

LITERARY.

OUR MR. JENKINS.

I was fortunate in my uncle. So everybody thought, for Uncle Braithwaite was as wealthy and thriving a manufacturer as any in Lambeth, and I, his dead sister's son, Cyril Vaughan by name, was not merely drawing a fair salary, but with the prospects of partnership, but was actually engaged to be married to my second cousin, reputed a great heiress—dear sweet Lucy Braithwaite—the old man's only child. A severe, just man was John Braithwaite. He had won his own way in life by rigid self-denial and unwearied industry during a joyless youth, and I doubt if he ever thoroughly enjoyed the fruits of his well-earned prosperity. It was only when his eye rested on his daughter's pretty face that his stern look relaxed. Lucy reminded him, doubtless, of her gentle mother. But he was a good master to a good servant, notably where he, who was by nature and habit suspicious, could repose full trust. He did so in his confidential clerk, Jacob Jenkins. That head clerk was one out of a thousand. "Respectable Jenkins" was the nick-name by irreverent youngsters in the counting-house spoke, with bated breath, of that pearl of clerks; but even those pert office lads had a belief in the man—he was so respectable. Never, as I have heard, in the 29 years of his toil, had honest Jenkins been known to ask for a holiday, to shirk extra work, or to make a blunder as to tare and tret, a thing of moment with a firm like ours, large exporters as we were.

As for myself, I am afraid that my merits, if I had any, were quite eclipsed by those of that commercial comet, Jenkins. Indeed I know of no reason, except my blood relationship to our principal, head of the house of Braithwaite, Perry & Co., for any comparison between that veteran of the desk and my inexperienced self. But my uncle often said, in his gruff way, "Take Jenkins for your model," or "Cyril, lad, it will be a long time before you can fill Jenkins' shoes."

Yet I stuck to my work, young as I was, and did my best not to be underserving of the prospective partnership; and, somehow, I got a vague impression in my head that, instead of my being jealous of Jenkins, Jenkins was jealous of me.

One day there was a big cheque to be changed—nearer to 3,000 pounds than two—and it was my task, no unusual one, to present the draft at Peabody & Sons'. In a house like ours, where the furnaces were always all aglow and the tall chimneys always smoking, the outgoings for wages, horse keep, and fuel were, I need hardly say, very large. On that day—how well I remember it!—I was in exceptionally high spirits. I had been talking with dear Lucy, and though her father, who said that we children need be in no hurry, would never consent to name even an approximate date for our wedding, still there was a vague prospect of connubial bliss next Spring. It was fine bright weather, and on Tuesday there was to be a garden party at some Richmond villa, to which we were all to go. Altogether I was in excellent spirits, and as far as any man could be from dreaming of the evil that was to come. "How will you take it?" asked the bank cashier. "Short!" I answered, with a sort of boyish pride in my newly-acquired familiarity with business phrases; and, with my gold and notes, I left the bank. As I did so a man staggered towards me, jostled me, then reeled

away, muttering, "Beg pardon!" and would have fallen but for the support of my arm. I saw in a moment that the man was sober. But he looked ill, very ill, haggard and hollow-eyed, though still young; and he was decently clad in a well-worn velvet suit, with large bronze buttons. There was a smack of the country about him, waif as he was in the midst of London, and his accent, so far as I could judge, was that of Yorkshire or Northumberland.

"You are ill, I fear," I inquired, "and perhaps a stranger to London?"

"Nigh clemmed in this blessed London of yours, paved wi' gold guineas, as our old crones say up in Craven," muttered the countryman, in the same thin, reedy voice; "paved wi' traps, say I, and cause for it, since all that grah-feyther stored up, whether for Bees and Bell, or for me—" and then he would have fallen but for my assistance.

Clearly the man was fainting, and from starvation. We had walked some distance. In tempting proximity, at the corner of a side street, was a house, over the door of which, in great gold letters, gleamed the words, "Luncheon Bar." Into this, quite instinctively, I half dragged, half hustled the man.

It was the middle of the day, luncheon-time, a brisk hour for business in the city, in the eating and drinking line at least, and the place which I had entered was full of customers, young men mostly, noisily chatting over their sandwiches. As I flung open the swing-door I felt sure that I caught a glimpse of my uncle's confidential clerk on the pavement outside. "Mr. Jenkins!" I called out, but he evidently did not hear me, and passed on. There was a rush of excited young fellows towards us—"Bet you he's drunk." "Four to five he's dead." "Run over," and so forth, and it was not immediately that I could get some restorative. But the poor countryman's face was livid, his eyes closed, his teeth fast shut, and he could swallow nothing. Then a doctor was sent for, and the doctor was slow in coming, and I had explanation after explanation to give, first to the dull-witted landlord, who came blinking out of a back parlor, then to inquisitive customers; and when at last a breathless surgeon, hastily summoned, came panting in at the heavy swing door, amidst the surging crowd, there was a necessary word or so with him. "But where is my patient?" asked the bewildered man of science; and, indeed, the "poor fellow" who was the object of all this stir had disappeared in the midst of the hubbub, and with him had vanished the heavy, steel-clasped, black morocco pocket-book, which I remembered, too late, to have incautiously laid on a table in the flurry and confusion of our sudden and awkward entry, and which was gone, pitilessly gone.

"Cyril Vaughan, I always deemed you to be a simpleton—a soft, as we Yorkshire chaps say—but now I know you to be a knave!" thundered out my irate uncle, the north country accent in his wrathful voice becoming unusually predominant. "Had you not been my relative, had not my girl—who shall never be the wife of such a scoundrel—begged you off, I would have prosecuted you as I would any other rogue, and sent you to quarry stone among convicts at Dartmoor or Portland. As it is, I won't hear another word of your lies or your excuses. Go, go! or I shall forget Lucy's pleadings and act as a citizen, and not as a father. The 'confidence trick,' eh? The countryman—the—

I am not your dupe, lad! Go, and get yourself hanged elsewhere! You won't starve on the sum of which you have robbed me."

Then came a terrible three months—it was that or more—a time of depression, of crushed spirits, a half broken heart for me. That I was wrongfully suspected gave me but cold comfort. I was innocent, but Lucy was lost to me; my prospects were blighted, no one would give work to me, and I was poor, and sinking fast into the direst depths of want. I remember how pale, and thin, and shabby I had become when I received a visit from my uncle's lawyer, Mr. Mordaunt.

"Mr. Vaughan, you wonder to see me," said the shrewd solicitor, as he took the broken chair I offered him—my wretched room in a suburban lodging-house contained but one—"but I come now as a messenger of good tidings. Do you remember a serving man, Enoch Clint by name, whom your uncle and my client, Mr. Braithwaite, engaged some six weeks before the unlucky affair of the stolen money? He was a smart young fellow, with excellent testimonials, all forged, by-the-by—and made himself useful both in the house and stable-yard, and was vastly popular with his fellow-servants on account of his powers of mimicry and the juggling tricks which he could perform."

I had an indistinct recollection of having seen and heard of such a person in my uncle's household, and I said so, wondering how there could be anything in Enoch Clint to concern me.

"This Enoch Clint," said Mr. Mordaunt, slowly, "was a north-countryman." I stared at him, sorely puzzled. "He was your countryman," drawled out the shrewd lawyer, and then a light broke in on me, and I grew sick and dizzy, and could hardly hear Mr. Mordaunt's friendly voice as he said, shaking my passive hand the while, "You have been sorely wronged, Mr. Vaughan. I, for one, believed you guilty, for which I heartily beg your pardon. Now, listen to me. This poor, wretch, Enoch Clint, was two days' since run over by a heavily-laden van, not fifty yards from his master's door, and carried back to the house, the crushed and blood-stained wreck of a man. He asked for his master, and Mr. Braithwaite being absent, prayed to see Miss Lucy. To her, in the doctor's presence, the dying man gasped out some inarticulate confession, clearing you from all blame but that of credulity, pardonable at your age, and implicating most seriously another person. At his own desire his broken statement was, by the doctor's help, taken down in writing, but he died before the narrative was complete. Miss Lucy had an interview with her father, I need scarcely say, on his return home, as a sequel to which, Mr. Braithwaite, more agitated than I had ever known him to be, called on me and laid the matter before me. We, too, had a long talk, and the result of it was, Mr. Cyril, that on the following morning I received a visit from—have you guessed it?—the confidential clerk, Mr. Jenkins."

"Our Mr. Jenkins?" I returned perplexed by the half-comic expression on the solicitor's face.

"Your Mr. Jenkins, if you will cling to the ancient formula," assented the lawyer, with twinkling eyes. "That commercial luminary came to me blandly unsuspecting, for, as it turned out, he had not even heard of the death of his accomplice. My first act, when he had made his bow and seated himself in the client's chair, was

to shut the door and lock it. When he heard the click of the lock he started and turned as pale as his shirt-collar. 'Now, my friend,' I said to him, in a frank, pleasant way, 'my advice to you is, for your own good, to make a clean breast of it at once.' Then you should have seen the ingenuous wonder of his interesting countenance. 'Excuse me, Mr. Mordaunt, but I can not have heard you aright,' he said, after a pause. 'Oh, yes, you have,' said I, shaking a finger at him. 'Come, come, Mr. Jenkins, it is time for you to drop the sheep's clothing and stand forth as the wolf you are—only this I promise, in Mr. Braithwaite's name, that if your revelations be full and ample, you shall have gentler and more generous treatment than you deserve.'

A stormy colloquy ensued. Once I thought the man meant to strike me, but there was something in my eye that restrained him, I suppose, for next he began to sob, and then to whine like a beaten hound, as, sitting on the edge of my writing-table and glaring at the carpet, he stammered out a confusion, which I reduced to writing, and to which he presently affixed his reluctant signature.

"The revelation, when this slippery witness was at length brought to make—he did not know, you see, Mr. Cyril, how much his colleague had confessed—was a tolerably complete one. He had, it seemed, an especial malice against yourself, as the kinsman and future partner, and heir of the employer whom it had been the business of his life to dupe by a show of zeal and a display of mock honesty—I say mock, because, probably, when the books come to be overhauled, it will be found that this was not the first time of a betrayal of trust. And Mr. Jenkins thought, too, that young as you were, you did not share Mr. Braithwaite's high opinion of him, and might one day ask troublesome questions. Wherefore, by the help of a forged character, he got this fellow Clint into your uncle's service, put him up to the trick which he played on you—Clint had been a low comedian, mountebank and thimble-rigger in his time—and received from Clint himself, at the door of the City public-house, the morocco pocket-book containing the gold and notes, which you, in the hurry and excitement of the moment, had—Why, Mr. Vaughn, you are ill?"

But if he said more I heard it not, for I was weak with long privation and sleeplessness, and the blood surged up to my temples, and there was a roar as of waves in my ears, and I sank fainting on the floor.

I have not much more to tell. How cordial, and self-reproachful even, was the reception which my uncle, Mr. Braithwaite, extended to me, or with what tearful joy my Lucy's eyes met mine, are easy to imagine, but difficult to describe. "I wronged you, my boy, and I thank heaven I was wrong in what I thought," said the old man, with a sob in his imperious voice; "Lucy, here, know you best."

A girl must have a feather fan.

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