Sheba Blake Publishing Corp.

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One

His Birth

On an evening in 1866 (exactly eight hundred years after the Battle of Hastings) Mr. Henry Knight, a draper's manager, aged forty, dark, clean-shaven, short, but not stout, sat in his sitting-room on the second-floor over the shop which he managed in Oxford Street, London. He was proud of that sitting-room, which represented the achievement of an ideal, and he had a right to be proud of it. The rich green wall-paper covered with peonies in full bloom (poisoning by arsenical wall-paper had not yet been invented, or Mr. Knight's peonies would certainly have had to flourish over a different hue) matched the magenta table-cloth of the table at which Mr. Knight was writing, and the magenta table-cloth matched the yellow roses which grew to more than exhibition size on the Axminster carpet; and the fine elaborate effect thus produced was in no way impaired, but rather enhanced and invigorated, by the mahogany bookcase full of imperishable printed matter, the horsehair sofa netted in a system of antimacassars, the waxen flowers in their glassy domes on the marble mantelpiece, the Canterbury with its spiral columns, the rosewood harmonium, and the posse of chintz-protected chairs. Mr. Knight,

who was a sincere and upright man, saw beauty in this apartment. It uplifted his soul, like soft music in the gloaming, or a woman's face.

Mr. Knight was writing in a large book. He paused in the act of composition, and, putting the pen between his teeth, glanced through the pages of the volume. They were filled with the drafts of letters which he had addressed during the previous seven years to the editors of various newspapers, including the *Times*, and several other organs great then but now extinct. In a space underneath each letter had been neatly gummed the printed copy, but here and there a letter lacked this certificate of success, for Mr. Knight did not always contrive to reach his public. The letters were signed with pseudonyms, such as A British Citizen, Fiat Justitia, Audi Alteram Partem, Indignant, Disgusted, One Who Knows, One Who Would Like to Know, Ratepayer, Taxpayer, Puzzled, and Pro Bono Publico—especially Pro Bono Publico. Two letters, to a trade periodical, were signed A Draper's Manager of Ten Years' Standing, and one, to the *Clerkenwell News*, bore his own real name.

The letter upon which he was now engaged was numbered seventy-five in the series, and made its appeal to the editor of the *Standard*. Having found inspiration, Mr. Knight proceeded, in a hand distinguished by many fine flourishes:

' … It is true that last year we only paid off some four millions, but the year before we paid, I am thankful to say, more than nine millions. Why, then, this outcry against the allocation of somewhat less than nine millions out of our vast national revenue towards the further extinction of the National Debt? *It is not the duty of the State, as well as of the individual, to pay its debts?* In order to support the argument with which I began this communication, perhaps you will permit me, sir, to briefly outline the history of the National Debt, our

national shame. In 1688 the National Debt was little more than six hundred thousand pounds….'

After briefly outlining the history of the National Debt, Mr. Knight began a new paragraph thus:

'In the immortal words of Shakspere, wh——'

But at this point he was interrupted. A young and pleasant woman in a white apron pushed open the door.

'Henry,' she called from the doorway.

'Well?'

'You'd better go now.'

'Very well, Annie; I'll go instantly.'

He dropped the pen, reduced the gas to a speck of blue, and in half a minute was hurrying along Oxford Street. The hour was ten o'clock, and the month was July; the evening favoured romance. He turned into Bury Street, and knocked like fate at a front-door with a brass tablet on it, No. 8 of the street.

'No, sir. He isn't in at the moment, sir,' said the maid who answered Mr. Knight's imperious summons.

'Not in!' exclaimed Mr. Knight.

'No, sir. He was called away half an hour ago or hardly, and may be out till very late.'

'Called away!' exclaimed Mr. Knight. He was astounded, shocked, pained. 'But I warned him three months ago!'

'Did you, sir? Is it anything very urgent, sir?'

'It's——' Mr. Knight hesitated, blushing. The girl looked so young and innocent.

'Because if it is, master left word that anyone was to go to Dr. Christopher's, 22, Argyll Street.'

'You will be sure to tell your master that I came,' said Mr. Knight frigidly, departing.

At 22, Argyll Street he was informed that Dr. Christopher had likewise been called away, and had left a recommendation that urgent cases, if any, should apply to Dr. Quain Short, 15, Bury Street. His anger was naturally increased by the absence of this second doctor, but it was far more increased by the fact that Dr. Quain Short happened to live in Bury Street. At that moment the enigma of the universe was wrapped up for him in the question, Why should he have been compelled to walk all the way from Bury Street to Argyll Street merely in order to walk all the way back again? And he became a trinity consisting of Disgusted, Indignant, and One Who Would Like to Know, the middle term predominating. When he discovered that No. 15, Bury Street, was exactly opposite No. 8, Bury Street, his feelings were such as break bell-wires.

'Dr. Quain Short is at the Alhambra Theatre this evening with the family,' a middle-aged and formidable housekeeper announced in reply to Mr. Knight's query. 'In case of urgency he is to be fetched. His box is No. 3.'

'The Alhambra Theatre! Where is that?' gasped Mr. Knight.

It should be explained that he held the stage in abhorrence, and, further, that the Alhambra had then only been opened for a very brief period.

'Two out, and the third at the theatre!' Mr. Knight mused grimly, hastening through Seven Dials. 'At the theatre, of all places!'

A letter to the *Times* about the medical profession was just shaping itself in his mind as he arrived at the Alhambra and saw that a piece entitled *King Carrot* filled the bill.

'*King Karrot!*' he muttered scornfully, emphasizing the dangerously explosive consonants in a manner which expressed with complete adequacy, not only his indignation against the entire medical profession, but his utter and profound contempt for the fatuities of the modern stage.

The politeness of the officials and the prompt appearance of Dr. Quain Short did something to mollify the draper's manager of ten years' standing, though he was not pleased when the doctor insisted on going first to his surgery for certain requisites. It was half-past eleven when he returned home; Dr. Quain Short was supposed to be hard behind.

'How long you've been!' said a voice on the second flight of stairs, 'It's all over. A boy. And dear Susan is doing splendidly. Mrs. Puddiphatt says she never saw such a——'

From the attic floor came the sound of a child crying shrilly and lustily:

'Aunt Annie! Aunt Annie! Aunt *Annie*!'

'Run up and quieten him!' Mr. Knight commanded. 'It's like him to begin making a noise just now. I'll take a look at Susan—and my firstborn.'

Two

Tom

In the attic a child of seven years was sitting up in a cot placed by the side of his dear Aunt Annie's bed. He had an extremely intelligent, inquisitorial, and agnostical face, and a fair, curled head of hair, which he scratched with one hand as Aunt Annie entered the room and held the candle on high in order to survey him.

'Well?' inquired Aunt Annie firmly.

'Well?' said Tom Knight, determined not to commit himself, and waiting wanly for a chance, like a duellist.

'What's all this noise for? I told you I specially wanted you to go to sleep at once to-night.'

'Yes,' said Tom, staring at the counterpane and picking imaginary bits off it. 'And you might have known I shouldn't go to sleep after *that*!'

'And here it's nearly midnight!' Aunt Annie proceeded. 'What do you want?'

'You—you've left the comb in my hair,' said Tom. He nearly cried.

Every night Aunt Annie curled Tom's hair.

‘Is it such a tiny boy that it couldn’t take it out itself?’ Aunt Annie said kindly, going to the cot and extracting the comb. ‘Now try to sleep.’ She kissed him.

‘And I’ve heard burglars,’ Tom continued, without moving.

‘Oh no, you’ve not,’ Aunt Annie pronounced sharply. ‘You can’t hear burglars every night, you know.’

‘I heard running about, and doors shutting and things.’

‘That was Uncle Henry and me. Will you promise to be a good boy if I tell you a secret?’

‘I shan’t *promise*,’ Tom replied. ‘But if it’s a good secret I’ll try—hard.’

‘Well, you’ve got a cousin, a little boy, ever so little! There! What do you think of that?’

‘I knew someone had got into the house!’ was Tom’s dispassionate remark. ‘What’s his name?’

‘He hasn’t any name yet, but he will have soon.’

‘Did he come up the stairs?’ Tom asked.

Aunt Annie laughed. ‘No,’ she said.

‘Then, he must have come through the window or down the chimney; and he wouldn’t come down the chimney ‘cause of the soot. So he came through the window. Whose little boy is he? Yours?’

‘No. Aunt Susan’s.’

‘I suppose she knows he’s come?’

‘Oh yes. She knows. And she’s very glad. Now go to sleep. And I’ll tell Aunt Susan you’ll be a good boy.’

‘You’d better not,’ Tom warned her. ‘I don’t feel sure. And I say, auntie, will there come any more little boys to-night?’

'I don't think so, dear.' Aunt Annie smiled. She was half way through the door, and spoke into the passage.

'But are you sure?' Tom persisted.

'Yes, I'm sure. Go to sleep.'

'Doesn't Aunt Susan want another one?'

'No, she doesn't. Go to sleep, I say.'

"Cause, when I came, another little boy came just afterwards, and he died, that little boy did. And mamma, too. Father told me.'

'Yes, yes,' said Aunt Annie, closing the door. 'Bee-by.'

'I didn't promise,' Tom murmured to his conscience. 'But it's a good secret,' he added brazenly. He climbed over the edge of the cot, and let himself down gently till his feet touched the floor. He found his clothes, which Aunt Annie invariably placed on a chair in a certain changeless order, and he put some of them on, somehow. Then he softly opened the door and crept down the stairs to the second-floor. He was an adventurous and incalculable child, and he desired to see the baby.

Persons who called on Mr. Henry Knight in his private capacity rang at the side-door to the right of the shop, and were instructed by the shop-caretaker to mount two flights of stairs, having mounted which they would perceive in front of them a door, where they were to ring again. This door was usually closed, but to-night Tom found it ajar. He peeped out and downwards, and thought of the vast showroom below and the wonderful regions of the street. Then he drew in his head, and concealed himself behind the plush portière. From his hiding-place he could watch the door of Uncle Henry's and Aunt Susan's bedroom, and he could also, whenever he felt inclined, glance down the stairway.

He waited, with the patience and the fatalism of infancy, for something to happen.

After an interval of time not mathematically to be computed, Tom heard a step on the stairs, and looked forth. A tall gentleman wearing a high hat and carrying a black bag was ascending. In a flash Tom recollected a talk with his dead father, in which that glorious and gay parent had explained to him that he, Tom, had been brought to his mother's room by the doctor in a black bag.

Tom pulled open the door at the head of the stairs, went outside, and drew the door to behind him.

'Are you the doctor?' he demanded, staring intently at the bag to see whether anything wriggled within.

'Yes, my man,' said the doctor. It was Quain Short, wrenched from the Alhambra.

'Well, they don't want another one. They've got one,' Tom asserted, still observing the bag.

'You're sure?'

'Yes. Aunt Annie said particularly that they didn't want another one.'

'Who is it that has come? Do you know his name? Christopher—is that it?'

'I don't know his name. But he's come, and he's in the bedroom now, with Aunt Susan.'

'How annoying!' said Dr. Quain Short under his breath, and he went.

Tom re-entered, and took up his old position behind the portière.

Presently he heard another step on the stair, and issued out again to reconnoitre. And, lo! another tall gentleman wearing another high hat and carrying another black bag was ascending.

'This makes three,' Tom said.

'What's that, my little man?' asked the gentleman, smiling. It was Dr. Christopher.

'This makes three. And they only want one. The first one came ever such a long time ago. And I can tell you Aunt Susan was very glad when he did come.'

'Dear, dear!' exclaimed Dr. Christopher. 'Then I'm too late, my little man. I was afraid I might be. Everything all right, eh?'

Tom nodded, and Dr. Christopher departed.

And then, after a further pause, up came another tall gentleman, high hat, and black bag.

'This is four,' said Tom.

'What's that, Tommy?' asked Mr. Henry Knight's regular physician and surgeon. 'What are you doing there?'

'One came hours since,' Tom said. 'And they don't want any more.' Then he gazed at the bag, which was larger and glossier than its predecessors. 'Have you brought a *very* nice one?' he inquired. 'They don't really want another, but perhaps if it's *very*——'

It was this momentary uncertainty on Tom's part that possibly saved my hero's life. For the parents were quite inexperienced, and Mrs. Puddiphatt was an accoucheuse of the sixties, and the newborn child was near to dying in the bedroom without anybody being aware of the fact.

'A very nice what?' the doctor questioned gruffly.

'Baby. In that bag,' Tom stammered.

'Out of the way, my bold buccaneer,' said the doctor, striding across the mat into the corridor.

At two o'clock the next morning, Tom being asleep, and all going well with wife and child, Mr. Henry Knight returned at length to his sitting-room, and resumed the composition of the letter to the editor of the *Standard*. The work

existed as an artistic whole in his head, and he could not persuade himself to seek rest until he had got it down in black-and-white; for, though he wrote letters instead of sonnets, he was nevertheless a sort of a poet by temperament. You behold him calm now, master once more of his emotions, and not that agitated, pompous, and slightly ridiculous person who lately stamped over Oxford Street and stormed the Alhambra Theatre. And in order to help the excellent father of my hero back into your esteem, let me point out that the imminence and the actuality of fatherhood constitute a somewhat disturbing experience, which does not occur to a man every day.

Mr. Knight dipped pen in ink, and continued:

' … who I hold to be not only the greatest poet, but also the greatest moral teacher that England has ever produced,

'"To thine own self be true, And it must follow, as the night the day, Thou canst not then be false to any man."

'In conclusion, sir, I ask, without fear of contradiction, are we or are we not, in this matter of the National Debt, to be true to our national selves? 'Yours obediently, 'A CONSCIENTIOUS TAXPAYER.'

The signature troubled him. His pen hovered threateningly over it, and finally he struck it out and wrote instead: 'Paterfamilias.' He felt that this pseudonym was perhaps a little inapposite, but some impulse stronger than himself forced him to employ it.

Three

His Christening

'But haven't I told you that I was just writing the very name when Annie came in to warn me?'

Mr. Knight addressed the question, kindly and mildly, yet with a hint of annoyance, to his young wife, who was nursing their son with all the experience of three months' practice. It was Sunday morning, and they had finished breakfast in the sitting-room. Within an hour or two the heir was to be taken to the Great Queen Street Wesleyan Methodist Chapel for the solemn rite of baptism.

'Yes, lovey,' said Mrs. Knight. 'You've told me, time and again. But, oh Henry! Your name's just Henry Knight, and I want his to be just Henry Knight, too! I want him to be called after you.'

And the mother, buxom, simple, and adoring, glanced appealingly with bright eyes at the man who for her epitomized the majesty and perfections of his sex.

'He will be Henry Knight,' the father persisted, rather coldly.

But Mrs. Knight shook her head.

Then Aunt Annie came into the room, pushing Tom before her. Tom was magnificently uncomfortable in his best clothes.

'What's the matter, Sue?' Aunt Annie demanded, as soon as she had noticed her sister's face.

And in a moment, in the fraction of a second, and solely by reason of Aunt Annie's question, the situation became serious. It jumped up, as domestic situations sometimes do, suddenly to the temperature at which thunderstorms are probable. It grew close, heavy, and perilous.

Mrs. Knight shook her head again. 'Nothing,' she managed to reply.

'Susan wants——' Mr. Knight began suavely to explain.

'He keeps on saying he would like him to be called——' Mrs. Knight burst out.

'No I don't—no I don't!' Mr. Knight interrupted. 'Not if you don't wish it!'

A silence followed. Mr. Knight drummed lightly and nervously on the table-cloth. Mrs. Knight sniffed, threw back her head so that the tears should not fall out of her eyes, and gently patted the baby's back with her right hand. Aunt Annie hesitated whether to speak or not to speak.

Tom remarked in a loud voice:

'If I were you, I should call him Tom, like me. Then, as soon as he can talk, I could say, "How do, Cousin Tom?" and he could say back, "How do, Cousin Tom?"'

'But we should always be getting mixed up between you, you silly boy!' said Aunt Annie, smiling, and trying to be bright and sunny.

'No, you wouldn't,' Tom replied. 'Because I should be Big Tom, and of course he'd only be Little Tom. And I don't think I'm a silly boy, either.'

'Will you be silent, sir!' Mr. Knight ordered in a voice of wrath. And, by way of indicating that the cord of tension had at last snapped, he boxed Tom's

left ear, which happened to be the nearest.

Mrs. Knight lost control of her tears, and they escaped. She offered the baby to Aunt Annie.

'Take him. He's asleep. Put him in the cradle,' she sobbed.

'Yes, dear,' said Aunt Annie intimately, in a tone to show how well she knew that poor women must always cling together in seasons of stress and times of oppression.

Mrs. Knight hurried out of the room. Mr. Knight cherished an injury. He felt aggrieved because Susan could not see that, though six months ago she had been entitled to her whims and fancies, she was so no longer. He felt, in fact, that Susan was taking an unfair advantage of him. The logic of the thing was spread out plainly and irrefutably in his mind. And then, quite swiftly, the logic of the thing vanished, and Mr. Knight rose and hastened after his wife.

'You deserved it, you know,' said Aunt Annie to Tom.

'Did I?' The child seemed to speculate.

They both stared at the baby, who lay peacefully in his cradle, for several minutes.

'Annie, come here a moment.' Mr. Knight was calling from another room.

'Yes, Henry. Now, Tom, don't touch the cradle. And if baby begins to cry, run and tell me.'

'Yes, auntie.'

And Aunt Annie went. She neglected to close the door behind her; Tom closed it, noiselessly.

Never before had he been left alone with the baby. He examined with minute care such parts of the living organism as were visible, and then, after courageously fighting temptation, and suffering defeat, he touched the baby's broad, flat nose. He scarcely touched it, yet the baby stirred and mewed faintly.

Tom began to rock the cradle, at first gently, then with nervous violence. The faint mew became a regular and sustained cry.

He glanced at the door, and decided that he would make a further effort to lull the ridiculous agitation of this strange and mysterious being. Bending down, he seized the baby in both hands, and tried to nurse it as his two aunts nursed it. The infant's weight was considerable; it exceeded Tom's estimate, with the result that, in the desperate process of extracting the baby from the cradle, the cradle had been overset, and now lay on its beam-ends.

'Hsh—hsh!' Tom entreated, shooing and balancing as best he could.

Then, without warning, Tom's spirit leapt into anger.

'Will you be silent, sir!' he demanded fiercely from the baby, imitating Uncle Henry's tone. 'Will you be silent, sir!' He shook the infant, who was astounded into a momentary silence.

The next thing was the sound of footsteps approaching rapidly along the passage. Tom had no leisure to right the cradle; he merely dropped the baby on the floor by the side of it, and sprang to the window.

'You naughty, naughty boy!' Aunt Annie shrieked. 'You've taken baby out of his cradle! Oh, my pet! my poor darling! my mumsy! Did they, then?'

'I didn't! I didn't!' Tom asserted passionately. 'I've never stirred from here all the time you were out. It fell out itself!'

'Oh!' screamed Aunt Annie. 'There's a black place on his poor little forehead!'

In an instant the baby's parents were to the rescue, and Tom was declaring his innocence to the united family.

'It fell out itself!' he repeated; and soon he began to think of interesting details. 'I saw it. It put its hand on the edge of the cradle and pulled up, and then it leaned to one side, and then the cradle toppled over.'