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Chapter 16 - Geoffrey As A Public Character

TIME had advanced to after noon before the selection of Geoffrey's future wife was accomplished, and before the instructions of Geoffrey's brother were complete enough to justify the opening of the matrimonial negotiation at Nagle's Hotel.

"Don't leave him till you have got his promise," were Lady Holchester's last words when her son started on his mission.

"If Geoffrey doesn't jump at what I am going to offer him," was the son's reply, "I shall agree with my father that the case is hopeless; and I shall end, like my father, in giving Geoffrey up."

This was strong language for Julius to use. It was not easy to rouse the disciplined and equable temperament of Lord Holchester's eldest son. No two men were ever more thoroughly unlike each other than these two brothers. It is melancholy to acknowledge it of the blood relation of a "stroke oar," but it must be owned, in the interests of truth, that Julius cultivated his intelligence. This degenerate Briton could digest books--and couldn't digest beer. Could learn languages--and couldn't learn to row. Practiced the foreign vice of perfecting himself in the art of playing on a musical instrument and couldn't learn the English virtue of knowing a good horse when he saw him. Got through life. (Heaven only knows how!) without either a biceps or a betting-book. Had openly acknowledged, in English society, that he didn't think the barking of a pack of hounds the finest music in the world. Could go to foreign parts, and see a mountain which nobody had ever got to the top of yet--and didn't instantly feel his honor as an Englishman involved in getting to the top of it himself. Such people may, and do, exist among the inferior races of the Continent. Let us thank Heaven, Sir, that England never has been, and never will be, the right place for them!

Arrived at Nagle's Hotel, and finding nobody to inquire of in the hall, Julius applied to the young lady who sat behind the window of "the bar." The young lady was reading something so deeply interesting in the evening newspaper that she never even heard him. Julius went into the coffee-room.

The waiter, in his corner, was absorbed over a second newspaper. Three gentlemen, at three different tables, were absorbed in a third, fourth, and fifth newspaper. They all alike went on with their reading without noticing the entrance of the stranger. Julius ventured on disturbing the waiter by asking for Mr. Geoffrey Delamayn. At the sound of that illustrious name the waiter looked up with a start. "Are you Mr. Delamayn's brother, Sir?"

"Yes."

The three gentlemen at the tables looked up with a start. The light of Geoffrey's celebrity fell, reflected, on Geoffrey's brother, and made a public character of him.

"You'll find Mr. Geoffrey, Sir," said the waiter, in a flurried, excited manner, "at the Cock and Bottle, Putney."

"I expected to find him here. I had an appointment with him at this hotel."

The waiter opened his eyes on Julius with an expression of blank astonishment. "Haven't you heard the news, Sir?"

"No!"

"God bless my soul!" exclaimed the waiter--and offered the newspaper.

"God bless my soul!" exclaimed the three gentlemen--and offered the three newspapers.

"What is it?" asked Julius.

"What is it?" repeated the waiter, in a hollow voice. "The most dreadful thing that's happened in my time. It's all up, Sir, with the great Foot-Race at Fulham. Tinkler has gone stale."

The three gentlemen dropped solemnly back into their three chairs, and repeated the dreadful intelligence, in chorus--"Tinkler has gone stale."

A man who stands face to face with a great national disaster, and who doesn't understand it, is a man who will do wisely to hold his tongue and enlighten his mind without asking other people to help him. Julius accepted the waiter's newspaper, and sat down to make (if possible) two discoveries: First, as to whether "Tinkler" did, or did not, mean a man. Second, as to what particular form of human affliction you implied when you described that man as "gone stale."

There was no difficulty in finding the news. It was printed in the largest type, and was followed by a personal statement of the facts, taken one way--which was followed, in its turn, by another personal statement of the facts, taken in another way. More particulars, and further personal statements, were promised in later editions. The royal salute of British journalism thundered the announcement of Tinkler's staleness before a people prostrate on the national betting book.

Divested of exaggeration, the facts were few enough and simple enough. A famous Athletic Association of the North had challenged a famous Athletic Association of the South. The usual "Sports" were to take place--such as running, jumping, "putting" the hammer, throwing cricket-balls, and the like--and the whole was to wind up with a Foot-Race of unexampled length and difficulty in the annals of human achievement between the two best men on either side. "Tinkler" was the best man on the side of the South. "Tinkler" was backed in innumerable betting-books to win. And Tinkler's lungs had suddenly given way under stress of training! A prospect of witnessing a prodigious achievement in foot-racing, and (more important still) a prospect of winning and losing large sums of money, was suddenly withdrawn from the eyes of the British people. The "South" could produce no second opponent worthy of the North out of its own associated resources. Surveying the athletic world in general, but one man existed who might possibly replace "Tinkler"--and it was doubtful, in the last degree, whether he would consent to come forward under the circumstances. The name of that man--Julius read it with horror--was Geoffrey Delamayn.

Profound silence reigned in the coffee-room. Julius laid down the newspaper, and looked about him. The waiter was busy, in his corner, with a pencil and a betting-book.

The three gentlemen were busy, at the three tables, with pencils and betting-books.

"Try and persuade him!" said the waiter, piteously, as Delamayn's brother rose to leave the room.

"Try and persuade him!" echoed the three gentlemen, as Delamayn's brother opened the door and went out.

Julius called a cab, and told the driver (busy with a pencil and a betting-book) to go to the Cock and Bottle, Putney. The man brightened into a new being at the prospect. No need to hurry him; he drove, unasked, at the top of his horse's speed.

As the cab drew near to its destination the signs of a great national excitement appeared, and multiplied. The lips of a people pronounced, with a grand unanimity, the name of "Tinkler." The heart of a people hung suspended (mostly in the public houses) on the chances for and against the possibility of replacing "Tinkler" by another man. The scene in front of the inn was impressive in the highest degree. Even the London blackguard stood awed and quiet in the presence of the national calamity. Even the irrepressible man with the apron, who always turns up to sell nuts and sweetmeats in a crowd, plied his trade in silence, and found few indeed (to the credit of the nation be it spoken) who had the heart to crack a nut at such a time as this. The police were on the spot, in large numbers, and in mute sympathy with the people, touching to see. Julius, on being stopped at the door, mentioned his name--and received an ovation. His brother! oh, heavens, his brother! The people closed round him, the people shook hands with him, the people invoked blessings on his head. Julius was half suffocated, when the police rescued him, and landed him safe in the privileged haven on the inner side of the public house door. A deafening tumult broke out, as he entered, from the regions above stairs. A distant voice screamed, "Mind yourselves!" A hatless shouting man tore down through the people congregated on the stairs. "Hooray! Hooray! He's promised to do it! He's entered for the race!" Hundreds on hundreds of voices took up the cry. A roar of cheering burst from the people outside. Reporters for the newspapers raced, in frantic procession, out of the inn, and rushed into cabs to put the news in print. The hand of the landlord, leading Julius carefully up stairs by the arm, trembled with excitement. "His brother, gentlemen! his brother!" At those magic words a lane was made through the throng. At those magic words the closed door of the council-chamber flew open; and Julius found himself among the Athletes of his native country, in full parliament assembled. Is any description of them needed? The description of Geoffrey applies to them all. The manhood and muscle of England resemble the wool and mutton of England, in this respect, that there is about as much variety in a flock of athletes as in a flock of sheep. Julius looked about him, and saw the same man in the same dress, with the same health, strength, tone, tastes, habits, conversation, and pursuits, repeated infinitely in every part of the room. The din was deafening; the enthusiasm (to an uninitiated stranger) something at once hideous and terrifying to behold. Geoffrey had been lifted bodily on to the table, in his chair, so as to be visible to the whole room. They sang round him, they danced round him, they cheered round him, they swore round him. He was hailed, in mandlin terms of endearment, by grateful giants with tears in their eyes. "Dear old man!" "Glorious, noble, splendid, beautiful fellow!" They hugged him. They patted him on the back. They wrung his hands. They prodded and punched his muscles. They embraced the noble legs that were going to run the unexampled race. At the opposite end of the room, where it was physically impossible to get near the hero, the enthusiasm vented itself in feats of strength and acts of destruction. Hercules I. cleared a space with his elbows, and laid down--and Hercules II. took him up in his teeth. Hercules III. seized the poker from the fireplace, and broke it on his arm. Hercules IV. followed with the tongs, and shattered them on his neck. The smashing of the furniture and the pulling down of the house seemed likely to succeed--when Geoffrey's eye lighted by accident on Julius, and Geoffrey's voice, calling fiercely for his brother, hushed the wild assembly into sudden attention, and turned the fiery enthusiasm into a new course. Hooray for his brother! One, two, three--and up with his brother on our shoulders! Four five, six--and on with his brother, over our heads, to the other end of the room! See, boys--see! the hero has got him by the collar! the hero has lifted him on the table! The hero heated red-hot with his own triumph, welcomes the poor little snob cheerfully, with a volley of oaths. "Thunder and lightning! Explosion and blood! What's up now, Julius? What's up now?"

Julius recovered his breath, and arranged his coat. The quiet little man, who had just muscle enough to lift a dictionary from the shelf, and just training enough to play the fiddle, so far from being daunted by the rough reception accorded to him, appeared to feel no other sentiment in relation to it than a sentiment of unmitigated contempt.

"You're not frightened, are you?" said Geoffrey. "Our fellows are a roughish lot, but they mean well."

"I am not frightened," answered Julius. "I am only wondering--when the Schools and Universities of England turn out such a set of ruffians as these--how long the Schools and Universities of England will last."

"Mind what you are about, Julius! They'll cart you out of window if they hear you."

"They will only confirm my opinion of them, Geoffrey, if they do."

Here the assembly, seeing but not hearing the colloquy between the two brothers, became uneasy on the subject of the coming race. A roar of voices summoned Geoffrey to announce it, if there was any thing wrong. Having pacified the meeting, Geoffrey turned again to his brother, and asked him, in no amiable mood, what the devil he wanted there?

"I want to tell you something, before I go back to Scotland," answered Julius. "My father is willing to give you a last chance. If you don't take it, _my_ doors are closed against you as well as _his_."

Nothing is more remarkable, in its way, than the sound common-sense and admirable self-restraint exhibited by the youth of the present time when confronted by an emergency in which their own interests are concerned. Instead of resenting the tone which his brother had taken with him, Geoffrey instantly descended from the pedestal of glory on which he stood, and placed himself without a struggle in the hands which vicariously held his destiny--otherwise, the hands which vicariously held the purse. In five minutes more the meeting had been dismissed, with all needful assurances relating to Geoffrey's share in the coming Sports--and the two brothers were closeted together in one of the private rooms of the inn.

"Out with it!" said Geoffrey. "And don't be long about it."

"I won't be five minutes," replied Julius. "I go back to-night by the mail-train; and I have a great deal to do in the mean time. Here it is, in plain words: My father consents to see you again, if you choose to settle in life--with his approval. And my mother has discovered where you may find a wife. Birth, beauty, and money are all offered to you. Take them--and you recover your position as Lord Holchester's son. Refuse them--and you go to ruin your own way."

Geoffrey's reception of the news from home was not of the most reassuring kind. Instead of answering he struck his fist furiously on the table, and cursed with all his heart some absent woman unnamed.

"I have nothing to do with any degrading connection which you may have formed," Julius went on. "I have only to put the matter before you exactly as it stands, and to leave you to decide for yourself. The lady in question was formerly Miss Newenden--a descendant of one of the oldest families in England. She is now Mrs. Glenarm--the young widow (and the childless widow) of the great iron-master of that name. Birth and fortune--she unites both. Her income is a clear ten thousand a year. My father can, and will, make it fifteen thousand, if you are lucky enough to persuade her to marry you. My mother answers for her personal qualities. And my wife has met her at our house in London. She is now, as I hear, staying with some friends in Scotland; and when I get back I will take care that an invitation is sent to her to pay her next visit at my house. It remains, of course, to be seen whether you are fortunate enough to produce a favorable impression on her. In the mean time you will be doing every thing that my father can ask of you, if you make the attempt."

Geoffrey impatiently dismissed that part of the question from all consideration.

"If she don't cotton to a man who's going to run in the Great Race at Fulham," he said, "there are plenty as good as she is who will! That's not the difficulty. Bother _that!_"

"I tell you again, I have nothing to do with your difficulties," Julius resumed. "Take the rest of the day to consider what I have said to you. If you decide to accept the proposal, I shall expect you to prove you are in earnest by meeting me at the station to-night. We will travel back to Scotland together. You will complete your interrupted visit at Lady Lundie's (it is important, in my interests, that you should treat a person of her position in the county with all due respect); and my wife will make the necessary arrangements with Mrs. Glenarm, in anticipation of your return to our house. There is nothing more to be said, and no further necessity of my staying here. If you join me at the station to-night, your sister-in-law and I will do all we can to help you. If I travel back to Scotland alone, don't trouble yourself to follow--I have done with you." He shook hands with his brother, and went out.

Left alone, Geoffrey lit his pipe and sent for the landlord.

"Get me a boat. I shall scull myself up the river for an hour or two. And put in some towels. I may take a swim."

The landlord received the order--with a caution addressed to his illustrious guest.

"Don't show yourself in front of the house, Sir! If you let the people see you, they're in such a state of excitement, the police won't answer for keeping them in order."

"All right. I'll go out by the back way."

He took a turn up and down the room. What were the difficulties to be overcome before he could profit by the golden prospect which his brother had offered to him? The Sports? No! The committee had promised to defer the day, if he wished it--and a month's training, in his physical condition, would be amply enough for him. Had he any personal objection to trying his luck with Mrs. Glenarm? Not he! Any woman would do--provided his father was satisfied, and the money was all right. The obstacle which was really in his way was the obstacle of the woman whom he had ruined. Anne! The one insuperable difficulty was the difficulty of dealing with Anne.

"We'll see how it looks," he said to himself, "after a pull up the river!"

The landlord and the police inspector smuggled him out by the back way unknown to the expectant populace in front. The two men stood on the river-bank admiring him, as he pulled away from them, with his long, powerful, easy, beautiful stroke.

"That's what I call the pride and flower of England!" said the inspector. "Has the betting on him begun?"

"Six to four," said the landlord, "and no takers."

Julius went early to the station that night. His mother was very anxious. "Don't let Geoffrey find an excuse in your example," she said, "if he is late."

The first person whom Julius saw on getting out of the carriage was Geoffrey--with his ticket taken, and his portmanteau in charge of the guard.