

"Now, about Clem's picture I don't think there can be any doubt whatever," said the generous-hearted little man. "They must be dolts, indeed, if they reject that. It's far and away the best thing Clem's done yet. That boy sir, has a great career before him."

"From a painter's point of view, I presume you mean?" said Mr. Fildew, with a snort.

"Precisely so. From a painter's point of view. What other point of view could you expect me to take?"

"No other, I suppose. *Chacun à son métier*. But the words, 'a great career,' hardly associate themselves in my mind with anything achieved by means of a brush and a paint-pot."

"A paint-pot, indeed! Let me tell you, sir—but you are only chaffing me, Mr. Fildew, only trying to set my Welsh blood boiling, that you may have a quiet laugh at me in your sleeve. But, joking apart, sir, you ought really to have a look at Clem's picture. It's there on the other easel. Shall I lift the cover for you?"

"Not to-day, thank you, Macer. I'm not in the vein. How is it possible for a man to have any proper appreciation of the fine arts who hasn't a son in the world to bless himself with?"

"If I might venture to offer, Mr. Fildew—" said Macer, doubtfully. He knew something of his visitor's queer moods and sudden spurts of temper and shook in his shoes as he made the offer.

"Just what I was coming to. You're a good fellow, Macer," responded Mr. Fildew, with much affability. Tony felt immensely relieved. The truth is, I just looked in to see whether Clem had a spare half-sovereign about him; I've run rather short, as most of us do at short times."

"If you are in a hurry, Mr. Fildew, and you will allow me—" said Macer, as he opened his purse.

"Thanks. Yes, I am in a hurry, and you can settle with Clem, you know; and so the half-sovereign was quietly transferred to Mr. Fildew's pocket.

"Any message for Clem, Mr. Fildew?"

"No, I think not, Macer. You may just tell him that his mother seems a little more cheerful and in less pain yesterday and to-day. But, really, I don't wish you to burden your memory with such a trifle."

"It won't seem a trifle to Clem. I could not tell him anything that would please him better."

"Hum! Not even the news that the Academy had accepted his picture?" asked Mr. Fildew, dryly.

"Not even to hear that would afford him the pleasure he would derive from knowing that his mother was really better."

"Ah, yes, Clem's a good boy, a model son in every way. Macer looked up quickly, but Mr. Fildew, with his glass in his eye, was apparently contemplating a cobweb in a far corner of the room. "But I must go now," he added, as he turned on his heel. "Don't forget to ask Clem for the half-sovereign; and if neither of you should be so fortunate as to have your picture hung by the Academy, I hope you won't go and hang yourselves instead." And, with one of his peculiar smiles, and a curt nod of the head; he left the room.

"Poor Clem! What a pity Providence didn't provide him with a different kind of father," said Tony Macer, as he turned to his work again. "Egad! If the fellow were worth ten thousand a year, he could hardly give himself more airs."

CHAPTER II.

AT THE BROWN BEAR.

The Brown Bear, the tavern usually patronized by Mr. Fildew of an evening, was situated in a quiet street no great distance from Bloomsbury Square. It was one of the few taverns dating from a by-gone generation that had escaped the hands of the modern innovator. It could boast no plate-glass windows lighted up with a score of gas-jets. There was plenty of old mahogany, black with age, to be seen inside the bar, but there was no mirrors and no gilding; neither was there any lavish display of colored glass or artificial shrubs. You went down one step from the street into the bar, the floor of which was sprinkled with sand, as in the days when George the Third was king. A huge oaken beam supported the ceiling. On a top-most shelf stood a couple of immense punch-bowls backed by some flagons of antique design, and below them were several bottles of Schiedam and other liquors that had been ripening for a dozen years. There was an air of sombre substantiality about the whole place.

Behind the bar was the "coffee-room," so called. Straight-backed, rush-bottomed chairs occupied three sides of it, in front of which were ranged four or five oblong tables, black with age and much polishing. At the upper end of the room was an elaborately carved arm-chair, where the president or chairman for the evening took his seat, opposite which stood a brass box containing tobacco, the lid of which flew open as often as a half-penny was dropped through an orifice at the opposite end. A few smoke-dried prints on coaching and sporting subjects, and three or four pipe-racks, decorated the walls.

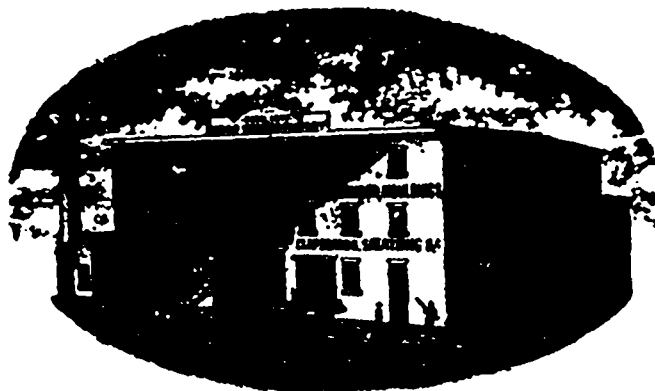
The general public were not allowed to invade this sanctum; for there was another room at the opposite end of the bar. The coffee-room was set apart and kept sacred for a certain set of regular customers, and such private friends as they might choose to bring with them from time to time, who, year in and year out, made it point of spending their evenings at the Brown Bear. Some there were who put in an appearance almost every night, some of them showed up only two or three times a week, but they were all known to each other and to the landlord, the freemasonry of good-fellowship, or what passed among them as such, being the one bond that kept them together. Several of them were small tradesmen of the neighborhood, two or three were connected with the law, a few of them were men whose work in this world was over, and who were eking out the remainder of their days on some small pension or private means of their own.

(To be continued.)

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