

Basil

by

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Basil

To Charles James Ward, Esq. Page 1	3
Chapter I.1.....	6
Chapter I.2.....	7
Chapter I.3.....	9
Chapter I.4.....	13
Chapter I.5.....	18
Chapter I.6.....	22
Chapter I.7.....	24
Chapter I.8.....	32
Chapter I.9.....	37
Chapter I.10.....	44
Chapter I.11.....	51
Chapter I.12.....	59
Chapter II.1.....	68
Chapter II.2.....	73
Chapter II.3.....	79
Chapter II.4.....	87
Chapter II.5.....	92
Chapter II.6.....	97
Chapter II.7.....	102
Chapter III.1.....	109
Chapter III.2.....	115
Chapter III.3.....	124
Chapter III.4.....	134
Chapter III.5.....	143
Chapter III.6.....	161
Chapter III.7.....	173
Chapter III.8.....	187

To Charles James Ward, Esq. Page 1

IT has long been one of my pleasantest anticipations to look forward to the time when I might offer to you, my old and dear friend, some such acknowledgment of the value I place on your affection for me, and of my grateful sense of the many acts of kindness by which that affection has been proved, as I now gladly offer in this place. In dedicating the present work to you, I fulfil therefore a purpose which, for some time past, I have sincerely desired to achieve; and, more than that, I gain for myself the satisfaction of knowing that there is one page, at least, of my book, on which I shall always look with unalloyed pleasure--the page that bears your name.

I have founded the main event out of which this story springs, on a fact within my own knowledge. In afterwards shaping the course of the narrative thus suggested, I have guided it, as often as I could, where I knew by my own experience, or by experience related to me by others, that it would touch on something real and true in its progress. My idea was, that the more of the Actual I could garner up as a text to speak from, the more certain I might feel of the genuineness and value of the Ideal which was sure to spring out of it. Fancy and Imagination, Grace and Beauty, all those qualities which are to the work of Art what scent and colour are to the flower, can only grow towards heaven by taking root in earth. Is not the noblest poetry of prose fiction the poetry of every-day truth?

Directing my characters and my story, then, towards the light of Reality wherever I could find it, I have not hesitated to violate some of the conventionalities of sentimental fiction. For instance, the first love-meeting of two of the personages in this book, occurs (where the real love-meeting from which it is drawn, occurred) in the very last place and under the very last circumstances which the artifices of sentimental writing would sanction. Will my lovers excite ridicule instead of interest, because I have truly represented them as seeing each other where hundreds of other lovers have first seen each other, as hundreds of people will readily admit when they read the passage to which I refer? I am sanguine enough to think not.

So again, in certain parts of this book where I have attempted to excite the suspense or pity of the reader, I have admitted as perfectly fit accessories to the scene the most ordinary street-sounds that could be heard, and the most ordinary street-events that could occur, at the time and in the place represented--believing that by adding to truth, they were adding to tragedy--adding by all the force of fair contrast--adding as no artifices of mere writing possibly could add, let them be ever so cunningly introduced by ever so crafty a hand.

Allow me to dwell a moment longer on the story which these pages contain.

Believing that the Novel and the Play are twin-sisters in the family of Fiction; that the one is a drama narrated, as the other is a drama acted; and that all the strong and deep emotions which the Play-writer is privileged to excite, the Novel-writer is privileged to excite also, I have not thought it either politic or necessary, while

adhering to realities, to adhere to every-day realities only. In other words, I have not stooped so low as to assure myself of the reader's belief in the probability of my story, by never once calling on him for the exercise of his faith. Those extraordinary accidents and events which happen to few men, seemed to me to be as legitimate materials for fiction to work with--when there was a good object in using them--as the ordinary accidents and events which may, and do, happen to us all. By appealing to genuine sources of interest within the reader's own experience, I could certainly gain his attention to begin with; but it would be only by appealing to other sources (as genuine in their way) beyond his own experience, that I could hope to fix his interest and excite his suspense, to occupy his deeper feelings, or to stir his nobler thoughts.

In writing thus--briefly and very generally--(for I must not delay you too long from the story), I can but repeat, though I hope almost unnecessarily, that I am now only speaking of what I have tried to do. Between the purpose hinted at here, and the execution of that purpose contained in the succeeding pages, lies the broad line of separation which distinguishes between the will and the deed. How far I may fall short of another man's standard, remains to be discovered. How far I have fallen short of my own, I know painfully well.

One word more on the manner in which the purpose of the following pages is worked out--and I have done.

Nobody who admits that the business of fiction is to exhibit human life, can deny that scenes of misery and crime must of necessity, while human nature remains what it is, form part of that exhibition. Nobody can assert that such scenes are unproductive of useful results, when they are turned to a plainly and purely moral purpose. If I am asked why I have written certain scenes in this book, my answer is to be found in the universally-accepted truth which the preceding words express. I have a right to appeal to that truth; for I guided myself by it throughout. In deriving the lesson which the following pages contain, from those examples of error and crime which would most strikingly and naturally teach it, I determined to do justice to the honesty of my object by speaking out. In drawing the two characters, whose actions bring about the darker scenes of my story, I did not forget that it was my duty, while striving to portray them naturally, to put them to a good moral use; and at some sacrifice, in certain places, of dramatic effect (though I trust with no sacrifice of truth to Nature), I have shown the conduct of the vile, as always, in a greater or less degree, associated with something that is selfish, contemptible, or cruel in motive. Whether any of my better characters may succeed in endearing themselves to the reader, I know not: but this I do certainly know:--that I shall in no instance cheat him out of his sympathies in favour of the bad.

To those persons who dissent from the broad principles here adverted to; who deny that it is the novelist's vocation to do more than merely amuse them; who shrink from all honest and serious reference, in books, to subjects which they think of in private and talk of in public everywhere; who see covert implications where nothing is implied, and improper allusions where nothing improper is alluded to; whose innocence is in the word, and not in the thought; whose morality stops at the tongue, and never gets on to the heart--to those persons, I

should consider it loss of time, and worse, to offer any further explanation of my motives, than the sufficient explanation which I have given already. I do not address myself to them in this book, and shall never think of addressing myself to them in any other.

Those words formed part of the original introduction to this novel. I wrote them nearly ten years since; and what I said then, I say now.

"Basil" was the second work of fiction which I produced. On its appearance, it was condemned off-hand, by a certain class of readers, as an outrage on their sense of propriety. Conscious of having designed and written, my story with the strictest regard to true delicacy, as distinguished from false--I allowed the prurient misinterpretation of certain perfectly innocent passages in this book to assert itself as offensively as it pleased, without troubling myself to protest against an expression of opinion which aroused in me no other feeling than a feeling of contempt. I knew that "Basil" had nothing to fear from pure-minded readers; and I left these pages to stand or fall on such merits as they possessed. Slowly and surely, my story forced its way through all adverse criticism, to a place in the public favour which it has never lost since. Some of the most valued friends I now possess, were made for me by "Basil." Some of the most gratifying recognitions of my labours which I have received, from readers personally strangers to me, have been recognitions of the purity of this story, from the first page to the last. All the indulgence I need now ask for "Basil," is indulgence for literary defects, which are the result of inexperience; which no correction can wholly remove; and which no one sees more plainly, after a lapse of ten years, than the writer himself.

I have only to add, that the present edition of this book is the first which has had the benefit of my careful revision. While the incidents of the story remain exactly what they were, the language in which they are told has been, I hope, in many cases greatly altered for the better.

WILKIE COLLINS.

Harley Street, London, July, 1862.

Chapter I.1

WHAT am I now about to write?

The history of little more than the events of one year, out of the twenty-four years of my life.

Why do I undertake such an employment as this?

Perhaps, because I think that my narrative may do good; because I hope that, one day, it may be put to some warning use. I am now about to relate the story of an error, innocent in its beginning, guilty in its progress, fatal in its results; and I would fain hope that my plain and true record will show that this error was not committed altogether without excuse. When these pages are found after my death, they will perhaps be calmly read and gently judged, as relics solemnized by the atoning shadows of the grave. Then, the hard sentence against me may be repented of; the children of the next generation of our house may be taught to speak charitably of my memory, and may often, of their own accord, think of me kindly in the thoughtful watches of the night.

Prompted by these motives, and by others which I feel, but cannot analyse, I now begin my self-imposed occupation. Hidden amid the far hills of the far West of England, surrounded only by the few simple inhabitants of a fishing hamlet on the Cornish coast, there is little fear that my attention will be distracted from my task; and as little chance that any indolence on my part will delay its speedy accomplishment. I live under a threat of impending hostility, which may descend and overwhelm me, I know not how soon, or in what manner. An enemy, determined and deadly, patient alike to wait days or years for his opportunity, is ever lurking after me in the dark. In entering on my new employment, I cannot say of my time, that it may be mine for another hour; of my life, that it may last till evening.

Thus it is as no leisure work that I begin my narrative--and begin it, too, on my birthday! On this day I complete my twenty-fourth year; the first new year of my life which has not been greeted by a single kind word, or a single loving wish. But one look of welcome can still find me in my solitude--the lovely morning look of nature, as I now see it from the casement of my room. Brighter and brighter shines out the lusty sun from banks of purple, rainy cloud; fishermen are spreading their nets to dry on the lower declivities of the rocks; children are playing round the boats drawn up on the beach; the sea-breeze blows fresh and pure towards the shore---all objects are brilliant to look on, all sounds are pleasant to hear, as my pen traces the first lines which open the story of my life.

Chapter I.2

I am the second son of an English gentleman of large fortune. Our family is, I believe, one of the most ancient in this country. On my father's side, it dates back beyond the Conquest; on my mother's, it is not so old, but the pedigree is nobler. Besides my elder brother, I have one sister, younger than myself. My mother died shortly after giving birth to her last child.

Circumstances which will appear hereafter, have forced me to abandon my father's name. I have been obliged in honour to resign it; and in honour I abstain from mentioning it here. Accordingly, at the head of these pages, I have only placed my Christian name--not considering it of any importance to add the surname which I have assumed; and which I may, perhaps, be obliged to change for some other, at no very distant period. It will now, I hope, be understood from the outset, why I never mention my brother and sister but by their Christian names; why a blank occurs wherever my father's name should appear; why my own is kept concealed in this narrative, as it is kept concealed in the world.

The story of my boyhood and youth has little to interest--nothing that is new. My education was the education of hundreds of others in my rank of life. I was first taught at a public school, and then went to college to complete what is termed "a liberal education."

My life at college has not left me a single pleasant recollection. I found sycophancy established there, as a principle of action; flaunting on the lord's gold tassel in the street; enthroned on the lord's dais in the dining-room. The most learned student in my college--the man whose life was most exemplary, whose acquirements were most admirable--was shown me sitting, as a commoner, in the lowest place. The heir to an Earldom, who had failed at the last examination, was pointed out a few minutes afterwards, dining in solitary grandeur at a raised table, above the reverend scholars who had turned him back as a dunce. I had just arrived at the University, and had just been congratulated on entering "a venerable seminary of learning and religion."

Trite and common-place though it be, I mention this circumstance attending my introduction to college, because it formed the first cause which tended to diminish my faith in the institution to which I was attached. I soon grew to regard my university training as a sort of necessary evil, to be patiently submitted to. I read for no honours, and joined no particular set of men. I studied the literature of France, Italy, and Germany; just kept up my classical knowledge sufficiently to take my degree; and left college with no other reputation than a reputation for indolence and reserve.

When I returned home, it was thought necessary, as I was a younger son, and could inherit none of the landed property of the family, except in the case of my brother's dying without children, that I should belong to a profession. My father had the patronage of some valuable "livings," and good interest with more than one member of the government. The church, the army, the navy, and, in the last instance, the bar, were offered me to choose from. I selected the last.

My father appeared to be a little astonished at my choice; but he made no remark on it, except simply telling me not to forget that the bar was a good stepping-stone to parliament. My real ambition, however, was, not to make a name in parliament, but a name in literature. I had already engaged myself in the hard, but glorious service of the pen; and I was determined to persevere. The profession which offered me the greatest facilities for pursuing my project, was the profession which I was ready to prefer. So I chose the bar.

Thus, I entered life under the fairest auspices. Though a younger son, I knew that my father's wealth, exclusive of his landed property, secured me an independent income far beyond my wants. I had no extravagant habits; no tastes that I could not gratify as soon as formed; no cares or responsibilities of any kind. I might practise my profession or not, just as I chose. I could devote myself wholly and unreservedly to literature, knowing that, in my case, the struggle for fame could never be identical--terribly, though gloriously identical--with the struggle for bread. For me, the morning sunshine of life was sunshine without a cloud!

I might attempt, in this place, to sketch my own character as it was at that time. But what man can say--I will sound the depth of my own vices, and measure the height of my own virtues; and be as good as his word? We can neither know nor judge ourselves; others may judge, but cannot know us: God alone judges and knows too. Let my character appear--as far as any human character can appear in its integrity, in this world--in my actions, when I describe the one eventful passage in my life which forms the basis of this narrative. In the mean time, it is first necessary that I should say more about the members of my family. Two of them, at least, will be found important to the progress of events in these pages. I make no attempt to judge their characters: I only describe them--whether rightly or wrongly, I know not--as they appeared to me.

Chapter I.3

I always considered my father--I speak of him in the past tense, because we are now separated for ever; because he is henceforth as dead to me as if the grave had closed over him--I always considered my father to be the proudest man I ever knew; the proudest man I ever heard of. His was not that conventional pride, which the popular notions are fond of characterising by a stiff, stately carriage; by a rigid expression of features; by a hard, severe intonation of voice; by set speeches of contempt for poverty and rags, and rhapsodical braggadocio about rank and breeding. My father's pride had nothing of this about it. It was that quiet, negative, courteous, inbred pride, which only the closest observation could detect; which no ordinary observers ever detected at all.

Who that observed him in communication with any of the farmers on any of his estates--who that saw the manner in which he lifted his hat, when he accidentally met any of those farmers' wives--who that noticed his hearty welcome to the man of the people, when that man happened to be a man of genius--would have thought him proud? On such occasions as these, if he had any pride, it was impossible to detect it. But seeing him when, for instance, an author and a new-made peer of no ancestry entered his house together--observing merely the entirely different manner in which he shook hands with each--remarking that the polite cordiality was all for the man of letters, who did not contest his family rank with him, and the polite formality all for the man of title, who did--you discovered where and how he was proud in an instant. Here lay his fretful point. The aristocracy of rank, as separate from the aristocracy of ancestry, was no aristocracy for him. He was jealous of it; he hated it. Commoner though he was, he considered himself the social superior of any man, from a baronet up to a duke, whose family was less ancient than his own.

Among a host of instances of this peculiar pride of his which I could cite, I remember one, characteristic enough to be taken as a sample of all the rest. It happened when I was quite a child, and was told me by one of my uncles now dead--who witnessed the circumstance himself, and always made a good story of it to the end of his life.

A merchant of enormous wealth, who had recently been raised to the peerage, was staying at one of our country houses. His daughter, my uncle, and an Italian Abbe were the only guests besides. The merchant was a portly, purple-faced man, who bore his new honours with a curious mixture of assumed pomposity and natural good-humour. The Abbe was dwarfish and deformed, lean, sallow, sharp-featured, with bright bird-like eyes, and a low, liquid voice. He was a political refugee, dependent for the bread he ate, on the money he received for teaching languages. He might have been a beggar from the streets; and still my father would have treated him as the principal guest in the house, for this all-sufficient reason--he was a direct descendant of one of the oldest of those famous Roman families whose names are part of the history of the Civil Wars in Italy.

On the first day, the party assembled for dinner comprised the merchant's daughter, my mother, an old lady who had once been her governess, and had always lived with her since her marriage, the new Lord, the Abbe, my father, and my uncle. When dinner was announced, the peer advanced in new-blown dignity, to offer his arm as a matter of course to my mother. My father's pale face flushed crimson in a moment. He touched the magnificent merchant-lord on the arm, and pointed significantly, with a low bow, towards the decrepit old lady who had once been my mother's governess. Then walking to the other end of the room, where the penniless Abbe was looking over a book in a corner, he gravely and courteously led the little, deformed, limping language-master, clad in a long, threadbare, black coat, up to my mother (whose shoulder the Abbe's head hardly reached), held the door open for them to pass out first, with his own hand; politely invited the new nobleman, who stood half-paralysed between confusion and astonishment, to follow with the tottering old lady on his arm; and then returned to lead the peer's daughter down to dinner himself. He only resumed his wonted expression and manner, when he had seen the little Abbe--the squalid, half-starved representative of mighty barons of the olden time--seated at the highest place of the table by my mother's side.

It was by such accidental circumstances as these that you discovered how far he was proud. He never boasted of his ancestors; he never even spoke of them, except when he was questioned on the subject; but he never forgot them. They were the very breath of his life; the deities of his social worship: the family treasures to be held precious beyond all lands and all wealth, all ambitions and all glories, by his children and his children's children to the end of their race.

In home-life he performed his duties towards his family honourably, delicately, and kindly. I believe in his own way he loved us all; but we, his descendants, had to share his heart with his ancestors--we were his household property as well as his children. Every fair liberty was given to us; every fair indulgence was granted to us. He never displayed any suspicion, or any undue severity. We were taught by his direction, that to disgrace our family, either by word or action, was the one fatal crime which could never be forgotten and never be pardoned. We were formed, under his superintendence, in principles of religion, honour, and industry; and the rest was left to our own moral sense, to our own comprehension of the duties and privileges of our station. There was no one point in his conduct towards any of us that we could complain of; and yet there was something always incomplete in our domestic relations.

It may seem incomprehensible, even ridiculous, to some persons, but it is nevertheless true, that we were none of us ever on intimate terms with him. I mean by this, that he was a father to us, but never a companion. There was something in his manner, his quiet and unchanging manner, which kept us almost unconsciously restrained. I never in my life felt less at my ease--I knew not why at the time--than when I occasionally dined alone with him. I never confided to him my schemes for amusement as a boy, or mentioned more than generally my ambitious hopes, as a young man. It was not that he would have received such confidences with ridicule or severity, he was incapable of it; but that he seemed above them, unfitted to enter into them, too far removed by his

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