



A
SUNSET TOUCH

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HOWARD SPRING

READERS BOOK CLUB

in association with The Companion Book Club, London

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FOR
DOREEN MARSTON

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*Just when we are safest, there's a sunset-touch,
A fancy from a flower-bell, someone's death,
A chorus-ending from Euripides.—
And that's enough for fifty hopes and fears
As old and new at once as Nature's self
To rap and knock and enter in our soul,
Take hands and dance there.*

Bishop Blougram's Confession

ROBERT BROWNING

PART ONE

About Mr. Menheniot

CHAPTER ONE

I

WHEN Mr. Menheniot came in to breakfast, Mrs. Sara was still dusting his room. This annoyed him, but he was a mild fellow, and he rarely allowed annoyance to appear. For one thing, he might have had to put up with someone worse than Mrs. Sara. She did understand the value of his things, and respected them. They were the sort of things she had been accustomed to in her young days. Then, she was a housemaid in a Cornish mansion. It was burned to the ground now, but it had never been burned out of Mrs. Sara's heart. She wouldn't see sixty again, and she had gone to the great house when she was ten. That was in 1890, and in 1890 things had not changed much in houses like that. There was a butler and a housekeeper; there were footmen and ladies' maids; there was a retinue of gardeners and woodmen; there were horses; and on Sundays the Family went to church in a big coach. Some people rode to church, and there was a long rail outside the churchyard wall to which horses were tied up till the service was over. In the winter there were dances for the staff, and the staffs from other great houses would come to join in the fun. If the weather was bitter, deer from the park would be killed and venison given to the poor. But down there in Cornwall the weather was not often bitter.

Mrs. Sara, who had been Peggy Probus, remembered all this, and she remembered the lovely furniture which was like the furniture Mr. Menheniot had, and so she never bashed about in Mr. Menheniot's room as she was inclined

to do in other peoples'. Nothing but junk in some of them, and in others all these flash bits of chromium and plastics; and the people were like the things they owned: slovenly people, or come-day-go-day people who had no solidity or substance. She had no feeling for them or for their things, as she had for Mr. Menheniot and his few Georgian pieces; and they were the sort of people she could never have been bothered to talk to. There was no class about them, but anyone could see that there was class about Mr. Menheniot, even though he was only a bank clerk. When she or Sara talked to him, he knew what they were talking about; and so she liked to tell him of how the Boer War came when she was twenty, and Mr. Andrew, who was the heir to the estate, was killed, and his father was never the same again. He was a widower by then, and there were no other children; "and they do say," Mrs. Sara would tell Mr. Menheniot, "that he set fire to the place deliberate." Anyhow, he was seen in a corridor with a lighted lamp, and he and the great house perished together.

"And that's how I married Sara," Mrs. Sara would say. "I suppose I'd have had him anyway, but I had to have him then."

He was an under-gardener, and he came as a head gardener into Surrey. And there he had been till he was sacked five years ago. He was getting old; "and anyway," Mrs. Sara asked, "who can afford to keep gardens up in these days?" They were, indeed, not the days they had been; for it was on a winter morning in January of 1944 that Mr. Menheniot found Mrs. Sara still dusting his room.

What a room it was! Mr. Menheniot thought. Even like this, with the curtains pulled back from the window, so that the bleak London morning looked in—even like this it was comforting. In the squalor and misery of war-time London it was an oasis. The white marble fireplace with a little delicate carving upon it, the brocade curtains, the eighteenth-century furniture, the few engravings and mezzotints upon the walls, the books, all leather-bound in the Sheraton book-case, the mirror with just a hint of Chippendale's Chinese flirtings, the pole-screen holding up its panel of charming embroidery, the lustres of the chandelier, which, even so niggard and grudging a day, achieved a faint gleam and twinkle: what, Mr. Menheniot often wondered, had the world to offer better than such things as these?

Standing in front of that superb fireplace was a cheap electric fire, with one of its three bars faintly glowing. Oh, it was a miserable, misbegotten thing, and he would have liked to throw it through the window. What was it doing in a room like this? But there you are. It is war time. You must put up with what you can get. You must be thankful that even this faint offering of cheer survives in days like these. He remembered other days. He had been here for five years now, gradually assembling these things about him, and he thought of night, which was his favourite time, with the curtains drawn, the coal fire leaping, the gleam on the furniture, and himself at work on that book of his, which perhaps no one but he would read. He began by calling it *A Cornish Family*, but changed that to *The Menheniots*. He loved the sound of his own name. He loved the look of it as the letters formed under his pen. He liked to turn it over on his tongue in company with other famous names from the county he had never lived in: the Carews, the Elyots, the Killigrews, the Menheniots. He was

becoming a crank and a recluse, living with imaginations. He knew it, and he gloried in it. After all, how many men belonged to a family like his?

No; it was not likely that he would ever shake it off now. He had spent too many hours in the Public Record Office and the British Museum, boring like a wood-beetle into the decayed and mouldy fabric of the family that had not for a long time lived on ancestral acres and that now, as far as he knew, had no living member but himself. But never had the Menheniots produced a more fanatical Menheniot, a bank clerk by day, Menheniot of Rosemullion by night.

III

He rubbed his skinny hands in the meagre warmth, then went to the window and looked out. Like the Menheniots, this handsome Georgian house had fallen on bad times. It survived amid decrepitude. The Saras, who had bought a lease of it with all their savings to run it as a boarding-house, had never been able to keep it up. Even before the war, the stucco had been unpainted and now was falling away, leaving ugly scabs. The bombs had spared it, but not unscathed. Some windows were gone. Chunks of exploding metal had pitted the front door, hacked pieces out of the four stone steps that led up to it between curved iron rails, broken the glass of the delicate fanlight. Brown paper had been pasted like a plaster over these wounds. But the position of the house was noble. It was on the South bank of the Thames, and looking across the river to the dome of St. Paul's floating above the city, Mr. Menheniot could forget that the other houses in the terrace of which this was part were now storehouses and offices and small shops clothed in that added dinginess that squats upon decayed splendour.

But, to-day, he could not see the dome. It was a miserable morning, and a wind carried slanting across the river a dispirited fall that could have been either rain or sleet. London, which he had always hated, and from which he had shut himself away in his charming shell, looked to-day fouler than Manchester, which he hated even more.

They were all one, Manchester and Salford, Manchester with a Lord Mayor and Salford with a Mayor, but where one town ended and the other began who knew? Certainly not he. There wasn't a no-man's land, an interregnum; there were just streets and streets and streets, reaching from the Cheshire plain in the south to the Lancashire hills in the north, and it was all one solid block of Manchester-Salford. And up there in the north was Pendlebury, which was theoretically a part of Salford but was in fact a part of the undivided enormity that lay upon Menheniot's childhood and youth.

He would always remember the day when he was fifteen, a day like this upon which he now brooded through the Georgian window. But it was afternoon, not morning, and the air was full of the softest imaginable drift of snow. It was too light to be called snow, really. It was the fog of winter's hoar breathing. Above it was a sky pitch-black, and, coming out from the Manchester Grammar School, a satchel of books swinging in his hand, he was in a busy world of traffic, where the street lights were on and every window, from the pavements up to where the roofs merged with blackness, was a blaze or a glow. Oh, it had enchantment then, the great city, the buzzing hive, vibrant and shining in the dark; but he had always distrusted it, felt a stranger in it; and his one thought was of the small house in Pendlebury where he could shut himself up with his father. His mother he did not remember. There they were, those two, and at night they would shut up together, like the two halves of a bi-valve, excluding everything.

He remembered how, that day, he came to the art-dealer's shop in St. Ann's Square, and lingered there a moment, as he always did; and that was the moment when his mania was born. There was a print in the window, and for a time he did not read what was written beneath it, so sharply was he shocked with a sense of looking at a portrait of his father. This man was wearing an odd-looking hat, with a feather drooping from the right side, and the clothes, lightly sketched, were odd, too. But forget all that, and look at this melancholy face, the large brooding eyes, the sad lips, the trim beard and firm nose. . . . It was his father to a T. Then he read what was printed beneath: Holbein—Portrait of a Cornish Gentleman.

In Pendlebury there was not the excitement of the town's buzz and murmur. The air was grey and muffled; only a street lamp here and there burned like a pale unmoving flower; and because this place was higher the snow had body. It fell across the lights and it lay, but not thickly, on the stone setts of the road. Young Menheniot's footsteps made no sound as he climbed the stony brow. The house conformed to the lie of the land. To reach the front door you went up a cobbled ramp that had a hand-rail, but there was a room down here, too, on the ground level: a half-basement with its window behind a grille at your feet. A light in the window told the boy that his father was still at work, and so, instead of climbing the ramp, he moved to the window and looked down at the cobbler working there. An unshaded gas-jet burned over old Menheniot's head. He was wearing an apron of supple leather, and a boot, sole-up, was clasped between his knees. His lips, which time and use had made as handy as fingers, were fringed with tacks that he took out one by one and hammered into the sole. The awl, the thread, the cobbler's wax, lay handy.

It was to the boy an accustomed sight. He was glad

that his father was a shoemaker, that he did not work in a mill. This was a craft, and young Roger Menheniot already had a feeling for crafts, an aversion from mass-things. The boots on his feet, the satchel slung across his back, a trunk they took when they went for a holiday, a screen that kept the winter draught out of the sitting-room: his father had made all these, and Roger would finger them and feel the strength and virtue in them and be glad. But that night he was not looking at the craftsman. Burning before his eye as if it were still physically there, the Holbein drawing was alongside his father's face. There was no doubt about it. Roger was certain that Holbein's Cornish Gentleman was a Tudor Menheniot. He turned and ran up the ramp and banged on the front door. They spent their accustomed evening of lamplight and firelight, not saying much but satisfied, happy, with one another's company. Roger spread his books upon the table and gave reluctant attention to Latin. The old man, who had bought a set of Addison's *Spectator* dirt-cheap, went on with his task of ripping off the dilapidated covers and re-binding the books in green leather, tooled with gold.

IV

There they were, still in the Sheraton book-case, those volumes that old Menheniot had re-bound so long ago. There in the room, too, was the leather screen, beautifully embossed, to which time and use had given a glow of light amber. When Mr. Menheniot went on holiday he used the old leather trunk that porters cursed for its weight, accustomed as they now were to the fibre and canvas that Roger despised. The old school satchel, with its shoulder-strap removed and a handle affixed instead, was all the despatch-case he ever wanted to have. He would still be

wearing the old boots if his feet had not outgrown them. There was so much in this room that he had bought. All his savings had gone into these things. At Maggs's bookshop, at Christie's and Sotheby's, he was to be seen, rarely buying, for he could not afford to, but buying now and then with taste, and always buying Georgian stuff. Not that the Menheniots didn't go back beyond Georgian times—oh, they went far, far beyond that; but that was when they burst apart, when Rosemullion ceased to know them, and at that point, it seemed to Mr. Menheniot, he should pick them up again. However, it was not wholly satisfactory, this buying. Even a lovely thing like this Tompion clock on the mantelpiece didn't give him quite the satisfaction he got from the old screen and the other things his father had made. Menheniot to Menheniot, generation to generation. That was the right way. And if he was to be the last of them, as he seemed likely to be—well, let the end at any rate be seemly.

He turned back from the window, from the grey morning weeping over the grey city stricken with the grief of war, as Mrs. Sara came in with his breakfast. And that was something she would do for no one else. The others had to come to their food in the bleak dining-room; but Mr. Menheniot's food came to him. He had demanded it in the first place, made it a condition of his coming there at all. His recluse nature could not bear the thought of "Pass me the cruet, please," or "Will you oblige with the jam, Mr. Menheniot?" It was bad enough to meet people at his work in the bank, where his dully efficient endeavours had made advancement impossible; but, once that was done with for the day, his life must be his own. So it was arranged at the beginning, and now Mrs. Sara herself would not have had it otherwise. She would have been shocked to see Mr. Menheniot sitting down with some of the trash she had to put up with nowadays—fly-by-nights,