

SOMEHOW GOOD

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CHAPTER I

A RETURNED TRAVELLER. NEMESIS IN LIVERMORE'S RENTS, 1808. EXTRAVAGANCE, AND NO CASH. A PAWNED WATCH, AND A RESIDUUM OF FOURPENCE

AN exceptionally well-built man in a blue serge suit walked into a bank in the City, and, handing his card across the counter, asked if credit had been wired for him from New York. The clerk to whom he spoke would inquire.

As he leaned on the counter, waiting for the reply, his appearance was that of a man just off a sea voyage, wearing a suit of clothes well knocked about in a short time, but quite untainted by London dirt. His get-up conveyed no information about his social position or means. His garments had been made for him; that was all that could be said. That is something to know. But it leaves the question open whether their wearer is really only a person in decent circumstances—*one* decent circumstance, at any rate—or a Duke.

The trustworthy young gentleman in spectacles who came back from an authority in the bush to tell him that no credit had been wired so far, did not seem to find any difficulty in affecting confidence that the ultimate advent of this wire was an intrinsic certainty, like the post. Scarcely, perhaps, the respectable confidence he would have shown to a real silk hat—for the applicant's was mere soft felt, though it looked new, for that matter—and a real clean shirt, one inclusive of its own collar and cuffs. Our friend's answered this description; but then, it was blue. However, the confidence would have wavered under an independent collar and wristbands. Cohesiveness in such a garment means that its wearer may be an original genius: compositeness may mean that he has to economize, like us.

"Did you expect it so early as this?" says the trustworthy young gentleman, smiling sweetly through his spectacles. "It isn't ten o'clock yet." But he only says this to show his confidence, don't you see? Because his remark is in its nature meaningless, as there is no time of day telegrams have a penchant for. No doubt there is a time—perhaps even times and half-a-time—when you cannot send them. But there is no time when they may not arrive. Except the smallest hours of the morning, which are too small to count.

"I don't think I did," replies the applicant. "I don't think I thought about it. I wired them yesterday from Liverpool, when I left the boat, say four o'clock."

"Ah, then of course it's a little too early. It may not come till late in the afternoon. It depends on the load on the wires. Could you call in again—well, a little before our closing time?"

"All right." The speaker took out a little purse or pocket-book, and looked in it. "I thought so," said he; "that was my last card." But the clerk had left it in the inner sanctum. He would get it, and disappeared to do so. When he came back with it, however, he found its owner had gone, saying never mind, it didn't matter.

"Chap seems in a great hurry!" said he to his neighbour clerk. "What's he got that great big ring on his thumb for?" And the other replying: "Don't you know 'em—rheumatic rings?" he added: "Doesn't look a rheumatic customer, anyhow!" And then both of them pinned up cheques, and made double entries.

The chap didn't seem in a great hurry as he sauntered away along Cornhill, looking in at the shop-windows. He gave the idea of a chap with a fine June day before him in London, with a plethora of choices of what to do and where to go. Also of being keenly interested in everything, like a chap that had not been in London for a long time. After watching the action of a noiseless new petroleum engine longer than its monotonous idea of life seemed to warrant, he told a hansom to take him to the Tower, for which service he paid a careless two shillings. The driver showed discipline, and concealed his emotions. *He* wasn't going to let out that it was a double fare, and impair a fountain of wealth for other charioteers to come. Not he!

The fare enjoyed himself evidently at the Tower. He saw

everything he could be admitted to—the Beauchamp Tower for sixpence, and the Jewel-house for sixpence. And he gave un-called-for gratuities. When he had thoroughly enjoyed all the dungeons and all the torture-relics, and all the memories of Harrison Ainsworth's romance, read in youth and never forgotten, he told another hansom to drive him across the Tower Bridge, and not go too fast.

As he crossed the Bridge he looked at his watch. It was half-past twelve. He would have time to get back before half-past one to a restaurant he had made a mental note of near the Bank, and still to allow the cabby to drive on a bit through the trans-pontine and interesting regions of Rotherhithe and Cherry Garden Pier. It was so unlike anything he had been seeing lately. None the worse for the latter, in some respects. So, at least, thought the fare.

For he had the good, or ill, fortune to strike on a rich vein of so-called life in a London slum. Shrieks of fury, terror, pain were coming out of an archway that led, said an inscription, into Livermore's Rents, 1808. Public opinion, outside those Rents, ascribed them to the fact that Salter had been drinking. He was on to that pore wife of his again, like last week. Half killed her, he did, then! But he was a bad man to deal with, and public opinion wouldn't go down that court if I was you.

"But you're not, you see!" said the fare, who had sought this information. "You stop here, my lad, till I come back." This to the cabman, who sees him, not without misgivings about a source of income, plunge into the filthy and degraded throng that is filling the court, and elbow his way to the scene of excitement.

"*He's* all right!" said that cabby. "I'll put a tenner on him, any Sunday morning"—a figure of speech we cannot explain.

From his elevation above the crowd he can see a good deal of what goes on, and guess the rest. Of what he hears, no phrase could be written without blanks few readers could fill in, and for the meaning of which no equivalent can even be hinted. The actual substance of the occurrence, that filters through the cries of panic and of some woman or child, or both, in agony, the brutal bellowings and threats of a predominant drunken lout, presumably Mr. Salter, the incessant appeals to God and

Christ by terrified women, and the rhetorical use of the names of both by the men, with the frequent suggestion that some one else should go for the police—this actual substance may be drily stated thus: Mr. Salter, a plumber by trade, but at present out of work, had given way to ennui, and to relieve it had for two days past been beating and otherwise maltreating his daughter, aged fourteen, and had threatened the life of her mother for endeavouring to protect her. At the moment when he comes into this story (as a mere passing event we shall soon forget without regret) he is engaged in the fulfilment of a previous promise to his unhappy wife—a promise we cannot transcribe literally, because of the free employment of a popular adjective (supposed to be a corruption of “by Our Lady”) before or after any part of speech whatever, as an expletive to drive home meaning to reluctant minds. It is an expression unwelcome on the drawing-room table. But, briefly, what Mr. Salter had so sworn to do was to twist his wife’s nose off with his finger and thumb. And he did not seem unlikely to carry out his threat, as Livermore’s tenantry lacked spirit or will to interpose, and did nothing but shriek in panic when feminine, and show discretion when masculine; mostly affecting indifference, and saying they warn’t any good, them Salters. The result seemed likely to turn on whether the victim’s back hair would endure the tension as a fulerum, or would come rippin’ out like so much grase.

“Let go of her!” half bellows, half shrieks her legal possessor, in answer to a peremptory summons. “Not for a swiney, soap-eatin’ Apoarstle—not for a rotten parson’s egg, like you. Not for a . . .”

But the defiance is cut short by a blow like the kick of a horse, that lands fairly on the eye-socket with a cracking concussion that can be heard above the tumult, and is followed by a roar of delight from the male vermin, who see all the joys before them of battle unshared and dangerless—the joys bystanders feel in foemen worthy of each other’s steel, and open to be made the subject of wagers.

The fare rejects all offers to hold his coat, but throws his felt hat to a boy to hold. Self-elected seconds make a kind of show of getting a clear space. No idea of assisting in the suppression of a dangerous drunken savage seems to suggest itself—nothing

but what is called “seeing fair.” This is, to wit, letting him loose on even terms on the only man who has had the courage to intervene between him and his victim. Let us charitably suppose that this is done in the hope that it means prompt and tremendous punishment before the arrival of the police. The cabman sees enough from his raised perch to justify his anticipating this with confidence. He can just distinguish in the crowd Mr. Salter’s first rush for revenge and its consequences. “He’s got it!” is his comment.

Then he hears the voice of his fare ring out clear in a lull—such a one as often comes in the tense excitement of a fight. “Give him a minute. . . . Now stick him up again!” and then is aware that Mr. Salter has been replaced on his legs, and is trying to get at his antagonist, and cannot. “He’s playin’ with him!” is his comment this time. But he does not play with him long, for a swift *finale* comes to the performance, perhaps consequent on a cry that heralds a policeman. It causes a splendid excitement in that cabman, who gets as high as he can, to miss none of it. “That’s your sort!” he shouts, quite wild with delight. “That’s the style! Foller on! Foller on!” And then, subsiding into his seat with intense satisfaction, “Done his job, anyhow! Hope he’ll be out of bed in a week!”—the last with an insincere affectation of sympathy for the defeated combatant.

The fare comes quickly along the court and out at the entry, whose occupants the cabman flicks aside with his whip suggestively. “Let the gentleman come, can’t you!” he shouts at them. They let him come. “Be off sharp!” he says to the cabby, who replies, “Right you are, governor!” and is off, sharp. Only just in time to avoid three policemen, who dive into Livermore’s Rents, and possibly convey Mr. Salter to the nearest hospital. Of all that this story knows no more; Mr. Salter goes out of it.

The fare, who seems very little discomposed, speaks through the little trap to his Jehu. “I never got my new hat again,” he says. “You must drive back; there won’t be any decent hatter here.”

“Ask your pardon, sir—the Bridge is histed. Vessel coming through—string of vessels with a tug-boat.”

“Oh, well, get back to the Bank—anywhere—the nearest way

you can." And after a mysterious short cut through narrow ways that recall old London, some still paved with cobbles, past lofty wharves or warehouses daring men lean from the floors of at dizzy heights, and capture bales for, that seem afloat in the atmosphere till one detects the thread that holds them to their crane above—under unexplained rialtos and over inexplicable iron incidents in paving that ring suddenly and wobble underfoot—the cab finds its way across London Bridge, and back to a region where you can buy anything, from penny puzzles to shares in the power of Niagara, if you can pay for them.

Our cab-fare, when he called out, "Hold hard here!" opposite to a promising hat-shop, seemed to be in doubt of being able to pay for something very much cheaper than Niagara. He took out his purse, still sitting in the cab, and found in it only a sovereign, apparently. He felt in his pockets. Nothing there beyond five shillings and some coppers. He could manage well enough—so his face and a slight nod seemed to say—till he went back to the Bank after lunch. And so, no doubt, he would have done had he been content with a common human billycock or bowler, like the former one, at four-and-six. But man is born to give way to temptation in shops. No doubt you have noticed the curious fact that when you go into a shop you always spend more—more than you mean to, more than you want to, more than you've got—one or other of them—but always *more*.

Inside the shop, billycocks in tissue-paper came out of band-boxes, and then out of tissue-paper. But, short of eight shillings, they betrayed a plebeian nature, and lacked charm. Now, those beautiful white real panamas, at twenty-two shillings, were exactly the thing for this hot weather, especially the one the fare tried on. His rich brown hair, that wanted cutting, told well against the warm straw-white. He looked handsome in it, with those strong cheek-bones and bronzed throat Mr. Salter would have been so glad to get at. He paid for it, saying never mind the receipt, and then went out to pay the cabby, who respectfully hoped he didn't see him any the worse for that little affair over the water.

"None the worse, thank you! Shan't be sorry for lunch, though." Then, as he stands with three shillings in his hand, waiting for a recipient hand to come down from above, he adds:

"A very one-sided affair! Did you hear what he said about his daughter? That was why I finished him so thoroughly."

"No, sir, I did *not* hear it. But he was good for the gruel he's got, Lord bless you! without that. . . . I ask your pardon, sir—no! *Not* from a gentleman like you! Couldn't think of it! Couldn't *think* of it!" And with a sudden whip-lash, and a curt hint to his horse, that cabman drove off unpaid. The other took out a pencil, and wrote the number of the cab on his blue wrist-band, close to a little red spot—Mr. Salter's blood probably. When he had done this he turned towards the restaurant he had taken note of. But he seemed embarrassed about finances—at least, about the three shillings the cabby had refused; for he kept them in his hand as if he didn't know what to do with them. He walked on until he came to a hidden haven of silence some plane-trees and a Church were enjoying unmolested, and noticing there a box with a slot, and the word "Contributions" on it, dropped the three shillings in without more ado, and passed on. But he had no intention of lunching on the small sum he had left.

An inquiry of a City policeman guided him to a pawnbroker's shop. What would the pawnbroker lend him on that—his watch? Fifteen shillings would do quite well. That was his reply to an offer to advance that sum, if he was going to leave the chain as well. It was worth more, but it would be all safe till he came for it, at any rate. "You'll find it here, any time up to twelve months," said the pawnbroker, who also nodded after him knowingly as he left the shop. "Coming back for it in a week, of course! All of 'em are. Name of Smith, *as usual!* Most of 'em are." Yet this man's honouring Mr. Smith with a comment looked as if he thought him unlike "most of 'em." *He* never indulged in reflections on the ruck—be sure of that!

Mr. Smith, if that was his name, didn't seem uneasy. He found his way to his restaurant and ordered a very good lunch and a bottle of Perrier-Jouet—not a half-bottle; he certainly was extravagant. He took his time over both, also a nap; then, waking, felt for his watch and remembered he had pawned it; looked at the clock and stretched himself, and called for his bill and paid it. Most likely the wire had come to the Bank by now; anyhow, there was no harm in walking round to see. If it wasn't there he would go back to the hotel at Kensington where

he had left his luggage, and come back to-morrow. It was a bore. Perhaps they would let him have a cheque-book, and save his having to come again. Much of this is surmise, but a good deal was the substance of remarks made in fragments of soliloquy. Their maker gave the waiter sixpence and left the restaurant with three shillings in his pocket, lighting a cigar as he walked out into the street.

He kept to the narrow ways and little courts, wondering at the odd corners Time seems to have forgotten about, and Change to have deserted as unworthy of her notice; every door of every house an extract from a commercial directory, mixed and made unalphabetical by the extractor; every square foot of flooring wanted for Negotiation to stand upon, and Transactions to be carried out over. No room here for anything else, thought the smoker, as, after a quarter of an hour's saunter, he threw away the end of his cigar. But his conclusion was premature. For lo and behold!—there, in a strange little wedge-shaped corner, of all things in the world, a *barber's shop*; maybe a relic of the days of Ben Jonson or earlier—how could a mere loafer tell? Anyhow, his hair wanted cutting sufficiently to give him an excuse to see the old place inside. He went in and had his hair cut—but under special reservation; not too much! The hairdresser was compliant; but, said he, regretfully: "You do your 'ed, sir, less than justice." Its owner took his residuum of change from his pocket, and carelessly spent all but a few coppers on professional remuneration and a large bottle of eau-de-Cologne. Perhaps the reflection that he could cab all the way back to the hotel had something to do with this easy-going way of courting an empty pocket.

When he got to the Bank another young gentleman, with no spectacles this time, said *he* didn't know if any credit was wired. He was very preoccupied, pinning up cheques and initialling some important customer's paying-in book. But *he* would inquire in a moment, if you would wait. And did so, with no result; merely expression of abstract certainty that it was sure to come. There was still an hour—over an hour—before closing time, said he to a bag with five pounds of silver in it, unsympathetically. If you could make it convenient to look in in an hour, probably we should have received it. The person ad-

dressed but not looked at might do so—wouldn't commit himself—and went away.

The question seemed to be how to while away that hour. Well!—there was the Twopenny Tube. At that time it was new, and an excitement. Our friend had exactly fourpence in his pocket. That would take him to anywhere and back before the Bank closed. And also he could put some of that eau-de-Cologne on his face and hands. He had on him still a sense of the foulness of Livermore's Rents and wanted something to counteract it. Eau-de-Cologne is a great sweetener.