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A LETTER OF INTRODUCTION.

SOYLE is the capital of one of the smallest counties in England; it is an assize town, and our funny man asserts, on every opportunity, that the persons who conferred that honour upon it were very bad judges of a size. The population, indeed, only consists of two thousands inhabitants, and I am one of them: as junior partner in the bank, open on ordinary occasions from eleven to three, and on market-days from ten to five, I may add, an important one of them. Our street is broad, our shop windows beautiful, the red bear which squats 'begging' (as if for custom) over the portico of our principal inn is of gigantic size, and, as a work of art, unique. Yet the passing stranger might think us dull. He would, however, be mistaken: the assizes are followed by a ball; the militia training is followed by a ball; the hunting season is closed by a ball; and there is an annual county ball. Four balls in the year! On these occasions, the *Red Bear*, on whose premises the assembly-rooms are situated, is full, overflowing into beds out; but generally strangers are scarce, unless you accept the bagmen, who make themselves at home everywhere, and are never really strangers—and the world's their shop, and all the men and women merely buyers. It was different in the days of coaches

(not so distant as you may imagine), for then travellers on their way to the picturesque country twenty miles farther on, would often sojourn with us for a night; pedestrian tourists almost invariably did so. Now they all pass us by in the railway trains without notice, unless some lover of architecture cries out: 'What a fine old church for such a pokey little place!'

Of course we have dinner and other private parties; but the only public entertainment provided for Soyle and his environs, besides the balls, is a billiard-room, also attached to the beneficent *Red Bear*. Here there is a pool every afternoon, from three till half-past five or thereabouts. In the evening the room is full of the bagmen and tradesmen of the place, so the gentry never enter it after dinner. This is no great disadvantage, for most of them live from two to five miles off. The doctor, indeed, has a house in the actual town, the vicar (who, however, does not indulge in pool) resides within a stone's-throw of the church, and I have to lodge at the bank; but we are exceptions.

I hope that no one will be shocked; I know that all games of billiards are looked upon with dread by many an anxious mother, and that more than one respectable gentleman, who would rather forego his dinner than allow