

**GEORGE
MEREDITH**

THE HOUSE ON
THE BEACH

George Meredith

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George Meredith

The House on the Beach: A Realistic Tale

CHAPTER I

The experience of great officials who have laid down their dignities before death, or have had the philosophic mind to review themselves while still wielding the deputy sceptre, teaches them that in the exercise of authority over men an eccentric behaviour in trifles has most exposed them to hostile criticism and gone farthest to jeopardize their popularity. It is their Achilles' heel; the place where their mother Nature holds them as she dips them in our waters. The eccentricity of common persons is the entertainment of the multitude, and the maternal hand is perceived for a cherishing and endearing sign upon them; but rarely can this be found suitable for the august in station; only, indeed, when their sceptre is no more fearful than a grandmother's birch; and these must learn from it sooner or later that they are uncomfortably mortal.

When herrings are at auction on a beach, for example, the man of chief distinction in the town should not step in among a poor fraternity to take advantage of an occasion of cheapness, though it be done, as he may protest, to relieve the fishermen of a burden; nor should such a dignitary as the bailiff of a Cinque Port carry home the spoil of victorious bargaining on his arm in a basket. It is not that his conduct is in itself objectionable, so much as that it causes him to be popularly weighed; and during life, until the best of all advocates can plead before our fellow Englishmen that we are out of their way, it is prudent to avoid the process.

Mr. Tinman, however, this high-stepping person in question, happened to have come of a marketing mother. She had started him from a small shop to a big one. He, by the practice of her virtues, had been enabled to start himself as a gentleman. He was a man of this ambition, and prouder behind it. But having started himself precipitately, he took rank among independent incomes, as they are called, only to take fright at the perils of starvation besetting one who has been tempted to abandon the source of fifty per cent. So, if noble imagery were allowable in our time in prose, might alarms and partial regrets be assumed to animate the splendid pumpkin cut loose from the suckers. Deprived of that prodigious nourishment of the shop in the fashionable seaport of Helmstone, he retired upon his native town, the Cinque Port of Crikswich, where he rented the cheapest residence he could discover for his habitation, the House on the Beach, and lived imposingly, though not in total disaccord with his old mother's principles. His income, as he observed to his widowed sister and solitary companion almost daily in their privacy, was respectable. The descent from an altitude of fifty to five per cent. cannot but be felt. Nevertheless it was a comforting midnight bolster reflection for a man, turning over to the other side between a dream and a wink, that he was making no bad debts, and one must pay to be addressed as esquire. Once an esquire, you are off the ground in England and on the ladder. An esquire can offer his hand in marriage to a lady in her own right; plain esquires have married duchesses; they marry baronets' daughters every day of the week.

Thoughts of this kind were as the rise and fall of waves in the bosom of the new esquire. How often in his Helmstone shop had he not heard titled ladies disdaining to talk a whit more prettily than ordinary women; and he had been a match for the subtlety of their pride—he understood it. He knew well that at the hint of a proposal from him they would have spoken out in a manner very different to that of ordinary women. The lightning, only to be warded by an esquire, was in them. He quitted business at the age of forty, that he might pretend to espousals with a born lady; or at least it was one of the ideas in his mind.

And here, I think, is the moment for the epitaph of anticipation over him, and the exclamation, alas! I would not be premature, but it is necessary to create some interest in him, and no one but a

foreigner could feel it at present for the Englishman who is bursting merely to do like the rest of his countrymen, and rise above them to shake them class by class as the dust from his heels. Alas! then an—undertaker's pathos is better than none at all—he was not a single-minded aspirant to our social honours. The old marketing mother; to whom he owed his fortunes, was in his blood to confound his ambition; and so contradictory was the man's nature, that in revenge for disappointments, there were times when he turned against the saving spirit of parsimony. Readers deep in Greek dramatic writings will see the fatal Sisters behind the chair of a man who gives frequent and bigger dinners, that he may become important in his neighbourhood, while decreasing the price he pays for his wine, that he may miserably indemnify himself for the outlay. A sip of his wine fetched the breath, as when men are in the presence of the tremendous elements of nature. It sounded the constitution more darkly-awful, and with a profounder testimony to stubborn health, than the physician's instruments. Most of the guests at Mr. Tinman's table were so constructed that they admired him for its powerful quality the more at his announcement of the price of it; the combined strength and cheapness probably flattering them, as by another mystic instance of the national energy. It must have been so, since his townsmen rejoiced to hail him as head of their town. Here and there a solitary esquire, fished out of the bathing season to dine at the house on the beach, was guilty of raising one of those clamours concerning subsequent headaches, which spread an evil reputation as a pall. A resident esquire or two, in whom a reminiscence of Tinman's table may be likened to the hook which some old trout has borne away from the angler as the most vivid of warnings to him to beware for the future, caught up the black report and propagated it.

The Lieutenant of the Coastguard, hearing the latest conscious victim, or hearing of him, would nod his head and say he had never dined at Tinman's table without a headache ensuing and a visit to the chemist's shop; which, he was assured, was good for trade, and he acquiesced, as it was right to do in a man devoted to his country. He dined with Tinman again. We try our best to be social. For eight months in our year he had little choice but to dine with Tinman or be a hermit attached to a telescope.

"Where are you going, Lieutenant?" His frank reply to the question was, "I am going to be killed;" and it grew notorious that this meant Tinman's table. We get on together as well as we can. Perhaps if we were an acutely calculating people we should find it preferable both for trade and our physical prosperity to turn and kill Tinman, in contempt of consequences. But we are not, and so he does the business gradually for us. A generous people we must be, for Tinman was not detested. The recollection of "next morning" caused him to be dimly feared.

Tinman, meanwhile, was awake only to the Circumstance that he made no progress as an esquire, except on the envelopes of letters, and in his own esteem. That broad region he began to occupy to the exclusion of other inhabitants; and the result of such a state of princely isolation was a plunge of his whole being into deep thoughts. From the hour of his investiture as the town's chief man, thoughts which were long shots took possession of him. He had his wits about him; he was alive to ridicule; he knew he was not popular below, or on easy terms with people above him, and he meditated a surpassing stroke as one of the Band of Esq., that had nothing original about it to perplex and annoy the native mind, yet was dazzling. Few members of the privileged Band dare even imagine the thing.

It will hardly be believed, but it is historical fact, that in the act of carrying fresh herrings home on his arm, he entertained the idea of a visit to the First Person and Head of the realm, and was indulging in pleasing visions of the charms of a personal acquaintance. Nay, he had already consulted with brother jurats. For you must know that one of the princesses had recently suffered betrothal in the newspapers, and supposing her to deign to ratify the engagement, what so reasonable on the part of a Cinque Port chieftain as to congratulate his liege mistress, her illustrious mother? These are thoughts and these are deeds >which give emotional warmth and colour to the ejecter members of a population wretchedly befogged. They are our sunlight, and our brighter theme of conversation. They are necessary to the climate and the Saxon mind; and it would be foolish to put them away, as

it is foolish not to do our utmost to be intimate with terrestrial splendours while we have them—as it may be said of wardens, mayors, and bailiffs-at command. Tinman was quite of this opinion. They are there to relieve our dulness. We have them in the place of heavenly; and he would have argued that we have a right to bother them too. He had a notion, up in the clouds, of a Sailors' Convalescent Hospital at Crikswich to seduce a prince with, hand him the trowel, make him "lay the stone," and then poor prince! refresh him at table. But that was a matter for by and by.

His purchase of herrings completed, Mr. Tinman walked across the mound of shingle to the house on the beach. He was rather a fresh-faced man, of the Saxon colouring, and at a distance looking good-humoured. That he should have been able to make such an appearance while doing daily battle with his wine, was a proof of great physical vigour. His pace was leisurely, as it must needs be over pebbles, where half a step is subtracted from each whole one in passing; and, besides, he was aware of a general breath at his departure that betokened a censorious assembly. Why should he not market for himself? He threw dignity into his retreating figure in response to the internal interrogation. The moment was one when conscious rectitude requires man should have a tail for its just display. Philosophers have drawn attention to the power of the human face to express pure virtue, but no sooner has it passed on than the spirit erect within would seem helpless. The breadth of our shoulders is apparently presented for our critics to write on. Poor duty is done by the simple sense of moral worth, to supplant that absence of feature in the plain flat back. We are below the animals in this. How charged with language behind him is a dog! Everybody has noticed it. Let a dog turn away from a hostile circle, and his crisp and wary tail not merely defends him, it menaces; it is a weapon. Man has no choice but to surge and boil, or stiffen preposterously. Knowing the popular sentiment about his marketing—for men can see behind their backs, though they may have nothing to speak with—Tinman resembled those persons of principle who decline to pay for a "Bless your honour!" from a voluble beggar-woman, and obtain the reverse of it after they have gone by. He was sufficiently sensitive to feel that his back was chalked as on a slate. The only remark following him was, "There he goes!"

He went to the seaward gate of the house on the beach, made practicable in a low flint wall, where he was met by his sister Martha, to whom he handed the basket. Apparently he named the cost of his purchase per dozen. She touched the fish and pressed the bellies of the topmost, it might be to question them tenderly concerning their roes. Then the couple passed out of sight. Herrings were soon after this despatching their odours through the chimneys of all Crikswich, and there was that much of concord and festive union among the inhabitants.

The house on the beach had been posted where it stood, one supposes, for the sake of the sea-view, from which it turned right about to face the town across a patch of grass and salt scurf, looking like a square and scornful corporal engaged in the perpetual review of an awkward squad of recruits. Sea delighted it not, nor land either. Marine Parade fronting it to the left, shaded sickly eyes, under a worn green verandah, from a sun that rarely appeared, as the traducers of spinsters pretend those virgins are ever keenly on their guard against him that cometh not. Belle Vue Terrace stared out of lank glass panes without reserve, unashamed of its yellow complexion. A gaping public-house, calling itself newly Hotel, fell backward a step. Villas with the titles of royalty and bloody battles claimed five feet of garden, and swelled in bowwindows beside other villas which drew up firmly, commending to the attention a decent straightness and unintrusive decorum in preference. On an elevated meadow to the right was the Crouch. The Hall of Elba nestled among weather-beaten dwarf woods further toward the cliff. Shavenness, featurelessness, emptiness, clamminess scurfiness, formed the outward expression of a town to which people were reasonably glad to come from London in summer-time, for there was nothing in Crikswich to distract the naked pursuit of health. The sea tossed its renovating brine to the determinedly sniffing animal, who went to his meals with an appetite that rendered him cordially eulogistic of the place, in spite of certain frank whiffs of sewerage coming off an open deposit on the common to mingle with the brine. Tradition told of a French lady and gentleman

entering the town to take lodgings for a month, and that on the morrow they took a boat from the shore, saying in their faint English to a sailor veteran of the coastguard, whom they had consulted about the weather, "It is better zis zan zat," as they shrugged between rough sea and corpselike land. And they were not seen again. Their meaning none knew. Having paid their bill at the lodging-house, their conduct was ascribed to systematic madness. English people came to Crikswich for the pure salt sea air, and they did not expect it to be cooked and dressed and decorated for them. If these things are done to nature, it is nature no longer that you have, but something Frenchified. Those French are for trimming Neptune's beard! Only wait, and you are sure to find variety in nature, more than you may like. You will find it in Neptune. What say you to a breach of the sea-wall, and an inundation of the aromatic grass- flat extending from the house on the beach to the tottering terraces, villas, cottages: and public-house transformed by its ensign to Hotel, along the frontage of the town? Such an event had occurred of old, and had given the house on the beach the serious shaking great Neptune in his wrath alone can give. But many years had intervened. Groynes had been run down to intercept him and divert him. He generally did his winter mischief on a mill and salt marshes lower westward. Mr. Tinman had always been extremely zealous in promoting the expenditure of what moneys the town had to spare upon the protection of the shore, as it were for the propitiation or defiance of the sea-god. There was a kindly joke against him on that subject among brother jurats. He retorted with the joke, that the first thing for Englishmen to look to were England's defences.

But it will not do to be dwelling too fondly on our eras of peace, for which we make such splendid sacrifices. Peace, saving for the advent of a German band, which troubled the repose of the town at intervals, had imparted to the inhabitants of Crikswich, within and without, the likeness to its most perfect image, together, it must be confessed, with a degree of nervousness that invested common events with some of the terrors of the Last Trump, when one night, just upon the passing of the vernal equinox, something happened.

CHAPTER II

A carriage Stopped short in the ray of candlelight that was fitfully and feebly capering on the windy blackness outside the open workshop of Crickledon, the carpenter, fronting the sea-beach. Mr. Tinnan's house was inquired for. Crickledon left off planing; at half-sprawl over the board, he bawled out, "Turn to the right; right ahead; can't mistake it." He nodded to one of the cronies intent on watching his labours: "Not unless they mean to be bait for whiting-pout. Who's that for Tinman, I wonder?" The speculations of Crickledon's friends were lost in the scream of the plane.

One cast an eye through the door and observed that the carriage was there still. "Gentleman's got out and walked," said Crickledon. He was informed that somebody was visible inside. "Gentleman's wife, mayhap," he said. His friends indulged in their privilege of thinking what they liked, and there was the usual silence of tongues in the shop. He furnished them sound and motion for their amusement, and now and then a scrap of conversation; and the sedater spirits dwelling in his immediate neighbourhood were accustomed to step in and see him work up to supper- time, instead of resorting to the more turbid and costly excitement of the public-house.

Crickledon looked up from the measurement of a thumb-line. In the doorway stood a bearded gentleman, who announced himself with the startling exclamation, "Here's a pretty pickle!" and bustled to make way for a man well known to them as Ned Crummins, the upholsterer's man, on whose back hung an article of furniture, the condition of which, with a condensed brevity of humour worthy of literary admiration, he displayed by mutely turning himself about as he entered.

"Smashed!" was the general outcry.

"I ran slap into him," said the gentleman. "Who the deuce!—no bones broken, that's one thing. The fellow—there, look at him: he's like a glass tortoise."

"It's a chiwal glass," Crickledon remarked, and laid finger on the star in the centre.

"Gentleman ran slap into me," said Crummins, depositing the frame on the floor of the shop.

"Never had such a shock in my life," continued the gentleman. "Upon my soul, I took him for a door: I did indeed. A kind of light flashed from one of your houses here, and in the pitch dark I thought I was at the door of old Mart Tinman's house, and dash me if I did n't go in—crash! But what the deuce do you do, carrying that great big looking-glass at night, man? And, look here tell me; how was it you happened to be going glass foremost when you'd got the glass on your back?"

"Well, 't ain't my fault, I knows that," rejoined Crummins. "I came along as careful as a man could. I was just going to bawl out to Master Tinman, 'I knows the way, never fear me'; for I thinks I hears him call from his house, 'Do ye see the way?' and into me this gentleman runs all his might, and smash goes the glass. I was just ten steps from Master Tinman's gate, and that careful, I reckoned every foot I put down, that I was; I knows I did, though."

"Why, it was me calling, 'I'm sure I can't see the way.'"

"You heard me, you donkey!" retorted the bearded gentleman. "What was the good of your turning that glass against me in the very nick when I dashed on you?"

"Well, 't ain't my fault, I swear," said Crummins. "The wind catches voices so on a pitch dark night, you never can tell whether they be on one shoulder or the other. And if I'm to go and lose my place through no fault of mine—"

"Have n't I told you, sir, I'm going to pay the damage? Here," said the gentleman, fumbling at his waistcoat, "here, take this card. Read it."

For the first time during the scene in the carpenter's shop, a certain pomposity swelled the gentleman's tone. His delivery of the card appeared to act on him like the flourish of a trumpet before great men.

"Van Diemen Smith," he proclaimed himself for the assistance of Ned Crummins in his task; the latter's look of sad concern on receiving the card seeming to declare an unscholarly conscience.

An anxious feminine voice was heard close beside Mr. Van Diemen Smith.

"Oh, papa, has there been an accident? Are you hurt?"

"Not a bit, Netty; not a bit. Walked into a big looking-glass in the dark, that's all. A matter of eight or ten pound, and that won't stump us. But these are what I call queer doings in Old England, when you can't take a step in the dark, on the seashore without plunging bang into a glass. And it looks like bad luck to my visit to old Mart Tinman."

"Can you," he addressed the company, "tell me of a clean, wholesome lodging-house? I was thinking of flinging myself, body and baggage, on your mayor, or whatever he is—my old schoolmate; but I don't so much like this beginning. A couple of bed-rooms and sitting-room; clean sheets, well aired; good food, well cooked; payment per week in advance."

The pebble dropped into deep water speaks of its depth by the tardy arrival of bubbles on the surface, and, in like manner, the very simple question put by Mr. Van Diemen Smith pursued its course of penetration in the assembled mind in the carpenter's shop for a considerable period, with no sign to show that it had reached the bottom.

"Surely, papa, we can go to an inn? There must be some hotel," said his daughter.

"There's good accommodation at the Cliff Hotel hard by," said Crickledon.

"But," said one of his friends, "if you don't want to go so far, sir, there's Master Crickledon's own house next door, and his wife lets lodgings, and there's not a better cook along this coast."

"Then why did n't the man mention it? Is he afraid of having me?" asked

Mr. Smith, a little thunderingly. "I may n't be known much yet in England; but I'll tell you, you inquire the route to Mr. Van Diemen Smith over there in Australia."

"Yes, papa," interrupted his daughter, "only you must consider that it may not be convenient to take us in at this hour—so late."

"It's not that, miss, begging your pardon," said Crickledon. "I make a point of never recommending my own house. That's where it is. Otherwise you're welcome to try us."

"I was thinking of falling bounce on my old schoolmate, and putting Old English hospitality to the proof," Mr. Smith meditated. "But it's late.

Yes, and that confounded glass! No, we'll bide with you, Mr. Carpenter.

I'll send my card across to Mart Tinman to-morrow, and set him agog at his breakfast."

Mr. Van Diemen Smith waved his hand for Crickledon to lead the way.

Hereupon Ned Crummins looked up from the card he had been turning over and over, more and more like one arriving at a condemnatory judgment of a fish.

"I can't go and give my master a card instead of his glass," he remarked.

"Yes, that reminds me; and I should like to know what you meant by bringing that glass away from Mr. Tinman's house at night," said Mr. Smith. "If I'm to pay for it, I've a right to know. What's the meaning of moving it at night? Eh, let's hear. Night's not the time for moving big glasses like that. I'm not so sure I haven't got a case."

"If you'll step round to my master along o' me, sir," said Crummins, "perhaps he'll explain."

Crummins was requested to state who his master was, and he replied,

"Phippun and Company;" but Mr. Smith positively refused to go with him.

"But here," said he, "is a crown for you, for you're a civil fellow.

You'll know where to find me in the morning; and mind, I shall expect Phippun and Company to give me a very good account of their reason for moving a big looking-glass on a night like this. There, be off."

The crown-piece in his hand effected a genial change in Crummins' disposition to communicate. Crickledon spoke to him about the glass; two or three of the others present jogged

him. "What did Mr. Tinman want by having the glass moved so late in the day, Ned? Your master wasn't nervous about his property, was he?"

"Not he," said Crummins, and began to suck down his upper lip and agitate his eyelids and stand uneasily, glimmering signs of the setting in of the tide of narration.

He caught the eye of Mr. Smith, then looked abashed at Miss.

Crickledon saw his dilemma. "Say what's uppermost, Ned; never mind how you says it. English is English. Mr. Tinman sent for you to take the glass away, now, did n't he?"

"He did," said Crummins.

"And you went to him."

"Ay, that I did."

"And he fastened the chiwal glass upon your back"

"He did that."

"That's all plain sailing. Had he bought the glass?"

"No, he had n't bought it. He'd hired it."

As when upon an enforced visit to the dentist, people have had one tooth out, the remaining offenders are more willingly submitted to the operation, insomuch that a poetical licence might hazard the statement that they shed them like leaves of the tree, so Crummins, who had shrunk from speech, now volunteered whole sentences in succession, and how important they were deemed by his fellow-townsmen, Mr. Smith, and especially Miss Annette Smith, could perceive in their ejaculations, before they themselves were drawn into the strong current of interest.

And this was the matter: Tinman had hired the glass for three days. Latish, on the very first day of the hiring, close upon dark, he had despatched imperative orders to Phippun and Company to take the glass out of his house on the spot. And why? Because, as he maintained, there was a fault in the glass causing an incongruous and absurd reflection; and he was at that moment awaiting the arrival of another chiwal-glass.

"Cut along, Ned," said Crickledon.

"What the deuce does he want with a chiwal-glass at all?" cried Mr. Smith, endangering the flow of the story by suggesting to the narrator that he must "hark back," which to him was equivalent to the jumping of a chasm hindward. Happily his brain had seized a picture:

"Mr. Tinman, he's a-standin' in his best Court suit."

Mr. Tinman's old schoolmate gave a jump; and no wonder.

"Standing?" he cried; and as the act of standing was really not extraordinary, he fixed upon the suit: "Court?"

"So Mrs. Cavely told me, it was what he was standin' in, and as I found 'm I left 'm," said Crummins.

"He's standing in it now?" said Mr. Van Diemen Smith, with a great gape.

Crummins doggedly repeated the statement. Many would have ornamented it in the repetition, but he was for bare flat truth.

"He must be precious proud of having a Court suit," said Mr. Smith, and gazed at his daughter so glassily that she smiled, though she was impatient to proceed to Mrs. Crickledon's lodgings.

"Oh! there's where it is?" interjected the carpenter, with a funny frown at a low word from Ned Crummins. "Practicing, is he? Mr. Tinman's practicing before the glass preparatory to his going to the palace in London."

"He gave me a shillin'," said Crummins.

Crickledon comprehended him immediately. "We sha'n't speak about it, Ned."

What did you see? was thus cautiously suggested.

The shilling was on Crummins' tongue to check his betrayal of the secret scene. But remembering that he had only witnessed it by accident, and that Mr. Tinman had not completely

taken him into his confidence, he thrust his hand down his pocket to finger the crown-piece lying in fellowship with the coin it multiplied five times, and was inspired to think himself at liberty to say: "All I saw was when the door opened. Not the house-door. It was the parlour-door. I saw him walk up to the glass, and walk back from the glass. And when he'd got up to the glass he bowed, he did, and he went back'ards just so."

Doubtless the presence of a lady was the active agent that prevented Crummins from doubling his body entirely, and giving more than a rapid indication of the posture of Mr. Tinman in his retreat before the glass. But it was a glimpse of broad burlesque, and though it was received with becoming sobriety by the men in the carpenter's shop, Annette plucked at her father's arm.

She could not get him to depart. That picture of his old schoolmate Martin Tinman practicing before a chival glass to present himself at the palace in his Court suit, seemed to stupefy his Australian intelligence.

"What right has he got to go to Court?" Mr. Van Diemen Smith inquired, like the foreigner he had become through exile.

"Mr. Tinman's bailiff of the town," said Crickledon.

"And what was his objection to that glass I smashed?"

"He's rather an irritable gentleman," Crickledon murmured, and turned to Crummins.

Crummins growled: "He said it was misty, and gave him a twist."

"What a big fool he must be! eh?" Mr. Smith glanced at Crickledon and the other faces for the verdict of Tinman's townsmen upon his character.

They had grounds for thinking differently of Tinman.

"He's no fool," said Crickledon.

Another shook his head. "Sharp at a bargain."

"That he be," said the chorus.

Mr. Smith was informed that Mr. Tinman would probably end by buying up half the town.

"Then," said Mr. Smith, "he can afford to pay half the money for that glass, and pay he shall."

A serious view of the recent catastrophe was presented by his declaration.

In the midst of a colloquy regarding the cost of the glass, during which it began to be seen by Mr. Tinman's townsmen that there was laughing- stuff for a year or so in the scene witnessed by Crummins, if they postponed a bit their right to the laugh and took it in doses, Annette induced her father to signal to Crickledon his readiness to go and see the lodgings. No sooner had he done it than he said, "What on earth made us wait all this time here? I'm hungry, my dear; I want supper."

"That is because you have had a disappointment. I know you, papa," said

Annette.

"Yes, it's rather a damper about old Mart Tinman," her father assented. "Or else I have n't recovered the shock of smashing that glass, and visit it on him. But, upon my honour, he's my only friend in England, I have n't a single relative that I know of, and to come and find your only friend making a donkey of himself, is enough to make a man think of eating and drinking."

Annette murmured reproachfully: "We can hardly say he is our only friend in England, papa, can we?"

"Do you mean that young fellow? You'll take my appetite away if you talk of him. He's a stranger. I don't believe he's worth a penny. He owns he's what he calls a journalist."

These latter remarks were hurriedly exchanged at the threshold of Crickledon's house.

"It don't look promising," said Mr. Smith.

"I didn't recommend it," said Crickledon.

"Why the deuce do you let your lodgings, then?"

"People who have come once come again."

"Oh! I am in England," Annette sighed joyfully, feeling at home in some trait she had detected in Crickledon.

CHAPTER III

The story of the shattered chiwal-glass and the visit of Tinman's old schoolmate fresh from Australia, was at many a breakfast-table before. Tinman heard a word of it, and when he did he had no time to spare for such incidents, for he was reading to his widowed sister Martha, in an impressive tone, at a tolerably high pitch of the voice, and with a suppressed excitement that shook away all things external from his mind as violently as it agitated his body. Not the waves without but the engine within it is which gives the shock and tremor to the crazy steamer, forcing it to cut through the waves and scatter them to spray; and so did Martin Tinman make light of the external attack of the card of VAN DIEMEN SMITH, and its pencilled line: "An old chum of yours, eh, matey?" Even the communication of Phippun & Co. concerning the chiwal-glass, failed to divert him from his particular task. It was indeed a public duty; and the chiwal-glass, though pertaining to it, was a private business. He that has broken the glass, let that man pay for it, he pronounced—no doubt in simpler fashion, being at his ease in his home, but with the serenity of one uplifted. As to the name VAN DIEMEN SMITH, he knew it not, and so he said to himself while accurately recollecting the identity of the old chum who alone of men would have thought of writing eh, matey?

Mr. Van Diemen Smith did not present the card in person. "At Crickledon's," he wrote, apparently expecting the bailiff of the town to rush over to him before knowing who he was.

Tinman was far too busy. Anybody can read plain penmanship or print, but ask anybody not a Cabinet Minister or a Lord-in-Waiting to read out loud and clear in a Palace, before a Throne. Oh! the nature of reading is distorted in a trice, and as Tinman said to his worthy sister: "I can do it, but I must lose no time in preparing myself." Again, at a reperusal, he informed her: "I must habituate myself." For this purpose he had put on the suit overnight.

The articulation of faultless English was his object. His sister Martha sat vice-regally to receive his loyal congratulations on the illustrious marriage, and she was pensive, less nervous than her brother from not having to speak continuously, yet somewhat perturbed. She also had her task, and it was to avoid thinking herself the Person addressed by her suppliant brother, while at the same time she took possession of the scholarly training and perfect knowledge of diction and rules of pronunciation which would infallibly be brought to bear on him in the terrible hour of the delivery of the Address. It was no small task moreover to be compelled to listen right through to the end of the Address, before the very gentlest word of criticism was allowed. She did not exactly complain of the renewal of the rehearsal: a fatigue can be endured when it is a joy. What vexed her was her failing memory for the points of objection, as in her imagined High Seat she conceived them; for, in painful truth, the instant her brother had finished she entirely lost her acuteness of ear, and with that her recollection: so there was nothing to do but to say: "Excellent! Quite unobjectionable, dear Martin, quite:" so she said, and emphatically; but the addition of the word "only" was printed on her contracted brow, and every faculty of Tinman's mind and nature being at strain just then, he asked her testily: "What now? what's the fault now?" She assured him with languor that there was not a fault. "It's not your way of talking," said he, and what he said was true. His discernment was extraordinary; generally he noticed nothing.

Not only were his perceptions quickened by the preparations for the day of great splendour: day of a great furnace to be passed through likewise! —he, was learning English at an astonishing rate into the bargain. A pronouncing Dictionary lay open on his table. To this he flew at a hint of a contrary method, and disputes, verifications and triumphs on one side and the other ensued between brother and sister. In his heart the agitated man believed his sister to be a misleading guide. He dared not say it, he thought it, and previous to his African travel through the Dictionary he had thought his sister infallible on these points. He dared not say it, because he knew no one else before whom he could practice, and as it was confidence that he chiefly wanted—above all things, confidence and

confidence comes of practice, he preferred the going on with his practice to an absolute certainty as to correctness.

At midday came another card from Mr. Van Diemen Smith bearing the superscription: alias Phil R.

"Can it be possible," Tinman asked his sister, "that Philip Ribstone has had the audacity to return to this country? I think," he added, "I am right in treating whoever sends me this card as a counterfeit."

Martha's advice was, that he should take no notice of the card.

"I am seriously engaged," said Tinman. With a "Now then, dear," he resumed his labours.

Messages had passed between Tinman and Phippun; and in the afternoon Phippun appeared to broach the question of payment for the chival-glass. He had seen Mr. Van Diemen Smith, had found him very strange, rather impracticable. He was obliged to tell Tinman that he must hold him responsible for the glass; nor could he send a second until payment was made for the first. It really seemed as if Tinman would be compelled, by the force of circumstances, to go and shake his old friend by the hand. Otherwise one could clearly see the man might be off: he might be off at any minute, leaving a legal contention behind him. On the other hand, supposing he had come to Crikswich for assistance in money? Friendship is a good thing, and so is hospitality, which is an essentially English thing, and consequently one that it behoves an Englishman to think it his duty to perform, but we do not extend it to paupers. But should a pauper get so close to us as to lay hold of us, vowing he was once our friend, how shake him loose? Tinman foresaw that it might be a matter of five pounds thrown to the dogs, perhaps ten, counting the glass. He put on his hat, full of melancholy presentiments; and it was exactly half-past five o'clock of the spring afternoon when he knocked at Crickledon's door.

Had he looked into Crickledon's shop as he went by, he would have perceived Van Diemen Smith astride a piece of timber, smoking a pipe. Van Diemen saw Tinman. His eyes cocked and watered. It is a disgraceful fact to record of him without periphrasis. In truth, the bearded fellow was almost a woman at heart, and had come from the Antipodes throbbing to slap Martin Tinman on the back, squeeze his hand, run over England with him, treat him, and talk of old times in the presence of a trotting regiment of champagne. That affair of the chival-glass had temporarily damped his enthusiasm. The absence of a reply to his double transmission of cards had wounded him; and something in the look of Tinman disgusted his rough taste. But the well-known features recalled the days of youth. Tinman was his one living link to the country he admired as the conqueror of the world, and imaginatively delighted in as the seat of pleasures, and he could not discard the feeling of some love for Tinman without losing his grasp of the reason why, he had longed so fervently and travelled so breathlessly to return hither. In the days of their youth, Van Diemen had been Tinman's cordial spirit, at whom he sipped for cheerful visions of life, and a good honest glow of emotion now and then. Whether it was odd or not that the sipper should be oblivious, and the cordial spirit heartily reminiscent of those times, we will not stay to inquire.

Their meeting took place in Crickledon's shop. Tinman was led in by Mrs. Crickledon. His voice made a sound of metal in his throat, and his air was that of a man buttoned up to the palate, as he read from the card, glancing over his eyelids, "Mr. Van Diemen Smith, I believe."

"Phil Ribstone, if you like," said the other, without rising.

"Oh, ah, indeed!" Tinman temperately coughed.

"Yes, dear me. So it is. It strikes you as odd?"

"The change of name," said Tinman.

"Not nature, though!"

"Ah! Have you been long in England?"

"Time to run to Helmstone, and on here. You've been lucky in business, I hear."

"Thank you; as things go. Do you think of remaining in England?"

"I've got to settle about a glass I broke last night."

"Ah! I have heard of it. Yes, I fear there will have to be a settlement."

"I shall pay half of the damage. You'll have to stump up your part."

Van Diemen smiled roguishly.

"We must discuss that," said Tinman, smiling too, as a patient in bed may smile at a doctor's joke; for he was, as Crickledon had said of him, no fool on practical points, and Van Diemen's mention of the half-payment reassured him as to his old friend's position in the world, and softly thawed him. "Will you dine with me to-day?"

"I don't mind if I do. I've a girl. You remember little Netty? She's walking out on the beach with a young fellow named Fellingham, whose acquaintance we made on the voyage, and has n't left us long to ourselves. Will you have her as well? And I suppose you must ask him. He's a newspaper man; been round the world; seen a lot."

Tinman hesitated. An electrical idea of putting sherry at fifteen shillings per dozen on his table instead of the ceremonial wine at twenty-five shillings, assisted him to say hospitably, "Oh! ah! yes; any friend of yours."

"And now perhaps you'll shake my fist," said Van Diemen.

"With pleasure," said Tinman. "It was your change of name, you know, Philip."

Look here, Martin. Van Diemen Smith was a convict, and my benefactor. Why the deuce he was so fond of that name, I can't tell you; but his dying wish was for me to take it and carry it on. He left me his fortune, for Van Diemen Smith to enjoy life, as he never did, poor fellow, when he was alive. The money was got honestly, by hard labour at a store. He did evil once, and repented after. But, by Heaven!"—Van Diemen jumped up and thundered out of a broad chest—"the man was one of the finest hearts that ever beat. He was! and I'm proud of him. When he died, I turned my thoughts home to Old England and you, Martin."

"Oh!" said Tinman; and reminded by Van Diemen's way of speaking, that cordiality was expected of him, he shook his limbs to some briskness, and continued, "Well, yes, we must all die in our native land if we can. I hope you're comfortable in your lodgings?"

"I'll give you one of Mrs. Crickledon's dinners to try. You're as good as mayor of this town, I hear?"

"I am the bailiff of the town," said Mr. Tinman.

"You're going to Court, I'm told."

"The appointment," replied Mr. Tinman, "will soon be made. I have not yet an appointed day."

On the great highroad of life there is Expectation, and there is Attainment, and also there is Envy. Mr. Tinman's posture stood for Attainment shadowing Expectation, and sunning itself in the glass of Envy, as he spoke of the appointed day. It was involuntary, and naturally evanescent, a momentary view of the spirit.

He unbent, and begged to be excused for the present, that he might go and apprise his sister of guests coming.

"All right. I daresay we shall see, enough of one another," said Van Diemen. And almost before the creak of Tinman's heels was deadened on the road outside the shop, he put the funny question to Crickledon, "Do you box?"

"I make 'em," Crickledon replied.

"Because I should like to have a go in at something, my friend."

Van Diemen stretched and yawned.

Crickledon recommended the taking of a walk.

"I think I will," said the other, and turned back abruptly. "How long do you work in the day?"

"Generally, all the hours of light," Crickledon replied; "and always up to supper-time."

"You're healthy and happy?"

"Nothing to complain of."

"Good appetite?"

"Pretty regular."

"You never take a holiday?"

"Except Sundays."

"You'd like to be working then?"

"I won't say that."

"But you're glad to be up Monday morning?"

"It feels cheerfuller in the shop."

"And carpentering's your joy?"

"I think I may say so."

Van Diemen slapped his thigh. "There's life in Old England yet!"

Crickledon eyed him as he walked away to the beach to look for his daughter, and conceived that there was a touch of the soldier in him.

CHAPTER IV

Annette Smith's delight in her native England made her see beauty and kindness everywhere around her; it put a halo about the house on the beach, and thrilled her at Tinman's table when she heard the thunder of the waves hard by. She fancied it had been a most agreeable dinner to her father and Mr. Herbert Fellingham—especially to the latter, who had laughed very much; and she was astonished to hear them at breakfast both complaining of their evening. In answer to which, she exclaimed, "Oh, I think the situation of the house is so romantic!"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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