DAVID CHRISTIE MURRAY

YOUNG MR. BARTER'S REPENTANCE

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From "Schwartz" by David Christie Murray

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Mr Bommaney was a British merchant of the highest rectitude and the most spotless reputation. He traded still under the name of Bommaney, Waite, and Co., though Waite had been long since dead, and the Company had gone out of existence in his father’s time. The old offices, cramped and inconvenient, in which the firm had begun life eighty years before, were still good enough for Mr. Bommaney, and they had an air of solid respectability which newer and flashier places lacked. The building of which they formed a part stood in Coalporter’s Alley, opposite the Church of St. Mildred, and the hum of the City’s traffic scarcely sounded in that retired and quiet locality.

Mr. Bommaney himself was a man of sixty, hale and hearty, with a rosy face and white whiskers. He was a broad-shouldered man, inclining to be portly, and he was currently accepted as a man of an indomitable will. There was no particular reason for the popular belief in his determination apart from the fact that it was a favourite boast of his that nothing ever got him down. On all occasions and in all companies he was wont to declare that no conceivable misfortune could really break a man of spirit. He confessed to a pitying sympathy for mealy-willed people (and everybody knew that Bommaney, in spite of his own strength of mind, was one of the kindliest creatures in the world); but, whenever he met a man in trouble, he would clip him by the shoulder, and would say, in his own hearty

fashion, ‘You must look the thing in the face, my boy. Look it in the face. I’d never let anything break *me* down.’

Since his reputation for fortitude was as solid and as old-fashioned amongst the people who knew him as his business character itself, it would have come as something of a shock upon any of his friends if he could but have been seen by them, or any credible man amongst them, on a certain afternoon in the April of 1880. He had locked himself in his own room, and, sitting there in a big chair before a businesslike desk, with a great number of docketed papers in pigeon-holes, and a disordered mass of papers strewn before him, the determined Mr. Bommaney, the decided Mr. Bommaney, the Mr. Bommaney whom no misfortune could subdue, was crying, very feebly and quietly, and was mopping his rosy cheeks, and blowing his nose in an utter and unrestraining abandonment to trouble.

There was another fact which would have come upon his friends with an equal shock of surprise if they could but have had it brought home to them. The man who sat unaffectedly crying in the big chair in helpless contemplation of the scattered papers was a hopeless bankrupt, and had seen himself sliding towards bankruptcy for years. When men who knew him wanted business advice, they went to him by preference, and nobody came away empty. He knew the City and its intricacies like a book. He knew who was safe and who was shaky, as if by a kind of instinct, and he knew where and when to invest, and where and when not to invest, as few men did. ‘You can’t get at me,’ he would say; for, old-fashioned as he was, he used a little of the new-fashioned slang to give spice and vigour to

his conversation. ‘There isn’t a move on the board that I don’t know.’ He advised his friends excellently, and there were perhaps half a score of fairly well-to-do speculative people who had to thank him, and him alone, for the comfort they lived in and the consideration they enjoyed. He had been wise for others all his life, and in his own interests he had always acted like a greenhorn. He talked loudly, he spent freely, he paid his way, he expressed the soundest business maxims, and was as shrewd in detail as he was wise in generalities, and these things made a natural reputation for him: whilst he traded for years at the expense of his capital, and went steadily and surely towards the bottomless gulf of insolvency. Now he was on the very verge of it, and to-morrow he would be in it. It lent a feeble sting to his sufferings to know how surprised people would be, and how completely men would find him out.

He had not very profoundly involved other people in his own ruin, but he had gone a little farther than a man altogether brave, and honourable, and clearsighted would have ventured, and he knew that some would suffer with him. He might have made arrangements to go a little farther still if he had been courageous, clear-sighted, and dishonest, and might have held his head up for another matter too, perhaps. But he had lacked the nerve for that, and had never consciously been a rogue. He felt even now a pride of honesty. He had been unfortunate, and his creditors would have everything—everything.

He thanked God that Phil’s mother had tied her money on her only son, and that the boy at least had enough to begin the world with. How should he face Phil when he came

home again? How should he send the news to him? The lad was away enjoying himself, travelling all round the world with a wandering Baronet, who owned a yacht and had an unappeasable taste for the destruction of big game. He would have to surrender his fashionable and titled acquaintance now, poor fellow, and begin the world with a disgraced and broken frame to be a drag and hindrance to him. The more Mr. Bommaney thought of these things, the more unrestrainedly he cried; and the more he cried, the less he felt able or inclined to control his tears.

He wept almost silently, only an occasional sniff betraying his emotion to his ear. He had always held his head so high, and had been so believed in. It was very bitter.

Whilst he was in the midst of this childish abandonment to his grief a set of knuckles softly and hesitatingly tapped the door from without, and directly afterwards a hand made a tentative respectful sort of attempt upon the handle.

‘Who’s there?’ cried Mr. Bommaney, steadying his voice as best he could.

‘A gentleman to see you, sir,’ answered a smooth voice outside.

Mr. Bommaney pushed back his chair, rose to his feet, and retiring to a smaller room consulted a little square looking-glass which hung upon the wall above his washing-stand. His blue eyes were very tearful and a little swollen, his cheeks and nose looked as if they had been scalded.

‘Wait a moment,’ he said aloud, and his voice betrayed him by a break. He blushed and trembled, thinking that Mr. Hornett, his confidential clerk, would know how he was

breaking down, and would speak of his want of courage and self-command hereafter. The reflection nerved him somewhat, and he sluiced his face with water, making a little unnecessary noise of splashing to tell the listener how he was engaged. He polished his face with the towel, and, consulting the mirror again, thought he looked a little better.

Then he re-entered his business room, and turning the key in the lock opened the door slightly, a mere inch or two.

‘Who is it?’

‘A Mr. Brown, sir,’ said the smooth voice outside. The clerk insinuated a card through the space between the door and door-jamb, and Mr. Bommaney took it from his fingers without revealing himself. He had some difficulty in making out its inscription, for his eyes were newly tearful, and, whilst he peered at it, a reflex of his late emotions brought a sniffling sob again. He was freshly ashamed at this, and said hastily,

‘Five minutes’ time. I will ring when I am ready. Ask the gentleman to wait.’

Mr. James Hornett softly closed the door, and stood on the landing with long lean fingers scraping at his lantern jaws. He was a little man, short of stature, and sparely built. His skin was vealy in complexion, and he had wiry hair of a russet-red. Even when he was clean shaven his fingers rasped upon his hollow cheeks with a faint sound. His nose and chin were long and pointed, and his manner was meek and self-effacing even when he was alone. There was a tinge of wonder in his face, at war with an habitual smile, in which his eyes had no part.

‘Something wrong?’ he said, under his breath. He went creeping softly down the stairs. ‘Something wrong? Mr. Bommaney in tears? Mr. Bommaney!’

Could anything have happened to Mr. Phil? That was the only thing Mr. Hornett could think of as being likely to affect his employer in that way.

Now Mr. Hornett had been in his present employ for thirty years, man and boy, and he was human. Therefore, when at the expiration of a little more than five minutes’ time Mr. Bommaney’s bell rang, he himself ushered the visitor upstairs, and in place of retiring to his own pew below stairs, lingered in a desert little apartment rarely used, and then stole out upon the landing and listened. He was the more prompted to this because the visitor, who had a bucolic hearty aspect, and was very talkative, had told him downstairs that Mr. Bommaney and himself were old friends and schoolfellows, and had been in each other’s confidence for years.

‘I am afraid, sir,’ Mr. Hornett had said, when the visitor first presented himself, ‘that Mr. Bommaney may not be able to see you at present. He gave orders not to be disturbed.’

‘Not see me?’ said the visitor with a laugh. ‘I’ll engage he will.’ And then followed the statement about his old acquaintanceship with Mr. Hornett’s employer.

If there were anything to be told at all, it seemed not unlikely that this visitor might be the recipient of the intelligence, and Mr. Hornett lingered to find if haply he might overhear. He heard nothing that enlightened him as

to the reasons for his employer's disturbance, but heard most that passed between the two.

Bommaney had succeeded in composing himself and in washing away the traces of his tears. Then he had taken a stiffish dose of brandy and water, and was something like his own man again. He received his visitor cordially, and in his anxiety not to seem low-spirited was a little more boisterous than common.

'I'm busy, you see,' he said, waving a hand at the papers scattered on the desk, and keeping up the farce of prosperous merchandise to the last, 'but I can spare *you* a minute or two, old man. What brings you up to town?'

'I've come here to settle,' said the visitor. He was a florid man with crisp black hair with a hint of gray in it, and he was a countryman from head to heel. He seemed a little disposed to flaunt his bucolics upon the town, his hat, his necktie, his boots and gaiters, were of so countrified a fashion, and yet he looked somehow more of a gentleman than Bommaney.

'Yes,' he said, 'I've come to settle.' He rubbed his hands and laughed here, not because there was anything humorous and amusing in his thoughts, but out of sheer health and jollity of nature. Bommaney, still distrustful of his own aspect, and afraid of being observed, sat opposite to him with bent head and fidgeted with his papers, blindly pretending to arrange them.

'To settle,' he said absently. Then, rousing himself with an effort, 'I thought you hated London?'

'Ah, my boy,' said his visitor, 'when you're in the shafts with a whip behind you, you've got to go where you are