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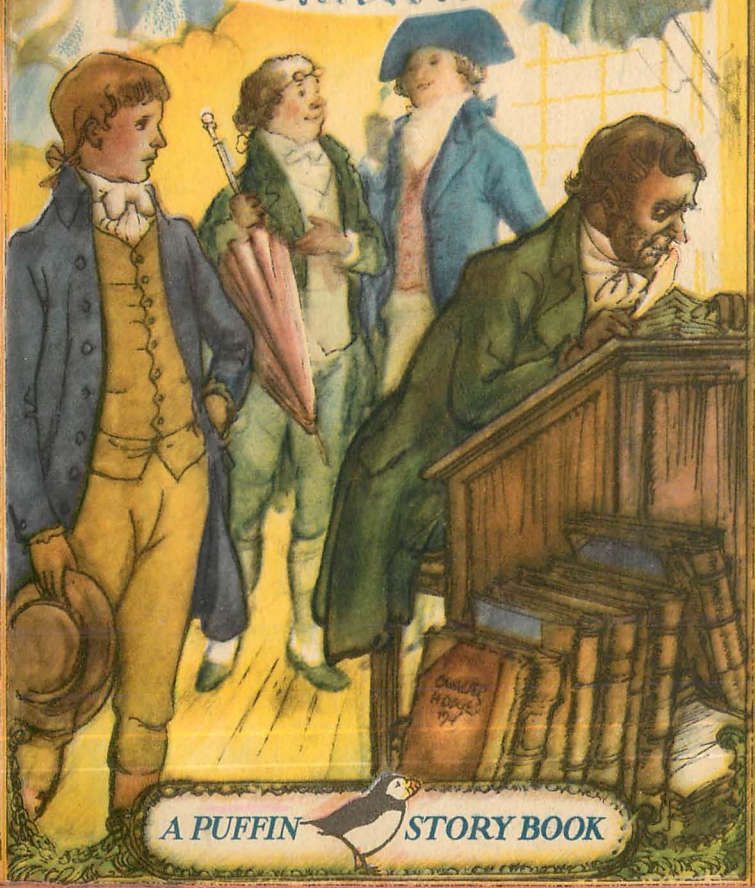
Mr SHERIDAN's UMBRELLA

by

L. A. G. STRONG



A PUFFIN STORY BOOK

ONE SHILLING & SIXPENCE

PUFFIN STORY BOOKS

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MR SHERIDAN'S UMBRELLA

L. A. G. STRONG

This is an adventure story with something added; a picture of Regency times, partly in Brighton, partly in London, where the theatre at which Richard Sheridan's plays were being produced was burned to the ground.

There is a mystery behind all these gay scenes – something sinister even in the little umbrella shop in fashionable Brighton which drew such famous customers as the Prince Regent himself – though it was Mr Sheridan's coming which set this story in train. Behind it and through it run the dark deeds of smugglers along the Sussex coast, evading the excise men and bringing in bales of silk and cases of brandy on moonless nights from across the channel.

It is a tale well told, with a good plot, to hold boys and girls from eleven to sixteen.

MR SHERIDAN'S UMBRELLA

BY

L. A. G. STRONG

PENGUIN BOOKS

HARMONDSWORTH · MIDDLESEX

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CHAPTER I

'AND there is no parcel, you say?'

The man at the coach office shook his head.

'No, sir. Nothing. I'll make sure for you if you like; but I'm pretty near certain. Jim!' He turned and shouted into the brown gloom of the inner office. 'Anything there for Mr Maitland – come on this morning's coach?'

There was a pause, and scrambling sounds indicative of search by the unseen Jim.

'No,' came the reply. 'Nothing.'

'There you are, young master.' The man turned and spread out his hands with a comical gesture. 'It's as I told you. Nothing yet.'

'It's very strange.' Will Maitland frowned. 'This is an important parcel which we are expecting, and which should have come two days ago. I can't understand it.'

'Very vexing, no doubt. But it ain't here. You can come in and look for yourself if you like.'

Will smiled.

'No,' he said, 'I'll take your word for it.' He looked around. 'Here, Smithers, where are you?'

He whistled, and a small brown spaniel shot out of the inner office and leaped up on him with frantic, and perhaps slightly guilty, demonstrations of affection.

'What have you been up to in there, you rogue? Down! Get down!'

Will smiled at the man, who smiled and nodded back. Then, with the dog gambolling round him, he went out into the narrow lane, and in a moment was in one of the streets leading down to the Front.

He hesitated for a moment, then, with a slightly grim expression, walked straight down the street. A gleam of sea between the narrow houses led him on. It was not his quickest way back – but, confound it all, if he must go an errand on a fine summer's morning, he might as well get all the benefit an errand brought, and fill his lungs with sea air before returning to the gloom and musty smells of workshop and office.

Will Maitland was not a figure to attract much attention, as he paused preoccupied in his walk to allow three chattering ladies to pass into the doors of the haberdasher's. Broad-shouldered, dark, and of strong build, he looked older than his seventeen years. His plain suit of brown was in homely contrast to the colours of a knot of three or four young bucks who, insolently drawling, stretching themselves, and rubbing the sleep from their eyes, sauntered towards him and turned in at the door of the coffee-house just before he was obliged to step into the gutter and let them pass. The sight of them, with their devil-may-care ease, and the whole fine day at their disposal, deepened the frown upon Will's countenance. How unequal was the world! Would the day ever come when he too might saunter around and take the air at his ease, instead of spending the hours from morning till night with his nose to the grindstone, with never a breath of fresh air except when his father or Gregory was too busy to go out, and he was sent instead?

Still frowning, he came to the end of the street. Smithers, whom the broad expanse of the Front, with all its openness and light, invariably sent into a transport, ran round in circles, and then, from sheer high spirits, dashed, barking wildly, at an inoffensive pretty girl who had evidently been sent by her mamma to get a change of books from the circulating library on the corner. The

pretty girl started, and stopped in momentary affright. Then she saw that Smithers meant no harm.

'*Smithers!* Come here, you scoundrel.'

And looking up, Will caught the girl's eye, and smiled. The change in his appearance was surprising. Plain and heavy when he scowled, his face lit up with a real charm.

The pretty girl half smiled in return. Then, blushing, looking down as a well-conducted maiden should, she stepped within the doors of the library and was lost to sight.

Calling Smithers to heel, Will crossed the road.

'Lovely morning, sir,' croaked the elder of the two old chairmen, who as usual were seated beside the antiquated sedan chair by the railings.

'Grand,' said Will shortly; and, turning, he made his way slowly homeward.

It was a lovely morning. The chairman was quite right. The air was very still, with a promise of heat to come. The sea was blue and calm as silk. A fine weather haze hung above it: the horizon was lost in mist, and, farther down, the long curving arm of the coast grew faint and disappeared a mere couple of miles away. It was hard to believe that a few short leagues beyond those innocent, dreamy levels of blue lay an enemy country, and that, when night fell, that same smooth surface might be disturbed by smugglers' boats, by revenue cutters, and by small fry innumerable bent upon unlawful business. Those old fishermen below him there, quacking away to one another in their broad Sussex voices, hammering at the keels of their boats, going through their lines, and spreading their nets to dry in the sun; many of them were Will's friends, whom he knew and loved to talk with. Yet if Ben the exciseman was to be believed, half of them (and possibly some from among his friends) brought

more than fish in their boats when they returned to the beach before dawn.

Calling to Smithers, he crossed the Steyne. On the cliff in front of him rose the new promenade, with the bow windows of its handsome lodging-houses winking in the sun. They wore a knowing air, those bow windows, as if they saw what was going on and twinkled in approval. Behind him lay the finest building in all Brighton, the Marine Pavilion, the home of the Prince himself. Behind that stood the centre of all Will's longings, the theatre which, owing to his father's strict command, remained for him still forbidden land. What a dog's life, what a bitter irony it was, thought Will, his lip curling as he turned up the dark street that led to his home. To be here in Brighton, in the year of grace 1808, in the height of the season, and to be no more a part of it than one of the wooden posts that stood in the sea. A haunt of gaiety for others, it was for him only the scene of his drudgery, where he must work at a trade he disliked and despised.

Could anything be more ridiculous – he turned at the little familiar entry, and, glancing once more seaward, apostrophized the morning: could anything be more ridiculous, on a fine summer's day, in the first pleasure town in all England, than to be about to busy oneself upon the manufacture of – of all preposterous things – umbrellas?

Mr Maitland was standing outside the largest shed, in excited conference with the head clerk, Gregory. At sight of Will both turned. Mr Maitland looked flustered and angry. He often got flustered nowadays. A spot of red burned on each of his pale, thin cheeks.

'Well?' he cried irritably as Will approached. 'Well?'

Morosely Will shook his head.

'It has not come,' he said.

'Has not come?' echoed Mr Maitland. 'But this is monstrous. Our work is all held up, don't you understand? We cannot get on with Mr Harden's order. We are clean out of silk; clean out. Are you *sure* there was nothing there?'

'Quite sure. They searched around specially. They offered me to see for myself if I would not take their word.'

'And did you see for yourself?'

'No. There were but a handful of parcels left,' he added, in response to his father's impatient exclamation, 'and they were small. It took the man but a moment to look through them.'

'Well' – Mr Maitland turned to the head clerk – 'I cannot understand it. Can you, Gregory?' He glared almost accusingly at his subordinate.

Will, bored by the whole subject, was suddenly struck by the head clerk's expression. It was too empty, too studiously blank. Hallo, he thought idly, he knows something about it; and then, since he was sick of the whole matter, he put it out of his mind.

'You had better go yourself to the coach office next time,' said Mr Maitland, and the clerk bowed.

Will gritted his teeth. Though it was no conceivable fault of his that the parcel had not come, still his father could not help implying, however indirectly, that anything which went wrong was somehow due to his inexperience, and to the lack of interest which he knew and could not forgive.

'We will wait till to-morrow morning on the chance,' Mr Maitland concluded, 'and if it has not come then you will go to Mr Harden and apologize in person.'

Will's answer was to look as black as he dared.

'Where is that dog of yours?' said Mr Maitland irritably, clapping at his pockets. 'I cannot have him about the place. He will do some mischief.'

'He's all right.'

'Ah, you say so, but how do you know he is all right? Where is he?'

Will kept his temper with an effort.

'In his usual place, I expect, under the big tallboy in the office. He will lie there till I come for him.'

'I do not care to have him left in the office. You had better tie him up.'

'Certainly, if you wish it.'

With set face Will went in and carried out his father's wishes. Smithers, who was lying curled up in the place predicted, looked up with large, mournful eyes at the indignity, and thumped his tail apologetically upon the floor.

'Now then, are you ready?'

The question needed no answer, and Will fell in silently behind his father for the daily tour of the sheds.

CHAPTER II

THIS manufacture of umbrellas, little though Will realized it, represented an unusually shrewd stroke of business ability. Mr Maitland had for many years carried on a rather vague business as a dealer in elegant furniture and in knick-knacks for drawing-rooms. A man of real talent, with a definite artistic sense, he was expert in repairing such articles, and, as his name became known, was entrusted with valuable old pieces and *objets d'art* by people of the highest quality. In order that his lathes might not be idle, he specialized also in the making of walking-canes, and the characteristic and fanciful products of his workshops were to be seen in great profusion up and down the Steyne, round the Pavilion gardens, and in other places where the fashionable were wont to assemble.

Work of this kind, however, though lucrative, was erratic. It was too apt to rise and fall with the season, and Mr Maitland had early looked about him for some staple commodity in regular demand which should support the more expert and exciting side of his business. Calling to his aid a knowledge of chemistry, he had hit upon hair powder. For a long time Maitland's Hair Powder had a steady sale in most parts of the South of England. It was not only good; it was actually a little cheaper than the foreign products stocked in the metropolis. Often it is unwise when one is dealing in a fashionable article to offer it at a lower price than its rivals, for people of quality are apt to think the article best that costs the most. Once they can be persuaded across this awkward hurdle, however, they are uncommonly grateful for any-

thing that saves their pockets and, as soon as a leader of fashion lets it be publicly known that he personally has used the less expensive article and found it good, it is astonishing what a rush there will be. So, owing to a stroke of luck here and there, the fame of Maitland's Hair Powder spread rapidly. Gentlemen in London recommended it one to another. It even reached, if rumour could be believed, as far as royalty.

Then, sudden as a hawk swooping from the sky, had come misfortune, in the shape of a tax on hair powder. True, the results were not immediate, for the wealthiest part of Mr Maitland's *clientèle* could well support the tax. But the manufacturer, shrewdly looking ahead, saw, with his knowledge of human nature, that sooner or later the fashion for hair powder would die out. Faced with the loss of his main support, he cast about him for a substitute. It was some time before he found one. Then one day an order came to repair the seats of an elegant suite of drawing-room furniture, the property of his Grace the Duke of —. This necessitated the purchase of a large roll of heavy silk; and, as he watched this silk being unrolled, the inspiration suddenly came to him. Silk on the one hand, walking-canes on the other! There, in front of his nose, were the two components that made – umbrellas!

The umbrella in England was still something of an oddity. Ladies, of course, had long carried them. Now, the inspired manufacturer decided, men were going to: not the great clumsy leather objects kept by the coffee-houses to shelter patrons to their door, nor the tent-like erections used by parsons at a funeral, but light, elegant creations, with modern frames of whalebone and fine silk coverings.

As was only to be expected, ridicule met his first efforts.

'What!' cried the young bucks of Brighton. 'Gentlemen carry umbrellas! Why, they would as soon go to war in their nightcaps.' Old General Jenkins, that famous Brighton character, was so indignant when he heard of it that he called on Mr Maitland in person and asked him roundly what he meant by trying to debauch his country's manhood with such d—d effeminate things. Others complained that he was introducing to Brighton the vile foreign fashions that hitherto only the maddest, or those that sought notoriety at any price, had dared bring into London. Soon the print-shops had cartoons in their windows for all to gaze and laugh at. One of the most popular depicted a whole family walking along in single file, each with an umbrella of appropriate size, down to the dog, which had one tied upon its tail. Comedians in the theatre introduced umbrellas to their scenes, and for months any reference, even the baldest, was sure to raise a laugh.

But Mr Maitland had proved right, and all these jokers wrong. In a surprisingly short space of time gentlemen *did* carry umbrellas, and the modest little factory, though competing with firms from abroad, was soon as famous in this new capacity as it had been with hair powder in the past.

Will had grown up with the manufactory. He had never known any home but this square stone house, the side drive of which led, not to a pleasant garden with a sloping lawn and chairs that faced the sea, but to a row of sheds where the umbrellas were made. The sheds were haphazard, of different sizes, and crowded together. They had grown up higgledy-piggledy as the business grew. Mr Maitland was always talking of pulling them down and having a big new factory built in their place, but somehow there was never time. Work kept pouring in; the promised slack period never came.

From the prosperity of the business Will, as has been indicated, drew little pleasure. He longed to be out of it. He was now surely old enough to be his own master; old enough to take a commission, to go to the university, to do anything in the wide earth rather than stay here in Brighton and help his father. His dislike of umbrellas grew to an obsession. He would wince whenever he met one in the streets, and turn away in case its owner should recognize him as a son of the man who made it. As for carrying one, even in the heaviest rain – he would have died sooner. He was obedient enough, and bowed his head to his father in all matters else, but on this point he was adamant.

So now, moodily, he followed his father on the round of the sheds. To Mr Maitland the sight of the work in progress was, as always, a tonic. He forgot his vexations, and began to talk animatedly of the various orders and plans in hand. He talked on, doing his utmost to infect his unwilling son with his own interest. Will was a puzzle to his father. The relationship of father to son was interpreted strictly enough in those times, but Mr Maitland was a humane and kindly man, and the death of Will's mother some years earlier had brought the remaining members of the little family closer together, and established a gentler relationship than was common. So, while on certain points of principle (the theatre was one of them) he was inflexible, the father often allowed his son far more rope than the son realized. As to keeping Will in the business, there was no question about that. There it was his to command, and Will's to obey. But it was no satisfaction to Mr Maitland to get his own way on those terms, and he strove almost pathetically to catch the boy's interest and make him see the worth and enterprise of the business that won them all their livelihood.

They passed from worker to worker, Mr Maitland, as his custom was, talking to each man, asking him how he did, looking at the work done, with a word of sober praise here and of censure there. There were few of the latter. He employed only the best workmen, and had a rare power of getting their utmost from them without bullying or driving. Here again, if Will had had the experience to see it, his father was remarkable. He treated all those who worked for him as if they were human beings. He knew the affairs of each, asked them about their wives and children, and looked after them, a despotic but benevolent shepherd. There were no children in his employ, as in so many others', working long hours for a wretched pittance. Mr Maitland paid and treated his employees well, and in return expected their best from them. In nine cases out of ten he got it.

Outside the biggest shed Mr Maitland stopped, and held on to a wood-pile while he got his breath. Will waited, kicking the ground. His father looked at him with a new light of anxious speculation in his eye. He opened his mouth as if to speak, shut it again, pursed up his lips; took another look at his son, and then, with a cough, spoke abruptly:

'Will.'

'Yes, father?'

'Will, do you think you know enough to look after things for me for a while – in an emergency?'

Will stared at his father, his mouth slowly opening.

'I don't say the need will arise,' said his father testily, looking away, the small spot of colour rising again to his cheeks. 'But it might. Only for a while, mind you. I'm not as young as I was. I have been feeling a little tired lately, off and on, and I sometimes think I may have to go away for a rest.'

Will still stared.

'Well?' His father's eyes came back to him again. 'Do you think you could manage for a few weeks?'

'I – I don't know, father.' This sounded ungracious, so he added quickly, 'I could try.'

'H'm.' Mr Maitland nodded, and looked away again.

Will was still too much astonished to say anything helpful. Coming from his father, the suggestion was as unexpected as a thunderbolt. The attitude to which he was accustomed was one of apparent mistrust mingled with criticism: dissatisfaction at his obvious lack of interest, hints that he did not understand the business (which might well be true), reluctance to entrust to him any but the smallest matters, and, on the rare occasions when he did anything on his own initiative and managed it rightly, a kind of grudging surprise. Thus the suggestion that he might actually be left in charge made him stare at his father, as if for the moment he had gone out of his mind. Stare he did – and with a new concern noticed that his father looked tired and old. His face was definitely thinner; there were lines about his eyes, and he seemed to get out of breath very easily of late.

'Well?' As if conscious of the scrutiny, Mr Maitland pulled himself together. 'We can't stay here all day.'

He led the way to the next shed. To reach it one had to go through a door in a wall, and on the far side of the wall, in a ramshackle, draughty place all to himself, the only place where he would work, sat Israel the half-wit, crouching all of a heap, his nose an inch from the knob of wood on which he was working. The half-wit, an odd discovery of Mr Maitland, was a gawky, shambling, ungainly creature some six years older than Will. Vacant and incapable with regard to the main businesses in life, he had one talent – an extraordinary gift for carving.

He was in almost every respect a highly inconvenient employee. First of all, he would not work in the sheds with the others, but had to have this dirty and ramshackle place of his own. Unable to work to order, he would often get fits when he would do no work at all, but sit moping in the corner, scowling morosely out of his slit eyes at all who passed by, and rejecting all attempts to speak to him. When the mood took him, however, he could reproduce with an uncanny and brilliant accuracy the heads of people or animals he had seen, or indeed any object that happened to strike his fancy. A great proportion of the handles which he carved could never be used, so freakish or unseemly were they. There was one occasion, which Will remembered with an unholy terror and joy, on which he had produced a libellous caricature of Mr Maitland himself. The best of his work, however, was exquisite, and commanded high prices. Thus, for all the inconvenience, it paid Mr Maitland to employ him; he had a soft spot in his heart for the odd creature, though he concealed it as best he could, and was always ready to be angry at the disproportionate interest taken in Israel by visitors to the manufactory and the time they tended to linger watching him instead of looking at features which Mr Maitland thought more worthy of attention.

This characteristic of Mr Maitland came uppermost now. Will, perversely, took more interest in Israel than in any of the rest of the employees, and if left alone would sit for hours watching the uncouth fingers that were so miraculously deft and skilful at their work. He stopped now, catching his breath in admiration. The idiot was carving the head of a goat, with exquisite touches representing the stiff curling hair. His work was a daily miracle.

As Will bent closer to look, his father, who had gone a few steps in front, turned at the door of the second shed.

'Are you never coming, Will?' he called brusquely.

And Will, his temper worse than ever, straightened up and followed.

CHAPTER III

NOT until late that afternoon was Will able to escape from his work and go down on the Front for a breath of fresh air. He was not tied to regular hours in the office, it being understood that whenever there was nothing in particular for him to do he might slip out for a while. At the same time, Mr Maitland expected to be able to find him when he wanted him, and, although Will used his privilege in moderation, would sometimes be annoyed if he was not there the moment he wanted him. The arrangement worked well enough as a rule, but Will chafed against it, perversely regarding the lack of set hours of evidence that his father still treated him as a child.

It was a busy morning, and a couple of strong hints from Will were needed before Mr Maitland would even break off for the midday meal. This was presided over by Will's sister Marjorie. Marjorie was only eighteen, but she had been keeping house for them for several years now, ever since Mrs Maitland died. Between her and Will there was a strong affection; and he wondered from time to time how she managed to live such a dull life, and yet seem perfectly contented.

Mr Maitland came at last, nearly ten minutes after the hour, and the two silently went through the garden and into the house. Marjorie met them in the hall.

'Late again,' she said affectionately to her father. 'I was just coming to fetch you.'

Mr Maitland kissed her cheek absent-mindedly.

'I am sorry,' he said. 'I was busy and didn't notice the time.'

Marjorie looked at Will.

'You should have reminded him,' she said. 'How often have I told you?'

'I did,' said Will sourly. 'Twice.' He threw his hat on the chest, and followed them into the parlour. Marjorie, with a quick glance at him, took her place and said no more.

They ate their meal in silence, Mr Maitland preoccupied, Will glum, and Marjorie, after a few general remarks, tactfully doing nothing to disturb them. After a few minutes more Mr Maitland pushed back his plate with a nervous gesture. Marjorie's face fell, and she gazed at him reproachfully.

'Oh, father! You've hardly eaten anything. And I took such pains to make it nice for you.'

'I know, my dear.' He smiled wanly, and patted her hand. 'It's delicious – but I don't seem to have any appetite to-day.'

'That's what you said yesterday. And the day before. I can't have you going on this way. You'll be ill on my hands, that'll be the next thing.'

Usually Mr Maitland sparked up and laughed when she rallied him. To-day he hardly even smiled.

'What is the matter?' she asked. 'I know I oughtn't to ask – but is anything wrong with the business?'

Mr Maitland half stiffened, and hesitated. It was part of his creed that women should not concern themselves with business, or with any masculine affairs, which in his opinion they were incapable of understanding. But Marjorie was privileged. She was his pet, and old beyond her years. Moreover, she had once or twice revealed that she had excellent shrewd notions of what was going on, and could if need be contribute a valuable opinion. It would not do to admit this, but Mr Maitland acknow-

ledged it in his heart, and on one occasion had even said something to Will about it, breaking off in an embarrassed manner at this breach of one of his firmest principles.

So now, after a momentary frown, he answered as if the question were quite a normal one.

'No, no. Nothing of any moment. An annoyance, that's all.'

He hesitated again, and then, to Will's great surprise, told her about the delay in sending the silk.

'I can't understand it,' he concluded. 'I can't understand it at all. Gregory has vouched for it, and it has always arrived punctually before. It is a great vexation. There is nothing I hate more than being behind my word.'

The two listeners could well understand that. Always a stickler for punctuality and accuracy in keeping a bargain, their father would find it absolute torture to be forced into unpunctuality himself.

Marjorie considered, wrinkling her forehead.

'Mr Gregory gets it from his brother-in-law, didn't you tell me?'

'Yes. In Amsterdam. It is shipped to Dover, and comes on from there by coach.'

There was a short silence.

'Might it not be better, if you can't rely upon him, to get it from somewhere else?' asked Marjorie.

Mr Maitland moved irritably in his chair, and she saw that she had made a mistake.

'There,' he cried. 'You don't understand. It's no use discussing such matters with you.'

'We get it cheap,' cut in Will bluntly. 'That's why.'

His father turned to him, not too well pleased; and the meal proceeded in silence.

After the meal, Will was kept busy for another hour and a half at the account books, and then at last he was

free. He slipped out unobtrusively, for it was part of his father's creed that the other workers should not be made discontented by noticing his escape. Actually there was no real concealment, and any one who pleased to look up might see him go; but this was another of the appearances that had to be kept up. Once clear of the sheds, Will whistled surreptitiously to Smithers, who came bounding from some secret lair, and the two set off at a brisk pace for the downland above the cliffs to the east of the town. This downland and these cliffs were Will's favourite haunt, partly because they were high and open, but also because, in a small hut a couple of miles away, lived his old friend Ben the exciseman.

The afternoon was still warm, but there was a breeze, and, as he climbed, Will savoured to the full the delicious release from the heat of the sheds and the stuffy ledgers. He made good speed, with Smithers bounding and circling around excitedly in all directions, picking up the trails of rabbits, and barking at the gulls that wheeled lazily overhead. Half an hour brought him to Ben's cottage – and then there was the usual business of keeping Smithers away from Ben's Towzer, who, chained to a barrel, worked himself into a frenzy at the sound and smell of a rival. At last the barking was stopped, both dogs pacified, and Will sat down beside old Ben on a bench in the tiny garden. The old man was methodically cleaning his pistols. After an exchange of greetings and comments on the day, Will fell silent.

'What's the matter?' inquired the old man shrewdly. 'You look a bit down in the mouth.'

With a nervous gesture Will leaned back and tossed his hat on the grass.

'I wish to the Lord,' he exclaimed, 'that I could get away.'

'Ah,' replied old Ben wisely, 'the town is a stifling place this weather. If I was to bide a night down there, I should stifle in my sleep.'

'I don't mean that so much. I can sleep all right. It's the waking part I don't like.'

'What's wrong, then?' The old man held a pistol up to the sky and squinted along the barrel. 'Too many umbrellas?'

'That's about it.' Will smiled crookedly. He did not like any reference to the business, even from his friend. 'I wish I could do something. It's no life for a man – no life at all.'

If old Ben's eye twinkled at the accent on the 'man,' he did not let Will see it. He busied himself for another half-minute over the pistol before he spoke again.

'If you're hard up for something to do,' he said, 'you might like to come along with us to-night. We have the idea of a job on, and there might be some fun. Though, mind you, I can't promise anything.'

Will sat up eagerly.

'A job? What sort of a job? Do you mean —'

'Aye.' The old man breathed on the wooden butt and polished it with a rag. 'What else would I mean? A job of knittin', or a spelling bee?'

'Tell me about it.'

'There ain't much to tell. You know the place, a bare mile from here, where there was a landslide last March year?'

'Yes. Where the cliff sticks out into a sort of little headland, you mean.'

'Call it a headland if you like. I call it a wall.'

'Where it sticks out, anyway.'

'Aye, where it sticks out. Well, on the far side of that it seems there's a bit of a cave.'

'But, Ben, how could there be, without any one seeing it?'

'Don't ask me,' replied the old man. 'I don't make no claim to be in Nature's secrets. And as for seeing it, it don't show, not from the outside, without you go in close. Round a bit of a corner, like, it is. Anyway, there it is, because I've seen it for myself.'

'Well, what about it?'

'Only that there's some of these here boats from France and elsewhere creeps up at high tide, lands the stuff, and hides it there until it suits their friends ashore to pick it up.' The old man stopped and spat very carefully. 'It's my belief the cave's a new one just opened up by another landslide. There's been a good many, in a small way, since that big one. Anyway, it's a handy place, and no one has thought of looking there – till we got the hint, that is.'

'But, Ben, how can they land stuff there? With that beach, it's shallow water even at full tide.'

'Ah,' said the old man with satisfaction. 'Now you've got to the significations of it; and that's why we're going along to-night. It *is* shallow, same as you say, and that means that the big boats can't get in. The load that we have warning of will be landed in two or three parts. Most of it should be there already. And Lieutenant Fleming and me and three or four others – and you yourself if you like to lend a hand – is going along there to-night to seize what's there.'

'But why not wait till you think the whole lot is there?'

'Because as soon as the whole lot's there they'll come and shift it, and we may miss 'em; whereas, if we go along in the middle, and lay hold of what there is, we may find more than the stuff itself. We may find who's landing it, and who it's for.'

Will nodded, and thought for a moment.

'Won't it be guarded?'

'I dare say.'

Will looked up. His eyes danced, and he beamed all across his face.

'Coming?' smiled the old man, catching his eye.

'You bet I'm coming. When do you start?'

'Half an hour after dark.'

'Where shall I meet you?'

'Here, of course.'

'Right.' Will sprang to his feet. 'I must get back now and make arrangements.'

'Here,' cried the old man anxiously. 'Not a word of this, mind you. There's no knowing who's in it. We can't afford —'

'I won't say a word of what I'm going to do. What do you take me for? I'll just tell my sister I'm going to be out late, and to leave the window open for me; that's all.'

'Oh,' said the old man, mollified. 'Well, if that's all —'

'It is all.' He ran a few steps, then turned. 'Thanks, Ben, for giving me the chance.'

The old man waved a hand, and went on attending to his pistols.

Will hurried homeward in a very different mood. He ran, he jumped over tussocks, he threw sticks for the ecstatic Smithers, he shouted, he sang. Not until he reached the outskirts of the town did he sober down. The prospect of an evening's excitement so exhilarated him that even when he reached the sedate Marine Parade he kept on wanting to laugh aloud, and frowned severely in order to repress his own exuberance. Passers-by looked at him queerly, he thought, and he began to wonder whether there must not be something strange about his appearance. Presently one, a young man, stared so hard

that Will coloured and was prepared to be angry. Then something familiar in the young man's face made him stop. They hesitated; opened their mouths to speak; moved; hesitated again; then recognized each other.

'Colin, by all that's wonderful!'

'Will!'

CHAPTER IV

'IT *is* you, isn't it?' said Colin.

'Yes, it's me all right.'

'I thought it must be. Then I wondered. You were looking so confoundedly odd.'

'Odd? What was I doing?'

'Swinging your arms, snapping your fingers, grinning all over your face, and then scowling like a maniac.'

Will flushed, and laughed.

'I was excited about something, that's all.'

'Faith,' said his friend, falling in beside him, 'don't get excited too often, then, or they'll clap you in the madhouse.'

Colin Egan was a young Irishman a couple of years older than Will. They had met at the fencing school, where Will, as a novice, had gazed in open-mouthed admiration at his grace and skill. Then, later on, Colin, noting the admiration, had been touched by it, and had thrown a good-natured word or two to the younger boy. A friendship sprang up between them, and Will, persevering hard, had acquired sufficient skill to fence with and take lessons from his hero. Then Colin had gone back to Ireland, and, after a laborious letter or so, Will had lost touch with him. Now, the first surprise of the meeting over, he was delighted to see his friend.

'And what on earth are you doing here in Brighton?' he inquired.

Colin hesitated for a moment before answering.

'I want to be an actor,' he said.

'An actor?'

Will's utterance rang with amazement and envy; but Colin misunderstood him.

'I know it's a confoundedly queer career for a gentleman, but there it is. The stage pulls me, and I care for nothing else.'

As Will was silent, Colin turned and looked at him sharply.

'You don't approve?' he asked.

'Approve! You lucky devil! I was envying you with all my heart and soul.'

Colin smiled.

'I'm glad you feel that way about it,' he said. 'Precious few people do.'

He fell in beside Will, and they walked along together towards the Steyne.

'Tell me all about it,' Will demanded.

Colin laughed.

'It's a long story,' he said; and plunged into it straight away, telling Will of his struggles with his parents, his persistence, his meeting with an actor in Dublin, more struggles, more persistence, and, finally, a letter of introduction which brought him to the great Mr Sheridan himself.

'What?' Will stopped dead and stared at his friend. 'You don't mean *the* Mr Sheridan? The friend of the Prince?'

'Yes.'

'But he isn't on the stage any longer. He's in politics now.'

'I know he is. But he has mighty interests in the stage still. He —'

'My father's always talking of him. He says he's the one man who acts according to his principles.'

'Does he indeed?' Colin opened his eyes approvingly. 'Plenty of people I could think of would say exactly the reverse. Mr Sheridan has a great many enemies. Still, I

don't care a rap about his politics. Didn't you know that he owns Drury Lane?'

'Owns Drury Lane?' repeated Will in wonder.

'He does indeed; so you see I am well set for what I want.' Colin smiled happily. 'My father knew him in Ireland, when they were both young. He's been very kind to him.'

'What part are you going to play?' inquired Will enviously.

Colin shrugged his shoulders.

'There is nothing settled yet. As a matter of fact, that's why I'm here. Mr Sheridan – maybe you have heard about him – is very vague on matters of business, and in the end he forgot to give me the letter of introduction he spoke of. Then he came down here. He's down here now. I've written once or twice to remind him, but they say he never reads his letters.'

'Never reads his letters! How on earth does he get on, then?'

'I don't know. He seems to manage somehow. At any rate, I thought the best thing to do was to ride down here, present myself to him, and remind him of his promise.'

They had come to the Steyne, and in another moment would reach the turning to Will's home. He hesitated, feeling once more a sudden access of shame at the nature of his business. He dared not let this smart young actor-to-be know how he got his living. At the very word 'umbrella,' Colin would surely laugh and leave him.

They stopped and stood looking at one another. Then Colin spoke just as if he was reading his friend's thoughts.

'What about you, though?' he said. 'What are you doing now?'

Will hesitated, then replied evasively:

'I? Oh, I'm just staying at home for the present.'

'I see.'

Colin was either too well-bred to show curiosity, or did not feel it.

'Been doing any fencing lately?' he asked.

'No, worse luck; I've been too busy.'

Instantly he cursed himself for a fool, lest Colin should ask what at; but Colin merely stretched and yawned.

'It's good exercise – but little use to a man in these times.'

'I suppose not.'

Then, àpropos of nothing, Will suddenly thought of the evening's work in front of him. On the impulse of the moment he told Colin. That young gentleman woke up at once and showed a vivid interest.

'Smugglers, eh?' he exclaimed. 'Well, I wish you joy of them. Mind you don't get a bullet in your ribs, though!'

'Not I! We shall take them by surprise.'

'Some fellows have all the luck,' said Colin, eyeing him enviously.

'Why don't you come with me? I could fix it up. I'm sure old Ben would not mind my bringing you.'

'I only wish I could, but I've several appointments to-night, besides seeing Mr Sheridan, and I daren't miss them.'

The two shook hands, promising to meet again at the first opportunity, and Will, waiting until his friend had gone some distance, turned up the narrow lane and came to the office. Going in the door, he almost collided with Gregory. The head clerk stood back, and an awkward pause followed. Will always found it difficult to speak to the man. He disliked him, yet could not feel really justified in doing so, and so was always constrained in his presence.

'Have you been to the coach office?' he asked, to break the silence. 'Was the stuff there?'

Once again it seemed that Gregory's face became unnaturally empty of expression.

'No,' he replied. 'It may come on the night mail, though. I will call in on my way here in the morning.'

'I wish there was a more direct way of getting it,' said Will, kicking at a knot in the flooring. 'There ought to be.'

'There's a war on,' the clerk reminded him, 'and it's French silk. You wouldn't get it at all if it wasn't for my brother-in-law in Amsterdam, and him getting it specially for us from Lyons.'

He looked reproachfully at Will as he spoke.

'It's very good of him – and you – to take the trouble,' replied Will awkwardly.

'No trouble; no trouble at all, Mr Will. I don't look at it in that way at all. Anything I can do for the firm I am always glad to do. I ask no better reward.'

Will felt suddenly hot all over, and, excusing himself abruptly, went through the office and pretended to look for Smithers.

CHAPTER V

THE half-pay lieutenant rose, drew his cloak around him, limped over to the window, and peered out.

Old Ben looked up from his game.

'Is it dark, sir?'

The lieutenant grunted.

'Dark as it's going to be.' He turned and came back into the room. 'We may as well start.'

The men, without saying anything, began, with leisurely movements, to put away their cards and get up from the low benches on which they were sitting. Will jumped eagerly to his feet, all impatience to be gone. It was more than an hour and a half since he had first come to the cottage, and the period of waiting until the long summer twilight should leave the sky had been exceedingly trying to his nerves. Old Ben, of course, he knew well, and one of the other men, but the rest were strangers and did not seem to welcome his presence or treat him as seriously as he would have wished. For the most part, they paid him no attention whatever, but went on with their games as if there were no exciting adventure toward at all. Will, whose upbringing had been stricter than he really knew, watched the cards with fascination and a sort of horror, which was intensified as soon as he saw that the men were playing for money. Lieutenant Fleming, the half-pay officer, seemed to be on familiar terms with them all. True, they called him 'sir'; but, beyond that, there was no pretence of the sort of discipline which Will, a stickler for etiquette, felt to be desirable. Moreover, the lieutenant fortified himself with occasional nips from a bottle of unmistakable appearance.

In all, there were six men present besides the lieutenant. All were playing games but one, and he was sitting in the corner, mysteriously twisting hay into ropes, which he bound every yard or so with a knot of twine. His curiosity roused, Will edged over to him and, after a while, asked him what he was doing. The answer was not reassuring.

'What am I doing?' the man repeated, with a huge grin, which revealed sorry gaps in his teeth. 'Why, making daisy-chains, of course.'

Much offended, Will drew away, and, with heightened colour, pretended to be absorbed in the game that was going on before him – of which, it need hardly be said, he understood nothing whatever. He felt uncomfortable and lonely. Indeed, but for an occasional friendly wink from old Ben, he would have wished to be back in Brighton and well out of the whole business.

Now, however, they were getting a move on at last. The men got up, grumbling quietly to themselves, and gathered their equipment for the expedition. Huge pistols were thrust into belts, cutlasses were strapped on, and, much to Will's surprise, a vast collection of lanterns was taken from a cupboard and one handed to each man. Will, who had been expecting the loan of a weapon, was bidden to carry two lanterns.

'Never mind what they are for,' said old Ben, seeing the look of surprise on his face, 'you bring 'em along. You will see what they are for presently.'

Once more Will lapsed into indignation. What else could a lantern be for but to give light? What he did not understand was why they should set out for a secret and dangerous mission with a collection of lights, which, once lit, would make them look like the Pavilion Gardens when the Prince was down. These men were all treating him as if he was a child, and old Ben was as bad as the rest.

The man who had been making the hay ropes was excused from carrying lantern or weapons. He had enough to do as it was, bundling his handiwork into a sack and slinging it across his shoulder.

The lieutenant looked round.

'Now then, all ready?'

'All ready, sir.'

And in a moment they were outside the cottage, making their way along the cliff top.

It was a blessed relief to come out from the hot, smoky atmosphere into the open air. The western sky was still full of soft light, but over the east, to which they were turning their faces, night had drawn close down. Northward the slow curves of the Downs could be seen only as a barrier that, suddenly but softly, shut off the faint starlit sky. On their right the land went dark to the edge of the cliff, then broke off, and there was nothing beyond but a mysterious, glimmering vagueness that might have been sea or sky. A faint breeze was coming from the north, bringing with it the cool breath of night and the sweet, unmistakable scents of grass and clover.

For about three-quarters of a mile the little party trudged ahead in silence. Then the lieutenant, who was leading, stopped and made his way to the edge of the cliff. He held up his hand, and for several seconds all stood listening. There was no sound except the gentle murmur of the sea upon the beach one hundred and fifty feet below, and, from far, far inland, the barking of a dog.

Will edged near to old Ben.

'What is going to happen now?' he whispered.

'We're going down over the cliff,' came the answer.

'Going down ...?'

'Yes. Slanting 'dicular-like. There is a path down here. Didn't you know that?'

'I knew we should have to get down somewhere, of course —'

He broke off, for the lieutenant, whose vague form was just visible ahead, silhouetted against the grey nothingness, stooped suddenly and disappeared. One by one the rest followed.

'Keep behind me,' old Ben whispered softly. 'Lean inwards all the way. It's dead easy going. Don't be scared.'

'I'm not scared,' Will protested shortly, but his heart was beating fast all the same as he stooped to follow the old man. To one who knew the cliff merely as a cliff, a white, irregular drop sheer to the level beach, the idea of going down it in the dark was, to say the least, exciting. However, thought Will grimly, if the rest can go down, so can I. He set his teeth and began the long climb down.

Old Ben was right. It was not difficult at all. Against the white chalk surface the black figures of the climbers ahead were clearly visible. Leaning inwards, as he was bid, and holding on to the rough surface with both hands, Will lowered himself step by step, copying each movement of the old man in front. They were sidling down an irregular fissure, or ridge, in the face of the cliff, the projecting ledge along which their feet felt their way being anything from a foot to two feet wide. All the same, it was a daring descent, and one which the smugglers, whoever they were, might well consider outside the powers of the little band whose unequal task it was to keep them in order.

Suddenly there was a scrabbling sound ahead, and the sound of a stifled curse. The party pulled up as if by magic, and an instant later, in the silence, there was heard a slither and a clatter as a piece of chalk, dislodged by an

unlucky boot, fetched up on the beach below. A series of harsh whispers followed, old Ben severely reprimanding the culprit, Bill by name, and the culprit protesting that it was not his fault, which a bit of the cliff give way under his feet, like.

A staccato command from the lieutenant silenced them all. For a full minute they stood still, listening, lest by any chance there should be anyone on the beach below to take the alarm. There was no sound, however; and, reassured, the lieutenant whispered the command once more, and the party resumed its crab-like downward progress.

Just as it seemed to Will that he had been doing this, and would go on doing this, for ever, the figure of the lieutenant in front detached itself and moved out oddly sideways at an angle to the direction in which they were travelling. Then the unlucky Bill did the same, then Ben, and in amazement Will found they had reached the bottom and were standing on the level beach.

'Now then, Jenkins – have you got the stuff?'

'Yes,' said the maker of daisy-chains sourly, 'and a precious job I had getting it down, I can tell you.'

He dumped his sack down at the lieutenant's feet. The lieutenant did not seem to be much impressed.

'Hay weighs light,' he observed.

'You try climbing down with it next time, that's all!' retorted the aggrieved Jenkins.

Will watched awestruck for the outburst which this mutinous remark should have provoked, but the lieutenant merely laughed.

'Get to work,' he observed; and, sitting down, he reached for one of the lengths of rope and proceeded to wind it around his right foot.

Now Will saw the purpose of the twisted hay. It was

to muffle the boots of the party, so that their tread upon the beach should not be heard. Five minutes later he was standing up, his own feet securely bound, feeling like a cart horse sunk over its hocks in mud.

'Now,' – the lieutenant assembled the party around him – 'as I reckon it, we are about a quarter of a mile from the place. Our job is to edge along at the foot of the cliff until we come to the place where it sticks out. Halt there for further orders.'

The next ten minutes were for Will rather worse than the descent of the cliff. Orders were to hug the base of the cliff; but this was far from easy, as, at every few yards, they kept coming across falls, great or small, of the chalky rock, which had to be skirted in turn. The enormous mass of hay on each foot made the going even more laborious, and Will found himself quite unable to calculate where his foot began and ended. Carrying two lanterns did not make the progress any easier either. In the first few yards he stumbled three times. Presently, however, whether because the going actually became easier or because he had acquired the knack of it, things got better. By the time the lieutenant, who was still leading, halted, Will had become quite expert in making his way under the new conditions.

The projection of rock was indeed formidable. It stuck out almost at a right angle, and towered above them farther than they could see, accustomed as they were by now to the dim light. Above them, soaring upwards, was the vague, milky glimmer of the cliff. They could not see the edge of the sea, and such sight as they got of the beach was highly deceptive, since it was composed half of chalk and half of darker substances, such as rock, and in the gloom the dark patches looked like pits in a white surface.

'Now then,' the lieutenant admonished them, 'cover your lanterns up with your cloaks and get them lit.' And, as the men obeyed, he went on, 'We're to creep round the corner and then rush them. I lead with Ben and Bill. Bill will carry one lantern for the two of us. Then you, young man, follow with a lantern in each hand. Hold them as wide apart as you can. The rest bring up the rear. Understand?'

'Aye, sir.'

'What is the point of that?' Will whispered to old Ben as, leaning against the rock, he laboured at the difficult task of lighting a lantern, at the same time shading its beams from the outside world.

The lieutenant heard the question.

'The point is,' he answered, 'that they should think there are more of us than there are. Three of us rush them, making all the row we know how; then they see a regular army of lights following up, and, ten to one, they will run for it.'

'Don't we want to catch them?'

The lieutenant uttered a faint sound of amusement.

'We don't want a broken head or a bullet in the guts,' whispered another voice. There was a general chuckle of approval.

Before Will had time to reflect upon these sentiments, the lieutenant gave another command, and the party, screening their lights as best they might, began to grope their way around the promontory. For perhaps two minutes they edged along. Then the figure of the lieutenant halted and stiffened. Evidently he had reached the corner. He waited for a moment for the others to draw level. Will saw from the movement of old Ben's elbow that he was pulling a pistol from his belt. He held his breath, standing tense, awaiting the signal.

'Now!'

With a diabolic screech the lieutenant shot forward, as if someone had stuck a pin into him, closely followed by Ben and Bill. Jerking the lanterns from under his cloak and holding his arms wide apart, as bidden, Will followed and, with a series of blood-curdling yells, the party rushed round the rocky edge of the promontory. The lights swayed crazily and danced on the soaring face of the cliff. A black shadow leaped towards them, and they saw at the base of the promontory the jagged, irregular mouth of a cave.

'Put up your hands!'

The command echoed back hollowly from the face of the cliff. A single figure, sprawling at the mouth of the cave, scrambled to its feet. Before it could escape, old Ben rushed forward and sprang upon it. A quick struggle ensued, made in the leaping light of the lanterns, and then bringing his full illumination to bear upon the scene, Will saw that old Ben had got the solitary guardian pinned against the wall, and was twisting his muffler tight around his neck and shaking him for all he was worth. Taken utterly by surprise, the man offered no resistance, but waved his hands feebly in the air and craned his head back, cawing like a rook.

'Easy on, Ben! He's unarmed.'

Ben gave his victim a few more shakes to make sure, then unwound the scarf from his neck and stood back. The man almost collapsed, clawing at the rock to save himself. He was a sorry specimen. Tall, thin, very pale, with a scraggy neck, a beak of a nose, and a little beard like a goat, he looked as unlikely a guardian of contraband goods as could well be imagined.

'How many more are there of you here?' Then, as the man did not answer, Ben thrust an enormous pistol into

his stomach. 'Speak up, d'you hear me? How many more of you are there here?'

The poor wretch was still too surprised and breathless to answer. He gasped, bubbled, and rolled his eyes.

'Speak up quick, or it'll be the worse for you.'

Ben prodded him with the pistol barrel. He squealed and doubled over forwards.

'Only me,' he gasped. 'I'm alone.'

'Alone, are you?' Ben stood back and lowered his pistol. 'You're a nice sort of a fellow to leave in charge,' he said scornfully. 'I wouldn't leave you in charge of the cheese in a mousetrap.'

The captive, rolling his eyes apprehensively in the light of the lantern, gave a feeble and deprecating smile.

'Come on,' said the lieutenant, 'let's see what he's got here. Jenkins, and you, Bill, look after him. Come along, young man. Give us some light.'

Nothing loath, Will went forward. The mouth of the cave contracted, then, as the lights came in, expanded and danced away from them. The lieutenant uttered a grunt of disappointment. There was little inside. Against the farther wall stood a number of stone bottles. Beyond them was a box and a pile of packages. Will went forward curiously. Suddenly he stopped as if frozen. One of the packages had a familiar look. Setting down one lantern on the floor, he raised the other and went forward, peering incredulously. On the top of one of the parcels was a label. With his eyes starting out of his head, Will stared at it. Then, recovering himself, he gave a swift glance around. The lieutenant and Ben were interested only in the bottles. Stooping forward with a quick movement, Will ripped the label off and stuffed it into his pocket.

*

Five minutes later the party had formed up again outside the cave.

'Will you leave a guard, sir?'

The lieutenant shook his head.

'No good,' he answered. 'They will have been warned of it all by now.'

Old Ben spat.

'That is likely enough,' he said; one of the others growled assent.

Will was incredulous.

'Warned of it?' he exclaimed. 'How can they? There's only this one man, and he won't be able to tell them anything.'

'They will know all right. Even the cliffs have ears hereabouts. My only wonder is that we were able to bring this off. A boat has seen us or heard us, I dare swear. It is always the same. Half the fishermen in Brighthelmstone are in league against us. On the best of terms with the French, too, I shouldn't wonder. What's the good of a handful like ourselves? Nothing short of two whole regiments here, camped on the beach for ten miles either way, would stop 'em – and then they would find a way in!'

CHAPTER VI

WILL was at the sheds next morning even before his father. He was particularly anxious to see Gregory arrive, and yet half dreaded it. The habit of years was strong with him. It is not easy to outgrow childish impressions and deferences in the space of two or three years, and Will, who had grown up somewhat in awe of the head clerk, found the familiar feeling creeping over him as he awaited his arrival. He tried to fortify himself with the thought that he had Gregory now fairly on the hop, but this novel sensation was almost as terrifying as it was pleasant.

Will shook himself angrily and squared his shoulders. This nonsense must stop. He was a man now, the son of Gregory's employer, and fully entitled to feel superior to him in every way. How would the sphinx-like, impeccable man account for the non-appearance of the silk? What story would he trump up? Will waited with beating heart. The visit to the cave last night, and now this – life was becoming exciting at last.

Mr Maitland, coming into the little office, started with surprise as he found his son turning over the pages of the day book. He said nothing, but the look of pleasure on his thin face made Will feel rather guilty.

He passed into the inner office, and another period of waiting followed. Then at last Will heard the familiar, shuffling footstep. He looked up and beheld, to his utter astonishment, Gregory, with a look of conscious virtue on his face, carrying under his arm a package identical in appearance with the one Will had seen in the cave on the previous evening. Before Will could recover his wits,

Mr Maitland, who had heard the door close, popped out eagerly. His face lit up as he caught sight of the parcel.

'Aha!' he cried with nervous satisfaction. 'So it has come at last.'

'Yes, sir. This morning.'

Mr Maitland remembered how late the parcel was, and his face grew correspondingly indignant.

'Any explanation of the delay?'

The head clerk looked down.

'No, sir,' he replied smoothly. 'There is, however, a war on, sir.'

Mr Maitland did not look pleased.

'I know that,' he answered sharply. Then, recovering his good humour, 'Well, it's here, anyway. Now we can get on.'

Well, well, well, thought Will, staring hard at Gregory. Lucky for you, my friend, that there was more than one package. So it came this morning, did it? Perhaps it did; but before daylight, and not to the coach office either.

Another thought struck him as he remembered Gregory's blank, expressionless face when his father had sent him, Will, to inquire at the office instead of the clerk. Why, likely as not, none of those packages of silk had ever been delivered at the office at all! No wonder they seemed to know so little about it. Smooth, plausible Gregory, what tenterhooks he must have been on for fear I would ask them about the other times and it would come out that he had never called there at all! Realization of the tight place the clerk had been in made Will for the moment feel almost affectionate towards him.

He started, realizing that his father was speaking to him.

'Will, my boy, will you take this along to Howard and tell him to get on with it at once?'

'Certainly, sir.'

Will took the opportunity as he went to inspect the package closely. Gregory was certainly a bold man. The label was identical with the one Will had in his pocket.

He handed over the silk to Howard, who expressed great delight and relief at being able to get on with his overdue orders, and came back to the office.

'How much do we pay for that silk, father?' he asked suddenly.

'How much?' Mr Maitland looked surprised, and turned with a faint smile to Gregory. 'Tell him the exact figure, will you?'

'The figure is twenty-five guineas, sir.'

'That is dear, surely,' said Will, his eye on Gregory's face. 'The second quality stuff we get from Birmingham is much less than half the price.'

Both men, for different reasons, stared at Will. Then the clerk's suave voice broke the silence.

'Well, yes, Mr Will; it is dear on paper. But there are a great many factors governing the price that do not appear at first sight. This is Lyons silk, the best in the world. There is nothing in this country to touch it, and it's a good deal cheaper than it might be on account of my brother-in-law getting it specially through for us. Apart from the fact that it's practically unprocurable anywhere else, the firm would have to pay a much higher price for it if we got it from any other source.'

'It's very considerate of your brother-in-law,' said Will, looking at him intently, 'to let us have it so cheap.'

Mr Maitland, who had been watching his son in astonishment, became suddenly irritated.

'Yes, Will,' he broke in, 'the silk is of the first quality, and I'm perfectly satisfied with the price. Unless you have any further economic questions to put to us,' he

went on, 'would you mind stepping down to Mr Harden's and telling him he can have half the consignment tomorrow and the rest by the end of the week? He has been pressing me for them, and, as I don't like the man, I am glad to be able to satisfy him at no longer delay,' he added in a lower voice to Gregory.

Will straightened himself up. Another errand! It was characteristic of his father, just as he was beginning to take a grown-up interest in what was going on, with a word to degrade him once more to the position of an errand-boy.

If only his father knew what he knew!

Feeling irrationally angry, he set off, not even bothering to call the faithful Smithers to join him.

A couple of hundred yards' sharp walking brought back a more reasonable frame of mind, and he began pondering over the events of the night before. Should he, if he found time, go up the cliff in the afternoon and see Ben, and find out whether the revenue cutter had had any luck? Clearly there was one boat it had not caught, or Gregory would not have got his precious parcel. What was he to do about the whole business? If and when his father heard of it, he would be furious with him for not letting him know at once. All the same, thought Will to himself, I'm hanged if I let him know at once! He only thinks of me as a child; he would simply take the whole affair out of my hands, and make goodness knows what muddle of it. He's getting his silk, and that, for the time being, ought to be enough for him.

All the same, despite these manly resolutions, the secret was a heavy one for inexperienced shoulders, and Will wished sorely that he could ask someone's advice about it.

'Hallo, Will!'

Looking up with a start, Will saw Colin running across the road.

'I was looking for you,' said his friend. 'I thought, if you had any time to waste, we might go into Louis's and have a round or so with the foils. I would like to know how much you have forgotten.'

Will's face set in discontented lines.

'I would ask nothing better,' he said, 'but I'm busy. I have – one or two visits to pay.'

'Never mind,' replied Colin imperturbably. 'We must have a try, though, before we are much older.'

'Yes, indeed. What are you doing this morning?'

'I? Nothing much. I'll go along to the Old Ship tavern and see if Mr Sheridan is awake yet. At least, I'll go presently. It's a bit early still and he would hardly thank me.'

They walked along for a few yards in silence, and then Colin suddenly caught Will by the arm.

'Why, what's come over me? I can't be awake yet myself. Last night, man, last night! How did you get on? Did you catch your smugglers?'

Will grinned.

'We caught precisely one,' he answered; and, relieved to find a confidant, he proceeded to tell Colin the whole story of the expedition and the discovery of Gregory's duplicity. As he went on his spirits rose, Colin's enthusiastic comments almost convincing him that the evening had been much more exciting than he thought.

Looking up, Will saw that he had come to the corner of the road where lived Mr Harden, the object of his errand. At all costs Colin must not come to the shop with him.

'I'm sorry,' he exclaimed, 'but here I must leave you. I have to turn up the road here.'

'Well, well,' exclaimed Colin, 'isn't that too bad? I no sooner get hold of you than you slip out of my hands again like an eel.'

Will grinned.

'I can't help it,' he said.

'Ah, you busy men! See what it is to be a man of affairs! All the same, business or no business, we must meet again soon.'

'We will meet again this evening, if you like. I'll come to your lodging.'

'Do. Mind, I hold you to that.'

And with a wave of his hand Colin turned and strode away westward. Will watched until he had gone a safe distance, then turned up the road, and a minute later stood blinking in Harden's dark shop.

The assistant who came forward to receive him dropped his ingratiating manner the moment he saw who it was.

'I will inform Mr Harden,' he said blandly. 'I have no doubt he will come as soon as possible. At the moment he is engaged.'

He went away, leaving Will scowling and gritting his teeth. This was another of the humiliations the business brought him – to be treated with scant civility by every jumped-up young jackanapes of a shop assistant. The contrast between their manners to a customer and to himself was sharp, and Will was just of an age to feel it.

He was kept cooling his heels for over ten minutes, and then at last the proprietor came out. Mr Harden was a little round man, with a smooth, falsely jovial manner.

'Well, well, Mr Maitland,' he said, 'this is very unfortunate this delay. Very unfortunate.'

Controlling his temper, Will politely explained the reasons for the delay all over again, and added his father's apologies. As he was doing so, he heard the shop door

open behind him and saw Mr Harden's eyes leave him and fix themselves on some object over his shoulder. Turning round, he perceived Colin closing the door behind a middle-aged gentleman, who stood with an air of consequence in the entrance and made no move to come any farther.

'Excuse me.' Mr Harden brushed abruptly past Will and hurried forward to greet his customers.

'Good-morning, sir. Good-morning,' he exclaimed in honeyed tones, bowing and rubbing his hands together. 'And what can I do for you this morning?'

'I want a couple of cravats,' said the middle-aged gentleman in a languid, rich voice. 'I ruined my last yesterday – or, should I say, in the early hours of this morning.'

Something in the stranger's voice and manner struck Will instantly. It also impressed Mr Harden. He clapped his hands briskly, and a couple of assistants rushed forward at once to pull up a chair and serve the visitors. Will, cursing his luck, withdrew into a dark corner and hoped to escape notice. To no purpose, however – for Colin, starting to explore about, came full upon him.

'Why,' he exclaimed, pulling up short, 'here he is!'

The middle-aged man, in the midst of fingering a cravat, turned round.

'Here who is?' he inquired.

'Why, my friend Will. The man I have just been talking to you about.'

'What?' said the man, with a new note of interest in his rich voice. 'The smuggler-catcher?'

'The very one. Will – how strange that we should run into you like this! Come and be introduced.'

Will came across the shop.

'Mr Sheridan,' said Colin. 'Will Maitland.'

A quick flush swept over Will's face.

'It's an honour to meet you, sir,' he stammered, and clasped the hand held out to him. For a moment he was so overcome that he could not look up. Then he plucked up his courage and looked into the great man's face.

He had often seen portraits of Mr Sheridan, and the first sight of the reality gave him a slight shock; for Mr Sheridan's face, when one looked at it closely, even in this dim light, was heavily lined. The most striking feature in it, however, was the eyes, which were extraordinarily vivid and piercing, yet alight with good humour.

'You are mighty kind,' said Mr Sheridan, 'and for me it is a pleasure to meet someone who has been about such exciting business as catching a smuggler. You must tell me the whole story, Mr Maitland. Your friend here was confoundedly mysterious.'

'Why,' protested Colin, 'I haven't had time. I'd only just begun.'

'Well, depend upon it,' said Mr Sheridan, stabbing at Colin's foot with his cane, 'Mr Maitland can do better. I must have the whole story from him, word for word. You shan't deny me, Mr Maitland; I won't let you off.'

Will was delighted, yet embarrassed. He could not but be conscious of Mr Harden and the assistants staring at him, with their eyes popping out of their heads.

'I'll be most happy, sir,' he answered, 'but I can't tell you freely here.'

Mr Sheridan looked round as if he had observed Mr Harden and his assistants for the first time. At his glance they seemed to shrink even farther into themselves, and become more obsequious, more insignificant.

'Come, come,' he said. 'Well, you must come along with me to the Ship this moment and tell us your story for a glass of Madeira. Hey, you!'

He turned to Mr Harden, who rushed forward, all eagerness to serve him, finished his purchase at his leisure, with Will and Colin standing admiringly looking on, and then rose and made a royal progress from the shop, with the proprietor and assistants bowing almost to the ground. Will, following Colin in his wake, felt more than avenged. The fellow would treat him better when he came next time!

A quarter of an hour later, seated in Mr Sheridan's parlour at the tavern, with a glass of Madeira on the table beside him, Will felt his old misgivings sweep over him again. Here, by a magic chance, he was sitting with the great Mr Sheridan; and not only was he obliged to talk, when he would so much sooner have listened, but he could not possibly tell his story without a reference to the accursed manufactory, about which apparently even Colin had forgotten. But need he mention it after all? He gulped at his glass, and felt the heat of the wine course invigoratingly through his veins. No, surely he need not go into particulars. 'My father's business' – that would do.

He looked up and met the twinkling, humorous eyes of his host.

'Now, Mr Maitland, if you are sufficiently refreshed, out with your story.'

Taking a deep breath, Will embarked upon his tale. Almost immediately he had evidence of Mr Sheridan's greatness. Here was a man who, instead of reducing those with him to a sense of their own insignificance, actually increased their powers; raised them to something near his own level. As he told his story Will was conscious, with a sort of dim astonishment, that never had he spoken so well or told any story with such point and humour. At moments he almost wondered if this could possibly be

his own voice speaking. Mr Sheridan was a wonderful listener. He leaned forward, his hands on his knees, his eyes on Will's face, with ejaculations of pleasure and surprise. When Will tentatively suggested that it would be well for him as yet to say nothing about Gregory to his father, the great man nodded emphatically.

'Why, you are right. You are perfectly right. You must keep your mouth shut for some time yet. Doubtless the situation will develop and you will be able to catch the fellow, to the profit of all.' He lay back in his chair, and stretched his legs out and looked up at the ceiling. 'A pretty situation,' he chuckled, 'a mighty pretty situation.'

'Sir,' exclaimed Colin, leaning forward eagerly, 'what a comedy it would make!'

'Aye,' said Mr Sheridan, 'it might indeed.'

Colin dared yet further.

'In *your* hands, sir,' he suggested.

Still smiling, Sheridan shook his head.

'Not now, my friend, not now. You're thirty years too late.'

He did not seem at all displeased, however, and Will, warmed by yet another gulp of Madeira, ventured to say:

'It was a sad day for the theatre when you went to Westminster, sir; but it was a lucky day for England.'

Sheridan sat up straight and looked at him. The young fellow's sincerity was patent.

'That's mighty handsome of you, sir,' he said, 'mighty handsome.' His piercing eyes held Will's for a moment, and then he returned to Will's story of the night before.

'Why was it you wanted the silk so badly?' he asked. 'I forget if you told me.'

'My father is a manufacturer, sir,' stammered Will in confusion.

'Yes, but, confound it, what does he manufacture?'

Will hesitated for a moment, then blurted out the shameful secret. To his surprise Sheridan did not seem scornful at all, but interested, even if slightly amused.

'Umbrellas?' he said. 'That's a good line of business, Egan, eh? Your father must be a prudent man, Mr Maitland. He'll make his fortune, and yours, before you know where you are.'

Enormously relieved, Will grinned.

'I hope so, sir, I'm sure.'

'Umbrellas, eh?' continued Sheridan reflectively. 'Ingenious things. I have often wondered how they were made.'

'Well, sir,' replied Will grimly, 'I can tell you if you really want to know. Or, better, I can show you.'

'Can you? Capital! What – do you mean show us the process at work?'

'Certainly. Every step of it.'

'Excellent. When can we come?'

'D'you *really* want to see the place, sir?' Will could hardly believe it.

'I do indeed, if it's not giving you too much trouble.'

'Trouble!' exclaimed Will. 'Why, it'll be the greatest honour you could pay us. My father will be delighted.' He hesitated. 'Can you come to-morrow morning?'

'Most certainly. And now, in return, you must accept an invitation of mine. You must sup with me here to-night. I'm having a little party, and will take no refusal. You, too.' He turned to Colin. 'Did I ask you before?'

'No, sir.'

'Well, I ask you now. And if you remind me, I'll write you that letter of introduction. Or – wait!' He smiled engagingly. 'It might be wise to remind me to-morrow as well.'

CHAPTER VII

WILL woke up the next morning with an immediate sense that something very important had happened to him, though he could not for a few seconds recall what it was. Memory seemed to come back to him in reverse order; he remembered little at first, except climbing in at the window, which Marjorie had left open for him, creeping upstairs, and then, in a sudden fear that he had forgotten to latch it afterwards, creeping all the way down again, to find it not only latched but shuttered. Then, in a rush, the experiences of the evening came back to him,

A long, low-ceilinged room, hazy with smoke and thick with the fumes of wine. A company of a dozen men or more, all much older than Colin and himself, but cheerful and lively as if they were in their twenties still. Candles everywhere – there must have been two or three score of them; and, reflected back from mirrors and twinkling in every facet of the chandeliers, they sparkled and danced, swelled and contracted, joined hands in rings, and became a veritable haze of light, which only by an effort of attention could he bring back to its component, dazzling stars. That was the wine, there was no doubt about that! Will had not been actually drunk, but he had been glad several times that he was seated in a comfortable chair and need not rise from it; his sight had played him strange tricks in the matter of those same candles; and when, the party over, he had gone out with Colin and gulped in the sweet fresh air of the early morning, the ground had seemed in some odd, unaccustomed way to press up against his feet, till he got used to it and learned to allow for its curious conduct.

But that was afterwards. At first Will noticed nothing but the fact that he was happy and, it seemed to him, in the best company in the world. The food was excellent – and the wine too. Clearly he was not alone in enjoying either. At what stage of the evening the singing had begun he could not remember; but they had all sung – all, that is, except the servants, who stood by and attended them with bored faces as if nothing out of the ordinary was happening. One Will noticed in particular, a sour-faced fellow, who seemed actively to dislike all that was going on. The first sight of him was a shock to Will, since it seemed that no one could possibly resist the warm tides of good humour and good fellowship which were flowing around the room. Two or three times Will stole a glance at him, after some particularly brilliant sally or burst of laughter, to see if he would not thaw and become human like the rest, but his face remained sour as whey.

Sheridan, the host, had been irrepressible, possessed throughout the evening by a genial demon of mirth. Will turned over on his back, stretched out his legs, and smiled at the ceiling. He could see him now, his face flushed, his eyes gleaming and dancing as he led them all in song. He could hear the rich roll of his voice, its Irish brogue intensified by happiness and wine, as he cursed them roundly for knowing neither the words nor the tune of an Irish song in which he was trying to lead them.

'Come, Charlie, you old blockhead. Sure, you know it. You don't? Lord, man, where were you raised? I'll warrant these young sparks here know it, anyway. What – you don't know it either?'

The bright eyes were fixed upon Will. Grinning ruefully, Will shook his head.

'Nor you?' They passed to Colin. 'And you an Irish-

man? Faith, think shame of yourself. Well – I'll have to sing it alone.'

And he did.

Then, maybe five minutes later, maybe an hour, he was calling for pencil and paper, and began to draw a series of caricatures of the company present and write lampoons beneath them. The man called Charlie was one of the first victims. Will felt apprehensive as the paper was passed to him by a chuckling neighbour. It seemed to him very far outside the proprieties to laugh at a grey-headed gentleman old enough to be his father; yet when he saw the caricature he could not control himself, but laughed outright in surprise, so irresistibly funny was it.

But Sheridan was in the mood when present company would not long suffice him, and his fancy took more daring flights. Several local notabilities fell unconscious victims, and then, selecting an extra fine piece of paper, he paused, a flash of even wickeder mischief came into his eye, and he began to work. The guests nearest to him clustered round, leaning upon him, craning over his shoulder to see, but he shook them off.

'Leave me be, gentlemen. Sure, how the devil can a man draw with the pack of you jogging his arm and blowing down his neck? Leave me be a minute.'

They obeyed and watched him in silence. He drew coolly, with frequent pauses, leaning back, eyeing his work with his head on one side, and occasionally biting his lips so as not to laugh. The drawing finished, he hesitated, tilted his head back, gazing at the chandeliers as if for inspiration, then, with another swift compression of his lips, wrote something at the foot of the paper. A last look, and he tossed the paper to a friend.

Like schoolboys his guests huddled round to see. There was an instant's almost horrified pause, then shocked,

delighted, throaty chuckles as the drawing was passed from hand to hand.

Will turned over in bed, smiling at the recollection. It had shocked him too, for a royal personage, however vulnerable to caricature, was surely sacred. Yet who could help laughing? He had stared at it fascinated; Colin had had to snatch it from his hand.

He stretched again. He felt oddly disinclined to get up. True, he had gone late to bed, but this was more than the disinclination caused by mere lateness. His head felt top-heavy, and there was a queer taste in his mouth. Still, it was worth these and far more serious inconveniences to have been there last night and heard Mr Sheridan.

There was a sharp knock on the door and Marjorie put her head round.

'Will! Not up yet! You'll be late, and father will wonder why.'

At the mention of his father, Will suddenly remembered that Sheridan and Colin were coming that very morning to see over the works.

'I won't be a minute,' he exclaimed, and hopped out of bed and washed and dressed with an energy that completely banished the strange feelings of a few minutes ago.

By dint of vigorous haste, he arrived at the breakfast table at the same time as his father. Mr Maitland, preoccupied as he always was, yet noticed the suppressed energy and eagerness of his son's manner.

'Why, Will, what's the matter with you? What are you excited about?'

'I've news for you, father. Guess what it is.'

Mr Maitland sat wearily down in his place.

'I can't guess,' he said.

'Father – Mr Sheridan is coming to pay us a call.'

'What!'

'Mr. Sheridan. He's coming to pay us a call. To see round the works. This very morning.'

Mr Maitland stared at him for a moment, then at Marjorie.

'Has the poor boy taken leave of his senses?' his glance seemed to ask.

'It's true, father. I had supper with him last night. He said he wanted to see over the works.'

'You had supper with Mr Sheridan?'

'Yes, father. At the Old Ship tavern.'

'How on earth ——'

'This was how it was, father;' and in a few sentences Will told him of his meeting with Colin and introduction to the great man.

'I hadn't time to ask you if you minded, father,' he concluded (forgetting that the arrangement had been made earlier in the day). 'I told him that you would be honoured by his visit.'

'You did right, my boy.' Mr Maitland's thin cheeks had flushed with pleasure. 'You did very well, but —' He stretched out his arms and looked deprecatingly at the left sleeve of his old brown coat. 'What hour is he coming? I must dress myself properly to receive him.'

'He said at about eleven o'clock.'

'Oh, well.' Mr Maitland sighed with relief. 'That gives us plenty of time. Marjorie, look out my best coat, will you, and polish up the buckles of my best shoes.'

*

Actually it was twenty to twelve before Sheridan put in an appearance, with Colin as his escort. Mr Maitland's nerves had suffered somewhat from the delay, and he had passed on a good deal of his nervousness to Will, suggesting first of all that this was some silly boyish

prank, then that Will had mistaken the great man's meaning, and, finally, that only an inexperienced fool of a boy could for a moment have supposed that a gentleman of Mr Sheridan's consequence would deign to visit an establishment such as theirs. It was hard to keep one's temper in the face of these suggestions, and Will had answered shortly, provoking a further lecture on the subject of impertinence, to which, it must be confessed, he paid but little heed, since he was beginning to wonder miserably whether Sheridan had forgotten his promise. The actual appearance of the great man, however, cheerful, debonair, flicking dust from his cuff with a beautiful silk handkerchief, instantly banished all these gloomy thoughts, and father and son hastened forward to bid him welcome.

'How d'you do, Mr Maitland, sir? How d'you do? Your son and I are friends already, and, as you see, I am come to hold him and you to his word.'

'You're most welcome, Mr Sheridan, sir, most welcome. You do us honour.'

'Now, Mr Maitland, sir, I want to see everything. It's my misfortune – or, perhaps, my fault – to have been born with a confoundedly inquisitive nature. I'm always poking my nose into someone's business or another. Now and then I can excuse myself that it's my trade, but in most cases I fear it's but unregenerate Adam.'

'Well, sir,' said Mr Maitland, smiling, 'I promise you that you shall see everything. But first will not you and the young gentleman take a biscuit and a glass of wine?'

'Not yet, sir. That shall come afterwards, if you will be so kind. If I have a fault worse than curiosity, Mr Maitland, it's laziness. Once you get me sitting comfortably in a chair, you may never get me out again; so you

had better show me round while the energy and the spirit are still quick in me.'

'Very well.'

Turning, Will's father led the way to the first of the sheds.

'You'll see,' he said, turning to his guests, 'that we proceed here on a very logical basis. We begin at the beginning. Handles are the first things dealt with, and here you see the process at work.'

He picked up various samples and passed them to Sheridan. For the most part they consisted of plain turned wood, but a few were covered with leather, ornamented with silver bands, and of course, as special luxuries, there were Israel's carved handles. These, as Will had expected, at once caught Sheridan's eye. He examined them with the interest of one caricaturist in another's work, and asked numerous questions about their creator.

'This fellow has genius,' he said finally, returning one of the best to Mr Maitland. 'I must have a handle like this. You must allow me to be one of your customers, Mr Maitland.'

'I'm afraid I can't do that, Mr Sheridan. At least, not on this occasion. If, however, you will allow me to offer you one as a memento of your visit, I shall be indeed happy.'

With a frank smile Sheridan impulsively held out his hand.

'You treat a man uncommon handsomely, Mr Maitland, sir, and I accept your offer gladly.'

Mr Maitland's pleasure was plain to see. He controlled it as best he might, and led them to a table where a man was busy cementing the handles to the umbrella sticks. The process was simple enough. Holding the stick in a cloth, he melted the cement, applied it to the end, and

stuck on the handle. Then he handed the stick over to a boy, who immediately dipped it into a bucket of water. As soon as it was cold this boy handed it to a second, who took it across the shed to the mounter. The mounter, his large, projecting ears red with the excitement of being watched, finished and polished stick and handle.

At the far end of the same shed sat one of the most important workmen of all, whose task it was to cut the grooves for the springs: the little hand-spring that is pressed to open the umbrella, and the spring to keep it open. Mr Maitland bade his guests watch closely.

'Delicate work this, Mr Sheridan, sir; very delicate. If the man's hand slips, even a fraction of an inch, the stick is ruined.'

Sheridan peered closely.

'So I see. I'll warrant it hardly ever slips.'

The workman said nothing, going on with his work as if nothing were happening, but his sallow cheeks darkened with pleasure.

Mr Maitland then led them across the yard to another shed, where the ribs were being made. These were thin pieces of whalebone, to which a man was busy attaching the smaller pieces, called stretchers. A second man, as soon as the stretchers were attached, was busy threading them together on wire and fastening them to a metal tube, called the runner, that slid up and down the stick. A third man was forcing the larger ribs into a groove near the top of the stick.

In the next shed the covers were being made. Here the workers were nearly all women. One woman was hard at work sewing little over-pieces of material, called 'preventers,' round the jointed part, so as to prevent the joints from wearing through the cover. The presiding genius of this shed was Howard, the cutter, who, with two

women assistants, sat at a large table, cutting out the triangular pieces of silk of which the cover was made.

As soon as these were cut out they were passed to another table, where five women were sewing up the seams and hemming the edges. Sheridan, whose interest in the proceedings had been slackening a little, perked up noticeably as soon as they came among the women, and Will could not help noting that it was the person of each, rather than her work, which seemed first to engage his attention. Will hid a smile. None of Mr Maitland's employees was by nature qualified to hold the guest's attention for more than a brief glance. The guest seemed to think so too, for he pulled himself together and attended courteously to Mr Maitland's discourse.

'This operation,' said Mr Maitland, leading the way to another table, 'is known as "tipping" – that is, sewing the cover on to the tips of the ribs. And here we have "bracing" – that is, sewing the seams to the ribs.'

He opened the door, showing a smaller shed off the main one, from which immediately a breath of hot air leaped out to greet them.

'This is the final job on the covers,' he said.

The guests observed two women with enormous flat-irons, their sleeves rolled up, pressing the finished umbrellas. On a stove in the corner stood four more irons, ready as soon as those in use were cooled.

Sheridan whistled.

'Hot work,' he exclaimed.

'Yes. There are no volunteers for it in the summer. In the winter, however, it becomes highly popular.'

He closed the door. They crossed the shed and came to another, where a man with a lathe was turning sticks and handles. At the other end of the same shed were the packers. The umbrellas were first packed in shavings and

sacking, then between thin strips of wood. They were then nailed into rough cases. After the atmosphere of the previous sheds, this one, with its clean smell of wood and shavings, was particularly pleasant.

'Now,' said Mr Maitland, 'you have seen everything.'

He took them into the office, where two young clerks, who had been biting their quills, suddenly sat up and became prodigiously busy. Gregory came forward, was introduced, and bowed low. Sheridan, greeting him, turned to Will and Colin with a swift, quivering wink, which they well understood.

'Where's the fellow that does the strange carvings?' Sheridan inquired, as they passed out from the office. 'Over there.' Mr Maitland pointed, and they saw the strange, hunched figure busy in his private corner.

Sheridan was interested at once.

'I must go and have a look at him,' he exclaimed.

'I wouldn't go too close if I were you,' Mr Maitland advised him.

Sheridan turned quickly.

'Why? Does he bite?'

'No,' laughed Mr Maitland. 'He's quite safe.'

'Has he fleas?'

'No, no. He's perfectly clean. Only ——'

'Then I'll risk it.'

Sheridan went forward on tiptoe, not to disturb the worker, and the others watched with smiles on their faces. In a row upon the table at which the half-wit worked lay several raw onions. Just as Sheridan came towards him, he reached out an ape-like hand, picked one up, and bit into it heartily.

The amused watchers saw Sheridan straighten up, grope in his pocket, tug, pull out his handkerchief, and apply it to his nose. Colin and Will began to laugh out-

right. For pride's sake Sheridan stayed for a few seconds; then he turned round and came back to them, smiling broadly and replacing his handkerchief.

A couple of minutes later they were seated in the parlour, regaling themselves with biscuits and Madeira. Mr Maitland, very conscious of his guest, led the talk to politics, and asked Sheridan what he thought were the chances of a Regency – 'though, indeed,' he added, 'from what we hear, His Majesty seems well at the moment.'

'Frankly, Mr Maitland, I know little more than you. We may come to it at any moment.'

'Well, if we do,' said Mr Maitland, 'it may well be a good thing for the country. His Royal Highness has, at any rate, some sterling advisers.' And he bowed towards his guest.

Will feared that the compliment might be too crude, but it was obviously much to Sheridan's liking. He regarded his host with approval.

'Are you ever in London, Mr Maitland?'

'Sometimes, sir. I have to go up on business.'

'If ever you have time for pleasure, I should be happy indeed to give you an order for the theatre.'

Almost imperceptibly Mr Maitland's face stiffened, as principle fought politeness in his breast.

'To be honest with you, Mr Sheridan, sir, the theatre is not a pastime that I care for.'

'Your son, then? I'll be bound he cares for it.'

Mr Maitland glanced sideways at Will.

'He's never been, sir – to the best of my knowledge.'

Sheridan seemed unable to believe his ears.

'You don't disapprove of the stage, I trust, Mr Maitland? For, in that case, you must have a poor opinion of me.'

The manufacturer looked at him squarely.

'If anything could make me think well of the stage, Mr Sheridan, it would be that you had been connected with it.'

Mr Sheridan threw back his head and laughed.

'Come, sir, come. You're a courtier!'

Mr Maitland flushed.

'No, sir. I speak my mind. And, come to that, Mr Sheridan, you yourself seem to have changed your opinion of late years. Unless I'm mistaken, it's a long time now since you wrote for the stage.'

'A touch!' cried Sheridan gaily, and bowed. 'You're right, Mr Maitland, sir. I write for it no longer. It's a rascally life for a gentleman – as I keep telling our young friend Egan here. But there, these young sparks, Mr Maitland! They won't believe what we wise old fellows tell them – I don't know that I blame them, either. This young fellow has great ambitions.' He took Colin by the elbow and shook it. Then, suddenly remembering, 'Bless my soul, boy, that letter! Why didn't you remind me?'

'I can't be reminding you every time we meet,' expostulated Colin with a smile.

'D'you hear that?' exclaimed Sheridan to Mr Maitland. 'D'you hear the way he drives his point home on me? Ah, but it's no use. I'm old and shameless. Don't be a fool, boy, all the same. You must persevere and attend to your business, or you'll never get on in this life.'

He rose to his feet.

'We must be going. I have an appointment, alas. Come, Egan – drink down your glass, and come along.'

Mr Maitland and Will followed them out into the lane, where cordial good-byes took place, and he and his father stood watching the pair go down to the Front. At the corner Sheridan turned and, seeing them still watching, waved his hand.

Father and son went back in silence. Mr Maitland was obviously pleased and deeply impressed, and Will said nothing to interfere with his mood. Sitting down to his work, Will felt towards it a willingness which he had never felt before. Somehow the shed seemed pleasanter for the visit which had just taken place.

At dinner the talk was all of Sheridan. Marjorie, greatly interested, plied them with questions. Her duties had kept her away, but she had peeped from a window and seen the great man go. She did not seem only interested in Sheridan, though, asking to Will's surprise even more questions about his companion. A thought striking him, he turned and looked at her humorously.

'We must ask him in,' he said. 'He knows a great deal about Mr Sheridan and will have much to tell us.'

Marjorie caught his eye and looked down, hiding a half-smile. Mr Maitland, picking up his knife and fork, began to discourse of early days and the stir made by Sheridan's speeches at the trial of Warren Hastings. He talked on throughout the meal, neglecting his food as usual; but for once Marjorie did not seem to pay him much attention. After dinner he complained suddenly of feeling tired, and indeed looked it. The animation of the morning had left his face. which was drawn and grey.

'Fetch me my letters, Will, there's a good boy,' he said. 'I'll write them here in my armchair.'

Will looked at him in concern.

'Why not let me do them for you, father?'

Usually such a question would have provoked an explosion, but to-day Mr Maitland seemed to consider it.

'There are one or two you couldn't do,' he said slowly, 'but the others are routine matters. Yes, look through them, my boy, and see which you think you can answer. I shall be much obliged to you.'

. Will's heart glowed.

'I'll bring them in for you to sign when I've done them,' he said; and went off, feeling happier than he had been for months.

CHAPTER VIII

A BREATH of soft air, sweet and cool from the sea, blew on Will's forehead. He stood at the side door, waiting for Marjorie to come and join him and get some fresh air. It was a perfect afternoon, the sun warm but not too hot, the sea glittering drowsily, people passing up and down the Front bemused, and a band playing merrily upon the Steyne. Will stood, at peace with the world. Smithers, who had been barking eagerly around him, had rushed back into the house, understanding perfectly well no start would be made until he could prevail on his young mistress to come to the door.

At last Will heard Marjorie's voice affectionately scolding the dog, and a moment later the quick patter of her feet upon the stairs.

'Sorry to keep you waiting,' she smiled breathlessly, and took his arm.

Smithers, his ambition realized at last, dashed out and rushed round in circles, barking till the sheds echoed.

Suddenly Marjorie pressed Will's arm.

'The front door,' she said. 'I'm sure I heard someone knocking.'

'Smithers! *Smithers*!'

Will stooped and pretended to pick up a stone, the only sure way of silencing the culprit. They stood listening, and then, clear and agitated, the knocker sounded again.

Brother and sister looked at one another. No one who knew them used the front door; they all came up to the side.

Will disengaged his arm.

'I'll run and see who it is,' he said.

'We'll both go, because then, if it's anyone for father, I can look after him and come and join you later.'

They went round together. Will exclaimed when he saw the visitor.

'Colin!'

Colin was obviously in a great state of excitement. He rushed up to them, barely pausing to salute Marjorie.

'May I speak to you for a moment? It's most urgent. No – don't go, Miss Maitland.'

'Certainly,' Will answered. 'We were just going out to take the air. Will you come in – or will you walk with us?'

'I'll come in if I may. No; after all, let's walk. If you can find somewhere out of the way, that is.'

'We'll go up the back lanes. There's no one there. Now then – what's amiss?'

'It's Mr Sheridan. I've just left him. He's in a pretty state.'

'Why?'

'You remember those drawings of his last night? You know – the ones with the verses underneath?'

Will glanced at Marjorie.

'Yes,' he replied.

'You didn't by any chance take any of them away with you did you?'

'I? No. Why?'

'Well – some of us did. One or two of them, if you remember, were not exactly fit to leave about.'

Will grinned.

'Oh, you mean the one about the Prince?'

'Sh!' cried Colin. 'Not so loud!'

Will stared at him in astonishment.

'Why, man, what's the matter? There's no one to hear us – and what matter if they did?'

'Well,' said Colin, 'the matter is that that drawing and one or two others cannot be found. Suppose they were to fall into the wrong hands!'

'But why should they?'

'For the good reason that we have accounted for most of them; but that particular one, and a couple of others about persons in the Prince's entourage, can't be found.'

'Well, what of it?'

'You're very dense to-day, Will. Supposing someone picked it up that was minded to make mischief. Sheridan's position with the Prince is none too secure. He has many enemies, who are jealous of his influence and would be only too glad of any opportunity to undermine it. Can't you see that that drawing would be a gift from Heaven to them?'

'But surely,' persisted Will, 'there were none of his enemies present last night? They all seemed to be on the best of terms with him.'

'You can't be too sure,' replied Colin, sagaciously shaking his head. 'One of them may have picked it up and dropped it somewhere. It may be anywhere about the place. The point is, he won't be at ease till he gets it again.'

Will thought for a moment.

'When is the Prince coming down next?' he asked.

'He's expected any day.'

'Well – I suppose Sheridan will see him as soon as he comes.'

'Yes; but he can't be with him at every hour of the day, can he?'

'No,' admitted Will, 'I suppose not.'

'In the meantime he can't very well go around the town making inquiries and saying, "Do you happen to have picked up a villainous caricature of my great friend

the Prince, with some villainous lines appended? I produced it in my cups last night, and I'm hanged if I know what's happened to it." '

The mimicry of Sheridan's voice was so exact that both Will and Marjorie laughed.

'He's in a terrible state about it,' Colin concluded, 'and he's asked me to do all I can to find it.'

Then Marjorie, who hitherto had not spoken a word, coughed nervously and said:

'Might I make a suggestion?'

Colin turned to her in astonishment.

'By all means, Miss Maitland. Pray do.'

'It's only this. Why should we not try to find out at the Old Ship whether any such piece of paper was picked up when the room was cleaned? You were on the ground floor, were you not?'

'Yes,' both answered her.

'Well, the old woman who has charge of all the cleaning on the ground floor is a friend of mine. She comes to our church.'

'Marjorie is busy with all manner of good works about the town,' Will explained to Colin.

'I know her well, anyway,' Marjorie went on, with a side glance at him. 'Suppose I were to go straight away now and consult her? It can do no harm, and I might find out something.'

'That's a magnificent idea, Miss Maitland,' exclaimed Colin, evidently much impressed. 'But would it not be troubling you too much?'

'No trouble at all,' replied Marjorie serenely. 'Let's walk in that direction at once; and, now that you've told us what you had to say, let's walk along the Front. It's much pleasanter than these back lanes.'

Ten minutes later they had reached the door of the

Ship tavern, where they parted, Marjorie to seek her acquaintance, and Will and Colin to pass the time as best they might until she came out again. The Front was very animated – promenaders of all descriptions, smart curricles dashing past, invalids taking the sunshine in their chairs, and officers in handsome uniforms parading up and down, two or three at a time, twirling their moustaches and ogling the girls as they passed. Cutting across the throng, with Smithers beside them, the two boys scrambled down towards the beach.

'What a stink of fish!' exclaimed Colin.

'You've come to the exact spot for it,' Will replied. 'They hold the fish market here early in the morning, and the smell hangs about all day.'

'Talking of fish, did you hear any more about your friends the smugglers?'

Will laughed.

'No. But I've heard since that when the cutter got back at last she found the most hardened old villain among them – one Grimes by name – sitting on his boat smoking a pipe. When they asked him what he was doing out of bed at that time in the morning, he said he preferred it because there were fewer people about. It was brazen impudence, but they could not arrest him for that. That's always the way of it. Old Ben says that they know to a man who's engaged on the job, but they can never bring it home to them.'

They reached the sea's edge, and spent an idle half-hour throwing in stones for Smithers, who swam out indefatigably in pursuit of each splash and never seemed to mind finding nothing for his pains when he reached it. The time passed quickly, and long before they expected her they heard a voice call, and, turning, saw Marjorie standing waving to them.

They scrambled up towards her, their feet slithering noisily on the shingle.

'Well,' inquired Will, 'any news?'

'Lots,' she replied, 'though whether it's good or not I don't know.'

'Tell us, Miss Maitland.'

'Well, I found my old lady without much difficulty, and put my question to her. "That's queer," she said the moment I asked her. "You're the second that's been round to-day asking the same question." "Who was the first?" I asked her. "I can't tell you that, dearie," she said, "but they offered me half-a-guinea if they might look through any papers and rubbish that was left behind." "What did you do?" I asked her. "I let 'em," she answered. "And did they find anything?" I asked. "Nothing they wanted. One or two little pictures, crumpled up like. That was what seemed to interest them most of all. But, so far as I could make out, they couldn't find the one they were looking for." '

Will and Colin looked at one another.

"There,' exclaimed Colin, 'what did I tell you? It's some enemy, plain enough.'

'Yes,' said Will; 'but, whoever he was, he didn't find the picture.'

Colin uttered a sudden exclamation, and caught Will's arm.

'The waiters!' he cried.

Marjorie glanced at him quickly.

'I thought of that,' she said. 'I asked the old lady if they all belonged to the hotel.'

'By jove, Miss Maitland,' exclaimed Colin, 'you think of everything!'

'She answered,' Marjorie continued, disregarding the

compliment, 'that last night there were several extra men employed because they were so busy. Two of the extra men waited on Mr Sheridan. I asked her if she knew who they were. She said she didn't, but if I'd wait for a while she would go and find out. She waddled off, and I waited, and presently she came back and said that one of them was named Smith, and he was still in the place, and the other, whose name was Lambert, was valet to Sir Charles Bladon.'

'Sir Charles Bladon!' exclaimed Colin. 'We're on the track at last. A close friend of the Prince – and mortally jealous of Sheridan.'

Memories of his friend made Will pause.

'Are you certain that he's jealous of Sheridan?' he asked.

'Bound to be, man. Bound to be. But I beg your pardon, Miss Maitland. Pray go on.'

'I asked if Sir Charles Bladon were still here. No, they said, he had been gone four days. He was called away suddenly to Derby and didn't need his valet. The Old Ship was busy and pressed for men, and he gave the valet leave to stay and work there for his own profit until he should send for him.'

'A blind,' cried Colin impatiently; 'a palpable blind! But go on, Miss Maitland.'

'Then, the first thing this morning, this Lambert took horse and left for London.'

'There you are! He has the drawing, and he's rushing off with it to his master. Why, man, it's plain as the nose on your face.'

'It seems to me,' said Marjorie slowly, 'that, even if this is true, Mr Sheridan will be safe for the space of a few days. If this man's employer has been called away to Derby, and had given him leave to remain for some days

behind, then, clearly, he does not expect to be back in London yet.'

'That is if we believe the story, Miss Maitland. I think, however, it's only a blind.'

'Even so, his master being in Derby, the man will take some time to reach him, and his master will take some time to reach the Prince.'

'That's true,' cried Colin, 'and meanwhile there's time for me to do something. I have to go to London in a couple of days, anyhow. I'll go up to-morrow and see what I can do.'

'But what can you do?'

Marjorie, always practical, raised her brown eyes to his, and before their clear gaze Colin was somewhat at a loss.

'I can do something. At any rate, it's certain that I can do nothing by remaining here. It'll be easy, for instance, to find where Sir Charles Bladon lives.'

'And what d'you propose to do then?' asked Will drily. 'Burgle the house?'

'That wouldn't be much use. I shouldn't know where the paper was.'

'Exactly.'

'Look here.' Colin turned round and faced him squarely. 'Obviously, from all that Miss Maitland has told us, there's someone besides ourselves interested in this paper. In support of Sheridan's suspicions, we have a definite clue to go upon. Why not follow it up? As I said, I have to go to town in a couple of days, anyway. This only means starting earlier. Don't you agree with me, Miss Maitland?'

Marjorie smiled.

'You mustn't ask me,' she said. 'But I can see it's pleasanter to be doing something than doing nothing.

And now, if you will excuse me, I must get home again. I have been longer than I should already.'

'I'll come with you,' Will said.

'And I,' said Colin, 'will go off to Sheridan with the news.'

'D'you know where to find him?'

'No, but I think he'll be in Roggett's subscription house at the corner of North Parade. He usually goes in there in the afternoon for a hand at cards.'

He took his leave, with an especially low bow for Marjorie, and Will and Marjorie walked home in silence. Plausible though it seemed, Will could not take Colin's conspiracy and chase quite seriously. He had a shrewd suspicion that its object was not entirely to benefit Sheridan, but a little, perhaps, to impress Marjorie. Will smiled to himself. If he knew anything of his sister, that was not the way to set about gaining her affections. What Marjorie was thinking remained, as ever, inscrutable. She was not a young lady to wear her heart upon her sleeve; but in the secluded life she led she met few young men, and it would not be natural if one of Colin's good looks and obvious good breeding failed to make an impression upon her.

As they came in sight of the gate, the two saw Janet, the maid, her face pale, standing looking up and down the road in a great state of agitation. On catching sight of them, she ran forward at once to meet them.

'Oh, Miss Marjorie,' she gasped, 'I'm so glad you've come. The master has been took ill. Mr Gregory and Howard got him up to bed between them, and the boy has been sent off for the doctor. Mr Will, sir, will you please go up to him at once.'

CHAPTER IX

IT was the next morning, and Will and Marjorie were sitting at the breakfast table alone. Mr Maitland was better; their immediate anxieties were thus allayed; but the doctor was worried about his general condition and had ordered him a complete rest from work, privately warning Will that it might be a long time before he was fit to resume. The prospect was a gloomy one for Will. Not only would he be tied to the works all day for an indefinite period, but he foresaw endless summonses to the bedside, when he would have to give an account of all that he had done, and probably receive stinging criticisms upon it. His meditations were not altogether selfish, however, for he was fond of his father, and both he and Marjorie had received a severe shock the evening before.

While they sat, mostly in silence, there was a knock at the front door, and Colin was shown in. He entered with something of a swagger, conscious of his appearance, booted and spurred, in a fine new riding coat, ready for his journey to town.

'You're off, then?'

'Yes, I'm off. Just came in for a moment to say good-bye.'

'What did Sheridan say? Is he pleased you are going?'

Colin's face clouded.

'I can't say that he is, greatly. He's the most extraordinary man,' he burst out after a pause. 'I found him out last night and told him all that we had discovered.'

'Well?'

'He wouldn't take it seriously. I never met such a man.

First of all he's worried out of his life on a mere suspicion. Then, when we find evidence in support of it, he pooh-poohs the whole matter.'

He frowned at the floor for a moment; then his face brightened.

'I'm going, anyway. He'll smile on the other side of his face if I get the paper and he finds I'm right after all. But I mustn't stay here talking. Good-bye, Miss Maitland.'

'Good-bye, Mr Egan,' Marjorie replied demurely. 'I hope you have a pleasant and successful journey.'

'Thank you.' He bowed low over her hand. 'That's mighty kind of you, Miss Maitland. I hope, too, that I shall not be long away, and that, when I return, I may do myself the honour of calling upon you to report progress.'

'That will be delightful,' Marjorie murmured, looking down at the ground.

Colin stood up and clicked his boots together in a military salute.

'Good-bye, Will.'

'Good-bye, Colin. Good hunting!'

He went out, Will accompanying him to the door. Returning to the breakfast table, Will noticed that his sister was smiling, and her eyes were dancing wickedly. He sat down. She looked up after a few seconds, caught his eye, and laughed outright.

'He's a baby,' she said; 'but I like him all the same.'

Will, somewhat scandalized, began to open his mouth in Colin's defence. Then, against his will, he smiled slowly.

'He takes it all very seriously, certainly. All the same, you must remember that he knows more of the world than either of us.'

'I wonder,' murmured Marjorie.

'Certainly he does,' said Will severely. 'He's travelled around and had a fine education and ——'

'I don't say he doesn't know a good many things we don't,' Marjorie cut in swiftly, 'but all the same there are one or two things we know that he doesn't. You're older than he is in several ways.'

'I?' Will was genuinely amazed. 'Why, whatever makes you think that?'

'I don't think,' said his sister, rising and shaking her ringlets with determination. 'I know. Now get on with you, finish your breakfast, and don't sit there staring. I want to clear away.'

In the days that followed, Will was far too busy to think of anything outside the works, and, save for an occasional idle query, Colin and his affairs faded from his mind. He had never realized before how much his father actually did. The keeping of the books Will wisely left entirely to Gregory, but, apart from that, there was more than enough to claim his attention. There were raw materials to be checked, dispatches watched, letters answered, and the hands timed and kept up to their work. This last was at first the most difficult part of all from Will's point of view, since, with the strict master removed, and a young untried one in his place, it was only human nature that the best of workmen should ease off a little and take advantage of the new situation. Thanks, however, to the spirit of goodwill and co-operation which Mr Maitland had managed to infuse into the business, Will had no real trouble. Once their imagination was aroused, the sympathy of the workpeople went out to him, and they did their best to make his task easy.

After a week under the new conditions, Will had

learned more about the business than during the whole of the time before. One fact was speedily impressed upon him – the business was growing, growing steadily all the time, week by week, almost day by day. Umbrellas were fast becoming popular, and the fact that France and Spain were both at war made imports difficult. As a natural result the few English makes were in great demand, and Maitland's had as good a reputation as any. This discovery, though he had known it in theory and often heard his father say as much, became personal to Will in these first difficult days, and nerved him with new pride and energy to carry on.

Another obstacle was Gregory. It was only a matter of days, as Will realized from the first, until he and the chief clerk should come to grips. Gregory resented Will's assumption of authority, and Will, in his heart of hearts, could scarcely blame him. It must be galling indeed for Maitland's right-hand man suddenly to have to take orders from one whom he and his master had more or less agreed in treating as a child. Yet Will was master now, and master he was determined to be. At first he had to go easy from sheer lack of knowledge, and he often wished passionately that he had paid more attention and learned more about the business. As it was, many of the clerk's smooth assertions he was unable to question; and though his instinct rebelled against them, and he gritted his teeth at Gregory's almost contemptuous manner, he had to give him his way. That was whenever Gregory consulted him, or whenever he himself intruded upon one of Gregory's transactions – for the clerk did not at first challenge his authority, but adopted the subtler and easier method of going his own way and saying nothing about it. Will worked in those days as he had never worked before. By degrees he caught up, as it were, and

drew abreast of all that was going on. More and more, as he grew surer of himself, by intelligent questions and remarks he obliged the head clerk to let him know what he was doing. This was little to Gregory's taste, and as clearly as he dared he showed as much. Still Will held his hand. It would never do to explode too soon.

At last a chance came. Will, in the outer office one day, paused before a pile of goods packed up and labelled, and stared at them in astonishment. Then, swiftly turning to the man in charge, he asked him what he meant by acting in defiance of orders.

The man looked injured and surprised.

'I only done what Mr Gregory told me, sir,' he protested.

'Mr Gregory told you to dispatch those goods?'

'Yes, sir. Only yesterday afternoon, sir.'

Will was so furious he dared not trust himself to speak. He went out into the yard and waited until the fresh air had calmed him. Then, inwardly seething with anger, but in control of himself, he went in to the head clerk's office.

'Gregory.'

The head clerk, sitting at his desk, turned, but did not rise.

'Sir?'

Will stared at him, waiting.

'You wished to speak to me?'

Still Gregory did not rise.

'Yes.'

There was a short silence. Then, with an ill-concealed sigh, Gregory laid down his pen and, as if by an afterthought, rose from his stool. Good, thought Will quickly; first round to me.

'Gregory,' he said, 'there has been a mistake in the outer office.'

'A mistake, Mr Will?'

'Yes. I find a number of packages addressed to Shepherd and Son. Jenkins told me that they were made up on your orders. Is that so?'

The clerk raised his eyebrows slightly, then looked down.

'It is, Mr Will.'

'But,' said Will, trying hard to keep his voice from shaking, 'I distinctly gave you orders the other day that we were to do no further business with Shepherd and Son.'

The clerk said nothing.

'What do you mean by flatly disobeying my instructions, Gregory?'

'I was merely carrying out Mr Maitland's wishes as I conceived it my duty to do.'

The office seemed to spin round Will, so that it was an effort to him to keep his balance.

He heard his voice, cool, with an edge to it.

'Unfortunately, Gregory, for the present you are paid to carry out my wishes.'

The clerk's nostrils suddenly went pinched and white.

A sneer twisted his mouth.

'If you wish to play ducks and drakes with the business Mr Will, I suppose I can't prevent you. At the same time, I have my duty to my employer.'

'My father has committed the entire conduct of the business to my care. I am perfectly ready to answer to him for what I do. In the meantime you will kindly not be insolent, but do as you are told.'

And, turning on his heel, Will strode out of the room. He went out again into the yard, shaking all over. He hated losing his temper at the best of times, and to quarrel with the great Gregory still shocked him with a

feeling of impiety. The fellow's a rascal, he had to remind himself time after time as he strode up and down; I have him in the hollow of my hand. It was a comforting reflection, and yet it did not comfort Will as much as he would have liked.

It is, however, always difficult to gauge the effect one has on other people, and Will, who the next morning, in spite of having right upon his side, was feeling both miserable and apologetic, was immensely surprised and cheered to find the head clerk treating him with an exaggerated respect. Good heavens, he thought incredulously, I seem to have given the fellow a fright after all! Still, he was young enough to grasp eagerly at the reconciliation, and the intercourse between them was more cordial than he could ever remember. Much as he distrusted Gregory in his heart, it was difficult not to believe that he had turned over a new leaf, and that henceforth relations between them were going to be pleasant and friendly.

This was just as well, for the very next morning Will had to go up to London. He did not want to go, and, despite the reconciliation, he did not at all fancy leaving everything in Gregory's charge. There was, however, a good chance of a large order from one of the London clothiers, a chance too good to be missed. And so, a fortnight after Colin's departure, Will, with a parcel of samples strapped to his valise, set off upon the same road. I'm nothing but a bagman, he thought indignantly, and contrasted his errand with Colin's. But the morning air was fresh, the day was fine, and in spite of himself he felt his spirits rise. He was riding his father's horse, Highwayman, a big, bony animal, not in the least like his name, but a steady, good old friend. After all, the excursion was a holiday and a change. Before he had gone three miles Will was frankly

rejoicing in his escape from the works, and looking forward eagerly to seeing Colin. Even the task before him of bargaining with the clothier took on the colours of an adventure. If only he could bring off a really good deal, and prove to his father that the business did not suffer from being left in his hands!

The day remained kind, the going was good, and at three o'clock in the afternoon Will was riding down Fleet Street, ravenously hungry, looking out for the inn where his father always stayed. The roar and bustle of the city, though he was a little frightened of it, was a stimulus, and banished all feelings of fatigue. He soon found the inn, and after a huge meal and a change from his dusty clothes, felt entirely refreshed and ready for adventure. After a short visit to the stable to see that Highwayman was comfortable, he set off on foot to hunt for Lincoln's Inn, where Colin was staying in a friend's chambers. Stopping a friendly-looking man in the street, a huge man with a red face like a countryman (not the wisest sort of man to stop, he reflected afterwards; it was, he supposed, the natural sympathy of one countryman for another that attracted him), he learned that it was quite close at hand. Turning in, and falling at once in love with its secluded charm, he at last found the staircase and the room, and knocked on the door.

A well-known voice cried, 'Come in,' and there, by great good luck, was Colin, sitting with one leg up on the window-seat.

'Will – by all that's lucky! What brings you here?'

Will beamed upon him with delight. Short as the time was that he had been in London, it was more than pleasant to see a face he knew.

'Sit down. Sit down,' Colin cried. 'Have a glass of Madeira, and tell me the news.'

'There's not much to tell,' said Will, and proceeded to tell it. Colin told him his in turn, the main item being that he had a post, albeit a humble one, at Drury Lane. He was understudying, he told Will, and in answer to Will's look of bewilderment explained what understudying was.

It was some time before Will remembered the ostensible reason for Colin's visit to town.

'Oh, yes,' he exclaimed suddenly, leaning forward. 'That fellow – did you see him?'

'What fellow?'

'The valet – Lambert, wasn't his name? The man who you thought had taken Sheridan's drawing.'

Colin's face changed.

'Oh, that fellow! Yes, I have traced him. He's still in London; Bladon hasn't returned.'

'It looks as if he hasn't got the drawing, then.'

'It does. Of course, he may be keeping it until his master comes back.'

'He may have sent it to him by post.'

'He would hardly risk that,' said Colin.

'I don't believe he has it at all.'

'He may be waiting to sell it to somebody else.'

Will looked at him closely, then turned away to hide a smile. Faced with the need for definite action, as opposed to vaguely riding off to London before a girl's admiring eyes, Colin seemed decidedly less interested in the fate of the missing caricature. At the same time he was obviously unwilling to give up his theory. Half maliciously, Will pressed him.

'Look here,' he said, 'if you've traced the man, why not try to get hold of him?'

'Get hold of him?'

'Yes. Get into conversation with him. Make friends

with him. Try to pump him and find out if he knows anything about it.'

Colin looked anything but enthusiastic. An almost sulky look came over his face.

'What's wrong?' Will asked. 'Don't you want to find the drawing after all? I thought you were so keen on getting it.'

'Of course I want to find it,' grumbled Colin, 'but you don't imagine a fellow like that would give anything away, do you?'

'You can't tell till you try,' said Will, sitting back and looking at him.

He felt that he understood his friend pretty well. Colin's principal trouble was that he was lazy. Over and above that, he had been piqued and had lost confidence because Sheridan had not treated his errand with due respect. A further thought, that now that Colin had got the post he wanted he was less concerned with Sheridan's welfare, Will hastily dismissed as ungenerous.

They went on talking for a while, and then Colin rose, saying that he had to go off to the theatre.

'You must come and see a performance there, Will,' he exclaimed. 'You'll find it a long way ahead of anything you've seen in Brighton.'

'You forget,' said Will 'I've never been to a theatre in my life.'

'True, I'd forgotten. Well, then, all the more reason for beginning well!'

CHAPTER X

THE rest of that evening Will spent in strolling about London. It was great fun being on his own, and it gave him a new sense of independence. At the same time he found the streets and narrow lanes of the city very confusing, and did not care to stray far from the inn for fear that he might not be able to find his way back again. Also, after about half an hour's exploration, he suddenly found that he was very tired and was glad to get back to the inn. It was too early yet to go to bed, and for a time he sat in the coffee-room, watching the guests and listening to their talk, so different in tone and speed and accent from the talk of Brighton. It was all very interesting and enjoyable, yet by the time that he climbed the stairs to his bedroom Will was missing Brighton more than he would allow himself to admit.

He slept soundly, despite a strange bed and the unfamiliar noises of the city. The breakfast was good, his table in the window amusing – it commanded a view of half the street, and for minutes at a time he could hardly eat, so enthralling was the sight; and the waiter was nice and friendly. He knew at once, of course, that Will had come up from the country, but did not assume any air of superiority on this account, and, indeed, spoke of Brighton with admiration, telling Will that he was lucky to be able to live there.

'Why?' said Will, turning and looking at him with astonishment. 'Do you know it? Have you been there?'

'Yes, sir,' replied the waiter. 'Three years ago I served a couple of months in the summer at the Old Ship tavern.'

Will beamed all over his face.

'Did you?' he exclaimed. 'Why, I know it well'; and at once all the strangeness of London vanished, and he felt confident and happy. He lingered over his breakfast, gossiping with the waiter, and then at last got up to prepare himself for his interview with the clothier.

An hour later he was on the pavement outside, feeling fairly well satisfied with his deal. The clothier, pleasant of manner, grey-haired, watching Will through shrewd, twinkling eyes, had been slow to come to the point. He left it to Will bluntly to broach the real purpose of their meeting. Then, after some humming and hawing, letting Will understand that he was making a special concession to him because he was young and because he had taken a liking to him, the clothier named a figure which Will instantly knew was absurdly high. Will smiled broadly and shook his head. The clothier affected to be both surprised and hurt. However, out of consideration for his old friend, Will's father, he would stretch a point and name another figure. Sadly, with becoming gravity, staring into the fireplace, Will shook his head. Much as Maitland's would have liked to accept such an offer, they could not; and for the following reasons. So for the time, veiled beneath traditional sorrow and politeness, the wrangle went on, until at last the pair agreed at a figure very different indeed from that suggested in the first place. Now, standing in the fresh air, half deafened by the drays that lumbered by over the cobbles, Will felt that he had not done badly, but might have done better. Already he understood something of the technique of such bargaining. He would know better next time, and to his own amusement he found himself looking forward with a real fighting zest to that next time.

Arrived back at the inn, to his surprise and delight he found Colin waiting for him.

'There you are!' Colin exclaimed. 'I hoped you would be back soon.'

He had the important air of one with news to communicate.

'Look here,' he went on, 'I've got in touch with this fellow.'

'What! With Lambert?'

'Yes.'

'You mean you've met him?'

'Not exactly. But I've met a rascal that knows him, and so it'll be an easy step to meet him myself, and – this is what I really came for – he's off now, this moment, to a prize fight in the Vale of Health, just beyond Hampstead village. Suppose we go along and take a look at him together?'

'But – shall we see him in all that crowd?'

'I expect so; and if we do it'll be a good chance to make his acquaintance. Besides, the fight will be worth seeing, anyhow.'

Once again Will smiled inwardly. Colin's moves were always so very transparent. It seemed extraordinary to Will that one in some respects so sophisticated could be so childlike as Colin was at times. At the same time his spirits rose at the idea of an adventure. A prize fight! He had often heard of them and read of them, but the idea of actually witnessing one had never come into his head. What would his father say? Well, that hardly mattered now. Here he was in London, the firm's accredited representative, doing a man's business. Why on earth should he not also enjoy a man's amusement?

He turned to Colin eagerly.

'You know the way?'

'Know the way?' repeated Colin scornfully. 'Of course I do. What do you take me for?'

'How soon must we start? At once?'

'In an hour, or less. There's just time to get a meal before we go.'

'A meal? It isn't long since I had breakfast.'

'Well,' rejoined Colin, 'it'll be a long time before you get anything else, so if you take my advice you'll fill up while you can. I'm going to, anyway.'

It would have been impossible in Brighton, but somehow, in the strange city, Will found an appetite, and the two ate well.

In a few minutes under the hour they had got their horses and were riding through Holborn out into the open country beyond. First of all they came to the village of Camden, which, as Colin explained with a laugh, grandly preferred to be called Camden Town. Turning presently, as they mounted the hill Will looked back upon the city, a regular forest of towers and spires. He gasped at its immensity. Brighton to it was a mere village.

'What a huge place it is!' he exclaimed.

'Yes. And it's growing bigger every year.'

'Supposing it spread out as far as this one day!'

Colin laughed.

'You may just as well suppose it would spread as far as Hampstead.'

'What's Hampstead like?'

'A small town; rather beautiful in a quiet sort of way. As it happens, I haven't been there for some years now, but there's one street I remember very well – a wide street, with red houses on each side and trees down the middle, leading up to a church with a squat spire.'

'That sounds a queer sort of place to choose for a fight,' said Will dubiously.

'Ah, but there's the Heath, you see. That's a very different matter. That's a queer place now, if you like.

The Spaniard's Road isn't one I should choose to ride along by myself after nightfall. There's an inn somewhere along it where they say Dick Turpin used to put up; and I think he would find kindred spirits there to this day.'

'Is that where we're going?' asked Will casually, but not without a touch of apprehension.

'No. As I told you, we're going to the Vale of Health. It isn't very far away, but a much honester sort of people live there. I've been to a fight there before, so I know the ropes.'

'I thought you said you had not been to Hampstead for some years.'

'No more I have – but the Vale of Health is outside. I know just where we can go. There's a tavern handy where we can stable the horses, and the ring is only just in front of it, on a stretch of grass beside the pond.'

'The pond?'

'Yes. It's more like a lake really. Charles II, I believe it was, used to go and drink it, or bathe in it or something, to cure himself of the gout.'

'Is that why it's called the Vale of Health?'

Colin stretched and yawned.

'I suppose it must be.'

They rode along for a while in silence. Here was real country, fresh and open as any Will had passed through on his way from Brighton. It was a lovely day, with the tang of autumn in the air. The leaves were turning, and already in a garden, as they passed, an old man was making a bonfire. The scent of the smoke added a last touch of exhilaration to the air.

'Tell me about the fight,' said Will presently. 'Who's fighting?'

'It's between Ned Bostall, a Cockney, and a man called

Walters, a countryman from Essex, who fights under the name of the "Bear." They're both much of a weight – round about thirteen stone, I believe – but Ned is taller, has a longer reach, and is altogether an older hand at the game. The Bear has only fought three or four times, but he's young and strong, and of the sort of build you'd expect with a name like that; and they say he can take any amount of punishment. All the same, the Cockney is expected to win.'

Will hesitated, and then asked a question that was uppermost in his mind.

'Is it very unpleasant?'

Colin turned and stared at him.

'What d'you mean, unpleasant?'

'Unpleasant to watch. Do they get all over blood, and that sort of thing?'

Colin still stared at him, and then burst into a laugh.

'Well, you're a queer one. If two men with pickled fists fight for an hour or more, you don't expect to see them quite unmarked at the end of it, do you?'

Will coloured and asked quickly, to hide his confusion, 'Pickled fists? What d'you mean?'

'Well, you see, if a man's hands give out, he's done, isn't he? So they harden them for weeks beforehand. Steep them in brine, so that the skin won't split. However, don't you worry. You'll see all about it soon.'

And with that Will had to be content.

As they came near their destination, the road became very crowded. Horses, gigs, open carriages, every kind of vehicle, and crowds on foot – in the space of a few minutes it seemed to Will that the country had become the town again. The crowds were excited and in the best of humour: there was any amount of noise, and a prodigious dust. It was a good thing that both the friends

had quiet horses. A party coming up from a side turning were heralding their approach with a coach horn, blowing upon it every few seconds with tremendous vigour. Wherever they came from, all on the road were going in the same direction – and all were men.

They reached the summit of the hill, then started down a gentle slope, the road running between long stretches of smooth green turf, and the Vale was before them. The lake, or pond, of which Colin had spoken, shone in the sun. The tavern and a little cluster of houses lay beside it. Most noticeable of all, however, were the crowds. There were people swarming everywhere like ants. Will had never seen such a crowd in one place before.

Colin uttered an exclamation of annoyance, and curtly bidding Will follow him, urged his horse on as fast as he could. It was impossible to do more than a trot, varied from time to time by a walk, so full was the road. Even getting on to the turf did not help much. At last, however, they came to the inn, only to find, as each had privately expected, that the stabling was full to overflowing.

Will looked blankly at Colin.

'What shall we do now?'

'Try something else, of course. Here, up this way. This looks hopeful.'

Heading up a narrow lane at right angles to the main road, the two made for a group of cottages lying two or three hundred yards away. The lane led past their back gardens. In the first they came to an old woman was hanging out washing on a line stretched from apple tree to apple tree, as unmoved by the echoing hubbub as if it were no nearer than the war in France. Colin sprang down, and removing his hat with a sweeping bow, asked her if they might tether their horses to her fence, and

offered her a florin if she would look after them till he came back.

The old woman, who had gaped at him with open mouth during the first part of his speech, was all alacrity the moment she heard of the florin.

'Aye, young sir,' she exclaimed, hobbling forward and taking the bridles. 'That I will, and welcome. Why, I'd feed and water 'em, too, for that money.'

'There's no need of that,' Colin smiled. 'Look after them for us, that's all.'

Hurrying back down the lane, congratulating themselves on their good fortune, they found what looked like an auxiliary fight going on in the middle of the crowd.

Will caught Colin's arm.

'What's all this?' he exclaimed. 'Hadn't we better keep out of it?'

'Don't worry,' Colin replied. 'They're only trying to clear a space near the ring for us. These ruffians would crowd right up near the ropes if we let them.'

'A space for *us*?' repeated Will in bewilderment.

'Why not?'

And crying coolly, 'By your leave, there; by your leave!' Colin proceeded to push his way boldly forward through the outer ranks. Will followed him dumbfounded. Whether it was due to Colin's smart sporting attire, or simply to his air of perfect confidence, Will did now know, but in a few minutes the pair found themselves standing as close to the ring as they could have wished, right in the midst of a crowd of loud-voiced young bucks, and nobody attempted to turn them away.

Suddenly Will began to laugh.

'What's the matter?' Colin asked him.

'I like the idea of coming here to look for Lambert. Why, you might as well look for a needle in a haystack.'

'There's rather a crowd, certainly,' Colin admitted.

However, there was more to think about than Lambert now. Will stared fascinated at the empty ring before him. Its bright untrodden grass contrasted vividly with the trodden wastes around. They had arrived just in time. Five minutes after they had reached their place, there was a sudden roar of cheering from the crowd. A lane was forced among the struggling figures, and the Cockney came into the ring, in greatcoat and hat, escorted by his second and his bottle-holder. Arrived, he spat, and, with a flourish, threw his hat into the ring. Then there was a smaller cheer, a vast heaving and struggling in the crowd, and the Bear arrived from the opposite side. The surge of the crowd hid him at first, and Will could not see whether he went through the same ritual.

Then, equilibrium restored, amid shouts of 'Keep the ring there, gentlemen! Keep the ring!' the two men stripped, came into the middle of the ring, and tossed a coin.

'What's that for?' Will asked.

'They're tossing for position – who's to face the sun. It makes a difference when it's as bright as this.'

There was a shout from the crowd. Evidently the Cockney had won the toss. The Bear grinned – Will took a fancy to him at once; the two men shook hands, and on the cry of 'Time!' the fight began.

His heart beating very fast, his mouth dry, Will watched in fascinated horror. The two figures, the one tall and white-skinned, the other short, stocky, and brown, circled round one another, sparring for an opening. Then, like a flash, the Cockney leaped forward. There was a quick exchange of blows, the two figures were at grips, struggling together; then a roar went up as the Cockney threw his opponent. Will could not see

the ground for the shoulders of the few people in front of him, so that he did not see how they fell, but he saw the Bear rise at once, still grinning, and each man retired for the brief prescribed rest upon his second's knee. A tempest of yells and cheers went on during the interval, and odds on the Cockney were freely offered. Much encouraged, he followed up his initial success with two more. Speedier and definitely longer in the reach, he sprang in, confident and agile, scoring freely with both hands, and each time threw his opponent.

'Ah,' chuckled a tall man standing close to Colin, 'that's his wits! Give me a Cockney every time. He's always quicker than your country bumpkins.'

'The Bear always takes a while to warm up,' growled another voice. 'Wait till he gets going. Then you'll see.'

'I'll have to wait for a long time, by the look of it!'

An elderly man with a weather-beaten, handsome face, red under its tan – he might well have been a retired naval officer – turned to the first speaker.

'Are you offering odds on your man, sir?'

'On the Cockney. Yes, sir, I am indeed. I'll lay you five to two.'

'In guineas? Done, sir!'

Will's attention was recalled from this transaction by a bellow from the crowd. A thin trickle of crimson was running from the Bear's nose. First blood to the Cockney!

The effect of this upon the Bear seemed a testimonial to the efficacy of blood-letting. In a moment all his lethargy departed. The look of good humour still remained upon his face, but it had set to a comical determination. Rising from his second's knee, he waited, slow as usual, retreated, shuffling round the ring in short steps, inviting his expert opponent to spring in. The Cockney,

now in the best of spirits, his eyes gleaming in his long, pale, rather melancholy face, made a perfunctory feint or so, and then sprang in. But as he sprang, the Bear, hunching his shoulders, suddenly became as quiet and solid as if he were carved out of mahogany, and dug a vicious blow at his opponent's body. The lookers-on heard the Cockney's loud, unguarded grunt, saw him stagger back on his heels – and with a speed amazing in one so clumsily built saw the Bear pursue him, deliver a couple more wicked, short-arm jabs, grapple his man to him, and fall heavily on top. The crowd gasped. The Bear's supporters set up a yell of joy, and the majority, whose money was on the Cockney, adjured him in loud and passionate voices to mind what he was doing.

The handsome elderly man turned, his eyes sparkling.

'That's the style,' he exclaimed. 'What did I tell you?'

' 'Tis the first thing your man has done, sir.'

'Aha, my friend, but not the last, as you'll see.'

'Give me the short 'un every time,' said a voice behind Will. 'Look at his balance!'

'Ah – but the Cockney has thrown him.'

'You wait!'

The Cockney, however, was not easily dismayed. An old campaigner, he had been in many a tight place. For a while he treated the Bear with increased respect, using his superior agility, fighting on the retreat, saving his strength, and, whenever possible, playing for his opponent's face and eyes. As the fight wore on, Will's taste for watching it lessened. Twenty minutes from the start both men were covered with blood. The Cockney's lower lip was split and swollen, and one of the Bear's eyes so hideously puffed that it gave Will a shock every time he caught sight of it. The swelling had come up quickly from a single lucky blow, and seeing it, the Cockney's

supporters began to howl like wild beasts for him to take advantage of it and finish the fight. Realizing the danger of his position, the Bear expended his strength lavishly, forcing the fight, chasing his opponent all round the ring, seeking for an opportunity to come to grips and use his superior strength. The Cockney, older, more easily tired, his face set in a defiant and melancholy grimace, fought coolly, weathering the storm as best he could, saving himself wherever possible, allowing himself to be thrown, falling light, and playing desperately with all his skill for the Bear's other eye.

As the pace of the fight quickened and the Bear's efforts grew more desperate, the excitement of the audience rose beyond control. Those who had money on the fight shoved and struggled to see better. They leaned forward, purple in the face, yelling advice or abuse to their man. The din was terrific, continuous. All feeling had left Will, save a desire to be out of this yelling crowd and to be rid of the spectacle of the two battered men who, weary and blood-spattered, fought on so savagely, yet with good humour. This was, to Will, the most sickening thing of all; the obvious fact that neither man bore the other the least ill-will, as was evident from their distorted grins and the remarks they made to each other as they fought. They were fighting to provide a spectacle, to win bets for others.

Suddenly a ferocious yell of exultation went up from the Cockney's supporters. He had reached his objective at last, and closed the Bear's other eye. Now it was only a matter of seconds. The Bear was still grinning, still willing, still full of fight. But he could no longer see. The Cockney, a good sportsman, stood back and looked appealingly first at the crowd, then at the Bear's second. They took the hint, and the towel came into the ring in

token of surrender. For the Bear to go on longer would have been to risk permanent injury, maybe blindness.

Turning at once, the two began to make their way through the crowd, before the roads became impassable, so as to get back to their horses. As they were pushing their way along together, Colin suddenly caught Will by the arm.

'Look,' he cried, 'there he is!'

'Who? Where?'

'Look. On the roof of that coach there. Lambert!'

And turning, Will saw, gazing with a sardonic expression over the scene, the melancholy figure he had seen waiting on the occasion of Sheridan's party.

He stared, and as he stared the figure and those with it began to scramble down. Clearly there was no chance of a meeting there. He was about to turn and say as much to Colin, when Colin again caught his arm and pointed back towards the ring: and Will saw, with a whir and a flutter of wings, a dozen or more carrier pigeons rise in the air to carry the news of the victory back to London.

CHAPTER XI

'I've got to go back to-morrow.'

'What, so soon? I thought at least you would stay till the end of the week.'

Will stretched, and shook his head regretfully.

'I'd love to. But I can't. I'm so new in charge of the works, I don't like to leave them any longer than I must. And then, as you know, there's Gregory. Goodness knows what mischief he'll get up to behind my back.'

'Have you let him know yet that you know where he gets the silk?'

'No, not yet.'

'Why not?'

'I don't know. It's hard to explain. Only I've a sort of instinct which tells me that it'll be useful later on. It's the sort of weapon one doesn't want to use before the right time.'

'No, I suppose not.'

'You see, if I did let him know, he might take fright and leave altogether, and, with father ill, I couldn't possibly manage by myself.'

It was the morning after the fight, and the two friends were sitting in the coffee-room of the inn where Will was staying. They had arrived home in safety the evening before, without, of course, any further sight of the mysterious Lambert. Colin had had at once to go to the theatre, and Will had again to spend the evening alone. He made friends, however, with another guest in the inn, an interesting man from the Midlands, who told him many things about the cotton trade; and he had also had

a talk with his friend the waiter. Tired after the day, he had gone to bed early, and slept sound.

'Well,' said Colin, leaning forward, his elbows on his knees, 'if you're leaving town to-morrow, then you must come to the play to-night, and that's all there is about it.'

'Will you be acting?'

'No – by great good luck. I'll get an order for us both, and we can sit together. We'll go there right away and make sure of it, and then, if you like, I'll show you around the town a bit.'

They picked up their hats and went out into the street. It was not far to Drury Lane, but Will found plenty to stare at, since his guide seemed to take a pleasure in plunging into the narrowest alleys and byways he could find. He left Will outside the theatre while he went in to see about the order, and Will stared with great awe at the celebrated building, which, while not as imposing as he had privately hoped, was still a great deal larger and more dignified than the theatre at Brighton.

To think that he was going to see a play at last! His heart beat quickly at the thought, and, do what he would, a queer, half-guilty feeling mingled with the excitement. He told himself that, when Sheridan had spoken to his father about the theatre, his father had seemed to melt a little on the subject. At any rate, he had not said outright that he would not allow Will to go. That silence must be taken for consent. If I've seen a prize fight yesterday, said Will to himself with a rueful grin, I needn't strain at going to the theatre to-day!

His musings were cut short as Colin appeared, waving the precious strip of paper.

'That's all right,' he announced with a smile. 'I got it without any trouble at all. It's the first order I've ever asked for. Some of the company are for ever asking, and

the manager grows sour, naturally enough. But I've never asked before, and so he smiled quite amiably, and we shall have good places.'

'What's the play?' asked Will – not that he minded. Any play would do for him. The mere fact of entering for the first time the magic world of the theatre was more than enough.

'*The Critic*. It's by Sheridan himself. It's being revived for three special performances.'

'By Sheridan himself!'

Will's eyes grew round with anticipation, which kept recurring at intervals during the sight-seeing that followed. Colin proved an admirable guide. He took Will here, there, and everywhere, and when at last, exhausted, Will decided that it was time for dinner, Colin took him to a strange old eating-house in the City, which one entered down an almost vertical staircase, like a ship's ladder, and where people ate in curious little compartments as high and dark as a church pew.

There was more sight-seeing after dinner, but, tired of walking, they went down to the river and hired a waterman to row them up and down. The sight of all the shipping, the busy wharves, and the roofs and towers of London rising up behind them, was one that Will knew he would never be able to forget.

Even full of excitement as they were, the hours passed slowly, so firmly fixed were Will's thoughts upon the treat ahead. He tried hard to stop himself from looking forward, lest the evening itself should not come up to his hopes; but it was useless. By the time when, with Colin beside him, he climbed the steps to the long, colonnaded porch of the theatre, he was in such a state of excited anticipation that he could hardly speak. With a part of his mind he felt half ashamed of his excitement, and

hoped that Colin would not notice it. Colin, whether he noticed it or not, made no sign, except perhaps even to accentuate his negligent man-about-town air of being accustomed to all these marvellous things, and taking them as a matter of course.

With a flourish of his pass, Colin led the way down a narrow passage, over stairs of thick pile carpet, into the theatre. The door opened, a gust of warm air and a babel of voices rushed out to meet them, and they were in the huge auditorium. Will stood and gasped, staggered by the brightness of it all. There were lights everywhere, hundreds upon hundreds of lights – candles, candelabra, lamps; and all round them, mingling with the light and warmth of the air, was the continual chatter of voices, half excited, half subdued. There were people everywhere – in the pit, high up in the galleries, and in tiers of boxes on either side of the huge expanse of curtain.

'Where are we going to sit?' Will asked his friend.

'In that box.' Colin pointed to the third box of the bottom tier. Half a minute later they were inside it. It was an admirable place, giving them a perfect view of the stage.

Will stared round the house, but his gaze came back every few seconds with awe and fascination to the huge curtain so brilliantly lit by the row of lamps beneath it.

'What sort of a play is *The Critic?*' he asked presently.

Colin smiled and looked superior.

'You'll see very soon for yourself,' he said.

When at last the curtain rose, and Will got his first sight of the stage, he experienced a momentary pang of disappointment. He had expected to see brilliant scenery and costumes, heroic figures, a pageant of magnificent colour and movement. Instead, he saw a scene of ordinary life, a room like any other, in which a husband and wife

were sitting and reading the paper. With the arrival of a gentleman, called Sir Fretful Plagiary – a strange name, surely, Will thought – things began to grow more lively. The man was a fool, that was plain to see. Will watched him for some time prating pompously away, and then, suddenly and quite inadvertently, he chuckled. At once he bit his lip, and felt the blood rush to his face and neck. What had he done now? He hoped that no one had heard. Much ashamed, he stole an apprehensive glance at Colin, and was mightily relieved to receive a broad grin and a wink.

A minute or so later a general laugh ran round the theatre, and then another and another. Will knew now that he might laugh with a clear conscience, and gave himself up whole-heartedly to watching the actors. He forgot Colin, he forgot the audience, he forgot everything in the intoxication of this new delight. When the curtain fell for the interval it was several moments before he moved his elbows from the ledge in front of him and uttered a sigh of pure happiness.

He turned to find Colin smiling at him with approval.

'Enjoying it?'

'I should just think I am,' said Will simply. 'I've never enjoyed myself so much in my life.'

Colin leaned forward and began to tell him about the play.

'Sir Fretful Plagiary,' he said, 'is drawn from life.'

'What, you don't mean to say there really is such a man?'

'Not of that name, and the character is exaggerated, of course. All the same, it's a portrait.'

'Like some of Sheridan's others,' said Will with a grin, recollecting the evening at the Ship.

'Exactly. This one is drawn from a playwright by the

name of Cumberland. He was reading one of his tragedies one day, and Sheridan yawned in the middle of it. Cumberland then flew into a great passion and declared that Sheridan had insulted him. Afterwards – Sheridan told me this himself – he said it was not the discourtesy to *him* that he minded so much, but the frightful dissipation which the yawn betrayed.'

Will laughed, and gazed round the theatre at the assembly of beautifully dressed women and their escorts, at the cheerful, friendly folk in the pit, then up, past the galleries, to the enormous height of the roof.

'How on earth did they roof it?' he asked. 'I shouldn't have thought that stone could stand the strain.'

'It's not stone. It's wood.'

'What, the whole building? It's painted to look like stone.'

'I know, but it's all wood'; and Colin began to explain to him the various intricacies of the theatre. 'D'you see the curtain there? What d'you think it's made of?'

'I don't know. That can't be wood too, surely.'

'It's iron, solid iron. Absolutely fireproof. When fire breaks out in a theatre it's almost always behind the scenes, on the stage side. All they have to do is lower that curtain at once, and the audience files out, safe as you please. And, for this side of the curtain, look up there at that roof.'

Will looked, but saw nothing out of the ordinary.

'Stored up in that roof there are I don't know how many gallons of water in an enormous tank. At a moment's notice that can be discharged and flood the whole place.'

'I hope there's no alarm of fire while we're here,' smiled Will. 'We'd all be like drowned rats!'

'We'd get a wetting, certainly.'

Then the interval was over, the bell rang, and the curtain went up again. Will soon found himself looking at a stage upon a stage; a second play within the play he was watching. The author of the play, or so it seemed, one Mr Puff, gave a signal; the orchestra played, the bell rang, and another curtain rose, disclosing darkness, the dim outline of battlements, and two figures asleep. The laughter which the first act had provoked, that strange, infectious sound that rippled round the tiers and galleries, swelled now to a roar. Will laughed till he was helpless, and even practised Colin shook in his chair. It was an Elizabethan play that they were watching, Will discovered, the most ridiculous creation of Sheridan in his maddest mood. Sir Walter Raleigh, turning out his toes, was a sad and ludicrous libel on his noble original. The spectacle of Lord Burleigh coming on to the stage shaking his head with infinite wisdom, and going away again as silently as he came, made Will hug himself with joy; but the supreme moment of the evening was a lunatic tableau, when the hero stood in the centre, being threatened simultaneously by two young women with daggers. Each young woman was grasped by a frenzied uncle, who pointed a sword at the hero's already mortgaged bosom, and the hero, with unexampled resource, discovered a dagger in each hand, wherewith he, in his turn, menaced the bosoms of the ladies. After this, the display of madness by the Governor of Tilbury Fort and his fair daughter, Tilburina, came almost as an anti-climax; and the end of the play, a pageant of insane and lopsided proportions, found him leaning back in his chair limp and helpless, unable to laugh any more.

'Well,' said Colin needlessly, as they made their way out into the open air once more, 'did you enjoy it?'

Will looked at him, and did not trouble to answer.

CHAPTER XII

THE next weeks passed for Will in a kind of dull, laborious dream. He seemed to have got into some long, obscure corridor of time, of which he could neither remember the beginning nor see the end. The routine work of the manufactory occupied all his time from morning till night, and there were often worries to take into the night hours as well. Mr Maitland's illness continued. He mended slowly though steadily, and Will hardly needed the doctor to tell him that it would be a long time yet before his father was fit to resume work.

These weeks, however, though dull, provided Will with invaluable experience. Difficulty after difficulty arose – the ordinary routine difficulties of the business, had he but known it, such as his father was used to meeting and thought nothing of. To Will, inexperienced and anxious, each occurrence seemed a catastrophe which rocked the business to its foundations. Just as he thought he was getting used to things at last, and was more or less ready for whatever should happen next, Howard fell ill, and that spelled more trouble than Will had ever dreamed of. Up till now he had always thought that the workpeople went on by themselves, like machines. He soon learned his mistake. The women, for instance, who worked in Howard's shed – it had never occurred to him that they needed keeping in order, and that Howard was the man that did it. Their overseer once removed, however, they suddenly ceased to be the respectful automatons Will had always taken them for, and became all too human and all too feminine. A whole host of unheard-of troubles

and complaints arose; they could not do this, it was impossible to do that, the materials were all wrong, they needed fresh tools, fresh needles, heavens knows what else.

The harassed Will had no sooner attempted to deal with their problems and settle them that they came to him in a body, declaring that they could not work in the shed. The trouble began, as far as Will could make out, when one girl, a tall, excitable creature, with masses of fair hair and strange, almost green eyes, declared that she had seen a rat in the corner of the shed. This sight – to which Will privately thought she might well have been accustomed, if not in the shed, at least in the yard outside it – was apparently enough to send her into hysterics and stir the emotions of her fellow-workers, who sent a message to Will to say that the shed was not fit for human habitation, and they could work there no longer.

Flustered, exasperated, his ears burning, Will went out to see them. It was a most unsatisfactory interview. When he arrived there, he found each girl bent over her work. He asked what was the matter. No one would answer him. Raising his voice, he asked again. The women giggled, and still kept their faces averted from him.

'Oh, well,' exclaimed Will, losing his temper at this unwonted behaviour, 'if you won't tell me what's the matter, I shall conclude that it's nothing, and expect you to continue your work as usual.'

It sounded fine and dignified, but he felt uncommonly foolish as he withdrew and slammed the door behind him. A gloomy report an hour later that the women had since done no work whatever did not improve his spirits.

Going into the house twenty minutes before the time for knocking off work, he encountered Marjorie, who bluntly asked him what was the matter. Will hesitated

for a moment; he did not want to appear a bigger fool than he felt. Then he told her.

Marjorie's colour rose, and her eyes sparkled dangerously.

'That's all right,' she said when he had finished. 'I'll see to them. You just leave them to me.'

She marched out to the shed then and there, and closed the door behind her. What she said Will never knew, but it was magnificently effective. The women were all at their accustomed posts next morning, working like niggers, and Will, having occasion to pass through the shed, found them subdued and respectful as ever.

Meanwhile, running through all this time like a thread of colour in a carpet, there was the problem of Gregory. The head clerk no longer appeared to resist Will's authority. His manner was smooth and deferential; and this, curiously enough, Will hated more than his previous thinly-veiled insolence. He suspected that Gregory was up to mischief. There was, however, nothing for him to go on. Gregory did his work well, did not complain in the least at the extra duties that fell upon him unavoidably in the absence of Mr Maitland, and from time to time respectfully made suggestions which Will found really helpful. But the question of the silk, with its many implications, moral and otherwise, lay always at the back of Will's mind. Two more consignments arrived during this period from Gregory's convenient relative in Amsterdam. The clerk had each time advised Will that he expected the consignment, and had suggested going to the coach office to call for it. It had apparently come. At least, Gregory had duly produced it, and at the appointed time. Whatever the reason, there were no delays. Will, of course, knew perfectly well that the stuff had never been near the coach office, or that, if it had,

the astute Gregory had merely sent it some way inland to meet the coach and be put aboard at a little distance outside the town. That did not matter. What did matter was that each package represented a definite fraud upon His Majesty's revenue. The proceeds of the fraud did not go to Maitland's: they paid a good price for the silk. All the same, Will could not feel that this acquitted him of guilt. He felt a traitor to old Ben and the lieutenant, his friends, in receiving the goods that had thus eluded their vigilance, and he resented bitterly handing over good money to the pockets of thieves and tricksters.

But what could he do? Gregory was literally indispensable, particularly at the present time. To quarrel with him now would be to invite disaster. Moreover, if Gregory left, or were dismissed, as must happen once the charge was brought home to him, it would be quite impossible to keep the news from Mr Maitland; and the consequent worry might have serious results. No: everything seemed to point to Will's sitting tight and doing nothing, a course which, as matters stood, he was only too anxious to follow.

Busied as he was with these multifarious concerns, Christmas came long before he expected it. Dates had meant nothing to him but the figures which he wrote at the top of his letters, and days had been marked only by unpleasantness or by its absence. The town was empty. Someone had told him that in the summer it had double as many residents as in the winter. The invalids still abounded, of course, being wheeled up and down in the strong, wet breezes, and once the Prince came down for a short time to his residence.

Will hailed Christmas with relief. It made a welcome break, and was otherwise notable as being the first day Mr Maitland was allowed downstairs. Will and Marjorie

went to church, sang carols lustily, and emerged, hungry, to make their way home along the Front. It was a mild day, after rain, with a soft wind blowing hard from the west. The sea, grey-brown and lumpy, was getting up and slapping edgeways upon the shingle. The sky was clear, save for an occasional patch of high, wispy cloud, travelling fast. There was exhilaration in the air, and Will, taking Marjorie's arm, stepped out more happily than he had done for weeks.

Crossing the Steyne, to their amazement and delight they ran into Colin. Marjorie saw him first, strolling up and down slowly, with an air of complete unconsciousness, near the lane that led up to the Maitland's house. She saw him for a moment before Will, and had time to note, doubtless with secret pleasure and amusement, that the air of unconsciousness masked something more anxious, something almost furtive. How strange that, of all places on the Front, he should choose for his promenade a length of fifty yards up and down so near their home!

'Why,' exclaimed Will, 'look! Of all people. Well,' he called, as Colin, seeing them, came forward, 'whoever would have thought of seeing you?'

'I ... I just happened to be passing;' and then he caught Marjorie's eye. 'I hoped I might meet you,' he continued disarmingly.

'Well,' said Will, 'you have met us, and now you must come in to dinner.'

Colin held back.

'I couldn't think of disturbing you on Christmas Day, of all days.'

Will caught him by the arm.

'You've got to come, whether you like it or not. I haven't seen you for ages. D'you think we're going to let

you go when we've found you like this? Tell him to come along, Marjorie. Tell him not to be silly.'

So Colin came, and a very happy meal they made of it. Marjorie had at first been fearful that his arrival might be too much for the invalid, but Colin bore himself so quietly and deferentially, and attended upon Mr Maitland with such charming solicitude, that his visit actually did him good.

Dinner over, Mr Maitland retired to rest on a sofa in the next room, and the three drew their chairs round the fire and talked to their hearts' content. After exchanging their more immediate news, Will half laughingly asked after Sheridan's lost caricature.

Colin looked up. He did not smile.

'Well, as a matter of fact,' he said, 'I did go further with it. I saw that fellow Lambert.'

'What, you actually met him?'

'Yes. We were wrong about him, Will. In spite of his appearance, he's a very decent sort of fellow. He spoke with me quite frankly, and I'm convinced that he knows nothing whatever about the paper.'

He looked, as he spoke, half apologetically at Marjorie, as if afraid that she would laugh at him.

'Well,' said Will, 'that's one anxiety removed, anyhow. Besides, I dare say by now Sheridan has forgotten all about it, hasn't he?'

'No,' Colin replied, 'that's the queer part of it. He's more anxious about it than ever. In fact, it's regularly getting on his nerves.'

'But why? Why on earth?'

'I don't know, except that he's on a better footing with the Prince than ever, and I suppose that, contrariwise, it makes him all the more anxious lest any one should have it in his power to do him an injury. Anyhow,

he's got it firmly into his head that someone has the caricature and is watching him, determined to bring about his downfall at some crucial moment.'

They talked on for a while, and then Will stood up and stretched.

'Look here,' he said. 'It's still fine. Let's go out and get some air before it's dark.'

'By all means. Where shall we go?'

'Well, Marjorie and I generally go up and take old Ben some tobacco and a slice of Christmas pudding. Would you like to come with us?'

'I should be delighted – if Miss Maitland doesn't object.'

Marjorie did not answer. She stood up and smiled.

'I'll go and put my bonnet on,' she said; and a few minutes later they were all three walking along, Will feeling happier than he had for months. They found the old man in good spirits, complaining still of smugglers, of course, declaring as usual that every owner of a boat in Brighton was in league with them, but well contented in spite of all. They remained with him about twenty minutes, warming themselves at his fire, and then, as dusk was falling, set out for home. Will and Marjorie together pressed Colin to stay with them. He pretended first reluctance and then business, but it was obvious that he was in no hurry to get back to town. Finally they persuaded him to stay till the end of the week. By then, Will told him, he himself would have to go up to town on business, and it would be far pleasanter if they could go up together.

The lights of Brighton began to twinkle, a great wind leaped softly out of the west, the sea roared and creamed on the shingle, and the three, arm in arm, strode along in step, without a care in the world.

CHAPTER XIII

WILL sat back in his chair, sprinkled sand over the letter he had just written, then read it over with a distinct feeling of approval.

'DEAR FATHER,' it said, 'This is to inform you that I yesterday saw Mr Jermyn and brought matters to a satisfactory conclusion with him. I bore in mind your warning about him, but I think you will agree that, in the circumstances, we shall be safe in doing business with him for the next few months at least.

'When I went in to see him, I was fully prepared to meet with difficulty and find him truculent and uncivil. As it turned out, the reverse was the case. I might actually have been coming to make him a present of a sum of money, instead of requiring the payment of an overdue debt. He received me with great affability, entreated me to be seated, and begged that I would do him the honour of taking a glass of wine with him. I was much bewildered by all this, and additionally suspicious, as you may well imagine. However, not to tantalize you by keeping away from the point any longer, I not only collected from him the monies owing to us, but, in earnest of further business, he has made a deposit of no less than two hundred and fifty pounds against orders to be placed with us in the coming months.

'This came about without any exaction on my part either. Puzzling my brains at the beginning of the interview, I concluded that he was afraid lest we give the preference to Mr Hedges, his chief rival. To test if my guess was correct, I let drop a series of hints, calculated to confirm him in this fear. He looked a little green at

that, and began to plead that we should favour him. Judging that the time had come to speak boldly, I said, "Well, you know, Mr Jermyn, I can't pretend that the record of our past dealings is such as to inspire us with confidence in you." He protested at that, I looked polite but unconvinced, and in the end he offered the deposit. I demurred against taking it, but he literally pressed it into my hand.

'This, and from such a source, suggests a number of thoughts to my mind, and will no doubt suggest more to yours. We may be sure at least that this man foresees a great increase of business and is anxious to have first call upon our services. I pray with all my heart that he may be right!

'I am going to-day to interview the other merchant, Mr Coleman. I trust that, since I have been away, your health is much improved. Please give my love to Marjorie and tell her I hope to be at home again soon.

I am, my dear father,

Your dutiful son,

WILL.'

Folding and sealing this lengthy effort, Will could not help feeling proud of it. Surely his father would begin to realize at last that he had come into his own, and that the firm had in him a useful representative. Steady, he said to himself, as the feeling of pleasure rose: steady: you're new to the job still, my lad, and it isn't long since you were in a pretty mess down there, wondering where to turn and what to do next.

All the same he decided he could allow himself a little self-congratulation on yesterday's work. The fat, dark-skinned merchant had not enjoyed the interview nearly as much as he had. Now if only he could come to an

equally satisfactory conclusion with Mr Coleman, the young silk manufacturer from the Midlands, he might go home with a good conscience and a mind at rest. A short while ago he had dreaded these interviews. Now he found himself looking forward to them with a real excitement. There was some fun in a commercial life, after all.

Will was staying in his old inn in Fleet Street. He felt proprietary towards it now, and regarded himself as an old habitué. The waiter and he were fast friends; and he went his way about the passages and rooms with assurance, a creature far removed from the timid guest who had first come there not so long ago.

Will put the letter in his pocket and stood up. The day was fine; it was time to go out and look for Colin. He had hardly got as far as the door, however, when Colin saved him the trouble. He burst into the room in great excitement, startling by the violence of his entry an old gentleman who was snoozing on the far side of the fire, and, taking Will by the arm, hurried him over to the window.

'What d'you think?' he exclaimed in low, urgent tones. 'I have a part – a real part – at last, with twenty lines to speak!'

'Colin! How marvellous! What is it? How did it happen?'

'Sheridan got it for me. He spoke with the stage manager. The actor who was to have taken it fell ill, and Sheridan persuaded the man to give me my chance.' He clenched his fists. 'I will justify it. I promise I will. He'll never regret it. Oh, Will, how I have longed for it – my chance at last!'

'Colin, this is great news. We must do something to celebrate it.'

'Yes, yes. That reminds me. That's why I've come to fetch you. We're to go along at once to the Piazza Coffee House, next to the theatre. You're to come too; Sheridan said so particularly.'

'What, will he be there?'

'Yes; he named half an hour from the time I left him. It's not that yet. Let's go along to the theatre and find him, and then we can all three go together.'

Will seized his hat, they dashed down the stairs, and in a moment they were hurrying through the crowded streets. The air was cold but invigorating, and the sun shone brightly on the house-tops. A gilded vane on a church tower swung in the wind, and the beam from it suddenly almost dazzled Will. Colin's excitement, joining with his own, wrought him to such a pitch that he wanted to throw back his head and laugh aloud.

They came to the theatre, and burrowed their way down a dark, dusty passage to Sheridan's room. The door was ajar, and, pulling up abruptly, they heard voices. An unknown voice, sounding dignified and obstinate, spoke; and then they heard Sheridan's voice, angry and querulous.

'But, my dear fellow, why not? A mere five hundred pounds, and for two days, three days at the most. The theatre's never going to miss it; and after all, it's my own money, isn't it, in the long run?'

'I'm sorry, Mr Sheridan, but it's quite impossible.'

'Good God, man, d'you want to drive me to the moneylenders? I tell you I must have the money. It's a pretty thing for a Member of Parliament to be without the ready money to buy himself a meal.' And then, to the horror of the unwilling listeners, the strong, confident voice took on a wheedling note. 'Come on, oblige me in this, there's a good fellow. I won't hide from you I'm

in desperate need of the money. It's only for three days, upon my honour. No, not for as long; ten to one, I can pay it back the day after to-morrow. No one will know. You shall not be blamed for it. Three hundred pounds even would be better than nothing. Come, there's a good fellow.'

The tone of the other voice did not change.

'I'm sorry, Mr Sheridan. Very sorry. But it's impossible. I beg that you won't put me to the pain of refusing you any longer.'

There was an impatient exclamation, and then, with a swift glance at Will, Colin strode forward and knocked loudly on the door. A pause, and then Sheridan in a changed voice cried, 'Come in.'

'Ah,' he exclaimed, as the two appeared in the doorway. 'There you are.'

His discomfiture still showed in his face, but only for an instant; then he turned with a charming smile to the man who was with him.

'Well, Mr Adams,' he said, 'you can't, and that's all there is about it. I'm sorry.' He nodded, smiled, and turned to the boys. 'Come on,' he said. 'I'm glad you've come.'

They went down the passage and emerged into the bright light outside. Will was shocked by the change in Sheridan. He looked years older. The lines round his eyes had multiplied and deepened; his face was thinner, the flesh sagging underneath it. But he had all his charm of manner still, and, pulling himself together with a painful and visible effort, he began to tell anecdotes, and soon had the boys laughing in spite of themselves.

Soon, however, the effort flagged, and, seated at the table, Sheridan became more and more dejected. The celebration of Colin's good fortune was forgotten, and

Sheridan, drinking glass after glass of claret, his chin sunk on his chest, could think of nothing but his own woes. Will, watching him, felt acutely miserable; miserable and helpless.

Suddenly Sheridan jerked his head up and looked at Colin.

'That cursed scrap of paper. Isn't there *any* news of it?'

'Nothing more, I'm afraid, sir.'

'Tchah!' He jerked his head peevishly. 'What a fool I was! But then I'm always a fool when I'm drunk. Take my advice, boy.' He pointed at Will. 'Don't drink too much, or, if you must, take care there's some sober person at hand to tidy up after you, and see you don't leave things about that you'll be sorry for later.'

'Surely, sir,' said Will, leaning forward, 'there's no danger now. If the thing had fallen into the hands of any enemy of yours – which I can hardly believe likely – surely by now it would have reached the Prince, and the harm would have been done.'

Sheridan set down his glass and gloomily shook his head.

'I haven't a moment's peace or safety while that thing is still at large,' he said. 'My life isn't worth living. It hangs over me like the sword of Damocles. What's the good of standing in well with the Prince – where's the security – when at any moment I may be knocked out with a blow of my own striking?'

'Sir,' said Will earnestly, 'I'm sure you're distressing yourself unnecessarily. By all the laws of probability the paper is thrown away and lost. My sister, as you know, made every inquiry for it at the tavern. Colin here has followed up the one clue that appeared possible, and found there was nothing in it. The only men we know of who could have been your enemies searched for the

paper at the tavern, and could not find it. Surely, after all this, the possibility of its being at large is not worth regarding.'

Sheridan looked at him, but again shook his head.

'You mean well, Mr Maitland, and I thank you for your good intentions. Still, as I told you, I shan't be at ease in my mind until the thing is found. If it ever will be found,' he added, half to himself.

'Well,' said Colin awkwardly, 'anything we can do ...' and he broke off, for there seemed precious little they could do.

'I know, I know,' said Sheridan, and impulsively shook a hand of each of them. 'You are good boys, and I know you'll do all you can for me. And now that's enough of my troubles. Let's talk of something else.' And, rousing himself from his lethargy, he began to talk of the theatre in such a way that the boys, anxious and worried though they were for him, were entranced.

Finally, 'What's the time?' inquired Sheridan; and then, leaping to his feet, he exclaimed that he was overdue at the theatre and must rush back.

'The reckoning – put it down to me,' he called to the waiter from the doorway, and disappeared, leaving the two friends staring at one another with expressions of mingled amusement and concern.

They left soon afterwards, and Will walked back to the inn alone, thinking deeply. An idea had come to him which almost took his breath away, so big was it, so unlike anything that had ever come into his life before. He had told Sheridan that he would do anything he could for him. Did he really mean this? Assuredly he did. Then, Will, my lad, he said to himself grimly, show yourself as good as your word.

Still unable to decide, he mounted the stairs to his

bedroom, and shut and fastened the door. For five minutes, perhaps, he sat on the bed, elbows on knees, hands clasped, staring in front of him. Then, with a sigh of decision, he took from his pocket the letter to his father and tore it in a score of pieces. After all, why not? He was in charge of the business now. He had a right to invest the money as he pleased. But – had he? Was he sure? Well, at any rate, it was only for a short time; two or three days, or a week at most. No one at home knew anything about the money, nor need know, till he told them.

Crossing to the small table in the window, he took the envelope with the bundle of bank bills from his pocket, and rang the bell for writing materials. As soon as they were brought, and he had again shut and fastened the door, he took bills for three hundred pounds and wrapped them up with a brief note. A few minutes later he was again approaching the theatre in Drury Lane. He went to the doorkeeper, who, having seen him before, nodded in token of acquaintance.

Will gave him the packet.

'Will you please deliver this to Mr Sheridan immediately? Into his own hands? It is of great importance.'

The man stared at the packet, stared at Will, and then nodded.

'I'll take it along to him myself this minute, sir.'

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For the rest of that day Will was in a strange state of mind. He could not be sure whether he had done right or wrong. Every now and then a wave of sick panic would come over him as he realized the enormous amount of money at stake, money which, after all, was not his own. Then he would tell himself that the money was partly

his own, and that, at any rate, he was the representative of the business and for the time being in sole control. Then he would picture his father's answer to that defence should he put it forward; his knees would begin to shake, and, despite the cold, a sweat would start out all over him. Then he would recall Sheridan's voice, the fatigue and anxiety in his face, and his dejection as he sat over his claret in the coffee-house; and at once a glow of conviction would come over him that he had done right. Besides, he would assure himself, his father had the greatest personal admiration for Mr Sheridan, and would be only too glad to serve him.

Distracted as Will was by these considerations, his interview with the young merchant from the Midlands was not altogether a success. Will took an instant liking to him personally. He was young, square-jawed, with a strong Midland voice and a blunt, direct manner, which Will found a great relief after the oiliness and persuasiveness of so many of the merchants. With Mr Coleman you at least knew where you stood. But he asked too high a price, and would not budge from it; and Will, since the French price was even higher, had no means of beating him down. They parted with goodwill, and, on Mr Coleman's part at least, with great good humour; but Will, making his way back to the inn, felt that, if his tail was not between his legs, it ought to be. The young merchant had made him feel a boy again, insufficient and inexperienced, and this feeling, combined with his former misgivings, made him spend a rather miserable evening. Even his customary talk with his old friend the waiter did little to cheer him up.

The next morning he got Highwayman out of the stable and decided to go for a ride to clear his head and spirits. The old horse was delighted to see his master,

and so pleased to get out into the air that he would have broken into a canter had the traffic allowed. As it was, making his way along Oxford Street at a walk, Will heard himself hailed, and, looking up, saw no other person than Sheridan riding in the opposite direction. Sheridan pulled up his horse, stopped, and began chatting with the utmost good humour. Will noticed at once that he looked far more cheerful. Some of the years he had so suddenly acquired had fallen from his face and figure; his carriage was more upright and his voice more vigorous. He spoke to Will with all his old charm, asked if he had had any news of his father or his sister, wanted to know where he was going, nodded approval, asked how long he was staying in London, said he would send for him soon, and then, with a nod and smile, rode on, leaving Will staring after him. He had been kindness itself – but he had not said a word about Will's letter and the money.

*

The next two or three days Will always tried to forget. He spent them miserably hanging about in London, waiting for the return of his money. He ought to have gone to Sheridan boldly, and he knew it, but he could not bring himself to do so, and Sheridan sent no word, gave no sign. Colin was busy, and Will only saw him once. Several times, while they talked, Will was on the point of confessing to him what he had done, but something held him back, and so the meeting left him more unhappy than ever.

Then a letter came from Marjorie. His father, she said, was getting anxious for him. Would he come back at once, even if it meant his returning to town again in a day or so.

Well, thought Will, I had better go. At any rate I'm

doing no good here. Sheridan, I expect, thinks so little of a thing like that that he has not bothered to mention it, and won't till he has the money to pay me back. I will come back to town in a few days and ask him for it. The decision a little eased his mind. Half an hour afterwards he had paid up at the inn, packed his belongings, and Highwayman was taking him sedately down Fleet Street. The sky was overcast, and, before he had gone far, a heavy shower came down. Turning up the collar of his coat, Will suddenly opened his eyes wide and stared. All down the street before him, umbrellas were springing up everywhere, like a little army of mushrooms.

CHAPTER XIV

WILL stared at Gregory in amazement.

'Time for the audit?' he repeated. 'Why, it's not due for a couple of months yet.'

'I know it's just over six weeks till the regular date, Mr Will. At the same time I think that, in the circumstances, it would be well to hold it as soon as possible.'

'But why on earth?'

'For several reasons, Mr Will.' The clerk looked up, and his eyes met Will's with undisguised malevolence.

Will felt chilled at heart, but he returned the gaze steadily.

'Let's hear them,' he said.

Gregory's eyes slid off sideways. 'In the first place, the time is convenient because, for the next three or four days, we shall have very little to do. Secondly, as Mr Maitland will, we hope, so soon be returning to work, I should like to have all in order for his return.'

'What d'you mean, all in order? There's no particular disorder that I am aware of.'

'Even so, Mr Will, I feel, as bookkeeper to the firm, that it would be more satisfactory to have the accounts cleared up. I should like to be able to present Mr Maitland with a complete and satisfactory account of all the firm's transactions up to date.'

Will eyed Gregory steadily. He had known immediately what the man was hinting at. Several weeks had elapsed since Will's return from London. Urgent business at the works, a rush of orders, various complications with the workpeople, had made it impossible for him to get away even for a couple of days; and the weeks had brought no

sign from Sheridan. They had not been pleasant weeks for Will, from whose mind the thought of the money was never far absent. If he had not been so busy in other respects, he could not possibly have borne the thought of it. And now, obviously, Gregory suspected something. He could not, of course, know what had happened, but somehow he guessed that there had been money paid over for which Will had not yet accounted to the firm. He suspects that I have made away with it for my own purposes, I suppose, thought Will, watching the smooth face with cordial dislike.

'I don't think you need worry,' he said at last. 'We'll keep the audit for the proper time.'

'That's all very well for you, Mr Will, sir,' replied Gregory, 'but it will hardly do for me. You forget that I am responsible to Mr Maitland for the firm's finances. I have never been left in such a position before, and naturally I wish at the first opportunity to render an account of my stewardship – and yours.

'What did you say, Gregory?'

'I said, Mr Will, sir, that I wished to render an account of my stewardship – and yours.'

He looked up, his eyes gleaming balefully. The buttons were off the foils at last.

'You needn't concern yourself on my account, Gregory, thank you very much. I can look after that.'

'I'm not so sure.'

Suddenly, in the midst of his anger, Will almost wanted to laugh. He was a mean, malevolent fellow, Gregory, exulting in the thought that at last he had got his young master on the hop; little realizing what a card that same young master was just about to play against him.

Raising his eyebrows, Will looked at Gregory, and finally, to the clerk's amazement, smiled.

'Very well, Gregory, if you insist.'

'I do insist, I'm afraid, sir.'

Will's smile broadened.

'Right. Get everything ready then, will you?'

Without waiting for an answer, he walked out of the room, through the office, and into the house. Running lightly up the stairs, he entered his bedroom, unlocked a desk, and took from it a small, crumpled piece of parchment. Eyeing it with satisfaction, he hummed a few bars of a song, put it in his pocket, and went back to the sheds.

When he came into the office again, he found Gregory already beginning to pull out the firm's books and stack them on a table. Gregory was evidently puzzled by Will's sudden access of lightheartedness, but, whether or not he thought it was mere bluff, he was grimly bent on going ahead with the business.

Will sat and watched him for a few minutes, letting him get out the heaviest books and files. A little exercise, he thought, won't do you any harm, my gentle, kind-hearted friend! But the clerk made no bones about his task. For that matter, Will could not remember ever having seen him show fatigue.

At last Will spoke.

'Oh, Gregory,' he said casually, 'I had a very interesting little experience some time ago now, which I forgot to tell you about.'

Gregory did not turn.

'Indeed, Mr Will,' he observed sarcastically.

'Yes.' Will picked up a quill pen and began playing with it. 'I don't know why I didn't tell you at the time, because I remember thinking that it would interest you very much.'

'Indeed, Mr Will?'

'Yes.' Hurrah, thought Will to himself, he thinks I'm

trying to make friends with him and try a little soft-soap on him, to make him give way about the audit. 'In fact. I thought the whole thing was rather in your line altogether.'

The clerk grunted. Every line of his back was eloquent of hostility and contempt. Any appeals to compassion in that quarter would meet with scant response.

'D'you know a place just along the cliffs, on the way towards Rottingdean, where there has been a landslide, and the cliff sticks out in a sort of bastion?'

For an instant the back had become rigid. Then it moved again, stooping and lifting.

'No, Mr Will, I can't say I do.'

'No? Don't you? Well, that's your loss, I must say, Gregory. It's a nice part of the world, and the breeze up there is very healthful.'

'Some of us,' the clerk almost snarled, 'haven't the time to be wandering so far afield. Some of us have to work for our living.'

'Yes, Gregory, I know; and the people I'm going to tell you about seem to have been working pretty hard for theirs.'

Gregory grunted. He straightened himself up and beat the dust from his hands, surveying the pile of books in front of him with grim satisfaction.

'Very hard they seem to have been working,' continued Will. 'But I'm getting on too fast. This bastion, or projection, I was telling you about makes a sharp angle with the cliff on the far side, and on that far side, in the corner, is a cave. Yes, Gregory, a cave, you know – one of those hollow places. Useful to hide things in.'

'I'm not very interested in geological formations,' said Gregory furiously, 'and I have no time to waste in talking about them. If you've quite finished with me, Mr Will, I will get on with my duties.'

'But I've not quite finished with you, Gregory. In fact, I've hardly begun. This cave I'm telling you about, for some reason or other, seems to have attracted the attention of His Majesty's excise and revenue officers. So much so, in fact, that one night some half a dozen of them paid it a visit, without going through the formality of notifying their intentions beforehand. No, wait a minute, Gregory; don't go. You haven't heard the story yet.'

'I have no more time to waste, Mr Will. There's still work to be done here, and someone has to do it.'

'In the cave, Gregory, the aforesaid party found one rather miserable man, supposed to be on guard, and a certain small quantity of goods. The goods were nothing very much; they did not particularly interest the officers: but one package had a considerable interest for me, and, I am sure, Gregory, would have had an even greater interest for you.'

The clerk's face was a sickly white. His hands shook, but his eyes blazed furiously.

'I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about, Mr Will.'

'Oh, yes, you have, Gregory. I hate to contradict. But you know quite well what I'm talking about. The object which interested me was a package of a very familiar shape. Shall I tell you what it was like, Gregory? It was exactly the same shape as the packages of silk which come on the coach from your brother-in-law in Amsterdam. Now wasn't that a funny thing? What could it have been doing there?'

'What nonsense is this, Mr Will?' blustered the head clerk. 'There might be a hundred packages similar in appearance – a thousand, for that matter. But I am making a fool of myself so much as to answer you. I shouldn't

have waited as long as I have to listen to such nonsense. At any rate I shall listen to no more.'

He turned and made for the door. Will waited until he had his hand upon the handle, then spoke once more.

'Just a minute, Gregory. I'm sorry to delay you, but there is just one thing more.' He put his hand in his pocket and pulled out the crumpled label. 'I perfectly appreciate all you say about the shape of the packages, and even, at a stretch, the way they were done up; but what d'you say to this label, which I took from the package in question?'

In spite of himself, Gregory came back a few steps into the room. Will rose and showed him the label. He stared at it for a moment, bereft of speech. Then, with a furious shrug of the shoulders, he pulled himself together.

'This is a plot,' he exclaimed, his voice choking with hatred. 'The label proves nothing. You have torn it from one of the packages here in the office, and have trumped up this tale against me, to cover your own misdoings.'

'Very pretty, Gregory. Very pretty, indeed, but it won't do. I took this from the package in the cave.'

'Prove it!' Gregory's lips were white and trembling with passion. 'Prove it, that's all I say.'

Good for you, thought Will. I couldn't, because no one saw me tear it off the package. However, you're not to know that.

'That won't be difficult,' he answered with a smile. 'There were six good men and true with me when I found it.'

Gregory staggered, and looked for a moment as if he would fall. Then his face lit up.

'In that case,' he snarled, 'why was I not arrested at once?'

Will's respect for the man, which had been rising

steadily, went upward at a bound. Here was a worthy adversary.

'For the good reason,' he answered smilingly, 'that the officers were after bigger game than you, and didn't want to give away their plans by striking too soon at small fry. Come on, Gregory,' he added, almost good-naturedly 'you'd better give in. I know, and you know that I know. You needn't bother to pretend any longer.'

For a couple of seconds more Gregory's eyes showed fight. Then the light went out of them, and a look of dreary resignation settled on his face. He reached out, ineffectively groping for a chair.

'Here you are, man. There: sit down. You'll feel better in a minute.'

Gregory sat for a short while, his chin sunk upon his chest, staring in front of him. Then he looked up at Will.

'What are you going to do, Mr Will?'

'Nothing – for the present, Gregory. You're too useful to lose. I couldn't have managed the business all this time without you, and that's why I've said nothing hitherto. I shouldn't have spoken now if you hadn't forced my hand.'

A look of hope appeared on Gregory's face.

'What d'you mean?' he asked.

Will laughed.

'I'll make a bargain with you, Gregory. You leave the date of the audit till the usual time, and I'll say nothing about this label.'

Gregory's eyes once more lit up with cunning.

'That's all very well, Mr Will, but ...'

'I know just what you're thinking, Gregory, and just what you're going to say. When the time for the audit comes, you'll find that I can give a satisfactory account of everything. You're quite right in your suspicions.'

'I've not said anything. I ...'

'Oh, never mind about tactics, Gregory. Let's be perfectly honest with one another. You know, or suspect, that I've been paid money for the firm and have not yet accounted for it. As it happens, I've not spent it upon myself, as you probably imagine. Actually, I've lent it to a friend, in the sure knowledge that I shall get it back again. But don't imagine that, because I'm making this bargain with you, you have any hold over me. If you go to my father with the story, he'll hardly have me imprisoned for lending the firm's money to a friend both of his and mine. Whereas, if I tell your story you won't be in so fortunate a position.'

Gregory looked for a moment at the middle buttons of Will's waistcoat, then at the fire. He said nothing. He was beaten.

'Well,' said Will, 'anything more?'

'No, thank you, Mr Will.'

'Very good, then. Oh, yes, by the way, there *is* something more. How much of our grade A silk comes from abroad?'

'All of it.'

'All through your kind agency, Gregory?'

'Well, yes, sir. Pretty nearly all.'

'It's just as well that you keep the books yourself, Gregory.'

'What d'you mean?'

'Oh, nothing, nothing. Only that you can tell me one or two things about the cost of it. Our regular consignment from your brother costs us twenty-five guineas, doesn't it?'

'That's right, sir.'

'And I understand that we're getting it cheap because of your brother-in-law in Amsterdam.'

'Exactly, sir.'

'Gregory, you know you're not quite so clever as you look. I've been finding out one or two things about prices in London, and I've been looking through the firm's books over a period of years. Come now, tell me the truth. How much do you actually pay your so-called brother-in-law in Amsterdam for the consignment?'

For a few seconds it looked as if Gregory would refuse to answer. His jaw stuck out mutinously, his eyes shifted from side to side. Then he shrugged his shoulders.

'Fourteen pounds ten,' he replied.

Will looked at him almost affectionately. It is hard not to like your enemy when you have thoroughly beaten him.

'Thank you, Gregory, that's all I wanted to know.' He turned in the doorway, smiling. 'I'm sorry about all these books. I'm afraid you'll have the bother of lifting them all back again.'

Once outside, Will hugged himself and danced with glee. His last attack upon the clerk had been sheer guesswork. Actually, he knew no more about prices, whether current or of years ago, than to guess that, if Gregory was defrauding the excise he was probably defrauding the firm too. The piece of knowledge he had just acquired was of the utmost importance. Now that he knew the huge profit that was being made on the imported silk, he must have another talk with Mr Coleman at the earliest possible moment. No doubt that shrewd young Midlander had his own way to make, but so had he, Will Maitland. Remembering that Mr Coleman had said he would be back in town early in February, Will decided that he must go up without delay.

Making his way straight to his father's room, he told him, without of course any reference to Gregory, that he had made one or two discoveries, which made him

believe that he could fix up things on a more advantageous basis with Mr Coleman.

The invalid's face brightened at his news. Forced to depend on others, whether he had confidence in them or not, Mr Maitland had clearly decided that the only thing he could do was to make up his mind that all was going on for the best. At the same time he had noted the change in Will, and was far too well pleased to see him earnestly applying himself to the business to discourage him in any way.

Certainly, my boy,' he said. 'Certainly. I wish you all success, I needn't say. When are you thinking of starting?'

'I'll start tonight.'

'That you won't.' Unobserved by Will, Marjorie had come into the room and overheard the last part of the conversation. 'I'm not going to have you catching your death of cold, riding up on a cold night like this. It's all misty, and foggy, and horrid. It'll do just as well in the morning.'

And Will, despite his eagerness to set off at once, agreed. If Mr Coleman were going to be there till the end of the week, he had plenty of time. All the same, it was difficult, wrought up as he was, not to be up and doing at once.

Will went to bed early that night so as to get a good rest before the journey. It was some time, however, before he fell asleep, for his mind was busy with the awkward and embarrassing question of going to Sheridan and asking for the return of his money. It had to be done; but the more he thought about it the less he liked it. In the middle of his distress he thought of Colin and a feeling of relief rushed over him. That was the side of the world which Colin knew about. Clearly, the borrowing and returning of money was a process well understood in smart society. Colin would tell him what to do; and having reached this happy conclusion, Will fell asleep.

CHAPTER XV

MR COLEMAN received Will courteously, but with a faint glint of amusement in his eye.

'Well, Mr Maitland. So you've come to close with me after all?'

'I don't know about that,' said Will doggedly, but with a smile. 'Shall we say that I have come to reopen negotiations?'

'I'm always glad to see you, of course, Mr Maitland. At the same time, my figure stands.'

'Does it? I wonder.'

Even as he spoke, Will found time to notice the difference that a few months had made to him, and to marvel, with a touch almost of panic, at his new-found hardihood.

'When I came to see you a few weeks ago, Mr Coleman,' he went on, 'there were a good many things I didn't know. For the matter of that, there still are. I'm new to the business, as you know; and in my early years, as my father's assistant, I didn't know as much about it as I might have done. Since I came to you last, however, I have acquired one or two very interesting pieces of knowledge.'

'Indeed, Mr Maitland?'

'Yes. You say that your figure of the other day must still stand?'

'Yes. It's an equitable and reasonable figure, based upon market conditions.'

'In that case, Mr Coleman, can you explain how it is that I'm offered silk of the finest quality, via Amsterdam, at fourteen pounds ten?'

Mr Coleman could not explain, but he had a very good try. He looked superior, he discredited Will's judgment, he suggested that the silk must be of inferior quality, and that Will, in his inexperience, had been deceived. Unfortunately, Will had a sample of the silk.

Then, at last, the young man from the Midlands gave in good-humouredly, and an agreement was reached satisfactory to both parties. He bore no ill-will, and let it be understood that such little manœuvres and deceits were, for him, all in the game.

'The man who comes into business without experience, Mr Maitland,' he said, 'deserves what he gets. It's nobody's business to explain to him what he ought to have known before he began.'

And Will, grinning ruefully – though it seemed to him rather sharp practice, all the same – agreed.

Emerging into the street, Will determined, while he was still in the mood, to get his other piece of business done; the more so as it was so difficult and distasteful to him. Now, without delay, and before he had time to think about it and let his misgivings grow, he would go to Sheridan's house and ask for the return of his money. It was, after all, a perfectly reasonable thing to do. He had right on his side. Ten to one, too, Sheridan, who was known to be so casual and easy-going in his affairs, had only been waiting for him to ask, and would let him have it at once, with the greatest cordiality, and probably thank him very kindly for the accommodation.

In any case, come what might, Will knew he must have the money. He hurried along through the dusk of the late afternoon, and presently was standing at the door of Sheridan's house.

A servant with a long upper lip and typical Irish face opened the door.

'Not at home, sir,' he replied in answer to Will's question, and made to shut it.

There flashed into Will's mind something that Colin had said about the way Sheridan's servants were trained to protect their master against the inroads of duns and tradesmen.

'D'you mean that he is out?' he inquired.

'Certainly, he's out, sir. He's at St Stephen's. An important motion is up for debate, and Mr Sheridan intends to speak.'

Unreasonably depressed, Will walked back towards Fleet Street. He walked slowly at first, and then, with a shiver, set off faster to keep himself warm. It was turning bitterly cold, and a wind was squirting out through the mouths of alleys and round corners with a sudden fierceness that seemed to reach one's very bones. It also made one hungry; and Will, reaching the inn, sought out his old friend the waiter and made an excellent meal. This, and the blaze of the fire, cheered him up somewhat, but he felt the need of company. To spend the evening by himself was unthinkable. Accordingly, he huddled into his big coat and made his way to Lincoln's Inn to look for Colin.

The hospitable, untidy room was empty, and the remains of a fire glowed sulkily in the grate. Will put on more fuel and poked it to a blaze, resolved to sit for a while, in case Colin should come back. But there was no sign of him, and Will presently recollected that he was probably at the theatre. Starting to go down the stairs, he met the man who looked after Colin's rooms, and took the opportunity to ask him if he knew where Colin was.

The man shook his head.

'No, sir. He won't be at the theatre. Being a Friday in Lent, there's no performance, and no rehearsal neither.

I don't know where to tell you to look for him, and that's a fact, sir.'

Outside, tucking his chin deeply down inside his collar, away from the bitter wind, Will decided that the best thing he could do would be to go to the Piazza. Colin might very well be there. The obvious and sensible thing to do, especially on such a cold night, was to go back to the inn, sit snugly for an hour before a blazing fire, and then go early to bed, but Will felt at all costs that he must have companionship. Head down, he made his way through the windy streets to the theatre, realizing for the first time that one could be even more lonely in the midst of a crowd of people than in the middle of the Downs. Reaching the Piazza, he pushed his way in, and the warmth of the place met him like a blessing. He opened his coat, sat down gratefully, and ordered a hot drink. Even if Colin did not come, there was something about the atmosphere of this place that felt friendly and cheery. And then, just as if he knew how badly Will wanted to see him, Colin came in at the door by himself. He saw Will at once, came across, and joined him most willingly in the hot drink.

'Why,' said Will, looking at him, 'you're frozen. What on earth are you doing, going about on a night like this without your greatcoat?'

'I left it in the theatre, like a fool. Didn't think I'd want it. As soon as we have warmed up here, let's go round and get it. Then you can come back with me to my rooms. We can be snug there and talk at peace.'

They sat for twenty minutes or so talking and enjoying themselves, and then Colin jumped up.

'If we sit here any longer we shall be too comfortable to move. Come on!'

They went outside, and Colin, with an exclamation

at the bitter wind, began to run. Luckily, it was no distance to the theatre, and they had soon plunged in through the stage door and were groping their way along the dark corridor. The whole place seemed huge and hollow in the unaccustomed silence, like a vast tomb. There were no actors, no scene-shifters, no expectant hubbub of voices from the auditorium, and only a faint light here and there, to enable the watchmen to make their rounds.

They reached the dressing-room and found the coat which Colin put on there and then. As they were coming out again, Will suddenly stopped and sniffed.

'What's the matter?' Colin asked. 'Caught cold?'

'No; I thought I smelled smoke.'

Colin sniffed in turn.

'I don't notice anything. Come on.'

Once more they entered the labyrinth of passages. The occasional lights were turned so low that they did not reach more than a couple of yards and for most of the way the two had to feel their way along the walls.

Will stopped again so abruptly that Colin, who was following, bumped into him.

'I swear I can smell smoke.'

Once more Colin sniffed.

'Yes, it does seem as if there is something burning somewhere.'

They went on a few steps, and then:

'It's getting stronger,' said Will. 'Hark! What's that?' He caught Colin's elbow.

Muffled, far away, but unmistakable, came a man's voice shouting, 'Fire!'

The two stood still for a moment.

'I wonder where it is,' said Colin. 'It must be somewhere near or we wouldn't ——'

He broke off as a chorus of voices took up the cry, louder, closer at hand.

By common consent the two turned and headed back along the corridor. In an incredibly short space of time the silence had given way to uproar. Outside there was a sound of feet running, voices crying directions, and a whole hubbub of contradictions and alarms.

Actually it took the boys only about half a minute to reach the auditorium, but when they opened the door they fell back aghast. Already the place was as brightly lit as for a performance. The fire had taken hold and was spreading with a rapidity which the boys simply could not believe, even though they were watching it. Flames were leaping hungrily at the back of the pit. Three or four men – little, helpless, black figures – were scurrying dementedly about, retreating from the heat and smoke, and the sizzling, biting tongues of flame. One of them turned and rushed towards the boys, his mouth open, his eyes staring, oddly waving his arms.

'The engines!' he bellowed. 'The engines!' and he pushed past the boys and stumbled away down the corridor, still bellowing, 'The engines!'

'They'll never be in time,' said Colin. 'Look, man, look!'

The flames were spreading every instant, clawing and tearing like live things at the wood and the hangings. As they watched, a single flame caught the front of the boxes. It checked for an instant, gathered itself, and then leaped up as if they were a ladder. At its touch the wood cried aloud. The whole theatre was full of roaring and smoke, and the heat was becoming terrific. Already pieces of burning wood were crashing down to the ground.

Will began to sway on his feet. Appalled and fascinated, he stared, and seemed unable to move hand or foot to save himself.

Suddenly Colin tugged at his arm.

'Come away, man, come away!'

The spell broken, Will turned and plunged after him down the passage. Already the place was so full of smoke that the lights burned like pin-points in a fog. With the horrible sight no longer before his eyes, Will's senses cleared.

'Can't we save some of the stuff behind?' he cried at intervals of coughing. 'That iron curtain. That will keep it back for a few minutes.'

'Sheridan's things, in that little room! Down this way.'

They turned and ran. Just as they reached the door of Sheridan's room there was a terrific crash behind them, followed by a furious hissing.

'The tank,' cried Will. 'It's come down already.'

'Much good it will do.' He seized the handle of the door and shook it, then swore loudly.

'Is it locked?'

'Yes.'

It was clearer down here, and the light burning just above the door enabled them to see dimly for a little way around them. Unable to speak for a sudden fit of coughing, Colin pointed to a bench against the wall. Seizing it, they used it as a battering ram and charged the door. Five or six heavy blows, and they had burst the lock.

'There's a light here. I know where he keeps it.'

'Hurry up. We haven't long.'

'Don't fluster me. We can do nothing in the dark.'

The spark leaped, then the tiny flame, and a few seconds later the room was full of light. Will caught Colin's arm.

'Listen to that!'

It was the sound of the flames, a horrible, tearing, hungry sound, growing louder every moment.

'Quick, man,' cried Colin, 'there's no time to lose.'

He dashed over to Sheridan's bureau, and started rattling at the drawers and swearing to himself. Will stood in a kind of dream, looking round. How extraordinary, he thought. This room is dying. No one will ever see it again. It looks unreal already.

Then he jumped. Colin was addressing him forcibly.

'Don't stand there like a mooncalf, man. *Do* something!'

Recalled to his senses, Will rushed forward to help him. Colin stood back.

'It's no good. The thing's locked, and all the drawers too.'

'What about that one at the bottom? That isn't locked.'

Will had noticed that it was projecting a little.

'No more it is. That's funny. I couldn't open it.' Colin went down again on one knee and tugged at the drawer. 'The cursed thing's stuck. Here, lend a hand.'

Seizing each one of the handles, they shook, rattled, and tugged. At last, with a jerk, the heavy drawer came forward. It was crammed to over-flowing, the principal hindrance being a large satchel, bulging, stuffed with papers, thrown carelessly in on top of the drawer to be out of the way.

The room was full of smoke. Already their heads were beginning to swim. Desperately they looked round. There was nothing more movable in the room except an old harp, draped in a cloth, which stood in a corner.

Will pointed to it.

'Shall we take the harp?'

Colin shook his head.

'Too heavy. Besides, it's all out of tune. It's never used.'

Out in the passage again, they were appalled by the thickness of the smoke. Bending double, they fairly ran for it. They reached the main corridor just in time. The air was unbearably hot, and just as they turned the corner

a great tongue of flame leaped suddenly from nowhere, searing them with its breath. When he got outside, Will found afterwards that it had singed off his eyebrows and part of his hair.

Coughing, with smarting eyes, half blinded, they staggered towards the open air. A man rushed out of a side corridor, screaming, waving his arms, and almost knocked them over. A moment later, without knowing how, they found themselves outside, gulping in deep, healing breaths of cold air.

Colin's first thought on coming to himself was to hide the satchel under his greatcoat, in case they were suspected of looting. The streets were light as day, and an almost impassable crowd was wedged round the theatre. Even as the boys began to try to push their way through, however, the crowd began to surge backwards. Sparks and burning pieces of wood were beginning to shower down, and the wind suggested a new terror to the houses nearby. In sudden panic, the crowd turned, pressing madly back, and a scene of hideous confusion followed, since all the time more and more people were converging towards the theatre in order to get a good view.

Then, almost miraculously, the pressure eased, and the boys found themselves in a side street. There was a roar and a crash behind them, and, turning, they saw a huge pillar of fire shooting upwards into the sky. The sight was one to remember for ever. The fierce light, with its black shadows, made the crowds of sightseers look like fiends, and the very houses seemed to dance in devilish glee around the scene of destruction.

'I wonder where Sheridan is,' cried Colin anxiously. 'I trust he has not been allowed to get anywhere near the theatre. It would be terrible if ...'

'Sheridan?' bellowed a voice in his ear; and, turning,

they saw a huge fellow, like a brewer's man, something larger than human in the light of the fire. 'You mean Sheridan, him what owns the place?'

'Yes,' cried Colin. 'We're friends of his.'

'Well, bless you,' bellowed the man, 'you don't have to worry about him. He's safe enough. Just round the corner here.'

'What's he doing?'

'Setting down and taking a glass of wine. He won't come to no harm; don't you fret.'

Looking incredulously at one another, the two broke away without a word, and fought their way round the corner. There, sure enough, in front of the Piazza, they caught a glimpse of the familiar figure surrounded by a crowd, serene and calm, all lit up with intense and unnatural brilliance. Before they could get to him, however, there was a sudden sharp alteration in the endless roaring and tumult which was going on all round them; not an increase of noise, for that would not be possible, but a new note in it; and then a jingling and a rattling, a trampling, and a clanging of bells. Turning, Colin and Will saw a detachment of mounted soldiers forcing their way along, cursing, shoving, threatening the crowds with the flat of their swords, clearing a way for the engines, and effectually cutting the pair of them off from the coffee-house.

CHAPTER XVI

It was not till at least twenty minutes later that Will and Colin succeeded at last in reaching the coffee-house. By the time they got there, Sheridan had gone; the place was full of people watching the fire and excitedly talking about what had happened.

Sheridan, it appeared, had been in his element. Where ninety-nine men out of a hundred would have been crushed and disappointed at so terrible a loss, he had behaved, whatever he felt privately, with the completest unconcern. Standing at the door when the blaze was at its height, he had bidden the waiter return to the room and fetch him out the bottle and glass from which he had been drinking.

When the man came, staring, Sheridan coolly poured himself a glass and drank it. The onlookers were rather shocked, and one of them had the hardihood to say so.

Sheridan turned to him.

'What, sir?' he said. 'May not a man take a glass of wine by his own fireside?'

All the rest of his conduct had been on the same level. However far from the stage he might pretend to be, and however much he might affect to despise it, he was, and would be to his dying day, a man of the theatre. The chance to dramatize an occurrence would always be too much for him, and here, in this disaster to his fortunes, was the supreme opportunity, with every eye upon him; a performance lit by the strongest and most dramatic illumination actor could wish.

There was nothing to be gained by sitting in the coffee-house, so as soon as they had heard their fill of what was

being said the two boys came out again into the street and made for Lincoln's Inn. Once they turned the corner and were out of range of the fire, they suddenly realized once more that the night was bitterly cold. Where they had been it was hot as midsummer. Shuddering and shivering at the change, the vitality drained from them with what they had been through, they hurried as fast as they could go.

Colin was worried by the satchel, to which he still clung. He seemed to think it was his duty to find Sheridan at once and give it to him.

'He may be wondering where it is, and worrying about it,' he said, with chattering teeth.

'Not he,' said Will steadily. 'He's got more to worry about than that. He'll take it for granted that everything has gone up in flames with the theatre. We'll go and find him to-morrow. It'll be a pleasant surprise for him to find that something has been saved, even if it is so small a thing as this.'

'It may not be a small thing. It probably has all his private papers in it. Money, too, perhaps.'

'All the better. He'll think he's lost everything, and then find that something is left. The more valuable it is, the better he'll be pleased. You'll never get him to take any notice to-night,' he went on with a shrewd insight into Sheridan's character. 'He'll be far too much in the public eye; far too busy showing how brave he is.'

Colin gave him a quick glance.

'That's true,' he said; and they hurried along in silence.

It was good to reach shelter, and Colin's room had never looked more inviting than when they came in at the door. The fire was still burning, though it was low. Will went down at once on his knees, and with a poker and a log or two restored it to life.

'There. That's better.'

He turned, and in the flickering light saw Colin leaning back on a sofa. He looked utterly done: his face was pale. Staring at him in sudden concern, Will noticed that he was nursing his wrist.

'What's the matter?'

He jumped up and crossed over to his friend.

'Nothing much. My wrist's a bit sore, that's all.'

'What, is it burnt?'

'A little.'

'Let me see.'

Half reluctantly, Colin took his hand away. Pulling back the sleeve, Will saw an ugly large patch, where the skin had been burnt away. He whistled.

'Have you any butter?'

'There should be some in the cupboard.'

Forgetting his own fatigue, now that there was something definite to do, Will went to the cupboard, found the butter, and then, from Colin's bedroom, brought a clean silk handkerchief. In a few minutes the wound was well greased and bound up.

'Now,' said Will, 'a drink, and you'll be right as rain again.'

'Thanks. Over there.'

He poured out a liberal glass for Colin and a glass for himself. Colin gulped it down, and the colour came slowly back to his cheeks.

'Thanks. That's better.' He laughed unsteadily. 'I felt confoundedly shaky all of a sudden. It was the cold, I think, coming suddenly after the other.'

'I know. My hand's shaking still. Didn't you notice it when I was pouring out the wine?'

'I can't say I did,' laughed Colin. 'I was too much taken up with my own concerns.'

They sat for a while in silence. The logs had blazed up with a quickness which reminded them of what they had so recently seen.

Colin shuddered.

'I'll never forget,' he said, 'the way the fire ran up those boxes. I shall see it in my dreams for weeks; I know I shall.'

'Yes. I couldn't have imagined it. It seemed so wicked – so alive.'

'Yes. Just like a wild animal.'

They fell silent for a few moments. Then Will heard Colin exclaim with surprise, and saw him pointing to the satchel, which he had laid upon the chair.

'Look at it. He didn't even bother to lock it.'

'No more he did. Perhaps there's nothing much in it after all.'

'Perhaps it's only bills,' suggested Colin. 'In that case he won't thank us for rescuing it.'

'That's soon settled.'

Will got up, reached for the satchel, and turning it upside down, tipped its contents out on the sofa between them. The two looked at the bundle, and then at each other. The satchel contained letters, scores of them, and all unopened!

'Good Lord!' said Colin. 'I knew he had a name for never opening his letters, but I didn't think it went as far as this. Why, man, whatever is the matter with you? Are you seeing a ghost, or what?'

Will was staring at the mass of letters with the strangest expression, as if his eyes were at any moment going to drop out of his head. Then, like a person in a dream, he slowly stretched out his hand and drew a package from the pile. Well might he stare – for there, in his hand, unopened, was the envelope he had sent to Sheridan with the money!

'What on earth, man! Have you gone mad?'

Will suddenly threw back his head and laughed. Coming after everything else that evening, the discovery was almost too much for him. He lay back, shaking with laughter, till the tears ran down his cheeks. Recovering himself a little at last, he saw Colin staring at him in consternation, prepared to get up from the sofa. Weakly, Will held up á hand to restrain him.

'No, no, it's all right. I'm quite all right. Wait for a minute till I get my breath, then I'll explain.'

Slowly, still watchful, Colin sat down again.

Will sat up straight and dried his eyes.

'Really, I'm quite all right. I'm not mad.'

And he proceeded to explain to Colin all about the packet of money, his subsequent anxieties, and how he had been that very day to ask Sheridan for it back.

Colin's first words confirmed what he had in his mind already.

'Well,' he said, 'you have got it back safe and sound, and so the less said about it the better. What a mercy it didn't go up in the fire!'

'You think I needn't say anything about it, then?'

'Say anything about it? Of course not. *He* won't know what was in the satchel.'

'It seems almost like stealing, in a way, doesn't it?'

'No,' said Colin decidedly, 'it doesn't in the least. In any case, I'd always welcome any opportunity to steal my own property back.'

He got up.

'Look here,' he said. 'I'm tired out. I'm going to bed. You must stay here for the night too. You can't possibly go back. It's much too cold.'

'I'll be glad to stay,' said Will thankfully. Once or twice the thought had come to him of the journey back

in the bitter wind, and he had not at all relished it. 'I can lie here on the sofa in front of the fire. In fact, I think I'll have the best of it.'

And a few minutes later the two were asleep.

*

The next morning, as soon as they had had breakfast, Will returned to the inn to spruce himself up, and then both boys set off in search of Sheridan. They found him at his club, holding forth, the centre of a large group around the fire. He looked well and happy, but as they got nearer they saw that he was buoyed up by a kind of feverish energy. It was excitement that was keeping him going. For the moment he was the popular hero. His conduct of the night before was the talk of the town, and he was making the most of his position.

It was nearly an hour before Colin and Will could get a hearing; Sheridan caught sight of them soon after they came into the room and gave them a quick nod of greeting, but went on talking to his friends. At last, after repeated attempts, Colin caught his eye, and held up the satchel.

Sheridan broke off, stared, and beckoned them to come. Reluctantly the older men made way for them.

'Why,' he said, holding out his hand for the satchel, 'how on earth did you get that?'

'From your room, sir,' said Colin. 'Your room in the theatre. We were able to get in just before the fire took hold. We ran there to try and save what we could.'

Sheridan looked at him, then at the satchel, then at him again.

'Was this all you brought?' he asked abruptly.

Surprised and rather hurt, the boys said it was.

With a grimace, Sheridan pushed the satchel aside.

'There was a harp there,' he said, not looking at them. 'Why did you not save that for me?'

A dead silence fell upon the room. Men looked at one another, embarrassed, uneasy.

'The harp, sir?' stammered Colin. 'We had not time – we didn't think ...'

'It was the one thing there I valued. It belonged to my wife – to my first wife. I wish you had saved it.'

He sat for a moment without moving, then shrugged his shoulders and turned to one of his friends. Everyone began to talk at once, to break the tension, and in a moment the room was noisier than ever.

Will and Colin, feeling both surprised and dejected, stood silent, waiting for their first chance to get away. It was some time before they managed it, however, and even then they were held up on the stairs and in the room below by the press of people coming in to see Sheridan.

Just as they had got out at last and, still silent, were walking down the street, they heard quick footsteps behind them, and one of the club servants hailed them, running, out of breath.

'I beg your pardon, gentlemen, but Mr Sheridan would be vastly obliged if he might speak with you for a moment.'

Colin and Will looked miserably at one another. They hesitated, and then, without a word, accompanied the servant back to the club.

Crying, 'By your leave, gentlemen, please; by your leave!' he forced a way for them through the press, and at the door of the room they were met by Sheridan himself. The strange, disappointed look had quite left him; his eyes were bright, and he was his own self again.

He held out a hand to each of them.

'Gentlemen, gentlemen, what must you think of me?

The fire that has consumed my theatre seems to have consumed my manners with it. I have never thanked you for restoring to me my property – and at the risk of your own safety, too.' His quick eye saw the bandage on Colin's wrist. 'Egan, my dear fellow, I trust that didn't happen last night. It did? But, good heavens, this is terrible. Has a doctor seen it? Here, here, Dr Molyneux, give an eye to this gentleman, pray.'

'It's nothing, sir, nothing,' protested Colin. 'Pray don't concern yourself. It is the veriest trifle.'

'Trifle or no trifle, it shall be seen to. Dr Molyneux, you will oblige me, I am sure.'

'A pleasure!'

And Colin had to stand, flushed and confused, while the keen-eyed, elderly surgeon unwound the bandage and inspected his wrist.

Seeing the place, which, though better, still looked angry enough, Sheridan was loud in his concern. He made both boys come over to the fire, and one of the club servants was dispatched for bandages, oil, and a bowl of water. And so, while Colin's arm was tended and dressed and bandaged, Sheridan kept him and Will in the place of honour at the fire, talking away gaily, with all his old sparkle and vividness, introducing them to the company, and generally making much of them.

One of the company made to bring him the satchel.

'No, no,' he cried, 'don't open it. Ten to one it's full of bills. I daren't risk looking inside to see!'

Colin laughed.

'I was afraid you might say that, sir,' he said. 'I said as much to Will here.'

'Ah, you young dog, you know me too well! At the same time it was most extraordinarily kind of you to take so much trouble on my account, and I'll always be grate-

ful, I assure you. Though my gratitude is light coin nowadays.' He laughed. 'If only one didn't involve others in one's own misfortunes! Confound it all, Egan, what will you do now? Your place of work has disappeared. Had you thought of that?'

'I had not, sir,' replied Colin steadily.

'Well, well, I'll see that you don't suffer for it. At least, I'll do my best.'

'That's all right, sir,' replied Colin, embarrassed again; 'but pray don't worry about me. You have enough to think of on your own account.'

'Indeed I have. And I've been thinking hard, I assure you.'

Dr Molyneux's skilled fingers made the last fastening of the bandage.

'There, young man,' he said, 'I think you'll find that easier.'

Colin thanked him, and Sheridan, standing up, clapped both him and Will on the shoulder.

'Good luck to you both,' he said. 'And you' – turning to Will – 'tell your father that I hope to be in Brighton soon. I want to give myself the pleasure of calling upon him. Good-bye, and thank you both once again.'

And, the crowd parting this time respectfully to let them through, the two boys went down the steps and out into the open air. All their former dejection had gone, and they walked lightly, intoxicated with pleasure, once more under the spell of the most remarkable man they had ever met.

CHAPTER XVII

THERE, you see, father, nothing very dreadful has happened after all.'

Supporting himself with a stick, and leaning upon Will's arm, Mr Maitland was making his first round of the sheds since his illness. Will had been at pains to get everything tidy and shipshape before he came. He realized that, anxious though his father had been to get back to work, he had yet half been dreading his first visit. It was an effort for him, weak as he still was, to make up his mind, or to face the everyday world from which he had so long been retired.

At the familiar sights, however, he took heart at once, and the shy but genuine greeting of his workpeople obviously delighted him. His quick eye noticed several small changes immediately, and Will almost apologetically explained why they had been made. To his surprise, however, his father made no objection, but listened to his explanation, and in each instance nodded approval.

The tour took some time, and at its conclusion Mr Maitland was exhausted. He sat on his chair in the office, slowly regaining his breath, and Will presently brought him a glass of wine. After a brief rest, he seemed quite recovered, and asked Will to summon Gregory.

The head clerk came in in his usual noiseless, ingratiating manner. He had not been looking too well lately, and Will shrewdly guessed that worry, not unconnected with a matter they both knew about, was the cause. Gregory might well wonder what steps Will would take now that his father was on the point of resuming control.

'Well, Gregory, how are you?'

'Very well, I thank you, Mr Maitland, sir. It is a great pleasure, if I may say so, to see you back in your rightful place again.'

Will looked at him sharply, but there was no side glance in the fellow's eyes, which were respectfully fixed upon his master.

'Thank you, Gregory, thank you very much. I am glad to be back. Though I must say the two of you seem to have managed pretty well without me.'

'I am sure, sir,' said Gregory suavely, 'that Mr Will will be as pleased as myself that you have returned.'

Will suddenly realized that Gregory thought he would resent his father's return. In that case, he said to himself, he's a fool to allude to it. For all he knows he might be making me angry, and that would hardly serve his turn.

'That audit, Gregory,' said Mr Maitland 'Have you had it yet?'

Gregory dropped his eyes.

'Not yet, sir.'

'How's that? You told me that you had special reasons for wishing to hold it early this year.'

'That was my fault, father,' Will cut in. 'I asked him to put it off. There were one or two small matters I wanted to clear up.'

'Well – are they settled yet?'

'Oh, yes, thank you, perfectly.'

'When shall we have the audit, then?'

'As soon as you like,' answered Will cheerfully, his eyes fixed on Gregory.

'Very well,' said Mr Maitland to the clerk. 'See to it then, will you?' And, with a bow and half a glance at Will, Gregory withdrew.

Mr Maitland turned in his chair.

'Now tell me, Will, about this deal of yours with Mr

Coleman. Are you quite sure you are right about the price? And the quality? I simply can't believe it.'

'Yes, father, perfectly.'

And Will explained at some length the details of the transaction, only leaving out the way in which he had originally got his information.

Still unconvinced, Mr Maitland shook his head.

'I simply can't understand it. Here we've been paying twenty-five pounds for the past three years. And getting the stuff cheap, too, so I understood.'

It was on the tip of Will's tongue to tell his father the whole story, but a sudden pity for Gregory withheld him. After all, the man had done well. He knew the business; and now that he was once found out, there was little likelihood of his trying any games again.

'I understand that conditions are easier of late, father,' he said. 'It's something to do with the progress of the war. At any rate, here is the price offered, and you have seen a sample. I take it you were satisfied with the sample?'

'Yes, yes, it's excellent. I have tested it in every way I know. It's simply that I can't believe – I don't want in any way to cast doubt on what you've done, my boy,' he added hastily. 'You've done splendidly, and I'm proud of you. But the difference in price seems so tremendous ...' He broke off, staring in front of him, 'I wonder if friend Gregory had anything to do with it,' he said, half to himself.

'I shouldn't worry about it, father,' said Will decisively. 'We can get the stuff at this price now, and in any quantity we want. As for what we were getting before, it suited us quite well, and we made no complaint about the price. I mean, it left us quite a good profit notwithstanding, so I don't think we need concern ourselves about it any further.'

This advice was clearly very much to Mr Maitland's taste. In his weak state he was only too anxious to avoid all occasion for worry.

'You're right, my boy. That's certainly the most sensible way to look at it.'

He fell silent for a few moments, and then amazed Will by saying:

'You know, I think it's time you had promotion.'

Will stared at him, completely unable to say a word.

'I must tell you,' said Mr Maitland, speaking with considerable emotion, 'what great pleasure it has given me to see the way in which you have acquitted yourself during these last months. There was a time, you know, when I didn't think you would ever take to the business. It worried me more than I can say. I thought you had no interest in it. But I've learned my mistake; it's only fit that I should acknowledge it, and in more ways than one.'

'That's all right, father,' said Will awkwardly. 'I'm afraid that when you first fell ill I realized how idle I'd been, and how little I knew about the business. I was very little use during those first weeks, but by degrees I seemed to pick up something about it.'

'I expect Gregory was useful to you, was he not?'

Mr Maitland, whether he still had doubts about his clerk or not, was evidently anxious to drive them out of his head and find reasons for his old confidence.

'He was, indeed,' said Will with a smile; 'more use than he'll ever know.'

And that's the truth, he thought to himself. If it hadn't been for friend Gregory I should still be the gawk of an ignorant fellow that I was six months ago; and whether that's to his credit or not is beside the mark.

'Which d'you think sounds better,' said Mr Maitland

thoughtfully, ' "Maitland and Maitland" or "Maitland and Son"?'

Will felt himself turning redder and redder. The room swam about him, and there was a lump in his throat.

'Personally, sir, I'd prefer "Maitland and Son," ' he managed to say at last.

'Very well, so be it. And now, partner, let's shake hands.'

They shook hands, and there was an awkward silence. Father and son were not used to emotional scenes, and involved in one, as it were, against their will, they did not know what to do about it.

'And now,' said Mr Maitland, who was the first to collect himself, 'I'd like a report upon the business, together with any suggestions you may have to make.'

Seizing eagerly at the diversion, Will plunged at once into a long narrative. Stumbling at first, he soon forgot all his self-consciousness and former fear of his father in his real enthusiasm and interest in the working of the business. At the same time, he had the sense and the caution not to go too fast in the suggestion of improvements, but to keep back the less important things and concentrate upon the change he wanted most. This was to clear a disused shed and fit it with benches, a table, and a fire, so that the workpeople might have their midday meal on the premises. As it was, those who lived near walked home, and those who lived at a distance ate their food as best they could in uncomfortable surroundings. The new arrangement would, as Will was able to show, not only make for the comfort and contentment of the workers, but also save the business time.

Several times, as Will was speaking, he ventured to glance at his father; but the old thunder-cloud showed no signs of gathering, and when Will had finished, Mr

Maitland nodded vigorous approval. His illness had changed him; Will realized with delight that the old artificial barrier between them had been broken down – he hoped for ever.

'And now,' said Mr Maitland, after they had talked a little longer about the business, 'tell me your own news. How's that young fellow Egan?'

'He's very well, thank you, father. As a matter of fact, it's funny you should ask, because he happens to be down here at this moment.'

'Down here, eh? I thought he was in London.'

'No. He's here, and, what's more, I believe he's coming to dinner.'

'You believe?' said Mr Maitland, looking at him. 'You mean you know very well.'

Will smiled and said nothing.

'Tell me, my boy,' said Mr Maitland, 'has the affair your approval?'

Will started, stared at his father, and then burst out laughing.

'I didn't know you knew about it, father.'

'It's a queer thing,' said Mr Maitland, 'but the young always seem to imagine their elders to be blind, deaf, and imbecile. What d'you think, boy? You must take me for an old fool. Anyhow, that's beside the mark. The point is, do you approve?'

'Well, sir, he seems awfully fond of her.'

'Is he to be trusted, Will? I may say at once I took a fancy to him from the start. He seemed to me a straight, honest, well-mannered young fellow.'

'He's all that, father. As a matter of fact, I think someone like Marjorie is exactly what he needs. He's as good a fellow as you'd find, but just a little – well, it's hard to find the right word. What I mean is, that he wants

something to give him a definite purpose in life, some sort of an anchor. Something to make him settle down and get on.'

'Marjorie would do that if anyone could,' said Mr Maitland. 'The only thing I worry about is the young fellow's profession.'

Will privately was worried about it too, but he did not say so.

'There's plenty of time, sir,' he said. 'I'm sure that Mr Sheridan will do all in his power for him; and, with the incentive of making a home for Marjorie, he will succeed, if he is ever going to succeed. After all, it's not as if they were going to be married to-morrow.'

'I should think not, indeed!' said Mr Maitland, losing colour at the very thought; for he had no idea how he was going to do without Marjorie, and only the knowledge of where her happiness lay reconciled him to the idea, even at some distant date.

'As a matter of fact,' said Will, 'I believe Colin has some hope of a post down here. He's been confoundedly mysterious in his letters. However, we shall know soon – at least, if it has anything to do with Mr Sheridan, for he's due down here at any time.'

'Well.' Mr Maitland made to rise from his chair, and Will, jumping up, came over to help him. 'Time will settle all these things. In any case, Will, boy, they are out of our hands. Once young people fall in love there's no stopping them. After all, they have their own lives to live.'

'Yes, indeed, sir,' assented Will; and thought, You would not have said that six months ago.

They passed out of the door, and as they were crossing the shed, Robert, the man whose task it was to stick on the handles, approached, scratching his head, with a puzzled expression.

'What's the matter, Robert?'

'Well, sir, I don't rightly know. These here things of Israel's – it's a problem to know what to use and what not to use, sir, and that's a fact. That's what I said to Mr Howard only just now, sir; it's a problem. He's been doing some lovely work lately, Israel has, and now he gives me a thing like this here. I don't know, I'm sure. It's finished off lovely, and I'd like to use it, but ...'

'Show me the thing, Robert.'

Mr Maitland held out his hand, and Robert, stopping for a moment to rub it with a cloth, handed him the latest example of the half-wit's handiwork.

Mr Maitland looked at it, turning to the light – stared, looked shocked, and then, his face twitching suspiciously, passed it to his son.

'What d'you think, Will?'

Will's jaw dropped; he stared in stupefaction. The grotesque head before him was not only a caricature of his Royal Highness, and a brilliantly cruel caricature at that, but Will had seen it before. It was the living image of Sheridan's drawing, wickedly endowed with life, in three dimensions.

He turned and looked at his father.

'I think we'd better talk this over first, father, somehow.'

'So do I. All right, Robert. Leave it with us for the moment. We'll give you instructions presently.'

'Very good, sir.'

As soon as they were alone, Will turned, with sparkling eyes, to his father.

'I've an idea that I can shed some light on this, father. I must see Israel at once.'

'Do, my boy. Just give me a hand into the office first, if you will.'

Will did so, and then raced off, with the handle in his

hand, to question the half-wit. He pulled up as he came to him, and approached him casually, so as not to scare him. Tackle Israel with precipitate questions, and he would think you were angry with him, become terrified, and shut up like a limpet.

'What a lovely head this is, Israel,' he exclaimed. 'It's the best you've done for a long time.'

Praise always delighted Israel. He grinned all across his face.

'Did you make it up out of your own head,' Will continued, 'or did you copy it from something?'

'Ah,' said Israel, 'I copied 'un.'

'What from?'

Israel considered suspiciously. His brows contracted. His loose, wet underlip stuck out.

'Was it from a person, or from a drawing on a piece of paper?'

The face brightened.

'Ah, master,' Israel said, 'a piece of paper.'

'And where did you get the piece of paper?'

Israel was not used to so many questions. He looked about him like a trapped animal. Then he darted a quick, apprehensive glance at Will's face. Seeing that he was smiling, first at him and then at the carving, Israel lost a little of his suspicions.

'Come on, Israel, there's a good boy. Tell me where you found the piece of paper.'

There was a long silence, and then:

'The gentleman dropped it,' said Israel.

'The gentleman? What gentleman?'

The half-wit began to cower and shrink away. He looked as if he were going to weep.

'The gentleman dropped it,' he repeated little above a whisper.

Very gently Will began to assure him that nobody was angry and that all was well. He praised the head at great length, making grimaces in imitation of it, until Israel was reassured and began to grin.

'It's beautifully copied,' he said. 'It's lovely. I think it's the best you've ever done. I don't know how you managed to copy it so exactly. The only thing I was wondering is: Was the nose quite this shape? *I* thought it came more to a point.'

Israel shook his head decidedly.

'No, no,' he said, 'it was like this.'

'Are you sure?' asked Will cunningly.

'Yes, certain sure. Look, Mr Will, I'll show you.'

And, groping in his pocket, Israel produced, filthy and crumpled and worn through at the folds, Sheridan's long-lost caricature.

CHAPTER XVIII

FOR several seconds Will stood staring as if he could not believe his eyes. He was brought back to his senses by a murmur from Israel.

'You see, Mr Will, the nose is right, like what I made it.'

'So it is, Israel. You're perfectly right.'

He stood irresolute, holding the drawing in one hand and the head in the other. Watching him doubtfully, Israel shrank slowly back into himself. Now that he had corrected the aspersion on his accuracy as an artist, he began to be afraid again.

Suddenly all Will's perplexity vanished. He threw back his head and laughed delightedly.

'It's a grand head, Israel. The best you've ever done. I'm going to have it made up at once. This very moment.'

Turning, he ran from the shed and made his way straight to his father.

'Father – may we have this made up instantly? There's just time to rush it through, if you give the order.'

Mr Maitland drew back in surprise.

'Tell them yourself, my boy, if you wish it. Your word is as good as mine now, you know.'

Will gaped. Then he remembered his new promotion.

'At the same time,' his father went on, looking at him with his head a little on one side, 'you might explain to me why you have suddenly taken leave of your senses.'

Will glanced at him, and then at the bewildered Robert.

'Wait till we get into the house,' he said. 'All right, Robert; wait here for a moment, will you? I'll just take Mr Maitland in, and then I'll come straight back.'

'You need do no such thing,' said his father. 'Mr Maitland can quite well go in by himself.'

And he proceeded to stump off, leaning on his stick.

'I'll be with you in one minute, father,' called Will.

Then he turned to Robert.

'Take this handle. Fit it on to the very best stick you have, and rush it through at once. I want it to take precedence of all other jobs on hand. Tell everyone to put the best work they know into it, and drop everything else they're doing, no matter what it is. Then, as soon as it's finished, bring it straight in to me in the house. D'you understand?'

Robert swallowed once or twice; his eyes goggled, but he pulled himself together and answered in his best routine manner:

'Very good, sir.'

Putting the paper in his pocket, Will went into the house. He found his father sitting beside the fire.

'Now then,' he said, drawing up a chair to the opposite side, 'I'll tell you what's the matter. First of all, take a look at this.'

And he handed his father the drawing. Mr Maitland looked at it. For a second or so he tried not to laugh. Then, with a great effort, he pulled his face into a severe expression and slowly shook his head. Respect for royalty was a part of his religion. He passionately deplored all that the Prince did to expose himself to comment, and would never join in any such comment himself. Watching his father's face, and very well understanding what was passing in his mind, Will told him the story.

*

It was dinner-time. The day had turned out dark and wet, and already, though it was still daylight, the candles

were lit upon the table. They illumined, at one end, Mr Maitland; at the other, Marjorie. Besides Will there were two guests – one Colin, the other no less a person than Sheridan himself. Will, leaving his father, had hurried down to the Old Ship tavern as fast as he could go, and found Sheridan there. It took but little persuasion by Colin and himself to bring the great man to their house.

The meal was now practically over. By all custom Marjorie ought to have gone and left the gentlemen to their wine, but this was a very special occasion, and so she remained. A great deal had happened since Will had sat by the fire explaining matters to his father. Colin and Sheridan had come up early for dinner, and while Will kept Sheridan busy, Colin had been in important conference with Mr Maitland. The result of that conference was now apparent, as, ceremoniously clearing his throat, Sheridan rose and lifted his glass.

'You'll forgive me, Mr Maitland, sir,' he said, 'for thrusting myself forward in this manner, and usurping a position to which I have no right. At the same time, I feel it incumbent upon me to propose a toast. In fact, I can restrain myself from doing so no longer. My young friend Will here – if I may allude to him so familiarly – gave me, before we sat down to the table, a certain piece of intelligence concerning one of the company and the beautiful and charming young lady who is sitting at the end of the table. I beg, therefore, that you will rise with me to drink the toast of young Egan here and Miss Maitland – or, as I prefer to call them, Colin and Marjorie.'

The toast was drunk, Colin and Marjorie paid proper thanks, and everybody began talking at once.

'I'm a very bad father, I fear, Mr Sheridan, sir,' said Mr Maitland to his guest, 'for I've never really found out from this young man what he proposes to live on'.

Colin started forward and looked eagerly at Sheridan.

'May I tell them, sir?' he asked.

Sheridan shrugged his shoulders.

'It would seem to me an excellent opportunity,' he replied smilingly; and Colin, turning to Mr Maitland, blurted out the news that he had been offered the position of Assistant Manager at the Brighton Theatre, entirely owing to Sheridan's influence.

Mr Maitland turned once more to Sheridan.

'I have more to thank you for, sir, than I thought. It was a happy day for me, and for us all, when my boy met you.'

'Mr Maitland, sir,' replied Sheridan, 'I'm a stormy petrel, and as a rule I bring into people's lives something of the confusion and muddle I make of my own. If for once in a way I have been the exception to my own rule, no one could be happier than I. All the same, the boot is on the other foot, really, for these young people have been confoundedly kind and considerate to me.'

And he proceeded to tell the astonished Mr Maitland about the fire and the rescue of the satchel.

'But what was in the satchel?' Mr Maitland inquired, since to one of his orderly mind the story was incomplete without that knowledge.

Sheridan laughed and raised his eyebrows comically.

'D'you know,' he said, 'I've never looked to this day!'

Mr Maitland, shocked, but smiling in spite of himself, slowly shook his head.

'Ah, Mr Maitland,' said Sheridan, 'you see how hopeless it is to try and do business with the likes of me!'

'We must take you in hand, Mr Sheridan.'

'Too late, I'm afraid. I've grown old in sin. Besides, ten to one they were all bills. There, Mr Maitland, now you look more horrified than ever. Really, you must not

concern yourself with me. I'm happy now; we're all happy together. Do not, I beg of you, remind me of anything outside this room.'

Mr Maitland's face cleared, and he smiled charmingly.

'Very well, Mr Sheridan, sir. Will, you're not looking after your guests. Fill Mr Sheridan's glass.'

Just as Will, with apologies, was hastening to do so, there came a knock at the door.

'Yes?' called Mr Maitland.

The door opened a couple of inches, but no more.

'Come in!'

The door opened another inch.

'See who it is, Will.'

'Master Will,' said a hoarse voice through the aperture; and Will, going to the door, found Robert standing outside. 'This here's what you asked for, Master Will.'

The door opened a little wider, and as Robert reached round it to hand Will the package – nothing would persuade him to allow the company to see him in his working clothes – Smithers, who had been excited by the arrival of visitors, squirmed his way in and rushed about the room, wagging his tail frantically.

'Thank you,' said Will to Robert; then turning, exclaimed, 'Smithers!' in tones of deep reproof. The spaniel, who knew perfectly well that he was not allowed into the dining-room, dropped his tail between his legs, but continued most ingratiatingly to wag his hind quarters.

'Bad dog,' exclaimed Mr Maitland. 'How did you get in here?' He was not displeased, and Smithers, expert at mind reading, raised his tail an inch or so, and wagged harder than ever.

'Faith,' exclaimed Sheridan, 'let the dog stay. This is an occasion when the whole family should be together – isn't it, Miss Marjorie?'

Marjorie, twinkling at him in reply, pushed back her chair and patted her knee. With a bound Smithers was in her lap, and she and Colin proceeded to make much of him.

Meanwhile, with ceremonial steps, Will came and stood in front of his chief guest. Sheridan cocked an eyebrow at the package.

'What on earth have you got there?' he inquired.

'A present for you, sir, if you'll be so good as to accept it. With the compliments of Maitland and Son.'

'Thank you, I'm sure. Shall I open it now?'

'Please.'

Much puzzled, with a humorous glance around the company, Sheridan proceeded to unwrap it, disclosing at last an umbrella of magnificent proportions, adorned with the head which was Israel's latest handiwork. Sheridan stared at the head in utter amazement. Then he threw back his head and uttered a tremendous laugh.

'Don't tell me, you young ruffian,' he exclaimed, suddenly checking himself and turning to Will, 'that you had it all the time?'

'No, indeed, sir,' said Will earnestly. 'I wouldn't have kept it for an instant without telling you, knowing the state of anxiety you were in.'

'Then how ...?'

'I only saw it myself for the first time a couple of hours ago, when it was brought to me by one of the men who didn't know whether to use it or not. It was the half-wit that carved it. You know, the fellow you saw when you came round that first time.'

'What, the fellow with the onions?'

'Yes, that's the one.'

Will produced the paper.

'I recognized the thing the moment I saw it, went at

once to him, and asked him where on earth he had got this, and he said, "The gentleman dropped it." '

A light broke upon Sheridan's face.

'I know,' he exclaimed. 'I must have pulled it out of my pocket with my handkerchief. There's no way else. Phew!' He blew out an enormous breath and turned to Mr Maitland. 'You can't imagine how happy I am to have this back. I've been worried over it for months.'

'I can understand that,' replied Mr Maitland dryly.

'Well,' said Sheridan, 'it shall do no more mischief.'

And, stretching out his hand, he burned it ceremoniously in the flame of the nearest candle.

'But my umbrella,' he said, affectionately surveying the carved head; 'that's another matter. It will hardly do, perhaps, to take with me when I pay a call upon His Royal Highness! At the same time, I itch to use it.'

'Well,' said Will, looking at the window-pane, 'you'll have plenty of chance outside.'

'I dare say,' replied Sheridan. 'But, if that's a hint for me to go, I may tell you roundly that I'm not going to take it.'

'A hint for you to go,' exclaimed Will boldly; 'don't talk such nonsense!'

'Will,' cried Mr Maitland, 'that's no way to speak to Mr Sheridan.'

'Ah, indeed, Mr Maitland, sir, he's right. I do talk a devil of a lot of nonsense. I always have. It's my undoing.'

And he proceeded to talk a great deal more. The discovery of the paper had so delighted him that, for the first time since that evening in the Old Ship, he gave full rein to his fancy, and even Mr Maitland laughed till he was breathless and had a fit of coughing, and Will and Colin had to slap him on the back. Then Colin and Marjorie withdrew to the next room, Will blew out the candles

on the table, and he, Sheridan, and Mr Maitland pulled their chairs round the fire and talked like people who have known each other all their lives, on an equality, without distinction of age or place.

The fire sank to a glow. Will poked it up, put on more logs, and the flames filled the room with merry, dancing light, throwing shadows of the three men enormously upon the walls. The figure of Sheridan, the handsome, lined face, the expressive eyes, were thrown into commanding relief; and beside him, leaning against his chair, staring up oddly towards the ceiling, the polished, caricatured head of the Prince winked and leered grotesquely in the leaping firelight.

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