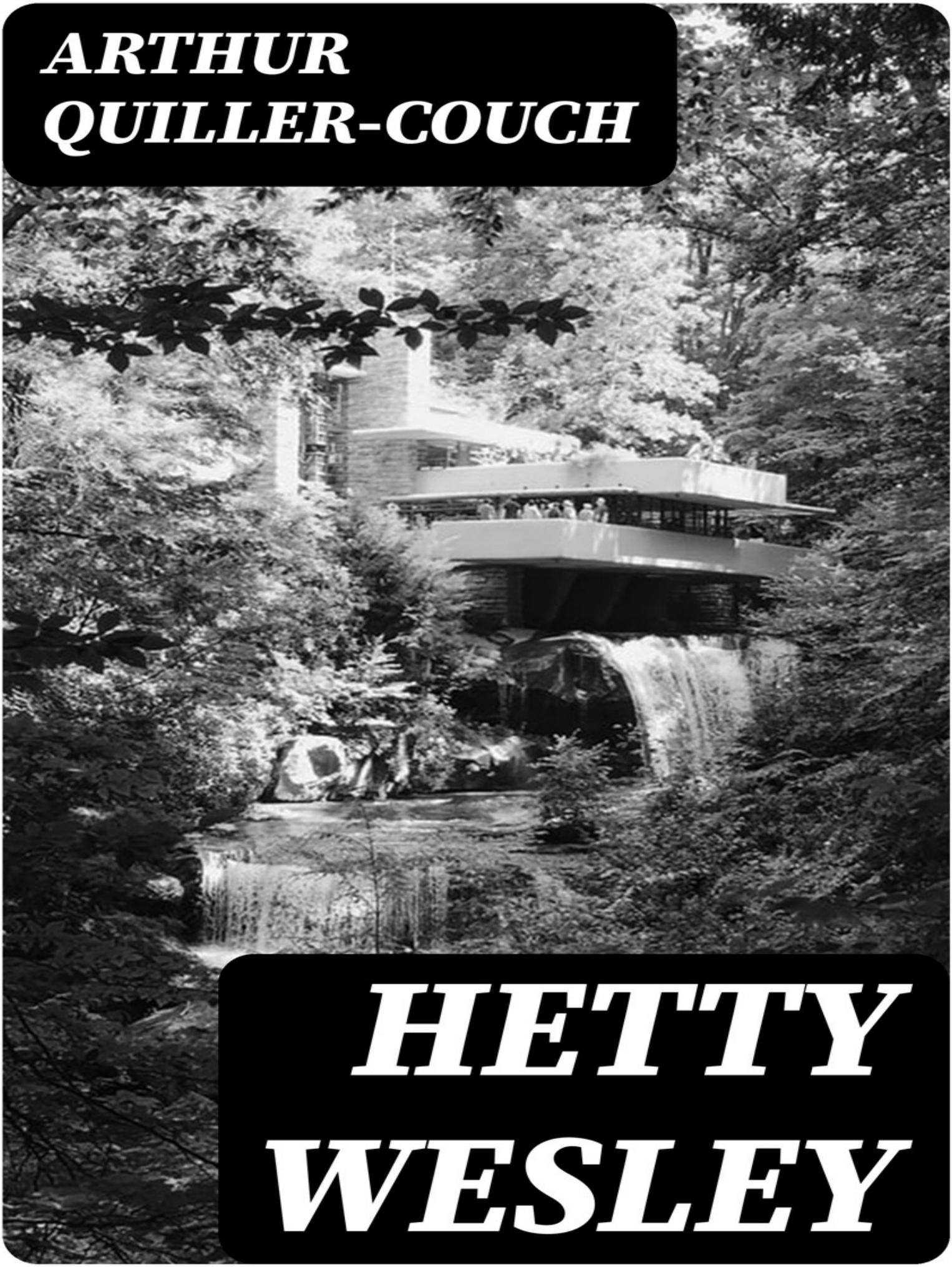
ARTHUR QUILLER-COUCH



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BOOK I.

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PROLOGUE.

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"For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?"

At Surat, by a window of his private office in the East India Company's factory, a middle-aged man stared out upon the broad river and the wharves below. Business in the factory had ceased for the day: clerks and porters had gone about their own affairs, and had left the great building strangely cool and empty and silent. The wharves, too, were deserted—all but one, where a Hindu sat in the shade of a pile of luggage, and the top of a boat's mast wavered like the index of a balance above the edge of the landing-stairs.

The luggage belonged to the middle-aged man at the window: the boat was to carry him down the river to the *Albemarle*, East Indiaman, anchored in the roads with her

Surat cargo aboard. She would sail that night for Bombay and thence away for England.

He was ready; dressed for his journey in a loose white suit, which, though designed for the East, was almost aggressively British. A Cheapside tailor had cut it, and, had it been black or gray or snuff-coloured instead of white, its wearer might have passed all the way from the Docks to Temple Bar for a solid merchant on 'Change—a self-respecting man, too, careless of dress for appearance' sake, but careful of it for his own, and as part of a habit of neatness. He wore no wig (though the date was 1723), but his own gray hair, brushed smoothly back from a sufficiently handsome forehead and tied behind with a fresh black ribbon. In his right hand he held a straw hat, broad-brimmed like a Quaker's, and a white umbrella with a green lining. His left fingered his clean-shaven chin as he gazed on the river.

The ceremonies of leave-taking were done with and dismissed; so far as he could, he had avoided them. He had ever been a hard man and knew well enough that the clerks disliked him. He hated humbug. He had come to India, almost forty years ago, not to make friends, but to make a fortune. And now the fortune was made, and the room behind him stood ready, spick and span, for the Scotsman who would take his chair to-morrow. Drawers had been emptied and dusted, loose papers and memoranda sorted and either burnt or arranged and docketed, ledgers entered up to the last item in his firm handwriting, and finally closed. The history of his manhood lay shut between their covers, written in figures terser than a Roman classic: his grand *coup* in Nunsasee goods, Abdul Guffere's debt commuted for

500,000 rupees, the salvage of the *Ramillies* wreck, his commercial duel with Viltul Parrak . . . And the record had no loose ends. He owed no man a farthing.

The door behind him opened softly and a small gray-headed man peered into the room.

"Mr. Annesley, if I might take the liberty—"

"Ah, MacNab?" Samuel Annesley swung round promptly.

"I trust, sir, I do not intrude?"

"'Intrude,' man? Why?"

"Oh, nothing, sir," answered the little man vaguely, with a dubious glance at Mr. Annesley's eyes. "Only I thought perhaps—at such a moment—old scenes, old associations—and you leaving us for ever, sir!"

"Tut, nonsense! You have something to say to me. Anything forgotten?"

"Nothing in the way of business, sir. But it occurred to me—" Mr. MacNab lowered his voice, "—Your good lady, up at the burial-ground. You will excuse me—at such a time: but it may be years before I am spared to return home, and if I can do anything in the way of looking after the grave, I shall be proud. Oh no—" he went on hurriedly with a flushed face: "for *love*, sir; for love, of course: or, as I should rather say, for old sake's sake, if that's not too bold. It would be a privilege, Mr. Annesley."

Samuel Annesley stood considering his late confidential clerk with bent brows. "I am much obliged to you, MacNab; but in this matter you must do as you please. You are right in supposing that I was sincerely attached to my wife—"

"Indeed yes, sir."

"But I have none of the sentiment you give me credit for. 'Let the dead bury the dead'—that is a text to which I have given some attention of late, and I hope to profit by it in—in the future."

"Well, God bless you, Mr. Annesley!"

"I thank you. We are delaying the boat, I fear. No"—as Mr. MacNab made an offer to accompany him—"I prefer to go alone. We have shaken hands already. The room is ready for Mr. Menzies, when he comes to-morrow. Good-bye."

A minute later Mr. MacNab, lingering by the window, saw him cross the road to the landing-stage and stand for a moment in talk with the Hindu, Bhagwan Dass. Then his straw hat disappeared down the steps. The boat was pushed off; and Bhagwan Dass, after watching it for a while, turned without emotion and came strolling across to the factory.

On board the *Albemarle* Mr. Annesley found the best cabin prepared for him, as became his importance. He went below at once and was only seen at meal-times during the short voyage to Bombay, a town that of late years had almost eclipsed Surat in trade and importance. Here Captain Bewes was to take in the bulk of his passengers and cargo, and brought his vessel close alongside the Bund. During the three days occupied in lading and stowing little order was maintained, and the decks lay open to a promiscuous crowd of coolies and porters, waterside loafers, beggars and thieves. The officers kept an eye open for these last: the rest they tolerated until the moment came for warping out, when the custom was to pipe all hands and clear the ship of intruders by a general rush.

The first two days Mr. Annesley spent upon the poop, watching the mob with a certain scornful interest. On the third he did not appear, but was served with *tiffin* in his cabin. At about six o'clock, the second mate—a Mr. Orchard—sought the captain to report that all was ready and waiting the word to cast off. His way led past Mr. Annesley's cabin, and there he came upon an old mendicant stooping over the door handle and making as if to enter and beg; whom he clouted across the shoulders and cuffed up the companion-ladder. Mr. Orchard afterwards remembered to have seen this same beggar man, or the image of him, off and on during the two previous days, seated asquat against a post on the Bund, and watching the *Albemarle*, with his crutch and bowl beside him.

When the rush came, this old man, bent and blear-eyed, was swept along the gangway like a chip on the tide. In pure lightness of heart a sailor, posted at the head of the plank, expedited him with a kick. "That'll do for good-bye to India," said he, grinning.

The old man showed no resentment, but was borne along bewildered, gripping his bowl to his breast. On the quay's edge he seemed to find his feet, and shuffled off towards the town, without once looking back at the ship.

CHAPTER I.

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"MILL—mill! A mill!"

At the entrance of Dean's Yard, Westminster, a small King's Scholar, waving his gown and yelling, collided with an old gentleman hobbling round the corner, and sat down suddenly in the gutter with a squeal, as a bagpipe collapses. The old gentleman rotated on one leg like a dervish, made an ineffectual stoop to clutch his gouty toe and wound up by bringing his rattan cane smartly down on the boy's shoulders.

"Owgh! Owgh! Stand up, you young villain! My temper's hasty, and here's a shilling-piece to cry quits. Stand up and tell me now—is it Fire, Robbery, or Murder?"

The youngster pounced at the shilling, shook off the hand on his collar, and darted down Little College Street to Hutton's Boarding House, under the windows of which he pulled up and executed a derisive war-dance.

"Hutton's, Hutton's,
Put up your buttons,
Hutton's are rottenly Whigs—"

"Mill—mill! Come out and carry home your Butcher Randall!
You'll be wanted when Wesley has done with him."

He was speeding back by this time, and flung this last taunt from a safe distance. The old gentleman collared him

again by the entry.

"Stop, my friend—here, hold hard for a moment! A fight, you said: and Wesley—was it Wesley?"

The boy nodded.

"Charles Wesley?"

"Well, it wouldn't be Samuel—at *his* age: now would it?" The boy grinned. The Reverend Samuel Wesley was the respected Head Usher of Westminster School.

"And what will Charles Wesley be fighting about?"

"How should I know? Because he wants to, belike. But I was told it began up school, with Randall's flinging a book at young Murray for a lousy Scotch Jacobite."

"H'm: and where will it be?"

The boy dropped his voice to a drawl. "In Fighting-green, I believe, sir: they told me Poets' Corner was already bespoke for a turn-up between the Dean and Sall the charwoman, with the Head Verger for bottle-holder—"

"Now, look here, young jackanapes—" But young jackanapes, catching sight of half a dozen boys—the vanguard of Hutton's—at the street corner, ducked himself free and raced from vengeance across the yard.

The old gentleman followed; and the crowd from Hutton's, surging past, showed him the way to Fighting-green where a knot of King's Scholars politely made room for him, perceiving that in spite of his small stature, his rusty wig and countrified brown suit, he was a person of some dignity and no little force of character. They read it perhaps in the set of his mouth, perhaps in the high aquiline arch of his nose, which he fed with snuff as he gazed round the ring while the fighters rested, each in his corner, after

the first round: for a mill at Westminster was a ceremonious business, and the Head Master had been known to adjourn school for one.

"H'm," said the newcomer; "no need to ask which is Wesley."

His eyes set deep beneath brows bristling like a wire-haired terrier's—were on the boy in the farther corner, who sat on his backer's knee, shoeless, stripped to the buff, with an angry red mark on the right breast below the collar-bone; a slight boy and a trifle undersized, but lithe, clear-skinned, and in the pink of condition; a handsome boy, too. By his height you might have guessed him under sixteen, but his face set you doubting. There are faces almost uncannily good-looking: they charm so confidently that you shrink from predicting the good fortune they claim, and bethink you that the gods' favourites are said to die young: and Charles Wesley's was such a face. He tightened the braces about his waist and stepped forward for the second round with a sweet and serious smile. Yet his mouth meant business.

Master Randall—who stood near three inches taller—though nicknamed "Butcher," was merely a dull heavy-shouldered Briton, dogged, hard to beat; the son of a South Sea merchant, retired and living at Barnet, who swore by Walpole and King George. But at Westminster these convictions—and, confound it! they were the convictions of England, after all—met with scurrilous derision; and here Master Randall nursed a dull and inarticulate resentment in a world out of joint, where the winning side was a butt for epigrams. To win, and be laughed at! To have the account

reopened in lampoons and witticisms, contemptible but irritating, when it should be closed by the mere act of winning! It puzzled him, and he brooded over it, turning sulky in the end, not vicious. It was in no viciousness that he had flung a book at young Murray's head and called him a lousy Jacobite, but simply to provoke Wesley and get his grievance settled by intelligible weapons, such as fists.

He knew his to be the unpopular side, and that even Freind, the Head Master, would chuckle over the defeat of a Whig. Outside of Hutton's, who cheered him for the honour of their house, he had few well-wishers; but among them was a sprinkling of boys bearing the great Whig names—Cowpers, Sackvilles, Osborns—for whose sake and for its own tradition the ring would give him fair play.

The second round began warily, Wesley sparring for an opening, Randall defensive, facing round and round, much as a bullock fronts a terrier. He knew his game; to keep up his guard and wait for a chance to get in with his long left. He was cunning, too; appeared slower than he was, tempting the other to take liberties, and, towards the end of the round, to step in a shade too closely. It was but a shade. Wesley, watching his eye, caught an instant's warning, flung his head far back and sprang away—not quickly enough to avoid a thud on the ribs. It rattled him, but did no damage, and it taught him his lesson.

Round 3. Tempted in turn by his slight success, Randall shammed slow again. But once bitten is twice shy, and this time he overreached himself, in two senses. His lunge, falling short, let in the little one, who dealt him a double knock—rap, rap, on either side of the jaw—before breaking

away. Stung out of caution he rushed and managed to close, but took a third rap which cut his upper lip. First blood to Wesley. The pair went to grass together, Randall on top. But it was the Tories who cheered.

Round 4. Randall, having bought his experience, went back to sound tactics. This and the next two rounds were uninteresting and quite indecisive, though at the end of them Wesley had a promising black eye and Randall was bleeding at mouth and nose. The old gentleman rubbed his chin and took snuff. This Fabian fighting was all against the lighter weight, who must tire in time.

Yet he did not look like tiring, but stepped out for Round 7 with the same inscrutable smile. Randall met it with a shame-faced grin— really a highly creditable, good-natured grin, though the blood about his mouth did its meaning some injustice. And with this there happened that which dismayed many and puzzled all. Wesley's fists went up, but hung, as it were impotent for the moment, while his eyes glanced aside from his adversary's and rested, with a stiffening of surprise, on the corner of the ring where the old gentleman stood. A cry went up from the King's Scholars—a groan and a warning. At the sound he flung back his head instinctively—as Randall's left shot out, caught him on the apple of the throat, and drove him staggering back across the green.

The old gentleman snapped down the lid of his snuffbox, and at the same moment felt a hand gripping him by the elbow. "Now, how the—" he began, turning as he supposed to address a Westminster boy, and found himself staring into the face of a lady.

He had no time to take stock of her. And although her fingers pinched his arm, her eyes were all for the fight.

It had been almost a knock-down; but young Wesley just saved himself by touching the turf with his fingertips and, resting so, crouched for a spring. What is more, he timed it beautifully; helped by Randall himself, who followed up at random, demoralised by the happy fluke and encouraged by the shouts of Hutton's to "finish him off." In the fall Wesley had most of his remaining breath thumped out of him; but this did not matter. He had saved the round.

The old gentleman nodded. "Well recovered: very pretty —very pretty indeed!" He turned to the lady. "I beg your pardon, madam—"

"I beg yours, sir." She withdrew her hand from his arm.

"If he can swallow that down, he may win yet."

"Please God!"

She stood almost a head taller than he, and he gazed up into a singularly noble face, proud and strong, somewhat pinched about the lips, but having such eyes and brows as belong to the few accustomed to confront great thoughts. It gave her the ineffable touch of greatness which more than redeemed her shabby black gown and antique bonnet; and, on an afterthought, the old gentleman decided that it must have been beautiful in its day. Just now it was pale, and one hand clutched the silk shawl crossed upon her bosom. He noted, too, that the hand was shapely, though roughened with housework where the mitten did not hide it.

She had scarcely glanced at him, and after a while he dropped his scrutiny and gazed with her across the ring.

"H'm," said he, "dander up, this time!"

"Yes," the lady answered, "I know that look, sir, though I have never seen it on *him*. And I trust to see him wear it, one day, in a better cause."

"Tut, madam, the cause is good enough. You don't tell me I'm talking to a Whig?—not that I'd dispute with a lady, Whig or Tory."

"A Whig?" She fetched up a smile: she had evidently a reserve of mirth. "Indeed, no: but I was thinking, sir, of the cause of Christ."

"Oh!" said the old gentleman shortly, and took snuff.

They were right. Young Wesley stepped out this time with a honeyed smile, but with a new-born light in his hazel eyes—a demoniac light, lambent and almost playful. Master Randall, caressed by them, read the danger signal a thought too late. A swift and apparently reckless feint drew another of his slogging strokes, and in a flash the enemy was under his guard. Even so, for the fraction of a second, victory lay in his arms, a clear gift to be embraced: a quick crook of the elbow, and Master Wesley's head and neck would be snugly in Chancery. Master Wesley knew it—knew, further, that there was no retreat, and that his one chance hung on getting in his blow first and disabling with it. He jabbed it home with his right, a little below the heart: and in a second the inclosing fore-arm dragged limp across his neck. He pressed on, aiming for the point of the jaw; but slowly lowered his hands as Randall tottered back two steps with a face of agony, dropped upon one knee, clutching at his breast, and so to the turf, where he writhed for a moment and fainted.

As the ring broke up, cheering, and surged across the green, the old gentleman took snuff again and snapped down the lid of his box.

"Good!" said he; then to the lady, "Are you a relative of his?"

"I am his mother, sir."

CHAPTER II.

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She moved across the green to the corner where Charles was coolly sponging his face and chest over a basin. "In a moment, ma'am!" said he, looking up with a twinkle in his eye as the boys made way for her.

She read the meaning of it and smiled at her own mistake as she drew back the hand she had put out to take the sponge from him. He was her youngest, and she had seen him but twice since, at the age of eight, he had left home for Westminster School. In spite of the evidence of her eyes he was a small child still—until his voice warned her.

She drew back her hand at once. Boys scorn any show of feeling, even between mother and son; and Charles should not be ridiculed on her account. So he sponged away and she waited, remembering how she had taught him, when turned a year old, to cry softly after a whipping. Ten children she had brought up in a far Lincolnshire parsonage, and without sparing the rod; but none had been allowed to disturb their father in his study where he sat annotating the Scriptures or turning an heroic couplet or adding up his tangled household accounts.

A boy pushed through the group around the basin, with news that Butcher Randall had come-to from his swoon and wished to shake hands: and almost before Charles could

pick up a towel and dry himself the fallen champion appeared with a somewhat battered grin.

"No malice," he mumbled: "nasty knock—better luck next time."

"Come, I say!" protested Charles, shaking hands and pulling a mock face, "Is there going to be a next time?"

"Well, you don't suppose I'm *convinced*—" Randall began: but Mrs.
Wesley broke in with a laugh.

"There's old England for you!" She brought her mittened palms together as if to clap them, but they rested together in the very gesture of prayer. "'Won't be convinced,' you say? but oh, when it's done you are worth it! Nay—don't hide your face, sir! Wounds for an honest belief are not shameful, and I can only hope that in your place my son would have shown so fair a temper."

"Whe-ew!" one of the taller boys whistled. "It's Wesley's mother!"

"She was watching, too: the last two rounds at any rate. I saw her."

"And I."

"—And so cool it might have been a dog-fight in Tuttle Fields. Your servant, ma'am!" The speaker made her a boyish bow and lifted his voice: "Three cheers for Mrs. Wesley!"

They were given—the first two with a will. The third tailed off; and Mrs. Wesley, looking about her, laughed again as the boys, suddenly turned shy or overtaken by a sense of delicacy, backed away sheepishly and left her alone with her son.

"Put on your shirt," said she, and again her hand went out to help him. "I want you to take a walk with me."

Charles nodded. "Have you seen Sam?"

"Yes. You may kiss me now, dear—there's nobody looking. I left him almost an hour ago: his leg is mending, but he cannot walk with us. He promises, though, to come to Johnson's Court this evening—I suppose, in a sedan-chair—and greet your uncle Annesley, whom I have engaged to take back to supper. You knew, of course, that I should be lodging there?"

"Sammy—we call him Sammy—told me on Sunday, but could not say when you would be arriving here."

"I reached London last night, and this morning your uncle Matthew came to my door with word that the *Albemarle* had entered the river. I think you are well enough to walk to the Docks with me."

"Well enough? Of course I am. But why not take a waterman from the stairs here?"

"'Twill cost less to walk and hire a boat at Blackwall, if necessary. Your father could give me very little money, Charles. We seem to be as poorly off as ever."

"And this uncle Annesley—" he began, but paused with a glance at his mother, whose face had suddenly grown hot. "What sort of a man is he?"

"My boy," she said with an effort, "I must not be ashamed to tell my child what I am not ashamed to hope. He is rich: he once promised to do much for Emmy and Sukey, and these promises came to nothing. But now that his wife is dead and he comes home with neither chick nor child, I see no harm in praying that his heart may be moved towards his

sister's children. At least I shall be frank with him and hide not my hope, let him treat it as he will." She was silent for a moment. "Are *all* women unscrupulous when they fight for their children? They cannot all be certain, as I am, that their children were born for greatness: and yet, I wonder sometimes—" She wound up with a smile which held something of a playful irony, but more of sadness.

"Jacky could not come with you?"

"No, and he writes bitterly about it. He is tied to Oxford—by lack of pence, again."

By this time Charles had slipped on his jacket, and the pair stepped out into the streets and set their faces eastward. Mrs. Wesley was cockney-bred and delighted in the stir and rush of life. She, the mother of many children, kept a well-poised figure and walked with the elastic step of a maid; and as she went she chatted, asking a score of shrewd questions about Westminster—the masters, the food, the old dormitory in which Charles slept, the new one then rising to replace it; breaking off to recognise some famous building, or to pause and gaze after a company of his Majesty's guards. Her own masterful carriage and unembarrassed mode of speech—"as if all London belonged to her," Charles afterwards described it—drew the stares of the passers-by; stares which she misinterpreted, for in the gut of the Strand, a few paces beyond Somerset House, she suddenly twirled the lad about and "Bless us, child, your eye's enough to frighten the town! 'Tis to be hoped brother Sam has not turned Quaker in India; or that Sally the cook-maid has a beefsteak handy."

Mr. Matthew Wesley, apothecary and by courtesy "surgeon," to whose house in Johnson's Court, Fleet Street, they presently swerved aside, had not returned from his morning's round of visits. He was a widower and took his meals irregularly. But Sally had two covers laid, with a pot of freshly drawn porter beside each; and here, after Charles's eye had been attended to and the swelling reduced, they ate and drank and rested for half an hour before resuming their walk.

So far, and until they reached the Tower, their road was familiar enough; but from Smithfield onwards they had to halt and inquire their way again and again in intervals of threading the traffic which poured out of cross-streets and to and from the docks on their right—wagons empty, wagons laden with hides, jute, scrap-iron, tallow, indigo, woollen bales, ochre, sugar; trollies and pack-horses; here and there a cordon of porters and warehousemen trundling barrels as nonchalantly as a child his hoop. The business of piloting his mother through these cross-tides left Charles little time for observation; but one incident of that walk he never forgot.

They were passing Shadwell when they came on a knot of people and two watchmen posted at the corner of a street across which a reek of smoke mingled with clouds of gritty dust. Twice or thrice they heard a crash or dull rumble of falling masonry. A distillery had been blazing there all night and a gang of workmen was now clearing the ruins. But as Charles and his mother came by the corner, the knot of people parted and gave passage to a line of stretchers—six stretchers in all, and on each a body, which the bearers

had not taken the trouble to cover from view. A bystander said that these were men who had run back into the building to drink the flaming spirit, and had dropped insensible, and been crushed when the walls fell in. The boy had never seen death before; and at the sight of it thrust upon him in this brutal form, he put out a hand towards his mother to find that she too was swaying.

"Hallo!" cried the same bystander, "look out there! the lady's fainting."

But Mrs. Wesley steadied herself. "'Tis not *that*," she gasped, at the same time waving him off; "'tis the fire—the fire!" And stepping by the crossing she fled along the street with Charles at her heels, nor ceased running for another hundred yards. "You do not remember," she began, turning at length; "no, of course you do not. You were a babe, not two years old; nurse snatched you out of bed—"

The odd thing was that, despite the impossibility, Charles seemed to remember quite clearly. As a child he had heard his sisters talk so often of the fire at Epworth Rectory that the very scene—and especially Jacky's escape—was bitten on the blank early pages as a real memory. He had half a mind now to question his mother about it and startle her with details, but her face forbade him.

She recovered her colour in bargaining with a waterman at Blackwall Stairs. Two stately Indiamen lay out on the river below, almost flank by flank; and, as it happened, the farther one was at that moment weighing her anchor, indeed had it tripped on the cathead. A cloud of boats hung about her, trailing astern as her head-sails drew and she began to gather way on the falling tide.

The waterman, a weedy loafer with a bottle nose and watery blue eyes, agreed to pull across for threepence; but no sooner were they embarked and on the tide-way, than he lay on his oars and jerked his thumb towards the moving ship. "Make it a crown, ma'am, and I'll overhaul her," he hiccupped.

Mrs. Wesley glanced towards the two ships and counted down threepence deliberately upon the thwart facing her, at the same time pursing up her lips to hide a smile. For the one ship lay moored stem and stern with her bows pointed up the river, and the other, drifting past, at this moment swung her tall poop into view with her windows flashing against the afternoon sun, and beneath them her name, the *Josiah Childs*, in tall gilt letters.

"Better make it a crown, ma'am," the waterman repeated with a drunken chuckle.

Mrs. Wesley rose in her seat. Her hand went up, and Charles made sure she meant to box the man's ears. He could not see the look on her face, but whatever it was it cowed the fellow, who seized his oars again and began to pull for dear life, as she sat back and laid her hand on the tiller.

"Easy, now," she commanded, after twenty strokes or so. "Easy, and ship your oar, unless you want it broken!" But for answer he merely stared at her, and a moment later his starboard oar snapped its tholepin like a carrot, and hurled him back over his thwart as the boat ran alongside the *Albemarle's* ladder.

"My friend," said Mrs. Wesley coolly, "you have a pestilent habit of not listening. I hired you to row me to the

Albemarle, and this, I believe, is she." Then, with a glance up at the half-dozen grinning faces above the bulwarks, "Can I see Captain Bewes?"

"Your servant, ma'am." The captain appeared at the head of the ladder; a red apple-cheeked man in shirt-sleeves and clean white nankeen breeches, who looked like nothing so much as an overgrown schoolboy.

"Is Mr. Samuel Annesley on board?"

Captain Bewes rubbed his chin. He had grown suddenly grave. "I beg your pardon," said he, "but are you a kinswoman of Mr. Annesley's?"

"I am his sister, sir."

"Then I'll have to ask you to step on board, ma'am. You may dismiss that rascal, and one of my boats shall put you ashore."

He stepped some way down the ladder to meet her and she took his hand with trepidation, while the *Albemarle's* crew leaned over and taunted the cursing waterman.

"There—that will do, my man. I don't allow swearing here.
Steady, ma'am, that's right; and now give us a hand, youngster."

"Is—is he ill?" Mrs. Wesley stammered.

"Who? Mr. Annesley? Not to my knowledge, ma'am."

"Then he is on board? We heard he had taken passage with you."

"Why, so he did; and, what's more, to the best of my knowledge, he sailed. It's a serious matter, ma'am, and we're all at our wits' ends over it; but the fact is—Mr. Annesley has disappeared."

CHAPTER III.

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That same evening, in Mr. Matthew Wesley's parlour, Johnson's Court, Captain Bewes told the whole story—or so much of it as he knew. The disappearance from on board his ship of a person so important as Mr. Samuel Annesley touched his prospects in the Company's service, and he did not conceal it. He had already reported the affair at the East India House and was looking forward to a highly uncomfortable interview with the Board of Governors: but he was concerned, too, as an honest man; and had jumped at Mrs. Wesley's invitation to sup with her in Johnson's Court and tell what he could.

Mr. Matthew Wesley, as host, sat at the head of his table and puffed at a churchwarden pipe; a small, narrow-featured man, in a chocolate-coloured suit, with steel buttons, and a wig of professional amplitude. On his right sat his sister-in-law, her bonnet replaced by a tall white cap: on his left the Captain in his shore-going clothes. He and the apothecary had mixed themselves a glass apiece of Jamaica rum, hot, with sugar and lemon-peel. At the foot of the table, with his injured leg supported on a cushion, reclined the Reverend Samuel Wesley, Junior, Usher of Westminster School, his gaunt cheeks (he was the plainest-featured of the Wesleys) wan with recent illness, and his eyes fixed on Captain Bewes's chubby face.

"Well, as I told you, Mr. Annesley's cabin lay beside my state-room, with a window next to mine in the stern: and, as I showed Mrs. Wesley to-day, my stateroom opens on the 'captain's cabin' (as they call it), where I have dined as many as two dozen before now, and where I do the most of my work. This has three windows directly under the big poop-lantern. I was sitting, that afternoon, at the head of the mahogany swing table (just as you might be sitting now, sir) with my back to the light and the midmost of the three windows wide open behind me, for air. I had the ship's chart spread before me when my second mate, Mr. Orchard, knocked at the door with word that all was ready to cast off. I asked him a few necessary questions, and while he stood there chatting I heard a splash just under my window. Well, that might have been anything—a warp cast off and the slack of it striking the water, we'll say. Whatever it was, I heard it, turned about, and with one knee on the window-locker (I remember it perfectly) took a glance out astern. I saw nothing to account for the sound: but I knew of a dozen things which might account for it— anything, in fact, down to some lazy cabin-boy heaving the dinner-scraps overboard: and having, as you'll understand, a dozen matters on my mind at the moment, I thought no more of it, but turned to Mr. Orchard again and picked up our talk. To this day I don't know that there was anything in the sound, but 'tis fair to tell you all I can."—Captain Bewes took a sip at his grog, and over the rim looked down the table towards Samuel, who nodded.

The Captain nodded back, set down his glass, and resumed. "Quite so. The next thing is that Mr. Orchard,

returning to deck two minutes later and having to pass the door of Mr. Annesley's cabin on his way, ran against an old Hindu beggar crouching there, fingering the door-handle and about to enter—or so Orchard supposed, and kicked him up the companion. He told me about it himself, next day, when we found the cabin empty and I began to make inquiries. 'Now here,' says you, 'here's a clue,' and I'm not denying but it may be one. Only when you look into it, what does it amount to? Mr. Annesley— saving your presence—was known for a stern man: you may take it for certain he'd made enemies over there, and these Hindus are the devil (saving your presence again, ma'am) for nursing a grudge. 'Keep a stone in your pocket seven years: turn it, keep it for another seven; 'twill be ready at hand for your enemy'—that's their way. But, to begin with, an old *jogi* is nothing strange to meet on a ship before she clears. These beggars in the East will creep in anywhere. And, next, you'll hardly maintain that an old beggarman ('seventy years old if a day,' said Orchard) was going to take an active man like Mr. Annesley and cram him bodily through a cabin window? 'Tis out of nature. And yet when we broke into his cabin, twenty-four hours later, there was not a trace of him: only his boxes neatly packed, his watch hanging to the beam and just running down, a handful of gold and silver tossed on to the bunk—just as he might have emptied it from his pockets—nothing else, and the whole cabin neat as a pin."

"But," objected Mr. Matthew Wesley, "if this *jogi*—or whatever you call him—had entered the cabin for no good, he would hardly have missed the money lying on the bunk."

"Sir, you must not judge these eastern mendicants by your London beggars. They are not thieves, nor avaricious, but religious men practising self-denial, who collect alms merely to support life, and believe that money so bestowed blesses the giver."

"A singularly perverted race!" was the apothecary's comment.

Captain Bewes turned towards Mr. Samuel, who next spoke from the penumbra at the far end of the table. "I believe, Captain," said he, "that these mendicants are as a rule the most harmless of men?"

"Wouldn't hurt a fly, sir. I have known some whose charity extended to the vermin on their own bodies."

Mrs. Wesley sat tapping the mahogany gently with her finger-tips. "To my thinking, the key of this mystery, if there be one, lies at Surat. My brother had powerful enemies: his letters make that clear. We must inquire into *them*—their numbers and the particular grudge they bore him—and also into the state of his mind. He was not the sort of person to be kidnapped in open day."

—"By a Thames waterman, for instance, madam?" said Captain Bewes, jocularly, but instantly changed his tone. "You suggest that he may have disappeared on his own account? To avoid his enemies, you mean?"

"As to his motives, sir, I say nothing: but it certainly looks to me as if he had planned to give you the slip."

"Tut-tut!" exclaimed Matthew. "And left his money behind?
Not likely!"

"We have still his boxes to search—"