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The Giant's Robe

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THE
GIANT'S ROBE

BY

F. ANSTEY
AUTHOR OF 'VICE-VERSÂ'

'Now does he feel his title
Hang loose about him, like a giant's robe

Upon a dwarfish thief' — *Macbeth*

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PREFACE.

IT has been my intention from the first to take this opportunity of stating that, if I am indebted to any previous work for the central idea of a stolen manuscript, such obligation should be ascribed to a short tale, published some time ago in one of the Christmas numbers—the only story upon the subject which I have read at present.

It was the story of a German student who, having found in the library of his university an old scientific manuscript, by a writer long since dead and forgotten, produced it as his own; and it is so probable that the recollection of this incident became quite unconsciously the germ of the present book that, although the matter is not of general importance, I feel it only fair to mention it here.

I trust, nevertheless, that it is not necessary to insist upon any claim to the average degree of originality; for if the book does not bear the traces of honest and independent work, that is a defect which is scarcely likely to be removed by the most eloquent and argumentative of prefaces.

THE GIANT'S ROBE.



CHAPTER I.

AN INTERCESSOR.

IN the heart of the City, but fended off from the roar and rattle of traffic by a ring of shops, and under the shadow of a smoke-begrimed classical church, stands—or rather stood, for they have removed it recently—the large public school of St. Peter's.

Entering the heavy old gate, against which the shops on both sides huddled close, you passed into the atmosphere of scholastic calm which, during working hours, pervades most places of education, and saw a long plain block of buildings, within which it was hard to believe, so deep was the silence, that some hundreds of boys were collected.

Even if you went down the broad stair to the school entrance and along the basement, where the bulk of the class-rooms was situated, there was only a faint hum to be heard from behind the numerous doors—until the red-waistcoated porter came out of his lodge and rang the big bell which told that the day's work was over.

Then nervous people who found themselves by any chance in the long dark corridors experienced an unpleasant sensation, as of a demon host in high spirits being suddenly let loose to do their will. The outburst was generally preceded by a dull murmur and rustle, which lasted for a few minutes after the clang of the bell had [Pg 2] died away—then door after door opened and hordes of boys plunged out with wild shrieks of liberty, to scamper madly down the echoing flagstones.

For half an hour after that the place was a Babel of unearthly yells, whistles, and scraps of popular songs, with occasional charges and scuffles and a constant tramp of feet.

The higher forms on both the classical and modern sides took no part of course in these exuberances, and went soberly home in twos or threes, as became 'fellows in the Sixth.' But they were in the mi-

nority, and the Lower School boys and the 'Remove'—that body-guard of strong limbs and thick heads which it seemed hopeless to remove any higher—were quite capable of supplying unaided all the noise that might be considered necessary; and, as there was no ill-humour and little roughness in their japes, they were very wisely allowed to let their steam off without interference. It did not last very long, though it died out gradually enough: first the songs and whistles became more isolated and distinct, and the hallooing and tramping less continued, until the *charivari* toned down almost entirely, the frightened silence came stealing back again, and the only sounds at last were the hurried run of the delinquents who had been 'run in' to the detention room, the slow footsteps of some of the masters, and the brooms of the old ladies who were cleaning up.

Such was the case at St. Peter's when this story begins. The stream of boys with shiny black bags had poured out through the gate and swelled the great human river; some of them were perhaps already at home and enlivening their families with the day's experiences, and those who had further to go were probably beguiling the tedium of travel by piling one another up in struggling heaps on the floors of various railway carriages, for the entertainment of those privileged to be their fellow-passengers.

Halfway down the main corridor I have mentioned was the 'Middle-Third' class-room, a big square room with dingy cream-coloured walls, high windows darkened with [Pg 3] soot, and a small stained writing-table at one end, surrounded on three sides by ranks of rugged seasoned forms and sloping desks; round the walls were varnished lockers with a number painted on the lid of each, and a big square stove stood in one corner.

The only person in the room just then was the form-master, Mark Ashburn; and he was proposing to leave it almost immediately, for the close air and the strain of keeping order all day had given him a headache, and he was thinking that before walking homeward he would amuse himself with a magazine, or a gossip in the masters' room.

Mark Ashburn was a young man, almost the youngest on the school staff, and very decidedly the best-looking. He was tall and well made, with black hair and eloquent dark eyes, which had the

gift of expressing rather more than a rigid examination would have found inside him—just now, for example, a sentimental observer would have read in their glance round the bare deserted room the passionate protest of a soul conscious of genius against the hard fate which had placed him there, whereas he was in reality merely wondering whose hat that was on the row of pegs opposite.

But if Mark was not a genius, there was a brilliancy in his manner that had something very captivating about it; an easy confidence in himself, that had the more merit because it had hitherto met with extremely small encouragement.

He dressed carefully, which was not without effect upon his class, for boys, without being overscrupulous in the matter of their own costume, are apt to be critical of the garments of those in authority over them. To them he was 'an awful swell'; though he was not actually overdressed—it was only that he liked to walk home along Piccadilly with the air of a man who had just left his club and had nothing particular to do.

He was not unpopular with his boys: he did not care twopence about any of them, but he felt it pleasant to be popular, and his careless good-nature secured that result [Pg 4] without much effort on his part. They had a great respect for his acquirements too, speaking of him among themselves as 'jolly clever when he liked to show it'; for Mark was not above giving occasional indications of deep learning which were highly impressive. He went out of his way to do it, and was probably aware that the learning thus suggested would not stand any very severe test; but then there was no one there to apply it.

Any curiosity as to the last hat and coat on the wall was satisfied while he still sat at his desk, for the door, with its upper panels of corrugated glass protected by stout wire network—no needless precaution there—opened just then, and a small boy appeared, looking rather pale and uncomfortable, and holding a long sheet of blue foolscap in one hand.

'Hullo, Langton,' said Mark, as he saw him; 'so it's you; why, haven't you gone yet, eh? How's that?'

'Please sir,' began the boy, dolorously, 'I've got into an awful row – I'm run in, sir.'

'Ah!' said Mark; 'sorry for you – what is it?'

'Well, I didn't do anything,' said he. 'It was like this. I was going along the passage, and just passing Old Jemmy's – I mean Mr. Shelford's – door, and it was open. And there was a fellow standing outside, a bigger fellow than me, and he caught hold of me by the collar and ran me right in and shut the door and bolted. And Mr. Shelford came at me and boxed my ears, and said it wasn't the first time, and I should have a detention card for it. And so he gave me this, and I'm to go up to the Doctor with it and get it signed when it's done!'

And the boy held out the paper, at the top of which Mark read in old Shelford's tremulous hand – 'Langton. 100 lines for outrageous impertinence. J. Shelford.'

'If I go up, you know, sir,' said the boy, with a trembling lip, 'I'm safe for a swishing.'

'Well, I'm afraid you are,' agreed Mark, 'but you'd better make haste, hadn't you? or they'll close the Detention Room, and you'll only be worse off for waiting, you see.' [Pg 5]

Mark was really rather sorry for him, though he had, as has been said, no great liking for boys; but this particular one, a round-faced, freckled boy, with honest eyes and a certain refinement in his voice and bearing that somehow suggested that he had a mother or sister who was a gentlewoman, was less objectionable to Mark than his fellows. Still he could not enter into his feelings sufficiently to guess why he was being appealed to in this way.

Young Langton half turned to go, dejectedly enough; then he came back and said, 'Please, sir, can't you help me? I shouldn't mind the – the swishing so much if I'd done anything. But I haven't.'

'What can I do?' asked Mark.

'If you wouldn't mind speaking to Mr. Shelford for me – he'd listen to you, and he won't to me.'

'He will have gone by this time,' objected Mark.

'Not if you make haste,' said the boy, eagerly.

Mark was rather flattered by this confidence in his persuasive powers: he liked the idea, too, of posing as the protector of his class, and the good-natured element in him made him the readier to yield.

'Well, we'll have a shot at it, Langton,' he said. 'I doubt if it's much good, you know, but here goes – when you get in, hold your tongue and keep in the background – leave it to me.'

So they went out into the long passage with its whitewashed walls and rows of doors on each side, and black barrel-vaulting above; at the end the glimmer of light came through the iron bars of the doorway, which had a prison-like suggestion about them, and the reflectors of the unlighted gas lamps that projected here and there along the corridor gave back the glimmer as a tiny spark in the centre of each metal disc.

Mark stopped at the door of the Upper Fourth Classroom, which was Mr. Shelford's, and went in. It was a plain room, not unlike his own, but rather smaller; it had a dais with a somewhat larger desk for the master, and a different arrangement of the benches and lockers, but it [Pg 6] was quite as gloomy, with an outlook into a grim area giving a glimpse of the pavement and railings above.

Mr. Shelford was evidently just going, for as they came in he had put a very large hat on the back of his head, and was winding a long grey comforter round his throat; but he took off the hat courteously as he saw Mark. He was a little old man, with a high brick-red colour on his smooth, scarcely wrinkled cheeks, a big aquiline nose, a wide thin-lipped mouth, and sharp little grey eyes, which he cocked sideways at one like an angry parrot.

Langton retired to a form out of hearing, and sat down on one end of it, nursing his detention paper anxiously.

'Well, Ashburn,' began the Reverend James Shelford, 'is there anything I can do for *you*?'

'Why,' said Mark, 'the fact is, I – –'

'Eh, what?' said the elder. 'Wait a minute – there's that impudent fellow back again! I thought I'd seen the last of him. Here, you sir, didn't I send you up for a flogging?'

'I—I believe you did, sir,' said Langton with extreme deference.

'Well, why ain't you *getting* that flogging—eh, sir? No impidence, now—just tell me, why ain't you being flogged? You ought to be in the middle of it now!'

'Well, you see,' said Mark, 'he's one of *my* boys— —'

'I don't care whose boy he is,' said the other, testily; 'he's an impudent fellow, sir.'

'I don't think he is, really,' said Mark.

'D'ye know what he did, then? Came whooping and shouting and hullabalooing into my room, for all the world as if it was his own nursery, sir. He's *always* doing it!'

'I never did it before,' protested Langton, 'and it wasn't my fault this time.'

'Wasn't your fault! You haven't got St. Vitus' dance, have you? I never heard there were any Tarantula spiders here. You don't go dancing into the Doctor's room, do you? *He'll* give you a dancing lesson!' said the old gentleman, sitting down again to chuckle, and looking very like Mr. Punch. [Pg 7]

'No, but allow me,' put in Mark; 'I assure you this boy is— —'

'I know what you're going to tell me—he's a model boy, of course. It's singular what shoals of model boys *do* come dancing in here under some irresistible impulse after school. I'll put a stop to it now I've caught one. You don't know 'em as well as I do, sir, you don't know 'em—they're all impudent and all liars—some are cleverer at it than others, and that's all.'

'I'm afraid that's true enough,' said Mark, who did not like being considered inexperienced.

'Yes, it's cruel work having to do with boys, sir—cruel and thankless. If ever I try to help a boy in my class I think is trying to get on and please me, what does he do? Turn round and play me some scurvy trick, just to prove to the others he's not currying favour. And then they insult me—why, that very boy has been and shouted "Shellfish" through my keyhole many a time, I'll warrant!'

'I think you're mistaken,' said Mark, soothingly.

'You do? I'll ask him. Here, d'ye mean to tell me you never called out "Shellfish" or—or other opprobrious epithets into my door, sir?' And he inclined his ear for the answer with his eyes fixed on the boy's face.

'Not "Shellfish," said the boy; 'I did "Prawn" once. But that was long ago.'

Mark gave him up then, with a little contempt for such injudicious candour.

'Oh!' said Mr. Shelford, catching him, but not ungently, by the ear. "'Prawn," eh? "Prawn"; hear that, Ashburn? Perhaps you wouldn't mind telling me *why* "Prawn"?'

A natural tendency of the youthful mind to comparative physiology had discovered a fancied resemblance which justified any graceful personalities of this kind; but Langton probably felt that candour had its limits, and that this was a question that required judgment in dealing with it.

'Because—because I've heard other fellows call you that,' he replied. [Pg 8]

'Ah, and why do *they* call me Prawn, eh?'

'I never heard them give any reason,' said the boy, diplomatically.

Mr. Shelford let the boy go with another chuckle, and Langton retired to his form again out of earshot.

'Yes, Ashburn,' said old Jemmy, 'that's the name they have for me—one of 'em. "Prawn" and "Shellfish"—they yell it out after me as I'm going home, and then run away. And I've had to bear it thirty years.'

'Young ruffians!' said Mark, as if the sobriquets were wholly unknown to the masters' room.

'Ah, they do though; and the other day, when my monitor opened the desk in the morning, there was a great impident kitten staring me in the face. He'd put it in there himself, I dare say, to annoy me.'

He did not add that he had sent out for some milk for the intruder, and had nursed it on his old knees during morning school, after which he showed it out with every consideration for its feelings; but

it was the case nevertheless, for his years amongst boys had still left a soft place in his heart, though he got little credit for it.

'Yes, it's a wearing life, sir, a wearing life,' he went on with less heat, 'hearing generations of stoopid boys all blundering at the same stiff places, and worrying over the same old passages. I'm getting very tired of it; I'm an old man now. "Occidit miseris crambe" — eh, you know how it goes on?'

'Yes, yes,' said Mark, 'quite so,' — though he had but a dim recollection of the line in question.

'Talking of verses,' said the other, 'I hear we're to have the pleasure of seeing one of your productions on Speech-night this year. Is that so?'

'I was not aware anything was settled,' said Mark, flushing with pleasure. 'I did lay a little thing of my own, a sort of allegorical Christmas piece — a *masque*, don't you know — before the Doctor and the Speeches Committee, but I haven't heard anything definite yet.'

'Oh, perhaps I'm premature,' said Mr. Shelford; 'perhaps I'm premature.' [Pg 9]

'Do you mind telling me if you've heard anything said about it?' asked Mark, thoroughly interested.

'I did hear some talk about it in the luncheon hour. You weren't in the room, I believe, but I think they were to come to a decision this afternoon.'

'Then it will be all over by now,' said Mark; 'there may be a note on my desk about it. I — I think I'll go and see, if you'll excuse me.'

And he left the room hastily, quite forgetting his original purpose in entering: something much more important to him than whether a boy should be flogged or not, when he had no doubt richly deserved it, was pending just then, and he could not rest until he knew the result.

For Mark had always longed for renown of some sort, and for the last few years literary distinction had seemed the most open to him. He had sought it by more ambitious attempts, but even the laurels which the performance of a piece of his by boy-actors on a Speech-day might bring him had become desirable; and though he had

written and submitted his work confidently and carelessly enough, he found himself not a little anxious and excited as the time for a decision drew near.

It was a small thing; but if it did nothing else it would procure him a modified fame in the school and the masters' room, and Mark Ashburn had never felt resigned to be a nonentity anywhere.

Little wonder, then, that Langton's extremity faded out of his mind as he hurried back to his class-room, leaving that unlucky small boy still in his captor's clutches.

The old clergyman put on the big hat again when Mark had gone, and stood up peering over the desk at his prisoner.

'Well, if you don't want to be locked up here all night, you'd better be off,' he remarked.

'To the Detention Room, sir?' faltered the boy.

'You know the way, I believe? If not, I can show you,' said the old gentleman politely. [Pg 10]

'But really and truly,' pleaded Langton, 'I didn't do anything this time. I was shoved in.'

'Who shoved you in? Come, you know well enough; you're going to lie, I can see. Who was he?'

It is not improbable that Langton *was* going to lie that time—his code allowed it—but he felt checked somehow. 'Well, I only know the fellow by name,' he said at last.

'Well, and *what's* his name? Out with it; I'll give him a detention card instead.'

'I can't tell you that,' said the boy in a lower voice.

'And why not, ye impident fellow? You've just said you knew it. Why not?'

'Because it would be sneakish,' said Langton boldly.

'Oh, "sneakish," would it?' said old Jemmy. "'Sneakish," eh? Well, well, I'm getting old, I forget these things. Perhaps it would. I don't know what it is to insult an old man—that's fair enough, I dare say. And so you want me to let you off being whipped, eh?'

'Yes, when I've done nothing.'

'And if I let you off you'll come galloping in here as lively as ever to-morrow, calling out "Shellfish"—no, I forgot—"Prawn's" *your* favourite epithet, ain't it?—calling out "Prawn" under my very nose.'

'No, I shan't,' said the boy.

'Well, I'll take your word for it, whatever that's worth,' and he tore up the compromising paper. 'Run off home to your tea, and don't bother me any more.'

Langton escaped, full of an awed joy at his wonderful escape, and old Mr. Shelford locked his desk, got out the big hook-nosed umbrella, which had contracted a strong resemblance to himself, and went too.

'That's a nice boy,' he muttered—'wouldn't tell tales, wouldn't he? But I dare say he was taking me in all the time. He'll be able to tell the other young scamps how neatly he got over "old Jemmy." I don't think he will, though. I can still tell when a boy's lying—I've had plenty of opportunities.'

Meanwhile Mark had gone back to his class-room. [Pg 11] One of the porters ran after him with a note, and he opened it eagerly, only to be disappointed, for it was not from the committee. It was dated from Lincoln's Inn, and came from his friend Holroyd.

'Dear Ashburn,' the note ran, 'don't forget your promise to look in here on your way home. You know it's the last time we shall walk back together, and there's a favour I want to ask of you before saying good-bye. I shall be at chambers till five, as I am putting my things together.'

'I will go round presently,' he thought. 'I must say good-bye some time to-day, and it will be a bore to turn out after dinner.'

As he stood reading the note, young Langton passed him, bag in hand, with a bright and grateful face.

'Please, sir,' he said, saluting him, 'thanks awfully for getting Mr. Shelford to let me off; he wouldn't have done it but for you.'

'Oh, ah,' said Mark, suddenly remembering his errand of mercy, 'to be sure, yes. So, he has let you off, has he? Well, I'm very glad I was of use to you, Langton. It was a hard fight, wasn't it? That's enough, get along home, and let me find you better up in your Ne-pos than you were yesterday.'

Beyond giving the boy his company in facing his judge for the second time, Mark, as will have been observed, had not been a very energetic advocate; but as Langton was evidently unaware of the fact, Mark himself was the last person to allude to it. Gratitude, whether earned or not, was gratitude, and always worth accepting.

'By Jove,' he thought to himself with half-ashamed amusement, 'I forgot all about the little beggar; left him to the tender mercies of old Prawn. All's well that ends well, anyhow!'

As he stood by the *grille* at the porter's lodge, the old Prawn himself passed slowly out, with his shoulders bent, and his old eyes staring straight before him with an absent, lack-lustre expression in them. Perhaps he was thinking that life might have been more cheerful for him [Pg 12] if his wife Mary had lived, and he had had her and boys like that young Langton to meet him when his wearisome day was over, instead of being childless and a widower, and returning to the lonely, dingy house which he occupied as the incumbent of a musty church hard by.

Whatever he thought of, he was too engaged to notice Mark, who followed him with his eyes as he slowly worked his way up the flight of stone steps which led to the street level. 'Shall I ever come to that?' he thought. 'If I stay here all my life, I *may*. Ah, there's Gilbertson — he can tell me about this Speech-day business.'

Gilbertson was a fellow-master, and one of the committee for arranging the Speech-day entertainment. For the rest he was a nervously fussy little man, and met Mark with evident embarrassment.

'Well, Gilbertson,' said Mark, as unconcernedly as he could, 'settled your programme yet?'

'Er — oh yes, quite settled — quite, that is, not definitely as yet.'

'And — my little production?'

'Oh, ah, to be sure, yes, your little production. We all liked it very much—oh, exceedingly so—the Doctor especially—charmed with it, my dear Ashburn, charmed!'

'Very glad to hear it,' said Mark, with a sudden thrill; 'and—and have you decided to take it, then?'

'Well,' said Mr. Gilbertson, looking at the pavement all round him, 'you see, the fact is, the Doctor thought, and some of us thought so too, that a piece to be acted by boys should have a leetle more—eh? and not quite so much—so much of what yours has, and a few of those little natural touches, you know—but you see what I mean, don't you?'

'It would be a capital piece with half that in it,' said Mark, trying to preserve his temper, 'but I could easily alter it, you know, Gilbertson.'

'No, no,' said Gilbertson, eagerly, 'you mustn't think of it; you'd spoil it; we couldn't hear of it, and—and it won't be necessary to trouble you. Because, you see, the Doctor thought it was a little long, and not quite light [Pg 13] enough; and not exactly the sort of thing we want, but we all admired it.'

'But it won't do? Is that what you mean?'

'Why—er—nothing definite at present. We are going to write you a letter about it. Good-bye, good-bye! Got a train to catch at Ludgate Hill.'

And he bustled away, glad to escape, for he had not counted upon having to announce a rejection in person.

Mark stood looking after him, with a slightly dazed feeling. *That* was over, then. He had written works which he felt persuaded had only to become known to bring him fame; but for all that it seemed that he was not considered worthy to entertain a Speech-night audience at a London public school.

Hitherto Mark's life had contained more of failure than success. From St. Peter's he had gone to a crammer's to be prepared for the Indian Civil Service, and an easy pass had been anticipated for him even at the first trial. Unfortunately, however, his name came out low down on the list—a disaster which he felt must be wiped out at

all hazards, and, happening to hear of an open scholarship that was to be competed for at a Cambridge college, he tried for it, and this time was successful. A well-to-do uncle, who had undertaken the expenses hitherto, was now induced to consent to the abandonment of the Civil Service in favour of a University career, and Mark entered upon it accordingly with fair prospects of distinction, if he read with even ordinary steadiness.

This he had done during his first year, though he managed to get a fair share of enjoyment out of his life, but then something happened to change the whole current of his ambitions—he composed a college skit which brought him considerable local renown, and from that moment was sought as a contributor to sundry of those ephemeral undergraduate periodicals which, in their short life, are so universally reviled and so eagerly read.

Mark's productions, imitative and crude as they necessarily were, had admirers who strengthened his own conviction that literature was his destiny; the tripos faded [Pg 14] into the background, replaced by the more splendid vision of seeing an accepted article from his pen in a real London magazine; he gave frantic chase to the will o' the wisp of literary fame, which so many pursue all their lives in vain, fortunate if it comes at last to flicker for awhile over their graves.

With Mark the results were what might have been expected: his papers in his second year examinations were so bad that he received a solemn warning that his scholarship was in some danger, though he was not actually deprived of it, and finally, instead of the good class his tutor had once expected, he took a low third, and left Cambridge in almost as bad a plight as Arthur Pendennis.

Now he had found himself forced to accept a third-form mastership in his old school, where it seemed that, if he was no longer a disciple, he was scarcely a prophet.

But all this had only fanned his ambition. He would show the world there was something in him still; and he began to send up articles to various London magazines, and to keep them going like a juggler's oranges, until his productions obtained a fair circulation, in manuscript.

Now and then a paper of his did gain the honours of publication, so that his disease did not die out, as happens with some. He went on, writing whatever came into his head, and putting his ideas out in every variety of literary mould—from a blank-verse tragedy to a sonnet, and a three-volume novel to a society paragraph—with equal ardour and facility, and very little success.

For he believed in himself implicitly. At present he was still before the outwork of prejudice which must be stormed by every conscript in the army of literature: that he would carry it eventually he did not doubt. But this disappointment about, the committee hit him hard for a moment; it seemed like a forecast of a greater disaster. Mark, however, was of a sanguine temperament, and it did not take him long to remount his own pedestal. 'After all,' he thought, 'what does it matter? If my "Sweet [Pg 15] Bells Jangled" is only taken, I shan't care about anything else. And there is some of my best work in that, too. I'll go round to Holroyd, and forget this business.'

CHAPTER II.

A LAST WALK.

MARK turned in from Chancery Lane under the old gateway, and went to one of the staircase doorways with the old curly eighteenth-century numerals cut on the centre stone of the arch and painted black. The days of these picturesque old dark-red buildings, with their small-paned dusty windows, their turrets and angles, and other little architectural surprises and inconveniences, are already numbered. Soon the sharp outline of their old gables and chimneys will cut the sky no longer; but some unpractical persons will be found who, although (or it may be *because*) they did not occupy them, will see them fall with a pang, and remember them with a kindly regret.

A gas jet was glimmering here and there behind the slits of dusty glass in the turret staircase as Mark came in, although it was scarcely dusk in the outer world; for Old Square is generally a little in advance in this respect. He passed the door laden with names and shining black plates announcing removals, till he came to an en-