

BENNETT ARNOLD

DENRY THE
AUDACIOUS

Arnold Bennett
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Denry the Audacious

CHAPTER I. THE DANCE

I

Edward Henry Machin first saw the smoke on the 27th May, 1867, in Brougham Street, Bursley, the most ancient of the Five Towns. Brougham Street runs down from St. Luke's Square straight into the Shropshire Union Canal, and consists partly of buildings known as "potbanks" (until they come to be sold by auction, when auctioneers describe them as "extensive earthenware manufactories") and partly of cottages whose highest rent is four-and-six a week. In such surroundings was an extraordinary man born. He was the only anxiety of a widowed mother, who gained her livelihood and his by making up "ladies' own materials" in ladies' own houses. Mrs. Machin, however, had a specialty apart from her vocation; she could wash flannel with less shrinking than any other woman in the district, and she could wash fine lace without ruining it; thus often she came to sew and remained to wash. A somewhat gloomy woman; thin, with a tongue! But I liked her. She saved a certain amount of

time every day by addressing her son as Denry instead of Edward Henry.

Not intellectual, not industrious, Denry would have maintained the average dignity of labour on a potbank had he not at the age of twelve won a scholarship from the Board School to the Endowed School. He owed his triumph to audacity rather than learning, and to chance rather than design. On the second day of the examination he happened to arrive in the examination room ten minutes too soon for the afternoon sitting. He wandered about the place exercising his curiosity, and reached the master's desk. On the desk was a tabulated form with names of candidates and the number of marks achieved by each in each subject of the previous day. He had done badly in Geography, and saw seven marks against his name in the geographical column, out of a possible thirty. The figures had been written in pencil. The very pencil lay on the desk. He picked it up, glanced at the door and at the rows of empty desks, and wrote a neat "2" in front of the 7; then he strolled innocently forth and came back late. His trick ought to have been found out – the odds were against him – but it was not found out. Of course it was dishonest. Yes, but I will not agree that Denry was uncommonly vicious. Every schoolboy is dishonest, by the adult standard. If I knew an honest schoolboy I would begin to count my silver spoons as he grew up. All is fair between schoolboys and schoolmasters.

This dazzling feat seemed to influence not only Denry's career but also his character. He gradually came to believe that he

had won the scholarship by genuine merit, and that he was a remarkable boy and destined to great ends. His new companions, whose mothers employed Denry's mother, also believed that he was a remarkable boy; but they did not forget, in their cheerful gentlemanly way, to call him "washer-woman." Happily Denry did not mind. He had a thick skin, and fair hair and bright eyes and broad shoulders, and the jolly gaiety of his disposition developed daily. He did not shine at the school; he failed to fulfil the rosy promise of the scholarship; but he was not stupider than the majority; and his opinion of himself, having once risen, remained at "set fair." It was inconceivable that he should work in clay with his hands.

When he was sixteen his mother, by operations on a yard and a half of Brussels point lace, put Mrs. Emery under an obligation. Mrs. Emery was the sister of Mr. Duncalf. Mr. Duncalf was the Town Clerk of Bursley, and a solicitor. It is well known that all bureaucracies are honeycombed with intrigue. Denry Machin left school to be clerk to Mr. Duncalf, on the condition that within a year he should be able to write shorthand at the rate of a hundred and fifty words a minute. In those days mediocre and incorrect shorthand was not a drug in the market. He complied (more or less, and decidedly less than more) with the condition. And for several years he really thought that he had nothing further to hope for. Then he met the Countess.

II

The Countess of Chell was born of poor but picturesque parents, and she could put her finger on her great-grandfather's grandfather. Her mother gained her livelihood and her daughter's by allowing herself to be seen a great deal with humbler but richer people's daughters. The Countess was brought up to matrimony. She was aimed and timed to hit a given mark at a given moment. She succeeded. She married the Earl of Chell. She also married about twenty thousand acres in England, about a fifth of Scotland, a house in Picadilly, seven country seats (including Sneyd), a steam-yacht, and five hundred thousand pounds' worth of shares in the Midland Railway. She was young and pretty. She had travelled in China and written a book about China. She sang at charity concerts and acted in private theatricals. She sketched from nature. She was one of the great hostesses of London. And she had not the slightest tendency to stoutness. All this did not satisfy her. She was ambitious! She wanted to be taken seriously. She wanted to enter into the life of the people. She saw in the quarter of a million souls that constitute the Five Towns a unique means to her end, an unrivalled toy. And she determined to be identified with all that was most serious in the social progress of the Five Towns. Hence some fifteen thousand pounds were spent in refurbishing Sneyd Hall, which lies on the edge of the Five Towns, and the Earl and Countess passed four months of the year

there. Hence the Earl, a mild, retiring man, when invited by the Town Council to be the ornamental Mayor of Bursley, accepted the invitation. Hence the Mayor and Mayoress gave an immense afternoon reception, to practically the entire roll of burgesses. And hence, a little later, the Mayoress let it be known that she meant to give a municipal ball. The news of the ball thrilled Bursley more than anything had thrilled Bursley since the signing of Magna Charta. Nevertheless municipal balls had been offered by previous mayoresses. One can only suppose that in Bursley there remains a peculiar respect for land, railway stock, steam-yachts, and great-grandfather's grandfathers.

Now everybody of account had been asked to the reception. But everybody could not be asked to the ball, because not more than two hundred people could dance in the Town Hall. There were nearly thirty-five thousand inhabitants in Bursley, of whom quite two thousand "counted," even though they did not dance.

III

Three weeks and three days before the ball, Denry Machin was seated one Monday alone in Mr. Duncalf's private offices in Duck Square (where he carried on his practice as a solicitor) when in stepped a tall and pretty young woman dressed very smartly but soberly in dark green. On the desk in front of Denry were several wide sheets of "abstract" paper, concealed by a copy of that morning's *Athletic News*. Before Denry could even think of reversing the positions of the abstract paper and the *Athletic News*, the young woman said, "Good morning," in a very friendly style. She had a shrill voice and an efficient smile.

"Good morning, Madam," said Denry.

"Mr. Duncalf in?" asked the young woman.

(Why should Denry have slipped off his stool? It is utterly against etiquette for solicitors' clerks to slip off their stools while answering enquiries.)

"No, Madam; he 's across at the Town Hall," said Denry.

The young lady shook her head playfully, with a faint smile.

"I 've just been there," she said. "They said he was here."

"I daresay I could find him, Madam – if you would –"

She now smiled broadly. "Conservative Club, I suppose?" she said, with an air deliciously confidential.

He too smiled.

"Oh, no," she said, after a little pause, "just tell him I 've

called."

"Certainly, Madam. Nothing I can do?"

She was already turning away, but she turned back and scrutinised his face, as Denry thought, roguishly.

"You might just give him this list," she said, taking a paper from her satchel and spreading it. She had come to the desk; their elbows touched. "He is n't to take any notice of the crossings-out in red ink – you understand. Of course I 'm relying on him for the other lists, and I expect all the invitations to be out on Wednesday. Good morning."

She was gone. He sprang to the grimy window. Outside, in the snow, were a brougham, twin horses, twin men in yellow, and a little crowd of youngsters and oldsters. She flashed across the footpath, and vanished; the door of the carriage banged, one of the twins in yellow leaped up to his brother, and the whole affair dashed dangerously away. The face of the leaping twin was familiar to Denry. The man had indeed once inhabited Brougham Street, being known to the street as Jock, and his mother had for long years been a friend of Mrs. Machin's.

It was the first time Denry had seen the Countess, save at a distance. Assuredly she was finer even than her photographs. Entirely different from what one would have expected! So easy to talk to! (Yet what had he said to her? Nothing – and everything.)

He nodded his head, and murmured, "No mistake about that lot!" Meaning, presumably, that all that one had read about the brilliance of the aristocracy was true, and more than true.

"She's the finest woman that ever came into this town," he murmured.

The truth was that she surpassed his dreams of womanhood. At two o'clock she had been a name to him. At five minutes past two he was in love with her. He felt profoundly thankful that, for a church tea-meeting that evening, he happened to be wearing his best clothes.

It was while looking at her list of invitations to the ball that he first conceived the fantastic scheme of attending the ball himself. Mr. Duncalf was, fussily and deferentially, managing the machinery of the ball for the Countess. He had prepared a little list of his own, of people who ought to be invited. Several aldermen had been requested to do the same. There were thus about a dozen lists to be combined into one. Denry did the combining. Nothing was easier than to insert the name of E. H. Machin inconspicuously towards the centre of the list! Nothing was easier than to lose the original lists, inadvertently, so that if a question arose as to any particular name the responsibility for it could not be ascertained without enquiries too delicate to be made. On Wednesday Denry received a lovely Bristol board stating in copper plate that the Countess desired the pleasure of his company at the ball; and on Thursday his name was ticked off on the list as one who had accepted.

IV

He had never been to a dance. He had no dress-suit, and no notion of dancing.

He was a strange inconsequent mixture of courage and timidity. You and I are consistent in character; we are either one thing or the other; but Denry Machin had no consistency.

For three days he hesitated, and then, secretly trembling, he slipped into Sillitoe's the young tailor who had recently set up and who was gathering together the *jeunesse dorée* of the town.

"I want a dress-suit," he said.

Sillitoe, who knew that Denry only earned eighteen shilling a week, replied with only superficial politeness that a dress-suit was out of the question; he had already taken more orders than he could execute without killing himself. The whole town had uprisen as one man and demanded a dress-suit.

"So you 're going to the ball, are you?" said Sillitoe, trying to condescend, but in fact slightly impressed.

"Yes," said Denry, "are you?"

Sillitoe started and then shook his head. "No time for balls," said he.

"I can get you an invitation, if you like," said Denry, glancing at the door precisely as he had glanced at the door before adding 2 to 7.

"Oh!" Sillitoe cocked his ears. He was not a native of the town,

and had no alderman to protect his legitimate interests.

To cut a shameful story short, in a week Denry was being tried on. Sillitoe allowed him two years' credit.

The prospect of the ball gave an immense impetus to the study of the art of dancing in Bursley, and so put quite a nice sum of money into the pocket of Miss Earp, a young mistress in that art. She was the daughter of a furniture dealer with a passion for the bankruptcy court. Miss Earp's evening classes were attended by Denry, but none of his money went into her pocket. She was compensated by an expression of the Countess's desire for the pleasure of her company at the ball.

The Countess had aroused Denry's interest in women as a sex. Ruth Earp quickened the interest. She was plain, but she was only twenty-four, and very graceful on her feet. Denry had one or two strictly private lessons from her in reversing. She said to him one evening, when he was practising reversing and they were entwined in the attitude prescribed by the latest fashion: "Never mind me! Think about yourself. It's the same in dancing as it is in life – the woman's duty is to adapt herself to the man." He did think about himself. He was thinking about himself in the middle of the night, and about her too. There had been something in her tone ... her eye...! At the final lesson he enquired if she would give him the first waltz at the ball. She paused, then said yes.

V

On the evening of the ball, Denry spent at least two hours in the operation which was necessary before he could give the Countess the pleasure of his company. This operation took place in his minute bedroom at the back of the cottage in Brougham Street, and it was of a complex nature. Three weeks ago he had innocently thought that you had only to order a dress-suit and there you were! He now knew that a dress-suit is merely the beginning of anxiety. Shirt! Collar! Tie! Studs! Cuff-links! Gloves! Handkerchief! (He was very glad to learn authoritatively from Sillitoe that handkerchiefs were no longer worn in the waistcoat opening, and that men who so wore them were barbarians and the truth was not in them. Thus, an everyday handkerchief would do.) Boots!.. Boots were the rock on which he had struck. Sillitoe, in addition to being a tailor, was a hosier, but by some flaw in the scheme of the universe hosiers do not sell boots. Except boots Denry could get all he needed on credit; boots he could not get on credit, and he could not pay cash for them. Eventually he decided that his church boots must be dazzled up to the level of this great secular occasion. The pity was that he forgot – not that he was of a forgetful disposition in great matters; he was simply over-excited – he forgot to dazzle them up until after he had fairly put his collar on and his necktie in a bow. It is imprudent to touch blacking in a dress-shirt. So

Denry had to undo the past and begin again. This hurried him. He was not afraid of being late for the first waltz with Miss Ruth Earp, but he was afraid of not being out of the house before his mother returned. Mrs. Machin had been making up a lady's own materials all day, naturally – the day being what it was! If she had had twelve hands instead of two, she might have made up the own materials of half a dozen ladies instead of one, and earned twenty-four shillings instead of four. Denry did not want his mother to see him ere he departed. He had lavished an enormous amount of brains and energy to the end of displaying himself in this refined and novel attire to the gaze of two hundred persons, and yet his secret wish was to deprive his mother of the beautiful spectacle!

However, she slipped in, with her bag and her seamy fingers and her rather sardonic expression, at the very moment when Denry was putting on his overcoat in the kitchen (there being insufficient room in the passage). He did what he could to hide his shirt-front (though she knew all about it) and failed.

"Bless us!" she exclaimed briefly, going to the fire to warm her hands.

A harmless remark. But her tone seemed to strip bare the vanity of human greatness.

"I 'm in a hurry," said Denry importantly, as if he was going forth to sign a treaty involving the welfare of nations.

"Well," said she, "happen ye are, Denry. But the kitchen table's no place for boot-brushes."

He had one piece of luck. It froze. Therefore, no anxiety about the condition of boots!

VI

The Countess was late; some trouble with a horse. Happily the Earl had been in Bursley all day and had dressed at the Conservative Club; and his lordship had ordered that the programme of dances should be begun. Denry learned this as soon as he emerged, effulgent, from the gentlemen's cloak-room into the broad red-carpeted corridor which runs from end to end of the ground-floor of the Town Hall. Many important townspeople were chatting in the corridor – the innumerable Sweetnam family, the Stanways, the great Etches, the Fearnsses, Mrs. Clayton Vernon, the Suttons, including Beatrice Sutton. Of course everybody knew him for Duncalf's shorthand clerk and the son of the incomparable flannel-washer; but universal white kid gloves constitute a democracy, and Sillitoe could put more style into a suit than any other tailor in the Five Towns.

"How do?" the eldest of the Sweetnam boys nodded carelessly.

"How do, Sweetnam?" said Denry with equal carelessness.

The thing was accomplished! That greeting was like a masonic initiation, and henceforward he was the peer of no matter whom. At first he had thought that four hundred eyes would be fastened on him, their glance saying: "This youth is wearing a dress-suit for the first time, and it is not paid for, either." But it was not so. And the reason was that the entire population of the Town Hall was heartily engaged in pretending that never in its life had

it been seen after seven o'clock of a night apart from a dress-suit. Denry observed with joy that, while numerous middle-aged and awkward men wore red or white silk handkerchiefs in their waistcoats, such people as Charles Fearn, the Sweetnams, and Harold Etches did not. He was, then, in the shyness of his handkerchief, on the side of the angels.

He passed up the double staircase (decorated with white or pale frocks of unparalleled richness) and so into the grand hall. A scarlet orchestra was on the platform, and many people strolled about the floor in attitudes of expectation. The walls were festooned with flowers. The thrill of being magnificent seized him, and he was drenched in a vast desire to be truly magnificent himself. He dreamt of magnificence, boot-brushes kept sticking out of this dream like black mud out of snow. In his reverie he looked about for Ruth Earp, but she was invisible. Then he went down-stairs again, idly; gorgeously feigning that he spent six evenings a week in ascending and descending monumental staircases, appropriately clad. He was determined to be as sublime as any one.

There was a stir in the corridor, and the sublimest consented to be excited.

The Countess was announced to be imminent. Everybody was grouped round the main portal, careless of temperatures. Six times was the Countess announced to be imminent before she actually appeared, expanding from the narrow gloom of her black carriage like a magic vision. Aldermen received her, and they did

not do it with any excess of gracefulness. They seemed afraid of her, as though she was recovering from influenza and they feared to catch it. She had precisely the same high voice, and precisely the same efficient smile as she had employed to Denry, and these instruments worked marvels on Aldermen; they were as melting as salt on snow. The Countess disappeared up-stairs in a cloud of shrill apologies and trailing Aldermen. She seemed to have greeted everybody except Denry. Somehow he was relieved that she had not drawn attention to him. He lingered, hesitating, and then he saw a being in a long yellow overcoat, with a bit of peacock's feather at the summit of a shiny high hat. This being held a lady's fur mantle. Their eyes met. Denry had to decide instantly. He decided.

"Hello, Jock!" he said.

"Hello, Denry!" said the other, pleased.

"What's been happening?" Denry enquired, friendly.

Then Jock told him about the antics of one of the Countess's horses.

He went up-stairs again, and met Ruth Earp coming down. She was glorious in white. Except that nothing glittered in her hair, she looked the very equal of the Countess, at a little distance, plain though her features were.

"What about that waltz?" Denry began, informally.

"That waltz is nearly over," said Ruth Earp, with chilliness. "I suppose you 've been staring at her ladyship with all the other men."

"I'm awfully sorry," he said. "I did n't know the waltz was –"

"Well, why did n't you look at your programme?"

"Have n't got one," he said naïvely.

He had omitted to take a programme. Ninny! Barbarian!

"Better get one," she said, cuttingly, somewhat in her rôle of dancing mistress.

"Can't we finish the waltz?" he suggested, crestfallen.

"No!" she said, and continued her solitary way downwards.

She was hurt. He tried to think of something to say that was equal to the situation, and equal to the style of his suit. But he could not. In a moment he heard her, below him, greeting some male acquaintance in the most effusive way.

Yet, if Denry had not committed a wicked crime for her, she could never have come to the dance at all!

He got a programme, and with terror gripping his heart he asked sundry young and middle-aged women whom he knew by sight and by name for a dance. (Ruth had taught him how to ask.) Not one of them had a dance left. Several looked at him as much as to say: "You must be a goose to suppose that my programme is not filled up in the twinkling of my eye!"

Then he joined a group of despisers of dancing near the main door. Harold Etches was there, the wealthiest manufacturer of his years (barely twenty-four) in the Five Towns. Also Sillitoe, cause of another of Denry's wicked crimes. The group was taciturn, critical, and very doggish.

The group observed that the Countess was not dancing. The

Earl was dancing (need it be said with Mrs. Jos. Curtenly, second wife of the Deputy Mayor?), but the Countess stood resolutely smiling, surrounded by Aldermen. Possibly she was getting her breath; possibly nobody had had the pluck to ask her. Anyhow she seemed to be stranded there, on a beach of Aldermen. Very wisely she had brought with her no members of a house-party from Sneyd Hall. Members of a house-party, at a municipal ball, invariably operate as a bar between greatness and democracy; and the Countess desired to participate in the life of the people.

"Why don't some of those johnnies ask her?" Denry burst out. He had hitherto said nothing in the group, and he felt that he must be a man with the rest of them.

"Well, *you* go and do it. It's a free country," said Sillitoe.

"So I would, for two pins!" said Denry.

Harold Etches glanced at him, apparently resentful of his presence there. Harold Etches was determined to put the extinguisher on *him*.

"I 'll bet you a fiver you don't," said Etches, scornfully.

"I 'll take you," said Denry very quickly, and very quickly walked off.

VII

"She can't eat me. She can't eat me!"

This was what he said to himself as he crossed the floor. People seemed to make a lane for him, divining his incredible intention. If he had not started at once, if his legs had not started of themselves, he would never have started; and, not being in command of a fiver, he would afterwards have cut a preposterous figure in the group. But started he was, like a piece of clockwork that could not be stopped! In the grand crisis of his life something not himself, something more powerful than himself, jumped up in him and forced him to do things. Now for the first time he seemed to understand what had occurred within him in previous crises.

In a second – so it appeared – he had reached the Countess. Just behind her was his employer, Mr. Duncalf, whom Denry had not previously noticed there. Denry regretted this, for he had never mentioned to Mr. Duncalf that he was coming to the ball, and he feared Mr. Duncalf.

"Could I have this dance with you?" he demanded bluntly, but smiling and showing his teeth.

No ceremonial title! No mention of "pleasure" or "honour." Not a trace of the formula in which Ruth Earp had instructed him! He forgot all such trivialities.

("I've won that fiver, Mr. Harold Etches," he said to himself.)

The mouths of Aldermen inadvertently opened. Mr. Duncalf blenched.

"It's nearly over, is n't it?" said the Countess, still efficiently smiling. She did not recognise Denry. In that suit he might have been a Foreign Office attaché.

"Oh! that does n't matter, I 'm sure!" said Denry.

She yielded, and he took the paradisiacal creature in his arms. It was her business that evening to be universally and inclusively polite. She could not have begun with a refusal. A refusal might have dried up all other invitations whatsoever. Besides, she saw that the Aldermen wanted a lead. Besides, she was young, though a Countess, and adored dancing.

Thus they waltzed together, while the flower of Bursley's chivalry gazed in enchantment. The Countess's fan, depending from her arm, dangled against Denry's suit in a rather confusing fashion which withdrew his attention from his feet. He laid hold of it gingerly between two unemployed fingers. After that he managed fairly well. Once they came perilously near the Earl and his partner; nothing else. And then the dance ended, exactly when Denry had begun to savour the astounding spectacle of himself enclasping the Countess.

The Countess had soon perceived that he was the merest boy.

"You waltz quite nicely!" she said, like an aunt, but with more than an aunt's smile.

"Do I?" he beamed. Then something compelled him to say: "Do you know, it's the first time I 've ever waltzed in my life,

except in a lesson, you know?"

"Really!" she murmured. "You pick things up easily, I suppose?"

"Yes," he said. "Do you?"

Either the question or the tone sent the Countess off into carillons of amusement. Everybody could see that Denry had made the Countess laugh tremendously. It was on this note that the waltz finished. She was still laughing when he bowed to her (as taught by Ruth Earp). He could not comprehend why she had so laughed, save on the supposition that he was more humorous than he had suspected. Anyhow he laughed too, and they parted laughing. He remembered that he had made a marked effect (though not one of laughter) on the tailor by quickly returning the question, "Are you?" And his unpremeditated stroke with the Countess was similar. When he had got ten yards on his way towards Harold Etches and a fiver he felt something in his hand. The Countess's fan was sticking between his fingers. It had unhooked itself from her chain. He furtively pocketed it.

VIII

"Just the same as dancing with any other woman!" – he told this untruth in reply to a question from Sillitoe. It was the least he could do. And any other young man in his place would have said as much or as little.

"What was she laughing at?" somebody else asked.

"Ah!" said Denry judiciously, "wouldn't you like to know?"

"Here you are!" said Etches, with an unattentive, plutocratic gesture handing over a five-pound note. He was one of those men who never venture out of sight of a bank without a banknote in their pockets – "because you never know what may turn up."

Denry accepted the note with a silent nod. In some directions he was gifted with astounding insight. And he could read in the faces of the haughty males surrounding him that in the space of a few minutes he had risen from nonentity into renown. He had become a great man. He did not at once realise how great, how renowned. But he saw enough in those eyes to cause his heart to glow, and to rouse in his brain those ambitious dreams which stirred him upon occasion. He left the group; he had need of motion, and also of that mental privacy which one may enjoy while strolling about on a crowded floor, in the midst of a considerable noise. He noticed that the Countess was now dancing with an Alderman, and that the Alderman, by an oversight inexcusable in an Alderman, was not wearing

gloves. It was he, Denry, who had broken the ice so that the Aldermen might plunge into the water! He first had danced with the Countess, and had rendered her up to the Alderman with delicious gaiety upon her countenance. By instinct he knew Bursley, and he knew that he would be talked of. He knew that, for a time at any rate, he would displace even Jos. Curtenly, that almost professional "card" and amuser of burgesses, in the popular imagination. It would not be: "Have ye heard Jos.'s latest?" It would be: "Have ye heard about young Machin, Duncalf's clerk?"

Then he met Ruth Earp, strolling in the opposite direction with a young girl, one of her pupils, of whom all he knew was that her name was Nellie, and that this was her first ball: a childish little thing with a wistful face. He could not decide whether to look at Ruth or to avoid her glance. She settled the point by smiling at him in a manner that could not be ignored.

"Are you going to make it up to me for that waltz you missed?" said Ruth Earp. She pretended to be vexed and stern, but he knew that she was not. "Or is your programme full?" she added.

"I should like to," he said simply.

"But perhaps you don't care to dance with us poor ordinary people, now you 've danced with the *Countess*!" she said, with a certain lofty and bitter pride.

He perceived that his tone had lacked eagerness.

"Don't talk like that," he said, as if hurt.

"Well," she said, "you can have the supper dance."

He took her programme to write on it.

"Why!" he said, "there's a name down here for the supper dance. 'Herbert' it looks like."

"Oh!" she replied carelessly, "that's nothing. Cross it out."

So he crossed Herbert out.

"Why don't you ask Nellie here for a dance," said Ruth Earp.

And Nellie blushed. He gathered that the possible honour of dancing with the supremely great man had surpassed Nellie's modest expectations.

"Can I have the next one?" he said.

"Oh, yes!" Nellie timidly whispered.

"It's a polka, and you are n't very good at polking, you know," Ruth warned him. "Still, Nellie will pull you through."

Nellie laughed, in silver. The naïve child thought that Ruth was trying to joke at Denry's expense. Her very manifest joy and pride in being seen with the unique Mr. Machin, in being the next after the Countess to dance with him, made another mirror in which Denry could discern the reflection of his vast importance.

At the supper, which was worthy of the hospitable traditions of the Chell family (though served standing-up in the police-court), he learnt all the gossip of the dance from Ruth Earp; amongst other things that more than one young man had asked the Countess for a dance, and had been refused, though Ruth Earp for her part declined to believe that Aldermen and Councillors had utterly absorbed the Countess's programme. Ruth hinted that the Countess was keeping a second dance open for him, Denry.

When she asked him squarely if he meant to request another from the Countess, he said, No, positively. He knew when to let well alone, a knowledge which is more precious than a knowledge of geography. The supper was the summit of Denry's triumph. The best people spoke to him without being introduced. And lovely creatures mysteriously and intoxicatingly discovered that programmes which had been crammed two hours before were not after all quite, quite full.

"Do tell us what the Countess was laughing at?" This question was shot at him at least thirty times. He always said he would not tell. And one girl who had danced with Mr. Stanway, who had danced with the Countess, said that Mr. Stanway had said that the Countess would not tell, either. Proof, here, that he was being extensively talked about!

Toward the end of the festivity the rumour floated abroad that the Countess had lost her fan. The rumour reached Denry, who maintained a culpable silence. But when all was over, and the Countess was departing, he rushed down after her, and in a dramatic fashion which demonstrated his genius for the effective, he caught her exactly as she was getting into her carriage.

"I've just picked it up," he said, pushing through the crowd of worshippers.

"Oh! thank you so much!" she said. And the Earl also thanked Denry. And then the Countess, leaning from the carriage, said with archness in her efficient smile: "You do pick things up easily, don't you?"

And both Denry and the Countess laughed without restraint, and the pillars of Bursley society were mystified.

Denry winked at Jock as the horses pawed away. And Jock winked back.

The envied of all, Denry walked home, thinking violently. At a stroke he had become possessed of more than he could earn from Duncalf in a month. The faces of the Countess, of Ruth Earp, and of the timid Nellie mingled in exquisite hallucinations before his tired eyes. He was inexpressibly happy. Trouble, however, awaited him.

CHAPTER II. THE WIDOW HULLINS'S HOUSE

I

The simple fact that he first, of all the citizens of Bursley, had asked a Countess for a dance (and not been refused) made a new man of Denry Machin. He was not only regarded by the whole town as a fellow wonderful and dazzling; but he so regarded himself. He could not get over it. He had always been cheerful, even to optimism. He was now in a permanent state of calm, assured jollity. He would get up in the morning with song and dance. Bursley and the general world were no longer Bursley and the general world; they had been mysteriously transformed into an oyster; and Denry felt strangely that the oyster-knife was lying about somewhere handy, but just out of sight, and that presently he should spy it and seize it. He waited for something to happen.

And not in vain.

A few days after the historic revelry, Mrs. Codleyn called to see Denry's employer. Mr. Duncalf was her solicitor. A stout, breathless, and yet muscular woman of near sixty, the widow of a chemist and druggist who had made money before limited companies had taken the liberty of being pharmaceutical.

The money had been largely invested in mortgage on cottage-property; the interest on it had not been paid, and latterly Mrs. Codleyn had been obliged to foreclose, thus becoming the owner of some seventy cottages. Mrs. Codleyn, though they brought her in about twelve pounds a week gross, esteemed these cottages an infliction, a bugbear, an affront, and a positive source of loss. Invariably she talked as though she would willingly present them to anybody who cared to accept; "and glad to be rid of 'em!" Most owners of property talk thus. She particularly hated paying the rates on them.

Now there had recently occurred, under the direction of the Borough Surveyor, a re-valuation of the whole town. This may not sound exciting; yet a re-valuation is the most exciting event (save a municipal ball given by a titled mayor) that can happen in any town. If your house is rated at £40 a year, and rates are 7/- in the £, and the re-valuation lifts you up to £45, it means thirty-five shillings a year right out of your pocket, which is the interest on £35. And if the re-valuation drops you to £35, it means thirty-five shillings *in* your pocket, which is a box of Havanas or a fancy waistcoat. Is not this exciting? And there are seven thousand houses in Bursley. Mrs. Codleyn hoped that her ratable value would be reduced. She based the hope chiefly on the fact that she was a client of Mr. Duncalf, the Town Clerk. The Town Clerk was not the Borough Surveyor and had nothing to do with the re-valuation. Moreover Mrs. Codleyn presumably entrusted him with her affairs because she considered him an

honest man, and an honest man could not honestly have sought to tickle the Borough Surveyor out of the narrow path of rectitude in order to oblige a client. Nevertheless Mrs. Codleyn thought that because she patronised the Town Clerk her rates ought to be reduced! Such is human nature in the provinces – so different from human nature in London, where nobody ever dreams of offering even a match to a municipal official, lest the act might be construed into an insult.

It was on a Saturday morning that Mrs. Codleyn called to impart to Mr. Duncalf the dissatisfaction with which she had learned the news (printed on a bit of bluish paper) that her ratable value, far from being reduced, had been slightly augmented.

The interview, as judged by the clerks through a lath-and-plaster wall and by means of a speaking tube, atoned by its vivacity for its lack of ceremony. When the stairs had finished creaking under the descent of Mrs. Codleyn's righteous fury, Mr. Duncalf whistled sharply twice. Two whistles meant Denry. Denry picked up his shorthand note-book and obeyed the summons.

"Take this down," said his master rudely and angrily.

Just as though Denry had abetted Mrs. Codleyn! Just as though Denry was not a personage of high importance in the town, the friend of Countesses, and a shorthand clerk only on the surface!

"Do you hear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Madam" – hitherto it had always been "dear Madam," or "dear Mrs. Codleyn" – "Madam. Of course I need hardly say that if, after our interview this morning and your extraordinary remarks, you wish to place your interests in other hands, I shall be most happy to hand over all the papers on payment of my costs. Yours truly ... To Mrs. Codleyn."

Denry reflected. "Ass! Why does n't he let her cool down?" Also: "He's got 'hands' and 'hand' in the same sentence. Very ugly. Shows what a temper he's in!" Shorthand clerks are always like that – hypercritical. Also: "Well, I jolly well hope she does chuck him! Then I sha n't have those rents to collect." Every Monday, and often on Tuesday too, Denry collected the rents of Mrs. Codleyn's cottages: an odious task for Denry. Mr. Duncalf, though not affected by its odiousness, deducted 7-1/2 Per cent. for the job from the rents.

"That 'll do," said Mr. Duncalf.

But as Denry was leaving the room, Mr. Duncalf called with formidable brusqueness:

"Machin."

"Yes, sir?"

In a flash Denry knew what was coming. He felt, sickly, that a crisis had supervened with the suddenness of a tidal wave. And for one little second it seemed to him that to have danced with a Countess while the flower of Bursley's chivalry watched in envious wonder, was not after all the key to the door of success throughout life.

Undoubtedly he had practised fraud in sending to himself an invitation to the ball! Undoubtedly he had practised fraud in sending invitations to his tailor and his dancing-mistress! On the day after the ball, beneath his great glory, he had trembled to meet Mr. Duncalf's eye lest Mr. Duncalf should ask him. "Machin, what were *you* doing at the Town Hall last night, behaving as if you were the Shah of Persia, the Prince of Wales, and Mr. George Alexander?" But Mr. Duncalf had said nothing, and Mr. Duncalf's eye had said nothing, and Denry thought that the danger was past.

Now it surged up.

"Who invited you to the Mayor's ball?" demanded Mr. Duncalf like thunder.

Yes, there it was! And a very difficult question!

"I did, sir," he blundered out. Transparent veracity! He simply could not think of a lie.

"Why?"

"I thought you 'd perhaps forgotten to put my name down on the list of invitations, sir."

"Oh!" This, grimly. "And I suppose you thought I 'd also forgotten to put down that tailor chap, Sillitoe?"

So it was all out! Sillitoe must have been chattering. Denry remembered that the classic established tailor of the town, Hatterton, whose trade Sillitoe was filching, was a particular friend of Mr. Duncalf's. He saw the whole thing.

"Well?" persisted Mr. Duncalf, after a judicious silence from

Denry.

Denry, sheltered in the castle of his silence, was not to be tempted out.

"I suppose you rather fancy yourself, dancing with your betters?" growled Mr. Duncalf, menacingly.

"Yes," said Denry. "Do *you*?"

He had not meant to say it. The question slipped out of his mouth. He had recently formed the habit of retorting swiftly upon people who put queries to him: "Yes, are *you*?" or "No, do *you*?" The trick of speech had been enormously effective with Sillitoe, for instance, and with the Countess. He was in process of acquiring renown for it. Certainly it was effective now. Mr. Duncalf's dance with the Countess had come to an ignominious conclusion in the middle, Mr. Duncalf preferring to dance on skirts rather than on the floor – and the fact was notorious.

"You can take a week's notice," said Mr. Duncalf pompously.

It was no argument. But employers are so unscrupulous in an altercation.

"Oh, very well!" said Denry; and to himself he said: "Something *must* turn up, now."

He felt dizzy, at being thus thrown upon the world – he who had been meditating the propriety of getting himself elected to the stylish and newly-established Sports Club at Hillport! He felt enraged, for Mr. Duncalf had only been venting on Denry the annoyance induced on him by Mrs. Codleyn. But it is remarkable that he was not depressed at all. No! he went about with songs

and whistling, though he had no prospects except starvation or living on his mother. He traversed the streets in his grand, new manner, and his thoughts ran: "What on earth can I do to live up to my reputation?"

However he possessed intact the five-pound note won from Harold Etches in the matter of the dance.

II

Every life is a series of coincidences. Nothing happens that is not rooted in coincidence. All great changes find their cause in coincidence. Therefore I shall not mince the fact that the next change in Denry's career was due to an enormous and complicated coincidence. On the following morning both Mrs. Codleyn and Denry were late for service at St. Luke's Church – Mrs. Codleyn by accident and obesity, Denry by design. Denry was later than Mrs. Codleyn, whom he discovered waiting in the porch. That Mrs. Codleyn was waiting is an essential part of the coincidence. Now Mrs. Codleyn would not have been waiting if her pew had not been right at the front of the church, near the chancel. Nor would she have been waiting if she had been a thin woman and not given to breathing loudly after a hurried walk. She waited partly to get her breath, and partly so that she might take advantage of a hymn or a psalm to gain her seat without attracting attention. If she had not been late, if she had not been stout, if she had not had a seat under the pulpit, if she had not had an objection to making herself conspicuous, she would have been already in the church and Denry would not have had a private colloquy with her.

"Well, you 're nice people, I must say!" she observed, as he raised his hat.

She meant Duncalf and all Duncalf's myrmidons. She was

still full of her grievance. The letter which she had received that morning had startled her. And even the shadow of the sacred edifice did not prevent her from referring to an affair that was more suited to Monday than to Sunday morning. A little more, and she would have snorted.

"Nothing to do with me, you know!" Denry defended himself.

"Oh!" she said, "you 're all alike and I 'll tell you this, Mr. Machin, I 'd take him at his word if it was n't that I don't know who else I could trust to collect my rents. I 've heard such tales about rent-collectors... I reckon I shall have to make my peace with him."

"Why!" said Denry. "I 'll keep on collecting your rents for you if you like."

"You?"

"I 've given him notice to leave!" said Denry. "The fact is, Mr. Duncalf and I don't hit it off together."

Another procrastinator arrived in the porch, and, by a singular simultaneous impulse, Mrs. Codleyn and Denry fell into the silence of the overheard and wandered forth together among the graves.

There, among the graves, she eyed him. He was a clerk at eighteen shillings a week, and he looked it. His mother was a sempstress, and he looked it. The idea of neat but shabby Denry and the mighty Duncalf not hitting it off together seemed excessively comic. If only Denry could have worn his dress-suit at church! It vexed him exceedingly that he had only worn that

expensive dress-suit once, and saw no faintest hope of ever being able to wear it again.

"And what's more," Denry pursued, "I 'll collect 'em for five per cent. instead of seven and a half. Give me a free hand and see if I don't get better results than *he* did. And I 'll settle accounts every month, or week if you like, instead of once a quarter, like *he* does."

The bright and beautiful idea had smitten Denry like some heavenly arrow. It went through him and pierced Mrs. Codleyn with equal success. It was an idea that appealed to the reason, to the pocket, and to the instinct of revenge. Having revengefully settled the hash of Mr. Duncalf, they went into church.

No need to continue this part of the narrative! Even the text of the rector's sermon has no bearing on the issue.

In a week there was a painted board affixed to the door of Denry's mother: "E. H. Machin, Rent Collector, and Estate Agent." There was also an inch advertisement in the *Signal* announcing that Denry managed estates large or small.

III

The next crucial event in Denry's career happened one Monday morning, in a cottage that was very much smaller even than his mother's. This cottage, part of Mrs. Codleyn's multitudinous property, stood by itself in Chapel Alley, behind the Wesleyan Chapel; the majority of the tenements were in Carpenter's Square, near to. The neighbourhood was not distinguished for its social splendour; but existence in it was picturesque, varied, exciting, full of accidents, as existence is apt to be in residences that cost their occupiers an average of three shillings a week. Some persons referred to the quarter as a slum, and ironically insisted on its adjacency to the Wesleyan Chapel, as though that was the Wesleyan Chapel's fault. Such people did not understand life and the joy thereof.

The solitary cottage had a front-yard, about as large as a blanket, surrounded by an insecure brick wall and paved with mud. You went up two steps, pushed at a door, and instantly found yourself in the principal reception-room, which no earthly blanket could possibly have covered. Behind this chamber could be seen obscurely an apartment so tiny that an auctioneer would have been justified in terming it "bijou," furnished simply but practically with a slopstone; also the beginnings of a stairway. The furniture of the reception-room comprised two chairs and a table, one or two saucepans, and some antique crockery. What

lay at the upper end of the stairway no living person knew, save the old woman, who slept there. The old woman sat at the fireplace, "all bunched up," as they say in the Five Towns. The only fire in the room, however, was in the short clay pipe which she smoked; Mrs. Hullins was one of the last old women in Bursley to smoke a cutty; and even then the pipe was considered coarse, and cigarettes were coming into fashion – though not in Chapel Alley. Mrs. Hullins smoked her pipe, and thought about nothing in particular. Occasionally some vision of the past floated through her drowsy brain. She had lived in that residence for over forty years. She had brought up eleven children and two husbands there. She had coddled thirty-five grandchildren there, and given instruction to some half-dozen daughters-in-law. She had known midnights when she could scarcely move in that residence without disturbing somebody asleep. Now she was alone in it. She never left it, except to fetch water from the pump in the Square. She had seen a lot of life, and she was tired.

Denry came unceremoniously in, smiling gaily and benevolently, with his bright, optimistic face under his fair brown hair. He had large and good teeth. He was getting – not stout, but plump.

"Well, mother!" he greeted Mrs. Hullins, and sat down on the other chair.

A young fellow obviously at peace with the world, a young fellow content with himself for the moment! No longer a clerk; one of the employed; saying "sir" to persons with no more fingers

and toes than he had himself; bound by servile agreement to be in a fixed place at fixed hours! An independent unit, master of his own time and his own movements! In brief, a man! The truth was that he earned now in two days a week slightly more than Mr. Duncalf paid him for the labour of five and a half days. His income, as collector of rents and manager of estates large or small, totalled about a pound a week. But he walked forth in the town, smiled, poked, spoke vaguely, and said "Do *you*?" to such a tune that his income might have been guessed to be anything from ten pounds a week to ten thousand a year. And he had four days a week in which to excogitate new methods of creating a fortune.

"I 've nowt for ye!" said the old woman, not moving.

"Come, come, now! That won't do!" said Denry. "Have a pinch of my tobacco!"

She accepted a pinch of his tobacco, and refilled her pipe, and he gave her a match.

"I 'm not going out of this house without half a crown at any rate!" said Denry blithely.

And he rolled himself a cigarette, possibly to keep warm. It was very chilly in the stuffy residence, but the old woman never shivered. She was one of those old women who seem to wear all the skirts of all their lives, one over the other.

"Ye 're here for th' better part o' some time, then," observed Mrs. Hullins, looking facts in the face. "I 've told ye about my son Jack. He 's been playing [out of work] six weeks. He starts

to-day, and he 'll gi' me summat Saturday."

"That won't do," said Denry, curtly and kindly.

He then, with his bluff benevolence, explained to Mother Hullins that Mrs. Codleyn would stand no further increase of arrears, from anybody, that she could not afford to stand any further increase of arrears, that her tenants were ruining her, and that he himself, with all his cheery good will for the rent-paying classes, would be involved in her fall.

"Six and forty years have I been i' this 'ere house!" said Mrs. Hullins.

"Yes, I know," said Denry. "And look at what you owe, mother!"

It was with immense good-humoured kindness that he invited her attention to what she owed. She tacitly declined to look at it.

"Your children ought to keep you," said Denry, upon her silence.

"Them as is dead, can't," said Mrs. Hullins, "and them as is alive has their own to keep, except Jack."

"Well, then, it's bailiffs," said Denry, but still cheerfully.

"Nay, nay! Ye 'll none turn me out."

Denry threw up his hands, as if to exclaim: "I 've done all I can, and I 've given you a pinch of tobacco. Besides, you ought not to be here alone. You ought to be with one of your children."

There was more conversation, which ended in Denry repeating, with sympathetic resignation:

"No, you 'll have to get out. It's bailiffs."

Immediately afterwards he left the residence, with a bright filial smile. And then, in two minutes, he popped his cheerful head in at the door again.

"Look here, mother," he said, "I 'll lend you half a crown if you like."

Charity beamed on his face, and genuinely warmed his heart.

"But you must pay me something for the accommodation," he added. "I can't do it for nothing. You must pay me back next week and give me threepence. That's fair. I could n't bear to see you turned out of your house. Now, get your rent-book."

And he marked half a crown as paid in her greasy, dirty rent-book, and the same in his large book.

"Eh, you 're a queer 'un, Mester Machin!" murmured the old woman, as he left. He never knew precisely what she meant. Fifteen – twenty years later in his career, her intonation of that phrase would recur to him and puzzle him.

On the following Monday everybody in Chapel Alley and Carpenter's Square seemed to know that the inconvenience of bailiffs and eviction could be avoided by arrangement with Denry the philanthropist. He did quite a business. And having regard to the fantastic nature of the security, he could not well charge less than threepence a week for half a crown. That was about forty per cent. a month and five hundred per cent. per annum. The security was merely fantastic, but nevertheless, he had his remedy against evil-doers. He would take what they paid him

for rent and refuse to mark it as rent, appropriating it to his loans; so that the fear of bailiffs was upon them again. Thus, as the good genius of Chapel Alley and Carpenter's Square, saving the distressed from the rigours of the open street, rescuing the needy from their tightest corners, keeping many a home together when but for him it would have fallen to pieces, always smiling, jolly, sympathetic, and picturesque, Denry at length employed the five-pound note won from Harold Etches. A five-pound note – especially a new and crisp one, as this was – is a miraculous fragment of matter, wonderful in the pleasure which the sight of it gives even to millionaires; but perhaps no five-pound note was ever so miraculous as Denry's. Ten per cent. per week, compound interest, mounts up; it ascends; and it lifts. Denry never talked precisely. But the town soon began to comprehend that he was a rising man, a man to watch. The town admitted that, so far, he had lived up to his reputation as a dancer with countesses. The town felt that there was something indefinable about Denry.

Denry himself felt this. He did not consider himself clever, nor brilliant. But he considered himself peculiarly gifted. He considered himself different from other men. His thoughts would run:

"Anybody but me would have knuckled down to Duncalf and remained a shorthand clerk for evermore."

"Who but me would have had the idea of going to the ball and asking the Countess to dance? ... And then that business with

the fan!"

"Who but me would have had the idea of taking his rent-collecting off Duncalf?"

"Who but me would have had the idea of combining these loans with the rent-collecting. It's simple enough! It's just what they want! And yet nobody ever thought of it till I thought of it!"

And he knew of a surety that he was that most admired type in the bustling, industrial provinces – a card.

IV

The desire to become a member of the Sports Club revived in his breast. And yet, celebrity though he was, rising though he was, he secretly regarded the Sports Club at Hillport as being really a bit above him. The Sports Club was the latest and greatest phenomenon of social life in Bursley, and it was emphatically the club to which it behoved the golden youth of the town to belong. To Denry's generation the Conservative Club and the Liberal Club did not seem like real clubs; they were machinery for politics, and membership carried nearly no distinction with it. But the Sports Club had been founded by the most dashing young men of Hillport, which is the most aristocratic suburb of Bursley and set on a lofty eminence. The sons of the wealthiest earthenware manufacturers made a point of belonging to it, and, after a period of disdain, their fathers also made a point of belonging to it. It was housed in an old mansion with extensive grounds and a pond and tennis courts; it had a working agreement with the Golf Club and with the Hillport Cricket Club. But chiefly it was a social affair. The correctest thing was to be seen there at nights, rather late than early; and an exact knowledge of card games and billiards was worth more in it than prowess on the field.

It was a club in the Pall Mall sense of the word.

And Denry still lived in insignificant Brougham Street,

and his mother was still a sempstress! These were apparently insurmountable truths. All the men whom he knew to be members were somehow more dashing than Denry – and it was a question of dash; few things are more mysterious than dash. Denry was unique, knew himself to be unique; he had danced with a Countess; and yet ... those other fellows! ... Yes there are puzzles, baffling puzzles, in the social career.

In going over on Tuesdays to Hanbridge, where he had a few trifling rents to collect, Denry often encountered Harold Etches in the tram-car. At that time Etches lived at Hillport, and the principal Etches manufactory was at Hanbridge. Etches partook of the riches of his family and, though a bachelor, was reputed to have the spending of at least a thousand a year. He was famous, on summer Sundays, on the pier at Llandudno, in white flannels. He had been one of the originators of the Sports Club. He spent far more on clothes alone than Denry spent in the entire enterprise of keeping his soul in his body. At their first meetings little was said. They were not equals and nothing but dress-suits could make them equals. However, even a king could not refuse speech with a scullion whom he had allowed to win money from him. And Etches and Denry chatted feebly. Bit by bit they chatted less feebly. And once, when they were almost alone in the car, they chatted with vehemence during the complete journey of twenty minutes.

"He is n't so bad," said Denry to himself, of the dashing Harold Etches.

And he took a private oath that at his very next encounter with Etches he would mention the Sports Club – "just to see." This oath disturbed his sleep for several nights. But with Denry an oath was sacred. Having sworn that he would mention the Club to Etches, he was bound to mention it. When Tuesday came he hoped that Etches would not be on the tram, and the coward in him would have walked to Hanbridge instead of taking the tram. But he was brave. And he boarded the tram. And Etches was already in it. Now that he looked at it close, the enterprise of suggesting to Harold Etches that he, Denry, would be a suitable member of the Sports Club at Hillport seemed in the highest degree preposterous. Why! He could not play at any games at all! He was a figure only in the streets! Nevertheless – the oath!

He sat awkwardly silent for a few moments, wondering how to begin, and determined to get it over. And then Harold Etches leaned across the tram to him and said:

"I say, Machin. I've several times meant to ask you. Why don't you put up for the Sports Club? It's really very good, you know."

Denry blushed. Quite probably for the last time in his life. And he saw with fresh clearness how great he was, and how large he must loom in the life of the town. He perceived that he had been too modest.

V

You could not be elected to the Sports Club all in a minute. There were formalities; and that these formalities were complicated and took time is simply a proof that the Club was correctly exclusive, and worth belonging to. When at length Denry received notice from the "Secretary and Steward" that he was elected to the most sparkling fellowship in the Five Towns, he was, positively, afraid to go and visit the Club. He wanted some old and experienced member to lead him gently into the Club and explain its usages and introduce him to the chief habitués. Or else he wanted to slip in unobserved while the heads of clubmen were turned. And then he had a distressing shock. Mrs. Codleyn took it into her head that she must sell her cottage property. Now Mrs. Codleyn's cottage property was the backbone of Denry's livelihood; and he could by no means be sure that a new owner would employ him as rent-collector. A new owner might have the absurd notion of collecting rents in person. Vainly did Denry exhibit to Mrs. Codleyn rows of figures showing that her income from the property had increased under his control. Vainly did he assert that from no other form of investment would she derive such a handsome interest. She went so far as to consult an auctioneer. The auctioneer's idea of what would constitute a fair reserve price shook, but did not quite overthrow, her. At this crisis it was that Denry happened to say

to her, in his new large manner: "Why! if I could afford, I 'd buy the property off you myself, just to show you...!" (He did not explain, to show her, and he did not perhaps know himself, what had to be shown.) She answered that she wished to goodness he would! Then he said wildly that he *would*, in instalments. And he actually did buy the Widow Hullins's half-a-crown-a-week cottage for £45, of which he paid £30 in cash and arranged that the balance should be deducted gradually from his weekly commission. He chose the Widow Hullins's because it stood by itself – an old piece, as it were, chipped off from the block of Mrs. Codleyn's realty. The transaction quieted Mrs. Codleyn. And Denry felt secure because she could not now dispense with his services without losing her security for £15. (He still thought in these small sums instead of thinking in thousands.)

He was now a property owner.

Encouraged by this great and solemn fact, he went up one afternoon to the Club at Hillport. His entry was magnificent, superficially. No one suspected that he was nervous under the ordeal. The truth is that no one suspected because the place was empty. The emptiness of the hall gave him pause. He saw a large framed copy of the "Rules" hanging under a deer's head, and he read them as carefully as though he had not got a copy in his pocket. Then he read the Notices, as though they had been latest telegrams from some dire seat of war. Then, perceiving a massive open door of oak (the club-house had once been a pretty stately mansion), he passed through it, and saw a bar (with bottles) and

a number of small tables and wicker chairs, and on one of the tables an example of the *Staffordshire *Signal** displaying in vast letters the fearful question: "Is your skin troublesome?" Denry's skin was troublesome; it crept. He crossed the hall and went into another room which was placarded "Silence." And silence was. And on a table, with copies of *The Potter's World*, *The British Australasian*, *The Iron Trades Review*, and the *Golfer's Annual*, was a second copy of the *Signal* again demanding of Denry in vast letters whether his skin was troublesome. Evidently the reading-room.

He ascended the stairs and discovered a deserted billiard-room with two tables. Though he had never played at billiards he seized a cue, but when he touched them the balls gave such a resounding click in the hush of the chamber that he put the cue away instantly. He noticed another door, curiously opened it, and started back at the sight of a small room and eight middle-aged men, mostly hatted, playing cards in two groups. They had the air of conspirators, but they were merely some of the finest solo-whist players in Bursley. (This was before Bridge had quitted Pall Mall.) Among them was Mr. Duncalf. Denry shut the door quickly. He felt like a wanderer in an enchanted castle who had suddenly come across something that ought not to be come across. He returned to earth, and in the hall met a man in shirt-sleeves – the Secretary and Steward, a nice homely man who said, in the accents of ancient friendship, though he had never spoken to Denry before: "Is it Mr. Machin? Glad to see you

Mr. Machin! Come and have a drink with me, will you? Give it a name." Saying which, the Secretary and Steward went behind the bar, and Denry imbibed a little whiskey and much information concerning the Club.

"Anyhow, I 've *been!*" he said to himself going home.

VI

The next night he made another visit to the Club, about ten o'clock. The reading-room, that haunt of learning, was as empty as ever; but the bar was full of men, smoke, and glasses. It was so full that Denry's arrival was scarcely observed. However, the Secretary and Steward observed him, and soon he was chatting with a group at the bar, presided over by the Secretary and Steward's shirt-sleeves. He glanced around, and was satisfied. It was a scene of dashing gaiety and worldliness that did not belie the Club's reputation. Some of the most important men in Bursley were there. Charles Fearn, the solicitor who practised at Hanbridge, was arguing vivaciously in a corner. Fearn lived at Bleakridge and belonged to the Bleakridge Club, and his presence at Hillport (two miles from Bleakridge) was a dramatic tribute to the prestige of Hillport's Club.

Fearn was apparently in one of his anarchistic moods. Though a successful business man, who voted right, he was pleased occasionally to uproot the fabric of society and rebuild it on a new plan of his own. To-night he was inveighing against landlords – he who by "conveyancing" kept a wife and family, and a French governess for the family, in rather more than comfort. The Fearnses' French governess was one of the seven wonders of the Five Towns. Men enjoyed him in these moods; and as he raised his voice, so he enlarged the circle of his audience.

"If the bye-laws of this town were worth a bilberry," he was saying, "about a thousand so-called houses would have to come down to-morrow. Now there's that old woman I was talking about just now – Hullins. She 's a Catholic – and my governess is always slumming about among Catholics – that's how I know. She 's paid half a crown a week for pretty near half a century for a hovel that isn't worth eighteen pence, and now she's going to be pitched into the street because she can't pay any more. And she 's seventy if she 's a day! And that's the basis of society. Nice, refined society, eh?"

"Who's the grasping owner?" some one asked.

"Old Mrs. Codleyn," said Fearn.

"Here, Mr. Machin, they 're talking about you," said the Secretary and Steward genially. He knew that Denry collected Mrs. Codleyn's rents.

"Mrs. Codleyn is n't the owner," Denry called out across the room, almost before he was aware what he was doing. There was a smile on his face and a glass in his hand.

"Oh!" said Fearn. "I thought she was. Who is?"

Everybody looked inquisitively at the renowned Machin, the new member.

"I am," said Denry.

He had concealed the change of ownership from the Widow Hullins. In his quality of owner he could not have lent her money in order that she might pay it instantly back to himself.

"I beg your pardon," said Fearn, with polite sincerity. "I'd no

idea!.." He saw that unwittingly he had come near to committing a gross outrage on club etiquette.

"Not at all!" said Denry. "But supposing the cottage was *yours*, what should *you* do, Mr. Fearn's? Before I bought the property I used to lend her money myself to pay her rent."

"I know," Fearn's answered with a certain dryness of tone.

It occurred to Denry that the lawyer knew too much.

"Well, what should you do?" he repeated obstinately.

"She 's an old woman," said Fearn's. "And honest enough, you must admit. She came up to see my governess, and I happened to see her."

"But what should you do in my place?" Denry insisted.

"Since you ask, I should lower the rent, and let her off the arrears," said Fearn's.

"And supposing she didn't pay then? Let her have it rent free, because she's seventy? Or pitch her into the streets?"

"Oh – Well – "

"Fearn's would make her a present of the blooming house and give her a conveyance free!" a voice said humorously, and everybody laughed.

"Well, that's what I 'll do," said Denry. "If Mr. Fearn's will do the conveyance free, I 'll make her a present of the blooming house. That's the sort of grasping owner I am."

There was a startled pause. "I mean it," said Denry firmly, even fiercely, and raised his glass. "Here's to the Widow Hullins!"

There was a sensation, because, incredible although the thing was, it had to be believed. Denry himself was not the least astounded person in the crowded smoky room. To him, it had been like somebody else talking, not himself. But, as always when he did something crucial, spectacular, and effective, the deed had seemed to be done by a mysterious power within him, over which he had no control.

This particular deed was quixotic, enormously unusual; a deed assuredly without precedent in the annals of the Five Towns. And he, Denry, had done it. The cost was prodigious, ridiculously and dangerously beyond his means. He could find no rational excuse for the deed. But he had done it. And men again wondered. Men had wondered when he led the Countess out to waltz. That was nothing to this. What! A smooth-chinned youth giving houses away – out of mere, mad, impulsive generosity!

And men said, on reflection: "Of course that's just the sort of thing Machin *would* do!" They appeared to find a logical connection between dancing with a Countess, and tossing a house or so to a poor widow. And the next morning every man who had been in the Sports Club that night was remarking eagerly to his friends: "I say, have you heard young Machin's latest?"

And Denry, inwardly aghast at his own rashness, was saying to himself: "Well, no one but me would ever have done that!"

He was now not simply a card; he was *the* card.

CHAPTER III. THE PANTECHNICON

I

"How do you do, Miss Earp?" said Denry, in a worldly manner which he had acquired for himself by taking the most effective features of the manners of several prominent citizens, and piecing them together so that as a whole they formed Denry's manner.

"Oh! How do you do, Mr. Machin?" said Ruth Earp, who had opened her door to him at the corner of Tudor Passage and St. Luke's Square.

It was an afternoon in July. Denry wore a new summer suit, whose pattern indicated not only present prosperity but the firm belief that prosperity would continue. As for Ruth, that plain but piquant girl was in one of her simpler costumes; blue linen; no jewelry. Her hair was in its usual calculated disorder; its outer fleeces held the light. She was now at least twenty-five, and her gaze disconcertingly combined extreme maturity with extreme candour. At one moment a man would be saying to himself: "This woman knows more of the secrets of human nature than I can ever know." And the next he would be saying

to himself: "What a simple little thing she is!" The career of nearly every man is marked at the sharp corners with such women. Speaking generally, Ruth Earp's demeanour was hard and challenging. It was evident that she could not be subject to the common weaknesses of her sex. Denry was glad. A youth of quick intelligence, he had perceived all the dangers of the mission upon which he was engaged, and had planned his precautions.

"May I come in a minute?" he asked in a purely business tone. There was no hint in that tone of the fact that once she had accorded him a supper-dance.

"Please do," said Ruth.

An agreeable flouncing swish of linen skirts as she turned to precede him down the passage! But he ignored it. That is to say, he easily steeled himself against it.

She led him to the large room which served as her dancing academy, the bare-boarded place in which, a year and a half before, she had taught his clumsy limbs the principles of grace and rhythm. She occupied the back part of a building of which the front part was an empty shop. The shop had been tenanted by her father, one of whose frequent bankruptcies had happened there; after which his stock of the latest novelties in inexpensive furniture had been seized by rapacious creditors, and Mr. Earp had migrated to Birmingham, where he was courting the Official Receiver anew. Ruth had remained, solitary and unprotected, with a considerable amount of household goods which had been her mother's. (Like all professional bankrupts,

Mr. Earp had invariably had belongings which, as he could prove to his creditors, did not belong to him.) Public opinion had justified Ruth in her enterprise of staying in Bursley on her own responsibility and renting part of the building, in order not to lose her "connection" as a dancing-mistress. Public opinion said that "there would have been no sense in her going dangling after her wastrel of a father."

"Quite a long time since we saw anything of each other," observed Ruth in rather a pleasant style, as she sat down and as he sat down.

It was. The intimate ecstasy of the supper-dance had never been repeated. Denry's exceeding industry in carving out his career, and his desire to graduate as an accomplished clubman, had prevented him from giving to his heart that attention which it deserved, having regard to his tender years.

"Yes, it is, isn't it?" said Denry.

Then there was a pause, and they both glanced vaguely about the inhospitable and very wooden room. Now was the moment for Denry to carry out his pre-arranged plan in all its savage simplicity. He did so.

"I 've called about the rent, Miss Earp," he said; and by an effort looked her in the eyes.

"The rent?" exclaimed Ruth, as though she had never in all her life heard of such a thing as rent; as though June 24th (recently past) was an ordinary day like any other day.

"Yes," said Denry.

"What rent?" asked Ruth, as though for aught she guessed it might have been the rent of Buckingham Palace that he had called about.

"Yours," said Denry.

"Mine!" she murmured. "But what has my rent got to do with you?" she demanded. And it was just as if she had said: "But what has my rent got to do with you, little boy?"

"Well," he said, "I suppose you know I 'm a rent-collector?"

"No, I did n't," she said.

He thought she was fibbing out of sheer naughtiness. But she was not. She did not know that he collected rents. She knew that he was a card, a figure, a celebrity; and that was all. It is strange how the knowledge of even the cleverest woman will confine itself to certain fields.

"Yes," he said, always in a cold, commercial tone, "I collect rents."

"I should have thought you 'd have preferred postage stamps," she said, gazing out of the window at a kiln that was blackening all the sky.

If he could have invented something clever and cutting in response to this sally he might have made the mistake of quitting his rôle of hard, unsentimental man of business. But he could think of nothing. So he proceeded sternly:

"Mr. Herbert Calvert has put all his property into my hands, and he has given me strict instructions that no rent is to be allowed to remain in arrear."

No answer from Ruth. Mr. Calvert was a little fellow of fifty who had made money in the mysterious calling of a "commission agent." By reputation he was, really, very much harder than Denry could even pretend to be; and indeed Denry had been considerably startled by the advent of such a client. Surely if any man in Bursley were capable of unmercifully collecting rents on his own account, Herbert Calvert must be that man!

"Let me see," said Denry further, pulling a book from his pocket and peering into it, "you owe five quarters' rent, £30."

He knew without the book precisely what Ruth owed, but the book kept him in countenance, supplied him with needed moral support.

Ruth Earp, without the least warning, exploded into a long peal of gay laughter. Her laugh was far prettier than her face. She laughed well. She might, with advantage to Bursley, have given lessons in laughing as well as in dancing; for Bursley laughs without grace. Her laughter was a proof that she had not a care in the world, and that the world for her was naught but a source of light amusement.

Denry smiled guardedly.

"Of course with me it's purely a matter of business," said he.

"So that's what Mr. Herbert Calvert has done!" she exclaimed, amid the embers of her mirth. "I wondered what he would do! I presume you know all about Mr. Herbert Calvert," she added.

"No," said Denry. "I don't know anything about him, except that he owns some property and I 'm in charge of it. Stay," he

corrected himself, "I think I do remember crossing his name off your programme once."

And he said to himself: "That's one for her. If she likes to be so desperately funny about postage stamps, I don't see why I should n't have my turn." The recollection that it was precisely Herbert Calvert whom he had supplanted in the supper-dance at the Countess of Chell's historic ball, somehow increased his confidence in his ability to manage the interview with brilliance.

Ruth's voice grew severe and chilly. It seemed incredible that she had just been laughing.

"I will tell you about Mr. Herbert Calvert." She enunciated her words with slow, stern clearness. "Mr. Herbert Calvert took advantage of his visits here for his rent, to pay his attentions to me. At one time he was so far – well – gone, that he would scarcely take his rent."

"Really!" murmured Denry, genuinely staggered by this symptom of the distance to which Mr. Herbert Calvert was once "gone."

"Yes," said Ruth, still sternly and inimically. "Naturally a woman can't make up her mind about these things all of a sudden," she continued. "Naturally!" she repeated.

"Of course," Denry agreed, perceiving that his experience of life and deep knowledge of human nature were being appealed to.

"And when I did decide definitely, Mr. Herbert Calvert did not behave like a gentleman. He forgot what was due to himself

and to me. I won't describe to you the scene he made. I'm simply telling you this so that you may know. To cut a long story short, he behaved in a very vulgar way. And a woman does n't forget these things, Mr. Machin." Her eyes threatened him. "I decided to punish Mr. Herbert Calvert. I thought if he would n't take his rent before – well, let him wait for it now! I might have given him notice to leave. But I did n't. I did n't see why I should let myself be upset because Mr. Herbert Calvert had forgotten that he was a gentleman. I said, Let him wait for his rent, and I promised myself I would just see what he would dare to do."

"I don't quite follow your argument," Denry put in.

"Perhaps you don't," she silenced him. "I did n't expect you would. You and Mr. Herbert Calvert! ... So he didn't dare to do anything himself, and he is paying you to do his dirty work for him! Very well! Very well!.." She lifted her head defiantly. "What will happen if I don't pay the rent?"

"I shall have to let things take their course," said Denry with a genial smile.

"All right, then," Ruth Earp responded. "If you choose to mix yourself up with people like Mr. Herbert Calvert, you must take the consequences! It's all the same to me, after all."

"Then it is n't convenient for you to pay anything on account?" said Denry, more and more affable.

"Convenient!" she cried. "It's perfectly convenient, only I don't care to. I won't pay a penny until I am forced. Let Mr. Herbert Calvert do his worst, and then I'll pay. And not before!"

And the whole town shall hear all about Mr. Herbert Calvert!"

"I see!" he laughed easily.

"Convenient!" she reiterated, contemptuously. "I think everybody in Bursley knows how my clientele gets larger and larger every year! ... Convenient!"

"So that's final, Miss Earp?"

"Perfectly," said Miss Earp.

He rose. "Then the simplest thing will be for me to send round a bailiff to-morrow morning, early." He might have been saying: "The simplest thing will be for me to send round a bunch of orchids."

Another man would have felt emotion, and probably expressed it. But not Denry, the rent-collector and manager of estates large and small. There were several different men in Denry, but he had the great gift of not mixing up two different Denrys when he found himself in a complicated situation.

Ruth Earp rose also. She dropped her eyelids and looked at him from under them. And then she gradually smiled.

"I thought I 'd just see what you 'd do," she said in a low confidential voice from which all trace of hostility had suddenly departed. "You 're a strange creature," she went on, curiously, as though fascinated by the problems presented by his individuality. "Of course I shan't let it go as far as that. I only thought I 'd see what you 'd say. I 'll write you to-night."

"With a cheque?" Denry demanded, with suave, jolly courtesy. "I don't collect postage stamps."

(And to himself: "She's got her postage stamps back.")

She hesitated. "Stay!" she said. "I 'll tell you what will be better. Can you call to-morrow afternoon? The bank will be closed now."

"Yes," he said, "I can call. What time?"

"Oh," she answered, "any time. If you come in about four, I 'll give you a cup of tea into the bargain. Though you don't deserve it!" After an instant, she added reassuringly: "Of course I know business is business with you. But I 'm glad I 've told you the real truth about your precious Mr. Herbert Calvert, all the same."

And as he walked slowly home Denry pondered upon the singular, erratic, incalculable strangeness of woman, and of the possibly magic effect of his own personality on women.

II

It was the next afternoon in July. Denry wore his new summer suit, but with a necktie of higher rank than the previous days. As for Ruth, that plain but piquant girl was in one of her more elaborate and foamier costumes. The wonder was that such a costume could survive even for an hour the smuts that lend continual interest and excitement to the atmosphere of Bursley. It was a white muslin, spotted with spots of opaque white, and founded on something pink. Denry imagined that he had seen parts of it before – at the ball; and he had; but it was now a tea-gown, with long languishing sleeves; the waves of it broke at her shoulders sending lacy surf high up the precipices of Ruth's neck. Denry did not know it was a tea-gown. But he knew that it had a most peculiar and agreeable effect on himself and that she had promised him tea. He was glad that he had paid her the homage of his best necktie.

Although the month was July, Ruth wore a kind of shawl over the tea-gown. It was not a shawl, Denry noted, it was merely about two yards of very thin muslin. He puzzled himself as to its purpose. It could not be for warmth, for it would not have helped to melt an icicle. Could it be meant to fulfil the same function as muslin in a confectioner's shop? She was pale. Her voice was weak, had an imploring quality.

She led him, not into the inhospitable wooden academy,

but into a very small room which like herself was dressed in muslin and bows of ribbon. Photographs of amiable men and women decorated the pinkish-green walls. The mantelpiece was concealed in drapery as though it had been a sin. A writing-desk as green as a leaf stood carelessly in one corner; on the desk a vase containing some Cape gooseberries. In the middle of the room a small table; on the table a spirit-lamp in full blast, and on the lamp a kettle practising scales; a tray occupied the remainder of the table. There were two easy chairs; Ruth sank delicately into one, and Denry took the other with precautions.

He was nervous. Nothing equals muslin for imparting nervousness in the naïve. But he felt pleased.

"Not much of the Widow Hullins touch about this!" he reflected privately.

And he wished that all rent-collecting might be done with such ease, and amid such surroundings, as this particular piece of rent-collecting. He saw what a fine thing it was to be a free man, under orders from nobody; not many men in Bursley were in a position to accept invitations to four o'clock tea at a day's notice. Further, five per cent. on thirty pounds was thirty shillings; so that if he stayed an hour – and he meant to stay an hour – he would, while enjoying himself, be earning money steadily at the rate of sixpence a minute.

It was the ideal of a business career.

When the kettle, having finished its scales, burst into song with an accompaniment of castanets and vapour, and Ruth's

sleeves rose and fell as she made the tea, Denry acknowledged frankly to himself that it was this sort of thing, and not the Brougham Street sort of thing, that he was really born for. He acknowledged to himself humbly that this sort of thing was "life," and that hitherto he had had no adequate idea of what "life" was. For, with all his ability as a card and a rising man, with all his assiduous frequenting of the Sports Club, he had not penetrated into the upper domestic strata of Bursley society. He had never been invited to any house where, as he put it, he would have had to mind his p's and q's. He still remained the kind of man whom you familiarly chat with in the street and club, and no more. His mother's fame as a flannel-washer was against him; Brougham Street was against him; and, chiefly, his poverty was against him. True, he had gorgeously given a house away to an aged widow! True, he succeeded in transmitting to his acquaintances a vague idea that he was doing well and waxing financially from strength to strength! But the idea was too vague, too much in the air. And save by a suit of clothes he never gave ocular proof that he had money to waste. He could not. It was impossible for him to compete with even the more modest of the bloods and the blades. To keep a satisfactory straight crease down the middle of each leg of his trousers was all he could accomplish with the money regularly at his disposal. The town was waiting for him to do something decisive in the matter of what it called "the stuff."

Thus Ruth Earp was the first to introduce him to the higher intimate civilisations, the refinements lurking behind the foul

walls of Bursley.

"Sugar?" she questioned, her head on one side, her arm uplifted, her sleeve drooping, and a bit of sugar caught like a white mouse between the claws of the tongs.

Nobody had ever before said "Sugar?" to him like that. His mother never said "Sugar?" to him. His mother was aware that he liked three pieces but she would not give him more than two. "Sugar?" in that slightly weak, imploring voice seemed to be charged with a significance at once tremendous and elusive.

"Yes, please."

"Another?"

And the "Another?" was even more delicious.

He said to himself: "I suppose this is what they call flirting."

When a chronicler tells the exact truth there is always a danger that he will not be believed. Yet in spite of the risk, it must be said plainly that at this point Denry actually thought of marriage. An absurd and childish thought, preposterously rash; but it came into his mind, and – what is more – it stuck there! He pictured marriage as a perpetual afternoon tea alone with an elegant woman, amid an environment of rib-boned muslin. And the picture appealed to him very strongly. And Ruth appeared to him in a new light. It was perhaps the change in her voice that did it. She appeared to him at once as a creature very feminine and enchanting, and as a creature who could earn her own living in a manner that was both original and ladylike. A woman such as Ruth would be a delight without being a drag. And truly,

was she not a remarkable woman? – as remarkable as he was a man? Here she was living amid the refinements of luxury. Not an expensive luxury (he had an excellent notion of the monetary value of things) but still luxury. And the whole affair was so stylish. His heart went out to the stylish.

The slices of bread-and-butter were rolled up. There, now, was a pleasing device! It cost nothing to roll up a slice of bread-and-butter – her fingers had doubtless done the rolling – and yet it gave quite a different taste to the food.

"What made you give that house to Mrs. Hullins?" she asked him suddenly, with a candour that seemed to demand candour.

"Oh!" he said, "just a lark! I thought I would. It came to me all in a second, and I did."

She shook her head. "Strange boy!" she observed.

There was a pause.

"It was something Charlie Fearn said, wasn't it?" she enquired.

She uttered the name "Charlie Fearn" with a certain faint hint of disdain, as if indicating to Denry that of course she and Denry were quite able to put Fearn into his proper place in the scheme of things.

"Oh!" he said. "So you know all about it?"

"Well," said she, "naturally it was all over the town. Mrs. Fearn's girl, Annunciata – what a name, eh? – is one of my pupils, the youngest, in fact."

"Well," said he, after another pause. "I was n't going to have

Fearns coming the duke over me!"

She smiled sympathetically. He felt that they understood each other deeply.

"You 'll find some cigarettes in that box," she said, when he had been there thirty minutes, and pointed to the mantelpiece.

"Sure you don't mind?" he murmured.

She raised her eyebrows.

There was also a silver match-box in the larger box. No detail lacked. It seemed to him that he stood on a mountain and had only to walk down a winding path in order to enter the promised land. He was decidedly pleased with the worldly way in which he had said: "Sure you don't mind?"

He puffed out smoke delicately. And, the cigarette between his lips, as with his left hand he waved the match into extinction, he demanded:

"You smoke?"

"Yes," she said, "but not in public. I know what you men are." This was in the early, timid days of feminine smoking.

"I assure you!" he protested, and pushed the box towards her. But she would not smoke.

"It is n't that I mind *you*," she said, "not at all. But I 'm not well. I 've got a frightful headache."

He put on a concerned expression.

"I *thought* you looked rather pale," he said awkwardly.

"Pale!" she repeated the word. "You should have seen me this morning! I have fits of dizziness, you know, too. The doctor says

its nothing but dyspepsia. However, don't let's talk about poor little me and my silly complaints. Perhaps the tea will do me good."

He protested again, but his experience of intimate civilisation was too brief to allow him to protest with effectiveness. The truth was, he could not say these things naturally. He had to compose them, and then pronounce them, and the result failed in the necessary air of spontaneity. He could not help thinking what marvellous self-control women had. Now when he had a headache – which happily was seldom – he could think of nothing else and talk of nothing else; the entire universe consisted solely of his headache. And here she was overcome with a headache and during more than half an hour had not even mentioned it!

She began talking gossip about the Fearnses and the Sweetnams, and she mentioned rumours concerning Henry Mynors (who had scruples against dancing) and Anna Tellwright, the daughter of that rich old skinflint, Ephraim Tellwright. No mistake; she was on the inside of things in Bursley society! It was just as if she had removed the front walls of every house and examined every room at her leisure, with minute particularity. But of course a teacher of dancing had opportunities... Denry had to pretend to be nearly as omniscient as she was.

Then she broke off, without warning, and lay back in her chair. "I wonder if you 'd mind going into the barn for me?" she murmured.

She generally referred to her academy as the barn. It had once

been a warehouse.

He jumped up. "Certainly," he said, very eager.

"I think you 'll see a small bottle of eau-de-cologne on the top of the piano," she said, and shut her eyes.

He hastened away, full of his mission, and feeling himself to be a terrific cavalier and guardian of weak women. He felt keenly that he must be equal to the situation. Yes, the small bottle of eau-de-cologne was on the top of the piano. He seized it and bore it to her on the wings of chivalry. He had not been aware that eau-de-cologne was a remedy for, or a palliative of headaches.

She opened her eyes, and with a great effort tried to be bright and better. But it was a failure. She took the stopper out of the bottle and sniffed first at the stopper and then at the bottle; then she spilled a few drops of the liquid on her handkerchief and applied the handkerchief to her temples.

"It's easier," she said.

"Sure?" he asked. He did not know what to do with himself, whether to sit down and feign that she was well, or to remain standing in an attitude of respectful and grave anxiety. He thought he ought to depart; yet would it not be ungallant to desert her under the circumstances? She was alone. She had no servant, only an occasional charwoman.

She nodded with brave, false gaiety. And then she had a relapse.

"Don't you think you'd better lie down?" he suggested in more masterful accents. And added: "And I'll go? ... You ought to lie

down. It's the only thing." He was now speaking to her like a wise uncle.

"Oh, no!" she said, without conviction. "Besides, you can't go till I 've paid you."

It was on the tip of his tongue to say: "Oh! don't bother about that, now!" But he restrained himself. There was a notable core of common-sense in Denry. He had been puzzling how he might neatly mention the rent while departing in a hurry so that she might lie down. And now she had solved the difficulty for him.

She stretched out her arm, and picked up a bunch of keys from a basket on a little table.

"You might just unlock that desk for me, will you?" she said. And further, as she went through the keys one by one to select the right key: "Each quarter I 've put your precious Mr. Herbert Calvert's rent in a drawer in that desk... Here 's the key." She held up the whole ring by the chosen key, and he accepted it. And she lay back once more in her chair, exhausted by her exertions.

"You must turn the key sharply in the lock," she said weakly, as he fumbled at the locked part of the desk.

So he turned the key sharply.

"You 'll see a bag in the little drawer on the right," she murmured.

The key turned round and round. It had begun by resisting but now it yielded too easily.

"It does n't seem to open," he said, feeling clumsy.

The key clicked and slid, and the other keys rattled together.

"Oh, yes," she replied. "I opened it quite easily this morning. It is a bit catchy."

The key kept going round and round.

"Here! I 'll do it," she said wearily.

"Oh, no!" he urged.

But she rose courageously, and tottered to the desk, and took the bunch off him.

"I 'm afraid you 've broken something in the lock," she announced, with gentle resignation, after she had tried to open the desk and failed.

"Have I?" he mumbled. He knew that he was not shining.

"Would you mind calling in at Allman's," she said, resuming her chair, "and tell them to send a man down at once to pick the lock? There 's nothing else for it. Or perhaps you 'd better say first thing to-morrow morning. And then as soon as he 's done it, I 'll call and pay you the money, myself. And you might tell your precious Mr. Herbert Calvert that next quarter I shall give notice to leave."

"Don't you trouble to call, please!" said he. "I can easily pop in here."

She sped him away in an enigmatic tone. He could not be sure whether he had succeeded or failed, in her estimation, as a man of the world and a partaker of delicate teas.

"Don't *forget* Allman's!" she enjoined him as he left the room. He was to let himself out.

"Oh, no!" he said.

III

He was coming home late that night from the Sports Club, from a delectable evening which had lasted till one o'clock in the morning, when just as he put the large door-key into his mother's cottage, he grew aware of peculiar phenomena at the top end of Brougham Street, where it runs into St. Luke's Square. And then, in the gas-lit gloom of the dark summer night he perceived a vast and vague rectangular form in slow movement towards the slope of Brougham Street.

It was a pantehnicon van.

But the extraordinary thing was, not that it should be a pantehnicon van, but that it should be moving of its own accord and power. For there were no horses in front of it, and Denry saw that the double shafts had been pushed up perpendicularly, after the manner of carmen when they outspan. The pantehnicon was running away. It had perceived the wrath to come and was fleeing. Its guardians had evidently left it imperfectly scotched or braked and it had got loose.

It proceeded down the first bit of Brougham Street with a dignity worthy of its dimensions, and at the same time with apparently a certain sense of the humour of the situation. Then it seemed to be saying to itself: "Pantehnicons will be pantehnicons." Then it took on the absurd gravity of a man who is perfectly sure that he is not drunk. Nevertheless it kept fairly

well to the middle of the road, but as though the road were a tight rope.

The rumble of it increased as it approached Denry. He withdrew the key from his mother's cottage and put it in his pocket. He was always at his finest in a crisis. And the onrush of the pantehnicon constituted a clear crisis. Lower down the gradient of Brougham Street was more dangerous, and it was within the possibilities that people inhabiting the depths of the street might find themselves pitched out of bed by the sharp corner of a pantehnicon that was determined to be a pantehnicon. A pantehnicon whose ardour is fairly aroused may be capable of surpassing deeds. Whole thoroughfares might crumble before it.

As the pantehnicon passed Denry, at the rate of about three and a half miles an hour, he leaped, or rather he scrambled, on to it, losing nothing in the process except his straw hat, which remained a witness at his mother's door that her boy had been that way and departed under unusual circumstances.

Denry had the bright idea of dropping the shafts down, to act as a brake. But, unaccustomed to the manipulation of shafts, he was rather slow in accomplishing the deed, and ere the first pair of shafts had fallen the pantehnicon was doing quite eight miles an hour and the steepest declivity was yet to come. Further the dropping of the left-hand shafts jerked the van to the left, and Denry dropped the other pair only just in time to avoid the sudden uprooting of a lamp-post. The four points of the

shafts digging and prodding into the surface of the road gave the pantechnicon something to think about for a few seconds. But unfortunately the precipitousness of the street encouraged its headstrong caprices, and a few seconds later all four shafts were broken; and the pantechnicon seemed to scent the open prairie. (What it really did scent was the canal.) Then Denry discovered the brake, and furiously struggled with the iron handle. He turned it and turned it, some forty revolutions. It seemed to have no effect. The miracle was that the pantechnicon maintained its course in the middle of the street. Presently Denry could vaguely distinguish the wall and double wooden gates of the canal wharf. He could not jump off; the pantechnicon was now an express; and I doubt whether he would have jumped off even if jumping off had not been madness. His was the kind of perseverance that, for the fun of it, will perish in an attempt. The final fifty or sixty yards of Brougham Street were level, and the pantechnicon slightly abated its haste. Denry could now plainly see, in the radiance of a gas-lamp, the gates of the wharf, and on them the painted letters: "Shropshire Union Canal Coy. Ltd. General Carriers. No admittance except on business." He was heading straight for those gates, and the pantechnicon evidently had business within. It jolted over the iron guard of the weighing machine, and this jolt deflected it, so that instead of aiming at the gates it aimed for part of a gate and part of a brick pillar. Denry ground his teeth together and clung to his seat. The gate might have been paper and the brick pillar a cardboard pillar.

The pantehnicon went through them as a sword will go through a ghost, and Denry was still alive. The remainder of the journey was brief and violent, owing partly to a number of bags of cement and partly to the propinquity of the canal basin. The pantehnicon jumped into the canal like a mastodon, and drank.

Denry, clinging to the woodwork, was submerged for a moment, but by standing on the narrow platform from which sprouted the splintered ends of the shafts, he could get his waist clear of the water. He was not a swimmer.

All was still; and dark, save for the faint stream of starlight on the broad bosom of the canal basin. The pantehnicon had encountered nobody whatever en route. Of its strange escapade Denry had been the sole witness.

"Well, I 'm dashed!" he murmured aloud.

And a voice replied from the belly of the pantehnicon: "Who is there?"

All Denry's body shook.

"It's me!" said he.

"Not Mr. Machin?" said the voice.

"Yes," said he. "I jumped on as it came down the street – and here we are!"

"Oh!" cried the voice. "I do wish you could get round to me!"

Ruth Earp's voice!

He saw the truth in a moment of piercing insight. Ruth had been playing with him! She had performed a comedy for him in two acts. She had meant to do what is called in the Five Towns "a

moonlight flit." The pantehnicon (doubtless from Birmingham, where her father was) had been brought to her door late in the evening, and was to have been filled and taken away during the night. The horses had been stabled, probably in Ruth's own yard, and while the carmen were reposing the pantehnicon had got off, Ruth in it. She had no money locked in her unlockable desk. Her reason for not having paid the precious Mr. Herbert Calvert was not the reason which she had advanced.

His first staggered thought was:

"She 's got a nerve! No mistake!"

Her duplicity, her wickedness, did not shock him. He admired her tremendous and audacious enterprise; it appealed strongly to every cell in his brain. He felt that she and he were kindred spirits.

He tried to clamber round the side of the van so as to get to the doors at the back, but a pantehnicon has a wheel-base which forbids leaping from wheel to wheel, especially when the wheels are under water. Hence he was obliged to climb on to the roof, and so slide down on to the top of one of the doors, which was swinging loose. The feat was not simple. At last he felt the floor of the van under half a yard of water.

"Where are you?"

"I 'm here," said Ruth, very plaintively. "I 'm on a table. It was the only thing they had put into the van before they went off to have their supper or something. Furniture removers are always like that. Haven't you got a match?"

"I 've got scores of matches," said Denry. "But what good do

you suppose they 'll be now? All soaked through!"

A short silence. He noticed that she had offered no explanation of her conduct towards himself. She seemed to take it for granted that he would understand.

"I 'm frightfully bumped, and I believe my nose is bleeding," said Ruth, still more plaintively. "It's a good thing there was a lot of straw and sacks here."

Then, after much groping, his hand touched her wet dress.

"You know you 're a very naughty girl," he said.

He heard a sob, a wild sob. The proud, independent creature had broken down under the stress of events. He climbed out of the water on to the part of the table which she was not occupying. And the van was as black as Erebus.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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