

# **Humplebee**

George Gissing

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The school was assembled for evening prayers, some threescore boys representing for the most part the well-to-do middle class of a manufacturing county. At either end of the room glowed a pleasant fire, for it was February and the weather had turned to frost.

Silence reigned, but on all the young faces turned to where the headmaster sat at his desk appeared an unwonted expression, an eager expectancy, as though something out of the familiar routine were about to happen. When the master's voice at length sounded, he did not read from the book before him; gravely, slowly, he began to speak of an event which had that day stirred the little community with profound emotion.

'Two of our number are this evening absent. Happily, most happily, absent for a short time; in our prayers we shall render thanks to the good Providence which has saved us from a terrible calamity. I do not desire to dwell upon the circumstance that one of these boys, Chadwick, had committed worse than an imprudence in venturing upon the Long Pond; it was in disregard of my injunction; I had distinctly made it known that the ice was still unsafe. We will speak no more of that. All we can think of at present is the fact that Chadwick was on the point of losing his life; that in all human probability he would have been drowned, but for the help heroically afforded him by one of his schoolfellows. I say heroically, and I am sure I do not exaggerate; in the absence of Humplebee I may declare that he nobly perilled his own life to save that of another. It was a splendid bit of courage, a fine example of pluck and promptitude and vigour. We have all cause this night to be proud of Humplebee.'

The solemn voice paused. There was an instant's profound silence. Then, from somewhere amid the rows of listeners, sounded a clear, boyish note.

'Sir, may we give three cheers for Humplebee?'

'You may.'

The threescore leapt to their feet, and volleys of cheering made the schoolroom echo. Then the master raised his hand, the tumult subsided, and after a few moments of agitated silence, prayers began.

Next morning there appeared as usual at his desk a short, thin, red-headed boy of sixteen, whose plain, freckled face denoted good-humour and a certain intelligence, but would never have drawn attention amongst the livelier and comelier physiognomies grouped about him. This was Humplebee. Hitherto he had been an insignificant member of the school, one of those boys who excel neither at games nor at lessons, of whom nothing is expected, and rarely, if ever, get into trouble, and who are liked in a rather contemptuous way. Of a sudden he shone glorious; all tongues were busy with him, all eyes regarded him, every one wished for the honour of his friendship. Humplebee looked uncomfortable. He had the sniffy beginnings of a cold, the result of yesterday's struggle in icy water, and his usual diffident and monosyllabic inclination was intensified by the position in which he found himself. Clappings on the shoulder from bigger boys who had been wont to joke about his tongues were busy with him, all eyes regarded him, every one wished for the honour of his friendship. Humplebee looked uncomfortable. He had the sniffy beginnings of a cold, the result of yesterday's struggle in icy water, and his usual diffident and monosyllabic inclination was intensified by the position in which he found himself. Clappings on the

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shoulder from bigger boys who had been wont to joke about his name made him flush nervously; to be addressed as 'Humpy,' or 'Beetle,' or 'Buz,' even though in a new tone, seemed to gratify him as little as before. It was plain that Humplebee would much have liked to be left alone. He stuck as closely as possible to his desk, and out of school-time tried to steal apart from the throng.

But an ordeal awaited him. Early in the afternoon there arrived, from a great town not far away, a well-dressed and high-complexioned man, whose every look and accent declared commercial importance. This was Mr Chadwick, father of the boy who had all but been drowned. He and the headmaster held private talk, and presently they sent for Humplebee. Merely to enter the 'study' was at any time Humplebee's dread; to do so under the present circumstances cost him anguish of spirit.

'Ha! here he is!' exclaimed Mr Chadwick, in the voice of bluff geniality which seemed to him appropriate. 'Humblebee, let me shake hands with you! Humplebee, I am proud to make your acquaintance; prouder still to thank you, to thank you, my boy!'

The lad was painfully overcome; his hands quivered, he stood like one convicted of disgraceful behaviour.

'I think you have heard of me, Humplebee. Leonard has no doubt spoken to you of his father. Perhaps my name has reached you in other ways?'

'Yes, sir,' faltered the boy.

'You mean that you know me as a public man?' urged Mr Chadwick, whose eyes glimmered a hungry vanity.

'Yes, sir,' whispered Humplebee.

'Ha! I see you already take an intelligent interest in things beyond school. They tell me you are sixteen, Humplebee. Come, now; what are your ideas about the future? I don't mean' — Mr Chadwick rolled a laugh — 'about the future of mankind, or even the future of the English race; you and I may perhaps discuss such questions a few years hence. In the meantime, what are your personal ambitions? In brief, what would you like to be, Humplebee?'

Under the eye of his master and of the commercial potentate, Humplebee stood voiceless; he gasped once or twice like an expiring fish.

'Courage, my boy, courage!' cried Mr Chadwick. 'Your father, I believe, destines you for commerce. Is that your own wish? Speak freely. Speak as though I were a friend you have known all your life.'

'I should like to please my father, sir,' jerked from the boy's lips.

'Good! Admirable! That's the spirit I like, Humplebee. Then you have no marked predilection? That was what I wanted to discover — well, well, we shall see. Meanwhile, Humplebee, get on with your arithmetic. You are good at arithmetic, I am sure?'

'Not very, sir.'

'Come, come, that's your modesty. But I like you none the worse for it, Humplebee. Well, well, get on with your work, my boy, and we shall see, we shall see.'

Therewith, to his vast relief, Humplebee found himself dismissed. Later in the day he received a summons to the bedroom where Mr Chadwick's son was being carefully nursed. Leonard Chadwick, about the same age as his rescuer, had never deigned to pay much attention to Humplebee, whom he regarded as stupid and plebeian; but the boy's character was marked by a generous impulsiveness, which came out strongly in the present circumstances.

'Hallo, Humpy!' he cried, raising himself up when the other entered. 'So you pulled me out of that hole! Shake hands, Buzzy, old fellow! You've had a talk with my governor, haven't you? What do you think of him?'

Humblebee muttered something incoherent.

'My governor's going to make your fortune, Humpy!' cried Leonard. 'He told me so, and when he says a thing he means it. He's going to start you in business when you leave school; most likely you'll go into his own office. How will you like that, Humpy? My governor thinks no end of you; says you're a brick, and so you are. I shan't forget that you pulled me out of that hole, old chap. We shall be friends all our lives, you know. Tell me what you thought of my governor?'

When he was on his legs again, Leonard continued to treat Humplebee with grateful, if somewhat condescending, friendliness. In the talks they had together the great man's son continually expatiated upon his preserver's brilliant prospects. Beyond possibility of doubt Humplebee would some day be a rich man; Mr Chadwick had said so, and whatever he purposed came to pass. To all this Humplebee listened in a dogged sort of

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way, now and then smiling, but seldom making verbal answer. In school he was not quite the same boy as before his exploit; he seemed duller, less attentive, and at times even incurred reproaches for work ill done — previously a thing unknown. When the holidays came, no boy was so glad as Humplebee; his heart sang within him as he turned his back upon the school and began the journey homeward.

That home was in the town illuminated by Mr Chadwick's commercial and municipal brilliance; over a small draper's shop in one of the outskirt streets stood the name of Humplebee the draper. About sixty years of age, he had known plenty of misfortune and sorrows, with scant admixture of happiness. Nowadays things were somewhat better with him; by dint of severe economy he had put aside two or three hundred pounds, and he was able, moreover, to give his son (an only child) what is called a sound education. In the limited rooms above the shop there might have been a measure of quiet content and hopefulness, but for Mrs Humplebee. She, considerably younger than her husband, fretted against their narrow circumstances, and grudged the money that was being spent — wasted, she called it — on the boy Harry.

From his father Harry never heard talk of pecuniary troubles, but the mother lost no opportunity of letting him know that they were poor, miserably poor; and adding, that if he did not work hard at school he was simply a cold-hearted criminal, and robbed his parents of their bread.

But during the last month or two a change had come upon the household. One day the draper received a visit from the great Mr Chadwick, who told a wonderful story of Harry's heroism, and made proposals sounding so nobly generous that Mr Humplebee was overcome with gratitude.

Harry, as his father knew, had no vocation for the shop; to get him a place in a manufacturer's office seemed the best thing that could be aimed at, and here was Mr Chadwick talking of easy book-keeping, quick advancement, and all manner of vaguely splendid possibilities in the future. The draper's joy proved Mrs Humplebee's opportunity. She put forward a project which had of late been constantly on her mind and on her lips, to wit, that they should transfer their business into larger premises, and give themselves a chance of prosperity. Humplebee need no longer hesitate. He had his little capital to meet the first expenses, and if need arose there need not be the slightest doubt that Mr Chadwick would assist him. A kind gentleman, Mr Chadwick! Had he not expressly desired to see Harry's mother, and had he not assured her in every possible way of the debt and gratitude he felt towards all who bore the name of Humplebee? The draper, if he neglected his opportunity, would be an idiot — a mere idiot!

So, when the boy came home for his holidays he found two momentous things decided; first, that he should forthwith enter Mr Chadwick's office; secondly, that the little shop should be abandoned and anew one taken in a better neighbourhood.

Now Harry Humplebee had in his soul a secret desire and a secret abhorrence. Ever since he could read his delight had been in books of natural history; beasts, birds, and fishes possessed his imagination, and for nothing else in the intellectual world did he really care. With poor resources he had learned a great deal of his beloved subjects. Whenever he could get away into the fields he was happy; to lie still for hours watching some wild thing, noting its features and its ways, seemed to him perfect enjoyment. His treasure was a collection, locked in a cupboard at home, of eggs, skeletons, butterflies, beetles, and I know not what. His father regarded all this as harmless amusement, his mother contemptuously tolerated it or, in worse humour, condemned it as waste of time. When at school the boy had frequent opportunities of pursuing his study, for he was in mid-country and could wander as he liked on free afternoons; but neither the headmaster nor his assistant thought it worth while to pay heed to Humplebee's predilection. True, it had been noticed more than once that in writing an 'essay' he showed unusual observation of natural things; this, however, did not strike his educators as a matter of any importance; it was not their business to discover what Humplebee could do, and wished to do, but to make him do things they regarded as desirable. Humplebee was marked for commerce; he must study compound interest, and be strong at discount. Yet the boy loathed every such mental effort, and the name of 'business' made him sick at heart.

How he longed to unbosom himself to his father! And in the first week of his holiday he had a chance of doing so, a wonderful chance, such as had never entered his dreams. The town possessed a museum of Natural History, where, of course, Harry had often spent leisure hours. Half a year ago a happy chance had brought him into conversation with the curator, who could not but be struck by the lad's intelligence, and who took an interest in him. Now they met again; they had one or two long talks, with the result that, on a Sunday afternoon, the curator of the museum took the trouble to call upon Mr Humplebee, to speak with him about his son. At the

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museum was wanted a lad with a taste for natural history, to perform at first certain easy duties, with the prospect of further advancement here or elsewhere. It seemed to the curator that Harry was the very boy for the place; would Mr Humplebee like to consider this suggestion? Now, if it had been made to him half a year ago, such an offer would have seemed to Mr Humplebee well worth consideration, and he knew that Harry would have heard of it with delight; as it was, he could not entertain the thought for a moment.

Impossible to run the risk of offending Mr Chadwick; moreover, who could hesitate between the modest possibilities of the museum and such a career as waited the lad under the protection of his powerful friend? With nervous haste the draper explained how matters stood, excused himself, and begged that not another word on the subject might be spoken in his son's hearing.

Harry Humplebee knew what he had lost; the curator, in talk with him, had already thrown out his suggestion; at their next meeting he discreetly made known to the boy that other counsels must prevail. For the first time Harry felt a vehement impulse, prompting him to speak on his own behalf, to assert and to plead for his own desires. But courage failed him. He heard his father loud in praise of Mr Chadwick, intent upon the gratitude and respect due to that admirable man. He knew how his mother would exclaim at the mere hint of disinclination to enter the great man's office. And so he held his peace, though it cost him bitterness of heart and even secret tears. A long, long time passed before he could bring himself to enter again the museum doors.

He sat on a stool in Mr Chadwick's office, a clerk at a trifling salary. Everything, his father reminded him, must have a beginning; let him work well and his progress would be repaid. Two years passed and he was in much the same position; his salary had increased by one half, but his work remained the same, mechanical, dreary, hateful to him in its monotony. Meanwhile his father's venture in the new premises had led to great embarrassments; business did not thrive; the day came when Mr Humplebee, trembling and shamefaced, felt himself drawn to beg help of his son's so-called benefactor. He came away from the interview with empty hands. Worse than that, he had heard things about Harry which darkened his mind with a new anxiety.

'I greatly fear,' said Mr Chadwick, 'that your son must seek a place in some other office. It's a painful thing; I wish I could have kept him; but the fact of the matter is that he shows utter incapacity. I have no fault to find with him otherwise; a good lad; in a smaller place of business he might do well enough. But he's altogether below the mark in an office such as mine. Don't distress yourself, Mr Humplebee, I beg, I shall make it my care to inquire for suitable openings; you shall hear from me — you shall hear from me. Pray consider that your son is under notice to leave this day month. As for the — other matter of which you spoke, I can only repeat that the truest kindness is only to refuse assistance. I assure you it is. The circumstances forbid it. Clearly, what you have to do is to call together your creditors, and arrive at an understanding. It is my principle never to try to prop up a hopeless concern such as yours evidently is. Good day to you, Mr Humplebee; good day.'

A year later several things had happened. Mr Humplebee was dead; his penniless widow had gone to live in another town on the charity of poor relatives, and Harry Humplebee sat in another office, drawing the salary at which he had begun under Mr Chadwick, his home a wretched bedroom in the house of working-folk.

It did not appear to the lad that he had suffered any injustice. He knew his own inaptitude for the higher kind of office work, and he had expected his dismissal by Mr Chadwick long before it came. What he did resent, and profoundly, was Mr Chadwick's refusal to aid his father in that last death-grapple with ruinous circumstance. At the worst moment Harry wrote a letter to Leonard Chadwick, whom he had never seen since he left school. He told in simple terms the position of his family, and, without a word of justifying reminiscence, asked his schoolfellow to help them if he could. To this letter a reply came from London. Leonard Chadwick wrote briefly and hurriedly, but in good-natured terms; he was really very sorry indeed that he could do so little; the fact was, just now he stood on anything but good terms with his father, who kept him abominably short of cash. He enclosed five pounds, and, if possible, would soon send more.

'Don't suppose I have forgotten what I owe you. As soon as ever I find myself in an independent position you shall have substantial proof of my enduring gratitude. Keep me informed of your address.'

Humblebee made no second application, and Leonard Chadwick did not again break silence.

The years flowed on. At five-and-twenty Humplebee toiled in the same office, but he could congratulate himself on a certain progress; by dogged resolve he had acquired something like efficiency in the duties of a commercial clerk, and the salary he now earned allowed him to contribute to the support of his mother. More or less reconciled to the day's labour, he had resumed in leisure hours his favourite study; a free library supplied him

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with useful books, and whenever it was possible he went his way into the fields, searching, collecting, observing. But his life had another interest, which threatened rivalry to this intellectual pursuit. Humplebee had set eyes upon the maiden destined to be his heart's desire; she was the daughter of a fellow-clerk, a man who had grown grey in service of the ledger; timidly he sought to win her kindness, as yet scarce daring to hope, dreaming only of some happy change of position which might encourage him to speak. The girl was as timid as himself; she had a face of homely prettiness, a mind uncultured but sympathetic; absorbed in domestic cares, with few acquaintances, she led the simplest of lives, and would have been all but content to live on in gentle hope for a score of years. The two were beginning to understand each other, for their silence was more eloquent than their speech.

One summer day — the last day of his brief holiday — Humplebee was returning by train from a visit to his mother. Alone in a third-class carriage, seeming to read a newspaper, but in truth dreaming of a face he hoped to see in a few hours, he suddenly found himself jerked out of his seat, flung violently forward, bumped on the floor, and last of all rolled into a sort of bundle, he knew not where. Recovering from a daze, he said to himself, 'Why, this is an accident — a collision!' Then he tried to unroll himself, and in the effort found that one of his arms was useless; more than that, it pained him horribly. He stood up and tottered on to the seat. Then the carriage-door opened, and a voice shouted —

'Anybody hurt here?'

'I think my arm is broken,' answered Humplebee.

Two men helped him to alight. The train had stopped just outside a small station; on a cross line in front of the engine lay a goods truck smashed to pieces; people were rushing about with cries and gesticulations.

'Yes, the arm is broken,' remarked one of the men who had assisted Humplebee. 'It looks as if you were the only passenger injured.' That proved, indeed, to be the case; no one else had suffered more than a jolt or a bruise. The crowd clustered about this hero of the broken arm, expressing sympathy and offering suggestions. Among them was a well-dressed young man, rather good-looking and of lively demeanour, who seemed to enjoy the excitement; he, after gazing fixedly at the pain-stricken face, exclaimed in a voice of wonder —

'By Jove! it's Humplebee!'

The sufferer turned towards him who spoke; his eyes brightened, for he recognised the face of Leonard Chadwick. Neither one nor the other had greatly altered during the past ten years; they presented exactly the same contrast of personal characteristics as when they were at school together. With vehement friendliness Chadwick at once took upon himself the care of the injured clerk. He shouted for a cab, he found out where the nearest doctor lived; in a quarter of an hour he had his friend under the doctor's roof. When the fracture had been set and bandaged, they travelled on together to their native town, only a few miles distant, Humplebee knowing for the first time in his life the luxury of a first-class compartment. On their way Chadwick talked exuberantly. He was delighted at this meeting; why, one of his purposes in coming north had been to search out Humplebee, whom he had so long scandalously neglected.

'The fact is, I've been going through queer times myself. The governor and I can't get along together; we quarrelled years ago, there's not much chance of our making it up. I've no doubt that was the real reason of his dismissing you from his office — a mean thing! The governor's a fine old boy, but he has his nasty side. He's very tight about money, and I — well, I'm a bit too much the other way, no doubt. He's kept me in low water, confound him! But I'm independent of him now. I'll tell you all about it to-morrow, you'll feel better able to talk. Expect me at eleven in the morning.'

Through a night of physical suffering Humplebee was supported by a new hope. Chadwick the son, warm-hearted and generous, made a strong contrast with Chadwick the father, pompous and insincere. When the young man spoke of his abiding gratitude there was no possibility of distrusting him, his voice rang true, and his handsome features wore a delightful frankness. Punctual to his appointment, Leonard appeared next morning. He entered the poor lodging as if it had been a luxurious residence, talked suavely and gaily with the landlady, who was tending her invalid, and, when alone with his old schoolfellow, launched into a detailed account of a great enterprise in which he was concerned. Not long ago he had become acquainted with one Geldershaw, a man somewhat older than himself, personally most attractive, and very keen in business. Geldershaw had just been appointed London representative of a great manufacturing firm in Germany. It was a most profitable undertaking, and, out of pure friendship, he had offered a share in the business to Leonard Chadwick.

'Of course, I put money into it. The fact is, I have dropped in for a few thousands from a good old aunt, who

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has been awfully kind to me since the governor and I fell out. I couldn't possibly have found a better investment, it means eight or nine per cent., my boy, at the very least! And look here, Humplebee, of course you can keep books?'

'Yes, I can,' answered the listener conscientiously.

'Then, old fellow, a first-rate place is open to you. We want some one we can thoroughly trust; you're the very man Geldershaw had in his eye. Would you mind telling me what screw you get at present?'

'Two pounds ten a week.'

'Ha, ha!' laughed Chadwick exultantly. 'With us you shall begin at double the figure, and I'll see to it that you have a rise after the first year. What's more, Humplebee, as soon as we get fairly going, I promise you a share in the business. Don't say a word, old boy! My governor treated you abominably. I've been in your debt for ten years or so, as you know very well, and often enough I've felt deucedly ashamed of myself. Five pounds a week to begin with, and the certainty of a comfortable interest in a thriving affair! Come, now, is it agreed?'

Humblebee forgot his pain; he felt ready to jump out of bed and travel straightway to London.

'And you know,' pursued Chadwick, when they had shaken hands warmly, 'that you have a claim for damages on the railway company. Leave that to me; I'll put the thing in train at once, through my own solicitor. You shall pocket a substantial sum, my boy! Well, I'm afraid I must be off; I've got my hands full of business. Quite a new thing for me to have something serious to do; I enjoy it! If I can't see you again before I go back to town, you shall hear from me in a day or two. Here's my London address. Chuck up your place here at once, so as to be ready for us as soon as your arm's all right. Geldershaw shall write you a formal engagement.'

Happily his broken arm was the left. Humplebee could use his right hand, and did so, very soon after Chadwick's departure, to send an account of all that had befallen him to his friend Mary Bowes. It was the first time he had written to her. His letter was couched in terms of studious respect, with many apologies for the liberty he took. Of the accident he made light — a few days would see him re-established — but he dwelt with some emphasis upon the meeting with Leonard Chadwick, and what had resulted from it.

'I did him a good turn once, when we were at school together. He is a good, warm-hearted fellow, and has sought this opportunity of showing that he remembered the old time.'

Thus did Humplebee refer to the great event of his boyhood. Having despatched the letter, he waited feverishly for Miss Bowes' reply; but days passed, and still he waited in vain. Agitation delayed his recovery; he was suffering as he had never suffered in his life, when there came a letter from London, signed with the name of Geldershaw, repeating in formal terms the offer made to him by Leonard Chadwick, and requesting his immediate acceptance or refusal. This plucked him out of his despondent state, and spurred him to action. With the help of his landlady he dressed himself, and, having concealed his bandaged arm as well as possible, drove in a cab to Miss Bowes' dwelling. The hour being before noon, he was almost sure to find Mary at home, and alone. Trembling with bodily weakness and the conflict of emotions, he rang the door bell. To his consternation there appeared Mary's father.

'Hallo! Humplebee!' cried Mr Bowes, surprised but friendly. 'Why, I was just going to write to you. Mary has had scarlet fever. I've been so busy these last ten days, I couldn't even inquire after you. Of course, I saw about your smash in the newspaper; how are you getting on?'

The man with the bandaged arm could not utter a word. Horror-stricken he stared at Mr Bowes, who had begun to express a doubt whether it would be prudent for him to enter the house.

'Mary is convalescent; the anxiety's all over, but —'

Humblebee suddenly seized the speaker's hand and in confused words expressed vehement joy. They talked for a few minutes, parted with cordiality, and Humplebee went home again to recover from his excitement.

A note from his employers had replied in terms of decent condolence to the message by which he explained his enforced absence. To-day he wrote to the principal, announcing his intention of resigning his post in their office. The response, delivered within a few hours, was admirably brief and to the point. Mr Humplebee's place had, of course, been already taken temporarily by another clerk; it would have been held open for him, but, in view of his decision, the firm had merely to request that he would acknowledge the cheque enclosed in payment of his salary up to date. Not without some shaking of the hand did Humplebee pen this receipt; for a moment something seemed to come between him and the daylight, and a heaviness oppressed his inner man. But already he had despatched to London his formal acceptance of the post at five pounds a week, and in thinking of it his

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heart grew joyous. Two hundred and sixty pounds a year! It was beyond the hope of his most fantastic day-dreams. He was a made man, secure for ever against fears and worries. He was a man of substance, and need no longer shrink from making known the hope which ruled his life.

A second letter was written to Mary Bowes; but not till many copies had been made was it at length despatched. The writer declared that he looked for no reply until Mary was quite herself again; he begged only that she would reflect, meanwhile, upon what he had said, reflect with all her indulgence, all her native goodness and gentleness. And, indeed, there elapsed nearly a fortnight before the answer came; and to Humplebee it seemed an endless succession of tormenting days. Then —

Humblebee behaved like one distracted. His landlady in good earnest thought he had gone crazy, and was only reassured when he revealed to her what had happened. Mary Bowes was to be his wife! They must wait for a year and a half; Mary could not leave her father quite alone, but in a year and a half Mr Bowes, who was an oldish man, would be able to retire on the modest fruit of his economies, and all three could live together in London. 'What,' cried Humplebee, 'was eighteen months? It would allow him to save enough out of his noble salary to start housekeeping with something more than comfort. Blessed be the name of Chadwick!'

When his arm was once more sound, and Mary's health quite recovered, they met. In their long, long talk Humplebee was led to tell the story of that winter day when he saved Leonard Chadwick's life; he related, too, all that had ensued upon his acquaintance with the great Mr Chadwick, memories which would never lose all their bitterness. Mary was moved to tears, and her tears were dried by indignation. But they agreed that Leonard, after all, made some atonement for his father's heartless behaviour. Humplebee showed a letter that had come from young Chadwick a day or two ago; every line spoke generosity of spirit. 'When,' he asked, 'might they expect their new bookkeeper. They were in full swing; business promised magnificently. As yet, they had only a temporary office, but Geldershaw was in treaty for fine premises in the City. The sooner Humplebee arrived the better; fortune awaited him.'

It was decided that he should leave for London in two days.

The next evening he came to spend an hour or two with Mary and her father. On entering the room he at once observed something strange in the looks with which he was greeted. Mary had a pale, miserable air, and could hardly speak. Mr Bowes, after looking at him fixedly for a moment, exclaimed —

'Have you seen to-day's paper?'

'I've been too busy,' he replied. 'What has happened?'

'Isn't your London man called Geldershaw?'

'Yes,' murmured Humplebee, with a sinking of the heart.

'Well, the police are after him; he has bolted. It's a long-firm swindle that he's been up to. You know what that means? Obtaining goods on false credit, and raising money on them. What's more, young Chadwick is arrested; he came before the magistrates yesterday, charged with being an accomplice. Here it is; read it for yourself.'

Humblebee dropped into a chair. When his eyes undazzled, he read the full report which Mr Bowes had summarised. It was the death-blow of his hopes.

'Leonard Chadwick has been a victim, not a swindler,' sounded from him in a feeble voice. 'You see, he says that Geldershaw has robbed him of all his money — that he is ruined.'

'He says so,' remarked Mr Bowes with angry irony.

'I believe him,' said Humplebee.

His eyes sought Mary's. The girl regarded him steadily, and she spoke in a low firm voice —

'I, too, believe him.'

'Whether or no,' said Mr Bowes, thrusting his hands into his pockets, 'the upshot of it is, Humplebee, that you've lost a good place through trusting him. I had my doubts; but you were in a hurry, and didn't ask advice. If this had happened a week later, the police would have laid hands on you as well.'

'So there's something to be thankful for, at all events,' said Mary.

Again Humplebee met her eyes. He saw that she would not forsake him.

He had to begin life over again — that was all.