

at the prospect that lay before me. It is true that since I was a boy of ten—and I have now seen nearly thirty Christmas Days—I had not been to the land of spa and heather, but had spent my life in London, and was looked upon as a cockney by country people; but my heart was always true to my native county, and I thought that going there meant almost the same as going home.

A few words are necessary to tell you whom I was about to visit, and, as there is a little bit of romance attachable to it, you will, I am sure, pardon me the necessity of the explanation.

My father was always supposed during his lifetime to be a man of considerable means, but, upon his death, to the astonishment of all his neighbours, his estate turned out to be heavily mortgaged, and there was little or nothing left for his widow and two sons. My elder brother, Francis Henry, then twenty-five years old, and fifteen years my senior, resolved upon seeking his fortune in Australia, and my mother and I with heavy hearts saw him on board the emigrant ship at Gravesend, ere we dropped into our places as atoms of the great world of London life.

Years passed by, and we heard nothing of Frank, beyond that he had joined an exploring expedition, and had been since lost sight of. In course of time my mother went to her grave in the full belief that her first-born was no longer a living man, and this opinion of hers I fully shared.

After many vicissitudes and ups and downs of fate, I found myself, as I have told you, in the secretaryship of the benevolent institution to which I have still the honour to belong.

One day a farm-labourer, in presenting himself to me as a candidate for aid in migration, gave as the name of his last employer, Francis Henry Holbrooke, gentleman farmer. Ashleigh Magna, Derbyshire. Struck by the name, I questioned him, and learnt the further particulars that this gentleman had only lately settled in the neighbourhood, that he had spent many years in Australia, and that he was about forty-five years old.

Feeling it my duty to leave no stone unturned to discover my lost brother, but fully assured that it would simply turn out a curious coincidence, so certain was I in my own mind of poor Frank's death, I wrote to the address given, and told him who and what I was.

The answer I received was laconic enough in all conscience, and from its sheer practicability would, I am afraid, have greatly shocked all the learned gentlemen now trying to solve the mysteries of the Tielborne labyrinth. He simply said, "If you are my brother Walter, write and tell me the name of the ship I went out in, and what I gave you, and what you gave me on board of her at Gravesend." To this I as curtly replied, "The ship was the *Western Star*; I gave you a clasp knife with a buckhorn handle and four blades, and you gave me a green leather purse, with a crown piece and a shilling in it."

Then came a letter full of brotherly affection, deploring our long separation, and begging me to come to his house, and stay as long as I liked.

And thither upon the twenty fourth day of December I was bound, with a heart as light as that of any one of the top-coated and muffled-up pleasure-seekers that left London on that bitterly cold winter's morning.