Hornung Ernest William

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
THE OLD HOME

Harry Ringrose came of age on the happiest morning of his life. He was on dry land at last, and flying north at fifty miles an hour instead of at some insignificant and yet precarious number of knots. He would be at home to eat his birthday breakfast after all; and half the night he sat awake in a long ecstasy of grateful retrospect and delicious anticipation, as one by one the familiar stations were hailed and left behind, each an older friend than the last, and each a deadlier enemy to sleep. Worn out by excitement, however, he lay down for a minute between Crewe and Warrington, and knew no more until the guard came to him at the little junction across the Westmoreland border. Harry started up, the early sun in his sleepy eyes, and for an instant the first-class smoking-compartment was his state-room aboard the ship *Sobraon*, and the guard one of his good friends the officers. Then with a rush of exquisite joy the glorious truth came home to him, and he was up and out that instant – the happiest and the luckiest young rascal in the land.

It was the 19th of May, and a morning worthy the month and the occasion. The sun had risen in a flawless sky, and the dear old English birds were singing on all sides of the narrow platform, as Harry Ringrose stretched his spindle-legs upon it and saw his baggage out of the long lithe express and into the little clumsy local which was to carry him home. The youth was thin and tall, yet not ungainly, with a thatch of very black hair, but none upon his sun-burnt face. He was shabbily dressed, his boots were down at heel and toe, there were buttons missing from his old tweed coat, and he wore a celluloid collar with his flannel shirt. On the other hand, he was travelling first-class, and the literary supplies tucked under his arm had cost the extravagant fellow several shillings at Euston book-stall. Yet he had very little money in his pocket. He took it all out to count. It amounted to five shillings and sixpence exactly, of which he gave half-a-crown to the guard for waking him, and a shilling to a porter here at the junction, before continuing his journey in the little train. This left him a florin, and that florin was all the money he possessed in the world.

He was, however, the only child of a father who would give him as much as he wanted, and, what was rarer, of one with sufficient sense of humour to appreciate the prodigal's return without a penny in his pocket or a decent garment on his back. Whether his people would be equally pleased at being taken completely by surprise was not quite so certain. They might say he ought to have let them know what ship he was coming by,

or at least have sent a telegram on landing. Yet all along he had undertaken to be home for his twenty-first birthday, and it would only have made them anxious to know that he had trusted himself to a sailing-vessel. Fifty days instead of twenty from the Cape! It had nearly cost him his word; but, now that it was over, the narrow margin made the joke all the greater; and Harry Ringrose loved a joke better than most things in the world.

The last two years of his life had been a joke from beginning to end: for in the name of health he had been really seeking adventure and undergoing the most unnecessary hardships for the fun of talking about them for the rest of his days. He pictured the first dinner-party after his return, and the faces of some dozen old friends when they heard of the leopards under the house, the lion in the moonlight, and (when the ladies had withdrawn) of the notorious murderer with whom Harry had often dined. They should perceive that the schoolboy they remembered was no longer anything of the sort, but a man of the world who had seen more of it than themselves. It is true that for a man of the world Harry Ringrose was still somewhat youthfully taken up with himself and his experiences; but his heart was rich with love of those to whom he was returning, and his mind much too simple to be aware of its own egotism. He only knew that he was getting nearer and nearer home, and that the joy of it was almost unendurable.

His face was to the carriage window, his native air streamed down his throat and blew a white lane through his long black

hair. Miles of green dales rushed past under a network of stone walls, to change soon to mines and quarries, which in their turn developed into furnaces and works, until all at once the sky was no longer blue and the land no longer green. And when Harry Ringrose looked out of the opposite window, it was across grimy dunes that stretched to a breakwater built of slag, with a discoloured sea beyond.

The boy rolled up his rug and changed his cap for a villainous sombrero preserved for the occasion. He then made a selection from his lavish supply of periodical literature, and when he next looked out the train was running in the very shadow of some furnaces in full blast. The morning sun looked cool and pale behind their monstrous fires, and Harry took off the sombrero to his father's ironworks, though with a rather grim eye, which saw the illuminated squalor of the scene without appreciating its prosperity. Sulphurous flames issued from all four furnaces; at one of the four they were casting as the train passed, and the molten incandescent stream ran white as the wire of an electric light.

After the works came rank upon rank of workmen's streets running right and left of the line; then the ancient and historic quarter of the town, with its granite houses and its hilly streets, all much as it had been a hundred years before the discovery of iron-stone enriched and polluted a fair countryside. Then the level-crossing, without a creature at the gates at such an hour; finally a blank drab platform with the long loose figure of the

head-porter standing out upon it as the homeliest sight of all. Harry clapped him on the cap as the train drew up; but either the man had forgotten him, or he was offended, for he came forward without a smile.

"Well, David, how are you? Your hand, man, your hand! I'm back from the wilds. Don't you know me?"

"I do now, sir."

"That's right! It does me good to see an old face like yours. Gently with this green box, David, it's full of ostrich-eggs, that's why I had it in the carriage. There's four more in the van; inspan the lot till we send in for them, will you? I mean to walk up myself. Come, gently, I say!"

The porter had dropped the green box clumsily, and now sought to cover his confusion by saying that the sight of Master Harry, that altered, had taken him all aback. Young Ringrose was justly annoyed; he had taken such care of that green box for so many weeks. But he did not withhold the florin, which was being pocketed for a penny when the man saw what it was and handed it back.

"What, not enough for you?" cried Harry.

"No, sir, too much."

The boy stared and laughed.

"Don't be an ass, David; I don't come home from Africa every day! If you'd been with me you'd think yourself lucky to get home at all! You just inspan those boxes, and we'll send for them after breakfast."

The man mumbled that it was not worth two shillings. Harry said that was his business. The porter hung his head.

"I – I may have broken them eggs."

"Oh, well, if you have, two bob won't mend 'em; cling on to it, man, and don't drop them again."

The loose-limbed porter turned away with the coin, but without a word, while Harry went off in high good-humour, though a little puzzled by the man's manner. It was not a time to think twice of trifles, however, and, at all events, he had achieved the sportsmanlike feat of emptying his pockets of their last coin. He strode out of the station with a merry, ringing tread. Half the town heard him as he went whistling through the streets and on to the outlying roads.

The one he took was uphill and countrified. High hedgerows bloomed on either hand, and yet you could hear the sea, and sometimes see it, and on this side of the town it was blue and beautiful. Our wayfarer met but one other, a youth of his own age, with whom he had played and fought since infancy, though the families had never been intimate. Harry halted and held out his hand, which was ignored, the other passing with his nose in the air, and a tin can swinging at his side, on his way to some of the works. Harry coloured up and said a hard word softly. Then he remembered how slow his old friend the porter had been to recognise him; and he began to think he must have grown up out of knowledge. Besides accounting for what would otherwise have been an inexplicable affront, the thought pleased and flattered

him. He strode on serenely as before, sniffing the Irish Sea at every step.

He passed little lodges and great gates with never a glance at the fine houses within: for to Harry Ringrose this May morning there were but one house and one garden in all England. To get to them he broke at last into a run, and only stopped when the crest of the hill brought him, breathless, within sight of both. There was the long front wall, with the gates at one end, the stables at the other, and the fresh leaves bulging over every intervening brick. And down the hill, behind the trees, against the sea, were the windows, the gables, the chimneys, that he had been dreaming of for two long years.

His eyes filled with a sudden rush of tears. "Thank God!" he muttered brokenly, and stood panting in the road, with bowed bare head and twitching lips. He could not have believed that the mere sight of home would so move him. He advanced in an altered spirit, a sense of his own unworthiness humbling him, a hymn of thanksgiving in his heart.

And now the very stones were eloquent, and every yard marked by some landmark forgotten for two years, and yet familiar as ever at the first glance. Here was the mark a drunken cabman had left on the gatepost in Harry's school-days; there the disused summerhouse with the window still broken by which Harry had escaped when locked in by the very youth who had just cut him on the road. The drive struck him as a little more overgrown. The trees were greener than he had ever known them,

the bank of rhododendrons a mass of pink without precedent in his recollection; but then it was many years since Harry had seen the place so late in May, for he had gone out to Africa straight from school.

As for the dear house, the creepers had spread upon the ruddy stone and the tiles had mellowed, but otherwise there seemed to be no change. It would look its old self when the blinds were up: meantime Harry fixed his eyes upon those behind which his parents would still be fast asleep, and he wondered, idly at first, why they had given up sleeping with a window open. It had been their practice all the year round; and the house had been an early-rising house; yet not a fire was lighted – not a chimney smoking – not a window open – not a blind drawn – though close upon seven o'clock by the silver watch that had been with Harry through all his adventures.

His hand shook as he put the watch back in his pocket. The possibility of his parents being away – of his surprise recoiling upon himself – had never occurred to him until now. How could they be away? They never dreamt of going away before the autumn. Besides, he had told them he was coming home in time to keep his birthday. They were not away – they were not – they were not!

Yet there he stood – in the sweep of the drive – but a few yards from the steps – and yet afraid to ring and learn the truth! As though the truth must be terrible; as though it would be a tragedy if they did happen to be from home!

It would serve him right if they were.

So at last, with such a smile as a man may force on the walk to the gallows, Harry Ringrose dragged himself slowly to the steps, and still more slowly up them; for they were dirty; and something else about the entrance was different, though he could not at first tell what. It was not the bell, which he now pulled, and heard clanging in the kitchen loud enough to rouse the house; he was still wondering what it was when the last slow tinkling cut his speculations short.

Strange how so small a sound should carry all the way from the kitchen!

He rang again before peering through one of the narrow ruby panes that lighted the porch on each side of the door. He could see no farther than the wall opposite, for the inner door was to the right, and in the rich crimson light the porch looked itself at first sight. Then simultaneously Harry missed the mat, the hat stand, a stag's antlers; and in another instant he knew what it was that had struck him as different about the entrance. He ought not to have been able to peer through that coloured light at all. The sill should have supported the statuette of Night which matched a similar representation of Morning on the other side of the door. Both were gone; and the distant bell, still pealing lustily from his second tug, was breaking the silence of an empty house.

Harry was like a man waking from a trance: the birds sang loud in his ears, the sun beat hot on his back, while he himself stood staring at his own black shadow on the locked door, and

wondering what it was, for it never moved. Then, in a sudden frenzy, he struck his hand through the ruby glass, and plucked out the pieces the putty still held in place, until he was able to squeeze through bodily. Blood dripped from his fingers and smeared the handle of the unlocked inner door as he seized and turned it and sprang within. The hall was empty. The stairs were bare.

He ran into room after room; all were stripped from floor to ceiling. The sun came in rods through the drawn blinds: on the walls were the marks of the pictures: on the floors, a stray straw here and there.

He cried aloud and railed in his agony. He shouted through the house, and his voice came back to him from the attics. Suddenly, in a grate, he espied a printed booklet. It was an auctioneer's list. The sale had taken place that very month.

The calmness of supreme misery now stole over Harry Ringrose, and he saw that his fingers were bleeding over the auctioneer's list. He took out his handkerchief and wiped them carefully – he had no tears to staunch – and bound up the worst finger with studious deliberation. Apathy succeeded frenzy, and, utterly dazed, he sat down on the stairs, for there was nowhere else to sit, and for some minutes the only sound in the empty house was the turning of the leaves of the auctioneer's list.

Suddenly he leapt to his feet: another sound had broken the silence, and it was one that he seemed to have heard only yesterday: a sound so familiar in his home, so home-like in itself, that it seemed even now to give the lie to his wild and staring eyes.

It was the sound of wheels in the gravel drive.

CHAPTER II
THE BREAKING OF THE NEWS

Harry was in three minds in as many seconds: he would hide, he would rush out and learn the truth, he would first see who it was that had followed him at such an hour. The last impulse prevailed, and the study was the room from which to peep. Harry crept in on tiptoe, past the bookshelves eloquently bare, to the bow-window with the drawn Venetian blinds. Slightly raising one of the laths, he could see everything as the cab drew up at the steps.

The cab-door was flung open and out sprang an utter stranger to Harry Ringrose. This was a middle-aged man of the medium height, wearing a somewhat shabby tall hat and a frock-coat which shone unduly in the strong sunlight. He had a fresh complexion, a reddish moustache streaked with grey, a sharp-pointed nose, and a very deep chin which needed shaving; but what struck Harry first and last were the keen, decisive eyes, twinkling behind glasses with gold rims, which went straight to the broken window and surveyed it critically before their owner had set foot on the steps. It seemed that the cabman saw it too and made some remark; for the fare turned upon him, paid him and slammed his door, and ordered him off in a very peremptory voice which Harry heard distinctly. The cab turned in the sweep

and disappeared among the trees. Then the stranger came slowly up the steps, with his eyes once more fixed upon the broken window. In another moment they had run like lightning over the face of the house, and, before Harry had time to move, had met his own.

The stranger raised his eyebrows, shook his head, and pointed to the front door. Harry went to it, shot the bolts back, turned the key, and flung the door wide open. He was trembling now with simple terror. His tongue would not ask what had happened. It was like standing to be shot, and having to give the signal to the firing party.

The other seemed to feel it almost equally: his fresh face was pale, and his quick eyes still with sorrow and compunction. It was evident he knew the worst. If only he would tell it unasked!

"My name is Lowndes," he began at last. "Gordon Lowndes – you must have heard of me?"

"I – I don't remember it," stammered Harry at the second attempt.

"I stayed here several times while you were in Africa. I was here in February."

"Yes, now I remember your name: it was in the last letter I had."

He could say this calmly; and yet his lips could not frame the question whose answer would indeed be life or death.

"Two years ago I did not know your people," resumed the other. "But for two years I have been their most intimate friend."

"Tell me," at length whispered Harry: "is – either of them – dead?" And he awaited the worst with a sudden fortitude.

Mr. Lowndes shook his head.

"Not that I know of," said he.

"Thank God!" the boy burst out, with the first break in his voice. "Nothing else matters – nothing – nothing! I made sure it was that! Can you swear that my father is all right?"

The other winced. "To the best of my knowledge," said he almost sharply.

"And my mother?"

"Yes, yes, I was with her three days ago."

"Where?"

"In London."

"London! And I passed through London last night! You saw her, you say, three days ago, and she was all right then?"

"I never knew her look better."

"Then tell me the worst and let us have it over! I can see that we have lost our money – but that doesn't matter. Nothing matters if they are all right; won't you come in, sir, and tell me all?"

Harry did not know it, for in his deep emotion he had lost sight of self; but there was something infinitely touching in the way the young man stood aside and ushered his senior into the hall as though it were still his home. Mr. Lowndes shook his head at the unconscious air, and he entered slowly, with it bent. Harry shut the doors behind them, and they turned into the first room. It was the room with the empty bookshelves; and it still smelt of

Harry's father's cheroots.

"You may wonder at my turning up like this," said Lowndes; "but for those fools at the shipping-office I should have met you at the docks. I undertook to do so, and to break the news to you there."

"But how could you know my ship?"

The other smiled.

"Cable," said he; "that was a very simple matter. But if your shipping fellows hadn't sworn you'd be reported from the Lizard, in lots of time for me to get up from Scotland to meet you, I should never have run down there as I was induced to do on business the night before last. I should have let the business slide. As it was the telegram reached me last night in Glasgow, when I knew it was too late to keep you out of this. Still, I timed myself to get here five minutes before you, and should have done it if my train hadn't been forty minutes late. It – it must have been the devil's own quarter-of-an-hour for you, Ringrose! Have a drop of this before we go on; it'll do you good."

He took a flask from his pocket and half filled the cup with raw whisky, which Harry seized gratefully and drained at a gulp. In truth, the shock of the morning, after the night's excitement, had left him miserably faint. The spirit revived him a little.

"You are very kind to me," he said, returning the cup. "You must be a great friend of my parents for them to give you this job, and a good friend to take it on! Now, if you please, tell me every mortal thing; you will tell me nothing I cannot bear; but I

am sure you are too kind to keep anything back."

Lowndes was gazing with a shrewd approval upon the plucky young fellow, in whom, indeed, disappointment and disaster had so far awakened only what was best. At the last words, however, the quick eyes fell behind the gold-rimmed glasses in a way that made Harry wonder whether he had indeed been told the worst. And yet there was already more than enough to account for the other's embarrassment; and he determined not to add to it by unnecessary or by impatient questions.

"You are doubtless aware," began Lowndes, "that the iron trade in this country has long been going from bad to worse? You have heard of the bad times, I imagine, before to-day?"

Harry nodded: he had heard of the bad times as long as he could remember. But because the happy conditions of his own boyhood had not been affected by the cry, he had believed that it was nothing else. He was punished now.

"The times," proceeded Lowndes, "have probably been bad since your childhood. How old are you now?"

"Twenty-one to-day."

"To-day!"

"Go on," said Harry, hoarsely. "Don't be sorry for me. I deserve very little sympathy." His hands were in the pockets he had wilfully emptied of every coin.

"When you were five years old," continued Lowndes, "the pig-iron your father made fetched over five pounds a ton; before you were seven it was down to two-pounds-ten; it never picked up

again; and for the last ten years it hasn't averaged two pounds. Shall I tell you what that means? For these ten years your father has been losing a few shillings on every ton of pig-iron produced – a few hundred pounds every week of his life!"

"And I was enjoying myself at school, and now in Africa! Oh," groaned Harry Ringrose, "go on, go on; but don't waste any pity on me."

"You may be a very rich man, but that sort of thing can't last for ever. The end is bound to come, and in your father's case it came, practically speaking, several years ago."

"Several years? I don't follow you. He never failed?"

"It would have been better for you all if he had. You have looked upon this place as your own, I suppose, from as far back as you can remember down to this morning?"

"As my father's own – decidedly."

"It has belonged to his bankers for at least five years."

"How do you know?" cried Harry hotly.

"He told me himself, when I first came down here, now eighteen months ago. We met in London, and he asked me down. I was in hopes we might do business together; but it was no go."

"What sort of business?"

"I wanted him to turn the whole thing into a Limited Liability Company," said Gordon Lowndes, reeling off the last three words as though he knew them better than his own name; "I mean those useless blast-furnaces! What good were they doing? None at all. Three bob a ton on the wrong side! That's all the

good they'd done for years, and that's all they were likely to do till times changed. Times never will change – to what they were when you were breeched – but that's a detail. Your father's name down here was as sweet as honey. All he'd got to do was to start an extra carriage or two, put up for Parliament on the winning side, and turn his works into a Limited Liability Company. I'd have promoted it. I'd have seen it through in town. The best men would have gone on the board, and we'd have done the bank so well in shares that they wouldn't have got out of it if they could. We'd have made a spanking good thing of it if only the governor would have listened to reason. He wouldn't; said he'd rather go down with the ship than let in a lot of shareholders. 'Damn the shareholders!' says I. 'Why count the odds in the day of battle?' It's the biggest mistake you can make, Ringrose, and your governor kept on making it! It was in this very room, and he was quite angry with me. He wouldn't let me say another word. And what happens? A year or so later – this last February – he wires me to come down at once. Of course I came, but it was as I thought: the bank's sick of it, and threatens to foreclose. I went to see them; not a bit of good. Roughly speaking, it was a case of either paying off half the mortgage and reconstructing the whole bag of tricks, or going through the courts to beggary. Twenty thousand was the round figure; and I said I'd raise it if it was to be raised."

This speech had barely occupied a minute, so rapidly was it spoken; and there was much of it which Harry, in his utter

ignorance of all such matters, would have found difficult to follow at a much slower rate of utterance. As it was, however, it filled him with distrust of his father's friend, who, on his own showing, had made some proposal dishonourable in the eyes of a high-principled man. Moreover, it came instinctively to Harry that he had caught a first glimpse of the real Gordon Lowndes, with his cunning eyes flashing behind his *pince-nez*, the gestures of a stump orator, and this stream of unintelligible jargon gushing from his lips. The last sentences, however, were plain enough even to Harry's understanding.

"You said you'd raise it," he repeated dryly; "yet you can't have done so."

"I raised ten thousand."

"Only half; well?"

"It was no use."

"My father would refuse to touch it?"

"N-no."

"Then what did he do?"

Lowndes drew back a pace, saying nothing, but watching the boy with twitching eyelids.

"Come, sir, speak out!" cried Harry, "He will tell me himself, you know, when I get back to London."

"He is not there."

"You said he was!"

"I said your mother was."

"Where is my father, then?"

"On the Continent – we think."

"You think? And the – ten thousand pounds?"

"He has it with him," said Lowndes, in a low voice. "I'm sorry to say he – bolted with the lot!"

CHAPTER III
THE SIN OF THE FATHER

"It's a lie!"

The word flew through Harry's teeth as in another century his sword might have flown from its sheath; and so blind was he with rage and horror that he scarcely appreciated its effect on Gordon Lowndes. Never was gross insult more mildly taken. The elder man did certainly change colour for an instant; in another he had turned away with a shrug, and in yet another he was round again with a sad half-smile. Harry glared at him in a growing terror. He saw that he was forgiven; a blow had disconcerted him less.

"I expected you to jump down my throat," observed Lowndes, with a certain twitching of the sharp nose which came and went with the intermittent twinkle in his eyes.

"It is lucky you are not a younger man, or you would have got even more than you expected!"

"For telling you the truth? Well, well, I admire your spirit, Ringrose."

"It is not the truth," said Harry doggedly, his chest heaving, and a cold sweat starting from his skin.

"I wish to God it were not!"

"You mean to tell me my father absconded?"

"That is the word I should have used."

"With ten thousand pounds that did not belong to him?"

"Not exactly that; the money was lent to him, but for another purpose. He has misapplied rather than misappropriated it."

Harry felt his head swimming. Disaster he might bear – but disaster rooted in disgrace! He gazed in mute misery upon the stripped but still familiar room; he breathed hard, and the stale odour of his father's cheroots became a sudden agony in his dilated nostrils. Something told him that what he had heard was true. That did not make it easier to believe – on the bare word of a perfect stranger.

"Proofs!" he gasped. "What proofs have you? Have you any?"

Lowndes produced a pocket-book and extracted a number of newspaper cuttings.

"Yes," sighed he, "I have almost everything that has appeared about it in the papers. It will be cruel reading for you, Ringrose; but you may take it better so than from anybody's lips. The accounts in the local press – the creditors' meetings and so forth – are, however, rather long. Hadn't you better wait until we're on our way back to town?"

"Wait? No, show me something now! I apologise for what I said; I made use of an unpardonable word; but – I don't believe it yet!"

"Here, then," said Lowndes, "if you insist. Here's a single short paragraph from the *P.M.G.* It would appear about the last day in March."

"The day I sailed!" groaned Harry. He took the cutting and

read as follows: —

THE MISSING IRONMASTER

> The Press Association states that nothing further has been ascertained with regard to the whereabouts of Mr. Henry J. Ringrose, the Westmoreland ironmaster, who was last seen on Easter Eve. He has been traced, however, as already reported in these columns, to the Café; Suisse in Dieppe, though no further. The people at the café; persist in stating that their visitor only remained a few hours, so that he would appear to have walked thence into thin air. The police, as usual, are extremely reticent; but inquiry at Scotland Yard has elicited the fact that considerable doubt exists as to whether the missing man's chief creditors will, or can, owing to the character of their claim, take further action in the matter.

"Who are the chief creditors?" asked Harry, returning the cutting with an ashy face.

"Four business friends of your father's, from whom I raised the money in his name."

"Here in the neighbourhood?"

"No, in London; they advanced two thousand five hundred each."

"It was no good, you say?"

"No; the bank was not satisfied."

"So my father ran away with their money and left the works to go to blazes – and my mother to starve?"

Lowndes shrugged his shoulders.

"I apologise again for insulting you, Mr. Lowndes," said the boy, holding out his hand. "You have been a good friend to my poor father, I can see, and I know that you firmly believe what you say. But I never will! No; not if all his friends, and every newspaper in the kingdom, told me it was true!"

"Then what are you to believe?"

"That there has been foul play!"

The elder man turned away with another shrug, and it was some moments before Harry saw his face; when he did it was grave and sympathetic as before, and exhibited no trace of the irritation which it had cost an apparent effort to suppress.

"I am not surprised at that entering your head, Ringrose."

"Has it never entered yours?"

"Everything has; but one weeds out the impossibilities."

"Why is it impossible?" Harry burst out. "It is a good deal likelier than that my father would have done what it's said he did! There's an impossibility, if you like; and you would say so, too, if you had known him better."

Mr. Lowndes shook his head, and smiled sadly as he watched the boy's flaming face through his spectacles.

"You may have known your father, Ringrose, but you don't know human nature, or you wouldn't talk like that. Nothing is impossible – no crime – not even to the best of us – when the

strain becomes more than we can bear. It is a pure question of strain and strength: which is the greater of the two. Every man has his breaking-point; your father was at his for years; it's a mystery to me how he held out so long. You must look at it sensibly, Ringrose. No thinking man will blame him, for the simple reason that every man who thinks knows very well that he might have done the same thing himself under the same pressure. Besides – give him a chance! With ten thousand pounds in his pocket – "

"You're sure he had it in his pocket?" interrupted Harry. These arguments only galled his wounds.

"Or else in a bag; it comes to the same thing."

"In what shape would he have the money?"

"Big notes and some gold."

"Yet foul play's an impossibility!"

"The numbers of the notes are known. Not one of them has turned up."

"I care nothing about that," cried the boy wildly, "though it shows he hasn't spent them himself. Listen to me, Mr. Lowndes. I believe my father is dead, I believe he has been murdered: and I would rather that than what you say! But you claim to have been his friend? You raised this money for him? Very well; take my hand – here in his room – where I can see him now, all the time I'm talking to you – and swear that you will help me to clear this mystery up! We'll inspan the best detective in town, and take him with us to Dieppe, and never leave him till we get at the truth.

I mean to live for nothing else. Swear that you will help me … swear it here … in his own room."

The wild voice had come down to a broken whisper. Next moment it had risen again: the man hesitated.

"Swear it! Swear it! Or you may have been my father's friend, but you are none from this hour to my mother and me."

Lowndes spread his hands in an indulgent gesture.

"Very well! I swear to help you to clear up this – mystery – as long as you think it is one."

"That is all I want. Now tell me when the next train starts for town. It used to be nine-twenty?"

"It is still."

"You are returning to London yourself?"

"Yes, by that train."

"Then let us meet at the station. It is now eight. I – I want to be alone here for an hour or two. No, it will do me good, it will calm me. I feel I have been very rude to you, sir, but I have hardly known what I said. I am beside myself – beside myself!" And Harry Ringrose rushed from the room, and up the bare and sounding stairs of his empty home: it was from his own old bedroom that he heard Lowndes leave the house, and saw a dejected figure climbing the sloping drive with heavy steps.

That hour of leave-taking is not to be described. How the boy harrowed himself wilfully by going into every room and thinking of something that had happened there, and seeing it all again through scalding tears, is a thing to be understood by some, but

pitied rather than commended. There was, however, another and a sounder side to Harry Ringrose, and the prayers he prayed, and the vows he vowed, these were brave, and he meant them all that bitter birthday morning, that was to have been the happiest of all his life. Then his heart was broken but still heroic: there came many a brighter day he would gladly have exchanged for that black one, for the sake of its high resolves, its pure impulses, its noble and undaunted aspirations.

He had one more rencontre before he got away: in the garden he espied their old gardener. It was impossible not to go up and speak to him; and Harry left the old man crying like a child; but he himself had no tears.

"I am glad they left you your job: you will care for things," he had said, as he was going.

"Ay, ay, for the master's sake: he was the best master a man ever had, say what they will."

"But you don't believe what they say?"

The gardener looked blank.

"Do you dare to tell me," cried Harry, "that you believe what they believe?"

It was at this the man broke down; but Harry strode away with bitter resentment in his heart, and so back to the town, with a defiant face for every passer; but this time there were none he knew. At the spot where his old companion had cut him, that affront was recalled for the first time; its meaning was plain enough now; and plain the strange conduct of the railway-porter,

who kept out of his way when Harry reappeared at the station.

Lowndes was there waiting for him, and had not only taken the tickets, but also telegraphed to Mrs. Ringrose; and this moved poor Harry to a shame-faced confession of his improvidence on the way down, and its awful results, in the midst of which the other burst out laughing in his face. Harry was a boy after his own heart; it was a treat to meet anybody who declined to count the odds in the day of battle; but, in any case, Mr. Lowndes claimed the rest of the day as "his funeral." As Harry listened, and thanked his new friend, he had a keen and hostile eye for any old ones; but the train left without his seeing another.

"The works look the same as ever," groaned Harry, as he gazed out on them once more. "I thought they seemed to be doing so splendidly, with all four furnaces in blast."

"They are doing better than for some years past: iron's looking up: the creditors may get their money back yet."

"Thank God for that!"

Lowndes opened his eyes, and the sharp nose twitched amusement.

"If I were in your place that would be the worst part of all. I have no sympathy with creditors as a class."

"I want to be even with them," said Harry through his teeth. "I will be, too, before I die: with every man of them. Hallo! why, this is a first-class carriage! How does that happen? I never looked where we got in; I followed you."

"And I chose that we should travel first."

"But I can't, I won't!" cried Harry, excitedly. "It was monstrous of me last night, but it would be criminal this morning. You sit where you are. I can change into a third at the next station."

"I have a first-class ticket for you," rejoined Lowndes. "You may as well make use of it."

"But when shall I pay you back?"

"Never, my boy! I tell you this is my funeral till I deliver you over to your mother, so don't *you* begin counting the odds; you've nothing to do with them. Besides, you came up like a rocket, and I won't have you go down altogether like the stick!"

Nor did he; and Harry soon saw that his companion was not to be judged by his shabby top-hat and his shiny frock-coat; he was evidently a very rich man. Where the boy had flung half-crowns overnight – where half-a-crown was more than ample – his elder now scattered half-sovereigns, and they had an engaged carriage the whole way. At Preston an extravagant luncheon-basket was taken in, with a bottle of champagne and some of the best obtainable cigars, for the quality of both of which Gordon Lowndes made profuse apologies. But Harry felt a new being after his meal, for grief and excitement had been his bread all day, and the wine warmed his heart to the strange man with whom he had been thrown in such dramatic contact. Better company, in happier circumstances, it would have been difficult to imagine; and it was clear that, with quip and anecdote, he was doing his utmost to amuse Harry and to take him out of his

trouble. But to no purpose: the boy was perforce a bad listener, and at last confessed it in as many words.

"My mind is so full of my father," added Harry, "that I have hardly given my dear mother a thought; but my life is hers from to-day. You said she was in Kensington; in lodgings, I suppose?"

"No, in a flat. It's very small, but there's a room for you, and it's been ready for weeks."

"What is she living on?"

"Less than half her private income by marriage settlement; that was all there was left, and five-eighths of it she would insist on making over to the men who advanced the ten thousand. She is paying them two-and-a-half per cent. on their money and attempting to live on a hundred and fifty a year!"

"I'll double it before long!"

"Then she'll pay them five."

"They shall have every farthing one day; and the other creditors, they shall have their twenty shillings in the pound if I live long enough. Now let me have the rest of those cuttings. I want to know just how we stand – and what they say."

Out came the pocket-book once more. They were an hour's run nearer town when Harry spoke again.

"May I keep them?" he said.

"Surely."

"Thank you. I take it the bank's all right – and thank God the other liabilities up there are not large. As to the flight with that ten thousand – I don't believe it yet. There has been foul play.

You mark my words."

Lowndes looked out at the flying fields.

"Which of you saw him last?" continued Harry.

"Your mother, when he left for town."

"When was that?"

"The morning after Good Friday."

"When did he cross?"

"That night."

"Did he write to anybody?"

"Not that I know of."

"Not to my mother?"

Lowndes leant forward across the compartment: there was a shrewd look in the spectacled eyes.

"Not that I know of," he said again, but with a different intonation. "I have often wondered!"

"Did you ask her?"

"Yes; she said not."

"Then what do you mean?" cried Harry indignantly. "Do you think my mother would tell you a lie?"

"Your mother is the most loyal little woman in England," was the reply. "I certainly think that she would keep her end up in the day of battle."

Harry ground his teeth. He could have struck the florid able face whose every look showed a calm assumption of his father's infamy.

"You take it all for granted!" he fumed; "you, who say you

were his friend. How am I to believe in such friendship? True friends are not so ready to believe the worst. Oh! it makes my blood boil to hear you talk; it makes me hate myself for accepting kindness at your hands. You have been very kind, I know," added Harry in a breaking voice; "but – but for God's sake don't let us speak about it any more!" And he flung up a newspaper to hide his quivering lips; for now he was hoping against hope and believing against belief.

Was it not in black and white in all the papers? How could it be otherwise than true? Rightly or wrongly, the world had found his father guilty; and was he to insult all and sundry who failed to repudiate the verdict of the world?

Harry was one who could not endure to be in the wrong with anybody: his weakness in every quarrel was an incongruous hankering for the good opinion of the enemy, and this was intensified in the case of one who was obviously anxious to be his friend. To appear ungracious or ungrateful was equally repugnant to Harry Ringrose, and no sooner was he master of his emotion than he lowered the paper in order to add a few words which should remove any such impression.

Gordon Lowndes sat dabbing his forehead with a handkerchief that he made haste to put away, as though it was his eyes he had been wiping, which indeed was Harry's first belief. But the gold-rimmed glasses were not displaced, and, so far from a tear, there was an expression behind them for which Harry could not then find the name; nevertheless, it made him hold his

tongue after all.

CHAPTER IV
THE NEW HOME

Harry had hoped that his companion would go his own way when they got to London; but it was "his funeral," as Mr. Lowndes kept saying, and he seemed determined to conduct it to the end. Euston was crowded, where Lowndes behaved like a man in his element, dealing abuse and largesse with equal energy and freedom, and getting Harry and all his boxes off in the first cab which left the station. But he himself was at Harry's side; and there he sat until the cab stopped, half-an-hour later, beneath a many-windowed red-brick pile thrown up in the angle of two back streets.

A porter in uniform ran up to help with the luggage, and, as Harry jumped out, a voice with a glad sob in it hailed him from a first-floor window. He waved his hat, and, with a pang, saw a white head vanishing: it had not been white when he went away. Next moment he was flying up the stone stairs three at a time; and on the first landing, at an open door, there was the sweet face, all aged and lined and lighted with sorrow and shame and love; there were the softest arms in all the world, spread wide to catch and clasp him to the warmest heart.

It was a long time afterwards, in a room which made the old furniture look very big, the old pictures very sad, that Mr.

Lowndes was remembered for the first time. They looked into the narrow passage: the boxes blocked it, but he was not there; they called, but there was no answer.

"Have we no servant, mother?"

"We have no room for one. The porter's wife comes up and helps me."

"I can help you! Many a meal have I cooked in Africa."

"My boy, what a home-coming!"

It was the first word about that, and with it came the first catch in Harry's mother's voice.

"No, mother, thank God I am back to take care of you; and oh! I am so thankful we are to be alone to-night."

"But I am sorry he did not come in."

"He was quite right not to."

"But he must have paid for the cab – I will look out of the window – yes, it has gone – and I had the money ready in case you forgot!"

Harry could have beaten himself, but he could not tell his mother just then that he had arrived without a penny, and that Lowndes had not only paid the cabman, but must be pounds out of pocket by him on the day.

"Don't you like him, dear?" said his mother, divining that he did not.

"I do and I don't," said Harry bluntly.

"He has been so kind to me!"

"Yes; he is kind enough."

"Did you not think it good of him to rush from Scotland to meet you and then bring you all the way to your – new – home?"

"It was almost too good. I would have been happier alone," said Harry, forgetting all else in his bitter remembrance of some speeches Lowndes had made.

"That is not very grateful, my boy. You little know what he has been to me!"

"Has he done so much?"

"Everything – all through! You see what I have saved from the wreck? It was he who went to bid for me at the sale!"

"You bought them in, mother?"

"Yes; I could accept nothing from the creditors. That is the one point on which I quarrel with Mr. Lowndes; but we have agreed to differ. Why do you dislike him, Harry?"

"Mother, don't you know?"

"I cannot imagine."

"He thinks the worst – about my father."

It was the first mention of the father's name. Mrs. Ringrose was silent for many moments.

"I know he does," she said at length.

"Then how can you bear the sight of him?" her boy burst out.

"It is no worse than all the world thinks."

And Mrs. Ringrose sighed; but now her voice was abnormally calm, as with a grief too great for tears.

The long May evening had not yet closed in, and in the ensuing silence the cries of children in the street below, and the Last

Waltz of Weber from the piano of the flat above, came with equal impertinence through the open windows. Mrs. Ringrose was in the rocking-chair in which she had nursed her only child. Her back was to the light, but she was rocking slowly. Her son stood over her with horror deepening in his face, but hers he could not see, only the white head which two years ago had been hardly grey. He dropped upon his knees and seized her hands; they were cold; and he missed her rings.

"Mother – mother! You don't think it too?"

No answer.

"You do! Oh, mother, how are we to go on living after this? What makes you think it? Quick! has he written to you?"

Mrs. Ringrose started violently. "Who put that into your head?" she cried out sharply.

"Nobody. I only wondered if there had been a letter, and I asked Lowndes, but he said you said there had not."

"Was that not enough for you?"

"Oh, mother, tell me the truth!"

The poor lady groaned aloud.

"God knows I meant to keep it to myself!" she whispered. "And yet – oh, how could I destroy his letter? And I thought you ought to see it – some day – not yet."

"Mother, I must see it now."

"You will never breathe it to a soul?"

"Never without your permission."

"No one must ever dream I heard one word after he left me!"

"No one ever shall."

"I will get the letter."

His hand was trembling when he took it from her.

"It was written on the steamer, you see."

"It may be a forgery," said Harry, in a loud voice that trembled too. Yet there was a ring of real hope in it. He was thinking of Lowndes in the train. He had caught him mopping a wet brow. He had surprised a guilty look – yes, guilty was the word – he had found it at last – in those shifty eyes behind the *pince-nez*. If villainy should be at the bottom of it all, and Lowndes at the bottom of the villainy!

If the letter should prove a forgery after all!

He had it in his hand. He carried it to the failing light. He hardly dared to look at it, but when he did a cry escaped him.

It was a cry of disappointment and abandoned hope.

Minutes passed without another sound; then the letter was slowly folded up and restored to its envelope, and dropped into Harry's pocket, before his arms went round his mother's neck.

"Mother, let me burn it, so that no eyes but ours shall ever see!"

"Burn it? Burn the last letter I may ever have from him? Give it to me!" And she pressed it to her bosom.

Harry hung his head in a long and wretched silence.

"We must forget him, mother," he said at last.

"Harry, he was a good father to you, he loved you dearly. He was mad when he did what he has done. You must never say that

again."

"I meant we must forget what he has done – "

"Ah God! if I could!"

"And only think of him as he used to be."

"Yes; yes; we will try."

"It would be easier – don't you think – if we never spoke of this?"

"We never will, unless we must."

"Let us think that we just failed like other people. But, mother, I will work all my life to pay off everybody! I will work for you till I drop. Goodness knows what at; but I learnt to work for fun in Africa, I am ready to work in earnest, and, thank God, I have all my life before me."

"You are twenty-one to-day!"

"Yes, I start fair in every way."

"That this should be your twenty-first birthday! My boy – my boy!"

The long May twilight deepens into night; the many windows of the red-brick block are lit up one by one; and the many lives go on. Below, at the curb, a doctor's brougham and a hansom are waiting end to end; and from that top flat a young couple come scuttling down the stone stairs, he in a crush-hat, she with a flower in her hair, and theirs is the hansom. The flat below has similar tenants, but here the doctor is, and the young man paces his desolate parlour with a ghastly face.

And in the flat below that it is Weber's Last Waltz once more,

and nothing else, by the hour together. And in the flat below that – the flat that would have gone into one room of their old home – Harry Ringrose and his mother are still steeling themselves and one another to face the future and to live down the past.

The light has been lowered in their front room and transferred for a space to the tiny dining-room at the back, which looks down into the building's well, but now it is the front windows which stand out once more. Twelve o'clock comes, and there is a tinkle of homing hansoms (the brougham has gone away masterless), and the public-house at the corner empties noisily, but the light in those front windows remains the brightest in the mansions. And Weber is done with at last; but the two voices below go on and on and on into the night; nor do they cease when their light shifts yet again into the front bedroom.

It is two in the morning, and the young couple have come home crumpled from their dance, and their feet drag dreadfully on the stairs, and the doctor has taken their hansom, and the young man below them is drunk with joy, when Harry Ringrose kisses his mother for the twentieth last time and really goes. But he is too excited to sleep. In half-an-hour he creeps back into the passage. Her light is still burning. He goes in.

"You spoke of Innes, mother?"

"Yes; I feel sure he would be the first to help you."

"I cannot go to him. I can go to nobody. We must start afresh with fresh friends, and I'll begin answering advertisements to-morrow. Yet – Innes has helped me already!"

Mrs. Ringrose has been reading herself asleep, like a practical woman, out of one of the new magazines he has brought home. The sweet face on the pillow is wonderfully calm (for it is not from his mother that Harry inherits his excitability), but at this it looks puzzled.

"When has he helped you?"

"To-night, mother! There was a motto he had when I was at his school. He used to say it in his sermons, and he taught me to say it in my heart."

"Well, my boy?"

"It came back to me just now. It puts all that we have been saying in a nutshell. May I tell you, mother?"

"I am waiting to hear."

"'Money lost – little lost.'"

"It's easy to say that."

"'Honour lost – much lost.'"

"I call it everything."

"No, mother, wait! 'Pluck lost – all lost!' It's only pluck that's everything. We must never lose that, mother, we must never lose that!"

"God grant we never may."

CHAPTER V
A WET BLANKET

The morning sun filled the front rooms of the flat, and the heavy hearts within were the lighter for its cheery rays. Sorrow may outlive the night, and small joy come in the morning; but yet, if you are young and sanguine, and the month be May, and the heavens unspotted, and the air nectar, then you may suddenly find yourself thrilling with an unwarrantable delight in mere life, and that in the very midst of life's miseries. It was so with young Harry Ringrose, on the morning following his tragic home-coming; it was even so with Harry's mother, who was as young at heart as her boy, and fully as sanguine in temperament. They had come down from the high ground of the night. The everyday mood had supervened. Harry was unpacking his ostrich eggs in the narrow passage, and thoroughly enjoying a pipe; in her own room his mother sat cleaning her silver, incredible contentment in her face, because her boy was in and out all the morning, and the little flat was going to bring them so close together.

"That's the lot," said Harry when the bed was covered with the eggs. "Now, mother, which do you think the best pair?"

"They all look the same to me."

"They are not. Look at this pair in my hands. Can't you see

that they're much bigger and finer than the rest?"

"I daresay they are."

"They're for you, mother, these two."

And he set them on the table among the spoons and forks and plate-powder. She kissed him, but looked puzzled.

"What shall you do with the rest?"

"Sell them! Five shillings a pair; five tens are fifty; that's two-pound-ten straight away."

"I won't have you sell them!"

"They are mine, mother, and I must."

"You'll be sorry for it when you have a good situation."

"Ah, when!" said Harry, and he was out again with a laugh.

A noise of breaking wood came from the passage. He was opening another case. His mother frowned at her miniature in the spoon she had in hand, and when he returned, brandishing a brace of Kaffir battle-axes, she would hardly look at them.

"I feel sure Wintour Phipps would take you into his office," said Mrs. Ringrose.

"I never heard of him. Who is he?"

"A solicitor; your father paid for his stamps when he was articled."

"An old friend, then?"

"Not of mine, for I never saw him; but he was your father's godson."

"It comes to the same thing, and I can't go to him, mother. Face old friends I cannot! You and I are starting afresh, dear;

I'm prepared to answer every advertisement in the papers, and to take any work I can get, but not to go begging favours of people who would probably cut us in the street. I don't expect to get a billet instantly; that's why I mean to sell all this truck – for the benefit of the firm."

"You had much better write an article about your experiences, and get it into some magazine, as you said you would last night."

Indeed, they had discussed every possible career in the night, among others that of literature, which the mother deemed her son competent to follow on the strength of certain contributions to his school magazine, and of the winning parody in some prize competition of ancient history. He now said he would try his hand on the article some day, but it would take time, and would anybody accept it when written? That was the question, said Harry, and his mother had a characteristic answer.

"If you wrote to the Editor of *Uncle Tom's Magazine*," said she, "and told him you had taken it in as long as you could remember – I bought in the bound volumes for you, my boy – I feel sure that he would accept it and pay for it too."

"Well, we'll see," said Harry, with a laugh. "Meanwhile we must find somebody to accept all these curios, and to pay for them. I see no room for them here."

"There is certainly very little."

"I wonder who would be the best people to go to?"

Mrs. Ringrose considered.

"I should try Whitbreds," said she at last, "since you are so

set upon it. They sell everything; and I have had all my groceries from them for so many years that they can hardly refuse to take something from us."

To the simple-hearted lady, whom fifty years had failed to sophisticate, there seemed nothing unreasonable in the expectations which she formed of others, for they were one and all founded upon the almost fanatical loyalty which was a guiding impulse of her own warm heart. In her years of plenty it was ever the humblest friend who won her warmest welcome, and the lean years to come proved powerless to check this generous spirit. Mrs. Ringrose would be illogically staunch to tradesmen whom she had dealt with formerly, and would delight their messengers with unnecessary gratuities because she had been accustomed to give all her life; but so unconscious was she of undue liberality on her part that she was apt to credit others with her own extravagance in charity, and to feel it bitterly when not done by as perhaps she alone would have done. It simply astounded her when three of her husband's old friends, who had in no way suffered by him, successively refused her secret supplication for a desk for her boy in their offices: she would herself have slept on the floor to have given the child of any one of them a bed in her little flat.

But the treadmill round in search of work was not yet begun, though Harry was soon enough to find himself upon the wheel. Even as he unpacked his native weapons a weighty step was ascending the common stair, and the electric bell rang long and aggressively just as Mrs. Ringrose decided that it would be worth

her son's while to let his trophies go for fifty pounds.

"A tall man in a topper!" whispered Harry, bursting quietly in. "I saw him through the ground glass; who can it be?"

"Your Uncle Spencer," said Mrs. Ringrose, looking straight at Harry over the wash-leather and the mustard-pot.

"Uncle Spencer!" Harry looked aghast. "What's bringing him, mother?"

"I wrote to him directly I got the telegram."

"You never said so!"

"No; I knew you wouldn't be pleased."

"Need I see him?"

"It is you he has come to see. Go, my boy; take him into the sitting-room, and I will join you when you have had your talk. Meanwhile, remember that he is your mother's brother, and will exert his influence to get you a situation; he has come so promptly, I shouldn't be surprised if he has got you one already! And you are letting him ring twice!"

Indeed, the avuncular thumb had already pressed the button longer than was either necessary or polite, and Harry went to the door with feelings which he had difficulty in concealing as he threw it open. Uncle Spencer stood without in a stiff attitude and in sombre clerical attire; he beheld his nephew without the glimmer of a smile on his funereal, bearded countenance, while his large hand was slow in joining Harry's, and its pressure perfunctory.

"So sorry to keep you waiting, but – but I forgot we hadn't

a servant," fibbed Harry to be polite. "Do come in, Uncle Spencer."

"I thought nobody could be at home," was the one remark with which the clergyman entered; and Harry sighed as he heard that depressing voice again.

The Reverend Spencer Walthew was indeed the survival of a type of divine now rare in the land, but not by any means yet extinct. His waistcoat fastened behind his back in some mysterious manner, and he never smiled. He was the vicar of a semi-fashionable parish in North London, where, however, he preached in a black gown to empty pews, while a mixed choir behaved abominably behind his back. As a man he was neither fool nor hypocrite, but the natural enemy of pleasure and enthusiasm, and one who took a grim though unconscious satisfaction in disheartening his neighbour. No two proverbial opposites afford a more complete contrast than was presented by Mr. Walthew and Mrs. Ringrose; and yet at the bottom of the brother's austerity there lay one or two of the sister's qualities, for those who cared to dig deep enough in such stony and forbidding ground.

Harry had never taken to his uncle, who had frowned on Lord's and tabooed the theatre on the one occasion of his spending a part of his holidays in North London; and Mr. Walthew was certainly the last person he wanted to see that day. It made Harry Ringrose throb and tingle to look on the clergyman and to think of his father; they had never been friendly together; and if one syllable

was said against the man who was down – no matter what he had done – the son of that man was prepared to make such a scene as should secure an immunity from further insult. But here Harry was indulging in fears as unworthy as his determination, and he was afterwards ashamed of both.

The clergyman began in an inevitable strain, dwelling solemnly on the blessing of adversity in general, before proceeding to point out that the particular misfortunes which had overwhelmed Harry and his mother could not, by any stretch of the imagination, be regarded as adventitious or accidental, since they were obviously the deliberate punishment of a justly irate God, and as such to be borne with patience, meekness, and humility. Harry chafed visibly, thinking of his innocent mother in the next room; but, to do the preacher justice, his sermon was a short one, and the practical issue was soon receiving the attention it deserved.

"I understand, Henry," said Mr. Walthew, "that you did obtain some useful and remunerative employment in Africa, which you threw up in order to come home and enjoy yourself. It is, of course, a great pity that you were so ill-advised and improvident; but may I ask in what capacity you were employed, and at what salary?"

"I don't admit that I was either ill-advised or improvident," cried Harry, with disrespectful warmth. "I didn't go out to work, but for my health, and I only worked for the fun of it, and am jolly glad I did come back to take care of my mother and to work

for her. I was tutor in a Portuguese planter's family, and he gave me seventy pounds a year."

"And your board?"

"And my board."

"It was very good. It is a great deal better than anything you are likely to get here. How long were you with the planter?"

"Ten months."

"Only ten months! You must allow an older head than yours to continue thinking it is a pity you are not there still. Now, as to money matters, your father would doubtless cease sending you remittances once you were earning money for yourself?"

"No, he sent me fifty pounds last Christmas."

"Then, at any rate, you have brought enough home to prevent your being a burden to your mother? Between fifty and a hundred pounds, I take it?"

Harry shook his head; it was hot with a shame he would have owned to anybody in the world but Mr. Walthew.

"Not fifty pounds?"

"No."

"How much, then?"

"Not a penny!"

The clergyman opened his eyes and lifted his hands in unaffected horror. Harry could not help smiling in his face – could not have helped it if he had stood convicted of a worse crime than extravagance.

"You have spent every penny – and you smile!" the uncle

cried. "You come home to find your mother at starvation's door – and you smile! You have spent her substance in – in – "

"Riot!" suggested Harry wickedly. "Sheer riot and evil living! Oh, Uncle Spencer, don't look like that; it's not exactly true; but, can't you see, I had no idea what was going to happen here at home? I thought I was coming back to live on the fat of the land, and when I'd made my miserable pile I spent it – like a man, I thought – like a criminal, if you will. Whichever it was, you must know which I feel now. And whatever I have done I am pretty badly punished. But at least I mean to take my punishment like a man, and to work like one, too, at any mortal thing I can find to do."

Mr. Walthew looked down his nose at the carpet on which he stood. He had sense enough to see that the lad was in earnest now, and that it was of no use to reproach him further with what was past.

"It seems to me, Henry," he said at length, "that it's a case of ability rather than of will. You say you are ready to do anything; the question is – what can you do?"

"Not many things," confessed Henry, in a humbler voice; "but I can learn, Uncle Spencer – I will do my best to learn."

"How old are you, Henry?"

"Twenty-one."

Harry was about to add "yesterday," but refrained from making his statement of fact an appeal for sympathy; for the man in him was coming steadily to the front.

"Then you would leave school in the Sixth Form?"

Harry had to shake his head.

"Perhaps you were on the Modern Side? All the better if you were!"

"No, I was not; I left in the form below the Sixth."

"Then you know nothing about book-keeping, for example?"

"I wish I did."

"But you are a fair mathematician?"

"It was my weakest point."

The clergyman's expression was more melancholy than ever. "It is a great pity – a very great pity, indeed," said he. "However, I see writing materials on the table, and shall be glad if you will write me down your full name, age, and address."

Harry sat down and wrote what was required of him in the pretty, rather scholarly hand which looked like and was the imitation of a prettier and more scholarly one. Then he unsuspectingly blotted the sheet and handed it to Mr. Walthew, who instantly began shaking his head in the most depressing fashion.

"It is as I feared," said he; "you do not even write a fair commercial hand. It is well enough at a distance," and he held the sheet at arm's length, "but it is not too easy to read, and I fear it would never do in an office. There are several City men among my parishioners; I had hoped to go to one or two of them with a different tale, but now I fear – I greatly fear. However, one can but try. You do not fancy any of the professions, I suppose? Not

that you could afford one if you did."

"Are the fees so high?" asked poor Harry, in a broken-spirited voice.

"High enough to be prohibitive in your case, though it might not be so if you had saved your money," the clergyman took care to add. "Of which particular profession were you thinking?"

"We – we have been talking it all over, and we did speak of – the Law."

"Out of the question; it would cost hundreds, and you wouldn't make a penny for years."

"Then there is – schoolmastering."

"It leads to nothing; besides – excuse me, Henry – but do you think you are scholar enough yourself to – to presume to – teach others?"

Harry fetched a groan.

"I don't know. I managed well enough in Mozambique, but it was chiefly teaching English. I only know that I would work day and night to improve myself, if once I could get a chance."

"Well," said Uncle Spencer, "it is just possible that I may hear in my parish of some delicate or backward boy whom you would be competent to ground, and if so I shall recommend you as far as I conscientiously can. But I cannot say I am sanguine, Henry; it would be a different thing if you had worked harder at school and got into the Sixth Form. I suppose no other career has occurred to you as feasible? I confess I find the range sadly restricted by the rather discreditable limitations to which you own."

Another career had occurred to Harry, and it was the one to which he felt most drawn, but by inclination rather than by conscious aptitude, so that he would have said nothing about it had not Mrs. Ringrose joined them at this moment. Her brother greeted her with a tepid salute, then dryly indicated the drift of the conversation, enlarging upon the vista of hopeless disability which it had revealed in Henry, and concluding with a repetition of his last question.

"No," said Harry rather sullenly, "I can think of nothing else I'm fit for unless I sweep a crossing; and then you would say I hadn't money for the broom!"

"But, surely, my boy," cried his mother, "you have forgotten what you said to me last night?"

Harry frowned and glared, for it is one thing to breathe your ridiculous aspirations to the dearest of mothers in the dead of night, and quite another thing to confide them to a singularly unsympathetic uncle in broad daylight. But Mrs. Ringrose had turned to her brother, and she would go on: "There is one thing he tells me he would rather do than anything else in the world – and I am sure he could do it best."

"What is that?"

"Write!"

Harry groaned. Mr. Walthew raised his eyebrows. Mrs. Ringrose sat triumphant.

"Write what, my dear Mary?"

"Articles – poems – books."

A grim resignation was given to Harry, and he laughed aloud as the clergyman shrugged his shoulders and shook his head.

"On his own showing," said Uncle Spencer, "I should doubt whether he has – er – the education – for that."

Mrs. Ringrose looked displeased, and even dangerous, for the moment; but she controlled her feelings on perceiving that the boy himself was now genuinely amused.

"You are quite mistaken," she contented herself with saying. "Have I never shown you the parody on Gray's Elegy he won a guinea for when he was fourteen? Then I will now."

And the fond lady was on her feet, only to find her boy with his back to the door, and laughter, shame and anger fighting for his face.

"You shall do no such thing, mother," Harry said firmly. "That miserable parody!"

"It was nothing of the kind. It began, 'The schoolbell tolls the knell – '"

"Hush, mother!"

"'Of parting play'" she added wilfully.

Mr. Walthew's eyebrows had reached their apogee.

"That is quite enough, Mary," said he. "I disapprove of parodies, root and branch; they are invariably vulgar; and when the poem parodied has a distinctly religious tendency, as in this case, they are also irreverent and profane. I am only glad to see that Henry is himself ashamed of his lucubration. If he should write aught of a religious character, and get it into print – a

difficult matter, Henry, for one so indifferently equipped – my satisfaction will not be lessened by my surprise. Meanwhile let him return to those classics he should never have neglected, for by the dead languages only can we hope to obtain a mastery of our own; and I, for my part, will do my best in what, after all, I regard as a much less hopeless direction. Good-bye, Mary. I trust that I shall see you both on Sunday."

But Mrs. Ringrose would not let him go without another word for her boy's parody.

"When I read it to Mr. Lowndes," said she, to Harry's horror, "he said that he thought that a lad who could write so well at fourteen should have a future before him. So you see everybody is not of your opinion, Spencer; and Mr. Lowndes saw nothing vulgar."

"Do I understand you to refer," said Mr. Walthew, bristling, "to the person who has done me the honour of calling upon me in connection with your affairs?"

"He is the only Mr. Lowndes I know."

"Then let me tell you, Mary, that his is not a name to conjure with in my hearing. I should say, however, that he is the last person to be a competent judge of vulgarity or – or other matters."

"Then you dislike him too?" cried poor Mrs. Ringrose.

"Do you?" said Mr. Walthew, turning to Harry; and uncle and nephew regarded one another for the first time with mutually interested eyes.

"Not I," said Harry stoutly. "He has been my mother's best friend."

"I am sorry to hear it," the clergyman said; "what's more, I don't believe it."

"But he has been and he is," insisted the lady; "you little know what he has done for me."

"I wouldn't trust his motives," said her brother. "I am sorry to say it, Mary; he is very glib and plausible, I know; but – he doesn't strike me as an honest man!"

Mrs. Ringrose was troubled and vexed, and took leave of the visitor with a face as sombre as his own; but as for Harry, he recalled his own feelings on the journey up, and he felt less out of sympathy with his uncle than he had ever done in his life before. But Mr. Walthew was not one to go without an irritating last word, and in the passage he had his chance. He had remarked on the packing cases, and Harry had dived into his mother's room and returned with an ostrich egg in each hand, of which he begged his uncle's acceptance, saying that he would send them by the parcels post. Mr. Walthew opened his eyes but shook his head.

"I could not dream of taking them from you," said he, "in – in your present circumstances, Henry."

"But I got them for nothing," said Harry, at once hurt and nettled. "I got a dozen of them, and any amount of assegais and things, all for love, when I was on the Zambesi. I should like you and my aunt to have something."

"Really I could not think of it; but, if I did, I certainly should not permit you to incur the expense of parcel postage."

"Pooh! uncle, it would only be sixpence or a shilling."

"*Only* sixpence *or* a shilling! As if they were one and the same thing! You talk like a millionaire, Henry, and it pains me to hear you, after the conversation we have had."

Harry wilfully observed that he never had been able to study the shillings, and his uncle stood shocked on the threshold, as indeed he was meant to be.

"Then it's about time," said he, "that you did learn to study them – and the sixpences – and the pence. You were smoking a pipe when I came. I confess I was surprised, not merely because the habit is a vile one, for it is unhappily the rule rather than the exception, but because it is also an extravagant habit. You may say – I have heard young men say – that it only costs you a few pence a week. Then, pray, study those few pence – and save them. It is your duty. And as for what you say you got for nothing, the ostrich eggs and so forth, take them and sell them at the nearest shop! That also is your bounden duty, unless you wish to be a burden to your mother in her poverty; and I am very sorry that you should compel me to tell you so by talking of not 'studying' the shillings."

He towered in the doorway, a funereal monument of righteous horror; and once more Harry held out his hand, and let his elder go with the last word. The lad realised, in the first place, that he had just heard one or two things which were perfectly true; and

yet, in the second, he was certain that he could not have replied without insolence – after his own prior and virtuous resolve to sell the curios himself. Now he never would sell them – so he felt for the moment; and he found himself closing the door as though there were illness in the flat, in his anxiety to keep from banging it as he desired.

"I fear your Uncle Spencer has been vexing you too," his mother said; "and yet I know that he will do his best to secure you a post."

"Oh, that's all right, mother; he was kind enough; it's only his way," said Harry, for he could see that his mother was sufficiently put out as it was.

"It's a way that makes me miserable," said poor Mrs. Ringrose, with a tear in her voice. "Did you hear what he said to me? He said what I never shall forgive."

"Not about those rotten verses?"

"No – about Mr. Lowndes. Your uncle said he didn't think him an honest man."

CHAPTER VI
THE GAME OF BLUFF

An inscrutable note reached Harry by the last post that night. It was from Gordon Lowndes, and it ran: —

"Leadenhall Street, E.C.
"May 20.

"Dear Ringrose, – If you are still of the same mind about a matter which we need not name, let me hear from you by return, and I'll 'inspan' the best detective in the world. He is at present cooling his heels at Scotland Yard, but may be on the job again any day, so why not on ours?

"Perhaps you will kindly drop me a line in any case, as I await your instructions.

"Yours faithfully,
"GORDON LOWNDES."

"What is it, my boy?"

"A line from Lowndes."

"Am I not to see it?"

"I would rather you didn't, mother dear."

"You haven't offended him, I hope?"

"Oh, no, it's about something we spoke of in the train; it has come to nothing, that's all."

And Mrs. Ringrose gathered, as she was intended to gather,

that some iron or other had already been in the fire – and come out again. She said no more. As for Harry, the final proof of his father's dishonour had put out of his mind the oath which he had made Lowndes swear in that almost happy hour when he could still refuse to believe; and the sting of the reminder, and of the contrast between his feelings then and now, was such that he was determined his mother should not bear it with him. But yet, with all the pain it gave, the note from Lowndes both puzzled and annoyed him; it was as though there were some subtle thing between the lines, a something in a cipher to which he had not the key; and he resented being forced to reply. After long deliberation, however, this was written and rewritten, and taken stealthily to the pillar in the small hours: —

"Kensington, May 21st.

"Dear Mr. Lowndes, – I am not of the same mind about the matter which you very kindly do not name. I hope that neither you nor I will ever have occasion to name it again, and that you will forgive me for what I said yesterday before I could believe the truth. I hardly know now what I did say, but I do honestly apologise, and only beg of you never to speak, and, if possible, not to think, of it again.

"Believe me that I am grateful for your kind offer, and more than grateful for all your goodness to my mother.

"Yours sincerely,

"HARRY RINGROSE."

This had the effect of bringing Lowndes to the flat the

following afternoon, in the high spirits which were characteristic of the normal man; it was only natural they should have deserted him the day before; and yet when Harry came in and found him taking tea with his mother, radiant, voluble, hilarious, the change was such that he seemed to the boy another being. Humour shone through the gold-rimmed glasses and trembled at the tip of the pointed nose. Harry had never seen a jollier face, or listened to so boisterous a laugh; and they were what he needed, for he had come in doubly embittered and depressed.

He had been to the great house which had supplied his mother with her groceries for so many years. He had seen a member of the firm, a gentleman of presence and aplomb, in whose courtly company Harry and his old clothes were painfully outclassed. The resultant and inevitable repulse was none the less galling from being couched in terms of perfectly polite condescension. Harry carried his specimen battle-axe home in the brown paper he had taken it in, and pitched it upon the sofa with a wry face before recounting his experience.

Lowndes instantly said that he would get a price for the curios if Harry would send them along to his office. Whereupon Harry thanked him, but still looked glum, for a worse experience remained untold.

The boy was in glaring need of new clothes; he could not possibly seek work in town as he was; and Mrs. Ringrose had characteristically insisted that he should go to his father's and his own old London tailors. There was, moreover, some point in such

a course, since it was now known that Mr. Ringrose had settled his tailors' account, with several others of the kind, on the very eve of his flight; so that in the circumstances these people might fairly be expected to wait for their money until Harry could earn it. Elsewhere he would have to pay ready cash, a very serious matter, if not an impossibility for some time to come. So Harry was really driven to go where he was known, but yet so ashamed, that it was only the miserable interview with the well-groomed gentleman aforesaid which had brought him to the point. He had called at the tailors' on his way home, chosen his cloth and been measured, only to be confronted by the senior partner at the door.

"What do you think he wanted?" cried Harry in a blaze. "A guarantee that they would be paid! I told them they needn't trouble to make the things at all, and out I came."

Lowndes dashed down his cup and was on his legs in an instant.

"I'll give them their guarantee," said he. "You swallow your tea and get your hat; we'll take a hansom back to your tailors, and I'll give them their guarantee!"

Harry was against any such intervention, but Mrs. Ringrose was against Harry, and in less than five minutes Lowndes had carried him off. In the hansom the spirits of that mirthful man rose higher than ever; he sat rubbing his hands and chuckling with delight; but so truculent were his sentiments that Harry, who hated a row as much as his companion appeared to like one, was not a little nervous as to what would happen, and got out finally

with his heart in his mouth.

What did happen need not be described. Suffice it that Mr. Lowndes talked to that master-tailor with extraordinary energy for the space of about three minutes, and that in several different strains, preparing his soil with simple reproaches, scarifying with sarcasm, and finally trampling it down with a weight of well-worded abuse the like of which Harry had never listened to off the stage. And the effect was more extraordinary than the cause: the tradesman took it like a lamb, apologised to Harry on the spot, and even solicited his friend's custom as they turned to leave the shop. The result opened Harry's mouth in sheer amazement. After a first curt refusal, Mr. Lowndes hesitated, fingered a cloth, became gradually gracious, and in the end was measured for no fewer than three suits and an Inverness cape.

"Couldn't resist it!" said he, roaring with laughter in the cab. "Trustfulness is a virtue we should all encourage, and I hope, Ringrose, that you'll continue to encourage it in these excellent fellows. I've sown the seed, it's for you to reap the flower; and recollect that they'll think much more of you when you order six suits than when you pay for one."

"It was extraordinary," said Harry, "after the dressing-down you gave them!"

"Dressing-down?" said Lowndes. "I meant to dress 'em down, and I'll dress anybody down who needs it – of that you may be sure. What's this? Grosvenor Square? Do you see that house with the yellow balcony in the far corner? That's my Lady Banff's

– I gave *her* a bit of my mind the other evening. Went to see my Lord on business. Left standing in the hall twenty minutes. Down came my Lady to dinner, so I just asked her, as a matter of curiosity, if they took me for a stick or an umbrella, to leave me there, and then I told her what I thought of the manners and customs of her house. My Lady had me shown into the library at once, and made me a handsome apology into the bargain. I guarantee friend Yellowplush to know better next time!"

Lowndes stayed to supper at the flat, and he became better and better company as Harry Ringrose gradually yielded to the contagion of his gaiety and his good-humour. He was certainly the most entertaining of men; yet for a long time Harry resented being entertained by him, and would frown one moment because he had been forced to laugh the moment before. Nor was this because of anything that had already happened; it was due entirely to the current behaviour of Gordon Lowndes. The man took unwarrantable liberties. His status at the flat was rightly that of a privileged friend, but Harry thought he presumed upon it insufferably.

Like many great talkers, Lowndes was a vile listener, who thought nothing of interrupting Mrs. Ringrose herself; while as for Harry, he tried more than once to set some African experience of his own against the visitor's endless anecdotes; but he never succeeded, and for a time the failures rankled. It was the visitor, again, who must complain of the supper: the lamb was underdone, the mint sauce too sweet for him, and

the salad dressing which was on the table not to be compared with the oil and vinegar which were not. These were the things that made Harry hate himself when he laughed; yet laugh he must; the other's intentions were so obviously good; and he did not offend Mrs. Ringrose. She encouraged him to monopolise the conversation, but that without appearing to attach too much importance to everything he said. And once when Harry caught her eye, himself raging inwardly, there was an indulgent twinkle in it which mollified him wonderfully, for it seemed to say: "These are his little peculiarities; you should not take them seriously; they do not make him any the less my friend – and yours." It was this glance which undermined Harry's hostility and prepared his heart for eventual surrender to the spell of which Gordon Lowndes was undoubted master.

"I tell you what, Ringrose," said he, as they rose from the table, "if you don't get a billet within the next month, I'll give you one myself."

"You won't!" cried Harry, incredulously enough, for the promise had been made without preliminary, and it seemed too good to be possible.

"Won't I?" laughed Lowndes; "you'll see if I won't! What's more, it'll be a billet worth half-a-dozen such as that uncle of yours is likely to get you. What would you say to three hundred for a start?"

"I knew you were joking," was what Harry said, with a sigh; and his mother turned away as though she had known it too.

"I was never more serious in my life," retorted Lowndes. "I'm up to my chin in the biggest scheme of the century – bar none – though I'm not entitled to tell you what it is at this stage. It's a critical stage, Ringrose, but this week will settle things one way or the other. It's simply a question whether the Earl of Banff will or whether the Earl of Banff won't, and he's going to answer definitely this week. If he will – and I haven't the slightest doubt of it in my own mind – the Company will be out before you know where you are – and you shall be Secretary – "

"Secretary!"

"Be good enough not to interrupt me, Ringrose. You shall be Secretary with three hundred a year. Not competent? Nonsense; I'll undertake to make you competent in a couple of hours; but if I say more, you'll know too much before the time, and I'm pledged to secrecy till we land the noble Earl. He's a pretty big fish, but I've as good as got him. However, he's to let us know this week, and perhaps it would be as well not to raise the wind on that three hundred meanwhile; but it's as good as in your pocket, Ringrose, for all that!"

Mrs. Ringrose sat in her chair, without a sound save that of her knitting needles; and Harry formed the impression that she was already in the secret of the unmentionable scheme, but that she disapproved of it. He remarked, however, that he only wished he had known of such a prospect in time to have mentioned it to his uncle at their interview.

"Your uncle!" cried Lowndes. "I should like to have seen his

face if you had! I asked him to take shares the other day – told him I could put him on the best thing of the reign – and it was as good as a pantomime to see his face. Apart from his religious scruples, which make him regard the City of London as the capital of a warmer place than England, he's not what you would call one of Nature's sportsmen, that holy uncle of yours. He's a gentleman who counts the odds. I wouldn't trust him in the day of battle. Never till my dying day shall I forget our first meeting!"

And Lowndes let out a roar of laughter that might have been heard throughout the mansions; but Harry looked at his mother, who was smiling over her knitting, before he allowed himself to smile and to ask what had happened.

"Your mother had written to tell him I was going to call," said Lowndes, wiping the tears from his eyes, "and when I did go he wanted proof of my identity because I didn't happen to have a card on me. I suppose he thought I looked a shady cuss, so he took it into his head I wasn't the real Simon Pure. You see, there's nothing rash about your uncle; as for me, I burst out laughing in his face, and that made matters worse. He said he'd want a witness then – a witness to my identity before he'd discuss his sister's affairs with me. 'All right,' says I, 'you shall have half a dozen witnesses, for I'll call my underclothes! There's "Gordon Lowndes" on my shirt and collar – there's "Gordon Lowndes" on my pants and vest – and if there isn't "Gordon Lowndes" on both my socks there'll be trouble when I get home,' I told him; and I was out of my coat and waistcoat before he could stop me. I'd

have gone on, too, but that was enough for your uncle! I can see him now – it was on his doorstep – but he let me in after that!"

Harry had a hearty, boyish laugh which it was a pleasure to hear, and Mrs. Ringrose heard it now as she had not heard it for two years; for she had shown that the story did not offend her by laughing herself; and besides, the boy also could see his uncle, with sable arms uplifted, and this impudent Bohemian coolly stripping on the doorstep. His innate impudence was brought home to Harry in different fashion a moment later, when the visitor suddenly complained of the light, and asked why on earth there was only one gas-bracket in a room of that size.

"Because I could not afford more," replied Mrs. Ringrose.

"Afford them, my dear madam? There should have been no question of affording them!" cried Gordon Lowndes. "You should have brought what you wanted from your own house."

"But it wasn't our own," sighed Mrs. Ringrose; "it belonged to – our creditors."

"Your creditors!" echoed Lowndes, with scathing scorn. "It makes me positively ill to hear an otherwise sensible lady speak of creditors in that submissive tone! I regard it as a sacred obligation on all of us to get to windward of our creditors, by fair means or foul. We owe it to our fellow-creatures who may find themselves similarly situated to-morrow or next day. If we don't get to windward of our creditors, be very sure they'll get to windward of us. But to pamper and pet the enemy – as though they'd dare to say a word about a petty gas-bracket! – was a

perfect crime, my dear Mrs. Ringrose, and one that showed a most deplorable lack of public spirit. I only wish I'd thought of your gas-brackets when I was down there the day before yesterday!"

"Why? What would you have done?" demanded Harry with some heat.

"Come away with one in my hat!" roared Lowndes. "Come away with the chandelier next my skin!"

And he broke into a great guffaw in which Harry Ringrose joined in his own despite. It was absurd to apply conventional standards to this sworn enemy of convention. It was impossible to be angry with Gordon Lowndes. Harry determined to take no further offence at anything he might say or do, but to follow his mother's tacit example and to accept her singular friend on her own tolerant terms. Nor was it hard to see when the lad made amiable resolutions; they flew like flags upon his face; and Mrs. Ringrose was able to go to bed and to leave the pair together with an easy mind.

Whereupon they sat up till long after midnight, and Harry, having relinquished all thought of entertaining Gordon Lowndes, was himself undeniably entertained. He had seen something of the world (less than he thought, but still something), yet he had never met with anybody half so interesting as Lowndes, who had been everywhere, seen everything, and done most things, in his time. He had made and lost a fortune in different companies, the names of which Harry hardly caught, for they set him speculating

upon the new Company which was to make his own small fortune too. Lowndes, however, refused to be drawn back to that momentous subject. Nor were all the exploits he recounted of a financial cast; there were some which Harry would have flatly disbelieved the day before; but one and all were consistent with the character of the man as he had seen it since.

Great names seemed as familiar to him as his own, and, after the scene at the tailors', Harry could well believe that Mr. Lowndes had heckled a very eminent politician to his inconvenience, if not to the alleged extent of altering the entire course of a General Election. He was also the very man to have defended in person an action for libel, and to have lost it by the little error of requesting the judge to "be good enough to hold his tongue." The consequences had been serious indeed, but Lowndes described them with considerable relish. His frankness was not the least of his charms as a raconteur. Before he went he had confessed to one crime at least – that of blackmailing a surgeon-baronet for a thousand pounds in his own consulting-room.

"He got a hold of the bell-rope," said Lowndes, "but it was no use his playing the game of bluff with *me*. I simply laughed in his face. He'd murdered a poor man's wife – vivisected her, Ringrose – taken her to pieces like a watch – and he'd got to pay up or be exposed."

For it was disinterested blackmail, so that even this story was characteristic if incredible. It illustrated what may be termed an

officious altruism – which Harry had seen operating in his own behalf – side by side with a perfectly piratical want of principle which Lowndes took no pains to conceal. It was impossible for an impressionable young fellow, needing a friend, not to be struck by one so bluff, so masterful, so kind-hearted, and probably much less unscrupulous than it pleased him to appear; and it was impossible for Harry Ringrose not to put the kind heart first, as he came upstairs after seeing Lowndes into a hansom, and thought how joyfully he would come up them if he were sure of earning even one hundred a year.

And Lowndes said three!

"I am thankful you like him," said Mrs. Ringrose, who was still awake. "But – we all can see the faults of those we really like – and there's one fault I do see in Mr. Lowndes. He is so sanguine!" Mrs. Ringrose might have added that we see those faults the plainest when they are also our own.

"Sanguine!" said Harry. "How?"

"He expects Lord Banff to make up his mind this week."

"Well?"

"It has been 'this week' all this year!"

Harry looked very sad.

"Then you don't think much of my chances of that – three hundred? I might have seen you didn't at the time."

"No, my boy, I do not. Of his will to help you there can be no question; his ability is another matter; and we must not rely on him."

"But you say he has helped you so much?"

"In a different way."

"Well," said Harry after a pause, "in spite of what you say, he seems quite sure himself that everything will be settled to-morrow. He has an appointment with Lord Banff in the afternoon. He wants to see me afterwards, and has asked me to go down and spend the evening with them at Richmond."

Mrs. Ringrose lay conspicuously silent.

"Who are 'they,' mother?" continued her son. "Somehow or other he is a man you never associate with a family, he's so complete in himself. Is he married?"

"His wife is dead."

"Then there are children?"

"One daughter, I believe."

"Don't you know her?"

"No; and I don't want to!" cried Mrs. Ringrose. So broke the small storm which had been brewing in her grave face and altered voice.

"Why not, mother?"

"She has never been near me! Here I have been nearly two months, and she has never called. I shall refuse to see her when she does. The father can come, but we are beneath the daughter. We are in trouble, you see! I only hope you'll have very little to say to her."

"I won't go at all if you'd rather I didn't."

"No, you must go; but be prepared for a snub – and to snub

her!"

The bitterness of a sweet woman is always startling, and Harry had never heard his mother speak so bitterly. Her spirit infected him, and he left her with grim promises. Yet he went to bed more interested than ever in Gordon Lowndes.

CHAPTER VII
ON RICHMOND HILL

It was the hour before sunset when Harry Ringrose took the train from Earl's Court to Richmond, and, referring to an envelope which Lowndes had given him overnight, inquired his way to Sandringham, Greville Road, Richmond Hill. Having no experience of suburban London, he was prepared to find a mansion not absolutely unworthy of its name, and was rather astonished at having to give that of the road to the policeman who directed him. He had half expected that officer to look impressed and say, "Oh, yes, Mr. Lowndes's; the large house on the hill; you can't mistake it." For though he gathered that Lowndes was only about to become a millionaire, and that his contempt for creditors was founded upon some former personal experience of that obnoxious class, it nevertheless appeared to Harry that his friend must be pretty well off as it was. At all events, he thought nothing of losing the last train and driving all this way home.

Harry had never been in Richmond before, and the picturesque features with which its narrow streets still abound were by no means lost upon him. Here a quaint gable, and there a tile roof, sunken and discoloured with sheer age, reminded him that he was indeed in the old country once more; and he rejoiced in the fact with a blessed surcease of the pain and shame with

which his home-coming had been fraught. May was in his blood; and as he climbed the hill the words of the old song, that another Richmond claims, rang so loud in his head that he had a work to keep them back from his lips: —

> "On Richmond Hill there lives a lass,
> More bright than May-day morn;
> Whose charms all other maids' surpass —
> A rose without a thorn.
> This lass so neat, with smiles so sweet,
> Has won my right good will.
> I'd crowns resign to call her mine,
> Sweet lass of Richmond Hill!"

The young fellow could not help thinking that it was a lass of Richmond Hill he was about to meet, and wondering whether her smiles would prove sweet, and her charms superior to those of all other maids. Harry Ringrose had never been in love. He had been duly foolish in his callow day, but that was nothing. From the firm pedestal of one-and-twenty he could look back, and lay his hand upon his heart, and aver with truth that it had never been irretrievably lost. Nevertheless, Harry was quite prepared to lose his heart as soon as ever he realised the ideal which was graven upon it; or he had been so prepared until the revelation of these last days had hurled such idle aspirations to the winds. But, for some reason, the memory of that revelation did not haunt him this evening; and, accordingly, he was so prepared once more.

One of the many inconveniences of preconceiving your fate lies in the nervous feeling that it may be lurking round every corner in the shape of every woman you are about to meet. Even when he met them Harry was not always sure. His ideal was apt to be elastic in the face of obvious charms. It was only the impossibles that he knew at sight, such as the girl who was climbing the hill ahead of him at this moment. Harry would not have looked twice at her but for one circumstance.

She was tall and well-built, on a far larger scale than Harry cared about, and yet she was continually changing a bag which she carried from one hand to the other. It was a leather travelling-bag, of no excessive size, but as she carried it in one hand her body bent itself the other way; and she never had it in the same hand long.

The hill was steep and seemed interminable; it was the warm evening of a hot day; and Harry, slowly overhauling the young woman, might have seen that she had pretty hair and ears, but he could think of nothing but her burden and her fatigue. He could not even think of himself and his ideals, and had so ceased committing his besetting sin. What he did see, however, was that the girl was a lady, and he heartily wished that she were not. He longed to carry that bag for her, but he could not bring himself to offer to do so. He had too much delicacy or too little courage.

Irresolutely he slackened his pace; he was ashamed, despite his scruples, to pass her callously without a word. He was close behind her now. He heard her breathing heavily. Was there

nothing he could say? Was there no way of putting it without offence? Harry was still thinking when the knot untied itself. The girl had stopped dead, and put the bag down with a deep sigh, and Harry had caught it up without thinking any more.

"What are you doing?" cried the girl. "Give that back to me at once."

Her voice was very indignant, but also a little faint; and the note of alarm with which it began changed to one of authority as she saw that, at any rate, she was not dealing with a thief.

"I beg your pardon," said Harry, very red, as he raised his hat with his unoccupied hand; "but – but you really must let me carry it a little way for you."

"I could not dream of it. Will you kindly give it me back this instant?"

The girl was now good-humoured but very firm. She also had coloured, but her lips remained pale with fatigue. And she had very fine, fearless, grey eyes; but Harry found he could defy them in such a cause, so that they flashed with anger, and a foot – no very small one – stamped heartily on the pavement.

"Did you hear what I said?"

"I did; but – "

"Give it to me!"

"It's so heavy."

"Give it to me!"

He was wondering whether the bag was full of jewels, that she was in such a state about it, when all at once she grabbed

at the handle he still hesitated to relinquish. The bag came open between them – and to his amazement he saw what it contained.

Coals!

A few fell out upon the pavement. Harry stooped, put them in again, and shut the bag. The young lady had moved away. She was walking on slowly ahead, and from her shoulders Harry feared that she was crying. He followed miserably but doggedly with the bag.

She never looked round, and he never took his eyes from those broad, quivering shoulders. He felt an officious brute, but he had a certain fierce consolation too: he had got his way – he had not been beaten by a woman. And the heaviness of the bag, no longer to be wondered at, was in itself a justification; he also had changed it from hand to hand, and that more than once, before they came to the top of the hill.

Here he followed his leader down a broad turning to the left, and thence along a smaller road until she stopped before the low wooden gate of a shabby little semi-detached house. Evidently this was her destination, and she was waiting for her bag. And now Harry lost confidence with every step he took, for the girl stood squarely with her back to the gate, and her eyes were dry but very bright, as though she meant to give him a bit of her mind before she let him go.

"You may put it down here."

Harry did so without a word.

"Thank you. You are a stranger to Richmond, I think?"

The thanks had sounded ironical, and the question took Harry aback. The grey eyes looked amused, and it was the last expression he had expected in them.

"How did you know that?" he simply asked.

"You are too sunburnt for Richmond, and – perhaps – too gallant!"

"Or officious?"

Her pleasant tone put him at his ease.

"No; it was very kind of you, and one good turn deserves another. Were you looking for any particular road or house?"

"Yes, for Sandringham, in the Greville Road."

She stood aside and pointed to the name on the little wooden gate.

"Why, this is it!" gasped Harry Ringrose.

"Yes; this is Sandringham," said the girl, with a sort of shamefaced humour. "No wonder you are disappointed!"

His eyes came guiltily from the little house with the big name. "Then are you Miss Lowndes?" he inquired aghast.

"That is my name – Mr. Ringrose."

Spoken with the broadest smile, this was the last straw so far as Harry's manners were concerned.

"How on earth do you know mine?" cried he.

"I guessed it in the road."

"How could you?"

"How did I know you were a stranger to Richmond?" rejoined Miss Lowndes. "Anybody could see that you have come from

foreign parts; and I had heard all about you from my father. Besides, I expected you. I only hoped to get home first with my coals. And to be caught like this – it's really too bad!"

"I am awfully sorry," murmured Harry, and with such obvious sincerity that Miss Lowndes smiled again.

"I think you may be!" said she. "One may find that stupidity in the kitchen has run one short of coals at the very moment when they are wanted most, and the quickest thing may be for one to go oneself and borrow a few from a friend. But it's hard lines to be caught doing so, Mr. Ringrose, for all that!"

So this was the explanation. To Harry Ringrose it was both simple and satisfying; but before he could say a word Miss Lowndes had changed the subject abruptly by again pointing to the grand name on the gate.

"This is another thing I may as well explain for your benefit, Mr. Ringrose; it is one of my father's little jokes. When he came here he was so tickled by the small houses with the large names that he determined to beat his neighbours at their own game. It was all I could do to prevent him from having 'Buckingham Palace' painted on the gate. So you are quite forgiven for finding it difficult to believe that this was the house, and also for upsetting my coals. And now I think we may shake hands and go in."

He took with alacrity the fine firm hand which was held out to him, and felt already at his ease as he followed Miss Lowndes to the steps, again carrying the bag. By this time, moreover, he had

noted and admired her pretty hair, which was fair with a warm tinge in it, her rather deep but very pleasant voice, and the clear and healthy skin which had her father's freshness in finer shades. She was obviously older than Harry, and stronger-minded as well as less beautiful than his ideal type. But he had a feeling, even after these few minutes, which had not come to him in all the hours that he had spent with Gordon Lowndes. It was the feeling that he had found a real friend.

But the surprises of the evening were only beginning, for while Harry contemplated a warped and blistered front door, in thorough keeping with the poverty-stricken appearance of the house, it was opened by a man-servant not unworthy of the millionaire of the immediate future. And yet next moment he found himself in a sitting-room as sordid as the exterior. The visitor was still trying to reconcile these contradictions when Miss Lowndes followed him slowly into the room, reading a telegram as she came.

"Are you very hungry, Mr. Ringrose?" said she, looking up in evident anxiety.

"Not a bit."

"Because I am afraid my father will not be home for another hour. This is a telegram from him. He has been detained. But it doesn't seem fair to ask you to wait so long!"

"I should prefer it. I shall do myself much better justice in an hour's time," said Harry, laughing; but Miss Lowndes still appeared to take the situation seriously, though she also seemed

relieved. And her embarrassment was notable after the way in which she had carried off the much more trying contretemps in the road. It was as though there were something dispiriting in the atmosphere of the poky and ill-favoured house, something which especially distressed its young mistress; for they sat for some time without a word, while dusk deepened in the shabby little room; and it was much to Harry's relief when he was suddenly asked if he had ever seen the view from Richmond Hill.

"Never," he replied; "will you show it to me, Miss Lowndes? I have often heard of it, and I wish you would."

"It would be better than sitting here," said his companion, "though I'm afraid you won't see much in this light. However, it's quite close, and we can try."

It was good to be in the open air again, but, as Miss Lowndes observed, it was a pity she had not thought of it before. In the park the shadows were already deep, and the deer straggling across the broad paths as they never do till nightfall. A warm glow still suffused the west, and was reflected in the river beneath, where pleasure-boats looked black as colliers on the belt of pink. It was the hour when it is dark indoors but light without, and yellow windows studded the woody levels while the contour of the trees was yet distinct. Even where the river coiled from pink to grey the eye could still follow it almost to Twickenham, a leaden track between the leaves.

"I only wish it were an hour earlier," added Miss Lowndes when she had pointed out her favourite landmarks. "Still, it's a

good deal pleasanter here than indoors." She seemed a different being when she was out of that house; she had been talkative enough since they started, but now she turned to Harry.

"Tell me about Africa, Mr. Ringrose. Tell me all the interesting things you saw and did and heard about while you were out there!"

Harry caught his breath with pleasure. It was the unconscious fault of his adolescence that he was more eager to convey than receive; it was the complementary defect of the quality of enthusiasm which was Harry's strongest point. He had landed from his travels loaded like a gun with reminiscence and adventure, but the terrible return to the old home had damped his priming, and at the new home the future was the one affair of his own of which he had had time or heart to think. But now the things came back to him which he had come home longing to relate. He needed no second bidding from the sympathetic companion at his side, but began telling her, diffidently at first, then with all his boyish gusto as he caught and held her interest, the dozen and one experiences that had been on his tongue three days (that seemed three weeks) ago.

To talk and be understood – to talk and be appreciated – it was half the battle of life with Harry Ringrose at this stage of his career. It is true that he had seen but little, and true that he had done still less, even in these two last errant years of his. But whatsoever he had seen or done, that had interested him in the least, he could bring home vividly enough to anybody who would

give him a sympathetic hearing. And to do so was a deep and a strange delight to him; not, perhaps, altogether unconnected with mere vanity; but ministering also to a subtler sense of which the possessor was as yet unconscious.

And Miss Lowndes listened to her young Othello, an older and more critical Desdemona, who liked him less for the dangers he had passed than for his ingenuous delight in recounting them. The talk indeed interested, but the talker charmed her, so that she was content to listen for the most part without a word. Meanwhile they were sauntering farther and farther afield, and at length the new Desdemona was compelled to tell Othello they must turn. He complied without pausing in the story. Her next interruption was more serious.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.