

PROLOGUE TO THE SECOND STORY.

The beginning of an excellent connection which I succeeded in establishing in and around that respectable watering-place, Tidbury-on-the-Marsh, was an order for a life-size oil portrait of a great local celebrity--one Mr. Boxsious, a solicitor, who was understood to do the most thriving business of any lawyer in the town.

The portrait was intended as a testimonial "expressive (to use the language of the circular forwarded to me at the time) of the eminent services of Mr. Boxsious in promoting and securing the prosperity of the town." It had been subscribed for by the "Municipal Authorities and Resident Inhabitants" of Tidbury-on-the-Marsh; and it was to be presented, when done, to Mrs. Boxsious, "as a slight but sincere token"--and so forth. A timely recommendation from one of my kindest friends and patrons placed the commission for painting the likeness in my lucky hands; and I was instructed to attend on a certain day at Mr. Boxsious's private residence, with all my materials ready for taking a first sitting.

On arriving at the house, I was shown into a very prettily furnished morning-room. The bow-window looked out on a large inclosed meadow, which represented the principal square in Tidbury. On the opposite side of the meadow I could see the new hotel (with a wing lately added), and close by, the old hotel obstinately unchanged since it had first been built. Then, further down the street, the doctor's house, with a colored lamp and a small door-plate, and the banker's office, with a plain lamp and a big door-plate--then some dreary private lodging-houses--then, at right angles to these, a street of shops; the cheese-monger's very small, the chemist's very smart, the pastry-cook's very dowdy, and the green-grocer's very dark, I was still looking out at the view thus presented, when I was suddenly apostrophized by a glib, disputatious voice behind me.

"Now, then, Mr. Artist," cried the voice, "do you call that getting ready for work? Where are your paints and brushes, and all the rest of it? My name's Boxsious, and I'm here to sit for my picture."

I turned round, and confronted a little man with his legs astraddle, and his hands in his pockets. He had light-gray eyes, red all round the lids, bristling pepper-colored hair, an unnaturally rosy complexion, and an eager, impudent, clever look. I made two discoveries in one glance at him: First, that he was a wretched subject for a portrait; secondly, that, whatever he might do or say, it would not be of the least use for me to stand on my dignity with him.

"I shall be ready directly, sir," said I.

"Ready directly?" repeated my new sitter. "What do you mean, Mr. Artist, by ready directly? I'm ready now. What was your contract with the Town Council, who have subscribed for this picture? To paint the portrait. And what was my contract? To sit for it. Here am I ready to sit, and there are you not ready to paint me. According to all the rules of law and logic, you are committing a breach of contract already. Stop! let's have a look at your paints. Are they the best quality? If not, I warn you, sir, there's a second breach of contract! Brushes, too? Why, they're old brushes, by the Lord Harry! The Town Council pays you well, Mr. Artist; why don't you work for them with new brushes? What? you work best with old? I contend, sir, that you can't. Does my housemaid clean best with an old broom? Do my clerks write best with old pens? Don't color up, and don't look as if you were going to quarrel with me! You can't quarrel with me. If you were fifty times as irritable a man as you look, you couldn't quarrel with me. I'm not young, and I'm not touchy--I'm Boxsious, the lawyer; the only man in the world who can't be insulted, try it how you like!"

He chuckled as he said this, and walked away to the window. It was quite useless to take anything he said seriously, so I finished preparing my palette for the morning's work with the utmost serenity of look and manner that I could possibly assume.

"There!" he went on, looking out of the window; "do you see that fat man slouching along the Parade, with a snuffy nose? That's my favorite enemy, Dunball. He tried to quarrel with me ten years ago, and he has done nothing but bring out the hidden benevolence of my character ever since. Look at him! look how he frowns as he turns this way. And now look at me! I can smile and nod to him. I make a point of always smiling and nodding to him--it keeps my hand in for other enemies. Good-morning! (I've cast him twice in heavy damages) good-morning, Mr. Dunball. He bears malice, you see; he won't speak; he's short in the neck, passionate, and four times as fat as he ought to be; he has fought against my amiability for ten mortal years; when he can't fight any longer, he'll die suddenly, and I shall be the innocent cause of it."

Mr. Boxsious uttered this fatal prophecy with extraordinary complacency, nodding and smiling out of the window all the time at the unfortunate man who had rashly tried to provoke him. When his favorite enemy was out of sight, he turned away, and indulged himself in a brisk turn or two up and down the room. Meanwhile I lifted my canvas on the easel, and was on the

point of asking him to sit down, when he assailed me again.

"Now, Mr. Artist," he cried, quickening his walk impatiently, "in the interests of the Town Council, your employers, allow me to ask you for the last time when you are going to begin?"

"And allow me, Mr. Boxsious, in the interest of the Town Council also," said I, "to ask you if your notion of the proper way of sitting for your portrait is to walk about the room!"

"Aha! well put--devilish well put!" returned Mr. Boxsious; "that's the only sensible thing you have said since you entered my house; I begin to like you already." With these words he nodded at me approvingly, and jumped into the high chair that I had placed for him with the alacrity of a young man.

"I say, Mr. Artist," he went on, when I had put him into the right position (he insisted on the front view of his face being taken, because the Town Council would get the most for their money in that way), "you don't have many such good jobs as this, do you?"

"Not many," I said. "I should not be a poor man if commissions for life-size portraits often fell in my way."

"You poor!" exclaimed Mr. Boxsious, contemptuously. "I dispute that point with you at the outset. Why, you've got a good cloth coat, a clean shirt, and a smooth-shaved chin. You've got the sleek look of a man who has slept between sheets and had his breakfast. You can't humbug me about poverty, for I know what it is. Poverty means looking like a scarecrow, feeling like a scarecrow, and getting treated like a scarecrow. That was my luck, let me tell you, when I first thought of trying the law. Poverty, indeed! Do you shake in your shoes, Mr. Artist, when you think what you were at twenty? I do, I can promise you."

He began to shift about so irritably in his chair, that, in the interests of my work, I was obliged to make an effort to calm him.

"It must be a pleasant occupation for you in your present prosperity," said I, "to look back sometimes at the gradual processes by which you passed from poverty to competence, and from that to the wealth you now enjoy."

"Gradual, did you say?" cried Mr. Boxsious; "it wasn't gradual at all. I was sharp--damned sharp, and I jumped at my first start in business slap into five hundred pounds in one day."

"That was an extraordinary step in advance," I rejoined. "I suppose you contrived to make some profitable investment--"

"Not a bit of it! I hadn't a spare sixpence to invest with. I won the money by my brains, my hands, and my pluck; and, what's more, I'm proud of having done it. That was rather a curious case, Mr. Artist. Some men might be shy of mentioning it; I never was shy in my life and I mention it right and left everywhere--the whole case, just as it happened, except the names. Catch me ever committing myself to mentioning names! Mum's the word, sir, with yours to command, Thomas Boxsious."

"As you mention 'the case' everywhere," said I, "perhaps you would not be offended with me if I told you I should like to hear it?"

"Man alive! haven't I told you already that I can't be offended? And didn't I say a moment ago that I was proud of the case? I'll tell you, Mr. Artist--but stop! I've got the interests of the Town Council to look after in this business. Can you paint as well when I'm talking as when I'm not? Don't sneer, sir; you're not wanted to sneer--you're wanted to give an answer--yes or no?"

"Yes, then," I replied, in his own sharp way. "I can always paint the better when I am hearing an interesting story."

"What do you mean by talking about a story? I'm not going to tell you a story; I'm going to make a statement. A statement is a matter of fact, therefore the exact opposite of a story, which is a matter of fiction. What I am now going to tell you really happened to me."

I was glad to see that he settled himself quietly in his chair before he began. His odd manners and language made such an impression on me at the time, that I think I can repeat his "statement" now, almost word for word as he addressed it to me.