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CHAPTER I

‘Be quiet children,’ said Mrs Marble. ‘Can’t you see that father’s busy?’

So he was. He propped his aching forehead on his hand, and tugged at his reddish moustache in an unhappy attempt at concentration. It was difficult to keep thinking about these wretched figures all the time, and it would have been even if Winnie did not try to poke John with a ruler in the intervals of squirming and muttering over her geometry homework. Mr Marble worried at his moustache while he peered at the column of figures on the scrap of paper before him. They seemed to be dancing in a faint mist under his eyes. He had been nerving himself for this effort for weeks now, and the instant that he began it he wanted to leave off. He was sure that looking at these figures would do no good. Nothing could do any good now.

The column of figures was headed briefly, ‘Debts’. Rent was three weeks overdue, and that was the smallest item entered. He owed over four pounds each to the butcher and the baker, and the milk bill came to over five. How on earth had Annie managed to run up a five-pound milk bill? He owed Evans, the grocer, more than six pounds. Mr Marble felt that he hated Evans, and had hated him ever since the time, a dozen years ago now, when they had arrived in Malcolm Road as a young couple, and Evans, apron, basket and whiskers complete, had called to solicit for their custom. Annie had just told him that Evans had threatened to put the brokers in if he were not paid. The Bank would sack him for certain if anything like that happened. To Mr Marble’s strained eyes the shape of Mr Evans suddenly seemed to loom over the paper he was regarding, with a flash of teeth and a leer in his eye like the devil he was. Mr Marble bit deep into the end of his pencil in a sudden flood of hatred.

There were some other items in the column too. The names of some of the men at the Bank appeared on the sheet of paper, and against them were set the amounts that Mr Marble owed them. Some of these men had even smaller incomes than his, and yet they managed nevertheless to keep out of debt—and even were sometimes able to lend money to poor devils like himself. But of course they weren’t married, or if they were they did not have extravagant wives like Annie. Not that Annie was extravagant, though. Not really. She was just careless. Rather like himself, thought Mr Marble, with weary self-reproach, bending again to

the figures. His debts amounted to no less than thirty pounds! On the asset side he had put nothing. He knew the amount of his assets too well to bother to do that. He was acutely aware of it. The balance in his account at the Bank was down to five shillings, and he had two florins in his pocket. There was no possibility of overdrawing. That would mean dismissal just the same.

It was his fault, he supposed weakly. He had seen this coming as long ago as last summer, and he had decided then that if they did without a holiday and spent nothing at Christmas they could get straight again. But they had had their holiday, and they had spent more than they should have done at Christmas. No, that had been Annie's fault. She had said that people would think it funny if they did not go to Worthing as she had told them they were going to do. And she had said it so often that in the end they had gone. And of course she had really been the cause of all those figures that were set against the names of men in the Bank on Mr Marble's little list. A man had to have a drink occasionally, when he slipped out of the office at half-past eleven, and of course he had to stand his friends one too, if they were with him. He could have paid for them easily if Annie had not spent all his money for him. And he had to smoke too, and have a good lunch occasionally. Mr Marble resolutely refused to think of how much he had spent on his hobby of photography. He knew that it was more than he should have done, and somewhere inside his conscience there was a nasty feeling that there was another bill, unreckoned in his list, due to the chemist at the end of the road for things he had bought for this purpose. The shelves in the bathroom upstairs were full of materials, and Mr Marble did not like to think of this, for he had never used half of them, having lately found more amusement in contemplating his hobby and buying things for it than in actually doing anything.

It was all very annoying and exasperating. How his head ached, and how tired he felt! His mind was numb. The grim feeling of blank despair was swamped by complete lassitude of soul. He realized vaguely that his oft-repeated threat of sending the children to bed without any supper would soon be carried into effect despite himself. He would be sacked from the Bank, and he would never get another job. He knew that well enough. He supposed it would end like the cases one read about in the paper, with his children's throats cut and himself and his wife dead of gas-poisoning. But at present he hardly cared. He wanted to relax. When those blessed kids had been packed off to bed he would drag the armchair up to the fire and put his feet up on the coalbox and read the paper and be comfortable for a bit. In the decanter in the sideboard there was a little drop of whisky left. Not much of course; three drinks perhaps, or maybe four. Mr Marble hoped it was four. With a drink and a paper and the fire he could forget his troubles for a little, for he couldn't do anything towards remedying them this evening. Mr Marble hardly

realized that he had said the same thing to himself every evening for months now. The prospect seemed ineffably alluring. He yearned towards the decanter in the sideboard. And the wind was shrieking outside, sending the rain spattering against the windows. That would make it seem even more comfortable when he was beside the fire.

But the children must be disposed of first. For some obscure reason Mr Marble had an objection to drinking whisky in front of his children. His wife did not matter so much, although he would have preferred to have her out of the way too. A glance at the clock disappointed him a little. It was only half-past seven, and the children would not be going to bed for another half-hour at the earliest. He felt suddenly irritable. He peered surreptitiously from under his eyebrows to see if he could catch them misbehaving so as to send them off at once. The whisky would taste all the better if he could come to it fresh from a parental triumph and an autocratic exertion of authority.

‘Stop that noise. John,’ he ordered, with queer, feeble savageness.

John looked round from his chair by the fire a little startled. Five seconds ago he had been mazed in the pages of *How England saved Europe*, and had been leading the Fusilier Brigade over heaps of dead up the blood-stained hill of Albuera. He gazed vacantly at his father.

‘Don’t look at me like a fool,’ spluttered Mr Marble. ‘Do what you’re told and stop that noise.’ The two orders were synonymous, but John did not realize that.

‘What did you tell me?’ he asked vaguely.

‘No impertinence, now. I said stop that noise.’

‘What noise, father?’ asked John, more to gain time to collect his thoughts than for any other reason. But the question was fatal.

‘Don’t try to deny it,’ said Mr Marble.

‘Now, you were making a noise, you know, Johnny,’ said Mrs Marble.

‘You were kicking with your feet,’ chimed in Winnie.

‘I didn’t deny it,’ protested John.

‘You did,’ said Mrs Marble.

‘You did,’ said Winnie.

‘Be quiet, Winnie,’ snapped Mr Marble, rounding on his usual favourite in unusual fashion. ‘You’re as bad as he is, and you know it. Have you done your homework yet? I send you to a good school, and this is all the return I get for it.’

‘Why, I got a scholarship,’ replied Winnie, with a jerk of her head.

‘Are you being impertinent too?’ demanded Mr Marble. ‘I don’t know what you children are coming to. It’s time for bed when you start being rude to your parents.’

The fatal words were said, and the children looked at each other in dismay. Mrs Marble made a typical faint-hearted effort on their behalf.

‘Oh, not just yet, father,’ she said.

That was all the opposition that Mr Marble needed to make him quite decided on the matter.

‘At once,’ he said. ‘John, go to bed—and leave that book down here too. Winnie, pack your things neatly ready for the morning and go along too. Let this be a lesson to you.’

‘But I haven’t done my homework,’ wailed Winnie, ‘and there’ll be such a row if I haven’t done it to-morrow.’

John did not answer. He was wondering how the Fusiliers would get on without him for the rest of their advance. Even Mrs Marble was moved to further protest at this drastic action, but her half-hearted entreaties were ignored by both sides.

‘Be quick, I am waiting,’ said Mr Marble.

It was inevitable. Sullenly Winnie began to stack her books together. John stood up and put *How England saved Europe* on the table. It was then, at the eleventh hour, that diversion came. It came in the form of a loud knocking at the street door. For a second everyone looked at each other startled, for visitors were a rarity in Malcolm Road, especially at the extraordinary hour of half-past seven. Winnie recovered first.

‘I’ll go,’ she said, and slipped through into the hall.

The others heard her tugging at the latch, and then the gas suddenly flickered as a gust of wind came rushing in with the opening of the street door. A strange, loud, masculine voice made itself heard asking for Mr Marble. He was about to go out too when Winnie reappeared.

‘Somebody for you, father,’ she said, and even as she spoke the owner of the strange voice came in behind her.

He was tall, and young, and seemed to be a study in browns, for he wore a brown trench coat and muffler, a brown tweed suit underneath, with brown shoes and socks. His face, too, was brown, although the shrieking wind outside had whipped it to a warm flush. He was young and debonair and handsome, and the sparkle of the raindrops on his muffler and the flash of his dark eyes and the gust of cold wind that entered the room at the same time as himself all combined to make his unexpected appearance as dramatic as even John, standing amazed by the fire, could wish for.

The stranger paused for a moment at the doorway.

‘Good evening,’ he said, a little diffidently.

‘Good evening,’ replied Mr Marble, wondering who on earth he was.

‘I suppose you are my Uncle William,’ said the new arrival. ‘I didn’t expect you to know me.’

‘I’m afraid I don’t.’

‘My mother was Mrs Medland, Mrs Winnie Medland, your sister, sir, I think. I have just come from Melbourne.’

‘Oh, of course. You’re Winnie’s boy? Come on in—no, let’s get your coat off first. Annie, poke up the fire. Winnie, clear that stuff off that chair.’

Mr Marble bustled out into the hall with his guest. His family heard him helping him off with his coat, and then—

‘And how is your mother now?’

There was no immediate answer to this question. The trench coat and the hat had been hung up on the hall-stand and the pair were about to reappear in the dining-room before the listeners there heard the hesitant, almost whispered, reply.

‘She’s dead. She died—six months ago.’

Mr Marble was still muttering the conventional condolences as they re-entered the dining-room, but he changed to clumsy brightness at the earliest possible moment. Truth to tell, he was not particularly interested in his sister Winnie, of whom he probably had not thought for the thirteen and a half years that had elapsed since he had had his daughter christened after her. Also he was feeling a little annoyed with this young man for turning up and interfering with the comfort of his evening. But Mr Marble was not the man to show it. Hostility of any kind—even the instinctive hostility towards strangers—was a feeling to be carefully concealed on every occasion. That was the lesson learned as a result of a lifetime spent in carrying out the orders of other people.

‘Annie,’ said Mr Marble, ‘this is our young nephew, Jim. Do you remember him when he was a little boy, just going out to Australia with Winnie and Tom? I think I can. You wore a sailor suit, didn’t you, er—Jim. Here, Winnie, this is a new cousin for you, one you never knew you had. Now sit down, sit down, man, and let’s hear all your news.’

‘Take that chair, Mr—Jim, I mean,’ said Mrs Marble, stumbling in embarrassed fashion at having to address an opulently clothed and handsome stranger by his Christian name, ‘you must be frozen.’

The new arrival was nearly as shy as was his hostess, but he suffered himself to be thrust into the best chair in the house—the one Mr Marble had coveted all the evening—while Mrs Marble ransacked her brain for something to talk about, and while the children drew as close as they could while remaining in the background.

Mr Marble plunged heavily into conversation.

‘When did you arrive?’ he asked.

‘This morning only. I came on the *Malina*, arriving at Tilbury at twelve. In fact, I only reached London and found a hotel and had something to eat before coming here.’

‘But how did you know we lived here?’

‘Mother told me your address before she d-died.’ The stumble was excusable. After all, the boy was no more than twenty. ‘We’d often talked about this trip. She was coming with me, you see. She never liked Australia—I don’t know why—and after father died—’

‘Tom dead as well? That’s bad luck.’

‘Yes. He died the beginning of last year. It was that really that made mother—’

‘Quite, quite,’ Mrs Marble clucked in sympathetic chorus. She hated to hear of anyone dying.

Mr Marble made haste to change the conversation to matters more interesting.

‘And how was your father’s business getting on?’ he demanded.

‘Oh, pretty well. He made a lot of money during the war. He didn’t want to, you know, but it just came, he said. But mother sold out after he died. She said she couldn’t run that big shipping office by herself, and I was too young, and they offered a good price for it, so she took it.’

‘So you’re a young man of leisure now, eh?’

‘I suppose so. I’ve only just come out of college, you know. Melbourne University. I’m having a look round to start with. That’s what mother always planned for me.’

‘Quite right too,’ said Mr Marble, with the instinctive deference towards the independently rich which was by now an inevitable trait in his character.

For a moment the conversation flagged, and the boy, still a little shy, had leisure to look about him. These were the only relatives he had on earth, and he would like to make the most of them, although, he confessed to himself, he was not greatly attracted at first sight. The room was frankly hideous. The flowered wallpaper was covered with photographs and with the worst kind of engravings. The spurious marble mantelpiece was littered with horrible vases. Of the two armchairs one was covered with plush, the other with a chintz that blended unhappily with the wallpaper. The other chairs were plain bentwood ones. On a table in the window were dusty aspidistras in vast green china pots. In the armchair opposite him sat his uncle, in a shabby blue suit flagrantly spotted here and there. He was a small man, with sparse reddish hair and a bristling moustache of the same colour. His weak grey eyes bore a worried expression—more worried even than the expression he had already noticed in the eyes of the tired men who had sat opposite him in the bus which had brought him here. He had a silver watchchain across his rumpled waistcoat, and on his feet were shapeless carpet slippers, above which showed heather mixture socks sagging garterless round his ankles. Beside him, uncomplaining and uncomfortable on one of the bentwood chairs, sat his wife, frail, pale and shabby; the most noticeable thing about her was her lop-sided steel rimmed spectacles. The children were only visible to him when he turned his head uncomfortably. They certainly were more attractive. The little girl, Winnie, bore in her sharp features undeniable promise of good looks, as she sat with her hands in her lap beside the table, and the boy—John, wasn’t he?—was quite a fair specimen of the fourteen-year-old. Nevertheless, young Medland did not feel at all at ease in his present situation. Six weeks on board a first-class liner, the only male passenger unmarried between the ages of fifteen and fifty is not the best

introduction to the life of a poverty-stricken suburban home. Medland felt the sudden need to think about something else.

‘May I smoke?’ he asked.

‘Why, yes, of course,’ said Mr Marble, rousing himself suddenly to his hospitable duties.

Mr Marble plunged into his pocket in search of the battered yellow packet of cigarettes that lay there. It held three cigarettes he knew, and he had been treasuring them to smoke himself later in the evening. He spent as long as he could before producing them, and he was successful in his tactics. Medland already had produced his case and was offering it to him.

It was a leather case, the parting gift of one of the middle-aged women on the boat. Women never realize that a leather case spoils cigarettes. But this was far more than a cigarette case. It was a substantial wallet, with pockets for stamps and visiting cards, and at the back, sagging open in consequence of the way in which Medland held it, was a compartment for money. And this was full. Marble noticed, as the case was tendered to him, a thick fold of Treasury notes, twenty pounds at least, may be thirty, decided Marble, gauging it with a bank clerk’s eye. Beside it was another fold of bank-notes—five pound notes, most probably. The sight positively dazzled poor Mr Marble’s vision. And it brought, too, a ray of hope into the grim cells of dumb despair in his soul. It was more than flesh and blood could bear not to remark on it.

‘That’s a nice case,’ said Mr Marble, tendering a lighted match to his guest.

‘Yes.’ Medland drew on his cigarette to make sure it was well lighted. ‘It was a present,’ he added modestly, and he held it out so that his uncle could see it more freely.

The bank-notes flashed once more before Marble’s tortured eyes.

‘Well lined too,’ said Marble, striving to keep the envy out of his tone.

‘Yes, I got them at Port Said—oh, you mean the notes?’ Medland did his best not to show surprise at his uncle’s bad taste. To assist in this he went into even further explanation. ‘I had to cash one of my letters of credit as soon as I got to London. The voyage left me without a bean, pretty nearly, and what I had was Australian money, of course.’

It was an idle enough speech, but it sufficed to set Mr Marble thinking rapidly and unsteadily. This boy had arrived just in time to save him. He surely would not deny his new-found uncle a loan? Those Treasury notes would save him, let alone the bank-notes. And a loan from a nephew was not the same thing at all as a debt to that devil Evans, who would be putting the bailiffs in directly. It was not even in the same class as a debt to those men at the office, to repay whom only enough to keep them from complaining to higher officials had absorbed all his month’s salary. On the heels of these thoughts came appalling realization of the peril of his position. It was the third of the month

only, and he had ten shillings in the world with which to stave off his creditors and to support his family until his next pay-day. Before this he had shut his eyes to the position with all the small resolution he possessed. But now that there was a chance of escape the danger in which he stood was forced home upon him, making him shudder involuntarily a little and setting his heart thumping heavily in his chest. Mechanically he glanced across at the sideboard in which was the decanter. But he checked himself. He was not going to have to waste one of his last three—or was it four?—drinks on this boy. He thrust the thought of the whisky fiercely on one side and turned to making cautious advances towards the nephew.

‘Did you have much difficulty in finding your way here?’ he asked—the inevitable question always addressed to the newcomer to the suburbs.

‘Oh, no,’ replied Medland. ‘I had your address, of course, mother dug it up from your old letters before she died. So I knew it was Dulwich, and in Trafalgar Square I saw dozens of buses all going to Dulwich, and I got on one and came as far as the terminus. Then it was easy. The first person I asked told me the way to Malcolm Road.’

‘Just so. And where did you say you were staying?’

Medland had not said he was staying anywhere, but he told him. It was a substantial Strand hotel. It was then that Medland, apropos of this, made the remark that was to alter everything.

‘It’s funny to think of,’ he said, striving to keep the conversation going, ‘but besides you there isn’t a soul in England who knows anything about me. I don’t think I was in the hotel more than an hour, and I only left my hand luggage there. The rest of my stuff is at Euston. What with going to the Bank and so on I simply didn’t have time to collect it, even if it had got there. I was thinking to myself as I came here that if I got lost and never found my way back no one would mind at all—except you, of course.’

‘H’m!’ said Mr Marble, and another train of thought came to him on the instant, and he shuddered again.

Medland’s shyness was turning to boyish talkativeness. He looked round to the two children.

‘Well,’ he said, and smiled, ‘you two don’t seem to have much to say for yourselves.’

Winnie and John still remained silent. They had been keeping as quiet as mice so as not to draw attention to themselves and raise again the postponed question of bed. But beside this John was lost in admiration of this weather-tanned man who had come all the way from Australia, and who treated such an amazing trip through pirate-haunted seas with so little concern that he had said no word about it. And he spoke so casually about hotels too. John had noticed last year at Worthing that his father spoke of people who lived in hotels as opposed to those who

live in rooms, and even in boarding-houses, with awe in his voice. And this man lived in a hotel and thought nothing of it!

As for Winnie, she was thinking that he was the most beautiful man she had ever seen. His warm brown face and his brown tweeds with their intoxicating scent were wonderful. Then when he looked straight at you and smiled, as he had just done, he was handsomer than anyone she could imagine, far handsomer than the fairy prince in the pantomime at Christmas.

‘Speak up, children,’ said their father. To Medland’s fastidious ear it sounded as if he might have added, ‘Tell the pretty gentleman his fortune.’

The children grinned shyly. Winnie could say nothing. But John made an effort, unused as he was to conversation owing to severe repression by his father during his queer moods of late.

‘You have kangaroos in Australia, haven’t you?’ he said, with a fourteen-year-old wriggle.

‘You’re right,’ said Medland. ‘I’ve hunted them too.’

‘Ooh,’ gasped John ecstatically. ‘On horseback?’

‘Yes, for miles and miles across the country, as fast as your horse could gallop. I’ll tell you about it some day.’

Both children writhed in delight.

‘And bushrangers?’ said John. ‘Did—did you ever see Ned Kelly?’

To Medland’s credit he did not laugh.

‘No such luck,’ he said. ‘There weren’t many round where I lived. But I know a topping book about them.’

‘*Robbery under Arms*,’ said both children at once.

‘Oh, you’ve read it?’

‘Read it? I should think they had.’ This was Mr Marble’s contribution to the conversation. ‘They’re terrors for reading, those two kids are. Never see ’em without a book.’

‘That’s fine,’ said Medland.

But the conversation wilted beyond recovery at this intrusion. And Marble, intent on getting Medland to himself, flashed a look at the children and jerked his head skywards. They understood, and climbed down dolefully from their chairs.

‘Bedtime, children?’ said Mr Marble in a tone of surprise that was unsuccessful in its purpose of deceiving Medland, since he had caught the tail end of Marble’s signal. ‘Good night, then. Why, aren’t you going to kiss me?’

They had not been intending to do so. The custom had died out months before, when Marble had begun turning to the decanter in the sideboard for distraction from his troubles, and with children a custom three months unused might as well never have existed. Besides, John was nearly too old for kissing now. Both John and Winnie kissed their father awkwardly, and their mother casually. Then John shook hands

with his new cousin. It was the first time he had ever shaken hands as man to man, with eye meeting eye in man's fashion, and he was very proud of it. Winnie, too, tried to shake hands in imitation of her brother, but there was something in Medland's smile and in the gentle traction he exerted on her hand that made her lean forward and kiss the boyish mouth tendered to her. It felt funny, different from other kisses she had known. It was a very silent pair that went up to bed.

Marble turned away with evident relief as they closed the door.

'Now we can be comfortable,' he said. 'Draw your chair up closer to the fire, er—Jim. What a night,' he added, as the wind howled outside.

Medland nodded moodily. He was feeling awkward. He was not at all at home with these strange people. He didn't like the way Marble behaved towards his children. The kids were all right of course, and the mother was a nonentity. But there was an atmosphere about the place that he hated. He pulled himself together and tried to shake off the brooding premonitory mood that was oppressing him. It was absurd, of course. Old Marble was only a very ordinary sort of chap. Seedy and down at heel, but quite all right. He was smiling oilily at present, but that didn't mean anything necessarily. Hang it all, if he didn't like the place he could clear out in a few minutes' time and never come back to it. For the matter of that Medland's thoughts swerved suddenly to the utterly absurd—he could change his hotel next morning and then they could never find him again. The bare idea was sufficient to bring his mind back to reality. There was no reason why he should think about things like that at all. The kids were fine, and he'd see a lot of them while he was in England. He could take them to a lot of the places he felt he had to go to, the Tower of London and St Paul's, for instance. That would be topping.

Mr Marble was speaking to his wife.

'What about some supper, Annie?' he was saying. 'I expect our young friend here is hungry.'

'But—' began Mrs Marble hopelessly, and then checked herself hastily and clumsily as she caught sight of her husband frowning at her.

'Don't worry about me, please,' put in Medland. 'I dined just before I came out.'

'That's all right, then,' replied Marble. 'I dined just after I came in.'

And he laughed. The laughter was just the least bit strained.

Conversation began again, resuming its hopeless, desultory way while Medland wondered in a bored, young man's fashion why on earth he did not get up and go at once. There were really several reasons. One was that the wind and the rain were continually making themselves heard outside; another was that the fire was most attractive—it was the most attractive thing in the whole house—but deep down there was a feeling of relief that he was not in a hotel with nothing special to do. Medland had laid plans for a very exciting time on his arrival in England, but at