

Part Fifth

LITTLE BILLEE

An Interlude

"Then the mortal coldness of the love like death itself comes down;
It cannot feel for others' woes, it dare not dream its own;
That heavy chill has frozen o'er the fountain of our tears,
And, though the eye may sparkle yet, 'tis where the ice appears.

"Though wit may flash from fluent lips, and mirth distract the breast,
Through midnight hours that yield no more their former hope of rest:
'Tis but as ivy leaves around a ruined turret wreath,
All green and wildly fresh without, but worn and gray beneath."

WHEN Taffy and the Laird went back to the studio in the Place St. Anatole des Arts, and resumed their ordinary life there, it was with a sense of desolation and dull bereavement beyond anything they could have imagined; and this did not seem to lessen as the time wore on.

They realized for the first time how keen and penetrating and unintermittent had been the charm of those two central figures—Trilby and Little Billee—and how hard it was to live without them, after such intimacy as had been theirs.

"Oh, it *has* been a jolly time, though it didn't last long!" So Trilby had written in her farewell letter to Taffy; and these words were true for Taffy and the Laird as well as for her.

And that is the worst of those dear people who have charm: they are so terrible to do without, when once you have got accustomed to them and all their ways.

And when, besides being charming, they are simple, clever, affectionate, constant, and sincere, like Trilby and Little Billee! Then the lamentable hole their disappearance makes is not to be filled up! And when they are full of genius, like Little Billee—and like Trilby, funny without being vulgar! For so she always seemed to the Laird and Taffy, even in French (in spite of her Gallic audacities of thought, speech, and gesture).

All seemed to have suffered change. The very boxing and fencing were gone through perfunctorily, for mere health's sake; and a thin layer of adipose deposit began to soften the outlines of the hills and dales on Taffy's mighty forearm.

Dodor and l' Zouzou no longer came so often, now that the charming Little Billee and his charming mother and still more charming sister had gone away—nor Carnegie, nor Antony, nor Lorrimer, nor Vincent, nor the Greek. Gecko never came at all. Even Sven-gali was missed, little as he had been liked. It is a dismal and sulky looking piece of furniture, a grand-piano that nobody ever plays—with all its sound and its souvenirs locked up inside—a kind of mausoleum! a lop-sided coffin—trestles and all!

So it went back to London by the "little quickness," just as it had come!

Thus Taffy and the Laird grew quite sad and mopy, and lunched at the Café de l'Odéon every day — till the goodness of the omelets palled, and the redness of the wine there got on their nerves and into their heads and faces, and made them sleepy till dinner-time. And then, waking up, they dressed respectably, and dined expensively, "like gentlemen," in the Palais Royal, or the Passage Choiseul, or the Passage des Panoramas — for three francs, three francs fifty, even five francs a head, and half a franc to the waiter! — and went to the theatre almost every night, on that side of the water — and more often than not they took a cab home, each smoking a Panatellas, which costs twenty-five centimes — five sous — $2\frac{1}{2}d.$

Then they feebly drifted into quite decent society — like Lorrimer and Carnegie — with dress-coats and white ties on, and their hair parted in the middle and down the back of the head, and brought over the ears in a bunch at each side, as was the English fashion in those days; and subscribed to *Galignani's Messenger*; and had themselves proposed and seconded for the Cercle Anglais in the Rue Sainte-n'y touche, a circle of British philistines of the very deepest dye; and went to hear divine service on Sunday mornings in the Rue Marbœuf!

Indeed, by the end of the summer they had sunk into such depths of demoralization that they felt they must really have a change; and decided on giving up the studio in the Place St. Anatole des Arts, and leaving Paris for good; and going to settle for the winter



DEMORALIZATION

in Düsseldorf, which is a very pleasant place for English painters who do not wish to overwork themselves — as the Laird well knew, having spent a year there.

It ended in Taffy's going to Antwerp for the Kermesse, to paint the Flemish drunkard of our time just as he really is; and the Laird's going to Spain, so that he might study toreadors from the life.

I may as well state here that the Laird's toreador pictures, which had had quite a vogue in Scotland as long as he had been content to paint them in the Place St. Anatole des Arts, quite ceased to please (or sell) after he had been to Seville and Madrid; so he took to painting Roman cardinals and Neapolitan

pifferari from the depths of his consciousness — and was so successful that he made up his mind he would never spoil his market by going to Italy!

So he went and painted his cardinals and his pifferari in Algiers, and Taffy joined him there, and painted Algerian Jews—just as they really are (and didn't sell them); and then they spent a year in Munich, and then a year in Düsseldorf, and a winter in Cairo, and so on.

And all this time, Taffy, who took everything *au grand sérieux*—especially the claims and obligations of friendship—corresponded regularly with Little Billee; who wrote him long and amusing letters back again, and had plenty to say about his life in London—which was a series of triumphs, artistic and social—and you would have thought from his letters, modest though they were, that no happier young man, or more elate, was to be found anywhere in the world.

It was a good time in England, just then, for young artists of promise; a time of evolution, revolution, change, and development—of the founding of new schools and the crumbling away of old ones—a keen struggle for existence—a surviving of the fit—a preparation, let us hope, for the ultimate survival of the fittest.

And among the many glories of this particular period two names stand out very conspicuously—for the immediate and (so far) lasting fame their bearers achieved, and the wide influence they exerted, and continue to exert still.

The world will not easily forget Frederic Walker and William Bagot, those two singularly gifted boys,

whom it soon became the fashion to bracket together, to compare and to contrast, as one compares and contrasts Thackeray and Dickens, Carlyle and Macaulay, Tennyson and Browning—a futile though pleasant practice, of which the temptations seem irresistible!

Yet why compare the lily and the rose?

These two young masters had the genius and the luck to be the progenitors of much of the best artwork that has been done in England during the last thirty years, in oils, in water-color, in black and white.

They were both essentially English and of their own time; both absolutely original, receiving their impressions straight from nature itself; uninfluenced by any school, ancient or modern, they founded schools instead of following any, and each was a law unto himself, and a law-giver unto many others.

Both were equally great in whatever they attempted—landscape, figures, birds, beasts, or fishes. Who does not remember the fish-monger's shop by F. Walker, or W. Bagot's little piebald piglings, and their venerable black mother, and their immense fat wallowing pink papa? An ineffable charm of poetry and refinement, of pathos and sympathy and delicate humor combined,



FRED WALKER

an incomparable ease and grace and felicity of workmanship belong to each; and yet in their work are they not as wide apart as the poles; each complete in himself and yet a complement to the other?

And, oddly enough, they were both singularly alike in aspect — both small and slight, though beautifully made, with tiny hands and feet; always arrayed as the lilies of the field, for all they toiled and spun so arduously; both had regularly featured faces of a noble cast and most winning character; both had the best and simplest manners in the world, and a way of getting themselves much and quickly and permanently liked. . . .

Que la terre leur soit légère!

And who can say that the fame of one is greater than the other's!

Their pinnacles are twin, I venture to believe — of just an equal height and width and thickness, like their bodies in this life; but unlike their frail bodies in one respect: no taller pinnacles are to be seen, methinks, in all the garden of the deathless dead painters of our time, and none more built to last!

But it is not with the art of Little Billee, nor with his fame as a painter, that we are chiefly concerned in this unpretending little tale, except in so far as they have some bearing on his character and his fate.

"I should like to know the detailed history of the Englishman's first love, and how he lost his innocence!"

"Ask him!"

"Ask him yourself!"

Thus Papelard and Bouchardy, on the morning of Little Billee's first appearance at Carrel's studio, in the Rue des Potirons St. Michel.

And that is the question the present scribe is doing his little best to answer.

A good-looking, famous, well-bred, and well-dressed youth finds that London Society opens its doors very readily; he hasn't long to knock; and it would be difficult to find a youth more fortunately situated, handsomer, more famous, better dressed or better bred, more seemingly happy and successful, with more attractive qualities and more condonable faults, than Little Billee, as Taffy and the Laird found him when they came to London after their four or five years in foreign parts—their Wanderjahr.

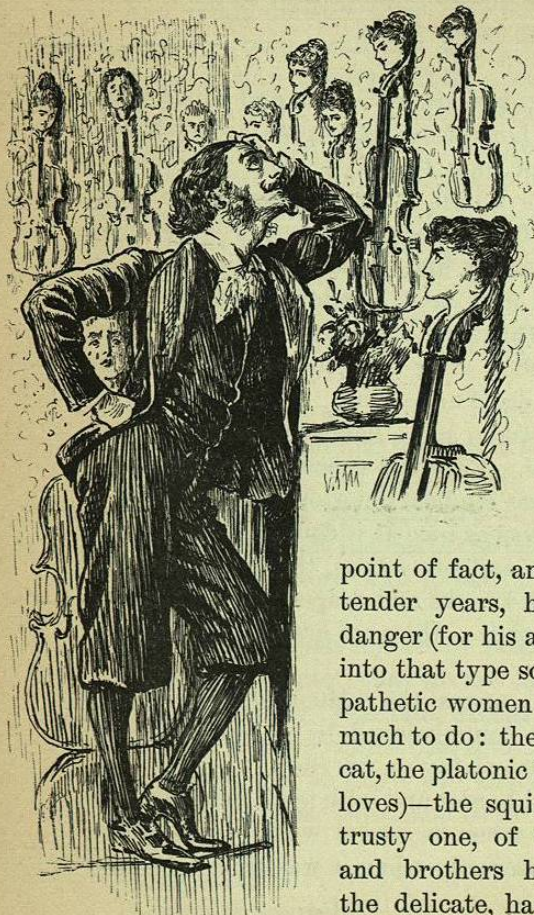
He had a fine studio and a handsome suite of rooms in Fitzroy Square. Beautiful specimens of his unfinished work, endless studies, hung on his studio walls. Everything else was as nice as it could be—the furniture, the bibelots, and bric-à-brac, the artistic foreign and Eastern knick-knacks and draperies and hangings and curtains and rugs—the semi-grand piano by Collard & Collard.

That immortal canvas, the "Moon-Dial" (just begun, and already commissioned by Moses Lyon, the famous picture-dealer), lay on his easel.

No man worked harder and with teeth more clinched than Little Billee when he was at work—none rested or played more discreetly when it was time to rest or play.

The glass on his mantel-piece was full of cards of

invitation, reminders, pretty mauve and pink and lilac-scented notes; nor were coronets wanting on many of these hospitable little missives. He had quite overcome his fancied aversion for bloated dukes and lords and the rest (we all do sooner or later, if things go well with us); especially for their wives and sisters and daughters and female cousins; even their mothers and aunts.



PLATONIC LOVE

In point of fact, and in spite of his tender years, he was in some danger (for his art) of developing into that type so adored by sympathetic women who haven't got much to do: the friend, the tame cat, the platonic lover (with many loves)—the squire of dames, the trusty one, of whom husbands and brothers have no fear!—the delicate, harmless dilettante of Eros—the dainty shepherd

who dwells “dans le pays du tendre!”—and stops there!

The woman flatters and the man confides—and there is no danger whatever, I'm told—and I am glad!

One man loves his fiddle (or, alas! his neighbor's sometimes) for all the melodies he can wake from it—it is but a selfish love!

Another, who is no fiddler, may love a fiddle too; for its symmetry, its neatness, its color—its delicate grainings, the lovely lines and curves of its back and front—for its own sake, so to speak. He may have a whole galleryful of fiddles to love in this innocent way—a harem!—and yet not know a single note of music, or ever care to hear one. He will dust them and stroke them, and take them down and try to put them in tune—*pizzicato!*—and put them back again, and call them ever such sweet little pet names: viol, viola, viola d'amore, viol di gamba, violino mio! and breathe his little troubles into them, and they will give back inaudible little murmurs in sympathetic response, like a damp Æolian harp; but he will never draw a bow across the strings, nor wake a single chord—or discord!

And who shall say he is not wise in his generation? It is but an old-fashioned philistine notion that fiddles were only made to be played on—the fiddles themselves are beginning to resent it; and rightly, I wot!

In this harmless fashion Little Billee was friends with more than one fine lady *de par le monde*.

Indeed, he had been reproached by his more bohemian brothers of the brush for being something of a tuft-hunter—most unjustly. But nothing gives such

keen offence to our unsuccessful brother, bohemian or bourgeois, as our sudden intimacy with the so-called great, the little lords and ladies of this little world! Not even our fame and success, and all the joy and pride they bring us, are so hard to condone—so imbittering, so humiliating, to the jealous fraternal heart.

Alas! poor humanity—that the mere countenance of our betters (if they *are* our betters!) should be thought so priceless a boon, so consummate an achievement, so crowning a glory, as all that!

“A dirty bit of orange-peel,
The stump of a cigar—
Once trod on by a princely heel,
How beautiful they are!”

Little Billee was no tuft-hunter—he was the tuft-hunted, or had been. No one of his kind was ever more persistently, resolutely, hospitably harried than this young “hare with many friends” by people of rank and fashion.

And at first he thought them most charming; as they so often are, these graceful, gracious, gay, good-natured stoics and barbarians, whose manners are as easy and simple as their morals—but how much better!—and who, at least, have this charm, that they can wallow in untold gold (when they happen to possess it) without ever seeming to stink of the same: yes, they bear wealth gracefully—and the want of it more gracefully still! and these are pretty accomplishments that have yet to be learned by our new aristocracy of the shop and counting-house, Jew or gentile, which is

everywhere elbowing its irresistible way to the top and front of everything, both here and abroad.

Then he discovered that, much as you might be with them, you could never be *of* them, unless perchance you managed to hook on by marrying one of their ugly ducklings—their failures—their remnants! and even then life isn't all beer and skittles for a rank outsider, I'm told! Then he discovered that he didn't want to be of them in the least; especially at such a cost as that! and that to be very much with them was apt to pall, like everything else.

Also, he found that they were very mixed; good, bad, and indifferent—and not always very dainty or select in their predilections, since they took unto their bosoms such queer outsiders (just for the sake of being amused a little while) that their capricious favor ceased to be an honor and a glory—if it ever was! And then, their fickleness!

Indeed, he found, or thought he found, that they could be just as clever, as liberal, as polite or refined—as narrow, insolent, swaggering, coarse, and vulgar—as handsome, as ugly—as graceful, as ungainly—as modest or conceited, as any other upper class of the community—and indeed some lower ones!

Beautiful young women, who had been taught how to paint pretty little landscapes (with an ivy-mantled ruin in the middle distance), talked technically of painting to him, *de pair à pair*, as though they were quite on the same artistic level, and didn't mind admitting it, in spite of the social gulf between.

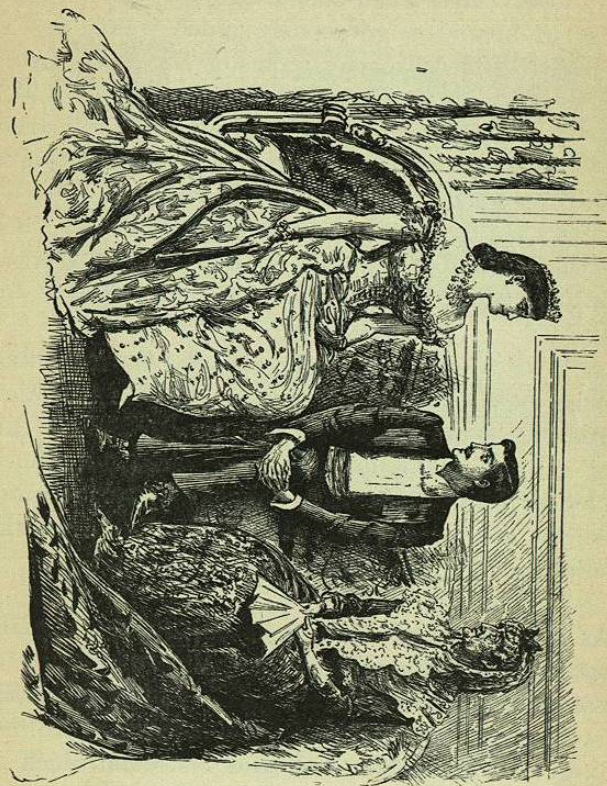
Hideous old frumps (osseous or obese, yet with unduly bared necks and shoulders that made him sick)

patronized him and gave him good advice, and told him to emulate Mr. Buckner both in his genius and his manners—since Mr. Buckner was the only “gentleman” who ever painted for hire; and they promised him, in time, an equal success!

Here and there some sweet old darling specially enslaved him by her kindness, grace, knowledge of life, and tender womanly sympathy, like the dowager Lady Chiselhurst—or some sweet young one, like the lovely Duchess of Towers, by her beauty, wit, good-humor, and sisterly interest in all he did, and who in some vague, distant manner constantly reminded him of Trilby, although she was such a great and fashionable lady!

But just such darlings, old or young, were to be found, with still higher ideals, in less exalted spheres; and were easier of access, with no impassable gulf between—spheres where there was no patronizing, nothing but deference and warm appreciation and delicate flattery, from men and women alike—and where the aged Venuses, whose prime was of the days of Waterloo, went with their historical remains duly shrouded, like ivy-mantled ruins (and in the middle distance!).

So he actually grew tired of the great before they had time to tire of him—incredible as it may seem, and against nature; and this saved him many a heart-burning; and he ceased to be seen at fashionable drums or gatherings of any kind, except in one or two houses where he was especially liked and made welcome for his own sake; such as Lord Chiselhurst’s in Piccadilly, where the “Moon-Dial” found a home for



“DARLINGS, OLD OR YOUNG”

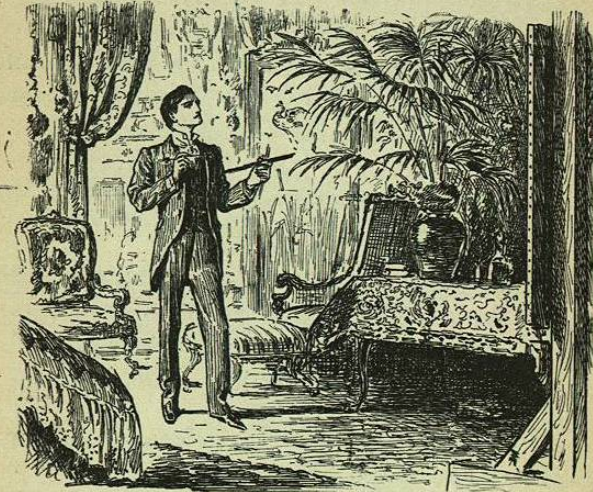
a few years, before going to its last home and final resting-place in the National Gallery (R. I. P.); or Baron Stoppenheim's in Cavendish Square, where many lovely little water-colors signed W. B. occupied places of honor on gorgeously gilded walls; or the gorgeously gilded bachelor rooms of Mr. Moses Lyon, the picture-dealer in Upper Conduit Street—for Little Billee (I much grieve to say it of a hero of romance) was an excellent man of business. That infinitesimal dose of the good old Oriental blood kept him straight, and not only made him stick to his last through thick and thin, but also to those whose foot his last was found to match (for he couldn't or wouldn't alter his last).

He loved to make as much money as he could, that he might spend it royally in pretty gifts to his mother and sister, whom it was his pleasure to load in this way, and whose circumstances had been very much altered by his quick success. There was never a more generous son or brother than Little Billee of the clouded heart, that couldn't love any longer!

As a set-off to all these splendors, it was also his pleasure now and again to study London life at its lower end—the eastest end of all. Whitechapel, the Minories, the Docks, Ratcliffe Highway, Rotherhithe, soon got to know him well, and he found much to interest him and much to like among their denizens, and made as many friends there among ship-carpenters, excisemen, longshoremen, jack-tars, and what not, as in Bayswater and Belgravia (or Bloomsbury).

He was especially fond of frequenting sing-songs, or

“free-and-easys,” where good, hard-working fellows met of an evening to relax and smoke and drink and sing—round a table well loaded with steaming tumblers and pewter pots, at one end of which sits Mr.



“THE MOON-DIAL”

Chairman in all his glory, and at the other “Mr. Vice.” They are open to any one who can afford a pipe, a screw of tobacco, and a pint of beer, and who is willing to do his best and sing a song.

No introduction is needed; as soon as any one has seated himself and made himself comfortable, Mr. Chairman taps the table with his long clay pipe, begs for silence, and says to his vis-à-vis: “Mr. Vice, it strikes me as the gen'l'man as is just come in 'as got a

singing face. Per'aps, Mr. Vice, you'll be so very kind as juster harsk the aforesaid gentl'man to oblige us with a 'armony."

Mr. Vice then puts it to the new-comer, who, thus appealed to, simulates a modest surprise, and finally professes his willingness, like Mr. Barkis; then, clearing his throat a good many times, looks up to the ceiling, and after one or two unsuccessful starts in different keys, bravely sings "Kathleen Mavourneen," let us say—perhaps in a touchingly sweet tenor voice:

"Kathleen Mavourneen, the gry dawn is brykin',
The 'orn of the 'unter is 'eard on the 'ill." . . .

And Little Billee didn't mind the dropping of all these aitches if the voice was sympathetic and well in tune, and the sentiment simple, tender, and sincere.

Or else, with a good rolling jingo bass, it was,

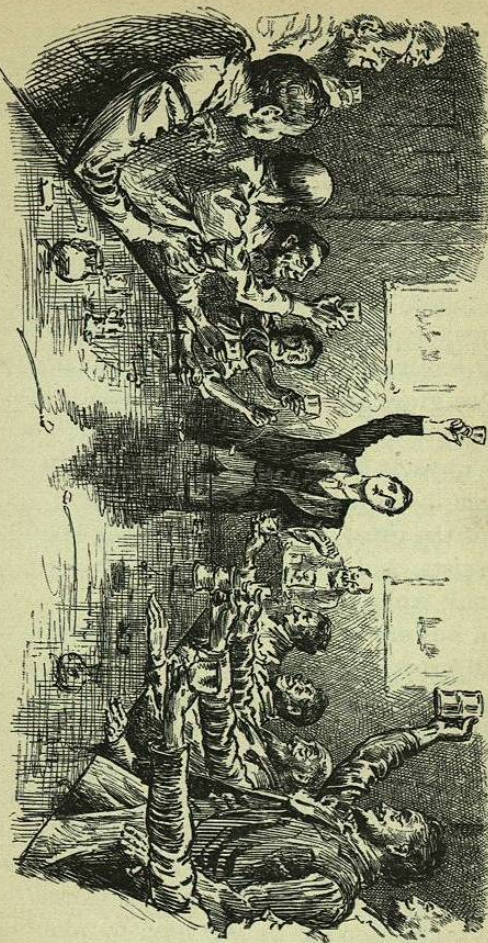
"'Earts o' hoak are our ships; 'earts o' hoak are our men;
And we'll fight and we'll conkwer agen and agen!"

And no imperfection of accent, in Little Billee's estimation, subtracted one jot from the manly British pluck that found expression in these noble sentiments—nor added one tittle to their swaggering, blatant, and idiotically aggressive vulgarity!

Well, the song finishes with general applause all round. Then the chairman says, "Your 'ealth and song, sir!" And drinks, and all do the same.

Then Mr. Vice asks, "What shall we 'ave the pleasure of saying, sir, after that very nice 'armony?"

And the blushing vocalist, if he knows the ropes,



THE CHAIRMAN

replies, "A roast leg o' mutton in Newgate, and nobody to eat it!" Or else, "May 'im as is going up the 'ill o' prosperity never meet a friend coming down!" Or else, "'Ere's to 'er as shares our sorrers and doubles our joys!" Or else, "'Ere's to 'er as shares our joys and doubles our expenses!" and so forth.

More drink, more applause, and many 'ear, 'ears. And Mr. Vice says to the singer: "You call, sir. Will you be so good as to call on some other gen'l man for a 'armony?" And so the evening goes on.

And nobody was more quickly popular at such gatherings, or sang better songs, or proposed more touching sentiments, or filled either chair or vice-chair with more grace and dignity than Little Billee. Not even Dodor or l' Zouzou could have beaten him at that.

And he was as happy, as genial, and polite, as much at his ease, in these humble gatherings as in the gilded saloons of the great, where grand-pianos are, and hired accompanists, and highly-paid singers, and a good deal of talk while they sing.

So his powers of quick, wide, universal sympathy grew and grew, and made up to him a little for his lost power of being specially fond of special individuals. For he made no close friends among men, and ruthlessly snubbed all attempts at intimacy—all advances towards an affection which he felt he could not return; and more than one enthusiastic admirer of his talent and his charm was forced to acknowledge that, with all his gifts, he seemed heartless and capricious; as ready to drop you as he had been to take you up.

He loved to be wherever he could meet his kind, high or low; and felt as happy on a penny steamer

as on the yacht of a millionaire—on the crowded knife-board of an omnibus as on the box-seat of a nobleman's drag—happier; he liked to feel the warm contact of his fellow-man at either shoulder and at his back, and didn't object to a little honest grime! And I think all this genial caressing love of his kind, this depth and breadth of human sympathy, are patent in all his work.

On the whole, however, he came to prefer for society that of the best and cleverest of his own class—those who live and prevail by the professional exercise of their own specially trained and highly educated wits, the skilled workmen of the brain—from the Lord Chief-Justice of England downward—the salt of the earth, in his opinion: and stuck to them.

There is no class so genial and sympathetic as *our own*, in the long-run—even if it be but the criminal class! none where the welcome is likely to be so genuine and sincere, so easy to win, so difficult to outstay, if we be but decently pleasant and successful; none where the memory of us will be kept so green (if we leave any memory at all!).

So Little Billee found it expedient, when he wanted rest and play, to seek them at the houses of those whose rest and play were like his own—little halts in a seeming happy life-journey, full of toil and strain and endeavor; oases of sweet water and cooling shade, where the food was good and plentiful, though the tents might not be of cloth of gold; where the talk was of something more to his taste than court or sport or narrow party politics; the new beauty; the coming match of the season; the coming ducal conversion to Rome; the last elopement in high life—the next!