Henry Handel Richardson

The Way Home

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goodpress@okpublishing.info

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When, having braved the bergs and cyclones of the desolate South Pacific, and rounded the Horn; having lain becalmed in the Doldrums, bartered Cross for Plough, and snatched a glimpse of the Western Isles: when the homeward-bound vessel is come level with Finisterre and begins to skirt the Bay, those aboard her get the impression of passing at one stroke into home waters. Gone alike are polar blasts and perfumed or desert-dry breezes; gone opalescent dawns, orange-green sunsets, and nights when the very moon shines warm, the black mass of ocean sluggish as pitch. The region the homing wanderer now enters is quick with associations. These tumbling crested marbled seas, now slate-grey, now of a cold ultramarine, seem but the offings of those that wash his native shores; and they are peopled for him by the saltwater ghosts of his ancestors, the great navigators, who traced this road through the high seas on their voyages of adventure and discovery. The fair winds that belly the sails, or the head winds that thwart the vessel's progress, are the romping south-west gales adrip with moisture, or the bleak north-easters which scour his island home and make it one of the windy corners of the world. Not a breath of balmy softness remains. There is a rawness in the air, a keener, saltier tang; the sad-coloured sky broods low, or is swept by scud that flies before the wind; trailing mists blot out the horizon. And these and other indelible memories beginning to pull at his heartstrings, it is over with his long patience. After tranquilly

enduring the passage of some fifteen thousand watery miles, he now falls to chafing, and to telling off the days that still divide him from port and home.

On an autumn morning in the late 'sixties that smart clipper the *Red Jacket*, of some seven hundred tons burden, entered the English Channel, and having rolled about for a while, for want of a breeze to steady her, picked up a fine free following wind and forged ahead at a speed of eight and a half knots an hour.

At the eagerly awaited cry of "Land ho!" from the foretop, an excited bunch of cuddy-passengers and their ladies, all markedly colonial in dress and bearing, swarmed to the side of the vessel, and set to raking and probing the distance. Telescopes and spy-glasses travelled from hand to hand, arms were silhouetted, exclamations flew, the female gaze, adrift in space, was gallantly piloted to the sober level of the horizon. And even the most sceptical convinced that the dusky shadow on the water's rim was, in truth, the goal of their journeying, three cheers were called for and given, the gentlemen swung their hats with an "England for ever!" the ladies blew kisses and fluttered their kerchiefs. But, their feelings eased, they soon had their fill of staring at what might equally well have been a cloud or a trail of smoke; and having settled the wagers laid on this moment, and betted anew on the day and hour of casting anchor, they accepted the invitation of a colonial Croesus, and went below to drink a glass to the Old Country.

Richard Mahony alone remained, though warmly bidden.

"The pleasure of your company, Mr. Mahony, sir!"

"Mayn't we hope, doctor, for a few words befitting the occasion?"

He had on the whole been a fairly popular member of the ship's party. This was thanks to the do-nothing life. Here, on board ship, he had actually known what it was to feel time hang heavy on his hands. In consequence, he had come out of his shell, turned sociable and hearty, taking an interest in his fellow-travellers, a lead in the diversions of the voyage. And the golden weeks of sunshine and sea air having made a new man of him—in looks he resembled a younger brother of the lean and haggard individual who had climbed the ship's ladder—he was able for once harmlessly to enjoy the passing hour. Again, a genuine sea-lover, he had found not one of the ninety odd days spent afloat unbearable; and in refusing to be daunted—either by the poor, rough food, or the close quarters; or during a hurricane, when the very cabins were awash; or again in the tropics, when the ship lay motionless on a glassy sea, the cruel sun straight overhead—by making light of inconvenience and discomfort, he had helped others, too, to put a brave face on them. Nobody guessed how easy it came to him. His cheerfulness was counted to him for a virtue, and set him high in general favour; people fell into the way of running to him not only with their ailments but their troubles; looked to him to smooth out the frictions that were the crop of this overlong voyage. So unusual a state of things could not last. And, indeed, with the vessel's first knot in northern waters, he had become sensitively aware of a cooling-off. Let but a foot meet the shore, and the whole ill-mixed company would scatter to the winds, never to reassemble. Well, he, for one,

would not feel that his ties with the colony were broken beyond repair until this had happened, and he had seen the last of all these boisterous, kindly, vulgar people.

The liking was chiefly on their part. For though, since setting sail, he had been rid of the big-mouthed colonial boaster, and among runaways like himself, men who were almost as glad as he to turn their backs on Australia—but a single one of the thirty cabin-passengers contemplated returning—this was far from saying that he had found in them congenial spirits. They chafed him in ways they did not dream of. The Midases of the party—it was ruled sharply off into those who had amassed a fortune and those who patently had not; none went "home" but for one or other reason; he himself was the only half tint on the palette—these lucky specimens were for ever trumpeting the opinion that the colonies were a good enough place in which to fill your money-bags; but to empty them, you repaired to more civilised climes. And to hear his case—or at least what had once been his intention—put thus crudely made Mahony wince. The speakers reminded him of underbred guests, who start belittling their entertainment before they are fairly over their host's door-sill. At the same time he had to laugh in his sleeve. For where, pray, could Monsieur le Boucher and Monsieur l'Epicier undo their purse-strings to better effect, find a society more exactly cut to their shape, than in the Antipodes, where no display was too showy, no banquet too sumptuous, no finery too loud; and where the man who could slap a well-filled pocket was anyone's equal?—Even less to his taste was the group of lean kine. With nothing to show for themselves but broken health and shattered

illusions, these men saw the land of their exile through the smoked glasses of hate, and had not a single good word to say for it. Which of course was nonsense.

And so it came about that Mary was sometimes agreeably surprised to hear Richard, if not exactly standing up for the colony, at least not helping to swell the choir of its detractors. This was unending, went round and round like a catch. People outdid one another in discovering fresh grounds for their aversion. Besides the common grievances—the droughts and floods, the dust winds and hot winds, the bare, ugly landscape, the seven plagues of winged and creeping things—many a small private grudge was owned to, and by the most unlikely lips. Here was a burly tanner who had missed the glimmer of twilight, been vexed at the sudden onrush of the dark. Another grumbler bemoaned the fact that, just when you looked for snow and holly-berries: "Hanged if there ain't the pitches and appricoats ripe and ready to tumble into your mouth!"

"An onnatcheral country, and that's the truth."

"The wrong side of the world, say I—the under side."

Quaint home-sicknesses cropped up, too. On board was a skinny little colonist from the Moreton Bay district, with, as the Irish wit of the company had it, "the face of his own granddad upon his shoulders"—who was, that is to say, more deeply wrinkled than the bewrinkled rest. Where this man came from, dirt was not: the little weatherboard houses were as clean when they dropped to pieces as when first run up. He it was who now confessed to an odd itch to see again the grime and squalor of London town: the shiny black mud that served as mortar to the paving-stones; the beds of

slush into which, on a rainy day, the crossing-sweepers voluptuously plunged their brooms; the smoke-stained buildings; monuments tarred with the dirt of ages. He wanted to feel his cheek stung by the mixture of flying fodder and dry ordure that whirls the streets, does the east wind go; to sniff the heavy smell of soot and frost that greets the Londoner's nose on a winter morning—even to choke and smother in a London fog.

No one smiled.

"Aye, it's what one's born to that tells; what one comes back to in the end," nodded a pursy builder, whose gold watch-chain, hung with seals and coins, was draped across his waistcoat like a line of gala bunting. "I knew a man, gents—it's a fact I'm tellin' you!—who could 'a bought out the up-country township he lived in twice and three times over; and yet I'm blessed if this old Johnny-bono didn't as good as turn on the waterworks when he spoke o' the pokey old cottage down Devon way, where he'd been young. Seemed as if all the good smells o' the rest o' the world couldn't make up to him for a bit o' peat burnin' on a still winter's evenin'; or new thatch smellin' in the rains or the softish stink o' the milch-cows' dung in long wet meadow grass."

That white raven, "the man who was going back," held aloof from the sentimentalists. Was he however present at such a sitting, he kept silence, an ambiguous expression on his face. Once only, in a conversation engineered by Mahony out of curiosity, did he speak up. And then it was with a disagreeable overbearing. "I left England, sir, six years since, because man isn't a sprite to live on air alone.

My father went half-starved all his days—he was a farmhand, and reared a family o' nine on eleven bob a week. He didn't taste meat from one year's end to another. Out yon "—and he pointed with his cutty-pipe over his shoulder—" I've ate meat three times a day. I've a snug little crib of me own and a few acres o' land, and I've come home to fetch out me old mother and the young fry. They shall know what it is to eat their fill every day of the seven, and she'll drive to chapel of a Sabbath in her own trap and a black silk gown.—Nay, be sure I haven't loafed around, nor sat with me hands before me. There's not much anyone can learn me in the way of work. But the old country wouldn't either gimme anything to do, nor yet keep me free, gratis and for nothing."—And so on, in a strain dear to the tongues of the lower orders.

These things flitted through Mahony's mind as he stood, chin in hand, elbow on gunwale, gazing over the last stretch of dividing sea. Before him lay an aquarelle of softest colouring, all pale light and misty shadow; and these lyric tints, these shades and half shades, gripped his heart as the vivid hues of the south never had. Their very fleetingness charmed. But a little ago and the day had been blue and sunny, with just a spice of crispness in the air to remind one that it was autumn. A couple of white bales of cloud, motionless overhead, had flung gigantic purple shadows, which lay like painted maps of continents on the glittering sea. But, the breeze freshening, the clouds had been set in motion; and simultaneously the shadow-continents, losing their form, had begun to travel the surface of the water. A rain-shower was coming up from the west: it drew a curtain

over the sky, and robbed the sea of its colour. Only in the east did a band of light persist, above which the fringes of the storm cloud hung, sending down straight black rays. And now the squall was upon them; wind and rain hunted each other over the waves; the deck slanted, masts and spars whistled, sails smacked and shrilled.

In the course of that day the vessel was taken in tow, and when, towards evening, the downpour ceased and Mahony again climbed the companion-way, a very different scene met his eye. They now drove through a leaden sea, which the rain had beaten flat, reduced to a kind of surly quiescence. Above them was an iron-grey sky, evenly spread and of a fair height, the lower clouds having withdrawn to the horizon where, in a long, cylinder-like roll, they hung poised on the water's rim. But this cold and stony aspect of things was more than made up for. Flush with the ship, looking as though it had just risen from the waves, was land—was the English shore.

At sight of it Mahony had a shock of surprise—that thrilled surprise that England holds for those of her sons who journey back, no matter whence, across the bleak and windy desert of the seas. Quite so lovely as this, one had not dared to remember the homeland. There it lay, stretched like an emerald belt against its drab background, and was as grateful to sun-tired eyes as a draught of mountain water to a climber's parched throat. Not a rood of this earth looked barren or unkempt: veritable lawns ran down to the brink of the cliffs; hedges ruled bosky lines about the meadows; the villages were bowers of trees — English trees. Even the rain had favoured him: his first

glimpse of all this beauty was caught at its freshest, grass and foliage having emerged from the clouds as if new painted in greenness.

Another aspect of it struck Mary who mounted in his wake, gloved, shawled and hatted against the evening chills. With an exclamation of pleasure she cried: "Oh, Richard—how pretty! How...how tidy! It looks like...like"—she hesitated, searching her memory for the trimmest spot she knew; and ended—"doesn't it?...just like the Melbourne Botanic Gardens."

"It looks too good to be true, my dear."

But he understood what she was trying to say. If the landscape before them was lovely as a garden, it had also something of a garden's limitations. There was an air of arrangedness about it; it might have been laid out according to plan, and on pleasing, but rather finikin lines; it was all exquisite, but just a trifle overdressed. And as he followed up the train of thought started by Mary's words, he was swept through by a sudden consciousness of England's littleness, her tiny, tight compactness, the narrow compass that allowed of so intensive a cultivation. These fair fields in miniature!—after the wide acreage of the colonial paddock. These massy hedgerows cutting up the good pasture-land into chequerboard squares!—after the thready rail-and-post fences that offered no hindrance to the eye. These diminutive clusters of houses huddled wall to wall—compared with the sprawling townships set, regardless of ground-space, at the four corners of immense cross-roads. These narrow, winding lanes and highways that crawled their mile or so from one village to the near next—after the

broad, red, rectilinear Australian roads, that dashed ahead, it might be for the length of a day's journey, without encountering human habitation. These duly preserved morsels of woodland, as often as not guarded, they too, by a leafy wall where songsters trilled-compared with the immense and terrible bush, bare alike of bird and man: all these forcible contrasts worked in him as he stood gazing on the fair natural garden of southern England; and a sensation that was half wonder, half a kind of protective tenderness, called at the same time a smile to his lips and tears to his eyes. In face of this adorable littleness, this miniature perfection, his feelings were those of the nomad son who, weary of beating up and down the world, turns home at last to rest on the untravelled heart of his mother. Here the familiar atmosphere of his childhood laps him round; and he breathes it greedily —even while he marvels how time has stood still for the home-keepers, and asks himself if he can ever again be one of them. All the tempestuous years of his youth lie between. He has fought fire-spueing dragons, suffered shipwreck in Sargasso, bent the knee at strange shrines. And the sense of an older, tireder wisdom, which makes of him the ancient, of them the young and untried, completes the breach. How, knowing what he knows, can he placidly live through the home day, with its small, safe monotony? How give up for ever the excitement of great risks taken and met, on grander shores, under loftier skies?

But a truce to such vapourings! Did the man exist that had it in him to fret and go unhappy, feel pinioned, and a prisoner while, round the cliffs of England, now grey, now white, now red, danced and beckoned the English sea? For

who, native to these coasts, would renounce, once having drawn on it, that heritage of vagrancy which has come down to him through the ages? Amphibian among the peoples, has he not learnt to adjust his balance to the sea's tumblings, his sight to its vast spaces?—so that into the English eye has, with time, come a look of remoteness: the sailor-look, which, from much scouring of horizons, seems to focus on near objects only with an effort.—And musing thus, Mahony believed he knew why, for all its smallness, on this little speck of an island rising green and crumbly from the waves, there should have bred a mighty race. It was not in spite of its size, but because of it. Just because the span of the land was so narrow, those whose blood ran high could shove off on the unruly element from their very doorsteps, and whether these looked north or south, faced sunrise or sunset: the deep-sea fishers, the great traffickers, the navigators and explorers, the fighting men of the deep. And with them, so it pleased him to think, no matter for what point they headed, they bore tidings of the mother-country, and of her struggles towards a finer liberty, a nicer justice, that should make of her sons true freemen; for her a difficult task because she lay isolate, shut off by barriers of foam, a prey to hoary traditions, and with no land-frontier across which seditious influences might slip; and yet for her most needful, seeing that the hearts of her people were restless, indomitable—had in them something of the unruliness of her seas. And just as these rovers carried out news of England, so, homing again, either for a breathing-space in the great tourney, or, old and feeble, to lay their bones in English earth, they brought back their quota of things seen,

heard, felt on their Odyssey; a fruity crop of experience; so that even the chimney-dwellers in England came by a certain bigness of vision: through the eyes of son or brother they explored outlandish parts, were present at exotic happenings. And now, his thoughts turning inward, he asked himself whether even he, Richard Mahony, in his small way, was not carrying on the great tradition. Having fared forth in his youth, endured in exile, then heard and obeyed the home-call, did not he, too, return the richer for a goodly store of spiritual experience—*his* treasure-trove of life-wisdom—which might serve to guide others on their road, or go before them as a warning? And the idea grew, under his pondering. He saw his race as the guardian of a vast reserve fund of spiritual force, to which all alike contributed—; as each was free at will or at need to draw on it—a hoard, not of the things themselves, but of their ghostly sublimates: the quintessence of all achievement, all endeavour; of failure, suffering, joy and pain. And, if this image held, it would throw light on the obscure purpose of such a seemingly aimless life as his had been; a life ragged with broken ends. Only in this way, he must believe, had it been possible to distil the precious drop of oil that was *his* ultimate essence. Not ours to judge of the means, or in what our puny service should consist: why to one should fall the bugles and the glory—the dying in splendour for a great cause, or the living illustriously to noble issues—to another, a life that was one long blind stumble, with, for finish, an inglorious end. Faith bid us believe that, in the sight of the great Foreordainer, all service was equal. But this we could not know. The veil—a web of steel despite its tenuity—was

lowered, and would not rise on the mystery until that day dawned towards which all our days had headed, for which no man had ever waited in vain. And then, pinched of nostril and marble-cold, earth's last little posy in our gripless hands, we should lie supine and—such was the irony of things—no longer greatly care to know.

Part I

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Chapter I

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The ancient little town of Buddlecombe, originally pressed down the mouth of a narrow valley to the sea, from which it is protected by rampart and breakwater, has, in the course of the centuries, scaled the nearer of the two hills that confine it. Nowadays its streets go everywhere up and down. A precipitous lane is climbed by the ridge-like steps of an Italian donkey-path; the old town gardens, massively walled, are built in tiers, so that the apple-trees on the higher levels scatter their blossoms on the gardens beneath. Coming from the upland, three driving-roads drop into the town at a bold gradient; and vehicles, whether they mount or descend, creep like snails. Halfway down the sheerest of the three, the quaint little old houses, that set in oddly enough just where the road is steepest, appear to cling shoulder to shoulder, each a storey or a half-storey lower than the last, their lines all out of drawing with age and the insecurity of their foothold; while those at the bottom of the hill, seen from this point but as a dimpling cluster of gables, dormers, chimneys, look, till you are virtually upon them, as if they were standing in the sea. The roofs of one and all are silvered with the mortar of innumerable repairs, some of their ancient tiles flying off afresh in every rowdy equinox.

The sea-front is crescent-shaped; and a high, wooded cliff, which leaves room for no more than a footpath between it and the surf-rolled shingle, cuts the town in two. The smaller half, grouped about the harbour, includes the old custom-house, a couple of ramshackle magazines and their yards, an ancient inn or two, all bustling places once on a time, when elephants' teeth and gold dust were unshipped here, and the stuffs and linens of England arrived on pack-horses for transit to France; when, too, much lucrative wine and spirit-running went on with the French coast. Now, there is little doing, either here or in the tiny antiquated storehouses and weighing-sheds out on the famous old stone quay that crooks round the harbour. In these sheds children play or visitors shelter while peeping forth at the great waves which, in stormy weather, toss up over the breakwater; and the storehouses are closed and deserted. A claim to notice, though, they still have. More than one of them is tinted a delicate pink; and the rays of the setting summer sun, catching this, reflect it like a rose in the harbour; which sometimes, half full, lies a pool of melted turquoise; sometimes, during the spring-tides, when the moored boats ride level with the quay, has no more colour in it than an empty glass, or a pure sky before dawn.

To get the best view of the town you must row out beyond harbour and mole, or, better still, swim out, on one of those dead-calm days that every summer brings—days when the yellow cliffs across the bay send down perfect golden shadows in the blue mirror of the sea. Then, lying pillowed on this saltest, most buoyant water, glance back to where, grouped in that perfect symmetry that seems the

lost secret of old town-builders, the little place on its gun-cliffs lies curved to the bay. Viewed thus, it looks like a handful of grey shells clustered on a silver shingle—pearl, not stone grey—for there is no dourness about Buddlecombe: light and graceful of aspect, it might have suffered bodily transport at the hands of some giant Ifrit, from the French coast over the way. Its silveriness is dashed only by the creeper on the square church-tower—perched, this, too, on the very cliff edge—a creeper which betimes in summer the salt air dyes a blood-red; and by an old jet-black house, tarred and pitched against the breakers which, in a south-west gale, beat to its topmost windows, and hurl roots and branches of seaweed up the slope of the main street.

Above the town the green hillsides are dotted with goodly residences, in which officers on half-pay, and Anglo-Indians in search of clemency, lie snug for the rest of their dormouse days. The houses are as secluded as a foliage of almost tropical luxuriance or walls well over man's height, with great hedges atop of these, can make them; and the loveliness of their jealously hidden gardens is only to be guessed at from peeps through a door left ajar by a careless errand-boy; from the bold application of an eye to a keyhole; or, in midsummer, from the purple masses of buddleia and the wealth of climbing-roses—pink and crimson, yellow and white—that toss over the walls in a confusion of beauty.

In this pleasant spot Richard Mahony had made his home. Here, too, he had found the house of his dreams. It was built of stone—under a tangle of creeper—was very old, very solid: floors did not shake to your tread, and, shut

within the four walls of a room, voices lost their carrying power. But its privacy was what he valued most. To the steep road on which it abutted the house turned a blank face—or blank but for entrance-door and one small window—while, in a line with it, up-hill and down, to conceal respectively flower and kitchen-gardens, ran two arms of massy wall. In addition to this, the front door was screened by a kind of sentry-box porch, open only on one side. In this porch was set a tiny glass oval; and here one could stand, secure from rough weather or the curiosity of an occasional passer-by, and watch for mounting postman or expected guest; just as no doubt fifty odd years before, through this very peep-hole, anxious eyes had strained for news-carrier or outrider bringing tidings of sailor son or soldier husband, absent on foreign service in the Great War.

On stepping over the threshold you found yourself at once on the upper floor; for so abruptly did the ground on the farther side fall away that the house was one storey to the road, two to the garden. The living-rooms were on the higher level, with a fine view over town and bay—all but one, a snug little oak-panelled parlour on the ground floor; and here it was that, one autumn morning between eight and nine o'clock, the Mahonys sat at breakfast. Although the air of the young day was mild in the extreme, a generous fire burned in the grate and roared up the chimney, entirely putting to shame, with its scarlet vigour, the wraith-like patch of sunshine that lay across the table.

Mary, seated behind the urn, looked very thoughtful; and this was the more marked because, in obedience to the prevailing fashion, she had swept the heavy bands of her

hair off cheeks and forehead, and now wore it braided high in a crown. The change threw up the fine, frank lines of her head and brow; and atoned for the youthful softness it robbed her of, by adding to the dignity and character of her face.

More than once during the meal she had made as if to speak. But as certainly as she opened her lips, Richard, who was deep in The *Times* of the day before, would either absently hold out his cup to her; or attack the muffin-dish anew; or, in turning a richly crackling sheet of the paper, exclaim: "Ha! Here we have it! Mr. Disraeli threatens to resign. The poor Queen will be forced to send for that turncoat Gladstone." And Mary did not wish to spoil his appetite or interrupt his reading.

But when he had pushed cup and saucer from him, wiped his moustache, and driven back his chair, fleetly to skim the less important columns, she felt justified in claiming his attention.

"Richard, dear—I want to tell you something. What we suspected is true. The Burroughs *have* called in Mr. Robinson. Selina says his gig stood outside their house yesterday for quite a time."

She paused, waiting for a rejoinder that did not come.

"And that's not the most annoying thing, either. He has been sent for to 'Toplands' as well."

After this she was no longer in doubt whether he heard her. For though he went on reading, his face changed in a way she well knew. To herself she called it "going wrong"—"his face went wrong" was how she put it —and in the year they had been in England, she had watched what

was formerly a casual occurrence turn to almost a habit. Now Richard had always been a very transparent person, showing anger, pride, amusement, all too plainly. But this was something different. It was not so much an expression as a loss of expression; and it happened when anyone laid a chance finger on some sensitive spot he had believed securely hidden. Put thus out of countenance he wore an oddly defenceless, even a hapless air; and it distressed her to see him give himself away in front of strangers. Hence, she had a fresh reason for trying to be beforehand with news of a disagreeable nature. In the old days, she had wished to hinder him feeling hurt; now it was to hinder him showing that he was hurt—which, of the two, she believed he minded more.

In the present case his sole response was a curt: "Well!...fools will be fools," as he turned a page of the paper. A moment later, however, he did what she expected: laid the *Times* down and stalked out of the room.

She threw a motherly glance after him, and sighed. Poor old Richard! She had been bound to tell him, of course; but by doing so she had furnished him with a worry for the whole day. It was clear he had set his heart on keeping "Toplands"; and now, after consulting him on and off for a couple of months, the silly people seemed to be going back to that red-nosed, ungentlemanly Mr. Robinson. She couldn't understand it. Still, in Richard's place, she would have taken it calmly. Ten to one turncoats like these would soon come running to him again. Time was needed for people here to find out how clever he was.

Having cleared the breakfast-table, she rang the bell for the servant to take away the tray. But neither her first ring nor a second was answered. For at this moment the girl, her skirts bunched high above a pair of neat prunellas, stood ruefully eyeing the condition of the lower lawn, wondering how she could make her master hear without soiling her boots or indecently raising her voice.

From the dining-room Mahony had stepped out into the garden. This was saturated with moisture. During the night a sea fog had crept up and enmuffled the land; and though by now a watery sun was dissipating the mists—they lingered only about remote objects, like torn handfuls of cotton wool—they had left everything drenched and sodden. As he crossed the grass of the upper lawn, the water came in over the tops of his carpet-slippers; bushes and shrubs against which he brushed delivered showers of drops; and gossamer-webs, spun by the thousand in lovely geometrics that hung whitey-grey and thick as twine, either shattered themselves on his shoulders, or laid themselves fillet-wise round his brow. At the foot of the garden he traversed a second lawn, in which his feet sank and stuck, and climbed three wooden steps set against a side wall. He had hammered these steps together himself, that he might have a view to seaward. A small cutting, in the end wall, as well as all the windows of the house, looked to the town and the row of yellow cliffs beyond. They dated from a time when a land view of any kind was preferred to that of the bare and open sea.

Here he now stood and stared at the palely glittering water. But he did not see it. His mind was busy with the

uncomfortable impression left on it by Mary's last statement. At a stroke this had laid waste the good spirits in which he had got up that morning; even if, for the moment, it had done no more than pull him up short, as one is pulled up by a knot in a needleful of pack-thread, or a dumb note on a keyboard. For the feeling roused in him was no such simple one as mere mortification at the rumoured loss of the big house known as "Toplands"; though the dear soul indoors put it down to this, and he should continue to let her think so. No; there was more behind. But only now, when alone with himself, did he mutter under his breath: "Good Lord! What if this place should prove to be Leicester over again!"

He got no further; for here was it that Selina's prim voice broke on his ear. The girl had followed in his steps to say that Jopson, the liveryman, was at the back door and wished to speak to him. A patient also waited in the passage.

Jopson, who was a short man of enormous bulk, had been accommodated with a chair, after his drag uphill. He rose at Mahony's approach, but continued to ease his weight against the doorpost.

"Sarry, surr, but I ca'an't let 'ee 'ave the mare to-day. 'Er's arff 'er feed. Sarry, surr. T'others is every one bespoke. No, surr, mine's t' only livery in the town. One o' the inns *might* let 'ee 'ave a turn-out, of a sart; but I dunno as I'd advise 'ee to go to they. They's almighty partiklar, surr, 'ow their 'arses is drove. 'Twouldn't do to bring one o' they whoam along, winded and h'all of a sweat."

"You surely don't mean to insinuate I've been overdriving the mare?"

"Well, surr, and since you mention it yourself, Allfred did say yesterday as 'ow you took 'er h'up ovurr Brandlebury 'Ill faster than 'er 'dd anny mind to go. The 'ills is steep 'ereabouts, surr, and cruel 'aard on the 'arses. An' 'tis naat the furst time neether. If you'll excuse me sayin' so, surr, them 'oove seen it do tell as 'ow you be rather a flash 'and with the reins."

"Well, upon my word, Jopson, this is something new! I drive for show?...I overwork a horse? Why, my man, where I come from, it used to be dinned into me on all sides that I was far too easy with them."

"Ca'an't say, surr, I'm sure." Jopson was perfectly civil, but equally non-committal.

"But I can!" gave back Mahony, with warmth. "I had two of my own there, let me tell you, and no beasts were ever better treated or cared for. They certainly hadn't to be walked up every slope for fear they'd lose their wind. They took their honest share of the day's work. For where I come from..." At the repetition of the phrase he bit his lip.

"Aye, surr, ahl very well, I dessay, for such a place—Australy, as I unnerstand," answered Jopson unmoved. "But 'twouldn't do 'ere, surr—in England. Thic's a civilised country." And so on to a somewhat acid wrangle, in which Mahony, galled by the doubt cast on his compassion for dumb brutes, was only restrained by the knowledge that, in this matter of conveyance, he was wholly in Jopson's power.

"Really, my dear, if it weren't that the fellow kept his hat in his hand and scattered his 'sirs' broadcast, it might just have been old Billy de la Poer himself I was talking to. *Do* you remember Billy? And how, in his palmy days, one had to

wheedle a mount out of him, if he wasn't in the vein to hire? The very same uppish independence! I don't know, I'm sure, what this country's coming to. Though I will say, with all his shortcomings Billy never had the impudence to tell me I couldn't drive."

The woman who was waiting for him brought a summons to one of the lonely little farms that dotted the inland hills.

"Three miles out and only shanks' ponies to get me there just my luck! Imagine, Mary, a place with but a single horse for hire! To-night I must go thoroughly into the money question again. I shan't be satisfied now, my dear, till I am independent of Jopson and his great fat pampered quadruped. Stable with him? Not I! Not if I have to build on here myself!"

His first visit led him down the main street of Buddlecombe.

It was between nine and ten o'clock, the hour of day at which the little town was liveliest. Shopkeepers had opened their shutters, saw-dusted and sprinkled their floors, picked over their goods, unlocked their tills and tied on clean white aprons. They might now be seen sunning themselves in their doorways, exchanging the time of day with their neighbours, or shooing off the dogs which, loosed from chain and kennel, frolicked, yapped and sprawled over the pavement. Mounted butcher-boys trotted smartly to and fro. A fisherman, urging a sluggish horse and laden cart uphill, cried mackerel at two a penny. And, from big houses and little, women were emerging, on foot or in donkey and pony-chaises, to do their marketing, chat with one another, glean the news that had accumulated overnight. For every one

knew everybody else in Buddlecombe, and was almost more interested in his neighbour's business than in his own. You could not, vowed Mahony, enter a shop for a penn'orth of tin-tacks—the selling of which was conducted as if you had all eternity to spare for it; what with the hunting up of a small enough bit of paper, the economical unravelling of a tangled length of twine—without learning that Mr. Jones's brindled cow had calved at last, or that the carrier had delivered to Mr. Du Cane still another hogshead of brandy-wine. This, together with many a sly inquiry as to where you yourself might be bound for, or the trend of your own affairs. Alongside the rampart stood half a dozen ancient men of the sea, discussing, with vigour, God knew what. A bottle-nosed constable, stationed in the middle of the road to superintend a traffic that did not exist, gossiped with the best.

Down this street Mahony walked, in the surtout, light trousers and bell-topper which he still preferred to the careless attire of a country doctor. He was greeted with bows and bobs and touched forelocks. But the fact of his appearing on foot brought him many a quizzing glance; and there were also shoppers who came at a trot to the door to see and stare after him. Or perhaps, he thought with a grimace, the more than common interest he roused this morning was due to his ill-treatment of Jopson's mare, the tale of which had no doubt already been buzzed abroad. He was really only now, after several months' residence in Buddlecombe, beginning to understand the seven days' wonder with which he must have provided the inhabitants by settling in their midst—he, who bore with him the exotic

aroma of the Antipodes! At the time, being without experience of little English country places, he had failed to appreciate it.

His visits in the town paid, he chose to leave it by the sea-front and climb the steeper hill at the farther end, rather than retrace his steps and present himself anew to all these curious and faintly hostile eyes.

Thus began for him a day of fatigue and discomfort. The promise of the early morning was not fulfilled: the sun failed; down came the mist again; and the tops of the hills and the high roads that ran along them were lost in a bank of cloud. He was for ever opening and shutting his umbrella, as he passed from rain to fog and fog to rain. Not a breath of air stirred. His greatcoat hung a ton-weight on his shoulders.

He walked moodily. As a rule on his country rounds, he had the distraction of the reins: his eye, too, could range delightedly over the shifting views of lovely pastoral country, fringed by the belt of blue sea. To-day, even had the weather allowed of it, he could have seen nothing, on foot between giant hedgerows that walled in the narrow lanes leading from one cottage and one village to the next. Plodding along he first tried, without success, to visualise the pages of his passbook; then fell back on the deeper, subtler worry that was in him. This, sitting perched hobgoblinlike on his neck, pricked and nudged his memory, and would not let him rest. So that, on coming out of a house and starting his tramp anew, he would murmur to himself: "Where was I?...what was it? Oh, yes, I know: just suppose this should turn out to be Leicester over again!"