

MY FRIEND DOUGLAS.

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“NO haughty feat of arms I tell” in depicting the humble individual who forms the theme of my discourse; in fact, as he is not an energetic personage by any means, feats of any kind, bellicose or otherwise, are not to be expected of him. He spends his blameless days in medita-

tion—mindful, perhaps, “of his lost love and far-off home.” His appearance, indeed, might be thought to indicate ill-health of body or mind, for a blotchy yellow skin and a stony glare from watery yellow eyes suggest that “mysterious disease” which, according to the advertisement of a certain patent medicine, is always “creeping upon us.” Add to this a wide and waistless figure and large flat feet, and it will be easily understood that not even his most intimate friends can call my hero’s appearance prepossessing. When, however, I say that he rejoices in a tail, and carries his very much attached residence about with him, it will be suspected at once that my bilious-looking friend, despite his high-sounding appellation, is only a tortoise. And so he is—a European terrapin, or water tortoise, not distantly related to the friend of Brer Rabbit, who was, as we all know, one of the very few of that wily rodent’s long-suffering acquaintance who managed to outwit him. And in some respects he even reminds one of a still more distinguished member of the house-bearing family: the snapping turtle, victim of the “Arkansas tooth-pick” of the intrepid Slingsby. He does not, however, hail from the States, like these famous relatives of his; but from some part of Southern Europe, which, I cannot say, as his kind’s range is a wide one. Somewhere, however, he was kidnapped, and transferred to the care of a London dealer in pets, furred, feathered, and scaly. Ransomed thence, he has settled down peaceably in a garden in the south of England, which, affording him as it does sunshine, shade, and bathing accommodation, he is not at all anxious to leave.

A small stone basin has been sunk in the ground for his ablutions, which, it must be confessed, leave him rather dirtier than before, for his speckled shell gets covered with fine dirt, only to be removed with a nail-brush. To this he entirely objects; and no wonder, for his backbone being the roof tree of his portable abode, his poor

nerves must be sadly jarred by the process. This same coating of Mother Earth makes him rather difficult to see when he is in request, which is pretty often, as his points and properties are constantly being shown off to visitors. His objections to this interference with his repose are, no doubt, modified by the meal which follows it. For though his appetite does not demand alligators and authors to satisfy it, his capacity for accommodating animal nourishment is by no means to be despised. Unlike that peaceful browser, the land tortoise, which is too often hawked about on barrows, and bought, under the influence of the wild idea that it will destroy “blackbeetles,” he firmly rejects a vegetable diet. Instead, he devours raw meat or worms to an alarming extent—for there appears to be no provision in his frame for expansion, till it is seen that his breastplate and carapace are not absolutely soldered together, but “give” a little. His meals are generally taken in the evening, when, if the sun has nicely taken the “chill off,” he resorts to his bath, and waits, with his head out, for someone to come and feed him: for he makes a point of always taking his food in the water. All night long he remains in the enjoyment of a luxurious soaking, and may be encountered next morning trudging along the path to his retreat among the vegetable-marrows. There he proceeds to lie flat in the sun, his head erect, and his wrinkled yellow throat heaving slowly, in that placid enjoyment of *dolce far niente* which reptiles exhibit to perfection—one might almost think it a legacy from the old times, when “the world went very well,” and doubtless very slowly. As for special exercise, “Douglas” has as much contempt for it as any southerner; the dozen yards’ walk to the water is quite enough for him, varied by an occasional expedition along the south border. Like Gilbert White’s celebrated tortoise, he does not care for too much sun, and on the other hand, when it is scanty, knows enough to tilt his shell to catch what warmth there is. Whether, like that historical reptile, he knows his special friend, I have never been sure; but he is well aware of what is happening when any benefactor begins to dig by the side of his little pond, crawling out and watching the operation with greedy eyes till a worm is turned up and given to him, when he seizes it, and waddles off at a desperate pace, usually in the wrong direction, the victim meanwhile twisting itself round his head, getting under his feet, and otherwise generally making itself unpleasant. Presently, however, he finds his watery dining-room, or is dropped into it by a kindly hand, and, once at the bottom, proceeds to tear up his prey with the aid of his claws, sharp and strong as any bird’s, bolting large pieces with the slow greediness which seems generally to distinguish reptilian repasts. After thus disposing of two or three lob-worms nearly as long as himself, he is not anxious for another repast for a

day or two. His horny jaws can bite a big worm asunder at one snap, nor do small frogs fare much better; but toads he will have nothing to do with. Raw meat he especially delights in, when nicely cut up for him, and will "put away" quite a respectable quantity, and then fast for some days. By way of a change of diet, some sticklebacks were submitted to his examination; but his piscatorial tastes need developing, for he took very little notice of them. This indifference they did not reciprocate, for they evidently regarded him as a useful shelter, rushing to hide under his ample form, and, I have no doubt, sometimes tickling him dreadfully.

From finding a tiny fish-bone, however, in the water, I am inclined to think that the unsuspecting fishlings may have found in him a treacherous refuge. What damage he would do to the human finger I don't know; unlike Dr. Watts's dogs, he does not delight to bite, and his scratching when taken up is only an effort to escape. For, phlegmatic as he seems, he does not readily brook restraint; place him on a table, and after a time he will display a suicidal-looking tendency to crawl off; and in a small enclosure he will climb impossible-looking places, his great muscular power enabling him to drag his unwieldy carcase up anything that affords him a secure hold for his claws.

With autumn, his activity, such as it is, and appetite alike begin to wane, and he spends the winter, after the manner of his kind, in torpidity and abstinence, in which latter, even in their period of active life, tortoises can far surpass any "fasting man." In fact, their comparative indestructibility is much in favour of these animals as pets; besides their power of undergoing abstinence, their shell protects them from rough treatment, though the small flattish covering of a terrapin will not bear so much hard usage as the vault-like shell of a land-tortoise. Still, by curling his tail round sideways, "Douglas" can manage to accommodate his members inside sufficiently well to defy the impertinent curiosity of thoughtless kittens, which are not inclined to respect any creature, however venerable in appearance. And nothing in nature, surely, looks more antique than these slow, shielded reptiles, whose gnarled and weather-beaten appearance is justified by the great age they are known to attain. Not that "Douglas" can be termed a patriarch; though several years must have elapsed since he crawled, no bigger than a half-crown piece, from the white egg laid by his parent on the shore of some water in the "sunny south." And that many more may pass before he bequeaths to them his shell as the memento of his unobtrusive existence is, I am sure, the wish of all his friends.

OUR LITTLE SCHEME.



ISN'T there somebody who says something, somewhere, about women being "uncertain." Perhaps it's Scott, or Voltaire, or possibly the Archbishop of Canterbury—I'm not sure, and I don't much care. I only mentioned it because I'm going to tell you something about an "uncertain" girl. Gwen Clifford was a very lovely creature; tall and slim and fair, with fine dark eyes and eyebrows, and a most enchanting smile. She lived with her aunt, and they came to stay in Burchester about the same time that our regiment, the "Nur-do-doods," was stationed there. The Nur-do-doods is a strictly "good form" regiment, generally wealthy, and very perfect in their morals, their single weakness being flirtation.

I don't know why we settled that old Mrs. Clifford and her niece had come to Burchester with the intention of catching one of us, but we did. Possibly, because the old lady had a Roman nose. I'm not sure. Personally, I've not much faith in a nose of that shape. I don't believe the Great Duke's nose had the slightest influence at Waterloo. I've known too many simpering fools with Roman noses, to believe that it had. Still, the general belief was as I've said. And, shortly, circumstances seemed to warrant us in our belief, for

very soon there was a most promising flirtation in full swing between the fair Gwen and our youngest subaltern. His name was Philip Dyke. We were rather puzzled to think why he was picked out. He certainly wasn't the wealthiest of us. We were far too clever to think that it was because he was a nice boy and fairly good-looking. We were sorry for him. Two of us even went so far as to warn him—at least, we began to. It was one evening after dinner; we three were alone in the mess; but at the first word he rose, saying with much dignity, "When I tell you that I intend asking Miss Clifford to become my wife, you will perhaps see that your remarks are impertinent." Of course, there was no more to be said. Still, we grieved for him. Next morning he had gone on leave, before any of us had seen him. We didn't know what to make of it! Had he asked and been refused? We heard that he had been closeted with the colonel for some time before his departure; but when the williest of us tried to pump that astute officer, the result was *nil*. There was nothing to be got out of him. By accident we discovered that Dyke had not taken leave of the Cliffords at all! Then we held council together. We decided unanimously that as Jack Roscoe had more charms in the way of "filthy lucre" than any other one of us, it was plainly his duty to come to the rescue. Jack didn't see it. Not at first. But he was a good fellow, and when we pointed out that it was