
E. F. BENSON
MICHAEL

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CHAPTER I

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Though there was nothing visibly graceful about Michael Comber, he apparently had the art of giving gracefully. He had already told his cousin Francis, who sat on the arm of the sofa by his table, that there was no earthly excuse for his having run into debt; but now when the moment came for giving, he wrote the cheque quickly and eagerly, as if thoroughly enjoying it, and passed it over to him with a smile that was extraordinarily pleasant.

“There you are, then, Francis,” he said; “and I take it from you that that will put you perfectly square again. You’ve got to write to me, remember, in two days’ time, saying that you have paid those bills. And for the rest, I’m delighted that you told me about it. In fact, I should have been rather hurt if you hadn’t.”

Francis apparently had the art of accepting gracefully, which is more difficult than the feat which Michael had so successfully accomplished.

“Mike, you’re a brick,” he said. “But then you always are a brick. Thanks awfully.”

Michael got up, and shuffled rather than walked across the room to the bell by the fireplace. As long as he was sitting down his big arms and broad shoulders gave the impression of strength, and you would have expected to find when he got up that he was tall and largely made. But when he rose the extreme shortness of his legs manifested itself, and he appeared almost deformed. His hands hung nearly to his knees; he was heavy, short, lumpish.

“But it’s more blessed to give than to receive, Francis,” he said. “I have the best of you there.”

“Well, it’s pretty blessed to receive when you are in a tight place, as I was,” he said, laughing. “And I am so grateful.”

“Yes, I know you are. And it’s that which makes me feel rather cheap, because I don’t miss what I’ve given you. But that’s distinctly not a reason for your doing it again. You’ll have tea, won’t you?”

“Why, yes,” said Francis, getting up, also, and leaning his elbow on the chimney-piece, which was nearly on a level with the top of Michael’s head. And if Michael had gracefulness only in the art of giving, Francis’s gracefulness in receiving was clearly of a piece with the rest of him. He was tall, slim and alert, with the quick, soft movements of some wild animal. His face, brown with sunburn and pink with brisk-going blood, was exceedingly handsome in a boyish and almost effeminate manner, and though he was only eighteen months younger than his cousin, he looked as if nine or ten years might have divided their ages.

“But you are a brick, Mike,” he said again, laying his long, brown hand on his cousin’s shoulder. “I can’t help saying it twice.”

“Twice more than was necessary,” said Michael, finally dismissing the subject.

The room where they sat was in Michael’s flat in Half Moon Street, and high up in one of those tall, discreet-looking houses. The windows were wide open on this hot July afternoon, and the bourdon hum of London, where Piccadilly poured by at the street end, came in blended and

blunted by distance, but with the suggestion of heat, of movement, of hurrying affairs. The room was very empty of furniture; there was a rug or two on the parquet floor, a long, low bookcase taking up the end near the door, a table, a sofa, three or four chairs, and a piano. Everything was plain, but equally obviously everything was expensive, and the general impression given was that the owner had no desire to be surrounded by things he did not want, but insisted on the superlative quality of the things he did. The rugs, for instance, happened to be of silk, the bookcase happened to be Hepplewhite, the piano bore the most eminent of makers' names. There were three mezzotints on the walls, a dragon's-blood vase on the high, carved chimney-piece; the whole bore the unmistakable stamp of a fine, individual taste.

"But there's something else I want to talk to you about, Francis," said Michael, as presently afterwards they sat over their tea. "I can't say that I exactly want your advice, but I should like your opinion. I've done something, in fact, without asking anybody, but now that it's done I should like to know what you think about it."

Francis laughed.

"That's you all over, Michael," he said. "You always do a thing first, if you really mean to do it—which I suppose is moral courage—and then you go anxiously round afterwards to see if other people approve, which I am afraid looks like moral cowardice. I go on a different plan altogether. I ascertain the opinion of so many people before I do anything that I end by forgetting what I wanted to do. At

least, that seems a reasonable explanation for the fact that I so seldom do anything."

Michael looked affectionately at the handsome boy who lounged long-legged in the chair opposite him. Like many very shy persons, he had one friend with whom he was completely unreserved, and that was this cousin of his, for whose charm and insouciant brilliance he had so adoring an admiration.

He pointed a broad, big finger at him.

"Yes, but when you are like that," he said, "you can just float along. Other people float you. But I should sink heavily if I did nothing. I've got to swim all the time."

"Well, you are in the army," said Francis. "That's as much swimming as anyone expects of a fellow who has expectations. In fact, it's I who have to swim all the time, if you come to think of it. You are somebody; I'm not!"

Michael sat up and took a cigarette.

"But I'm not in the army any longer," he said. "That's just what I am wanting to tell you."

Francis laughed.

"What do you mean?" he asked. "Have you been cashiered or shot or something?"

"I mean that I wrote and resigned my commission yesterday," said Michael. "If you had dined with me last night—as, by the way, you promised to do—I should have told you then."

Francis got up and leaned against the chimney-piece. He was conscious of not thinking this abrupt news as important as he felt he ought to think it. That was characteristic of him; he floated, as Michael had lately told him, finding the

world an extremely pleasant place, full of warm currents that took you gently forward without entailing the slightest exertion. But Michael's grave and expectant face—that Michael who had been so eagerly kind about meeting his debts for him—warned him that, however gossamer-like his own emotions were, he must attempt to ballast himself over this.

"Are you speaking seriously?" he asked.

"Quite seriously. I never did anything that was so serious."

"And that is what you want my opinion about?" he asked. "If so, you must tell me more, Mike. I can't have an opinion unless you give me the reasons why you did it. The thing itself—well, the thing itself doesn't seem to matter so immensely. The significance of it is why you did it."

Michael's big, heavy-browed face lightened a moment. "For a fellow who never thinks," he said, "you think uncommonly well. But the reasons are obvious enough. You can guess sufficient reasons to account for it."

"Let's hear them anyhow," said Francis.

Michael clouded again.

"Surely they are obvious," he said. "No one knows better than me, unless it is you, that I'm not like the rest of you. My mind isn't the build of a guardsman's mind, any more than my unfortunate body is. Half our work, as you know quite well, consists in being pleasant and in liking it. Well, I'm not pleasant. I'm not breezy and cordial. I can't do it. I make a task of what is a pastime to all of you, and I only shuffle through my task. I'm not popular, I'm not liked. It's no earthly use saying I am. I don't like the life; it seems to

me senseless. And those who live it don’t like me. They think me heavy—just heavy. And I have enough sensitiveness to know it.”

Michael need not have stated his reasons, for his cousin could certainly have guessed them; he could, too, have confessed to the truth of them. Michael had not the light hand, which is so necessary when young men work together in a companionship of which the cordiality is an essential part of the work; neither had he in the social side of life that particular and inimitable sort of easy self-confidence which, as he had said just now, enables its owner to float. Except in years he was not young; he could not manage to be “clubable”; he was serious and awkward at a supper party; he was altogether without the effervescence which is necessary in order to avoid flatness. He did his work also in the same conscientious but leaden way; officers and men alike felt it. All this Francis knew perfectly well; but instead of acknowledging it, he tried quite fruitlessly to smooth it over.

“Aren’t you exaggerating?” he asked.

Michael shook his head.

“Oh, don’t tone it down, Francis!” he said. “Even if I was exaggerating—which I don’t for a moment admit—the effect on my general efficiency would be the same. I think what I say is true.”

Francis became more practical.

“But you’ve only been in the regiment three years,” he said. “It won’t be very popular resigning after only three years.”

“I have nothing much to lose on the score of popularity,” remarked Michael.

There was nothing pertinent that could be consoling here.

“And have you told your father?” asked Francis. “Does Uncle Robert know?”

“Yes; I wrote to father this morning, and I’m going down to Ashbridge to-morrow. I shall be very sorry if he disapproves.”

“Then you’ll be sorry,” said Francis.

“I know, but it won’t make any difference to my action. After all, I’m twenty-five; if I can’t begin to manage my life now, you may be sure I never shall. But I know I’m right. I would bet on my infallibility. At present I’ve only told you half my reasons for resigning, and already you agree with me.”

Francis did not contradict this.

“Let’s hear the rest, then,” he said.

“You shall. The rest is far more important, and rather resembles a sermon.”

Francis appropriately sat down again.

“Well, it’s this,” said Michael. “I’m twenty-five, and it is time that I began trying to be what perhaps I may be able to be, instead of not trying very much—because it’s hopeless—to be what I can’t be. I’m going to study music. I believe that I could perhaps do something there, and in any case I love it more than anything else. And if you love a thing, you have certainly a better chance of succeeding in it than in something that you don’t love at all. I was stuck into the army for no reason except that soldiering is among the few

employments which it is considered proper for fellows in my position—good Lord! how awful it sounds!—proper for me to adopt. The other things that were open were that I should be a sailor or a member of Parliament. But the soldier was what father chose. I looked round the picture gallery at home the other day; there are twelve Lord Ashbridges in uniform. So, as I shall be Lord Ashbridge when father dies, I was stuck into uniform too, to be the ill-starred thirteenth. But what has it all come to? If you think of it, when did the majority of them wear their smart uniforms? Chiefly when they went on peaceful parades or to court balls, or to the Sir Joshua Reynolds of the period to be painted. They've been tin soldiers, Francis! You're a tin soldier, and I've just ceased to be a tin soldier. If there was the smallest chance of being useful in the army, by which I mean standing up and being shot at because I am English, I would not dream of throwing it up. But there's no such chance."

Michael paused a moment in his sermon, and beat out the ashes from his pipe against the grate.

"Anyhow the chance is too remote," he said. "All the nations with armies and navies are too much afraid of each other to do more than growl. Also I happen to want to do something different with my life, and you can't do anything unless you believe in what you are doing. I want to leave behind me something more than the portrait of a tin soldier in the dining-room at Ashbridge. After all, isn't an artistic profession the greatest there is? For what counts, what is of value in the world to-day? Greek statues, the Italian pictures, the symphonies of Beethoven, the plays of Shakespeare. The people who have made beautiful things

are they who are the benefactors of mankind. At least, so the people who love beautiful things think."

Francis glanced at his cousin. He knew this interesting vital side of Michael; he was aware, too, that had anybody except himself been in the room, Michael could not have shown it. Perhaps there might be people to whom he could show it but certainly they were not those among whom Michael's life was passed.

"Go on," he said encouragingly. "You're ripping, Mike."

"Well, the nuisance of it is that the things I am ripping about appear to father to be a sort of indoor game. It's all right to play the piano, if it's too wet to play golf. You can amuse yourself with painting if there aren't any pheasants to shoot. In fact, he will think that my wanting to become a musician is much the same thing as if I wanted to become a billiard-marker. And if he and I talked about it till we were a hundred years old, he could never possibly appreciate my point of view."

Michael got up and began walking up and down the room with his slow, ponderous movement.

"Francis, it's a thousand pities that you and I can't change places," he said. "You are exactly the son father would like to have, and I should so much prefer being his nephew. However, you come next; that's one comfort."

He paused a moment.

"You see, the fact is that he doesn't like me," he said. "He has no sympathy whatever with my tastes, nor with what I am. I'm an awful trial to him, and I don't see how to help it. It's pure waste of time, my going on in the Guards. I do it badly, and I hate it. Now, you're made for it; you're

that sort, and that sort is my father's sort. But I'm not; no one knows that better than myself. Then there's the question of marriage, too."

Michael gave a mirthless laugh.

"I'm twenty-five, you see," he said, "and it's the family custom for the eldest son to marry at twenty-five, just as he's baptised when he's a certain number of weeks old, and confirmed when he is fifteen. It's part of the family plan, and the Medes and Persians aren't in it when the family plan is in question. Then, again, the lucky young woman has to be suitable; that is to say, she must be what my father calls 'one of us.' How I loathe that phrase! So my mother has a list of the suitable, and they come down to Ashbridge in gloomy succession, and she and I are sent out to play golf together or go on the river. And when, to our unutterable relief, that is over, we hurry back to the house, and I escape to my piano, and she goes and flirts with you, if you are there. Don't deny it. And then another one comes, and she is drearier than the last—at least, I am."

Francis lay back and laughed at this dismal picture of the rejection of the fittest.

"But you're so confoundedly hard to please, Mike," he said. "There was an awfully nice girl down at Ashbridge at Easter when I was there, who was simply pining to take you. I've forgotten her name."

Michael clicked his fingers in a summary manner.

"There you are!" he said. "You and she flirted all the time, and three months afterwards you don't even remember her name. If you had only been me, you would have married her. As it was, she and I bored each other stiff.

There’s an irony for you! But as for pining, I ask you whether any girl in her senses could pine for me. Look at me, and tell me! Or rather, don’t look at me; I can’t bear to be looked at.”

Here was one of Michael’s morbid sensitivenesses. He seldom forgot his own physical appearance, the fact of which was to him appalling. His stumpy figure with its big body, his broad, blunt-featured face, his long arms, his large hands and feet, his clumsiness in movement were to him of the nature of a constant nightmare, and it was only with Francis and the ease that his solitary presence gave, or when he was occupied with music that he wholly lost his self-consciousness in this respect. It seemed to him that he must be as repulsive to others as he was to himself, which was a distorted view of the case. Plain without doubt he was, and of heavy and ungainly build; but his belief in the finality of his uncouthness was morbid and imaginary, and half his inability to get on with his fellows, no less than with the maidens who were brought down in single file to Ashbridge, was due to this. He knew very well how light-heartedly they escaped to the geniality and attractiveness of Francis, and in the clutch of his own introspective temperament he could not free himself from the handicap of his own sensitiveness, and, like others, take himself for granted. He crushed his own power to please by the weight of his judgments on himself.

“So there’s another reason to complain of the irony of fate,” he said. “I don’t want to marry anybody, and God knows nobody wants to marry me. But, then, it’s my duty to become the father of another Lord Ashbridge, as if there

had not been enough of them already, and his mother must be a certain kind of girl, with whom I have nothing in common. So I say that if only we could have changed places, you would have filled my niche so perfectly, and I should have been free to bury myself in Leipzig or Munich, and lived like the grub I certainly am, and have drowned myself in a sea of music. As it is, goodness knows what my father will say to the letter I wrote him yesterday, which he will have received this morning. However, that will soon be patent, for I go down there to-morrow. I wish you were coming with me. Can't you manage to for a day or two, and help things along? Aunt Barbara will be there."

Francis consulted a small, green morocco pocket-book.

"Can't to-morrow," he said, "nor yet the day after. But perhaps I could get a few days' leave next week."

"Next week's no use. I go to Baireuth next week."

"Baireuth? Who's Baireuth?" asked Francis.

"Oh, a man I know. His other name was Wagner, and he wrote some tunes."

Francis nodded.

"Oh, but I've heard of him," he said. "They're rather long tunes, aren't they? At least I found them so when I went to the opera the other night. Go on with your plans, Mike. What do you mean to do after that?"

"Go on to Munich and hear the same tunes over, again. After that I shall come back and settle down in town and study."

"Play the piano?" asked Francis, amiably trying to enter into his cousin's schemes.

Michael laughed.

“No doubt that will come into it,” he said. “But it’s rather as if you told somebody you were a soldier, and he said: ‘Oh, is that quick march?’”

“So it is. Soldiering largely consists of quick march, especially when it’s more than usually hot.”

“Well, I shall learn to play the piano,” said Michael.

“But you play so rippingly already,” said Francis cordially. “You played all those songs the other night which you had never seen before. If you can do that, there is nothing more you want to learn with the piano, is there?”

“You are talking rather as father will talk,” observed Michael.

“Am I? Well, I seem to be talking sense.”

“You weren’t doing what you seemed, then. I’ve got absolutely everything to learn about the piano.”

Francis rose.

“Then it is clear I don’t understand anything about it,” he said. “Nor, I suppose, does Uncle Robert. But, really, I rather envy you, Mike. Anyhow, you want to do and be something so much that you are gaily going to face unpleasantnesses with Uncle Robert about it. Now, I wouldn’t face unpleasantnesses with anybody about anything I wanted to do, and I suppose the reason must be that I don’t want to do anything enough.”

“The malady of not wanting,” quoted Michael.

“Yes, I’ve got that malady. The ordinary things that one naturally does are all so pleasant, and take all the time there is, that I don’t want anything particular, especially now that you’ve been such a brick—”

“Stop it,” said Michael.

“Right; I got it in rather cleverly. I was saying that it must be rather nice to want a thing so much that you’ll go through a lot to get it. Most fellows aren’t like that.”

“A good many fellows are jelly-fish,” observed Michael.

“I suppose so. I’m one, you know. I drift and float. But I don’t think I sting. What are you doing to-night, by the way?”

“Playing the piano, I hope. Why?”

“Only that two fellows are dining with me, and I thought perhaps you would come. Aunt Barbara sent me the ticket for a box at the Gaiety, too, and we might look in there. Then there’s a dance somewhere.”

“Thanks very much, but I think I won’t,” said Michael. “I’m rather looking forward to an evening alone.”

“And that’s an odd thing to look forward to,” remarked Francis.

“Not when you want to play the piano. I shall have a chop here at eight, and probably thump away till midnight.”

Francis looked round for his hat and stick.

“I must go,” he said. “I ought to have gone long ago, but I didn’t want to. The malady came in again. Most of the world have got it, you know, Michael.”

Michael rose and stood by his tall cousin.

“I think we English have got it,” he said. “At least, the English you and I know have got it. But I don’t believe the Germans, for instance, have. They’re in deadly earnest about all sorts of things—music among them, which is the point that concerns me. The music of the world is German, you know!”

Francis demurred to this.

“Oh, I don’t think so,” he said. “This thing at the Gaiety is ripping, I believe. Do come and see.”

Michael resisted this chance of revising his opinion about the German origin of music, and Francis drifted out into Piccadilly. It was already getting on for seven o’clock, and the roadway and pavements were full of people who seemed rather to contradict Michael’s theory that the nation generally suffered from the malady of not wanting, so eagerly and numerously were they on the quest for amusement. Already the street was a mass of taxicabs and private motors containing, each one of them, men and women in evening dress, hurrying out to dine before the theatre or the opera. Bright, eager faces peered out, with sheen of silk and glitter of gems; they all seemed alert and prosperous and keen for the daily hours of evening entertainment. A crowd similar in spirit pervaded the pavements, white-shirted men with coat on arm stepped in and out of swinging club doors and the example set by the leisured class seemed copiously copied by those whom desks and shops had made prisoners all day. The air of the whole town, swarming with the nation that is supposed to make so grave an affair of its amusements, was indescribably gay and lighthearted; the whole city seemed set on enjoying itself. The buses that boomed along were packed inside and out, and each was placarded with advertisement of some popular piece at theatre or music-hall. Inside the Green Park the grass was populous with lounging figures, who, unable to pay for indoor entertainment, were making the most of what the coolness of sunset and grass supplied them with gratis; the

newsboards of itinerant sellers contained nothing of more serious import than the result of cricket matches; and, as the dusk began to fall, street lamps and signs were lit, like early rising stars, so that no hint of the gathering night should be permitted to intrude on the perpetually illuminated city. All that was sordid and sad, all that was busy (except on these gay errands of pleasure) was shuffled away out of sight, so that the pleasure seekers might be excused for believing that there was nothing in the world that could demand their attention except the need of amusing themselves successfully. The workers toiled in order that when the working day was over the fruits of their labour might yield a harvest of a few hours' enjoyment; silkworms had spun so that from carriage windows might glimmer the wrappings made from their cocoons; divers had been imperilled in deep seas so that the pearls they had won might embellish the necks of these fair wearers.

To Francis this all seemed very natural and proper, part of the recognised order of things that made up the series of sensations known to him as life. He did not, as he had said, very particularly care about anything, and it was undoubtedly true that there was no motive or conscious purpose in his life for which he would voluntarily have undergone any important stress of discomfort or annoyance. It was true that in pursuance of his profession there was a certain amount of "quick marching" and drill to be done in the heat, but that was incidental to the fact that he was in the Guards, and more than compensated for by the pleasures that were also naturally incidental to it. He would have been quite unable to think of anything that he would

sooner do than what he did; and he had sufficient of the ingrained human tendency to do something of the sort, which was a matter of routine rather than effort, than have nothing whatever, except the gratification of momentary whims, to fill his day. Besides, it was one of the conventions or even conditions of life that every boy on leaving school “did” something for a certain number of years. Some went into business in order to acquire the wealth that should procure them leisure; some, like himself, became soldiers or sailors, not because they liked guns and ships, but because to boys of a certain class these professions supplied honourable employment and a pleasant time. Without being in any way slack in his regimental duties, he performed them as many others did, without the smallest grain of passion, and without any imaginative forecast as to what fruit, if any, there might be to these hours spent in drill and discipline. He was but one of a very large number who do their work without seriously bothering their heads about its possible meaning or application. His particular job gave a young man a pleasant position and an easy path to general popularity, given that he was willing to be sociable and amused. He was extremely ready to be both the one and the other, and there his philosophy of life stopped.

And, indeed, it seemed on this hot July evening that the streets were populated by philosophers like unto himself. Never had England generally been more prosperous, more secure, more comfortable. The heavens of international politics were as serene as the evening sky; not yet was the storm-cloud that hung over Ireland bigger than a man’s hand; east, west, north and south there brooded the peace

of the close of a halcyon day, and the amazing doings of the Suffragettes but added a slight incentive to the perusal of the morning paper. The arts flourished, harvests prospered; the world like a newly-wound clock seemed to be in for a spell of serene and orderly ticking, with an occasional chime just to show how the hours were passing.

London was an extraordinarily pleasant place, people were friendly, amusements beckoned on all sides; and for Francis, as for so many others, but a very moderate amount of work was necessary to win him an approved place in the scheme of things, a seat in the slow-wheeling sunshine. It really was not necessary to want, above all to undergo annoyances for the sake of what you wanted, since so many pleasurable distractions, enough to fill day and night twice over, were so richly spread around.

Some day he supposed he would marry, settle down and become in time one of those men who presented a bald head in a club window to the gaze of passers-by. It was difficult, perhaps, to see how you could enjoy yourself or lead a life that paid its own way in pleasure at the age of forty, but that he trusted that he would learn in time. At present it was sufficient to know that in half an hour two excellent friends would come to dinner, and that they would proceed in a spirit of amiable content to the Gaiety. After that there was a ball somewhere (he had forgotten where, but one of the others would be sure to know), and to-morrow and to-morrow would be like unto to-day. It was idle to ask questions of oneself when all went so well; the time for asking questions was when there was matter for complaint, and with him assuredly there was none. The

advantages of being twenty-three years old, gay and good-looking, without a care in the world, now that he had Michael's cheque in his pocket, needed no comment, still less complaint. He, like the crowd who had sufficient to pay for a six-penny seat at a music-hall, was perfectly content with life in general; to-morrow would be time enough to do a little more work and glean a little more pleasure.

It was indeed an admirable England, where it was not necessary even to desire, for there were so many things, bright, cheerful things to distract the mind from desire. It was a day of dozing in the sun, like the submerged, scattered units or duets on the grass of the Green Park, of behaving like the lilies of the field. . . . Francis found he was rather late, and proceeded hastily to his mother's house in Savile Row to array himself, if not "like one of these," like an exceedingly well-dressed young man, who demanded of his tailor the utmost of his art; with the prospect, owing to Michael's generosity, of being paid to-morrow.

Michael, when his cousin had left him, did not at once proceed to his evening by himself with his piano, though an hour before he had longed to be alone with it and a pianoforte arrangement of the Meistersingers, of which he had promised himself a complete perusal that evening. But Francis's visit had already distracted him, and he found now that Francis's departure took him even farther away from his designed evening. Francis, with his good looks and his gay spirits, his easy friendships and perfect content (except when a small matter of deficit and dunning letters obscured the sunlight for a moment), was exactly all that he would have wished to be himself. But the moment he formulated

that wish in his mind, he knew that he would not voluntarily have parted with one atom of his own individuality in order to be Francis or anybody else. He was aware how easy and pleasant life would become if he could look on it with Francis's eyes, and if the world would look on him as it looked on his cousin. There would be no more bother. . . . In a moment, he would, by this exchange, have parted with his own unhappy temperament, his own deplorable body, and have stepped into an amiable and prosperous little neutral kingdom that had no desires and no regrets. He would have been free from all wants, except such as could be gratified so easily by a little work and a great capacity for being amused; he would have found himself excellently fitting the niche into which the rulers of birth and death had placed him: an eldest son of a great territorial magnate, who had what was called a stake in the country, and desired nothing better.

Willingly, as he had said, would he have changed circumstances with Francis, but he knew that he would not, for any bait the world could draw in front of him, have changed natures with him, even when, to all appearance, the gain would so vastly have been on his side. It was better to want and to miss than to be content. Even at this moment, when Francis had taken the sunshine out of the room with his departure, Michael clung to his own gloom and his own uncouthness, if by getting rid of them he would also have been obliged to get rid of his own temperament, unhappy as it was, but yet capable of strong desire. He did not want to be content; he wanted to see always ahead of him a golden mist, through which the shadows of

unconjecturable shapes appeared. He was willing and eager to get lost, if only he might go wandering on, groping with his big hands, stumbling with his clumsy feet, desiring . . .

There are the indications of a path visible to all who desire. Michael knew that his path, the way that seemed to lead in the direction of the ultimate goal, was music. There, somehow, in that direction lay his destiny; that was the route. He was not like the majority of his sex and years, who weave their physical and mental dreams in the loom of a girl's face, in her glance, in the curves of her mouth. Deliberately, owing chiefly to his morbid consciousness of his own physical defects, he had long been accustomed to check the instincts natural to a young man in this regard. He had seen too often the facility with which others, more fortunate than he, get delightedly lost in that golden haze; he had experienced too often the absence of attractiveness in himself. How could any girl of the London ballroom, he had so frequently asked himself, tolerate dancing or sitting out with him when there was Francis, and a hundred others like him, so pleased to take his place? Nor, so he told himself, was his mind one whit more apt than his body. It did not move lightly and agreeably with unconscious smiles and easy laughter. By nature he was monkish, he was celibate. He could but cease to burn incense at such ineffectual altars, and help, as he had helped this afternoon, to replenish the censers of more fortunate acolytes.

This was all familiar to him; it passed through his head unbidden, when Francis had left him, like the refrain of some well-known song, occurring spontaneously without need of an effort of memory. It was a possession of his, known by

heart, and it no longer, except for momentary twinges, had any bitterness for him. This afternoon, it is true, there had been one such, when Francis, gleeful with his cheque, had gone out to his dinner and his theatre and his dance, inviting him cheerfully to all of them. In just that had been the bitterness—namely, that Francis had so overflowing a well-spring of content that he could be cordial in bidding him cast a certain gloom over these entertainments. Michael knew, quite unerringly, that Francis and his friends would not enjoy themselves quite so much if he was with them; there would be the restraint of polite conversation at dinner instead of completely idle babble, there would be less outspoken normality at the Gaiety, a little more decorum about the whole of the boyish proceedings. He knew all that so well, so terribly well. . . .

His servant had come in with the evening paper, and the implied suggestion of the propriety of going to dress before he roused himself. He decided not to dress, as he was going to spend the evening alone, and, instead, he seated himself at the piano with his copy of the Meistersingers and, mechanically at first, with the ragged cloud-fleeces of his reverie hanging about his brain, banged away at the overture. He had extraordinary dexterity of finger for one who had had so little training, and his hands, with their great stretch, made light work of octaves and even tenths. His knowledge of the music enabled him to wake the singing bird of memory in his head, and before long flute and horn and string and woodwind began to make themselves heard in his inner ear. Twice his servant came in to tell him that his dinner was ready, but Michael had no heed for anything but

the sounds which his flying fingers suggested to him. Francis, his father, his own failure in the life that had been thrust on him were all gone; he was with the singers of Nuremberg.

CHAPTER II

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The River Ashe, after a drowsy and meandering childhood, passed peacefully among the sedges and marigolds of its water meadows, suddenly and somewhat disconcertingly grows up and, without any period of transition and adolescence, becomes, from being a mere girl of a rivulet, a male and full-blooded estuary of the sea. At Coton, for instance, the tips of the sculls of a sauntering pleasure-boat will almost span its entire width, while, but a mile farther down, you will see stone-laden barges and tall, red-winged sailing craft coming up with the tide, and making fast to the grey wooden quay wall of Ashbridge, rough with barnacles. For the reeds and meadow-sweet of its margin are exchanged the brown and green growths of the sea, with their sharp, acrid odour instead of the damp, fresh smell of meadow flowers, and at low tide the podded bladders of brown weed and long strings of marine macaroni, among which peevish crabs scuttle sideways, take the place of the grass and spires of loosestrife; and over the water, instead of singing larks, hang white companies of chiding seagulls. Here at high tide extends a sheet of water large enough, when the wind blows up the estuary, to breed waves that break in foam and spray against the barges, while at the ebb acres of mud flats are disclosed on which the boats lean slanting till the flood lifts them again and makes them strain at the wheezing ropes that tie them to the quay.

A year before the flame of war went roaring through Europe in unquenchable conflagration it would have seemed that nothing could possibly rouse Ashbridge from its red-brick Georgian repose. There was never a town so inimitably drowsy or so sternly uncompetitive. A hundred years ago it must have presented almost precisely the same appearance as it did in the summer of 1913, if we leave out of reckoning a few dozen of modern upstart villas that line its outskirts, and the very inconspicuous railway station that hides itself behind the warehouses near the river's bank. Most of the trains, too, quite ignore its existence, and pass through it on their way to more rewarding stopping-places, hardly recognising it even by a spurt of steam from their whistles, and it is only if you travel by those that require the most frequent pauses in their progress that you will be enabled to alight at its thin and depopulated platform.

Just outside the station there perennially waits a low-roofed and sanguine omnibus that under daily discouragement continues to hope that in the long-delayed fulness of time somebody will want to be driven somewhere. (This nobody ever does, since the distance to any house is so small, and a porter follows with luggage on a barrow.) It carries on its floor a quantity of fresh straw, in the manner of the stage coaches, in which the problematic passenger, should he ever appear, will no doubt bury his feet. On its side, just below the window that is not made to open, it carries the legend that shows that it belongs to the Comber Arms, a hostelry so self-effacing that it is discoverable only by the sharpest-eyed of pilgrims. Narrow roadways, flanked by proportionately narrower pavements, lie ribbon-like

between huddled shops and squarely-spacious Georgian houses; and an air of leisure and content, amounting almost to stupefaction, is the moral atmosphere of the place.

On the outskirts of the town, crowning the gentle hills that lie to the north and west, villas in acre plots, belonging to business men in the county town some ten miles distant, “prick their Cockney ears” and are strangely at variance with the sober gravity of the indigenous houses. So, too, are the manners and customs of their owners, who go to Stoneborough every morning to their work, and return by the train that brings them home in time for dinner. They do other exotic and unsuitable things also, like driving swiftly about in motors, in playing golf on the other side of the river at Coton, and in having parties at each other’s houses. But apart from them nobody ever seems to leave Ashbridge (though a stroll to the station about the time that the evening train arrives is a recognised diversion) or, in consequence, ever to come back. Ashbridge, in fact, is self-contained, and desires neither to meddle with others nor to be meddled with.

The estuary opposite the town is some quarter of a mile broad at high tide, and in order to cross to the other side, where lie the woods and park of Ashbridge House, it is necessary to shout and make staccato prancings in order to attract the attention of the antique ferryman, who is invariably at the other side of the river and generally asleep at the bottom of his boat. If you are strong-lunged and can prance and shout for a long time, he may eventually stagger to his feet, come across for you and row you over. Otherwise you will stand but little chance of arousing him from his

slumbers, and you will stop where you are, unless you choose to walk round by the bridge at Coton, a mile above.

Periodical attempts are made by the brisker inhabitants of Ashbridge, who do not understand its spirit, to substitute for this aged and ineffectual Charon someone who is occasionally awake, but nothing ever results from these revolutionary moves, and the requests addressed to the town council on the subject are never heard of again. “Old George” was ferryman there before any members of the town council were born, and he seems to have established a right to go to sleep on the other side of the river which is now inalienable from him. Besides, asleep or awake, he is always perfectly sober, which, after all, is really one of the first requirements for a suitable ferryman. Even the representations of Lord Ashbridge himself who, when in residence, frequently has occasion to use the ferry when crossing from his house to the town, failed to produce the smallest effect, and he was compelled to build a boathouse of his own on the farther bank, and be paddled across by himself or one of the servants. Often he rowed himself, for he used to be a fine oarsman, and it was good for the lounger on the quay to see the foaming prow of his vigorous progress and the dignity of physical toil.

In all other respects, except in this case of “Old George,” Lord Ashbridge’s wishes were law to the local authorities, for in this tranquil East-coast district the spirit of the feudal system with a beneficent lord and contented tenants strongly survived. It had triumphed even over such modern innovations as railroads, for Lord Ashbridge had the undoubted right to stop any train he pleased by signal at