

## *Our Junior Partner*

It is not often that a man gets a real view of himself. I don't mean the dressing glass view, which you may have as often as you like; nor the forensic view, if I may so call it; subjective outlooks both, revealing only the man as he stands in relation to other humanities, but of the real ego nothing. I don't know how it was, then, that one sunny morning in June the sight of my image, reflected in the large plate-glass window in Cockspur street, came to me as a revelation. The outward view was this: of a provincial, evidently from the manufacturing districts, stooped in shoulder, lined in face, wearing dark clothes of a villainous cut, and a hideous stovepipe hat. A hammerman only, a fashioner of rude uncouth masses into smoother and uglier forms, such divine light as might once have been given me burnt in devotion to the hammer. And yet I, this unlovely lump of humanity, had in earlier days been even as the graceful well-adorned youth who are sunning themselves in bright west London.

Yes, actually, ten years ago, I, John Brown, of the Buttermilk Iron Company, Bunghole-moor, Yorks, was a junior clerk in the navigation office, and in my small way a swell. Since then, for ten long years, had all my former life been put out of my thoughts, and with the clang of iron and roar of steam in my ears had been hammering till at last I had hammered a sort of and purpose into the dark hard life which was mine.

I had come up to town to give evidence on armor-plates before a select committee. We had been down in Woolwich Marshes hammering with monster guns at monster plates all that morning, and I had come back to town with a proud sense of triumph at my heart, for the Buttermilk plates had proved the toughest and truest: the biggest shot had dropped from their pitted fronts like a cricket ball before the bat of the cautious Maryleboner. So having finished my business with the War Department, I gave myself up to idleness for a few hours, and strolled down Pall Mall, enjoying the warm sunshine and the bright life about me. I had almost fancied I was again the swell young clerk in the navigation office, when I came unexpectedly on my image in the plate glass window. And then the contrast between that which I had been and that which I was set me thinking of my old life and my old friends. Chief among these last had been Henry Clinton, also of the navigation office.

Although Harry and I had been intimate friends yet was he always a mystery to me. He hadn't a penny except his pay, which wasn't much, and yet he always contrived to live in the swim of extreme swelldom. Certainly, his great-grandfather; but then a man can't live on his great-grandfather. His great-grandfather won't pay his club subscription or his dinner bills, and Harry was a member of the most expensive and most exclusive club in London. Nevertheless Harry was a prudent lad. The only use he made of his club was to write letters on the club paper, or to stand in the bow window on high days to be seen by men.

I had lost sight of Harry altogether for many years; and was rather curious to know what had become of him. The navigation office was close at hand. I would go there and inquire for Clinton.

Within the dull quadrangle of the navigation office an under secretary's brougham was standing. A groom on horseback was leading a handsome park hack round and round, just as of old.

Inside there was a wonderful change. It used to be such a solemn, quiet, aristocratic place. Now, as I entered, I was nearly knocked down by two men in paper caps, carrying a plank bierwise on

their shoulders. There was a cheerful sound of hammering, there were invigorating clouds of dust. Carpenters and masons were exchanging cheery greetings. Piles of huge volumes encumbered the hall. The messengers flitted to and fro like the ghosts of a former world among all this chaotic new birth. I managed at last to find the hallporter.

“Where shall I find Mr. Clinton?” He shrugged his shoulders and waved his hands.

“Really, there’s no saying where any of our gentlemen are now. Things are so upset—”

“But is he here?”

“Oh, yes, sir! I’ll try and find him for you.”

After conferring with several messengers on the way and taking me up and down several passages, he knocked at the door of No. 45.

There was no mistaking the ring of the “Come in!” which followed the knock. I There was no one visible in the room when I entered, but from a little ground-glass box where he had been doing his toilet, there came Harry Clinton, radiant and splendid; just the same as of old, only toned down a little —more of a gentleman and less of a swell about him. He looked at me bluntly for a moment, then, as he heard my voice, he came forward and grasped me by both hands.

“Jack, old fellow, how glad I am! Come, let’s get out of this beastly hole. I want to talk to you for a week.”

As we left the quad, the groom touched his hat.

“Oh, take the horse home, Brook! I shall walk.”

“You’ll come and dine, of course; and send for your traps and stay with me. Must go back tonight? Well, dine, at all events.” Yes, I would dine with him. We strolled leisurely down Pall Mall, talking of old days, till we reached the Athemæum, when Harry gripped me by the arm and said :

“Now. Jack, turn round quickly, and see if you can spot a fellow in black— seedy man, like a bankrupt undertaker hanging about.”

I turned, and recognized such a man strolling along, with his hands in his pockets.

“Gad, that’s capital! Jack, it’s the greatest fun in the world. You remember what a gentlemanly place our office used to be?”

I nodded.

“Well, we’ve changed all that. The manufacturing districts have come down upon us bodily, and swamped us. By gad, they have! And without wishing to hurt your feelings, Jack, they’re a

scurvy lot! Well new chief is, I fancy, a Scotch hawker: something of that sort— a beast, in fact. He called me “young mon” the other day; and when I told him my name wasn’t Mon, but Clinton, he said that it was evident that the deciplin’ of the office was in a shockin’ state.”

“But, Harry.” I said, “you must acknowledge they've ferreted out some very foul places.”

“Oh. there’s a use in the world for scavengers and detectives, only, don't you see, I object to be brought into contact with them. But for my story. You can see, Jack, that my way of living isn’t that of a man with only four hundred a year.”

I nodded.

"Well, the beasts suspect me, it seems, and have put detectives on to me; and I get a deal of fun out of them. I make appointments with my butcher—he's a sporting card that, and is a member of Tattersail's ; and with Spinyall, the livery-stable man— he's breaking in a colt for me— and I meet him in odd shady little places about Westminster—they think I'm mad, but that don't matter. And whenever we meet I see two or three seedy cads dodging about the corners; and each of these respectable tradesmen has a man apiece walking behind him, and tracking him everywhere. It's capital fun. I'll swell their estimates for them, the d——d cads.”

Harry shook his sides with laughter; but I looked grave, and said:

“You shouldn’t play with edged tools.”

When we reached Harry’s house, a pleasant mansion in Hyde Park gardens, the little man was still behind us, strolling carelessly along with his hands in his pockets.

We had a very pleasant little dinner. Mrs. Clinton was a very Lovely and agreeable woman; and after dinner appeared two jolly little cherubs, a boy and girl. We then went up into the smoke-room— an airy chamber on the second floor, looking over the Park, with flowers on the balcony. There we smoked and drank cold brandy and water, talking over the old days.

“You remember, Jack,” said Clinton, “when old Chouser, your cousin, carried you off to the north to put you in his foundry, how that you introduced him to me, and how I said, in my grand way, that I'd be glad to see him to dine with me at Bodger's? Well, he came one day, and looked me up at the office, and I took him to Bodger's, and No. 12 Frankfort street, adjoining French's Hotel, dined him in the I strangers' room. That pleased Chouser immensely; for I got Wallsend and Lord Bowster to join us; and your manufacturing fellows are bigger toadies in their course way than anybody. After that there was nothing he wouldn't do for me— “Harry my boy, come and dine. We've two Miss Wainwrights from Manchester with us. Fifty thousand apiece.” We Moslems reckon not much of blood, Jack, and to a man who has only expensive tastes and twopence-halfpenny a year to live upon, fifty thousand is a temptation. But they were so hard— hard as nails, Jack. I couldn't stand them. Chouser got quite crusty about it. But one day he came down to the office quite softened. “Harry,” he said “I want you to dome a service. My niece, who married Colonel Lutestring of the Eighty-eighth Hussars, is coming by the Atrato, which is due at Southampton tomorrow. I've only just heard, because the letters were in the Cadmus, which was wrecked in the Red Sea. I've sent Mrs. Macender, my house keeper, to meet her; but she's such a daft old body, and my sister's up in Edinburgh. Now, will you go, there's a dear boy, and

look after her, and bring her back to Carlton Terrace?’ I went, Jack. A man don't care about talking of his love passages with his wife, but I may say that as soon as I saw her dear sweet face in widow's weeds, my heart went right out to her. We were like brother and sister for a whole year—a whole long year, Jack—and then I ventured to begin to make love to her. Chouser approved—I believe the old beggar meant it all along—and he gave us fifty thousand on our wedding day. And yet, Jack, although I've got everything the heart of man can desire, I'm not altogether happy. I don't seem to have earned it: and my life wants an object.”

“Ah?” said I, puffing out a big mouthful of smoke, “where's that fifty thousand invested?”

“By Jove. I don't exactly know. In something of Chouser's. I got about ten percent for it, I know that, paid into my bankers once a quarter.”

“Then, Harry, it's in the Buttermilk Iron Company. I know we've got fifty thousand marked off in the private ledger, H. and E. C. and we pay the interest regularly into the Bank of England; but I'd no idea it was yours. Why, Harry, in a kind of way you're our junior partner.”

Harry made a face. “*Non olet nummes.*”

“But, Harry,” said I, “you want an object in life, you were saying; here you have one cut out to your hands. Chouser wants to get out; he wants to be privy councilor, or something of that sort, and he can't whilst he's a government contractor. Leave your red tape, old fellow, and come and join us. You shall be the London manager. You understand the dodgeries of the public offices, and you'll be invaluable in getting our contracts out. You shall double your income, and rule men instead of ruling paper.”

Harry stroked his beard in a meditative way.

“I don't think it would do, old fellow. I'm too old to learn new tricks; but I'll think about it, too. I say, though, if you must go by the 9:15 you've no time to lose, I'll drive down to the King's-cross with you and see you off”

“Harry,” said I, recollecting myself just as we were starting, “I forgot that I hadn't money enough about me to take me home. You can give me some cash or a check, perhaps?”

“I dare say I can. How much?”

“Say twenty pounds.”

I sat down and wrote out a check. Harry handed over four five-pound notes, and thrust the check into his waistcoat pocket.

As we walked across the forecourt to the hansom, I saw, leaning against the rails close by, the dark figure of a man. Fifty yards behind us a second cab was drawn up to the curb.

Arrived at the Kings-cross, and having taken my ticket, I found that the man in black was still close to us. He had looking over my shoulder when I took my ticket; he had satisfied himself by examining my portmanteau that I was the intended passenger and not Clinton. Still he looked

sharply about him from side to side, hanging close to our heels, as though afraid we should slip out of his reach.

Harry didn't notice him; had got so close to him that he had ceased to care about him.

I noticed, too, that two men were standing by the booking-door, who didn't seem to be going by the night mail. There seemed to be a certain correspondence between the two men at the door and the third man, who was following us up and down the platform.

"Come into the carriage and sit down till the train starts, it's so awfully draughty on the platform," I said without lowering my voice.

We got in and sat down. The guard locked us up again, and took a turn on the platform, his whistle between his fingers, expecting the signal to depart. Looking through the window, I saw the little black sidle up to the guard. I knew the guard well; he was a Yorkshireman from Bunghole Moor; I had helped him to get his present appointment; the hottest foot warmer, a compartment to myself, unrestricted smoking in authorized carriages, were at my disposition through his good offices. I called him to the door, whispered to him; he nodded, touched his hat, and resumed his work. Presently old Buckthorn rushed foaming on the platform, almost too late for the train; a porter rolling a truck of portmanteaus and hat-boxes galloped after him; then a flying valet, his hands full of dressing-cases, coats and dispatch boxes.

"Harry, that's Buckthorn, the wild boar of the Bungholes; see, he's coming here; no, he sees the hated face of the Buttermilk man. The fellow, Harry, passes his life in a perpetual conflict with the industry which has made his fortune in spite of him. His hall and demense are right in the of the iron district, and he tries all he knows to keep them in the exact condition they were in the time of William the Conquer.

Buckthorn and suite were packed into the train, the hand of the clock at its next pulse would have marked the quarter, the little black man— ah! the little black man! The whole train of circumstances connected themselves in my mind in the flash of a moment—that Harry would be pounced upon, a row, a scandal, and with it all the revengeful eyes of Buckthorn gleaming on the scene in delight at the humiliation of one of the hated brood. "Ironmaster, robber, scoundrel!" he would roar, no doubt. "Lock 'em all up, rid the country of the rogues!" The little black man, joined by the two others, was now approaching the carriage door. Harry jumped up, and vowing it was time to go, tried to open the door. It was locked.

"I'll tell the guard, Harry." said I, thrusting him aside.

I did say something to the guard. He blew his whistle, the train began to move. The black man made a dash at the carriage; the guard caught him round the waist and swung him back. There was a great bustle and shout and hubbub on the platform, heard for moment, and then lost in the rattle of the train.

In the meantime Harry and I had been fighting. I couldn't help being a little rough with him, he struggled so hard to get out. I am pretty stiff and powerful even for a Yorkshireman, and an occasional turn with the hammer at my experimental forge at the Buttermilk works keeps my

muscular system well developed. so I held him back in his seat in spite of his struggles, and after a moment he ceased to struggle and sat still, staring at me, his face quite livid. Poor Harry! I well knew his thoughts for that one bad minute—that he was in the grasp of a madman; that his last hour had come; of the wife who was waiting at home for him, of the children sleeping in their little cots; a wild whirl of emotions; and with them all an intense curiosity, the supreme consciousness standing aloof and wondering in great awe, as in the very portals of doom. A vision of sudden death, indeed, too solemn for my pen.

The train was now at speed, waking the echoes of Holloway with its shrieks.

I released Harry from my grasp. “We don't stop till Peterborough,” I said, laughing; “but you can get back by the 1:45 train.”

Harry tried to smile; he had made up his mind to humor me, evidently fearing another paroxysm. “Didn't you think I was mad?”

“And If you're not mad, I should like to know what the devil you mean!” roared Clinton, recovering his temper and evidently determined to punch my head if he could.

“I am sorry I was so rough, but I couldn't help it. If you had not come with me, you would have been arrested at King's-cross.”

“And if I had — I don't care for the beasts.”

“Harry, you know that we Buttermilk people are large contractors for iron plates?”

“Of course I do. I'd some papers through my hands today referring to you.”

“And haven't you got a check of mine in your pocket? Put this and that together and see if there wasn't a *prima facie* case against you. You see what it is to play with edged tools.”

“But what good will it do taking me to Peterborough? Won't they telegraph?”

“No; because the boobies see you've spotted them, and they know that they have no evidence to justify them. They hoped to find something on you — don't you see and I now they'll know you're on your guard. You'd better hand back that check, and I'll destroy it.”

We had now passed away altogether from the town, its lights and houses, and were scudding across the country. It was a fine night, but very dark. The windows were wide open, letting in the balmy air of June. Harry felt in his pocket for the check, found it, and held it in his hand towards me. I was fumbling in my purse for the odd notes. I found them and looked up at Harry, who sat there with the check unfolded in his hand. But as I stretched forth to take it from him a dark arm was stretched between us, a dusky band grasped the check and then disappeared in the night.

We looked at each other in dismay for a moment; then I opened the carriage door and let myself down on the step. Yes, sure enough, there was the black man clinging to the handle of the next

carriage, making his way as well as he could towards the break-van. The danger was at the junction of the two carriages, in springing from one step to the other. He was balancing himself on the end of the step of our carriage, preparing to jump to the next, when I overtook him and put my arm round him. The roaring of the train, the rush of the wind almost prevented me from thinking. The carriage shook and heaved; I had enough to do to hold on with one hand, whilst with the other I grasped the black man. I could just hear Harry's voice. He was shouting, "Come back!"

But I wouldn't go back. I was mad at being outwitted. The smallness of my stake in the matter, the risk I ran, were as nothing. I was a Yorkshireman and bound to win at all costs. I felt that the man I held was a stiff and wiry fellow, not to be overcome without a desperate struggle, the sooner commenced the better. I had my right arm around him just under his arms, as he stood facing the side of the carriage. By an effort with my right I reached his right arm and grasped it firmly. His right hand held the check, I thought. His thumb was towards me as I sat with my back to the engine; he could hardly have changed it into his other hand. My hand reached his wrist—his hand, which was clutching an iron stanchion of the carriage. I could feel a corner of the crisp paper of the check. As I gripped his fingers, he no doubt felt that he must either give up his hold of the iron, or that I should force open his hand and seize the paper. He let go the iron. We then stood swaying about on the step of the carriage, he holding on by his left, arm, I by mine, only saved from destruction by the grip we had of each other. I was stronger in the arms than he, stronger in the wrists; but he was stronger in the fingers. His fingers were like steel springs; but under the firm pull of my arm his hold on the carriage relaxed. I felt that his left arm was giving way, that he must inevitably fall, that I must fall with him, if I did not fling him from me. I had the strength to do it, but my soul sickened at the thought. Would it be *murder*?

He let go, and swung round upon the step. I too, let go, clasped him with both arms, and with all my strength leaped from the carriage-step. It was a toss-up for death; the one who came to the ground first would be killed, the other might be saved. The last thing I remember was that the harsh roar of the train was changed to a softer tone as we leaped from the carriage step. Then there was a moment of blackness. Had I indeed been killed, and was my soul falling through the chaos? A violent blow on the side convinced me that I was still in the flesh. There was then a rushing and bubbling of waters in my ears; then I felt my heels kicking on the gravelly bed of a river. "O Lord, methought, what torture 'twere to drown!"—a dream that only—but for the rush and flurry of it, drowning would have been easy enough. If it hadn't been for that hardening process, the secret of which was mine only and would die with me, I wouldn't so much have minded stopping there among the sedges. But for the Buttermilk Ironworks there must be a struggle. Among the gravel and weeds at the bottom of the river the struggle was fierce enough; but at last the grasp of the little man relaxed, and just as suffocation seemed to be wringing my soul from my body, I felt myself free, and struck a few feeble strokes towards the light. In a moment my head popped up into the air, and instinctively I paddled on to the shore. I was nearly done for, too. I crawled onto the bank, and lay there breathless for a while. It was a narrow sluggish stream out of which I had just emerged. It widened out lower down, into a marshy pool. The full orb of the moon was rising just over this pool, throwing a yellow, lambent, quivering light, a broad path of glory, right up the rippling stream, stirred by the breath of the night wind. As I lay there, breathless, senseless almost, I was yet strangely moved by the light of the moon. I raised myself on one elbow, and stared intently into the glowing light. Was there any comfort left

for me in all this world whereon the moonbeams shone?—for me, who had on my soul the life of a fellow man?

I lay lengthwise along the bank, prone, among stumps of willows and clinging water plants, and as I looked full into the face of the moon, suddenly between me and it was raised a human hand and arm, the finger raised as in warning or menace. Good God! was it the dead man's hand from the pool which was raised to denounce me? I think my senses almost left me. I lay there still gazing at the moon, but the hand had disappeared. Suddenly I felt a hand upon me, passed gently over me as I lay—a hand and arm, and a hot breath on my cheek. In terror and horror I seized the hand, and threw my arm out, grasping—a leather legging with very hard buttons.

“Oh, Lard. Lard! marcy ‘pon us! Oh Lard! marcy! ‘tis the keeper. Oh, Lard Mr. Keeper, lemme go this time. I'll never I lay night lines again.”

I rose and confronted my ghostly visitant.  
—a stout rustic in a dark smock. He had been crouching by the bank laying his lines. It was his hand, no doubt, which had appeared athwart the moon. As we both into the light, a voice hailed us from the other bank :

“Hullo, guv’nor, what part of the world do you call this?”

It was my friend in black, the little detective. I knew his voice. Good heavens! I could have embraced the man I would have killed ten minutes before.

“Oh! it’s you, Mr. Brown, is it? Well. I’m glad you ain’t drowned, after all. You ain’t going to fight for that bit of pap?r, are you anymore?”

“No; you have stuck to it well. I’m finished. Wish you joy of it.”

The rustic had listened in terror to this mysterious conversation.

“Show us the way to the nearest station, and I'll not split upon your night-lines.”

The rustic was thankful enough to escape. We passed over the railway bridge—a wooden beam without any parapet—and joined the detective. We walked amicably together along the line till we came to a cross lane, and then a few minutes’ walk brought us to a little village. A small railway hotel stood by the side of the road. We entered, and called for hot brandy and water. The girl who waited upon us stared in wonder at our dripping clothes. Our hats had gone, of course, and we had tied our handkerchiefs round our heads. The detective took out his pocketbook.

“Honor bright?” he said, interrogatively.

“Honor bright,” I replied.

“Well, then, I’ll just make a note of this here check. Perhaps you’ll excuse me, Miss, if I just step inside the bar; the light’s better.”



Despite the “honor bright,” my friend preferred to keep the bar and glasses and the sleepy barmaid between me and the check. He fumbled for his spectacles, found them, wiped them, put them on, brought out a fat notebook; then in his most official judicial manner spread out the check into the full light of the guttering tallow candle, and, pencil in hand, proceeded to master its contents.

“D—nation!” he shouted, jumping up, almost upsetting the table; “what’s this here game? What the hangment did you want to pitch me into the river for this blank blank thing?”

He threw the paper on to the counter. I took it up and read; “Admit two to Stalls: David Birdbolt, Manager.”

“Well, anyhow,” said I, “if we had gone to the shades below, we should have had a good place.”

Harry Clinton told me afterwards that he had found the check in his waistcoat pocket after I had disappeared; he having handed me the theatrical order instead. There was no scandal on the Buttermilk Iron Company, nor on my friend Harry, arising out of this transaction. I confess that I take a considerable secret pride in my part of it. The government have put me on the Commission of the Peace, and on the bench I often meet my friend Buckthorn, but he can no longer bear me down by the weight of his bumptiousness. I always feel that I hold a trump card over him. Much of his; reputation is due to his once having in single combat half killed a poacher; but what is that to having nearly murdered a policeman? The story somehow oozed out, and it gives me great weight on the bench, I assure you.

Harry Clinton has retired from the Navigation office with a handsome pension, economy being now all the rage. I think he’ll join us. I think he’ll take an active share in the Buttermilk Iron Company, will be our London agent, and no longer the junior partner.

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