

## CHAPTER VI. - MY SMOKING-TABLE.

Had it not been for a bootblack at Charing Cross I should probably never have bought the smoking-table. I had to pass that boy every morning. In vain did I scowl at him, or pass with my head to the side. He always pointed derisively (as I thought) at my boots. Probably my boots were speckless, but that made no difference; he jeered and sneered. I have never hated any one as I loathed that boy, and to escape him I took to going round by the Lowther Arcade. It was here that my eye fell on the smoking-table. In the Lowther Arcade, if the attendants catch you looking at any article for a fraction of a second, it is done up in brown paper, you have paid your money, and they have taken down your address before you realize that you don't want anything. In this way I became the owner of my smoking-table, and when I saw it in a brown-paper parcel on my return to my chambers I could not think what it was until I cut the strings. Such a little gem of a table no smokers should be without; and I am not ashamed to say that I was in love with mine as soon as I had fixed the pieces together. It was of walnut, and consisted mainly of a stalk and two round slabs not much bigger than dinner-plates. There were holes in the centre of these slabs for the stalk to go through, and the one slab stood two feet from the floor, the other a foot higher. The lower slab was fitted with a walnut tobacco-jar and a pipe-rack, while on the upper slab were exquisite little recesses for cigars, cigarettes, matches, and ashes. These held respectively three cigars, two cigarettes, and four wax vestas. The smoking-table was an ornament to any room; and the first night I had it I raised my eyes from my book to look at it every few minutes. I got all my pipes together and put them in the rack; I filled the jar with tobacco, the recesses with three cigars, two cigarettes, and four matches; and then I thought I would have a smoke. I swept my hand confidently along the mantelpiece, but it did not stop at a pipe. I rose and looked for a pipe. I had half a dozen, but not one was to be seen--none on the mantelpiece, none on the window-sill, none on the hearth-rug, none being used as book-markers. I tugged at the bell till William John came in quaking, and then I asked him fiercely what he had done with my pipes. I was so obviously not to be trifled with that William John, as we called him, because some thought his name was William, while others thought it was John, very soon handed me my favorite pipe, which he found in the rack on the smoking-table. This

incident illustrates one of the very few drawbacks of smoking-tables. Not being used to them, you forget about them. William John, however, took the greatest pride in the table, and whenever he saw a pipe lying on the rug he pounced upon it and placed it, like a prisoner, in the rack. He was also most particular about the three cigars, the two cigarettes, and the four wax vestas, keeping them carefully in the proper compartments, where, unfortunately, I seldom thought of looking for them.

The fatal defect of the smoking-table, however, was that it was generally rolling about the floor--the stalk in one corner, the slabs here and there, the cigars on the rug to be trampled on, the lid of the tobacco-jar beneath a chair. Every morning William John had to put the table together. Sometimes I had knocked it over accidentally. I would fling a crumpled piece of paper into the waste-paper basket. It missed the basket but hit the smoking-table, which went down like a wooden soldier. When my fire went out, just because I had taken my eyes off it for a moment, I called it names and flung the tongs at it. There was a crash--the smoking-table again. In time I might have remedied this; but there is one weakness which I could not stand in any smoking-table. A smoking-table ought to be so constructed that from where you are sitting you can stretch out your feet, twist them round the stalk, and so lift the table to the spot where it will be handiest. This my smoking-table would never do. The moment I had it in the air it wanted to stand on its head.

Though I still admired smoking-tables as much as ever, I began to want very much to give this one away. The difficulty was not so much to know whom to give it to as how to tie it up. My brother was the very person, for I owed him a letter, and this, I thought, would do instead. For a month I meant to pack the table up and send it to him; but I always put off doing it, and at last I thought the best plan would be to give it to Scrymgeour, who liked elegant furniture. As a smoker, Scrymgeour seemed the very man to appreciate a pretty, useful little table. Besides, all I had to do was to send William John down with it. Scrymgeour was out at the time; but we left it at the side of his fireplace as a pleasant surprise. Next morning, to my indignation, it was back at the side of my fireplace, and in the evening Scrymgeour came and upbraided me for trying, as he most unworthily expressed it, "to palm the thing off on him." He was no sooner gone than I took the table to pieces to send it to my brother. I tied the stalk up in brown paper, meaning to get a box for the other parts. William John sent off the stalk, and for some days the other pieces

littered the floor. My brother wrote me saying he had received something from me, for which his best thanks; but would I tell him what it was, as it puzzled everybody? This was his impatient way; but I made an effort, and sent off the other pieces to him in a hat-box.

That was a year ago, and since then I have only heard the history of the smoking-table in fragments. My brother liked it immensely; but he thought it was too luxurious for a married man, so he sent it to Reynolds, in Edinburgh. Not knowing Reynolds, I cannot say what his opinion was; but soon afterward I heard of its being in the possession of Grayson, who was charmed with it, but gave it to Pelle, because it was hardly in its place in a bachelor's establishment. Later a town man sent it to a country gentleman as just the thing for the country; and it was afterward in Liverpool as the very thing for a town. There I thought it was lost, so far as I was concerned. One day, however, Boyd, a friend of mine who lives in Glasgow, came to me for a week, and about six hours afterward he said that he had a present for me. He brought it into my sitting-room--a bulky parcel--and while he was undoing the cords he told me it was something quite novel; he had bought it in Glasgow the day before. When I saw a walnut leg I started; in another two minutes I was trying to thank Boyd for my own smoking-table. I recognized it by the dents. I was too much the gentleman to insist on an explanation from Boyd; but, though it seems a harsh thing to say, my opinion is that these different persons gave the table away because they wanted to get rid of it. William John has it now.