

"I spoke literally," he asserted. "I can show you your life, as it might have been, as clearly as if you saw yourself in a mirror."

Bennet rubbed his eyes, and, satisfied that he was awake, went with the stranger to a large house standing in its own grounds, some fifty yards up a slope on the right-hand side of the right-hand lane of the two he had to choose between. He can identify the exact spot to-day, but the house is not there and the grounds are a bare field.

There was nothing abnormal about the house, so he says.

The stranger conducted him to a large room at the back, furnished in green velvet, like a large and comfortable study. The only peculiar feature was a big armchair, covered with a canopy, at one end of a stand. At the other end there stood a plain gateway. The door was of ivory, with silver pillars at the sides, and a silver shield on top inscribed in mystic characters. In the centre of the door there was a round handle. Bennet thinks there was a mechanism at the back of the door, but he did not see it.

The stranger waved him to an ordinary armchair first.

"There have been side-ways which you have missed, that would have improved your circumstances," the stranger remarked, but you passed the main road full sixteen years ago. Perhaps you remember?"

"You mean," Bennet suggested, "when I declined that post abroad? With Johnson and Richborough?"

He had always felt that he "missed his chance" then.

"Yes," the stranger agreed.

"You see," Bennet explained, "I had just taken a great fancy to Bertha—I mean my wife. Chichester was in the field first, and it seemed no use asking her at once. I'd only known her a few days. I was a young ass, of course, because she says she liked me from the very first; but I thought I'd lose her if I went away."

The stranger nodded assent.

"People choose their roads for reasons like that," he said. "They may be good reasons, or they may be bad ones. They do not alter the external result, once the road is chosen; but they alter the man. That is a point which you must bear in mind. Now take that chair, and you will find the road which you might have chosen; not the past—I cannot remake that—but the present. That is to say that for half an hour you will live exactly as you would have lived at this time to-day, if you had taken the appointment in the firm you mention. If you wish, after your trial, I can make the change permanent."

He sat in the chair, and he stared at the ivory door, and wondered what the stranger was doing behind it, just as you wonder what the dentist is doing behind you. He heard a jingle very like the clatter of steel instruments; and suddenly the door and the room were gone, and he sat at a large spick-and-span roll-top desk in a beautifully appointed office, far superior to the private room of the head of his firm. He was dressed in brand new clothes, and had an extraordinarily comfortable feeling of exact fit and silk underwear.

He returned to the grand desk, and found that he was signing a letter acknowledging a cheque for fifteen thousand pounds.

Next he read an offer to place with his firm a contract for seventy thousand pounds, on certain conditions. He noticed that it was addressed to Sir Charles Bennet and Co.

There were some private notes. One was

an invitation to dine with a duke. Another was from an earl—"My dear Bennet." He was a very important man.

He signed a cheque for Lady Bennet carelessly, a couple of thousand or so was quite immaterial to him, he knew; and he had an idea that it was as immaterial to Lady Bennet. Yes, she was rich in her own right: He recollected that; but he did not remember *her* very well. He would go home and see what she was like.

A magnificent motor conveyed him to his house, and a footman took his coat.

"Is her ladyship in?" he asked.

"Yes, Sir Charles; in the drawing-room."

He strolled into the drawing-room. At the far end—some forty feet from the door—he saw a large, handsome woman; too much jewellery, but carrying it well.

"Good gracious!" she ejaculated. "What brought you home at this time?"

"Motor," he said, standing with his back to the fire. "And I wanted to talk to you. They're badgering me again to stand for Parliament."

She shook her head. "You can't burn the candle at both ends," she pronounced decidedly. "Burn it at the end which makes money. It gives you more power than making speeches and—" she paused.

"You're right," he owned. "We've got the Billiter contract, by the way. I'd rather like Parliament. Sort of feeling that I'm a candle with another end to burn."

"You'd better burn it at home, then," she said sharply. "The children hardly know you. I suppose you wouldn't know them if you met them in the street!"

He smiled.

"You might have them down now."

She waved her hand to the bell, and he pressed the knob.

"Tell Miss Richardson to bring the children," his wife commanded, and presently they came. A boy of twelve, he was Charlie; a girl of ten, who answered to "Beck"; and a shy little creature of five, who was "Maidie." They hung round their big mother and stared at him. He talked to them awkwardly.

He felt relieved when they were gone.

HE woke up facing the ivory door with the diamond handle. The stranger took his arm and helped him off the platform.

"Well?" he asked. "Do you wish you had taken the other turning?"

"Wish!" Bennet cried. "Wish! Why, I'd have been worth—what?"

"A million and a half sterling," the stranger told him; "and your wife another half million, and more when her father dies. She was Miss Rachel Levy, you know; only daughter of the millionaire."

"She seemed precious clever," Bennet said, "and not bad-looking. What sort of a wife would she be?"

"As good as you'd let her be," the stranger answered. "A *very* good mother. You wouldn't have cared much for her or for your children. You see, Mr. Bennet, you are a man with considerable limitations. If your energies had flowed in the direction of prosperity, you wouldn't have had much left."

"I work hard," Bennet claimed. "I make more money for the firm than the partners do, though you might not think so."

"I don't think so," the stranger stated. "You put in a quantity of work, but they put in the quality. Your heart and the best of you are at home, my friend!"

"I see," Bennet said slowly. "I don't look out for the firm as I look out for my family. That's true, but still, isn't there a cross-path

to a moderate prosperity, with my present family? I like them much better than the others."

"The others would have been just as likable, if you had liked them as much," the stranger told him. "They are really very nice people. Your wife—that-might-have-been is an exceptionally good woman, in spite of some human drawbacks. She is naturally affectionate. So are the children. Anyhow, you must have them, if you elect to be put on the main road to prosperity."

"My domestic energies don't seem to do much for my family," he remarked savagely. "My wife has to be a household drudge. We can't even afford a maid. I don't see how I can give the boys a decent start in life, and we haven't been able to afford music lessons for my eldest girl. Perhaps they'd be better off if I'd chose the other turning. Would Bert—I mean Mrs. Bennet—have married Chichester? And would my children—my real children—have existed, if I had taken the other turning, sixteen years ago?"

"I don't know," the stranger said; "but the apparatus will show you. You can see them on the ivory screen, as they would be to-day, if you had chosen the other turning."

"Look at the knob," the stranger commanded. Bennet stared at the huge, many-faced diamond; and gradually a picture grew upon the great door. At first it was misty. Then the mist cleared, and he saw his wife, sitting in a very comfortable middle-class dining-room. There was a sideboard, he noticed, like the one at the Universal Furnishing Emporium, magnified and glorified. Bertha was well dressed and rather plumper and younger looking than at present, but yet in a way she seemed older. The lines upon her face were fewer; but the missing lines had been pleasant lines, graven in by cares borne for love. A woman well cared for, but not happy.

His four eldest children were gathered round her. He missed Baby May. They were well dressed—better than in their present Sunday bests, the renewal of which was such a tax upon him—and little altered in appearance. At first he did not detect any alteration, but gradually he detected a difference in expression—an uneasy way of looking round, as if they expected to be accused of wrong-doing. That was what struck him.

The eldest boy, sharp and mischievous, but well-meaning Dick, listened to something, and held up his hand.

"Hang it all!" he grumbled. "That's father come home early. Just when we were enjoying ourselves!"

"Hush, dear," his wife reproved the boy. "You shouldn't speak like that of your father."

They all looked toward the door, and Chichester walked in; the same lanky, quick, querulous man as Bennet had known him.

"Hello!" he greeted them. His wife just nodded, and the children said "Good afternoon, father," in a "company" manner. It was so different from the way they greeted Bennet when *he* returned. All five, and perhaps the baby, met him at the door, or on the steps outside. The boys almost tore his coat from him, and his wife and the girls hugged him.

"You're home early," his wife remarked to Chichester. She also spoke in a company manner. When Bennet was early she always said "How nice!" And then she rattled off the events of the day, and her face looked quite girlish in spite of the little care-worn lines left after her smile had absorbed the other lines.

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