his career. According to his mother's private notion, it would be a demonstration, and a triumphant demonstration, that, though the mills of God grind slowly, they grind exceeding small. For until that term, of which the Speech Day was the glittering conclusion, the surpassing merits and talents of her son had escaped recognition at the Bloomsbury Middle School. He had never reached the top of a form; he had never received a prize; he had never earned pedagogic praise more generous than 'Conduct fair – progress fair.' But now, out of the whole school, he had won the prize for Good Conduct. And, as if this was not sufficiently dazzling, he had also taken to himself, for an essay on 'Streets,' the prize for English Composition. And, thirdly, he had been chosen to recite a Shaksperean piece at the ceremony of prize-giving. It was the success in Composition which tickled his father's pride, for was not this a proof of heredity? Aunt Annie flattered herself on the Good Conduct prize. Mrs. Knight exulted in everything, but principally in the prospective sight of her son at large on the platform delivering

Shakspere to a hushed, attentive audience of other boys' parents. It was to be the apotheosis of Henry, was that night!

'Will you hear me, father?' Henry requested meekly, when he had finished the first preparations for his big day, and looked at the time, and cut a piece of skin from the palm of his hand, to the horror of his mother and aunt. 'Will you hear me, father?'

(No! I assure you he was not a detestable little prig. He had been brought up like that.)

And Mr. Knight took Staunton's Shakspere from the bookcase and opened it at *Othello*, Act I., scene iii., and Henry arose and began to explain to the signiors of Venice in what manner Desdemona had fallen in love with him and he with Desdemona; how he told Desdemona that even from his boyish days he had experienced moving accidents by flood and field, and had been sold into slavery, and all about the cannibals and the – but he came to utter grief at the word Anthropophagi.'

'An-thro-poph-a-gi,' said his father.

'It's a very difficult word, I'm sure,' said his mother.

Difficult or not, Henry mastered it, and went on to the distressful strokes his youth had suffered, and then to Desdemona's coy hint:

> 'Upon this hint I spoke – spake, I mean;
> She loved me for the dangers I had passed,
> And I loved her that she did pity them.
> This only is the witchcraft I have used.
> Here comes the lady; let her witness it.'

'Have a bit of toast, my pet,' Mrs. Knight suggested.

The door opened at the same moment.

'Enter Desdemona,' said a voice. 'Now do go light on the buttered toast, Othello. You know you'll be ill.'

It was Cousin Tom. He was always very late for breakfast.

CHAPTER V
MARRONS GLACÉS

And Tom was always being inconvenient, always producing intellectual discomfort. On this occasion there can be no doubt that if Tom had not come in just then Henry would have accepted and eaten the buttered toast, and would have enjoyed it; and his father, mother, and aunt would have enjoyed the spectacle of his bliss; and all four of them would have successfully pretended to their gullible consciences that an indiscretion had not been committed. Here it must be said that the Achilles' heel of Henry Shakspere Knight lay in his stomach. Despite his rosy cheeks and pervading robustness, despite the fact that his infancy had been almost immune from the common ailments – even measles – he certainly suffered from a form of chronic dyspepsia. Authorities differed upon the cause of the ailment. Some, such as Tom, diagnosed the case in a single word. Mr. Knight, less abrupt, ascribed the evil to Mrs. Knight's natural but too solicitous endeavours towards keeping up the strength of her crescent son. Mrs. Knight and Aunt Annie regarded it as a misfortune simply, inexplicable, unjust, and cruel. But even Mrs. Knight and Aunt Annie had perceived that there was at least an apparent connection between hot buttered toast and the recurrence of the malady. Hence, though the two women would not admit that this connection was more than a series of unfortunate coincidences, Henry had been advised to deprive himself of hot buttered toast. And here came Tom, with his characteristic inconvenience, to catch them in the very midst of their folly, and to make even Mr. Knight, that mask of stern rectitude, a guilty accessory before the fact.

'It's only this once!' Mrs. Knight protested.

'You're quite right,'said Tom. 'It's only this once.'

Henry took the piece of toast, and then, summoning for one supreme effort all the spiritual courage which he had doubtless inherited from a long line of Puritan ancestors, he nobly relinquished it.

Mr. Knight's eyes indicated to Tom that a young man who was constantly half an hour late for breakfast had no moral right to preach abstinence to a growing boy, especially on his birthday. But the worst thing about Tom was that he was never under any circumstances abashed.

'As nothing is worse than hot toast cold,' Tom imperturbably remarked, 'I'll eat it at once.' And he ate the piece of toast.

No one could possibly blame Tom. Nevertheless, every soul round the table did the impossible and blamed him. The atmosphere lost some of its festive quality.

Tom Knight was nineteen, thin, pale, and decidedly tall; and his fair hair still curled slightly on the top of his head. In twelve years his development, too, had amounted to a miracle, or would have amounted to a miracle had there been anyone present sufficiently interested to observe and believe in it. Miracles, however, do not begin to exist until at least one person believes, and the available credence in the household had been monopolized by Tom's young cousin. The great difference between Tom and Henry was that Tom had faults, whereas Henry had none – yet Tom was the elder by seven years and ought to have known better! Mr. Knight had always seen Tom's faults, but it was only since the advent of Henry that Mrs. Knight, and particularly Aunt Annie, had begun to see them. Before Henry arrived, Tom had been Aunt Annie's darling. The excellent spinster took pains never to show that Henry had supplanted him; nevertheless, she showed it all the time. Tom's faults flourished and multiplied. There can be no question that he was idle, untruthful, and unreliable. In earliest youth he had been a merry prank; he was still a prank, but not often merry. His spirit seemed to be overcast; and the terrible fact came out gradually that he was not 'nicely disposed.' His relatives failed to understand him, and they gave him up like a puzzle. He was self-contradictory. For instance, though a shocking liar, he was lavish of truth whenever truth happened to be disconcerting and inopportune. He it was

who told the forewoman of his uncle's millinery department, in front of a customer, that she had a moustache. His uncle threshed him. 'She *has* a moustache, anyhow!' said this Galileo when his uncle had finished. Mr. Knight wished Tom to go into the drapery, but Tom would not. Tom wanted to be an artist; he was always drawing. Mr. Knight had only heard of artists; he had never seen one. He thought Tom's desire for art was mere wayward naughtiness. However, after Tom had threatened to burn the house down if he was not allowed to go to an art-school, and had carried out his threat so far as to set fire to a bale of cotton-goods in the cellar, Mr. Knight yielded to the whim for the sake of peace and a low temperature. He expansively predicted ultimate disaster for Tom. But at the age of eighteen and a half, Tom, with his habit of inconvenience, simply fell into a post as designer to a firm of wholesale stationers. His task was to design covers for coloured boxes of fancy notepaper, and his pay was two guineas a week. The richness of the salary brought Mr. Knight to his senses; it staggered, sobered, and silenced him. Two guineas a week at eighteen and a half! It was beyond the verge of the horizons of the drapery trade. Mr. Knight had a shop-walker, aged probably thirty-eight and a half, who was receiving precisely two guineas a week, and working thirty hours a week longer than Tom.

On the strength of this amazing two guineas, Tom, had he chosen, might easily have regained the long-lost esteem of his relatives. But he did not choose. He became more than ever a mystery to them, and a troubling mystery, not a mystery that one could look squarely in the face and then pass by. His ideals, if they could be called ideals, were always in collision with those of the rest of the house. Neither his aunts nor his uncle could ever be quite sure that he was not enjoying some joke which they were not enjoying. Once he had painted Aunt Annie's portrait. 'Never let me see that thing again!' she exclaimed when she beheld it complete. She deemed it an insult, and she was not alone in her opinion. 'Do you call this art?' said Mr. Knight. 'If this is art, then all I can say is I'm glad I wasn't brought up to understand art, as you call it.' Nevertheless, somehow the painting was exhibited at South Kensington in the national competition of students works, and won a medal. 'Portrait of my Aunt,' Tom had described it in the catalogue, and Aunt Annie was furious a second time. 'However,' she said, 'no one'll recognise me, that's one comfort!' Still, the medal weighed heavily; it was a gold medal. Difficult to ignore its presence in the house!

Tom's crowning sin was that he was such a bad example to Henry. Henry worshipped him, and the more Tom was contemned the more Henry worshipped.

'You'll surely be very late, Tom,' Mrs. Knight ventured to remark at half-past nine.

Mr. Knight had descended into the shop, and Aunt Annie also.

'Oh no,' said Tom – 'not more than is necessary.' And then he glanced at Henry. 'Look here, my bold buccaneer, you've got nothing to do just now, have you? You can stroll along with me a bit, and we'll see if we can buy you a twopenny toy for a birthday present.'

Tom always called Henry his 'bold buccaneer.' He had picked up the term of endearment from the doctor with the black bag twelve years ago. Henry had his cap on in two seconds, and Mrs. Knight beamed at this unusual proof of kindly thought on Tom's part.

In the street Tom turned westwards instead of to the City, where his daily work lay.

'Aren't you going to work to-day?' Henry asked in surprise.

'No,' said Tom. 'I told my benevolent employers last night that it was your birthday to-day, and I asked whether I could have a holiday. What do you think they answered?'

'You didn't ask them,' said Henry.

'They answered that I could have forty holidays. And they requested me to wish you, on behalf of the firm, many happy returns of the day.'

'Don't rot,' said Henry.

It was a beautiful morning, sunny, calm, inspiriting, and presently Tom began to hum. After a time Henry perceived that Tom was humming the same phrase again and again: 'Some streets are longer than others. Some streets are longer than others.'

'*Don't rot*, Tom,' Henry pleaded.

The truth was that Tom was intoning a sentence from Henry's prize essay on streets. Tom had read the essay and pronounced it excellent, and till this very moment on the pavement of Oxford Street Henry had imagined Tom's verdict to be serious. He now knew that it was not serious.

Tom continued to chant, with pauses: 'Some streets are longer than others… Very few streets are straight… But we read in the Bible of the street which is called Straight… Oxford Street is nearly straight… A street is what you go along… It has a road and two footpaths.'

Henry would have given his penknife not to have written that essay. The worst of Tom was that he could make anything look silly without saying that it was silly – a trick that Henry envied.

Tom sang further: 'In the times before the French Revolution the streets of Paris had no pavements … *e. g.*, they were all road… It was no infrequent occurrence for people to be maimed for life, or even seriously injured, against walls by passing carriages of haughty nobles.'

'I didn't put "haughty,"' Henry cried passionately.

'Didn't you?' Tom said with innocence. 'But you put "or even seriously injured."'

'Well?' said Henry dubiously.

'And you put "It was no infrequent occurrence." Where did you steal that from, my bold buccaneer?'

'I didn't steal it,' Henry asserted. 'I made it up.'

'Then you will be a great writer,' Tom said. 'If I were you, I should send a telegram to Tennyson, and tell him to look out for himself. Here's a telegraph-office. Come on.'

And Tom actually did enter a doorway. But it proved to be the entrance to a large and magnificent confectioner's shop. Henry followed him timidly.

'A pound of marrons glacés,' Tom demanded.

'What are they?' Henry whispered up at Tom's ear.

'Taste,' said Tom, boldly taking a sample from the scales while the pound was being weighed out.

'It's like chestnuts,' Harry mumbled through the delicious brown frosted morsel. 'But nicer.'

'They are rather like chestnuts, aren't they?' said Tom.

The marrons glacés were arranged neatly in a beautiful box; the box was wrapped in paper of one colour, and then further wrapped in paper of another colour, and finally bound in pink ribbon.

'Golly!' murmured Henry in amaze, for Tom had put down a large silver coin in payment, and received no change.

They came out, Henry carrying the parcel.

'But will they do me any harm?' the boy asked apprehensively.

The two cousins had reached Hyde Park, and were lying on the grass, and Tom had invited Henry to begin the enterprise of eating his birthday present.

'Harm! I should think not. They are the best things out for the constitution. Not like sweets at all. Doctors often give them to patients when they are getting better. And they're very good for sea-sickness too.'

So Henry opened the box and feasted. One half of the contents had disappeared within twenty minutes, and Tom had certainly not eaten more than two marrons.

'They're none so dusty!' said Henry, perhaps enigmatically. 'I could go on eating these all day.'

A pretty girl of eighteen or so wandered past them.

'Nice little bit of stuff, that!' Tom remarked reflectively.

'What say?'

'That little thing there!' Tom explained, pointing with his elbow to the girl.

'Oh!' Henry grunted. 'I thought you said a nice little bit of stuff.'

And he bent to his chestnuts again. By slow and still slower degrees they were reduced to one.

'Have this,' he invited Tom.

'No,' said Tom. 'Don't want it. You finish up.'

'I think I can't eat any more,' Henry sighed.

'Oh yes, you can,' Tom encouraged him. 'You've shifted about fifty. Surely you can manage fifty-one.'

Henry put the survivor to his lips, but withdrew it.

'No,' he said. 'I tell you what I'll do: I'll put it in the box and save it.'

'But you can't cart that box about for the sake of one chestnut, my bold buccaneer.'

'Well, I'll put it in my pocket.'

And he laid it gently by the side of the watch in his waistcoat pocket.

'You can find your way home, can't you?' said Tom. 'It's just occurred to me that I've got some business to attend to.'

A hundred yards off the pretty girl was reading on a seat. His business led him in that direction.

CHAPTER VI
A CALAMITY FOR THE SCHOOL

It was a most fortunate thing that there was cold mutton for dinner. The economic principle governing the arrangement of the menu was that the simplicity of the mutton atoned for the extravagance of the birthday pudding, while the extravagance of the birthday pudding excused the simplicity of the mutton. Had the first course been anything richer than cold mutton, Henry could not have pretended even to begin the repast. As it was, he ate a little of the lean, leaving a wasteful margin of lean round the fat, which he was not supposed to eat; he also nibbled at the potatoes, and compressed the large remnant of them into the smallest possible space on the plate; then he unobtrusively laid down his knife and fork.

'Come, Henry,' said Aunt Annie, 'don't leave a saucy plate.'

Henry had already pondered upon a plausible explanation of his condition.

'I'm too excited to eat,' he promptly answered.

'You aren't feeling ill, are you?' his mother asked sharply.

'No,' he said. 'But can I have my birthday pudding for supper, after it's all over, instead of now?'

Mrs. Knight and Aunt Annie looked at one another. 'That might be safer,' said Aunt Annie, and she added: 'You can have some cold rice pudding now, Henry.'

'No, thank you, auntie; I don't want any.'

'The boy's ill,' Mrs. Knight exclaimed. 'Annie, where's the Mother Seigel?'

'The boy's no such thing,' said Mr. Knight, pouring calmness and presence of mind over the table like oil. 'Give him some Seigel by all means, if you think fit; but don't go and alarm yourself about nothing. The boy's as well as I am.'

'I think I *should* like some Seigel,' said the boy.

Tom was never present at the mid-day meal; only Mrs. Knight knew that Henry had been out with him; and Mrs. Knight was far too simple a soul to suspect the horrid connection between the morning ramble and this passing malaise of Henry's. As for Henry, he volunteered nothing.

'It will pass off soon,' said Aunt Annie two hours later. The time was then half-past three; the great annual ceremony of Speech Day began at half-past seven. Henry reclined on the sofa, under an antimacassar, and Mrs. Knight was bathing his excited temples with eau de Cologne.

'Oh yes,' Mr. Knight agreed confidently; he had looked in from the shop for a moment. 'Oh yes! It will pass off. Give him a cup of strong tea in a quarter of an hour, and he'll be as right as a trivet.'

'Of course you will, won't you, my dear?' Mrs. Knight demanded fondly of her son.

Henry nodded weakly.

The interesting and singular fact about the situation is that these three adults, upright, sincere, strictly moral, were all lying, and consciously lying. They knew that Henry's symptoms differed in no particular from those of his usual attacks, and that his usual attacks had a minimum duration of twelve hours. They knew that he was decidedly worse at half-past three than he had been at half-past two, and they could have prophesied with assurance that he would be still worse at half-past four than he was then. They knew that time would betray them. Yet they persisted in falsehood, because they were incapable of imagining the Speech Day ceremony without Henry in the midst. If any impartial friend had approached at that moment and told them that Henry would spend the evening in bed, and that they might just as well resign themselves first as last, they would have cried him down, and called him unfriendly and unfeeling, and, perhaps, in the secrecy of their hearts thrown rotten eggs at him.

It proved to be the worst dyspeptic visitation that Henry had ever had. It was not a mere 'attack' – it was a revolution, beginning with slight insurrections, but culminating in universal upheaval, the overthrowing of dynasties, the establishment of committees of public safety, and a reign of terror. As

a series of phenomena it was immense, variegated, and splendid, and was remembered for months afterwards.

'Surely he'll be better *now*!' said Mrs. Knight, agonized.

But no! And so they carried Henry to bed.

At six the martyr uneasily dozed.

'He may sleep a couple of hours,' Aunt Annie whispered.

Not one of the three had honestly and openly withdrawn from the position that Henry would be able to go to the prize-giving. They seemed to have silently agreed to bury the futile mendacity of the earlier afternoon in everlasting forgetfulness.

'Poor little thing!' observed Mrs. Knight.

His sufferings had reduced him, in her vision, to about half his ordinary size.

At seven Mr. Knight put on his hat.

'Are you going out, father?' his wife asked, shocked.

'It is only fair,' said Mr. Knight, 'to warn the school people that Henry will not be able to be present to-night. They will have to alter their programme. Of course I shan't stay.'

In pitying the misfortune of the school, thus suddenly and at so critical a moment deprived of Henry's presence and help, Mrs. Knight felt less keenly the pang of her own misfortune and that of her son. Nevertheless, it was a night sufficiently tragic in Oxford Street.

Mr. Knight returned with Henry's two prizes — *Self-Help* and *The Voyage of the 'Fox' in the Arctic Seas*.

The boy had wakened once, but dozed again.

'Put them on the chair where he can see them in the morning,' Aunt Annie suggested.

'Yes,' said the father, brightening. 'And I'll wind up his watch for him… Bless us! what's he been doing to the watch? What *is* it, Annie?

'Why did you do it?' Mr. Knight asked Tom. 'That's what I can't understand. Why did you do it?'

They were alone together the next morning in the sitting-room. ('I will speak to that young man privately,' Mr. Knight had said to the two women in a formidable tone.) Henry was still in bed, but awake and reading Smiles with precocious gusto.

'Did the kid tell you all about it, then?'

'The kid,' said Mr. Knight, marking by a peculiar emphasis his dissatisfaction with Tom's choice of nouns, 'was very loyal. I had to drag the story out of him bit by bit. I repeat: why did you do it? Was this your idea of a joke? If so, I can only say – '

'You should have seen how he enjoyed them! It was tremendous,' Tom broke in. 'Tremendous! I've no doubt the afternoon was terrible, but the morning was worth it. Ask Henry himself. I wanted to give him a treat, and it seems I gave you all one.'

'And then the headmaster!' Mr. Knight complained. 'He was very upset. He told me he didn't know what they should do without Henry last night.'

'Oh yes. I know old Pingles. Pingles is a great wit. But seriously, uncle,' said Tom – he gazed at the carpet; 'seriously – ' He paused. 'If I had thought of the dreadful calamity to the school, I would only have bought half a pound.'

'Pah!' Mr. Knight whiffed out.

'It's a mercy we're all still alive,' murmured Tom.

'And may I ask, sir – ' Mr. Knight began afresh, in a new vein, sarcastic and bitter. 'Of course you're an independent member of society, and your own master; but may I venture to ask what you were doing in Hyde Park yesterday at eleven o'clock?'

'You may,' Tom replied. 'The truth is, Bollingtons Limited and me, just me, have had a row. I didn't like their style, nor their manners. So the day before yesterday I told them to go to the devil – '

'You told them to go to the – !'

'And I haven't seen anything of Bollingtons since, and I don't want to.'

'That is where you are going to yourself, sir,' thundered Mr. Knight. 'Mark my words. That is where you are going to yourself. Two guineas a week, at your age, and you tell them – ! I suppose you think you can get a place like that any day.'

'Look here, uncle. Listen. Mark my words. I have two to say to you, and two only. Good-morning.'

Tom hastened from the room, and went down into the shop by the shop-stairs. The cashier of the establishment was opening the safe.

'Mr. Perkins,' said Tom lightly, 'uncle wants change for a ten-pound note, in gold.'

'Certainly, Mr. Tom. With pleasure.'

'Oh!' Tom explained, as though the notion had just struck him, taking the sovereigns, 'the note! I'll bring it down in a jiffy.'

'That's all right, Mr. Tom,' said the cashier, smiling with suave confidence.

Tom ran up to his room, passing his uncle on the way. He snatched his hat and stick, and descended rapidly into the street by the house-stairs. He chose this effective and picturesque method of departing for ever from the hearth and home of Mr. Knight.

CHAPTER VII
CONTAGIOUS

'There's only the one slipper here,' said Aunt Annie, feeling in the embroidered slipper-bag which depended from a glittering brass nail in the recess to the right of the fireplace. And this fireplace was on the ground-floor, and not in Oxford Street.

'I was mending the other this morning,' said Mrs. Knight, springing up with all her excessive stoutness from the easy-chair. 'I left it in my work-basket, I do believe.'

'I'll get it,' said Aunt Annie.

'No, I'll get it,' said Mrs. Knight.

So it occurred that Aunt Annie laid the left slipper (sole upwards) in front of the brisk red fire, while Mrs. Knight laid the right one.

Then the servant entered the dining-room – a little simple fat thing of sixteen or so, proud of her cap and apron and her black afternoon dress. She was breathing quickly.

'Please'm, Dr. Dancer says he'll come at nine o'clock, or as soon after as makes no matter.'

In delivering the message the servant gave a shrewd, comprehending, sympathetic smile, as if to say: 'I am just as excited about your plot as you are.'

'Thank you, Sarah. That will do.' Aunt Annie dismissed her frigidly.

'Yes'm.'

Sarah's departing face fell to humility, and it said now: 'I'm sorry I presumed to be as excited about your plot as you are.'

The two sisters looked at each other interrogatively, disturbed, alarmed, shocked.

'Can she have been listening at doors?' Aunt Annie inquired in a whisper.

Wherever the sisters happened to be, they never discussed Sarah save in a whisper. If they had been in Alaska and Sarah in Timbuctoo, they would have mentioned her name in a whisper, lest she might overhear. And, by the way, Sarah's name was not Sarah, but Susan. It had been altered in deference to a general opinion that it was not nice for a servant to bear the same name as her mistress, and, further, that such an anomaly had a tendency to subvert the social order.

'I don't know,' said Mrs. Knight 'I put her straight about those lumps of sugar.'

'Did you tell her to see to the hot-water bottle?'

'Bless us, no!'

Aunt Annie rang the bell.

'Sarah, put a hot-water bottle in your master's bed. And be sure the stopper is quite tight.'

'Yes'm. Master's just coming down the street now, mum.'

Sarah spoke true. The master was in fact coming down the wintry gaslit street. And the street was Dawes Road, Fulham, in the day of its newness. The master stopped at the gate of a house of two storeys with a cellar-kitchen. He pushed open the creaking iron device and entered the garden, sixteen foot by four, which was the symbol of the park in which the house would have stood if it had been a mansion. In a stride he walked from one end to the other of the path, which would have been a tree-lined, winding carriage-drive had the garden been a park. As he fumbled for his latchkey, he could see the beaming face of the representative of the respectful lower classes in the cellar-kitchen. The door yielded before him as before its rightful lord, and he passed into his sacred domestic privacy with an air which plainly asserted: 'Here I am king, absolute, beneficent, worshipped.'

'Come to the fire, quick, Henry,' said Aunt Annie, fussing round him actively.

It would be idle to attempt to conceal, even for a moment, that this was not Henry the elder, but Henry Shakspere, aged twenty-three, with a face made grave, perhaps prematurely, by the double

responsibilities of a householder and a man of affairs. Henry had lost some of his boyish plumpness, and he had that night a short, dry cough.

'I'm coming,' he replied curtly, taking off his blue Melton. 'Don't worry.'

And in a fraction of a second, not only Aunt Annie, but his mother in the dining-room and his helot in the cellar-kitchen, knew that the master was in a humour that needed humouring.

Henry the younger had been the master for six years, since the death of his father. The sudden decease of its head generally means financial calamity for a family like the Knights. But somehow the Knights were different from the average. In the first place Henry Knight was insured for a couple of thousand pounds. In the second place Aunt Annie had a little private income of thirty pounds a year. And in the third place there was Henry Shakspere. The youth had just left school; he left it without special distinction (the brilliant successes of the marred Speech Day were never repeated), but the state of his education may be inferred from the established fact that the headmaster had said that if he had stayed three months longer he would have gone into logarithms. Instead of going into logarithms, Henry went into shorthand. And shorthand, at that date, was a key to open all doors, a cure for every ill, and the finest thing in the world. Henry had a talent for shorthand; he took to it; he revelled in it; he dreamt it; he lived for it alone. He won a speed medal, the gold of which was as pure as the gold of the medal won by his wicked cousin Tom for mere painting. Henry's mother was at length justified before all men in her rosy predictions.

Among the most regular attendants at the Great Queen Street Wesleyan Chapel was Mr. George Powell, who himself alone constituted and comprised the eminent legal firm known throughout Lincoln's Inn Fields, New Court, the Temple, Broad Street, and Great George Street, as 'Powells.' It is not easy, whatever may be said to the contrary, to reconcile the exigencies of the modern solicitor's profession with the exigencies of active Wesleyan Methodism; but Mr. George Powell succeeded in the difficult attempt, and his fame was, perhaps, due mainly to this success. All Wesleyan solicitors in large practice achieve renown, whether they desire it or not; Wesleyans cannot help talking about them, as one talks about an apparent defiance of natural laws. Most of them are forced into Parliament, and compelled against their wills to accept the honour of knighthood. Mr. George Powell, however, had so far escaped both Parliament and the prefix – a fact which served only to increase his fame. In fine, Mr. George Powell, within the frontiers of Wesleyan Methodism, was a lion of immense magnitude, and even beyond the frontiers, in the vast unregenerate earth, he was no mean figure. Now, when Mr. Powell heard of the death of Henry Knight, whom he said he had always respected as an upright tradesman and a sincere Christian, and of the shorthand speed medal of Henry Shakspere Knight, he benevolently offered the young Henry a situation in his office at twenty-five shillings a week, rising to thirty.

Young Henry's fortune was made. He was in Powells, and under the protecting ægis of the principal. He shared in the lustre of Powells. When people mentioned him, they also mentioned Powells, as if that settled the matter – whatever the matter was. Mr. Powell invested Mrs. Knight's two thousand pounds on mortgage or freehold security at five per cent., and upon this interest, with Henry's salary and Aunt Annie's income, the three lived in comfort at Dawes Road. Nay, they saved, and Henry travelled second-class between Walham Green and the Temple. The youth was serious, industrious, and trustworthy, and in shorthand incomparable. No one acquainted with the facts was surprised when, after three years, Mr. Powell raised him to the position of his confidential clerk, and his salary to fifty-two shillings and sixpence.

And then Mr. Powell, who had fought for so long against meaningless honours, capitulated and accepted a knighthood. The effect upon Dawes Road was curious and yet very natural. It was almost as though Henry himself had accepted a knighthood. Both Mrs. Knight and Aunt Annie seemed to assume that Henry had at least contributed to the knighthood and that the knighthood was in some subtle way the reward of Henry's talent, rectitude, and strenuousness. 'Sir George' – those two syllables which slipped smoothly off the tongue with no effort to the speaker – entered largely into

all conversations in the house at Dawes Road; and the whole street, beginning with the milkman, knew that Henry was Sir George's – no, not Sir George's confidential clerk, no such thing! – private secretary.

His salary was three guineas a week. He had a banking account at Smith, Payne and Smiths, and a pew at the Munster Park Wesleyan Chapel. He was a power at the Regent Street Polytechnic. He bought books, including encyclopædias and dictionaries. He wrote essays which were read and debated upon at the sessions of the Debating Society. (One of the essays was entitled: 'The Tendencies of Modern Fiction'; he was honestly irate against the Stream of Trashy Novels Constantly Poured Forth by the Press.) He took out a life insurance policy for two hundred and fifty pounds, and an accident policy which provided enormous sums for all sorts of queer emergencies. Indeed, Henry was armed at every point. He could surely snap his fingers at Chance.

If any young man in London had the right to be bumptious and didactic, Henry had. And yet he remained simple, unaffected, and fundamentally kind. But he was very serious. His mother and aunt strained every nerve, in their idolatrous treatment of him, to turn him into a conceited and unbearable jackanapes – and their failure to do so was complete. They only made him more serious. His temper was, and always had been, what is called even.

And yet, on this particular evening when Sarah had been instructed to put a hot-water bottle in his bed, Henry's tone, in greeting his aunt, had been curt, fretful, peevish, nearly cantankerous. 'Don't worry me!' he had irascibly protested, well knowing that his good aunt was guiltless of the slightest intention to worry him. Here was a problem, an apparent contradiction, in Henry's personality.

His aunt, in the passage, and his mother, who had overheard in the dining-room, instantly and correctly solved the problem by saying to themselves that Henry's tone was a Symptom. They had both been collecting symptoms for four days. His mother had first discovered that he had a cold; Aunt Annie went further and found that it was a feverish cold. Aunt Annie saw that his eyes were running; his mother wormed out of him that his throat tickled and his mouth was sore. When Aunt Annie asked him if his eyes ached as well as ran, he could not deny it. On the third day, at breakfast, he shivered, and the two ladies perceived simultaneously the existence of a peculiar rash behind Henry's ears. On the morning of the fourth day Aunt Annie, up early, scored one over her sister by noticing the same rash at the roots of his still curly hair. It was the second rash, together with Henry's emphatic and positive statement that he was perfectly well, which had finally urged his relatives to a desperate step – a step involving intrigue and prevarication. And to justify this step had come the crowning symptom of peevishness – peevishness in Henry! It wanted only that!

'I've asked Dr. Dancer to call in to-night,' said Aunt Annie casually, while Henry was assuming his toasted crimson carpet slippers. Mrs. Knight was brewing tea in the kitchen.

'What for?' Henry demanded quickly, and as if defensively. Then he added: 'Is mother wrong again?'

Mrs. Knight had a recurrent 'complaint.'

'Well,' said Aunt Annie darkly, 'I thought it would be as well to be on the safe side…'

'Certainly,' said Henry.

This was Aunt Annie's neat contribution to the necessary prevarication.

They had tea and ham-and-eggs, the latter specially chosen because it was a dish that Henry doted upon. However, he ate but little.

'You're overtired, dear,' his mother ventured.

'Overtired or not, mater,' said Henry with a touch of irony, 'I must do some work to-night. Sir George has asked me to – '

'My dear love,' Mrs. Knight cried out, moved, 'you've no right – '

But Aunt Annie quelled the impulsive creature with a glance full of meaning. 'Sir George what?' she asked, politely interested.

'The governor has asked me to look through his Christmas appeal for the Clerks' Society, and to suggest any alterations that occur to me.'

It became apparent to the ladies, for the thousand and first time, that Sir George would be helpless without Henry, utterly helpless.

After tea the table was cleared, and Henry opened his bag and rustled papers, and the ladies knitted and sewed with extraordinary precautions to maintain the silence which was the necessary environment of Henry's labours. And in the calm and sane domestic interior, under the mild ray of the evening lamp, the sole sounds were Henry's dry, hacking cough and the cornet-like blasts of his nose into his cambric handkerchief.

'I think I'll do no more to-night,' he said at length, yawning.

'That's right, dear,' his mother ejaculated.

Then the doctor entered, and, for all the world as if by preconcerted action, the ladies disappeared. Dr. Dancer was on friendly terms with the household, and, his age being thirty, he was neither too old nor too young to address Henry as Old Man.

'Hallo, old man,' he began, after staring hard at Henry. 'What's the matter with your forehead?'

'Forehead?' Henry repeated questioningly.

'Yes. Let's have a look.'

The examination was thorough, and it ended with the thrusting of a thermometer into Henry's unwilling mouth.

'One hundred and two,' said the doctor, and, smiling faintly, he whispered something to Henry.

'You're joking,' Henry replied, aghast.

'No, I'm not. Of course it's not serious. But it means bed for a fortnight or so, and you must go immediately.'

The ladies, who had obviously and shamelessly been doing that which they so strongly deprecated in Sarah, came back into the room.

In half an hour Henry was in bed, and a kettle containing eucalyptus was steaming over a bright fire in the bedroom; and his mother was bent upon black-currant tea in the kitchen; and Aunt Annie was taking down from dictation, in her angular Italian hand, a letter which began: 'Dear Sir George, – I much regret to say'; and little Sarah was standing hooded and girt up, ready to fly upon errands of the highest importance at a second's notice.

'Sarah,' said Mrs. Knight solemnly, when Sarah had returned from the post and the doctor's, 'I am going to trust you. Your master has got the measles, but, of course, we don't want anyone to know, so you mustn't breathe a word.'

'No'm,' said Sarah.

'He never had them as a boy,' Mrs. Knight added proudly.

'Didn't he, mum?' said Sarah.

The doctor, whose gift for seriousness was not marked, showed a tendency to see humour in the situation of Sir George's private secretary being down with measles. But he was soon compelled to perceive his mistake. By a united and tremendous effort Mrs. Knight and Aunt Annie made measles august. As for Sarah, she let slip the truth to the milkman. It came out by itself, as the spout of a teapot had once come off by itself in her hand.

The accident policy appeared to provide for every emergency except measles.

CHAPTER VIII
CREATIVE

The sick-room – all due solemnity and importance must be imported into the significance of that word – the sick-room became a shrine, served by two ageing priestesses and a naïve acolyte. Everything was done to make Henry an invalid in the grand manner. His bed of agony became the pivot on which the household life flutteringly and soothingly revolved. No detail of delicate attention which the most ingenious assiduity could devise was omitted from the course of treatment. And if the chamber had been at the front instead of at the back, the Fulham Vestry would certainly have received an application for permission to lay down straw in the street.

The sole flaw in the melancholy beauty of the episode was that Henry was never once within ten miles of being seriously ill. He was incapable of being seriously ill. He happened to be one of those individuals who, when they 'take' a disease, seem to touch it only with the tips of their fingers: such was his constitution. He had the measles, admittedly. His temperature rose one night to a hundred and three, and for a few brief moments his mother and Aunt Annie enjoyed visions of fighting the grim spectre of Death. The tiny round pink spots covered his face and then ran together into a general vermilion. He coughed exquisitely. His beard grew. He supported life on black-currant tea and an atmosphere impregnated with eucalyptus. He underwent the examination of the doctor every day at eleven. But he was not personally and genuinely ill. He did not feel ill, and he said so. His most disquieting symptom was boredom. This energetic organism chafed under the bed-clothes and the black-currant tea and the hushed eucalyptic calm of the chamber. He fervently desired to be up and active and stressful. His mother and aunt cogitated in vain to hit on some method of allaying the itch for work. And then one day – it was the day before Christmas – his mother chanced to say:

'You might try to write out that story you told us about – when you are a little stronger. It would be something for you to do.'

Henry shook his head sheepishly.

'Oh no!' he said; 'I was only joking.'

'I'm sure you could write it quite nicely,' his mother insisted.

And Henry shook his head again, and coughed. 'No,' he said. 'I hope I shall have something better to do than write stories.'

'But just to pass the time!' pleaded Aunt Annie.

The fact was that, several weeks before, while his thoughts had been engaged in analyzing the detrimental qualities of the Stream of Trashy Novels Constantly Poured Forth by the Press, Henry had himself been visited by a notion for a story. He had scornfully ejected it as an inopportune intruder; but it had returned, and at length, to get rid for ever of this troublesome guest, he had instinctively related the outline of the tale over the tea-table. And the outline had been pronounced wonderful. 'It might be called *Love in Babylon*– Babylon being London, you know,' he had said. And Aunt Annie had exclaimed: 'What a pretty title!' Whereupon Henry had remarked contemptuously and dismissingly: 'Oh, it was just an idea I had, that's all!' And the secret thought of both ladies had been, 'That busy brain is never still.'

As the shades of Christmas Eve began to fall, Aunt Annie was seated by the sick-bed, engaged in making entries in the household washing-book with a lead pencil. Henry lay with his eyes closed. Mrs. Knight was out shopping. Presently there was a gentle *ting* of the front-door bell; then a protracted silence; then another gentle *ting*.

'Bless the girl! Why doesn't she answer the door?' Aunt Annie whispered to herself, listening hard.

A third time the bell rang, and Aunt Annie, anathematizing the whole race of servants, got up, put the washing-book on the dressing-table, lighted the gas and turned it low, and descended to answer the door in person and to behead Sarah.

More than an hour elapsed before either sister re-entered Henry's room – events on the ground-floor had been rather exciting – and then they appeared together, bearing a bird, and some mince-tarts on a plate, and a card. Henry was wide awake.

'This *is* a surprise, dear,' began Mrs. Knight. 'Just listen: "With Sir George Powell's hearty greetings and best wishes for a speedy recovery!" A turkey and six mince-tarts. Isn't it thoughtful of him?'

'It's just like the governor,' said Henry, smiling, and feeling the tenderness of the turkey.

'He is a true gentleman,' said Aunt Annie.

'And we've sent round to the doctor to ask, and he says there's no harm in your having half a mince-tart; so we've warmed it. And you are to have a slice off the breast of the turkey to-morrow.'

'Good!' was Henry's comment. He loved a savoury mouthful, and these dainties were an unexpected bliss, for the ladies had not dreamt of Christmas fare in the sad crisis, even for themselves.

Aunt Annie, as if struck by a sudden blow, glanced aside at the gas.

'I could have been certain I left the gas turned down,' she remarked.

'I turned it up,' said Henry.

'You got out of bed! Oh, Henry! And your temperature was a hundred and two only the day before yesterday!'

'I thought I'd begin that thing – just for a lark, you know,' he explained.

He drew from under the bed-clothes the household washing-book. And there, nearly at the top of a page, were Aunt Annie's last interrupted strokes:

'2 Ch – '

and underneath:

'Love in Babylon'

and the commencement of the tale. The marvellous man had covered nine pages of the washing-book.

Within twenty-four hours, not only Henry, but his mother and aunt, had become entirely absorbed in Henry's tale. The ladies wondered how he thought of it all, and Henry himself wondered a little, too. It seemed to 'come,' without trouble and almost without invitation. It cost no effort. The process was as though Henry acted merely as the amanuensis of a great creative power concealed somewhere in the recesses of his vital parts. Fortified by two halves of a mince-tart and several slices of Sir George's turkey, he filled the washing-book full up before dusk on Christmas Day; and on Boxing Day, despite the faint admiring protests of his nurses, he made a considerable hole in a quire of the best ruled essay-paper. Instead of showing signs of fatigue, Henry appeared to grow stronger every hour, and to revel more and more in the sweet labour of composition; while the curiosity of the nurses about the exact nature of what Henry termed the dénouement increased steadily and constantly. The desires of those friends who had wished a Happy Christmas to the household were generously gratified.

It was a love tale, of course. And it began thus, the first line consisting of a single word, and the second of three words:

'*Babylon!*

'*And in winter!*

'*The ladies' waiting-room on the arrival platform of one of our vast termini was unoccupied save for the solitary figure of a young and beautiful girl, who, clad in a thin but still graceful costume, crouched shivering over the morsel of fire which the greed of a great company alone permitted to its passengers. Outside resounded the roar and shriek of trains, the ceaseless ebb and flow of the human tide which beats for ever on the shores of modern Babylon. Enid Anstruther gazed sadly into the embers. She had come to the end of her resources. Suddenly the door opened, and Enid looked up, naturally expecting to see one of her own sex. But it was a man's voice, fresh and strong, which exclaimed: "Oh, I beg pardon!" The two glanced at each other, and then Enid sank backwards.*'

Such were the opening sentences of *Love in Babylon*.

Enid was an orphan, and had come to London in order to obtain a situation in a draper's shop. Unfortunately, she had lost her purse on the way. Her reason for sinking back in the waiting-room was that she had fainted from cold, hunger, and fatigue. Thus she and the man, Adrian Tempest, became acquainted, and Adrian's first gift to her was seven drops of brandy, which he forced between her teeth. His second was his heart. Enid obtained a situation, and Adrian took her to the Crystal Palace one Saturday afternoon. It was a pity that he had not already proposed to her, for they got separated in the tremendous Babylonian crowd, and Enid, unused to the intricacies of locomotion in Babylon, arrived home at the emporium at an ungodly hour on Sunday morning. She was dismissed by a proprietor with a face of brass. Adrian sought her in vain. She sought Adrian in vain – she did not know his address. Thenceforward the tale split itself into two parts: the one describing the life of Adrian, a successful barrister, on the heights of Babylon, and the other the life of Enid, reduced to desperate straits, in the depths thereof. The contrasts were vivid and terrific.

Mrs. Knight and Aunt Annie could not imagine how Henry would bring the two lovers, each burning secretly the light torch of love in Babylon, together again. But Henry did not hesitate over the problem for more than about fifty seconds. Royal Academy. Private View. Adrian present thereat as a celebrity. Picture of the year, 'The Enchantress.' He recognises her portrait. She had, then, been forced to sell her beauty for eighteenpence an hour as an artist's model. To discover the artist and Enid's address was for Adrian the work of a few minutes.

This might have finished the tale, but Henry opined that the tale was a trifle short. As a fact, it was. He accordingly invented a further and a still more dramatic situation. When Adrian proposed to Enid, she conscientiously told him, told him quietly but firmly, that she could not marry him for the reason that her father, though innocent of a crime imputed to him, had died in worldly disgrace. She could not consent to sully Adrian's reputation. Now, Adrian happened to be the real criminal. But he did not know that Enid's father had suffered for him, and he had honestly lived down that distant past. 'If there is a man in this world who has the right to marry you,' cried Adrian, 'I am that man. And if there is a man in this world whom you have the right to spurn, I am that man also.' The extreme subtlety of the thing must be obvious to every reader. Enid forgave and accepted Adrian. They were married in a snowy January at St. Paul's, Knightsbridge, and the story ended thus:

'*Babylon in winter*.

'*Babylon!*'

Henry achieved the entire work in seven days, and, having achieved it, he surveyed it with equal pride and astonishment. It was a matter of surprise to him that the writing of interesting and wholesome fiction was so easy. Some parts of the book he read over and over again, for the sheer joy of reading.

'Of course it isn't good enough to print,' he said one day, while sitting up in the arm-chair.

'I should think any publisher would be glad to print it,' said his mother. 'I'm not a bit prejudiced, I'm sure, and I think it's one of the best tales I ever read in all my life.'

'Do you really?' Henry smiled, his natural modesty fighting against a sure conviction that his mother was right.

Aunt Annie said little, but she had copied out *Love in Babylon* in her fine, fair Italian hand, keeping pace day by day with Henry's extraordinary speed, and now she accomplished the transcription of the last pages.

The time arrived for Henry to be restored to a waiting world. He was cured, well, hearty, vigorous, radiant. But he was still infected, isolate, one might almost say *taboo*; and everything in his room, and everything that everyone had worn while in the room, was in the same condition. Therefore the solemn process, rite, and ceremony of purification had to be performed. It began upon the last day of the old year at dusk.

Aunt Annie made a quantity of paste in a basin; Mrs. Knight bought a penny brush; and Henry cut up a copy of the *Telegraph* into long strips about two inches wide. The sides and sash of the window were then hermetically sealed; the register of the fireplace was closed, and sealed also. Clothes were spread out in open order, the bed stripped, rugs hung over chairs.

'Henry's book?' Mrs. Knight demanded.

'Of course it must be disinfected with the other things,' said Aunt Annie.

'Yes, of course,' Henry agreed.

'And it will be safer to lay the sheets separately on the floor,' Aunt Annie continued.

There were fifty-nine sheets of Aunt Annie's fine, finicking caligraphy, and the scribe and her nephew went down on their knees, and laid them in numerical sequence on the floor. The initiatory '*Babylon*' found itself in the corner between the window and the fireplace beneath the dressing-table, and the final '*Babylon*' was hidden in gloomy retreats under the bed.

Then Sarah entered, bearing sulphur in a shallow pan, and a box of matches. The paste and the paste-brush and the remnants of the *Telegraph* were carried out into the passage. Henry carefully ignited the sulphur, and, captain of the ship, was the last to leave. As they closed the door the odour of burning, microbe-destroying sulphur impinged on their nostrils. Henry sealed the door on the outside with 'London Day by Day,' 'Sales by Auction,' and a leading article or so.

'There!' said Henry.

All was over.

At intervals throughout the night he thought of the sanative and benign sulphur smouldering, smouldering always with ghostly yellow flamelets in the midst of his work of art, while the old year died and the new was born.

CHAPTER IX
SPRING ONIONS

The return to the world and to Powells, while partaking of the nature of a triumph, was at the same time something of a cold, fume-dispersing, commonsense-bestowing bath for Henry. He had meant to tell Sir George casually that he had taken advantage of his enforced leisure to write a book. 'Taken advantage of his enforced leisure' was the precise phrase which Henry had in mind to use. But, when he found himself in the strenuous, stern, staid, sapient and rational atmosphere of Powells, he felt with a shock of perception that in rattling off *Love in Babylon*

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.