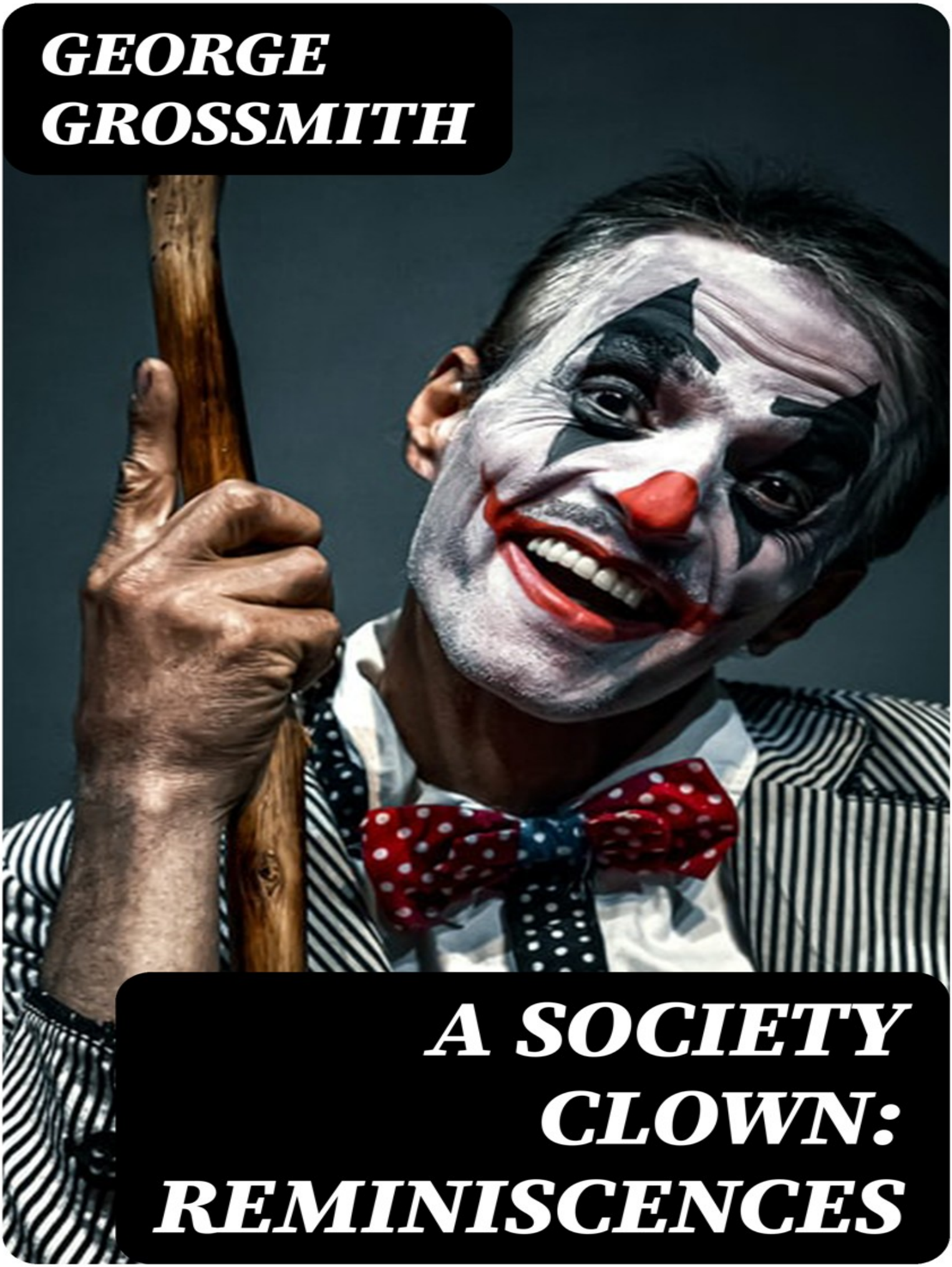
GEORGE GROSSMITH



A SOCIETY CLOWN: REMINISCENCES

George Grossmith

A Society Clown: Reminiscences

EAN 8596547229629

DigiCat, 2022
Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

Table of Contents

CHAPTER II.

Table of Contents

Early Recollections.

"A many years ago, when I was young and charming." *H.M.S. Pinafore*.

As I was born in December, 1847, I was not five years old when I was taken to a house at the corner of Wellington Street, Strand, to see the funeral procession of the Duke of Wellington. And I remember it as distinctly as if it had been yesterday. The crowd, the soldiers, and the magnificent funeral car, are still strongly engraven on my memory. That was the most important of my earlier recollections.

The next recollection of great importance was my having fallen desperately in love with a Miss Field, at a day-school near Bloomsbury, to which I was taken at five years of age, and which was kept by a Miss Adams. It was an academy for young (extremely young) ladies and gentlemen. It was only natural that I should desire to make my *fiancee* a suitable gift as a token of our engagement; so I presented her with a set of large gold shirt-studs, which I annexed from my father's dressing-table. The mother of my adored one, without having the courtesy to consult her daughter or myself, took the gift from the former, and returned it to the father of the latter. My parent explained to me the etiquette with regard to acts of alienation in a sweet, simple, and comprehensive manner worthy of Dr. Watts, and extracted from me a promise that in future I would discard that

humour which had prompted me to generously dispose of other people's property. That promise I have faithfully kept.

As a reward for my future good intentions, he handed me a sovereign, with injunctions not to spend it. I must confess I could not see his object. A few days afterwards I began to be suspicious of his sovereign. There was some writing on one side, which I was not yet intelligent enough to decipher; but on the other, instead of the pretty head of our Most Gracious Majesty, there was an impression of a hat. I was much worried and concerned about that hat. I perfectly remember going to my parents and saying, "I would rather have a sovereign without a hat on." I also remember with what continued roars of laughter my request was met. I have the sovereign to this day. It is a brass disc, the exact size of a sovereign, advertising the Gibus opera hat.

About 1855 I was sent to a preparatory school kept by the Misses Hay, at Massingham House, Haverstock Hill. I was a boarder, and it was there I first began to play the fool. I invented several shadow pantomimes, and acted in them. As no dialogue was required, I can say nothing of my literary ability. On one occasion, when my mother visited me, she asked how I was getting on with my lessons. Miss Eliza Hay (from whom I had a letter last May) said, "He gets on very well with his music, but I am afraid he will one day be a clown."

I mention this because, about fifteen years afterwards, my father met her, and informed her that I had made my appearance at the Polytechnic Institution as a professional entertainer, and she replied, "Ah! I always said he would be a clown." This is not repeated with any unkind intention, for

the remarks were made by Miss Hay in a pure spirit of chaff. She was very kind to me, gave me lessons in elocution, and taught me pieces of poetry to recite. She used to write poetry herself.

Her sister, Miss Isabelle, taught me the piano; and, of course, I learned the "Priere d'une Vierge" and "Les Cloches de Monastere," and the "Duet in D" by Diabelli, to say nothing of Czerny's 101 exercises, all of which I used to play tolerably well at the age of nine and ten. Miss Isabelle also sang very nicely; and as I was very fond of music, I became a favourite pupil, and was taken by her to local concerts, where she sang for charities. Of course, I fell over head and ears in love with her.

The school was kept by three sisters, and the elder was a handsome lady with grey hair. She was an immense favourite with the boys. I have never forgotten her kindness in occasionally permitting me to fire off a brass cannon with real gunpowder in the kitchen. That was the sort of extension of license that a boy appreciated.

In 1856 I witnessed, from the lower part of Primrose Hill, the fireworks in celebration of peace with Russia. The final sight was wonderful, and greatly impressed me. At a given period, thousands of rockets were fired from the Hill and all the parks.

I was sometimes taken to the theatre, and have a faint recollection of Wright at the Adelphi, and a more distinct one of T. P. Cooke in *Black-eyed Susan*. I was afterwards introduced to him at Margate, and surprised to find he looked so old—which he certainly did not on the stage. It was in this year, I think, that I was taken to see the ruins of

Covent Garden Theatre. It was the day after the fire, and smoke was still ascending in columns. I described this with characteristic exaggeration, and became a temporary hero at the school of the Misses Hay.

In 1857 my father took the little house now known as 36 Haverstock Hill. It was then known as 9 Powis Place, and was called Manor Lodge. My school was only a few doors off, and so I became a day scholar. I remained at this preparatory school until I was nearly twelve, and I can safely say I was very happy in those days. I do not mean to infer that I am not happy now. Fortunately, I am of an extremely happy disposition, and I so thoroughly enjoy the bright side of life that its shadows sink into insignificance.

Amongst my school-fellows at the Misses Hay's was Dr. Arthur W. Orwin, of the Throat and Ear Hospital, Gray's Inn Road.

In 1860 there was a Pugilistic Fever in England. Tom Sayers fought J. C. Heenan, the Benicia Boy. The fever was very virulent. It attacked Peers, Commons, Bishops, Actors, Soldiers, Sailors, Tinkers and Tailors. It attacked The Times, and all the daily, evening, weekly, monthly, quarterly, and yearly periodicals. Is it to be wondered at, that it attacked also the school of the Misses Hay? Tom Sayers, with his big dog, had been pointed out to me; so had Heenan and Tom King.

I was surreptitiously, and most certainly without the knowledge of my parents, taken by one of the servants at home to the house of Mr. Ben Caunt, who shook hands with me and showed me the room where boxing matches took place. I was then taken across the road, and this boy of

twelve years and a few months was presented to Nat Langham. I was accordingly seized with the fever very badly. On the inside of my leather belt I sketched little panels of my imagined victories, and issued a challenge to fight anyone for the championship of the school—the victor to hold the leather belt. As I had shaken hands with Ben Caunt and Langham, the boys were rather afraid of me. Orwin, however, accepted the challenge, threw his castor into the ring, and we fought for twenty minutes or half an hour: it seemed years to me. In the end I was undoubtedly defeated. One generally hears that corruption is the aim and end of all fights. I knew nothing of such practices then, and so cannot explain what induced me to offer Orwin twopence to admit that I was the conqueror, or what persuaded him to accept the sum and condition.

After leaving the preparatory school, I was sent to the North London Collegiate School, then under the headmastership of Dr. Williams. I wore a "mortar-board," and walked to and from the school with E. H. Dickens, who was a nephew of Charles Dickens, and who, living close to my home, became (and still is) a great friend of mine. The chief delight of the little home on Haverstock Hill was the garden at the back. It was much prettier than the modern suburban garden. There used to be nine apple trees and two pear trees. As time wore on, a couple of the trees wore out. My mother used to send the apples away to friends in basketsful. My brother Weedon and I generally partook of this fruit when it had grown to the size of a chestnut, and was particularly hard and green. We much preferred it to the

mature apple. In this respect I think we resembled most boys.

When the bicycle came in vogue, a few years after, we three boys procured one each. (I include my father as one of the boys. It was his own desire, as well as his nature, to be one of us, and I often think many fathers would find it to their advantage if they followed his example). I possessed, what was considered then, a very high bicycle, the front wheel being 36 inches high. I got one for my brother, cheap, at an auction-room near Covent Garden. Being considered the champion rider of the three, I was sent to bid for the steed, and ride it home in style. I succeeded in the former, but not in the latter. Before an admiring crowd of Covent Garden loungers, loafers, porters, fruiterers, flower-girls and policemen, I leapt on to the saddle, and immediately broke the back of the spring, which had evidently been carefully made of cast-iron. My intention was that the bicycle should carry me home, but we reversed the order of things.

The steed used by my father stood about two and a half feet from the ground, and had iron wheels. He himself was only a little over five feet, and was much—very much—inclined to *embonpoint*. In the winter, the garden-path at Manor Lodge was a fine field for practice. I forget how many laps went to the mile; all I remember is, that three miles about did for Weedon and myself, and half a mile did for the Guv'nor—that is, if he had not done for himself before then. I never recollect anything so funny as seeing him trundling round the garden. It somewhat resembled a diminutive edition of the modern road engine. We heard him in the house distinctly—loud as he approached the house, the

noise becoming less as he reached the bottom of the garden. Sometimes the noise would suddenly cease. Ha! We in the house knew instinctively what had happened, and rushed to the windows to look out. Yes; there he was, in the thick of the gooseberry bushes. Not on the bicycle—oh dear, no! Under it, most decidedly under it. Sometimes on these occasions we would push up the windows, and, in conjunction with our dear mother, greet him with a loud guffaw. Sometimes we would preserve a strict silence and listen. We heard him wheel the vehicle back, place it against the lattice-work of the verandah, open the door, and, as usual, call for me.

"George—George!"

"Here I am. What is it?"

"Oh, I say, George, have you got a piece of sticking-plaister?"

He always appealed to me for this article, knowing that I was in possession of a few quires of court plaister; for it was at this period I had commenced to shave.

In summer my mother would not permit the bicycles in the garden because of the flowers, in which she took pride. In the earlier days at Manor Lodge the garden was a mass of roses. As the demon builders began to surround the locality, so the roses began to die, and blight began to kill the apple-trees.

Still, the garden always looked pretty, especially in the summer and autumn. Then we three boys went in for amateur photography. The fad was started by me, and I was the principal operator. A "dark room" was erected against the wall near the house, and the front was manufactured

out of the folding doors which had formerly separated the dining-room from the drawing-room. An amateur photographer was a scarcity in those days. The clean and easy dry-plate process was not then in use. We first had to clean the plain glass plate, which, in my case, was never successfully accomplished; then to coat it with collodion, which, if it did not run off the plate up the sleeve, generally "set" in diagonal streaks. Then it had to be placed in the wet silver bath, an extremely sensitive concoction, which got out of order without the slightest provocation. After its exposure in the camera (by-the-by, I generally forgot to pull up the shutter, or, if I remembered that, discovered when I went to uncover the lens that its cap was already off), this plate was subjected to a development which was original in its vagaries.

If the figures on the plate were indistinct, it was more than could be said of the spots and patches which appeared vividly on the fingers and clothes. Still, I was devoted to the occupation while in my teens, and would photograph all day long, anybody or anything. The family sat or stood to me a dozen times a day. The dogs used to sneak into the house and hide in the coal cellar the moment they saw me bring out the camera. The tradesmen and servants were all taken. All my father's friends, and they were numerous and good-natured, were seized and carried into the garden to be taken on glass; for I generally took "positives," which were finished off then and there and put into little brass frames, like the sixpenny and shilling portraits (eighteenpence if a bit of jewellery is painted in with gold) one sees displayed in the Euston Road and elsewhere.

I have taken Toole scores of times, H. J. Byron, J. Billington, Andrew Halliday, and many more: in fact, the last-named wrote an article in *All the Year Round* called "Precocious Boys," in which he described my brother and myself photographing him in a back-garden. I hope the reader will not think I am boasting, but I solemnly declare that I do not believe any photographer, professional or amateur, ever succeeded in turning out so many deplorable failures as I did.

I attach rather an interesting programme of a juvenile—followed by a grown-up—party at Manor Lodge:

———

Haverstock Hill, April 1st, 1864.

With Master George and Walter Grossmith's Compliments.

PROGRAMME

7 o'clock.—General Gathering of the Company (Limited). The first arrival will please to make itself as comfortable as possible.

7.30.—Music and Conversation. The latter may be varied by an occasional allusion to the day of the month—a practical joke being the "touch of nature" that makes everybody *touchy*.

8 o'clock.—Quadrille and Polka. After which, Mrs. Martha Brown (from the Egyptian Hall) will describe her "Trip to Brighton and back."

9 o'clock.—Quadrille and Waltz.

A few young gents in their teens, inspired by the Tercent-*e*-nary (see Hepworth Dixon or any other dixon-ary), will

recite a passage from—and a very long way from—HAMLET.

9.30.—Quadrille. Polka. Spanish Dance.

10 o'clock.—THE JUVENILE SPREAD. Children under 20 not admitted.

10.30.—The author of "Underground London" will demonstrate his well-known connection with the arch-enemy. (Beware of your pockets.)

11.—Dancing, Comic Singing, etc.

12 to 1.—Arrival of the Professionals from the Royal Adelphi, Olympic, St. James's, and Princess's Theatres, retained at an enormous cost for this night only—or rather morning.

BANQUET OF THE ELDERS IN THE CULINARY CAVERNS OF THE REGIONS BELOW.

Resumption of the fun. Paul's return a *great* go. Curious analysis of the Brothers Webb, to ascertain which is which. Mr. Toole will oblige, etc.

Any attempt to define the order or duration of the proceedings from this point being obviously absurd, it will suffice to state that the Sun rises at 5.30.

———

The twenty minutes' burlesque on Hamlet was written expressly for us by my father. It was received so well that we afterwards did it at the residences of Mr. Toole and John Hollingshead to "grown-up" parties, of which we were very proud. I played Hamlet, my brother played Ophelia and the Gravedigger, and the remainder of the characters were assumed by schoolfellows at the North London Collegiate

School, who were, singularly enough, distantly connected with the stage. They were Pierre Leclercq, the brother of Carlotta Leclercq; Claude Addison, brother of the Misses Fanny and Carlotta Addison; B. Terry, brother of Ellen Terry, who, with her sister Kate (Mrs. Arthur Lewis), visited Manor Lodge several times. The part of the Queen was played by T. Bolton, who afterwards went on the stage and became a prominent member of Mr. Wilson Barrett's provincial companies. Many actors and literary men and women came in late at this party.

I knew very little of Society (with a big S) in those days, but had the honour, under the parental roof, of meeting and making friends, while a young man, of such people as Henry Irving, Toole, J. Clarke (Little Clarke, as he was called), H. J. Byron, John Oxenford, Kate and Ellen Terry, Madame Celeste, Miss Woolgar, Andrew Halliday, Artemus Ward, Chas. Wyndham, the brothers Brough, Luke Fildes, R.A., Joseph Hatton, Dillon Croker, J. Prowse, Fred Barnard, Mrs. Eiloart, Eliza Winstanley, Emma Stanley (the entertainer), W. S. Woodin, Arthur Sketchley, Tom Hood the younger, T. W. Robertson, Miss Furtardo, Paul Bedford.

For eight or nine months in the year we did not see much of the master of the house, for he was away lecturing; but we always welcomed his return home, generally on Saturdays. In the summer he had more leisure; he was brimful of humour, and there were few people so good at repartee.

When he was "put out," there was no mistaking it. He would then speak without thinking; but he never *wrote* without thinking. What a deal of trouble would be saved in

this world if people would only delay answering an annoying letter for twenty-four hours!

Some of my father's replies were very amusing, I remember. I happened to come across a copy of one recently. I must first explain that my mother was passionately fond of animals, and had a strong tendency to overfeed them. In the next garden to ours a dog was chained close to the adjoining wall, and I have no doubt whatever that every remnant of food was dropped over for his special delight. The next-door neighbour wrote a sharp remonstrance, and complained that his dog was getting too fat in consequence of its being overfed. My father wrote the following characteristic reply:

"9 Powis Place,
"December 18th, 1870.

"Dear Sir,—I am very sorry my people have annoyed you by giving food to your dog.

"Mrs. Grossmith happens to be very fond of dogs. I think she prefers them to human beings, and she has a notion that it is very cruel to keep one chained up eternally; and possibly this want of exercise may have more to do with its getting fat than the occasional extra feeding to which you refer, and which comes of weak womanly sympathy with misfortune—just as our booby philanthropists, after contributing nearly half a million for the relief of the sick and wounded, received nothing but kicks and growls from the ruffianly savages in return.

"Seriously, however, you have a perfect right to complain, and I have given orders which I hope will be obeyed. I am very seldom in London myself, and cannot

boast of having much control over my household when I am; but I think I may rely on your wishes being implicitly regarded.

"I almost wonder that it has not occurred to you to put the dog on the other side of the garden, out of their reach; but I trust there will be no occasion for this now.

"Yours faithfully,
"GEO. GROSSMITH.—Esq."

The next-door neighbour was amused with this letter, having taken it in its proper spirit, and became a visitor to the house. "All's well that ends well."

In accordance with its usual custom, time rolled on. I began to exhibit a taste for painting, and my brother Weedon for acting. These professions we subsequently reversed. Weedon (his full name is Walter Weedon Grossmith) left the North London Collegiate School to go to school nearer home; viz., Mr. Simpson's, in Belsize Park. Eventually I left the N.L.C.S. to go to Bow Street, with the ultimate intention of entering for the bar; and Weedon, after leaving school, went to the West London School of Art in Portland Street, also to the Slade School at the London University, and eventually he passed the requisite examination that admitted him to the Royal Academy Schools.

I have endeavoured to make this little sketch of my old home as brief as possible, and will conclude this chapter with an incident that ultimately happened to be of considerable importance to me:

At a certain juvenile party, while still in jackets and turned-down collars, I met and became enamoured of a little

maiden in a short frock and sash.

She flattered me by approving of my comic songs; and I was immensely struck with her power of conversation, which was unusual for one so young. I ascertained that her name was Emmeline Rosa Noyce, and that she was the only daughter of Doctor Noyce, whose practice was in the neighbourhood. We danced every dance together; but the Fates decreed that we should not meet again for another three or four years. We *did* meet—in a crowd, and again danced *nearly* every dance together; for, strange to say, she understood my step.

All this was simply a beginning to a very happy end: and I can say with truth that the wisest step I ever took in the whole course of my life was when, on the 14th May, 1873, I made my juvenile sweetheart my wife—with her consent, of course,—and, thank God, I have never had reason to regret it for a single second.

CHAPTER III.

Table of Contents

At Bow Street Police Court.

"Take down our sentence as we speak it."—*Iolanthe*.

For a period of twenty years I had the distinguished honour of being decidedly "well known to the police." When I between seventeen and eighteen years of age, and still at the North London Collegiate School, I received instructions from my father, who was just starting for Liverpool, that as Mr. Courtenay was ill I must go and "do" Bow Street. Mr.

John Kelly Courtenay used to do all the reporting at Bow Street Police Court during my father's absence on his lecturing tours. I had learned shorthand (the Lewisian system, I believe it was called) some two or three years previously.

Off I marched to Bow Street with the greatest *sang-froid* to report a case, at which in after years I should certainly have shied. It was a most important bank fraud, and meant enormous complications in figures. Mr. Burnaby, the chief clerk, was kind enough to let me correct my figures from the depositions which had been taken by him; Sir Thomas Henry repeated to me the gist of his remarks on remanding the case, and the result was I turned out a report on manifold for all the evening and morning papers, and the usual special report for *The Times*—in this instance over a column long—with which my father was delighted.

I received a most encouraging letter from him after a few days' interval. The interval was merely to give time for the arrival of any complaint from the papers. Editors are not in the habit of sending letters of congratulation, only of complaint. No complaint arrived, however, and my only disappointment was the complete absence of important and interesting cases.

At last another opportunity arrived which enabled me to distinguish myself. I wish it had not. A poor woman was charged with purloining a shirt which was hanging outside a cheap hosier's in Clare Market somewhere. It was a windy day, and the end of the shirt was apparently flapping round the corner of the shop; so the prisoner, unable to resist temptation, filched it after the manner of a clown in a