

THE
PALL MALL
MAGAZINE


EDITED BY
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AND
SIR DOUGLAS STRAIGHT

VOL. V.
JANUARY TO APRIL 1895

"Vires acquirit eundo"

Editorial and Publishing Offices
18, CHARING CROSS ROAD, LONDON, W.C.
1895

THE PALL MALL MAGAZINE



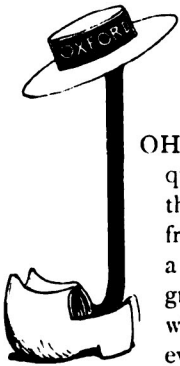
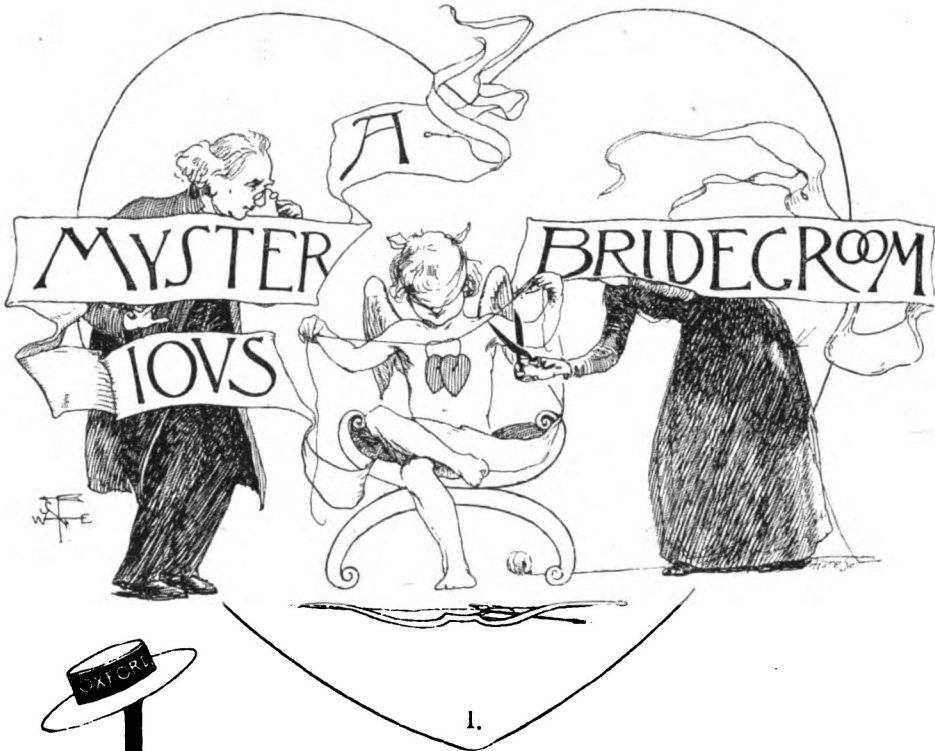
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ONE SHILLING

Published by the Proprietors, 18, Charing Cross Road, London, W.C.

Editorial and Publishing Offices: 18, CHARING CROSS ROAD, LONDON, W.C.

NEW YORK: THE INTERNATIONAL NEWS COMPANY, DUANE STREET.
TORONTO: THE TORONTO NEWS COMPANY. MONTREAL: THE MONTREAL NEWS COMPANY.



JOHN ROTHBURY was a young man who had succeeded to his fortune quite unexpectedly, after the very homeliest training as a child, and no thought that he was born to be anything but a peasant gardener, growing fruit and flowers for the market ; or, perhaps, if luck should favour him, a painter, living in a cottage like Millet, as poor at least, if not as great as that master. But John was so far from any knowledge of what was going on in the world that it is to be feared he had not even heard of Millet, but only imagined vaguely a wondering beatific existence all given up to art, and conscious of nothing else, nothing finer or more desirable in the world. But he was a youth of very conscientious mind, and when he discovered that he was the heir of a large fortune he put himself with great docility into the hands of his guardians and men of business, and suffered himself to be trained in the most correct way according to all the necessities of what one of them called his "station," though John was aware that he had in reality no station, but only wealth and a blank record like that of one who had no ancestors, nobody who had gone before him in the path of life. His father, who had made all the money, had been unknown to John, and he had no relatives nor any fixed place in the world. He had, indeed, a house in London, but that did not count as a home. His mother, after having so long accustomed herself to the barest elements of life, did not feel capable of any other manner of living, and remained in the cottage in the south of France, which she had chosen for her dwelling before her son was born. And thus John was virtually alone in the world. He was a most docile ward in the hands of his governors, so long as he was under age, and even beyond that time so long as his education lasted. He went to Oxford dutifully, having been prepared with care for that crowning point of training, and though he never distinguished himself in the faintest degree, got through very well in the

crowd. But after this he took the reins in his own hands, and pursued the way that pleased his childish thought. He had no special duty to his country, no "place" to keep up, or territorial influence to exercise; so he gave himself up to what was in reality the only thing he loved in the world, which was Art. I doubt whether he would ever have become a Millet, even had he been left to pursue that career, as he originally intended; but he did attain to painting pictures which, if they were not great, were at least very sincere and natural, and possessed a quiet character and originality not to be despised. His life was innocently Bohemian, very free and untroubled, full of wanderings in beautiful places, and brotherhood with queer people, but with very little of the wildness of the society which is generally distinguished by that name; or, at least, of the supposed wildness which is conventionally attributed



"His life was . . . full of wanderings in beautiful places."

to it. John was *bourgeois* in the cleanness of his life and manners; he did not like noise, and hated drinking; he was, in fact, born respectable, though he disliked any ties upon his personal freedom. This is in reality, I think, the true artist temperament, though the world is pleased to call it unconventional, meaning unruly and disorderly—whereas order is the breath of its nostrils. John was very particular about all his simple surroundings: he pulled down curtains and thrust ugly ornaments out of the way with a freedom which somehow no French *aubergiste*, and scarcely even any English village innkeeper, took amiss. Perhaps this arose from the fact that John was more liberal than artist-guests usually are, keeping no very strict eye upon the little sundries of a bill as most of them do, and allowing himself to be discreetly fleeced for the benefit of the company in general; and partly that he knew exactly how to deal with the Frenchmen, at least of that class, as one to the manner born.

Thus he spent his life in his own way, and it was a very enjoyable life. Few people suspected that he had a house in Belgravia to which he might retire at any moment, or a great deal of money upon which he could draw as he pleased. Still less was it generally known that he had been brought up as a French peasant. What his comrades knew of him was that he was a very good fellow, who might be safely asked for a small loan in time of need, or who would even offer that kindness where he saw it was much wanted, and who never troubled any one about paying back. To account for this he always said that he had had some money left him, and that, as he had neither wife nor child, he wanted it much less than many others did. He sold a picture now and then, at which he always had the air of being astonished as well as pleased, protesting that it was all luck, and that the others, which remained on the painters' hands, were really much better than his, which sometimes, no doubt, was the case. He said freely that he was a lucky fellow, and people generally took him at his word. He was certainly one who was content, and loved his art and his freedom, and his long days' sketchings out of doors, and the humours of the little artist community which is wont to gather together at all sorts of out-of-the-way places, very gregarious and friendly, and admiring the beauty of the world as nobody else does. John loved to sit among them, and hear them adoring the light as it came upon their bit of landscape, or upon the curves of a figure—and the landscape or the figure upon which the light came—and the distances and the foregrounds, and the human grace and outline, and all the beautiful things which these (sometimes rough) fellows admired and lingered over with an exquisite pleasure. He too admired and adored, and fell into despair over his own attempted renderings of these lovely things. And yet there was always a grace in his roughest studies, which was not lost even in the most elaborate of his pictures, the grace of a real sense of beauty and a real sympathy with life.

This life went on for many years, till John had entered upon the thirties, the full maturity of manhood. And then a thing happened to him, the strangest thing in life, yet the most common thing, and occurring every day. He fell in love—all at once, without any warning, in that perfectly unprepared and unintentional way which often happens among the most unlikely of men. It was not that he wanted a wife, which is the motive with some men. Most certainly he did not want a wife whose advent would disturb all his plans and force him back into the trammels of society. This, I suppose, was why, when his love came to the boiling pitch, he presented himself to the parents of his Edith solely as he was, or as appearances showed him, as an artist doing tolerably well in his profession, and able to keep his wife more or less comfortably. These parents were the vicar of a little parish in the Isle of Wight and his wife—good, honest people, who were naturally poor, and whose daughter, one of several, had shown some taste for drawing, and had been sent to such schools of art as they could hear of, or get at, to cultivate this faculty. Poor Edith was not a genius, as these good people had fondly hoped at first, but she had found a little market for her modest drawings—better, perhaps, than if she had had more power or pretension; and they were satisfied that they had done what was the best for her. It was necessary that their girls should learn to do something for themselves, they sadly acknowledged, "in case anything should happen to me," the Vicar said. It was certain that this "anything" must happen sooner or later, for the Vicar was an old man; and the girls took their work very cheerfully, as it is happily now the fashion for girls to do, not bemoaning themselves, as in a previous generation. Margaret, the eldest, was a governess; as for little Dorothy, it was not as yet decided what she should be trained to be.

There was great commotion at the Vicarage when John, with a somewhat heavy foot (which he retained from his peasant days, nothing ever obliterating the *sabot* from the habits of the human step), came up the gravel walk to the old parson's study into which the evening sun was streaming level with blinding force. The house was a pretty house, covered with a great flowering myrtle, which was the pride of the parish, and showed its round pink buds at the window of the odd little den, full of mouldy books, kept wholesome by the constant fumigation of the Vicar's pipe, which was the old gentleman's refuge from all the cares of the world. He came out of it, when John made his exit into the garden, where Edith, very nervous, was waiting for him, with his grey hair all rubbed up and standing on end round his head, and calling for "Mary, Mary," in a voice which went over all the house. This perturbed tone, with which she was very well acquainted, unearthed Mrs. Austen from the spare bedroom, in which, as in the only unoccupied place, she was cutting out under-garments for the sewing-class.

"I am coming, I am coming, Edward," she cried, as she put down her big scissors, and rubbed her forefinger and thumb which were almost blistered by the use of those implements. She hurried after him to the drawing-room, where he had already seated himself in the species of confessional to which he resorted when he went thus specially into this apartment in the working portion of the day. He was the Vicar, and he had a high sense of his own



"John made his exit to where Edith, very nervous, was waiting for him."

sacerdotal dignity; nevertheless there were moments in which the peace of his mind depended upon a free and full confession into his wife's private and particular ear.

"Mary," he said, with tremendous seriousness, "I have just had a very strange visitor, Mr. Rothbury the artist. And what do you think he wants?—our Edith for his wife!"

"Well, my dear," said Mrs. Austen with composure, "I cannot say I am very much surprised."

"Surprised! Edith, whom we thought we had done so well for, training her for her water-colours."

"Ah, Edward, that is all very true," said Mrs. Austen; "and I wish we had the money in our pockets that she has cost for that. But so far as she is concerned I am sure it will be much happier that her husband should do the water-colours and she look after the house."

"Do you really think so?" he asked. "I thought you would be disappointed, after all the trouble we have taken."

"Oh, disappointed!" she said—thus brushing that folly aside. "And did he tell you what his means were? and does it seem to you that he has enough to keep her comfortably? and can he make any provision in case of—anything happening?" This paraphrase of the more dreadful words, death and misfortune, was the expression always used between the Vicar and his wife.

The Vicar rubbed up his stubby grey locks still more. "He did say something about five hundred a year; but I was so much taken by surprise, and so uncertain how you would take it——"

"Five hundred a year!" his wife repeated, "and we've never had more than three hundred and fifty." She put up her hand to her eyes, and a sob came into her voice. "That's a very good income for a young couple—oh, a very good income—to begin upon. I suppose he expects to make more as he goes on. And, Edward, it is very important to know whether he has anything to settle. Did he say he had anything to settle? He might die, though God forbid it, and leave Edith with perhaps—others to provide for. You must inquire into that, my dear."

"Mary," said the Vicar, "Edith has nothing. How can I ask him questions about his most intimate concerns, when we have nothing to give on our side?"

"What nonsense!" cried the troubled woman; "haven't we Edith to give—a girl that any man might be proud of. And she will have to give up her profession; and there probably will be—others to take into consideration. If he has no money to settle, you must make him insure his life."

"My dear Mary!" said the Vicar in despair. "How am I to speak to a stranger like Mr. Rothbury about his most intimate concerns?"

"Oh, Edward, don't be so ridiculous!" Mrs. Austen cried; and then she added with composure that she supposed she must do it herself. "Though it always comes so much better from a man," she said. But this the Vicar deprecated as quite a mistake on her part.

"He will not mind it from you," said this disingenuous clergyman. "He will think that you don't know much of business, and that if you're over anxious it's very excusable in a mother; whereas me he would expect to speak like a man of the world."

Poor Vicar! if that was his opinion it was one which was not shared by any of his family. But John, on being talked to, proved himself most happily ready to do anything that was required. He was ready to settle upon Edith a house he had in London, which brought in a very decent rent, he said; or he would insure his life, or do anything Mrs. Austen pleased. He was, indeed, so entirely at his ease about this that his very compliance raised doubt in the anxious mother's mind. He talked quite calmly of insuring his life for thousands!

"And where is the money to come from to pay the premiums?" she said with a troubled countenance, being well aware what a business it was to scrape together enough to pay the Vicar's premiums once a year. But she had to be satisfied for the moment with these assurances, and Edith was as happy as the day was long.

Edith was so happy that she did not mind at all whether John had five hundred

pounds or farthings a year. "He wants us just to go on as he has been doing, travelling a great deal and sketching everywhere, and enjoying all the most beautiful places in the world. Oh, mother! think of going to Italy, and perhaps Spain, and all the places that one has dreamt of, but never hoped to see!" cried Edith, in her delight.

But Mrs. Austen shook her head. "Do you mean that, you are, to have no house—no home of your own to settle down in?" she said in dismay.

"Not till we get old and want to settle down. Not now, when we are both young and free; we are to work together, and draw together, and never to have a dull hour," Edith said, radiant with smiles.

Poor thing! poor young unthinking girl! But how was her mother to convince her that this was not the most desirable life in the world? Mrs. Austen did not think it at all desirable. What she wished for was a house,—it might be quite a small house to begin with—decently furnished, with a little plate for the table, which no doubt the friends of the young couple would give them as wedding presents, if properly directed thereto. Had not Mrs. Cramer given Alice Scott a dozen of spoons only the other day? and Edith was a much greater favourite with that lady than ever Alice had been. A little house with a Brussels carpet in the little drawing-room, and those art carpets, which only cost thirty-five shillings each, in the bedrooms; and, perhaps, some nice second-hand furniture, which is so much more the fashion nowadays than anything new. Mrs. Austen having succeeded so well in the matter of the life insurance, resolved to put forth to John the importance of having a house ready for Edith, and giving up this sort of vagabond scheme of wandering, without delay. He received the representation—made by her with great nervousness—with the same easy good-humour which he had shown before.

"There is the house in London," he said: "whenever we like we can come home to that."

"But you said it was let, and that the rent——"

"To be sure," he said, "it is let; but that stops at the end of the season, or whenever we please."

"But—but—Mr. Rothbury, the rent was to be the provision for Edith; the settlement——"

"Oh, was it?" he said lightly; "well, we must put something in its place."

"But—it was a great part of your income, I understood. I am afraid you are not a very good man of business. A house to live in is of great importance; but something to live upon is more important still."

"That will be all right, Mrs. Austen. The lawyers will look after that. Edith and I will do very well. I assure you you need not fear."

"That is all very well," she said, with a troubled countenance; "but the Vicar will insist on guarantees. You can't live on the rent of your house, and occupy your house, and settle it on Edith—all these three things together. The Vicar, I am afraid, dear Mr. Rothbury, will expect something very much more definite."

"Well," said John, "I can insure my life for a few thousands more. You like the idea of insuring one's life!"

"When you have plenty of money to pay the premiums. Do you know what a few thousands insured cost a year? And where are you to get the money?" Mrs. Austen asked, almost in a tragic tone.

But John Rothbury only laughed, and assured her that he and Edith would do very well: which was the most unsatisfactory answer to a business discussion that could be in the world.

II.

It was on that same evening—when Mrs. Austen was still in this puzzled and troubled state, which naturally she had communicated to the Vicar, in whom there was no light on the subject—that George Gregory came in to tea. He was one of the artist band with whom Edith—who had met them all sketching one time or another, and who had the modern young woman's confidence in *camaraderie*, and conviction that all the elderly nonsense about the impossibility of friendship between men and women was contemptible indeed—had formed acquaintance, and to whom the Vicar, with a clerical impulse of hospitality and his usual imprudence, had given a general invitation. All the family, except Mrs. Austen herself, were of opinion that it did not matter how many people you asked to tea. If it had been to dinner, indeed, or even to supper—but a cup of tea and a piece of cake or bread and butter, of what consequence could that be in a house where so much of those simple dainties was consumed every day? Mrs. Austen, in this as in many details, ran counter to the general mind of the Vicarage. She knew how soon an extra spoonful of tea in the pot and an extra loaf cut down for bread and butter mounted up; and all those painter young men ate bread and butter as if they thought it cost nothing. But this was one of the points on which Mrs. Austen was overborne by the family and compelled to submit.

It was, as has been said, on the very evening when there had arisen that discussion between Edith's mother and John as to the house. George Gregory was one of the artist brotherhood whom no one liked very much, but he was one who was most assiduous in his devotion to the household gods of tea and bread and butter in the Vicarage. He had been absent for a little time, and had not heard, or pretended he had not heard, "about John,"—which was the manner in which the family described Edith's engagement. And he said, "Rothbury!—oh, he's a queer fellow!" when some one mentioned somewhat familiarly his name.

"How is he a queer fellow?" said Mrs. Austen, pricking up her ears.

"Well, in every way, I think," said the malevolent one. "He has always plenty of money, but no one knows where it comes from. As for his making three hundred a year, or one hundred a year, by selling his pictures, I don't believe a word of it. He can't paint a little bit. He copies Millet—French Millet, you know, like all those Paris fellows. I am not sure that I think such a lot of Millet as some do—but his imitators! And yet the fellow has always plenty of money, and flings it about like a lord." Mr. Gregory was aware of more than one loan which never would be repaid to John, but which burned the borrower's pockets, so to speak, all the same.

Mrs. Austen grew pale. Edith was fortunately not present, and therefore could not be affected by this report; but it struck the Vicar absolutely dumb for the moment, and he sat gaping at the speaker, who was exhilarated by the sensation he had made.

"If he has plenty of money," said Mrs. Austen, "I daresay it is from his property if it is not from his art. I happen to know that he has houses in the best quarter of London."

"Oh, that house in Belgravia!" the artist said; "everybody knows of that. It's part of the mystery. It is not let, Mrs. Austen, any more than I am. When he goes to town he goes there, and it's a palace. It's there he hangs all his pictures, I suppose, that he pretends to sell. He should have quite a gallery!" Gregory said, with a laugh. "And there's another queer thing about him which very few people know."

The Vicar had been making signals of distress, betraying the part he took in the

matter, to his wife for some moments. He said now, "This is very serious, Mary; this is very serious," shaking his great head.

"I don't know," said Mrs. Austen, "that it matters very much to us how queer Mr. Rothbury may be; but, for the sake of the story, what is the other queer thing—that people don't know?"

"Well, you may see it in him," said the unfaithful brother. "Don't you notice the clumsy way he walks, as if he were wearing wooden shoes? Well, so he did once: he was brought up in a little French place, like a little clodhopper. Just a little peasant he was, hanging about the railway to carry a bag, and so forth. I knew a fellow once that saw him at it—just a little Jacques Bonhomme, don't you know?"



"This is very serious, Mary."

The Vicar's eyes grew larger and larger; his grey locks began to erect themselves on his head.

"Mary," he said, "Mary, it is well that we have heard this."

She gave her shoulders a shrug and wrench in her impatience.

"If Mr. Rothbury has raised himself to his present position by his own exertions, it is the greatest credit to him, I am sure," she said.

"Ah, yes, if he has done that!" said the other, with a laugh. "But that's a mystery, like all the rest."

"I think we have discussed our neighbours quite long enough," said Mrs. Austen, for Edith had just come in and taken her place at the table; and she changed the subject so determinedly that even that evil tongue could find no more opportunity of speech.

Gregory went away, however, chuckling to himself with a sense that he had "dished," as he said, John Rothbury, a fellow who was so well off as to lend money to men a great deal better than himself, confound him! and who did sell his daubs too, taking the bread out of other fellows' mouths.

After their uncomfortable visitor was gone, the Vicar tried every means he could think of to get his wife's private ear. He was very much troubled, the poor old gentleman! He accepted this new-comer's word against John, whom he was much better acquainted with, with that faith of the ignorant which is so unaccountable and exasperating.

"It must be put a stop to—it must be put a stop to," he said to himself.

For her part, Mrs. Austen was troubled too. She did not know how to reconcile these strangely differing details. A peasant boy in France—well, if he had raised himself by his own exertions! And then that house in town which had already troubled her mind, which was let, and was to be settled on Edith, and yet was a home that would be open to them; and was a palace, this man said, with all his unsold pictures hanging in it. These things were enough to make Mrs. Austen very uncomfortable, though she did not give in as her husband did. They were all heightened, too, to her, by John's extreme easy-mindedness, by his almost laughing suggestion of one way after another of supplying the necessary settlement, and even by the lavish character of his presents, and his readiness to produce money for anything that was wanted—parish charities, choir excursions, or whatever Edith might chance to be interested in.

When her husband finally secured her attention, after many efforts, she was in a very perturbed state.

"My dear, I am afraid Mr. Rothbury is not the man we thought," he said, shaking his old head, when he had at last beguiled her into his study, from which there was no escape.

"How dreadfully untidy you are, Edward! and what a quantity of books you have out of the shelves! You can't be reading all these at once," she said.

"My dear Mary, I was speaking to you of Mr. Rothbury."

"Oh yes, I know! But to bring me into a place smelling of dust like this, and of tobacco; I don't really know which is worst," she cried, with many sniffs of disgust.

"Mary, don't turn me off like this. If this young man was really an uneducated boy, carrying parcels from the railway, and then suddenly has a great command of money and a house in town——"

"We knew he had a house in town," said Mrs. Austen reproachfully, as if that was an argument.

"Well, yes, so we did," her husband replied; "he made no secret of that," accepting the statement, too, on his side, as if there was logic in it.

"And if he was only a peasant boy," cried Mrs. Austen, suddenly thinking of another thing, which really was an argument, "how comes he, Edward, I ask you, to be an Oxford man?—for that he is, as you know."

"There is certainly a great deal in that," said the Vicar, staggered. "A Brasenose man. It is not very great for scholarship, but still it is a good college."

"Which is a great deal more than that young man Gregory ever was—who never has a good word for any one," cried his wife triumphantly; and then she turned tail to the question of the books, and put some of them, which the Vicar particularly wanted, back into the shelves without remorse or pity, so that Mr. Austen was very glad finally to get her out of his den, and to take what comfort he could from his pipe and his thoughts alone.



"Putting the books back into the shelves without remorse."

But the Vicar's wife was not at all at her ease. She took an opportunity next day to question John about his early life.

"How well you speak French!" she said. "I heard you reading something out loud to Edith, and it was so different from the common English pronunciation. You must have a turn for languages." This was her subtle way of opening the subject.

"No credit to me," he said. "French was my first language. I used to know it better than English."

"Dear me!" she said innocently; "was that because you had a French nurse, or were your parents living abroad?"

"My mother lived abroad, and she does so now. I am going to take Edith to see her," he said, with a queer look; "but it must be later in the year, for at present it would be too hot."

Mrs. Austen pondered for a little, and then she said, "You must have led a very chequered life. Brought up in France, and then going to Oxford, and then an artist,—I can't follow you, I that have always lived in one place. It makes my head go round."

"Well," he said, "it is quite true. I have had an odd life." And his face, which had been so gay, grew grave, and he gave a little sigh, but said not another word.

What was poor Mrs. Austen to do? They had made all the inquiries they could about him, as prudent parents must. And they had got, as even the Vicar allowed, "every satisfaction." But there was a mystery, notwithstanding the assurance of those very respectable lawyers in London, who had certified to Mr. Rothbury's respectability, and that his circumstances were as he had stated them. But that was a phrase which would bear many meanings. Mrs. Austen had read a novel not very long before in which the lover and young husband, the most kind, the most chivalric of men, was discovered to make his income by burgling,—if there is such a word,—which means that he was a burglar of consummate cleverness, and had kept himself entirely from suspicion. Who could tell that John might not be something of that sort? Or there might be an establishment of coiners, as in Lord Lytton's "Night and Morning," in that Belgravian house? A peasant boy carrying travellers' bags at a railway station, and then a thriving artist selling pictures at the rate of five hundred pounds a year, and possessing house property in Belgravia. "But then he is an Oxford man," Mrs. Austen said to herself. That was the only gleam of comfort; but how by any possibility it could fit in between the other chapters she could not imagine. Oh, if he would only tell her his story simply, whatever it was! She was not a woman to be frightened by humble birth. The Austens had always been people in a good position, and she flattered herself her own family was at least as good: but still the Vicar's wife was a woman of the century, and if he had raised himself by his own exertions—— But the house in Belgravia, which was a palace, and full of beautiful things,—perhaps, who could tell, unholy gear, got he dared not say how! To think that Edith, her Edith, might be taken home to that, and afterwards make some dreadful discovery and break her heart! Mrs. Austen took a walk round and round the garden, hiding in all the sheltered nooks, and keeping out of the eye and the repeated calls of her family for a long time, going over and over this terrible question. How could she now solve it? John was quite frank up to a certain point, but there he stopped; and how could she cross-question him as to these very intimate concerns with which, perhaps, she had nothing to do? And yet she had a right to know all about him before she gave him Edith. Poor Mrs. Austen did not know what to do.

And I confess it was very ridiculous of John to make any mystery about it. There was nothing in his birth or in his life which he had any reason to be ashamed of. His father and mother had not "got on." They had parted, and he had been brought up on his mother's small income till he was sixteen; and then his father had died, and he had suddenly been made aware, never having given any previous thought to it, that he was the heir to a large fortune. This was the simple truth. If it was a mystery, yet it was not a mystery which had anything disgraceful in it. His mother might be blamed, but for folly and want of understanding only, not for anything shameful. Why he should have hesitated to tell the Austens all this, who could say? It was highly absurd on his part. He had thought of giving Edith a surprise in the Lord of Burleigh way, taking her to his house, which he had made very handsome, a beautiful place, indeed a show house, and after showing her all its beauties and gloating over her admiration, saying to her, "All of this is thine and mine." It was a foolish idea, but he had cherished it. As for the parents, the settlements, when they were produced, would very well satisfy them. And he was delighted with the good faith which took him, as he thought, for granted, and on his own estimate.

"But we must not let it go on," said the Vicar: "an errand boy—of no family; we cannot let it go on."



"Mrs. Austen took a walk round and round the garden."

"Oh, family!" cried Mrs. Austen; "who is of any family nowadays? As long as a man has enough, and is presentable and well behaved, I don't think anything of his family, if that were all."

"There was a great financial man, a stockbroker or something of the kind, of the name of Rothbury," said the Vicar reflectively.

"If John had been connected with a man like that he would not have been

brought up in a French village," said Mrs. Austen, with most reasonable decision and firmness, cutting her husband short ; and he recognised the justice of what she said : yet, notwithstanding, it was a little comfort to him that there was a great financial man whose name was Rothbury. It afforded some kind of vague guarantee that things might come right. And then there was the extraordinary yet unmistakable certainty that John Rothbury was a Brasenose man. Such a jumble of facts was beyond any one's power to reconcile and arrange, and whilst they were pausing and wondering the days ran on, and the wedding drew near. It was to be a wedding without fuss, for the Austens were far from rich ; and Mrs. Austen, though it was a little against her Church principles, was yet deeply grateful in her heart that the afternoon marriages, which were now the fashion, made anything like a wedding-breakfast impossible. But this did make it possible to ask, so to speak, the whole island to Edith's marriage. Though she sent out the invitations with an anxious heart, she yet did send them out ; and everybody accepted. It would have been the most delightful anticipation to Mrs. Austen, with nothing but triumph in it, had it not been for that drop of bitterness, dropped into the heart of all that was sweet. And throughout the whole, need I say, the Vicar kept up that continual cry, "Are you going to let things go on, Mary? How can we let things go on? He ought to be brought to book. He ought to be made to explain everything. Surely you are not going to let everything go on?"

"Bring him to book yourself," she said at last, turning to bay. Even the wife of a clergyman loses patience sometimes. "Make him explain : you are the proper person !"

Then the Vicar was cowed, and retired to his study, saying no more.

Must he be brought to book? Must he be made to explain? She went over all the arguments, for and against, over and over. A French peasant boy—an English Oxford man—a thriving artist making five hundred a year—a man who never sold his daubs at all, but hung them in a gallery all to themselves in a house in Belgravia. But how could a French peasant boy have a house in Belgravia? or a burglar or coiner be an Oxford man? Indeed, Mrs. Austen soon gave up the burgling and coining as inconceivable, as things only to be imagined in a novel, not for common life. And all the time she was going about Edith's simple trousseau, making the "things" at home, putting her own fine needlework into them to make up for the lace and embroideries of the shop.

"What is the matter with mother? Is it only because Edith is going away?" the other children said.

Perhaps the only one who had an inkling as to what was meant by the shaking of the Vicar's head and the anxiety on Mrs. Austen's brow was John ; and I am sorry to say that he did not behave as he should have done in the matter. He took the parents very lightly. He was disposed to laugh at their uneasiness. So long as it was all right with Edith he did not care. It was Edith he was in love with, and not her parents, as is the way of young men ; and when he was questioned he had a way of turning the inquiries off. One day Mrs. Austen asked him, "Where did you say your house was, in town?" suddenly, with an elaborate air of impromptu which betrayed her.

"I don't think I ever said where it was," he replied.

"You said it was let ; and then you said if you got tired of wandering you could take Edith home there."

"Yes," said John, with a laugh ; "I could send off the tenant, don't you know? Nothing could be more easy ; you have to give them notice, and the thing is done."



"Then she turned sternly upon the lawyer."

"The thing is not done in a moment," said Mrs. Austen, shaking her head; and then added, "and you relied upon the rent for a part of your income."

"Oh, the income is all right," said John lightly; and then he was carried off by Edith, who came just then into the room equipped for a walk. The Vicar was present, but he never said a word.

"How can I question the man about his most private affairs?" he asked. "But, Mary, you should really enter into it more fully; you should bring him to book."

Should she put a stop to it all,—deprive Edith of the comfort of five hundred pounds a year, a serene and peaceful happiness which her mother had never attained, all on the chance that John, who was an Oxford man and, besides, wore truth and honesty written on his face, was a burglar or a coiner, or got his money in some other

illegitimate way,—and break the girl's heart into the bargain? The Vicar went on shaking his head as if he would have shaken it off. The poor woman was so exasperated at last that she rushed at him in a fury and caught that large head by its grey locks in her two hands.

"Oh, for goodness' sake, stop shaking your head! or else do something yourself!" she cried. "Don't you preach to us every day that we ought to have faith?"

"In God," said the Vicar, trying to shake—as a dog barks internally when prevented from utterance—notwithstanding the firm grip of his wife's hands.

"And in man too," Mrs. Austen cried, letting him go, like a momentarily arrested pendulum, in a still stronger oscillation from side to side.

This is an episode in John Rothbury's history in which I cannot justify his action. But it may be said that, when the settlements were placed before the parents, there was such a scene in the Vicar's library as had never been seen before. There was nothing to settle, as the lawyer gravely remarked,—as if they did not know that!—on the lady's side. But on John's! Mrs. Austen read those wonderful papers over her husband's shoulder, and it was some time before either of them could quite understand through the phraseology of the law what wonderful thing it was that had happened.

"Oh, Edward!" she cried at last, with a sort of shriek that ran through the house; and then she turned sternly upon the lawyer, who sat by as calm as a cabbage, and asked vehemently if it was all true.

"Is what all true?" said that astonished man.

"This!" cried the excited mother, striking the papers with her hand. "Has he got all these things? Is he as rich as that? Do you mean to tell me——?"

But here the Vicar took his part, as became him, as the head and sovereign authority in the house.

"Compose yourself," he said, laying his hand quite affectionately upon hers, which was quivering. "Have not I always said, my dear, that John Rothbury was a man we could fully confide in, from every point of view?"

Meanwhile Edith, who had never known any of these tremors, was trying on her wedding-gown; and John—much amused by the thought of the revelation which was bursting upon the elder people, and also of what the dignified Mr. Simmon, one of the distinguished firm of Douglas & Simmon, would think of the Vicar's study, with its smell of smoke—was waiting for his last good-night till that process was over.

And the wedding next day was the prettiest wedding that had been seen in the island for many a day. And everybody was there; and it somehow crept out among the crowd that Edith Austen was making the finest match, and that her husband was no mere landscape-painter, as everybody had supposed, but a man with—Heaven only knew how many thousands a year. No wonder her mother beamed! But Edith, it was said (though no one believed it), was the sole individual who did not know.

M. O. W. OLIPHANT.