

BENNETT ARNOLD

A MAN FROM
THE NORTH

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A Man from the North

CHAPTER I

There grows in the North Country a certain kind of youth of whom it may be said that he is born to be a Londoner. The metropolis, and everything that appertains to it, that comes down from it, that goes up into it, has for him an imperious fascination. Long before schooldays are over he learns to take a doleful pleasure in watching the exit of the London train from the railway station. He stands by the hot engine and envies the very stoker. Gazing curiously into the carriages, he wonders that men and women who in a few hours will be treading streets called Piccadilly and the Strand can contemplate the immediate future with so much apparent calmness; some of them even have the audacity to look bored. He finds it difficult to keep from throwing himself in the guard's van as it glides past him; and not until the last coach is a speck upon the distance does he turn away and, nodding absently to the ticket-clerk, who knows him well, go home to nurse a vague ambition and dream of Town.

London is the place where newspapers are issued, books written, and plays performed. And this youth, who now sits in an office, reads all the newspapers. He knows exactly when a new work by a famous author should appear, and awaits the reviews with impatience. He can tell you off-hand the names of the pieces in the bills of the twenty principal West-end theatres, what their quality is, and how long they may be expected to run; and on the production of a new play, the articles of the dramatic critics provide him with sensations almost as vivid as those of the most zealous first-nighter at the performance itself.

Sooner or later, perhaps by painful roads, he reaches the goal of his desire. London accepts him – on probation; and as his strength is, so she demeans herself. Let him be bold and resolute, and she will make an obeisance, but her heel is all too ready to crush the coward and hesitant; and her victims, once underfoot, do not often rise again.

CHAPTER II

The antique four-wheeler, top-heavy with luggage, swung unsteadily round by Tattersall's and into Raphael Street. Richard thrust down the window with a sharp bang, indicative of a strange new sense of power; but before the cab came to a standstill he had collected himself, and managed to alight with considerable decorum. When the door opened in answer to his second ring, a faint, sour odour escaped from the house, and he remembered the friendly feminine warnings which he had received at Bursley on the subject of London lodgings. The aspect of the landlady, however, reassured him; she was a diminutive old woman in ridiculously short skirts, with a yellow, crinkled face, grey eyes, and a warm, benevolent smile that conquered. As she greeted Richard she blushed like a girl, and made a little old-fashioned curtsey. Richard offered his hand, and, after wiping hers on a clean apron, she took it timidly.

"I hope we shall get on well together, sir," she said, looking straight up into her new lodger's eyes.

"I'm sure we shall," answered Richard, sincerely.

She preceded him up the narrow, frowsy staircase, which was full of surprising turns.

"You'll find these stairs a bit awkward at first," she apologised. "I've often thought of getting a bit of nice carpet on them, but what's the use? It would be done for in a week. Now, here's your room, sir, first floor front, with two nice French windows, you see, and a nice balcony. Now, about tidying it of a morning, sir. If you'll step out for a walk as soon as you get up, my daughter shall make the bed, and dust, and you'll come in and find it all nice and straight for breakfast."

"Very well," assented Richard.

"That's how I generally arrange with my young men. I like them to have their breakfast in a nice tidy room, you see, sir. Now, what will you have for tea, sir? A little nice bread and butter..."

When she was gone Richard formally surveyed his quarters: a long, rather low room, its length cut by the two windows which were Mrs. Rowbotham's particular pride; between the windows a table with a faded green cloth, and a small bed opposite; behind the door an artfully concealed washstand; the mantelpiece, painted mustard yellow, bore divers squat earthenware figures, and was surmounted by an oblong mirror framed in rosewood; over the mirror an illuminated text, "Trust in Jesus," and over the text an oleograph, in collision with the ceiling, entitled, "After the Battle of Culloden." The walls were decorated with a pattern of giant pink roses; and here and there, hiding the roses, were hung photographs of persons in their Sunday clothes, and landscapes hand-painted in oil, depicting bridges, trees, water, and white sails in the distance. But the furnishing of the room caused Richard no uneasiness; in a few moments he had mentally arranged how to make the place habitable, and thenceforth he only saw what should and would be.

Tea was brought in by a girl whose face proclaimed her to be Mrs. Rowbotham's daughter. At the sight of her Richard privately winked; he had read in books about landladies' daughters, but this one gave the lie to books; she was young, she was beautiful, and Richard would have sworn to her innocence. With an accession of boldness which surprised himself, he inquired her name.

"Lily, sir," she said, blushing like her mother.

He cut the new, heavy bread, and poured out a cup of tea with the awkwardness of one unaccustomed to such work, and, having made space on the tray, set the evening paper against the sugar basin, and began to eat and read. Outside were two piano organs, children shouting, and a man uttering some monotonous unintelligible cry. It grew dark; Mrs. Rowbotham came in with a lamp and cleared the table; Richard was looking through the window, and neither spoke. Presently he sat down. That being his first night in London, he had determined to spend it quietly *at home*. The piano organs and the children were still strident. A peculiar feeling of isolation momentarily overcame him, and the noises of the street seemed to recede. Then he went to the window again, and noticed that

the children were dancing quite gracefully; it occurred to him that they might be ballet children. He picked up the paper and examined the theatrical advertisements, at first idly, but afterwards in detail.

With a long sigh, he took his hat and stick, and went very slowly downstairs. Mrs. Rowbotham heard him fumbling with the catch of the front door.

"Are you going out, sir?"

"Only just for a walk," said Richard, nonchalantly.

"Perhaps I'd better give you a latch-key?"

"Thanks."

Another moment and he was in the delicious streets, going east.

CHAPTER III

Although he had visited London but once before, and then only for a few hours, he was not unfamiliar with the topography of the town, having frequently studied it in maps and an old copy of Kelly's directory.

He walked slowly up Park Side and through Piccadilly, picking out as he passed them the French Embassy, Hyde Park Corner, Apsley House, Park Lane, and Devonshire House. As he drank in the mingled glare and glamour of Piccadilly by night, – the remote stars, the high sombre trees, the vast, dazzling interiors of clubs, the sinuous, flickering lines of traffic, the radiant faces of women framed in hansoms, – he laughed the laugh of luxurious contemplation, acutely happy. At last, at last, he had come into his inheritance. London accepted him. He was hers; she his; and nothing should part them. Starvation in London would itself be bliss. But he had no intention of starving! Filled with great purposes, he straightened his back, and just then a morsel of mud thrown up from a bus-wheel splashed warm and gritty on his cheek. He wiped it off caressingly, with a smile.

Although it was Saturday night, and most of the shops were closed, an establishment where watches and trinkets of "Anglo-Spanish" gold, superb in appearance and pillowed on green plush, were retailed at alluring prices, still threw a brilliant light on the pavement, and Richard crossed the road to inspect its wares. He turned away, but retraced his steps and entered the shop. An assistant politely inquired his wishes.

"I want one of those hunters you have in the window at 29/6," said Richard, with a gruffness which must have been involuntary.

"Yes, sir. Here is one. We guarantee that the works are equal to the finest English lever."

"I'll take it." He put down the money.

"Thank you. Can I show you anything else?"

"Nothing, thanks," still more gruffly.

"We have some excellent chains..."

"Nothing else, thanks." And he walked out, putting his purchase in his pocket. A perfectly reliable gold watch, which he had worn for years, already lay there.

At Piccadilly Circus he loitered, and then crossed over and went along Coventry Street to Leicester Square. The immense façade of the Ottoman Theatre of Varieties, with its rows of illuminated windows and crescent moons set against the sky, rose before him, and the glory of it was intoxicating. It is not too much to say that the Ottoman held a stronger fascination for Richard than any other place in London. The British Museum, Fleet Street, and the Lyceum were magic names, but more magical than either was the name of the Ottoman. The Ottoman, on the rare occasions when it happened to be mentioned in Bursley, was a synonym for all the glittering vices of the metropolis. It stank in the nostrils of the London delegates who came down to speak at the annual meetings of the local Society for the Suppression of Vice. But how often had Richard, somnolent in chapel, mitigated the rigours of a long sermon by dreaming of an Ottoman ballet, – one of those voluptuous spectacles, all legs and white arms, which from time to time were described so ornately in the London daily papers.

The brass-barred swinging doors of the Grand Circle entrance were simultaneously opened for him by two human automata dressed exactly alike in long semi-military coats, a very tall man and a stunted boy. He advanced with what air of custom he could command, and after taking a ticket and traversing a heavily decorated corridor encountered another pair of swinging doors; they opened, and a girl passed out, followed by a man who was talking to her vehemently in French. At the same moment a gust of distant music struck Richard's ear. As he climbed a broad, thick-piled flight of steps, the music became louder, and a clapping of hands could be heard. At the top of the steps hung a curtain of blue velvet; he pushed aside its stiff, heavy folds with difficulty, and entered the auditorium.

The smoke of a thousand cigarettes enveloped the furthest parts of the great interior in a thin bluish haze, which was dissipated as it reached the domed ceiling in the rays of a crystal chandelier. Far in front and a little below the level of the circle lay a line of footlights broken by the silhouette of the conductor's head. A diminutive, solitary figure in red and yellow stood in the centre of the huge stage; it was kissing its hands to the audience with a mincing, operatic gesture; presently it tripped off backwards, stopping at every third step to bow; the applause ceased, and the curtain fell slowly.

The broad, semicircular promenade which flanked the seats of the grand circle was filled with a well-dressed, well-fed crowd. The men talked and laughed, for the most part, in little knots, while in and out, steering their way easily and rapidly among these groups, moved the women: some with rouged cheeks, greasy vermilion lips, and enormous liquid eyes; others whose faces were innocent of cosmetics and showed pale under the electric light; but all with a peculiar, exaggerated swing of the body from the hips, and all surreptitiously regarding themselves in the mirrors which abounded on every glowing wall.

Richard stood aloof against a pillar. Near him were two men in evening dress conversing in tones which just rose above the general murmur of talk and the high, penetrating tinkle of glass from the bar behind the promenade.

"And what did she say then?" one of the pair asked smilingly. Richard strained his ear to listen.

"Well, *she* told *me*," the other said, speaking with a dreamy drawl, while fingering his watch-chain absently and gazing down at the large diamond in his shirt, – "*she* told *me* that she said she'd do for him if he didn't fork out. But I don't believe her. You know, of course... There's Lottie..."

The band suddenly began to play, and after a few crashing bars the curtain went up for the ballet. The rich *coup d'oeil* which presented itself provoked a burst of clapping from the floor of the house and the upper tiers, but to Richard's surprise no one in his proximity seemed to exhibit any interest in the entertainment. The two men still talked with their backs to the stage, the women continued to find a pathway between the groups, and from within the bar came the unabated murmur of voices and tinkle of glass.

Richard never took his dazed eyes from the stage. The moving pageant unrolled itself before him like a vision, rousing new sensations, tremors of strange desires. He was under a spell, and when at last the curtain descended to the monotonous roll of drums, he awoke to the fact that several people were watching him curiously. Blushing slightly, he went to a far corner of the promenade. At one of the little tables a woman sat alone. She held her head at an angle, and her laughing, lustrous eyes gleamed invitingly at Richard. Without quite intending to do so he hesitated in front of her, and she twittered a phrase ending in *chéri*.

He abruptly turned away. He would have been very glad to remain and say something clever, but his tongue refused its office, and his legs moved of themselves.

At midnight he found himself in Piccadilly Circus, unwilling to go home. He strolled leisurely back to Leicester Square. The front of the Ottoman was in darkness, and the square almost deserted.

CHAPTER IV

He walked home to Raphael Street. The house was dead, except for a pale light in his own room. At the top of the bare, creaking stairs he fumbled a moment for the handle of his door, and the regular sound of two distinct snores descended from an upper storey. He closed the door softly, locked it, and glanced round the room with some eagerness. The smell of the expiring lamp compelled him to unlatch both windows. He extinguished the lamp, and after lighting a couple of candles on the mantelpiece drew a chair to the fireplace and sat down to munch an apple. The thought occurred to him: "This is my home – for how long?"

And then:

"Why the dickens didn't I say something to that girl?"

Between the candles on the mantelpiece was a photograph of his sister, which he had placed there before going out. He looked at it with a half smile, and murmured audibly several times:

"Why the dickens didn't I say something to that girl, with her *chéri*?"

The woman of the photograph seemed to be between thirty and forty years of age. She was fair, with a mild, serious face, and much wavy hair. The forehead was broad and smooth and white, the cheek-bones prominent, and the mouth somewhat large. The eyes were a very light grey; they met the gaze of the spectator with a curious timid defiance, as if to say, "I am weak, but I can at least fight till I fall." Underneath the eyes – the portrait was the work of an amateur, and consequently had not been robbed of all texture by retouching – a few crowsfeet could be seen.

As far back as Richard's memory went, he and Mary had lived together and alone in the small Red House which lay half a mile out of Bursley, towards Turnhill, on the Manchester road. At one time it had been rurally situated, creeping plants had clothed its red walls, and the bare patch behind it had been a garden; but the gradual development of a coal-producing district had covered the fields with smooth, mountainous heaps of grey refuse, and stunted or killed every tree in the neighbourhood. The house was undermined, and in spite of iron clamps had lost most of its rectangles, while the rent had dropped to fifteen pounds a year.

Mary was very much older than her brother, and she had always appeared to him exactly the mature woman of the photograph. Of his parents he knew nothing except what Mary had told him, which was little and vague, for she watchfully kept the subject at a distance.

She had supported herself and Richard in comfort by a medley of vocations, teaching the piano, collecting rents, and practising the art of millinery. They had few friends. The social circles of Bursley were centred in its churches and chapels; and though Mary attended the Wesleyan sanctuary with some regularity, she took small interest in prayer-meetings, class-meetings, bazaars, and all the other minor religious activities, thus neglecting opportunities for intercourse which might have proved agreeable. She had sent Richard to the Sunday-school; but when, at the age of fourteen, he protested that Sunday-school was "awful rot," she answered calmly, "Don't go, then;" and from that day his place in class was empty. Soon afterwards the boy cautiously insinuated that chapel belonged to the same category as Sunday-school, but the hint failed of its effect.

The ladies of the town called sometimes, generally upon business, and took afternoon tea. Once the vicar's wife, who wished to obtain musical tuition for her three youngest daughters at a nominal fee, came in and found Richard at a book on the hearthrug.

"Ah!" said she. "Just like his father, is he not, Miss Larch?" Mary made no reply.

The house was full of books. Richard knew them all well by sight, but until he was sixteen he read only a select handful of volumes which had stood the test of years. Often he idly speculated as to the contents of some of the others, – "Horatii Opera," for instance: had that anything to do with theatres? – yet for some curious reason, which when he grew older he sought for in vain, he never

troubled himself to look into them. Mary read a good deal, chiefly books and magazines fetched for her by Richard from the Free Library.

When he was about seventeen, a change came. He was aware dimly, and as if by instinct, that his sister's life in the early days had not been without its romance. Certainly there was something hidden between her and William Vernon, the science master at the Institute, for they were invariably at great pains to avoid each other. He sometimes wondered whether Mr. Vernon was connected in any way with the melancholy which was never, even in her brightest moments, wholly absent from Mary's demeanour. One Sunday night – Richard had been keeping house – Mary, coming in late from chapel, threw his arms round his neck as he opened the door, and, dragging down his face to hers, kissed him hysterically again and again.

"Dicky, Dick," she whispered, laughing and crying at the same time, "something's happened. I'm almost an old woman, but something's happened!"

"I know," said Richard, retreating hurriedly from her embrace. "You're going to marry Mr. Vernon."

"But how could you tell?"

"Oh! I just guessed."

"You don't mind, Dick, do you?"

"I! Mind!" Afraid lest his feelings should appear too plainly, he asked abruptly for supper.

Mary gave up her various callings, the wedding took place, and William Vernon came to live with them. It was then that Richard began to read more widely, and to form a definite project of going to London.

He could not fail to respect and like William. The life of the married pair seemed to him idyllic; the tender, furtive manifestations of affection which were constantly passing between Mary and her sedate, middle-aged husband touched him deeply, and at the thought of the fifteen irretrievable years during which some ridiculous misunderstanding had separated this loving couple, his eyes were not quite as dry as a youth could wish. But with it all he was uncomfortable. He felt himself an intruder upon holy privacies; if at meal-times husband and wife clasped hands round the corner of the table, he looked at his plate; if they smiled happily upon no discoverable provocation, he pretended not to notice the fact. They did not need him. Their hearts were full of kindness for every living thing, but unconsciously they stood aloof. He was driven in upon himself, and spent much of his time either in solitary walking or hidden in an apartment called the study.

He ordered magazines whose very names Mr. Holt, the principal bookseller in Bursley, was unfamiliar with, and after the magazines came books of verse and novels enclosed in covers of mystic design, and printed in a style which Mr. Holt, though secretly impressed, set down as eccentric. Mr. Holt's shop performed the functions of a club for the dignitaries of the town; and since he took care that this esoteric literature was well displayed on the counter until called for, the young man's fame as *a great reader* soon spread, and Richard began to see that he was regarded as a curiosity of which Bursley need not be ashamed. His self-esteem, already fostered into lustiness by a number of facile school successes, became more marked, although he was wise enough to keep a great deal of it to himself.

One evening, after Mary and her husband had been talking quietly some while, Richard came into the sitting-room.

"I don't want any supper," he said, "I'm going for a bit of a walk."

"Shall we tell him?" Mary asked, smiling, after he had left the room.

"Please yourself," said William, also smiling.

"He talks a great deal about going to London. I hope he won't go till – after April; I think it would upset me."

"You need not trouble, I think, my dear," William answered. "He talks about it, but he isn't gone yet."

Mr. Vernon was not quite pleased with Richard. He had obtained for him – being connected with the best people in the town – a position as shorthand and general clerk in a solicitor's office, and had learnt privately that though the youth was smart enough, he was scarcely making that progress which might have been expected. He lacked "application." William attributed this shortcoming to the excessive reading of verse and obscure novels.

April came, and, as Mr. Vernon had foretold, Richard still remained in Bursley. But the older man was now too deeply absorbed in another matter to interest himself at all in Richard's movements, – a matter in which Richard himself exhibited a shy concern. Hour followed anxious hour, and at last was heard the faint, fretful cry of a child in the night. Then stillness. All that Richard ever saw was a coffin, and in it a dead child at a dead woman's feet.

Fifteen months later he was in London.

CHAPTER V

Mr. Curpet, of the firm of Curpet and Smythe, whose name was painted in black and white on the dark green door, had told him that the office hours were from nine-thirty to six. The clock of the Law Courts was striking a quarter to ten. He hesitated a moment, and then seized the handle; but the door was fast, and he descended the two double flights of iron stairs into the quadrangle.

New Serjeant's Court was a large modern building of very red brick with terra-cotta facings, eight storeys high; but in spite of its faults of colour and its excessive height, ample wall spaces and temperate ornamentation gave it a dignity and comeliness sufficient to distinguish it from other buildings in the locality. In the centre of the court was an oval patch of brown earth, with a few trees whose pale-leaved tops, struggling towards sunlight, reached to the middle of the third storey. Round this plantation ran an immaculate roadway of wooden blocks, flanked by an equally immaculate asphalt footpath. The court possessed its own private lamp-posts, and these were wrought of iron in an antique design.

Men and boys, grave and unconsciously oppressed by the burden of the coming day, were continually appearing out of the gloom of the long tunnelled entrance and vanishing into one or other of the twelve doorways. Presently a carriage and pair drove in, and stopped opposite Richard. A big man of about fifty, with a sagacious red and blue face, jumped alertly out, followed by an attentive clerk carrying a blue sack. It seemed to Richard that he knew the features of the big man from portraits, and, following the pair up the staircase of No. 2, he discovered from the legend on the door through which they disappeared that he had been in the presence of Her Majesty's Attorney-General. Simultaneously with a misgiving as to his ability to reach the standard of clerical ability doubtless required by Messrs. Curpet and Smythe, who did business cheek by jowl with an attorney-general and probably employed him, came an elevation of spirit as he darkly guessed what none can realise completely, that a man's future lies on his own knees, and on the knees of no gods whatsoever.

He continued his way upstairs, but Messrs. Curpet and Smythe's portal was still locked. Looking down the well, he espied a boy crawling reluctantly and laboriously upward, with a key in his hand which he dragged across the bannisters. In course of time the boy reached Messrs. Curpet and Smythe's door, and opening it stepped neatly over a pile of letters which lay immediately within. Richard followed him.

"Oh! My name's Larch," said Richard, as if it had just occurred to him that the boy might be interested in the fact. "Do you know which is my room?"

The boy conducted him along a dark passage with green doors on either side, to a room at the end. It was furnished mainly with two writing-tables and two armchairs; in one corner was a disused copying-press, in another an immense pile of reporters' note-books; on the mantelpiece, a tumbler, a duster, and a broken desk lamp.

"That's your seat," said the boy, pointing to the larger table, and disappeared. Richard disposed of his coat and hat and sat down, trying to feel at ease and not succeeding.

At five minutes past ten a youth entered with the "Times" under his arm. Richard waited for him to speak, but he merely stared and took off his overcoat. Then he said, —

"You've got my hook. If you don't mind I'll put your things on this other one."

"Certainly," assented Richard.

The youth spread his back luxuriously to the empty fireplace and opened the "Times," when another and smaller boy put his head in at the door.

"Jenkins, Mr. Alder wants the "Times.""

The youth silently handed over the advertisement pages which were lying on the table. In a minute the boy returned.

"Mr. Alder says he wants the inside of the "Times.""

"Tell Mr. Alder to go to hell, with my compliments." The boy hesitated.

"Go on, now," Jenkins insisted. The boy hung on the door-handle, smiling dubiously, and then went out.

"Here, wait a minute!" Jenkins called him back. "Perhaps you'd better give it him. Take the damn thing away."

A sound of hurried footsteps in the next room was succeeded by an imperious call for Jenkins, at which Jenkins slipped nimbly into his chair and untied a bundle of papers.

"Jenkins!" the call came again, with a touch of irritation in it, but Jenkins did not move. The door was thrust open.

"Oh! You are there, Jenkins. Just come in and take a letter down." The tones were quite placid.

"Yes, Mr. Smythe."

"I never take any notice of Smythe's calls," said Jenkins, when he returned. "If he wants me, he must either ring or fetch me. If I once began it, I should be running in and out of his room all day, and I've quite enough to do without that."

"Fidgety, eh?" Richard suggested.

"Fidgety's no word for it, *I* tell you. Alder – that's the manager, you know – said only yesterday that he has less trouble with forty Chancery actions of Curpet's than with one county-court case of Smythe's. I know I'd a jolly sight sooner write forty of Curpet's letters than ten of Smythe's. I wish I'd got your place, and you'd got mine. I suppose you can write shorthand rather fast."

"Middling," said Richard. "About 120."

"Oh! We had a man once who could do 150, but he'd been a newspaper reporter. I do a bit over a hundred, if I've not had much to drink overnight. Let's see, they're giving you twenty-five bob, aren't they?"

Richard nodded.

"The man before you had thirty-five, and he couldn't spell worth a brass button. I only get fifteen, although I've been here seven years. A damn shame I call it! But Curpet's beastly near. If he'd give some other people less, and me a bit more..."

"Who are 'some other people'?" asked Richard, smiling.

"Well, there's old Aked. He sits in the outer office – you won't have seen him because he doesn't generally come till eleven. They give him a pound a week, just for doing a bit of engrossing when he feels inclined to engross, and for being idle when he feels inclined to be idle. He's a broken-down something or other, – used to be clerk to Curpet's father. He has some dibs of his own, and this just finds him amusement. I bet he doesn't do fifty folios a week. And he's got the devil's own temper."

Jenkins was proceeding to describe other members of the staff when the entry of Mr. Curpet himself put an end to the recital. Mr. Curpet was a small man, with a round face and a neatly trimmed beard.

"Good morning, Larch. If you'll kindly come into my room, I'll dictate my letters. Good morning, Jenkins." He smiled and withdrew, leaving Richard excessively surprised at his suave courtesy.

In his own room Mr. Curpet sat before a pile of letters, and motioned Richard to a side table.

"You will tell me if I go too fast," he said, and began to dictate regularly, with scarcely a pause. The pile of letters gradually disappeared into a basket. Before half a dozen letters were done Richard comprehended that he had become part of a business machine of far greater magnitude than anything to which he had been accustomed in Bursley. This little man with the round face dealt impassively with tens of thousands of pounds; he mortgaged whole streets, bullied railway companies, and wrote familiarly to lords. In the middle of one long letter, a man came panting in, whom Richard at once took for Mr. Alder, the Chancery manager. His rather battered silk hat was at the back of his head, and he looked distressed.

"I'm sorry to say we've lost that summons in *Rice v. The L. R. Railway.*"

"Really!" said Mr. Curpet. "Better appeal, and brief a leader, eh?"

"Can't appeal, Mr. Curpet."

"Well, we must make the best of it. Telegraph to the country. I'll write and keep them calm. It's a pity they were so sure. Rice will have to economise for a year or two. What was my last word, Larch?" The dictation proceeded.

One hour was allowed for lunch, and Richard spent the first moiety of it in viewing the ambrosial exteriors of Strand restaurants. With the exception of the coffee-house at Bursley, he had never been in a restaurant in his life, and he was timid of entering any of those sumptuous establishments whose swinging doors gave glimpses of richly decorated ceilings, gleaming tablecloths, and men in silk hats greedily consuming dishes placed before them by obsequious waiters.

At last, without quite knowing how he got there, he sat in a long, low apartment, papered like an attic bedroom, and odorous of tea and cake. The place was crowded with young men and women indifferently well-dressed, who bent over uncomfortably small oblong marble-topped tables. An increasing clatter of crockery filled the air. Waitresses, with pale, vacant faces, dressed in dingy black with white aprons, moved about with difficulty at varying rates of speed, but none of them seemed to betray an interest in Richard. Behind the counter, on which stood great polished urns emitting clouds of steam, were several women whose superior rank in the restaurant was denoted by a black apron, and after five minutes had elapsed Richard observed one of these damsels pointing out himself to a waitress, who approached and listened condescendingly to his order.

A thin man, rather more than middle-aged, with a grey beard and slightly red nose, entered and sat down opposite to Richard. Without preface he began, speaking rather fast and with an expressive vivacity rarely met with in the ageing, —

"Well, my young friend, how do you like your new place?"

Richard stared at him.

"Are you Mr. Aked?"

"The same. I suppose Master Jenkins has made you acquainted with all my peculiarities of temper and temperament. — Glass of milk, roll, and two pats of butter — and, I say, my girl, try not to keep me waiting as long as you did yesterday." There was a bright smile on his face, which the waitress unwillingly returned.

"Don't you know," he went on, looking at Richard's plate, — "don't you know that tea and ham together are frightfully indigestible?"

"I never have indigestion."

"No matter. You soon will have if you eat tea and ham together. A young man should guard his digestion like his honour. Sounds funny, doesn't it? But it's right. An impaired digestive apparatus has ruined many a career. It ruined mine. You see before you, sir, what might have been an author of repute, but for a wayward stomach."

"You write?" Richard asked, interested at once, but afraid lest Mr. Aked might be cumbrously joking.

"I used to." The old man spoke with proud self-consciousness.

"Have you written a book?"

"Not a book. But I've contributed to all manner of magazines and newspapers."

"What magazines?"

"Well, let me see — it's so long ago. I've written for 'Cornhill.' I wrote for 'Cornhill' when Thackeray edited it. I spoke to Carlyle once."

"You did?"

"Yes. Carlyle said to me — Carlyle said to me — Carlyle said — " Mr. Aked's voice dwindled to an inarticulate murmur, and, suddenly ignoring Richard's presence, he pulled a book from his pocket and began to finger the leaves. It was a French novel, "La Vie de Bohème." His face had lost all its mobile expressiveness.

A little alarmed by such eccentricity, and not quite sure that this associate of Carlyle was perfectly sane, Richard sat silent, waiting for events. Mr. Aked was clearly accustomed to reading while he ate; he could even drink with his eyes on the book. At length he pushed his plates away from him, and closed the novel with a snap.

"I see you're from the country, Larch," he said, as if there had been no lapse in the conversation. "Now, why in God's name did you leave the country? Aren't there enough people in London?"

"Because *I* wanted to be an author," answered Richard, with more assurance than veracity, though he spoke in good faith. The fact was that his aspirations, hitherto so vague as to elude analysis, seemed within the last few minutes mysteriously to have assumed definite form.

"You're a young fool, then."

"But I've an excellent digestion."

"You won't have it if you begin to write. Take my word, you're a young fool. You don't know what you're going in for, my little friend."

"Was Murger a fool?" Richard said clumsily, determined to exhibit an acquaintance with "La Vie de Bohème."

"Ha! We read French, do we?"

Richard blushed. The old man got up.

"Come along," he said peevishly. "Let's get out of this hole."

At the pay-desk, waiting for change, he spoke to the cashier, a thin girl with reddish-brown hair, who coughed, —

"Did you try those lozenges?"

"Oh! yes, thanks. They *taste* nice."

"Beautiful day."

"Yes; my word, isn't it!"

They walked back to the office in absolute silence; but just as they were going in, Mr. Aked stopped, and took Richard by the coat.

"Have you anything special to do next Thursday night?"

"No," said Richard.

"Well, I'll take you to a little French restaurant in Soho, and we'll have dinner. Half a crown. Can you afford?"

Richard nodded.

"And, I say, bring along some of your manuscripts, and I'll flay them alive for you."

CHAPTER VI

An inconstant, unrefreshing breeze, sluggish with accumulated impurity, stirred the curtains, and every urban sound – high-pitched voices of children playing, roll of wheels and rhythmic trot of horses, shouts of newsboys and querulous barking of dogs – came through the open windows touched with a certain languorous quality that suggested a city fatigued, a city yearning for the moist recesses of woods, the disinfectant breath of mountain tops, and the cleansing sea.

On the little table between the windows lay pen, ink, and paper. Richard sat down to be an author. Since his conversation with Mr. Aked of the day before he had lived in the full glow of an impulse to write. He discerned, or thought he discerned, in the fact that he possessed the literary gift, a key to his recent life. It explained, to be particular, the passion for reading which had overtaken him at seventeen, and his desire to come to London, the natural home of the author. Certainly it was strange that hitherto he had devoted very little serious thought to the subject of writing, but happily there were in existence sundry stray verses and prose fragments written at Bursley, and it contented him to recognise in these the first tremulous stirrings of a late-born ambition.

During the previous evening he had busied himself in deciding upon a topic. In a morning paper he had read an article entitled "An Island of Sleep," descriptive of Sark; it occurred to him that a similar essay upon Lichfield, the comatose cathedral city which lay about thirty miles from Bursley, might suit a monthly magazine. He knew Lichfield well; he had been accustomed to visit it from childhood; he loved it. As a theme full of picturesque opportunities it had quickened his imagination, until his brain seemed to surge with vague but beautiful fancies. In the night his sleep had been broken, and several new ideas had suggested themselves. And now, after a day of excited anticipation, the moment for composition had arrived.

As he dipped his pen in the ink a sudden apprehension of failure surprised him. He dismissed it, and wrote in a bold hand, rather carefully, —

MEMORIES OF A CITY OF SLEEP.

That was surely an excellent title. He proceeded: —

On the old stone bridge, beneath which the clear, smooth waters of the river have crept at the same pace for centuries, stands a little child, alone. It is early morning, and the clock of the time-stained cathedral which lifts its noble gothic towers scarce a hundred yards away, strikes five, to the accompaniment of an unseen lark overhead.

He sat back to excogitate the next sentence, staring around the room as if he expected to find the words written on the wall. One of the gilt-framed photographs was slightly askew; he left his chair to put it straight; several other pictures seemed to need adjustment, and he levelled them all with scrupulous precision. The ornaments on the mantelpiece were not evenly balanced; these he rearranged entirely. Then, having first smoothed out a crease in the bedcover, he sat down again.

But most of the beautiful ideas which he had persuaded himself were firmly within his grasp, now eluded him, or tardily presented themselves in a form so obscure as to be valueless, and the useful few that remained defied all attempts to bring them into order. Dashed by his own impotence, he sought out the article on Sark, and examined it afresh. Certain weekly organs of literature had educated him to sneer at the journalism of the daily press, but it appeared that the man who wrote "An Island of Sleep" was at least capable of expressing himself with clearness and fluency, and possessed the skill to pass naturally from one aspect of his subject to another. It seemed simple enough...

He went to the window.

The sky was a delicate amber, and Richard watched it change to rose, and from rose to light blue. The gas-lamps glared out in quick succession; some one lowered the blind of a window opposite his own, and presently a woman's profile was silhouetted against it for a moment, and then vanished. A melody came from the public house, sung in a raucous baritone to the thrumming of a guitar; the cries of the playing children had now ceased.

Suddenly turning into the room, he was astonished to find it almost in darkness; he could distinguish only the whiteness of the papers on the table.

He was not in the mood for writing to-night. Some men wrote best in the evening, others in the morning. Probably he belonged to the latter class. Be that as it might, he would rise at six the next morning and make a new beginning. "It's only a question of practice, of course," he said, half aloud, repressing a troublesome dubiety. He would take a short walk, and go early to bed. Gradually his self-confidence returned.

As he closed the front door there was a rustle of silks and a transient odour of violets; a woman had gone by. She turned slightly at the sound of the door, and Richard had a glimpse of a young and pretty face under a spreading hat, a full, ripe bust whose alluring contours were perfectly disclosed by a tight-fitting bodice, and two small white hands, in one a dangling pair of gloves, in the other an umbrella. He passed her, and waited at the corner by Tattersall's till she overtook him again. Now she stood on the kerb within six feet of him, humming an air and smiling to herself. Up went the umbrella to signal for a hansom.

"The Ottoman," Richard heard her say across the roof of the cab, the driver leaning forward with his hand to his ear. What a child's voice it seemed, lisping and artless!

The cabman winked at Richard, and gently flicked his horse. In a moment the hansom was two dwindling specks of red in a shifting multitude of lights.

An hour later he saw her in the promenade of the theatre; she stood against a pillar, her eyes on the entrance. As their glances met, she threw her head a little backwards, like one who looks through spectacles on the end of his nose, and showed her teeth. He sat down near her.

Presently she waved her hand to a man who was coming in. He seemed about thirty, with small, clear eyes, bronzed cheeks, a heavy jaw, and a closely trimmed brown moustache. He was fashionably garbed, though not in evening dress, and he greeted her without raising his hat.

"Shall we have a drink?" she suggested. "I'm so thirsty."

"Fizz?" the man drawled. She nodded.

Soon they went out together, the man carelessly stuffing change for a five-pound note into his pocket.

"What's the difference between him and me?" Richard reflected as he walked home. "But just wait a bit; wait till I've..."

When he reached his lodging the meanness of the room, of his clothes, of his supper, nauseated him. He dreamed that he was kissing the Ottoman girl, and that she lisped, "Nice boy," whereupon he cast a handful of sovereigns on her lap.

At six o'clock the next morning he was working at his article. In two days it was finished, and he had despatched it to a monthly magazine, "together with a stamped directed envelope for its return if unsuitable," in accordance with the editorial instructions printed below the table of contents in every number. The editor of the "Trifler" promised that all manuscripts so submitted, and written on one side of the paper only, should be dealt with promptly.

He had been expecting to discuss his work with Mr. Aked at the proposed dinner, but this had not taken place. On the morning after the arrangement had been made, Mr. Aked fell ill, and in a few days he wrote to resign his post, saying that he had sufficient to live on, and felt "too venerable for regular work."

Richard held but the frailest hope that "A City of Sleep" would be accepted, but when the third morning arrived, and the postman brought nothing, his opinion of the article began to rise. Perhaps it

had merit, after all; he recalled certain parts of it which were distinctly clever and striking. Hurrying home from the office that afternoon, he met the landlady's daughter on the stairs, and said casually, —

"Any letters for me, Lily?"

"No, sir." The girl had an attractive blush.

"I'll take a couple of eggs for tea, if Mrs. Rowbotham has them."

He remained at home in the evening, waiting for the last delivery, which occurred about 9:30. The double knocks of the postman were audible ten or twelve houses away. At last Richard heard him mounting the steps of No. 74, and then his curt rat-tat shook the house. A little thud on the bare wooden floor of the hall seemed to indicate a heavier package than the ordinary letter.

As, when a man is drowning, the bad actions of a whole lifetime present themselves to him in one awful flash, so at that moment all the faults, the hopeless crudities, of "A City of Sleep" confronted Richard. He wondered at his own fatuity in imagining for a single instant that the article had the barest chance of acceptance. Was it not notorious that famous authors had written industriously for years without selling a line!

Lily came in with the supper-tray. She was smiling.

"Warm work, eh, Lily?" he said, scarcely knowing that he spoke.

"Yes, sir, it's that hot in the kitchen you wouldn't believe." Setting down the tray, she handed him a foolscap envelope, and he saw his own handwriting as if in a dream.

"For me?" he murmured carelessly, and placed the letter on the mantelpiece. Lily took his orders for breakfast, and with a pleasant, timid "Good-night, sir," left the room.

He opened the envelope. In the fold of his manuscript was a sheet of the best cream-laid note-paper bearing these words in flowing copperplate: "The Editor presents his compliments to Mr. Larch [written] and regrets to be unable to use the enclosed article, for the offer of which he is much obliged."

The sight of this circular, with the offices of the magazine illustrated at the top, and the notification in the left-hand corner that all letters must be addressed to the editor and not to any member of the staff individually, in some mysterious way mitigated Richard's disappointment. Perhaps the comfort of it lay in the tangible assurance it afforded that he was now actually a *literary aspirant* and had communications, however mortifying, with *the press*.

He read the circular again and again during supper, and determined to re-write the article. But this resolve was not carried out. He could not bring himself even to glance through it, and finally it was sent to another magazine exactly as it stood.

Richard had determined to say nothing in the office about his writing until he could produce a printed article with his name at the foot; and frequently during the last few days his mouth had watered as he anticipated the sweetness of that triumph. But next day he could not refrain from showing to Jenkins the note from the "Trifler." Jenkins seemed impressed, especially when Richard requested him to treat the matter as confidential. A sort of friendship arose between them, and strengthened as time went on. Richard sometimes wondered how precisely it had come about, and why it continued.

CHAPTER VII

Albert Jenkins was nineteen years of age, and lived with his parents and seven brothers and sisters in Camberwell; his father managed a refreshment bar in Oxford Street. He had been in the employ of Messrs. Curpet and Smythe for seven years, – first as junior office boy, then as senior office boy, and finally as junior shorthand clerk. He was of the average height, with a shallow chest, and thin arms and legs. His feet were very small – he often referred to the fact with frank complacency – and were always encased in well-fitting hand-made boots, brightly polished. The rest of his attire was less remarkable for neatness; but at intervals an ambition to be genteel possessed him, and during these recurrent periods the nice conduct of his fingernails interfered somewhat with official routine. He carried his hat either at the back of his head or tilted almost upon the bridge of his nose. In the streets he generally walked with sedate deliberation, his hands deep in his pockets, his eyes lowered, and an enigmatic smile on his thin lips.

His countenance was of a pale yellow complexion just tinged with red, and he never coloured; his neck was a darker yellow. Upon the whole, his features were regular, except the mouth, which was large, and protruded like a monkey's; the eyes were grey, with a bold regard, which not seldom was excusably mistaken for insolence.

Considering his years, Jenkins was a highly accomplished person, in certain directions. Upon all matters connected with her Majesty's mail and inland revenue, upon cab fares, bus-routes, and local railways, upon "Pitman outlines," and upon chamber practice in Chancery, he was an unquestioned authority. He knew the addresses of several hundred London solicitors, the locality of nearly every street and square within the four-mile radius, and, within the same limits, the approximate distance of any one given spot from any other given spot.

He was the best billiard-player in the office, and had once made a spot-barred break of 49; this game was his sole pastime. He gambled regularly upon horse-races, resorting to a number of bookmakers, but neither winning nor losing to an appreciable extent; no less than three jockeys occasionally permitted him to enjoy their companionship, and he was never without a stable-tip.

His particular hobby, however, was restaurants. He spent half his income upon food, and quite half his waking hours either in deciding what he should consume, or in actual drinking and mastication. He had personally tested the merits of every bar and house of refreshment in the neighbourhood of the Law Courts, from Lockhart's to Gatti's, and would discourse for hours on their respective virtues and defects. No restaurant was too mean for his patronage, and none too splendid; for days in succession he would dine upon a glass of water and a captain biscuit with cheese, in order to accumulate resources for a delicate repast in one of the gilded establishments where the rich are wont to sustain themselves; and he had acquired from his father a quantity of curious lore, throwing light upon the secrets of the refreshment trade, which enabled him to spend the money thus painfully amassed to the best advantage.

Jenkins was a cockney and the descendant of cockneys; he conversed always volubly in the dialect of Camberwell; but just as he was subject to attacks of modishness, so at times he attempted to rid himself of his accent, of course without success. He swore habitually, and used no reticence whatever, except in the presence of his employers and of Mr. Alder the manager. In quick and effective retort he was the peer of cabmen, and nothing could abash him. His favourite subjects of discussion were restaurants, as before mentioned, billiards, the turf, and women, whom he usually described as "tarts." It was his custom to refer to himself as a "devil for girls," and when Mr. Alder playfully accused him of adventures with females of easy virtue, his delight was unbounded.

There were moments when Richard loathed Jenkins, when the gross and ribald atmosphere which attended Jenkins' presence nauseated him, and utter solitude in London seemed preferable to the boy's company; but these passed, and the intimacy thrived. Jenkins, indeed, had his graces; he

was of an exceedingly generous nature, and his admiration for the deep literary scholarship which he imagined Richard to possess was ingenuous and unconcealed. His own agile wit, his picturesque use of slang, his facility in new oaths, and above all his exact knowledge of the byways, and backwaters of London life, endowed him, in Richard's unaccustomed eyes, with a certain specious attractiveness. Moreover, the fact that they shared the same room and performed similar duties made familiar intercourse between them natural and necessary. With no other member of the staff did Richard care to associate. The article clerks, though courteously agreeable to everyone, formed an exclusive coterie; and as for the rest, they were either old or dull, or both. He often debated whether he should seek out Mr. Aked, who was now recovered, and had once, unfortunately in Richard's absence, called at the office; but at length he timidly decided that the extent of their acquaintance would not warrant it.

"Where shall we go to lunch to-day?" was almost the first question which Richard and Jenkins asked each other in the morning, and a prolonged discussion would follow. They called the meal "lunch," but it was really their dinner, though neither of them ever admitted the fact.

Jenkins had a predilection for grill-rooms, where raw chops and steaks lay on huge dishes, and each customer chose his own meat and superintended its cooking. A steak, tender and perfectly cooked, with baked potatoes and half a pint of stout, was his ideal repast, and he continually lamented that no restaurant in London offered such cheer at the price of one shilling and threepence, including the waiter. The cheap establishments were never satisfactory, and Jenkins only frequented them when the state of his purse left no alternative. In company with Richard he visited every new eating-house that made its appearance, in the hope of finding the restaurant of his dreams, and though each was a disappointment, yet the search still went on. The place which most nearly coincided with his desires was the "Sceptre," a low, sombre room between the Law Courts and the river, used by well-to-do managing clerks and a sprinkling of junior barristers. Here, lounging luxuriously on red plush seats, and in full sight and hearing of a large silver grill, the two spent many luncheon hours, eating slowly, with gross, sensual enjoyment, and secretly elated by the proximity of men older and more prosperous than themselves, whom they met on equal terms.

Richard once suggested that they should try one of the French restaurants in Soho which Mr. Aked had mentioned.

"Not me!" said Jenkins, in reply. "You don't catch me going to those parley-voos again. I went once. They give you a lot of little messes, faked up from yesterday's dirty plates, and after you've eaten half a dozen of 'em you don't feel a bit fuller. Give me a steak and a potato. I like to know what I'm eating."

He had an equal detestation of vegetarian restaurants, but once, during a period of financial depression, he agreed to accompany Richard, who knew the place fairly well, to the "Crabtree" in Charing Cross Road, and though he grumbled roundly at the insubstantiality of the three-course dinner *à la carte* which could be obtained for sixpence, he made no difficulty, afterwards, about dining there whenever prudence demanded the narrowest economy.

An air of chill and prim discomfort pervaded the Crabtree, and the mingled odour of lentils and sultana pudding filled every corner. The tables were narrow, and the chairs unyielding. The customers were for the most eccentric as to dress and demeanour; they had pale faces, and during their melancholy meals perused volumes obviously instructive, or debated the topics of the day in platitudinous conversations unspiced by a single oath. Young women with whom their personal appearance was a negligible quantity came in large numbers, and either giggled to one another without restraint or sat erect and glared at the males in a manner which cowed even Jenkins. The waitresses lacked understanding, and seemed to resent even the most courteous advances.

One day, just as they were beginning dinner, Jenkins eagerly drew Richard's attention to the girl at the pay-desk. "See that girl?" he said.

"What about her? Is she a new one?"

"Why, she's the tart that old Aked used to be after."

"Was she at that A. B. C. shop in the Strand?" said Richard, who began to remember the girl's features and her reddish brown hair.

"Yes, that's her. Before she was at the A. B. C. she was cashier at that boiled-beef place opposite the Courts, but they say she got the sack for talking to customers too much. She and Aked were very thick then, and he went there every day. I suppose his courting interfered with business."

"But he's old enough to be her father!"

"Yes. He ought to have been ashamed of himself. She's not a bad kind, eh?"

"There wasn't anything between them, really, was there?"

"I don't know. There might have been. He followed her to the A. B. C., and I think he sometimes took her home. Her name's Roberts. We used to have him on about her – rare fun."

The story annoyed Richard, for his short *tête-à-tête* with Mr. Aked had remained in his mind as a pleasant memory, and though he was aware that the old man had been treated with scant respect by the youngsters in the office, he had acquired the habit of mentally regarding him with admiration, as a representative of literature. This attachment to a restaurant cashier, clearly a person of no refinement or intellect, scarcely fitted with his estimate of the journalist who had spoken to Carlyle.

During the meal he surreptitiously glanced at the girl several times. She was plumper than before, and her cough seemed to be cured. Her face was pleasant, and undoubtedly she had a magnificent coiffure.

When they presented their checks, Jenkins bowed awkwardly, and she smiled. He swore to Richard that next time he would mention Mr. Aked's name to her. The vow was broken. She was willing to exchange civilities, but her manner indicated with sufficient clearness that a line was to be drawn.

In the following week, when Richard happened to be at the Crabtree alone, at a later hour than usual, they had rather a long conversation.

"Is Mr. Aked still at your office?" she asked, looking down at her account books.

Richard told what he knew.

"Oh!" she said, "I often used to see him, and he gave me some lozenges that cured a bad cough I had. Nice old fellow, wasn't he?"

"Yes, I fancy so," Richard assented.

"I thought I'd just ask, as I hadn't seen him about for a long time."

"Good afternoon – Miss Roberts."

"Good afternoon – Mr. – "

"Larch."

They both laughed.

A trivial dispute with Jenkins, a few days later, disclosed the fact that that haunter of bars had a sullen temper, and that his displeasure, once aroused, was slow to disappear. Richard dined alone again at the Crabtree, and after another little conversation with Miss Roberts, having time at his disposal, he called at the public library in St. Martin's Lane. In a half-crown review he saw an article, by a writer of considerable repute, entitled "To Literary Aspirants," which purported to demonstrate that a mastery of the craft of words was only to be attained by a regular course of technical exercises; the nature of these exercises was described in detail. There were references to the unremitting drudgery of Flaubert, de Maupassant, and Stevenson, together with extracts chosen to illustrate the slow passage of the last-named author from inspired incompetence to the serene and perfect proficiency before which all difficulties melted. After an unqualified statement that any man – slowly if without talent, quickly if gifted by nature – might with determined application learn to write finely, the essayist concluded by remarking that never before in the history of literature had young authors been so favourably circumstanced as at that present. Lastly came the maxim, *Nulla dies sine linea*.

Richard's cooling enthusiasm for letters leaped into flame. He had done no writing whatever for several weeks, but that night saw him desperately at work. He took advantage of the quarrel to sever all save the most formal connection with Jenkins, dined always frugally at the Crabtree, and spent every evening at his lodging. The thought of Alphonse Daudet writing "Les Amoureuses" in a Parisian garret supported him through an entire month of toil, during which, besides assiduously practising the recommended exercises, he wrote a complete short story and began several essays. About this time his "City of Sleep" was returned upon his hands in a condition so filthy and ragged that he was moved to burn it. The short story was offered to an evening daily, and never heard of again.

It occurred to him that possibly he possessed some talent for dramatic criticism, and one Saturday evening he went to the first performance of a play at the St. George's theatre. After waiting for an hour outside, he got a seat in the last row of the pit. Eagerly he watched the critics take their places in the stalls; they chatted languidly, smiling and bowing now and then to acquaintances in the boxes and dress circle; the pit was excited and loquacious, and Richard discovered that nearly everyone round about him made a practice of attending first nights, and had an intimate knowledge of the *personnel* of the stage. Through the hum of voices the overture to "Rosamund" fitfully reached him. During whole bars the music was lost; then some salient note caught the ear, and the melody became audible again until another wave of conversation engulfed it.

The conclusion of the last act was greeted with frenzied hand-clapping, beating of sticks, and inarticulate cries, while above the general noise was heard the repeated monosyllable "'thor, 'thor." After what seemed an interminable delay the curtain was drawn back at one side and a tall man in evening dress, his face a dead white, stepped before the footlights and bowed several times; the noise rose to a thunderous roar, in which howls and hissing were distinguishable. Richard shook from head to foot, and tears unaccountably came to his eyes.

The whole of Sunday and Monday evening were occupied in writing a detailed analysis and appreciation of the play. On Tuesday morning he bought a weekly paper which devoted special attention to the drama, in order to compare his own view with that of an acknowledged authority, and found that the production was dismissed in ten curt lines as mere amiable drivel.

A few days afterwards Mr. Curpet offered him the position of cashier in the office, at a salary of three pounds a week. His income was exactly doubled, and the disappointments of unsuccessful authorship suddenly ceased to trouble him. He began to doubt the wisdom of making any further attempt towards literature. Was it not clear that his talents lay in the direction of business? Nevertheless a large part of his spare cash was devoted to the purchase of books, chiefly the productions of a few celebrated old continental presses, which he had recently learned to value. He prepared a scheme for educating himself in the classical tongues and in French, and the practice of writing was abandoned to make opportunity for the pursuit of culture. But culture proved to be shy and elusive. He adhered to no regular course of study, and though he read much, his progress towards knowledge was almost imperceptible.

Other distractions presented themselves in the shape of music and painting. He discovered that he was not without critical taste in both these arts, and he became a frequenter of concerts and picture-galleries. He bought a piano on the hire-purchase system, and took lessons thereon. In this and other ways his expenditure swelled till it more than swallowed up the income of three pounds a week which not long before he had regarded as something very like wealth. For many weeks he made no effort to adjust the balance, until his debts approached the sum of twenty pounds, nearly half of which was owing to his landlady. He had to go through more than one humiliating scene before an era of economy set in.

One afternoon he received a telegram to say that William Vernon had died very suddenly. It was signed "Alice Clayton Vernon." Mrs. Vernon was William's stately cousin-in-law, and Richard, to whom she had spoken only once, – soon after Mary's wedding, – regarded her with awe; he disliked her because he found it impossible to be at ease in her imposing presence. As he went into Mr.

Curpet's room to ask for leave of absence, his one feeling was annoyance at the prospect of having to meet her again. William's death, to his own astonishment, scarcely affected him at all.

Mr. Curpet readily granted him two days' holiday, and he arranged to go down to Bursley the following night for the funeral.

CHAPTER VIII

Wearied of sitting, Richard folded his overcoat pillow-wise, put it under his head, and extended himself on the polished yellow wood. But in vain were his eyes shut tight. Sleep would not come, though he yawned incessantly. The monstrous beat of the engine, the quick rattle of windows, and the grinding of wheels were fused into a fantastic resonance which occupied every corner of the carriage and invaded his very skull. Then a light tapping on the roof, one of those mysterious sounds which make a compartment in a night-train like a haunted room, momentarily silenced everything else, and he wished that he had not been alone.

Suddenly jumping up, he put away all idea of sleep, and lowered the window. It was pitch dark; vague changing shapes, which might have been either trees or mere fancies of the groping eye, outlined themselves a short distance away; far in front was a dull glare from the engine, and behind twinkled the guard's lamp... In a few seconds he closed the window again, chilled to the bone, though May was nearly at an end.

The thought occurred to him that he was now a solitary upon the face of the earth. It concerned no living person whether he did evil or good. If he chose to seek ruin, to abandon himself to the most ignoble impulses, there was none to restrain, – not even a brother-in-law. For several weeks past, he had been troubled about his future, afraid to face it. Certainly London satisfied him, and the charm of living there had not perceptibly grown less. He rejoiced in London, in its vistas, its shops, its unending crowds, its vastness, its wickedness; each dream dreamed about London in childhood had come true; and surer than ever before was the consciousness that in going to London he had fulfilled his destiny. Yet there was something to lack in himself. His confidence in his own abilities and his own character was being undermined. Nearly a year had gone, and he had made no progress, except at the office. Resolutions were constantly broken; it was three months since he had despatched an article to a newspaper. He had not even followed a definite course of study, and though his acquaintance with modern French fiction had widened, he could boast no exact scholarship even in that piquant field. Evening after evening – ah! those long, lamplit evenings which were to be given to strenuous effort! – was frittered away upon mean banalities, sometimes in the company of some casual acquaintance and sometimes alone. He had by no means grasped the full import and extent of this retrogression; it was merely beginning to disturb his self-complacency, and perhaps, ever so slightly, his sleep. But now, hurrying to the funeral of William Vernon, he lazily laughed at himself for having allowed his peace of mind to be ruffled. Why bother about "getting on"? What did it matter?

He still experienced but little sorrow at the death of Vernon. His affection for the man had strangely faded. During the nine months that he had lived in London they had scarcely written to one another, and Richard regarded the long journey to attend William's obsequies as a tiresome concession to propriety.

That was his real attitude, had he cared to examine it.

At about four o'clock it was quite light, and the risen sun woke Richard from a brief doze. The dew lay in the hollows of the fields but elsewhere there was a soft, fresh clearness which gave to the common incidents of the flying landscape a new and virginal beauty – as though that had been the morn of creation itself. The cattle were stirring, and turned to watch the train as it slipped by.

Richard opened the window again. His mood had changed, and he felt unreasonably joyous. Last night he had been too pessimistic. Life lay yet before him, and time enough to rectify any indiscretions of which he might have been guilty. The future was his, to use as he liked. Magnificent, consoling thought! Moved by some symbolic association of ideas, he put his head out of the window and peered in the direction of the train's motion. A cottage stood alone in the midst of innumerable meadows; as it crossed his vision, the door opened, and a young woman came out with an empty pail swinging in her left hand. Apparently she would be about twenty-seven, plump and sturdy and

straight. Her hair was loose about her round, contented face, and with her disengaged hand she rubbed her eyes, still puffed and heavy with sleep. She wore a pink print gown, the bodice of which was unfastened, disclosing a white undergarment and the rich hemispheres of her bosom. In an instant the scene was hidden by a curve of the line, and the interminable succession of fields resumed, but Richard had time to guess from her figure that the woman was the mother of a small family. He pictured her husband still unconscious in the warm bed which she had just left; he even saw the impress of her head on the pillow, and a long nightdress thrown hastily across a chair.

He was deeply and indescribably affected by this suggestion of peaceful married love set in so great a solitude. The woman and her hypothetical husband and children were only peasants, their lives were probably narrow and their intellects dormant, yet they aroused in him a feeling of envy which surged about his brain and for the moment asphyxiated thought...

Later on the train slackened speed as it passed through a shunting-yard. The steam from the light shunting-engine rose with cloud-like delicacy in the clear air, and an occasional short whistle seemed to have something of the quality of a bird's note. The men with their long poles moved blithely among the medley of rails, signalling one another with motions of the arm. The coupling-chains rang with a merry, giant tinkle, and when the engine brought its load of waggons to a standstill, and a smart, metallic bump, bump, bump ran *diminuendo* from waggon to waggon, one might have fancied that some leviathan game was being played. Richard forgot the girl with the pail, and soon after went to sleep.

At six o'clock the train reached Knype, where he had to change. Two women with several children also alighted, and he noticed how white and fatigued were their faces; the children yawned pitifully. An icy, searching wind blew through the station; the exhilaration of the dawn was gone, and a spirit of utter woe and disaster brooded over everything. For the first time William's death really touched him.

The streets of Bursley were nearly empty as he walked through the town from the railway station, for the industrial population was already at work in the manufactories, and the shops not yet open. Yet Richard avoided the main thoroughfares, choosing a circuitous route lest he might by chance encounter an acquaintance. He foresaw the inevitable banal dialogue: —

"Well, how do you like London?"

"Oh, it's fine!"

"Getting on all right?"

"Yes, thanks."

And then the effort of two secretly bored persons to continue a perfunctory conversation unaided by a single mutual interest.

A carriage was driving away from the Red House just as Richard got within sight of it; he nodded to the venerable coachman, who gravely touched his hat. The owner of the carriage was Mr. Clayton Vernon, William's cousin and an alderman of Bursley, and Richard surmised that Mrs. Clayton Vernon had put herself in charge of the place until the funeral should be over. He trembled at the prospect of a whole day to be spent in the company of these excellent people, whom William had always referred to with a smile, and yet not without a great deal of respect. The Clayton Vernons were the chief buttress of respectability in the town; rich, strictly religious, philanthropic, and above all dignified. Everyone looked up to them instinctively, and had they possessed but one vice between them, they would have been loved.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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