VICE VERSA
OR
A LESSON
TO FATHERS

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PREFACE

There is an old story of a punctiliously polite Greek, who, while performing the funeral of an infant daughter, felt bound to make his excuses to the spectators for "bringing out such a ridiculously small corpse to so large a crowd."

The Author, although he trusts that the present production has more vitality than the Greek gentleman's child, still feels that in these days of philosophical fiction, metaphysical romance, and novels with a purpose, some apology may perhaps be needed for a tale which has the unambitious and frivolous aim of mere amusement.

However, he ventures to leave the tale to be its own apology, merely contenting himself with the entreaty that his little fish may be spared the rebuke that it is not a whale.

In submitting it with all possible respect to the Public, he conceives that no form of words he could devise would appeal so simply and powerfully to their feelings as that which he has ventured to adopt from a certain Anglo-Portuguese Phrase-Book of deserved popularity.

Like the compilers of that work, he—"expects then who the little book, for the care what he wrote him and her typographical corrections, will commend itself to the—*British Paterfamilias*—at which he dedicates him particularly."

1.
BLACK MONDAY

> "In England, where boys go to boarding schools, if the holidays were not long there would be no opportunity for cultivating the domestic affections."—*Letter of Lord Campbell's, 1835.*

On a certain Monday evening late in January, 1881, Paul Bultitude, Esq. (of Mincing Lane, Colonial Produce Merchant), was sitting alone in his dining-room at Westbourne Terrace after dinner.

The room was a long and lofty one, furnished in the stern uncompromising style of the Mahogany Age, now supplanted by the later fashions of decoration which, in their outset original and artistic, seem fairly on the way to become as meaningless and conventional.

Here were no skilfully contrasted shades of grey or green, no dado, no distemper on the walls; the woodwork was grained and varnished after the manner of the Philistines, the walls papered in dark crimson, with heavy curtains of the same colour, and the sideboard, dinner-waggon, and row of stiff chairs were all carved in the same massive and expensive

style of ugliness. The pictures were those familiar presentments of dirty rabbits, fat white horses, bloated goddesses, and misshapen boors, by masters who, if younger than they assume to be, must have been quite old enough to know better.

Mr. Bultitude was a tall and portly person, of a somewhat pompous and overbearing demeanour; not much over fifty, but looking considerably older. He had a high shining head, from which the hair had mostly departed, what little still remained being of a grizzled auburn, prominent pale blue eyes with heavy eyelids and fierce, bushy whitey-brown eyebrows. His general expression suggested a conviction of his own extreme importance, but, in spite of this, his big underlip drooped rather weakly and his double chin slightly receded, giving a judge of character reason for suspecting that a certain obstinate positiveness observable in Mr. Bultitude's manner might possibly be due less to the possession of an unusually strong will than to the circumstance that, by some fortunate chance, that will had hitherto never met with serious opposition.

The room, with all its aesthetic shortcomings, was comfortable enough, and Mr. Bultitude's attitude — he was lying back in a well-wadded leather arm-chair, with a glass of claret at his elbow and his feet stretched out towards the ruddy blaze of the fire — seemed at first sight to imply that happy after-dinner condition of perfect satisfaction with

oneself and things in general, which is the natural outcome of a good cook, a good conscience, and a good digestion.

At first sight; because his face did not confirm the impression—there was a latent uneasiness in it, an air of suppressed irritation, as if he expected and even dreaded to be disturbed at any moment, and yet was powerless to resent the intrusion as he would like to do.

At the slightest sound in the hall outside he would half rise in his chair and glance at the door with a mixture of alarm and resignation, and as often as the steps died away and the door remained closed, he would sink back and resettle himself with a shrug of evident relief.

Habitual novel readers on reading thus far will, I am afraid, prepare themselves for the arrival of a faithful cashier with news of irretrievable ruin, or a mysterious and cynical stranger threatening disclosures of a disgraceful nature.

But all such anticipations must at once be ruthlessly dispelled. Mr. Bultitude, although he was certainly a merchant, was a fairly successful one—in direct defiance of the laws of fiction, where any connection with commerce seems to lead naturally to failure in one of the three volumes.

He was an elderly gentleman, too, of irreproachable character and antecedents; no Damocles' sword of exposure was swinging over his bald but blameless

head; he had no disasters to fear and no indiscretions to conceal. He had not been intended for melodrama, with which, indeed, he would not have considered it a respectable thing to be connected.

In fact, the secret of his uneasiness was so absurdly simple and commonplace that I am rather ashamed to have made even a temporary mystery of it.

His son Dick was about to return to school that evening, and Mr. Bultitude was expecting every moment to be called upon to go through a parting scene with him; that was really all that was troubling him.

This sounds very creditable to the tenderness of his feelings as a father — for there are some parents who bear such a bereavement at the close of the holidays with extraordinary fortitude, if they do not actually betray an unnatural satisfaction at the event.

But it was not exactly from softness of heart that he was restless and impatient, nor did he dread any severe strain upon his emotions. He was not much given to sentiment, and was the author of more than one of those pathetically indignant letters to the papers, in which the British parent denounces the expenses of education and the unconscionable length and frequency of vacations.

He was one of those nervous and fidgety persons who cannot understand their own children, looking on them as objectionable monsters whose next

movements are uncertain — much as Frankenstein must have felt towards *his* monster.

He hated to have a boy about the house, and positively writhed under the irrelevant and irrepressible questions, the unnecessary noises and boisterous high spirits which nothing would subdue; his son's society was to him simply an abominable nuisance, and he pined for a release from it from the day the holidays began.

He had been a widower for nearly three years, and no doubt the loss of a mother's loving tact, which can check the heedless merriment before it becomes intolerable, and interpret and soften the most peevish and unreasonable of rebukes, had done much to make the relations between parent and children more strained than they might otherwise have been.

As it was, Dick's fear of his father was just great enough to prevent any cordiality between them, and not sufficient to make him careful to avoid offence, and it is not surprising if, when the time came for him to return to his house of bondage at Dr. Grimstone's, Crichton House, Market Rodwell, he left his father anything but inconsolable.

Just now, although Mr. Bultitude was so near the hour of his deliverance, he still had a bad quarter of an hour before him, in which the last farewells must be said, and he found it impossible under these circumstances to compose himself for a quiet half-

hour's nap, or retire to the billiard-room for a cup of coffee and a mild cigar, as he would otherwise have done — since he was certain to be disturbed.

And there was another thing which harassed him, and that was a haunting dread lest at the last moment some unforeseen accident should prevent the boy's departure after all. He had some grounds for this, for only a week before, a sudden and unprecedented snowstorm had dashed his hopes, on the eve of their fulfilment, by forcing the Doctor to postpone the day on which his school was to re-assemble, and now Mr. Bultitude sat on brambles until he had seen the house definitely rid of his son's presence.

All this time, while the father was fretting and fuming in his arm-chair, the son, the unlucky cause of all this discomfort, had been standing on the mat outside the door, trying to screw up enough courage to go in as if nothing was the matter with him.

He was not looking particularly boisterous just then. On the contrary, his face was pale, and his eyelids rather redder than he would quite care for them to be seen by any of the "fellows" at Crichton House. All the life and spirit had gone out of him for the time; he had a troublesome dryness in his throat, and a general sensation of chill heaviness, which he himself would have described — expressively enough, if not with academical elegance — as "feeling beastly."

The stoutest hearted boy, returning to the most perfect of schools, cannot always escape something of this at that dark hour when the sands of the holidays have run out to their last golden grain, when the boxes are standing corded and labelled in the hall, and some one is going to fetch the fatal cab.

Dick had just gone the round of the house, bidding dreary farewells to all the servants; an unpleasant ordeal which he would gladly have dispensed with, if possible, and which did not serve to raise his spirits.

Upstairs, in the bright nursery, he had found his old nurse sitting sewing by the high wire fender. She was a stern, hard-featured old lady, who had systematically slapped him through infancy into boyhood, and he had had some stormy passages with her during the past few weeks; but she softened now in the most unexpected manner as she said good-bye, and told him he was a "pleasant, good-hearted young gentleman, after all, though that aggravating and contrairy sometimes." And then she predicted, with some of the rashness attaching to irresponsibility, that he would be "the best boy this next term as ever was, and work hard at all his lessons, and bring home a prize" — but all this unusual gentleness only made the interview more difficult to come out of with any credit for self-control.

Then downstairs, the cook had come up in her evening brown print and clean collar, from her warm spice-scented kitchen, to remark cheerily that "Lor

bless his heart, what with all these telegrafts and things, time flew so fast nowadays that they'd be having him back again before they all knew where they were!" which had a certain spurious consolation about it, until one saw that, after all, it put the case entirely from her own standpoint.

After this Dick had parted from his elder sister Barbara and his young brother Roly, and had arrived where we found him first, at the mat outside the dining-room door, where he still lingered shivering in the cold foggy hall.

Somehow, he could not bring himself to take the next step at once; he knew pretty well what his father's feelings would be, and a parting is a very unpleasant ceremony to one who feels that the regret is all on his own side.

But it was no use putting it off any longer; he resolved at last to go in and get it over, and opened the door accordingly. How warm and comfortable the room looked — more comfortable than it had ever seemed to him before, even on the first day of the holidays!

And his father would be sitting there in a quarter of an hour's time, just as he was now, while he himself would be lumbering along to the station through the dismal raw fog!

How unspeakably delightful it must be, thought Dick enviously, to be grown up and never worried by the thoughts of school and lesson-books; to be able

to look forward to returning to the same comfortable house, and living the same easy life, day after day, week after week, with no fear of a swiftly advancing Black Monday.

Gloomy moralists might have informed him that we cannot escape school by simply growing up, and that, even for those who contrive this and make a long holiday of their lives, there comes a time when the days are grudgingly counted to a blacker Monday than ever made a school-boy's heart quake within him.

But then Dick would never have believed them, and the moralists would only have wasted much excellent common sense upon him.

Paul Bultitude's face cleared as he saw his son come in. "There you are, eh?" he said, with evident satisfaction, as he turned in his chair, intending to cut the scene as short as possible. "So you're off at last? Well, holidays can't last for ever—by a merciful decree of Providence, they don't last quite for ever! There, good-bye, good-bye, be a good boy this term, no more scrapes, mind. And now you'd better run away, and put on your coat—you're keeping the cab waiting all this time."

"No, I'm not," said Dick, "Boaler hasn't gone to fetch one yet."

"Not gone to fetch a cab yet!" cried Paul, with evident alarm, "why, God bless my soul, what's the man thinking about? You'll lose your train! I know

you'll lose the train, and there will be another day lost, after the extra week gone already through that snow! I must see to this myself. Ring the bell, tell Boaler to start this instant—I insist on his fetching a cab this instant!"

"Well, it's not my fault, you know," grumbled Dick, not considering so much anxiety at all flattering, "but Boaler has gone now. I just heard the gate shut."

"Ah!" said his father, with more composure, "and now," he suggested, "you'd better shake hands, and then go up and say good-bye to your sister—you've no time to spare."

"I've said good-bye to them," said Dick. "Mayn't I stay here till—till Boaler comes?"

This request was due, less to filial affection than a faint desire for dessert, which even his feelings could not altogether stifle. Mr. Bultitude granted it with a very bad grace.

"I suppose you can if you want to," he said impatiently, "only do one thing or the other—stay outside, or shut the door and come in and sit down quietly. I cannot sit in a thorough draught!"

Dick obeyed, and applied himself to the dessert with rather an injured expression.

His father felt a greater sense of constraint and worry than ever; the interview, as he had feared, seemed likely to last some time, and he felt that he ought to improve the occasion in some way, or, at all events, make some observation. But, for all that,

he had not the remotest idea what to say to this red-haired, solemn boy, who sat staring gloomily at him in the intervals of filling his mouth. The situation grew more embarrassing every moment.

At last, as he felt himself likely to have more to say in reproof than on any other subject, he began with that.

"There's one thing I want to talk to you about before you go," he began, "and that's this. I had a most unsatisfactory report of you this last term; don't let me have that again. Dr. Grimstone tells me—ah, I have his letter here—yes, he says (and just attend, instead of making yourself ill with preserved ginger)—he says, 'Your son has great natural capacity, and excellent abilities; but I regret to say that, instead of applying himself as he might do, he misuses his advantages, and succeeds in setting a mischievous example to—if not actually misleading—his companions.' That's a pleasant account for a father to read! Here am I, sending you to an expensive school, furnishing you with great natural capacity and excellent abilities, and—and—every other school requisite, and all you do is to misuse them! It's disgraceful! And misleading your companions, too! Why, at your age, they ought to mislead *you*—No, I don't mean that—but what I may tell you is that I've written a very strong letter to Dr. Grimstone, saying what pain it gave me to hear you misbehaved yourself, and

telling him, if he ever caught you setting an example of any sort, mind that, *any* sort, in the future—he was to, ah, to remember some of Solomon's very sensible remarks on the subject. So I should strongly advise you to take care what you're about in future, for your own sake!"

This was not a very encouraging address, perhaps, but it did not seem to distress Dick to any extent; he had heard very much the same sort of thing several times before, and had been fully prepared for it then.

He had been seeking distraction in almonds and raisins, but now they only choked instead of consoling him, and he gave them up and sat brooding silently over his hard lot instead, with a dull, blank dejection which those only who have gone through the same thing in their boyhood will understand. To others, whose school life has been one unchequered course of excitement and success, it will be incomprehensible enough—and so much the better for them.

He sat listening to the grim sphinx clock on the black marble chimneypiece, as it remorselessly ticked away his last few moments of home-life, and he ingeniously set himself to crown his sorrow by reviving recollections of happier days.

In one of the corners of the overmantel there was still a sprig of withered laurel left forgotten, and his eye fell on it now with grim satisfaction.

He made his thoughts travel back to that delightful afternoon on Christmas Eve, when they had all come home riotous through the brilliant streets, laden with purchases from the Baker Street Bazaar, and then had decorated the rooms with such free and careless gaiety.

And the Christmas dinner too! He had sat just where he was sitting now, with, ah, such a difference in every other respect — the time had not come then when the thought of "only so many more weeks and days left" had begun to intrude its grisly shape, like the skull at an ancient feast.

And yet he could distinctly recollect now, and with bitter remorse, that he had not enjoyed himself then as much as he ought to have done; he even remembered an impious opinion of his that the proceedings were "slow." Slow! with plenty to eat, and three (four, if he had only known it) more weeks of holiday before him; with Boxing Day and the brisk exhilarating drive to the Crystal Palace immediately following, with all the rest of a season of licence and varied joys to come, which he could hardly trust himself to look back upon now! He must have been mad to think such a thing.

Overhead his sister Barbara was playing softly one of the airs from "The Pirates" (it was Frederic's appeal to the Major-General's daughters), and the music, freed from the serio-comic situation which it illustrates, had a tenderness and pathos of its

own which went to Dick's heart and intensified his melancholy.

He had gone (in secret, for Mr. Bultitude disapproved of such dissipations) to hear the Opera in the holidays, and now the piano conjured the whole scene up for him again—there would be no more theatre-going for him for a very long time!

By this time Mr. Bultitude began to feel the silence becoming once more oppressive, and roused himself with a yawn. "Heigho!" he said, "Boaler's an uncommonly long time fetching that cab!"

Dick felt more injured than ever, and showed it by drawing what he intended for a moving sigh.

Unfortunately it was misunderstood.

"I do wish, sir," said his parent testily, "you would try to break yourself of that habit of breathing hard. The society of a grampus (for it's no less) delights no one and offends many—including me—and for Heaven's sake, Dick, don't kick the leg of the table in that way; you know it simply maddens me. What do you do it for? Why can't you learn to sit at table like a gentleman?"

Dick mumbled some apology, and then, having found his tongue and remembered his necessities, said, with a nervous catch in his voice, "Oh, I say, father, will you—can you let me have some pocket-money, please, to go back with?"

Mr. Bultitude looked as if his son had petitioned for a latch-key.

"Pocket-money!" he repeated, "why, you can't want money. Didn't your grandmother give you a sovereign as a Christmas-box? And I gave you ten shillings myself!"

"I do want it, though," said Dick; "that's all spent. And you know you always *have* given me money to take back."

"If I do give you some, you'll only go and spend it," grumbled Mr. Bultitude, as if he considered money an object of art.

"I shan't spend it all at once, and I shall want some to put in the plate on Sundays. We always have to put in the plate when it's a collection. And there's the cab to pay."

"Boaler has orders to pay your cab—as you know well enough," said his father, "but I suppose you must have some, though you cost me enough, Heaven knows, without this additional expense."

And at this he brought up a fistful of loose silver and gold from one of his trouser-pockets, and spread it deliberately out on the table in front of him in shining rows.

Dick's eyes sparkled at the sight of so much wealth; for a moment or two he almost forgot the pangs of approaching exile in the thought of the dignity and credit which a single one of those bright new sovereigns would procure for him.

It would ensure him surreptitious luxuries and open friendships as long as it lasted. Even

Tipping, the head boy of the school, who had gone into tails, brought back no more, and besides, the money would bring him handsomely out of certain pecuniary difficulties to which an unexpected act of parental authority had exposed him; he could easily dispose of all claims with such a sum at command, and then his father could so easily spare it out of so much!

Meanwhile Mr. Bultitude, with great care and precision, selected from the coins before him a florin, two shillings, and two sixpences, which he pushed across to his son, who looked at them with a disappointment he did not care to conceal.

"An uncommonly liberal allowance for a young fellow like you," he observed. "Don't buy any foolishness with it, and if, towards the end of the term you want a little more, and write an intelligible letter asking for it, and I think proper to let you have it—why, you'll get it, you know."

Dick had not the courage to ask for more, much as he longed to do so, so he put the money in his purse with very qualified expressions of gratitude.

In his purse he seemed to find something which had escaped his memory, for he took out a small parcel and unfolded it with some hesitation.

"I nearly forgot," he said, speaking with more animation than he had yet done, "I didn't like to take it without asking you, but is this any use? May I have it?"

"Eh?" said Mr. Bultitude, sharply, "what's that? Something else—what is it you want now?"

"It's only that stone Uncle Duke brought mamma from India; the thing, he said, they called a 'Pagoda stone,' or something, out there."

"Pagoda stone? The boy means Garuda Stone. I should like to know how you got hold of that; you've been meddling in my drawers, now, a thing I will not put up with, as I've told you over and over again."

"No, I haven't, then," said Dick, "I found it in a tray in the drawing-room, and Barbara said, perhaps, if I asked you, you might let me have it, as she didn't think it was any use to you."

"Then Barbara had no right to say anything of the sort."

"But may I have it? I may, mayn't I?" persisted Dick.

"Have it? certainly not. What could you possibly want with a thing like that? It's ridiculous. Give it to me."

Dick handed it over reluctantly enough. It was not much to look at, quite an insignificant-looking little square tablet of greyish green stone, pierced at one angle, and having on two of its faces faint traces of mysterious letters or symbols, which time had made very difficult to distinguish.

It looked harmless enough as Mr. Bultitude took it in his hand; there was no kindly hand to hold him back, no warning voice to hint that there

might possibly be sleeping within that small marble block the pent-up energy of long-forgotten Eastern necromancy, just as ready as ever to awake into action at the first words which had power to evoke it.

There was no one; but even if there had been such a person, Paul Bultitude was a sober prosaic individual, who would probably have treated the warning as a piece of ridiculous superstition.

As it was, no man could have put himself in a position of extreme peril with a more perfect unconsciousness of his danger.