Dorrien of Cranston Vol.I

By

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Freeditorial

DORRIEN OF CRANSTON VOL.I

Chapter One

Concerning Certain Dorriens.

General Dorrien sits at the breakfast table in the cheerful dining-room at Cranston Hall, with a frown upon his face and an open letter in his hand.

He is a handsome man, with severe, regular features; a man of whom his dependents would certainly stand in awe, and his family would fear more than love. There is sternness in the glance of his keen eyes, in the cut of the closely-trimmed grey moustache and whisker, and in every movement of the erect military figure. A man of iron will, not to be turned aside from his own hard and fast rule of right and wrong by any consideration—what chance had the foibles and follies of youth with one of this mould? And there he sits, motionless, gazing upon the open letter, the frown deepening upon his brow.

The letter bears an American postmark and is from his eldest son, whom he has not seen for eight years. It is business-like in the terse brevity of its wording, for it merely, and as a matter of duty, announces the writer's intended return to England, tidings one would think that should gladden a father's heart.

But in this case not so. Roland Dorrien and his father had parted in bitter anger. Faults on both sides, of course. The former wild, reckless and imprudent, as youth too strictly and needlessly restrained is almost sure to prove; the latter merciless and unbending. Resentful feelings and hot, hasty temper, met by additional severity and cold scorn—thus they had parted, and save two or three curt communications on money matters had held no intercourse since. And the son, sharing largely in the paternal force of will, has made no attempt at apology or conciliation during his exile; and now he is coming home.

So the General's reflections are not of a comforting nature. He has not softened during these years. Never was he known to give way; all must yield to him. The exile has not done this; therefore Time, rather than heal the paternal anger, has only consolidated it.

Roland is not his first-born. There was another, a fine cavalry soldier, who had already begun to distinguish himself in his father's profession, and him the General had loved as the apple of his eye. But one day news of a terrible Alpine fatality arrived at Cranston Hall. An Englishman and his two guides—both incompetent—had been lost on the

Lauteraar glacier. They were seen by another party not very far behind them on that dangerous pass suddenly to disappear—and upon these arriving at the spot, a fresh rift in the brink of a black, bottomless crevasse showed that the edge had given way beneath the doomed trio who had approached it regardless of proper precaution. There yawned the horrible fissure, its glassy blue sides falling perpendicular into unknown depths, and revealing the barest possible traces of the catastrophe to the horror-stricken witnesses. The Englishman who had thus found a nameless grave in the most stupendous of Nature's vaults was Vernon Dorrien, the General's eldest son, and the light of the old soldier's life seemed thenceforth to be buried there also.

Roland was now the heir and would reign in his dead brother's place. Not of legal right though, for the entail ended with the present Squire, who had it in his power to will Cranston as he chose. But the General had his own stern ideas of right. The Dorriens had always held Cranston from father to son, or, failing male issue, from brother to brother, and in spite of his aversion to his eldest surviving son the latter would succeed him in the ancestral domain. Right and justice would not allow Roland to be disinherited, but that he should fill his dead brother's place was very unpalatable to General Dorrien.

And now he sits with the letter in his hand gazing meditatively out upon the sunlit lawn and the noble elms in the park, and on the wooded hollows beneath the brown heather-clad uplands; and his soul is filled with bitterness as he thinks of the man who was to have owned all this fair domain now lying cold and stiff in his vast and icy tomb. The cawing of rooks floats in through the half-open window, and the flower-beds are stirred by a cool, soft breath from yon patch of amethyst sea just glimpsed through a dip in the downs away there to the right.

The window shuts with an angry slam, the result of the sudden opening of a door. He looks up quickly as a lady enters—an elderly lady with a strong-minded face. She must have been very handsome in her youth—she is handsome yet, though her dark hair is only just beginning to turn grey, and her large eyes are clear and lustrous still; but the firm moulding of mouth and chin seems to show that her will is nearly, if not quite, as determined as that of her husband. She takes her place opposite to him at the table.

"I have a letter here"—he begins—"from Roland."

"Yes? And what does he say?" Her tone betrays scant interest in the subject, and she busies herself with the urn.

“Very little that he ought to say—very little indeed. Why, madam, you have taught your children the Fifth Commandment to small purpose.” And he hands her the letter with a bitter smile.

She takes it frowning, but without a word, for she has long learnt the futility of trying to stem his taunts or his anger. Her domineering spirit would long since have reduced most men to submission, but in her husband she had found her master; and thus for many a year a cold-hearted peace has reigned between them, but their characters are too much alike ever to harmonise, and they know it.

“He does not say he is coming home,” she remarks, handing back the letter—“only to England.”

“And he does not express a shadow of regret for his shameful behaviour before he went away, or for his treatment of me. And yet he talks about ‘his duty to inform me of his return.’ His duty!” repeats the General with bitter sarcasm.

“You know I told you, at the time, you were too hard on him. Things might have been worse.”

“Too hard on him! Might have been worse! Eleanor, are you mad? A son of mine to be threatened with a common breach of promise action by common low people. I don’t see what could be worse.”

“Well, it was only a threat. The boy was imprudent, of course; but then, he was very young.”

“But old in vice, no doubt. But it was not so much the disgraceful affair itself that I felt, as that a son of mine should be mixed up with low, vulgar people.”

“They were not so very low. The father was a professional man—a surgeon in good practice, and—”

“And would assess his daughter’s affections at 4,000 pounds, and would exhibit the young lady in open court as a butt for the ribald wit of a filthy mob, and for the questioning and brow-beating and broad jeers of a set of profligate barristers. Really, Eleanor, I am at a loss to see how lowness and vulgarity could descend much further.”

To this conclusive retort she makes no reply. Then tentatively—

“But don’t you think, Reginald, that he ought to come here now? He ought to be known in the county, if—if—”

“If he is one day to take his place here—is not that what you wanted to say? Well, whether he does so or not depends upon himself. I may bequeath Cranston as I choose. Most men would cast off a son for a tenth of the undutiful conduct Roland has shown towards me; but I waive that. I only desire to be just. Roland will take his place here just as if he were the inheritor at law. But if ever he disgraces himself again, not one shilling will he get from me, and Cranston will go to his brother. So you had better find an early opportunity of warning him.”

It is lamentable to have to record the fact, but her husband’s resentment against his son was not so displeasing to Mrs Dorrien as her conscience told her should have been the case. For even as all his affection is buried in the grave of his first-born, so does she dote upon her youngest. For the exiled Roland she has little love. He is too strong of will for her; and no more than over his father has she ever been able to exercise over him that power she delights in. But to see her idolised Hubert installed at Cranston as its heir—even though in his brother’s place—is a tempting picture to the eyes of this woman, whose one weakness is love of her idol. To do her justice, conscience prevails, and she is about to urge even more in defence of the absent one, when a step is heard on the stairs, and the General exclaims:

“Hush. No more now. I hear Nellie coming down. Oblige me by not mentioning this”—tapping the letter—“to her, or to anyone, at present.”

“Good-morning, papa,” cries a fresh, cheerful voice, and the old man’s face softens perceptibly beneath his daughter’s kiss. She is a tall, largely-made girl, but not in the least gawky or ungraceful; and although her features are too irregular for conventional beauty, yet a profusion of soft brown hair, blue eyes and the warm flush tingeing a clear skin, together with a bright, taking expression when she smiles, combine to render Nellie Dorrien a pretty girl—some think, a very pretty girl.

“You’re late, child,” says the General, not unkindly. “Better sit down and get your breakfast. I must go and attend to my correspondence”—and gathering up his letters he goes out.

“I do think, Nellie,” began her mother, as soon as they were left alone, “I do think you might take the trouble to be down a little sooner. Your papa is so vexed when everybody is late, and now you are both late, and he’ll be doubly so.”

“But he was not a bit cross, mamma, at least not with me.”

“Not with you! No, perhaps not. But Hubert isn’t down yet, and it’ll all fall upon him. However, as you are safe, it doesn’t matter about poor Hubert,” added Mrs Dorrien acidly.

“Really, mamma, I don’t think it’s quite fair to saddle me with Hubert’s derelictions. Surely he is old enough to take care of himself,” gently objected the girl.

“Of course. Selfishness is the order of the day in this house, I ought to have remembered that.”

Nellie gave a little shrug of her shoulders, but made no reply. She was far from being a selfish girl, but she could not see why everything and everybody should be made to give way to Hubert and his convenience, as it had to do wherever her mother’s authority or influence reached. For Mrs Dorrien chose to fancy her youngest son an invalid, on the strength of which that interesting youth at the age of twenty-two would have taken first prize at an unlicked cub show—supposing such an institution to exist. Nellie herself knew this reputed debility to be sheer fudge—which knowledge she unconsciously shared with certain convivial and raffish spirits who were wont to meet more nights a week than was good for them at the “Cock and Bull and Twisted Cable” in Wandsborough, and these latter could have accounted for the poor boy’s chronic seediness more to his mother’s enlightenment than satisfaction.

“Hallo, mother. Morning, Nell!” cried the object under discussion, entering the breakfast-room and sliding languidly into his place. A sallow, loosely-built, light-haired youth, somewhat deficient in chin, and with an irritating drawl.

“At last, Hubert dear. I began to think you must have had a bad night, and was getting anxious!” said his mother fondly. “How are you this morning, my boy? You don’t look at all well.”

She was right—in one sense. He had had a bad night, the above-mentioned sporting hostelry containing proportionately less whisky and soda, not to mention other varieties of tipple more or less deleterious. The General’s hair would have stood straight on end had he known when and how his youngest-born had arrived home.

“Oh, I’m all right, mother,” growled that guileless youth, “except that I’ve got a deuce of a head on. But I say, what was the veteran looking so mortally black about just now? I met him on the stairs, or rather I saw him—he didn’t see me, thank Heaven—and he was scowling like an assassin. He had a lot of letters in his fist. By the way”—breaking off

with a start of alarm—"no one has been dunning him about—about me, don't you know. Eh?"

"No, no dear," quickly answered his mother. "It was not about you. Your father is put out over his correspondence, but it is not about you. That I may say."

"That's lucky," said Hubert, greatly relieved. "I didn't know who might have been at him. But, mother, what was it about?" he persisted, his curiosity awakened in proportion as his fears were lulled.

"Nothing that you need mind," returned Mrs Dorrien, rising and taking refuge from further questioning in flight.

"Nellie," began the young man, as soon as his mother had left the room, "I wish you knew the Rectory people."

"So do I. I just met the girls once at the Nevilles' garden party, and rather liked them. But mamma would sooner cut off her head than have anything to say to them. But why do you wish it?"

"Oh, I don't know. The eldest isn't up to much—too cold and stuck up. As for the young one—Sophie—she's a detestable brat. Tries to snub a fellow, don't you know. Thinks herself no end clever. But the middle one—Olive—fact is, she's a monstrously pretty girl."

"Ahem! And when did you make that discovery?"

"Why I saw her at the station the other day—and rather took stock of her; and I tell you, a fellow might make something of her."

"Or the other way about—she might make something of a fellow," returned his sister, with a slight curl of the lip.

"Go it!" exploded the other wrathfully. "Of course it's very funny and all that. I see what you mean, and the joke's a poor one. I thought you might be of some use to a fellow; but if you want to play the fool instead, why there's an end of it."

"My dear boy, I can't help you in the very least. You know mamma hates the sight of them, and as for papa he declares that if he had his will he would try poor Dr Ingelow by drumhead court martial and have him shot. It's hard lines that we are to be at daggers

drawn with people whom everybody says are awfully nice, just because their opinions are not ours, I must say."

"Well, I rather agree with the veteran. All that papistical stuff is awful bosh, and a parson who goes in for it is no better than a wolf in sheep's clothing—as old mother Frewen always says. But all the same that's no reason why we shouldn't know the girls."

"Why didn't you make acquaintance with the brother at Oxford?" asked Nellie.

"Oh, I don't know. Didn't think it worth while then. These freshmen are generally a bore."

"Freshmen! Why this is his fourth term."

"Is it? I didn't know. Hallo—I say—there's the veteran calling you, outside. Better look sharp, the old man's face is getting apoplectic," he added teasingly, discerning that the French window was jammed and wouldn't open, and that the frown was deepening on their father's face where he stood at the other side of the gravel walk.

General Dorrien had been comfortably off before he succeeded his elder brother, with whom he had been on bad terms, and whose death, some five years previous to the opening of this narrative, took place on the high seas during the voyage home from South America—a voyage undertaken by medical advice. The General accepted his new position and its responsibilities perfectly naturally and easily, and at once set to work vigorously and with military precision to rectify the numerous derelictions which had prevailed and thriven under the sway of his easy-going predecessor. It stood to reason that many suffered by the change. Consequently the new Squire was not beloved. But if unpopular with his dependents, by his equals he was received with open arms. He had been a brilliant soldier in his time, and had served with distinction in more than one of our wars in the East; the county therefore felt proud of his fame, being, in fact, not wholly free from some idea of having itself contributed thereto. Then the late Squire had been a bachelor, but here was a family who would keep up Cranston as it should be kept up. There ought to be a law against old bachelors occupying such a place as Cranston, said the county, in its joy at seeing a family once more in possession at the Hall, and a family comprising two eligible sons—one of them a right royal "catch"—and a daughter who would certainly not be dowerless. So although on further acquaintance the General was feared rather than liked, yet the county was very well satisfied. But its feminine side longed for the return of the eldest son to his ancestral home, with a solicitude that should have been insidiously flattering to the unconscious wanderer had he been aware of its existence.

Chapter Two.

Concerning a Man and a Dog.

Before a house in Cambridge Terrace a hansom draws up with that series of jerks peculiar to its kind, and discharges its freight—a man, a dog and a portmanteau, and while the first is making enquiries as to the occupant being within, the second is scampering up and down the footway as hard as he can pelt, for he has been pent up on shipboard and in trains for many a weary day, and now such an opportunity of stretching his legs is in no wise to be neglected.

"Not in?" the traveller is saying in reply to the servant who opens the door. "But he isn't out of town?"

"Oh no, sir. Mr Venn's generally home before this. He may be in any minute now."

"All right. I'll wait for him. Here, cabman, lay hold of the other end," and between them they deposit the portmanteau, a battered and weatherworn campaigner, safe inside the hall door, and cabby, having received more than double his fare, retires well satisfied and mumbling gleefully, "Military gent 'ome from Hingia. Two bob and a 'arf crown from Euston. Yee-epp?"

"Just my luck," muses the traveller with vexation in his face, as he gazes round upon his friend's sitting-room, a typical bachelor den in all its pipe-and-book-and-stick-bestrewn untidiness. "Just my luck to come back to this cursed town to find the only man I know and could reckon on not at home—possibly out for the evening, and not a soul to speak to in the meanwhile."

Here a scuffle and a vigorous whine outside the front door cuts short his ruminations. Quickly he opens it.

"Roy, you rascal, come in, sir. Humbugging after cats as usual?" This address, though irate in wording, is affectionate in tone, as the beautiful animal bounds past the instant the door is open, and draws up in the absent Venn's room, wagging his bushy tail and looking perfectly satisfied with himself. His glossy red-brown coat breaks off at the neck in a white curling ruff which continues down his broad chest, whose normal snowiness is now grimy with railway travel. The soft brown eyes, set in dark circles, and the smooth velvety ears, betray his collie origin, ennobled and broadened as this is by the sturdier proportions engrafted upon it by the admixture of a larger and sterner race—peradventure of the real Newfoundland or Saint Bernard blood. After a few preliminary

sniffs round the room the animal settles himself cosily on the rug, his soft, upturned eyes fixed affectionately upon his master. So much for the dog, and what of the man?

A tall and well-proportioned frame, which shows to advantage in its travel-worn suit of light tweed. A finely shaped head, carried high and erect and covered with dark clustering hair. A well-cut profile and regular features in which is an expression of quick readiness, render the face a striking and remarkable one, tanned as it is too by exposure to sun and weather. The eyes are very uncommon, and not at all in keeping with the dark complexion, being in fact violet blue; and there is that in their expression which, together with certain lines on the forehead, would to a physiognomist betray a stormy and unsettled spirit.

There is impatience in the gesture as he stands stroking his drooping moustache while gazing out into the rapidly darkening street. Suddenly Roy, raising his head, emits a threatening growl as a latch-key is turned in the front door. Then in a couple of strides a broad-shouldered, cheery looking fellow bursts into the room—

"Hallo!" is the startled greeting of the new-comer, pulling up short and wondering who the deuce was the intruder whose dog lay growling at him in right threatening fashion from his own hearth.

"All right, Venn. He won't eat you," is the stranger's reply. "But don't you know me?"

"Hanged if I do! No—yes—I do though. Why, Roland Dorrien, where on earth have you dropped from now?"

"'The clouds' you were going to say. No. The Rockies—game thing. Plenty of cloud, literal and metaphorical, besets the way of those whose lives are cast yonder."

"By Jingo!" cried the other, passing his hand over his fair, closely cropped beard. "Why didn't you say you were coming back? And did you get this splendid chap out West?"

For Roy, having sniffed the new-comer and pronounced him satisfactory, was now looking up gravely into that worthy's face and wagging his brush as if desirous of an introduction.

"Yes. Traded him from an Indian who was battering him up a good bit with a rail because he didn't take kindly to dragging a sledge. And ever since he has stuck to me very much closer than a brother. But then, you see he's only a dog, not a human, which explains it."

“Well, you’d better shake down here,” said Venn. “That is, if Mrs Symes has a room. I’ll ring and ask.”

Mrs Symes had a room, and the traveller shook down accordingly.

“I suppose you’ve been having a rare good time of it out West,” began Venn as later in the evening they sat over their cigars. “Shooting grizzlies and Indians, and chevying buffaloes, while a poor stockbroking devil like myself has been tied by the leg to this well-worn spot. Why it doesn’t seem eight years since I saw you off that jolly fine morning in search of fortune. And you’re twice the man you were then. No wonder I didn’t know you at first.”

“It is eight years though, rather over than under. As for having a good time of it, ‘Least said, etc.’ That is until the good old Squire’s bequest took effect, and then things weren’t so bad, because, you see, I could do what I liked, and I did. I forgot—you haven’t heard—how should you have?” seeing the other look slightly mystified. “Well then, the old Squire—my father’s brother, you know—and I used to be very thick, which was good and sufficient reason for my not being allowed to go near him. He died five years ago, as you may or may not know, and I own to feeling a trifle sold at being as I thought cut off with a shilling. Well, a year back, I heard that the good old chap had left me all his personal property to the figure of seven or eight hundred a year. His will stipulated that I was to be kept in the dark about it until my thirtieth birthday—a proviso for which I suppose I ought to feel devoutly grateful, for I was a consummate young ass in those days I’m afraid. Cranston, of course, was entailed, so he could do nothing with that. But he did the best he could for me.”

“Lucky dog,” said Venn. “And now you’ll get Cranston into the bargain.”

“Oh, hold hard, there. My chances of that are about equal to yours. Cranston was entailed—now it isn’t; my affectionate parent was the last man of that ilk. He can will it as he likes now or make a fresh entail, and I’m afraid that won’t be in my direction.”

“But you and he are surely not at cuts after all these years,” said Venn. “He’ll be glad enough to see you again now.”

“He isn’t that sort. He’s never got over that idiotic affair, or pretends he hasn’t. You know what I mean”—as Venn again looked inquiringly. “You don’t? Well, I don’t see why I shouldn’t tell you. There was a girl I used to be very thick with when I was up here before—didn’t mean anything by it of course. I was a thoughtless young fool, you know, and all that sort of thing. She was pretty and taking, and I used to see a good deal of her

and take her about a good bit. Not to put too fine a point upon it, we carried on considerably. I always was inclined to be an ass in that line."

"Quite so, old chap," laughed Venn, as the other paused in his narrative and stared dreamily in front of him. "So you were—and so you will be again. Drive on."

"Well things went smoothly enough for a while, and at last it struck me I was going a little too far, and so I began to haul off—found an excuse for leaving Town and so on. The admission sounds hang-dog I grant, but then, only remember my means and prospects—the first nil—ditto the second. To cut the matter short, one day—I was at home at the time—the General sent for me to his sanctum. Without a word he handed me a letter to read. It was from a lawyer, acting for the girl's father, and threatening to sue me for 4,000 pounds damages for breach of promise. They thought I wasn't worth anything—then at any rate—and so they'd try it on with my father. By the Lord, Venn old man, I spent a lively half-hour. How he did let drive. I had disgraced him—disgraced the family—disgraced everybody—wasn't fit to look a dog in the face or to be in the same backyard with a self-respecting cat, and so on. Well now, if he had behaved with ordinary judgment, I was quite ready to admit having made an ass of myself—an infernal ass if he liked—for I was disgusted at the preposterous threat and the extortionateness of the demand. It seemed to ruffle my callow sensibilities, don't you see. But when he simply volleyed abuse at me and wouldn't listen to a word I had to say, by Jove! my back got up too and there was a most awful row. He would disown me on the spot—cut me off with a shilling—unless I left England and stayed out of it till he gave me permission to return. I might go where I liked, but I must clear out of the country. Well, I elected to go out West—and went. You know the rest."

"Then that's how it was you went out there?" said Venn. "I always suspected there had been something under it deeper than you let out. And has he said you might return?"

"Not he. I didn't ask him. I can do as I like now, and as he'll cut me off anyhow, it doesn't much matter."

"When do you go down to Cranston?"

"Don't think I shall go at all. None of us hit it off somehow, and more than ever am I better out of it. I think, though, I'll run down to Wandsborough and have a look round—incog, don't you know."

"Wandsborough, did you say?" exclaimed Venn, astonished.

"Yes. It's the town adjacent to my hypothetical heritage. Know the place?"

“N-no. I never was there myself, but the rector there is an old friend of mine. Ingelow his name is; I’ll give you an introduction to him.”

“Thanks, awfully. But—er—the fact is, I don’t get on well with parsons, and—”

“Oh, you will with this one. He’s an out and out good sort. And Dorrien, you dog, he has some daughters. They were jolly little romps when I knew them years ago, and promised to grow up very pretty.”

“Did they? That alters the case. It’ll be slow at Wandsborough. On second thoughts, Venn, I’ll take your introduction, and will duly report if the promise has been kept. But see here. I’m going to prospect around for a week or two in that section, and I don’t want my people to know I’m there, so I’ve thought of a wrong name. Put the introduction in the name of ‘Rowlands’ instead of Dorrien. That’s the one I’m going to take.”

Venn replied that he was hanged if he would. But, ultimately, he did.

Chapter Three.

"At First Sight!"

The Church of Saint Peter and the Holy Cross at Wandsborough is full from end to end for the great service of the forenoon. It is Whitsun Day and the High Celebration is about to commence.

A noble building is this old parish church, with its splendid chancel and columned aisles and long spacious nave. Windows, rich in stained glass, throw a network of colour upon the subdued and chastened light within, and a great number of saints and martyrs, in glowing pane and canopied niche, would seem to afford representation of the whole court, and company of Heaven, whichever way the eye may turn; and here and there, glimpsed through a foreground of graceful arches, the red gleam of a lamp suspended in some side chapel imparts an idea of mystery and awe to the half-darkened recess where it burns.

To-day, the chancel is magnificently decorated. The high altar, ornamented with a profusion of choice flowers and ablaze with many lights, stands out a prominent and striking object, and visible to nearly everybody in the building. Large banners, wrought in exquisite needlework, setting forth the image of saint, or mystery, or some historical event in the annals of Christianity, are ranged around the walls. A perfume of incense is in the air, and, as the great bell ceases tolling, a low sweet melody, gurgling forth from yon illuminated organ pipes, seems specially designed to attune the minds of the awaiting multitude to the solemnity which is about to begin.

The seat nearest the light gilded railing which divides the choir from the nave is occupied by three graceful and tastefully attired girls. Two of them are apparently in devout frame of mind enough, but the third suffers her gaze to wander in a way which, all things considered, is not as it should be. Not to put too fine a point upon it, she is evidently given to looking about her. But the sternest of ecclesiastical martinets would find it difficult to be hard on the owner of that face. It is a face to be seen and remembered. A perfect oval, its warm paleness is lit up by the loveliest of hazel eyes, long-lashed, expressive, lustrous. Delicate features, and the faintest suspicion of a smile ever lurking about the corners of the sweetest little mouth in the world, complete the picture—a picture of dark piquante beauty which is more than winning. So think, for the hundredth time, more than one in its owner's immediate vicinity. So thinks for the first time one in particular, who, from the moment he entered, has done little else but furtively watch that faultless profile, as well as he is able and under difficulties, for he is nearly in line with the same. Who can she be? he is wondering. Is it the Rectory pew,

and can it be that the owner of that rare face is one of the rector's daughters? It may as well be stated that the stranger's surmise is correct.

And now the congregation rises in a body as a long double file of surpliced choristers emerges from a side chapel. Then follow the three officiating clergy in their rich red vestments, attended by acolytes and taper-bearers in scarlet and lawn; and advancing to the steps of the high altar, all kneel. The great organ thunders forth like the surging of many waters, as the first verse of Veni Creator is solemnly chanted. Then, rising, choristers and priests advance in procession down the chancel. A thurifer goes first, flinging his censer high in the air, and the lights, borne one on each side of the great silver crucifix, gleam redly through a misty cloud. Bright banners move aloft at intervals above the shining pageant, which is closed by the richly vested celebrant and his attendants. Quickly the crowded congregation takes up the grand old plainsong hymn, joining in heartily as the stately procession wends its way slowly down the nave—a glow of light and colour—and, making a complete circuit of the spacious building, re-enters the chancel. The choristers file into their stalls; the celebrant and his assistants ascend to the altar and incense it in every part, as amid a great volume of choral harmony the service begins.

He to whom we have made brief reference watches the ceremonial with some interest. That he is a stranger is evident, and this, coupled with his striking appearance, is, we grieve to say, a fact which occupies the attention of many a fair devotee there present far more than it should, remembering the time and place. That it engrosses a sufficient share of that of the young lady in the front seat we grieve still more to be obliged to chronicle, remembering that she is an occupant of the Rectory pew. But the stranger does not reciprocate the general attention of which he is the object, for he has an eye for but one face amid that assembly of faces. Stay, though; another there attracts his interest to a tolerably vivid degree, and it is that of no less a personage than the celebrating priest himself; a strikingly handsome man of lofty stature, and whose forking grey beard descends, like that of Aaron, even to the skirts of his embroidered clothing—or nearly so. And in the countenance of this imposing ecclesiastic he detects a strong family likeness to the lovely brunette who first attracted his eye.

The service, magnificent in its artistic adjuncts, and impressive in its well-ordered ceremonial, proceeds. The stately altar, aglow with lights and gorgeous draperies; the solemn chant of the celebrant and jubilant response from choir and organ; the ever-changing postures and picturesque groupings; clouds of incense and the silvery ringing of bells at the culmination of the solemnity—all go to make up an imposing whole. But it is over at last. Choristers, acolytes and priests retire amid a stirring voluntary from the great organ, and the sunlight, intercepted and subdued by lancets of stained glass, falls in a hundred changing gleams upon the now empty chancel.

The occupants of the Rectory pew linger in their seats, and while the other two are busy gathering up their books and sunshades preparatory to a move, the girl whom we have noticed, turning half round, scans the departing congregation. As she does so she meets the stranger's glance and there is a meaning in it which renders her slightly confused—perhaps a little angry.

"Now, Olive dear, we'd better go," whispers a remonstrant voice. With a start and a half blush the girl recollects herself, and the three haste to follow in the wake of the now thinning crowd, which is streaming out through the west door.

"Ah-h! what a relief to be outside again!" exclaimed she who had been addressed as "Olive," as the three girls wended their way beneath the tall feathery elms which shaded the churchyard walk. "I declare I thought it was never going to end."

"Hush, dear I don't talk like that," answered the eldest of the three, with a slightly scared look around. "If anyone were to hear you, what would be said?"

"That a man's foes are they of his own household," came the reply with a merry, ringing laugh. "That if our dad must give us such a long and elaborate function on so heavenly a morning as this, he might at least let us off a twenty minutes sermon."

Even more startled looked the remonstrant, as at the moment some acquaintances passed within earshot. What if they should have heard?

"It's no use shaking your solemn old head at me, Margaret," went on the first speaker. "I meant what I said, and I don't care who knows it. Now we shan't have time for a walk."

Margaret Ingelow made no reply. She was a fair, good-looking girl of twenty-five, with a thoughtful, refined face. Her bright young sister's levity often jarred upon her uncomfortably when exercised upon sacred or ecclesiastical subjects, for which she herself entertained the profoundest reverence. Left motherless at an early age, upon her had devolved the care of the younger children, and this, combined with her position as head of the household, had endowed the rector's eldest daughter with a gravity of thought and manner beyond her years.

"Olive, look! Who is that, I wonder!" exclaimed Sophie, aged seventeen.

"That" was a masculine figure a little in front on the opposite side of the street, for they had left the churchyard now. Olive, following her sister's glance, recognised the stranger who had attracted her notice in church.

“Perhaps someone down here for the Whitsun holidays,” struck in Margaret’s quiet voice. But for some occult reason the remark was received by Olive with a little frown.

“In other words, something between a cheap trippist and a bank clerk,” she said. “No—not exactly.”

“Keep your temper, Olive dear,” laughed Sophie maliciously. “We didn’t know the subject was a tender one or we’d have—”

“Why, what a pace you girls walk at!” cried a cheery voice behind them. “I thought I should have to return home in my own sweet society.”

“Oh, father, there you are at last,” cried Margaret, stopping as the rector joined them. “We quite thought it would be of no use waiting.”

“That tiresome Mr Barnes always keeps you prosing in the vestry for half an hour,” struck in Sophie. “What an old bore he is! I can’t see the use of churchwardens at all.”

“Our friends at the Radical club do, dear,” rejoined her father with a twinkle in his eyes. “How on earth would they emphasise their arguments without a goodly number of ‘churchwardens’ to smash?”

“Now, father, you know I don’t mean that kind of churchwarden, so don’t try and be sarcastic,” cried Sophie. And the rector burst into a hearty laugh.

It is a pleasant sight that quartette wending homewards along the sunny street already given over to the stillness of a provincial town at the Sunday dinner hour. The girls in their light, tasteful summer dresses looking as fresh and cool as roses on which the dew yet lingers, grouped around the tall upright form of their father, who, with one hand thrust in easy attitude through the sash of his long flowing cassock, walked among them looking supremely happy and contented, now and again bestowing a nod and a pleasant smile in response to the greeting of some passer-by.

“Father,” said Olive, thrusting her hand through the rector’s arm and nestling up to his side with the most bewitchingly affectionate gesture. “Do you know you’re a dear, sweet old dad, and I’m very proud of you?”

“And wherefore this sudden honour, darling?” enquired he, gazing down into her upturned face with a fond smile. He was afraid to own to himself how he loved this beautiful, wayward second daughter, who tyrannised over him in all things domestic, to

an incredible extent. For the fact must be recorded that this one was the spoilt child of the house.

“You sang the service beautifully to-day—and it was worth something to hear you,” she replied. “And yet you want to make us believe you are losing your voice—like Mr Medlicott, who can’t even monotone on G without getting flat.”

“My dear little critic, perhaps it is that Medlicott has more to worry him than I. Though to be sure he is spared such a dreadful little plague as this,” rejoined the rector with his sunny laugh, pressing the arm, passed through his, to his side.

“Oh, indeed! Well then, for that let me tell you you gave us too long a sermon,” she retorted.

“Did I? It was only eighteen minutes.”

“Far too long. Look now. We are done out of our walk all through that. And just look what a heavenly day it is.”

“Poor little things!”

Margaret, turning her head, encountered her father’s ruefully comic, mock-penitent glance, and was hardly reassured. She regarded his sacred office as so great—so tremendous—a thing, that to hear him taken to task by this giddy child in his discharge of it always grated upon her. And all accustomed to this kind of talk as she was, yet she felt uncomfortable under it. For she was pre-eminently one of those who took life seriously. But the rector and his favourite daughter thoroughly understood each other.

“Goodness!” cried Sophie, as a neat brougham drawn by a pair of fine greys swept past them. “Why if that isn’t the Dorriens’ carriage.”

“Surely they weren’t in church!” said Margaret wonderingly.

“Hardly, I think,” said the rector, with a lurking smile and a flash of quiet merriment in his dark eyes. “Poor Mrs Dorrien looks upon the parish church as a very well of iniquity—and myself, the Pope, and a certain personage who shall be nameless, as an excellently matched trio.”

“Old pig!” muttered Olive to herself.

“Why then, it must have been Hubert Dorrien after all,” said Sophie. “I thought it was, but he was too far back to be sure. Every time I looked round I caught that detestable eyeglass glaring at me.”

“‘Every time’—ahem! And pray how many times was that?” said her father, drily.

“Oh, there now, I’ve done it,” cried Sophie with a laugh and a blush. “But it was only once or twice as the procession was coming round, and that was all behind us, so we couldn’t see anything of it unless we did look back. Will that satisfy you, dad, dear?”

“Well explained!” said the rector with a hearty laugh. “We must let her down easily on a great occasion, mustn’t we, Margaret?”

“But all the same that Hubert Dorrien angers me—he looks so conceited and supercilious always,” went on Sophie. “He’s a horrid boy?”

“‘Boy!’ Why hear her! Why he’s five years older than you, Sophie,” laughed her father.

“Well then he doesn’t look it,” retorted she. “And he’s always tied to his mother’s apron-string.”

“I wonder what Roland, the eldest one, is like,” said Margaret; “the one in America. I wonder he doesn’t come home.”

“Perhaps he doesn’t get on well at home,” suggested Olive. “But I wish he would come. He’s sure to be nice, if only as a change from his utterly horrid family. And nice people—or at any rate nice men—are conspicuous here by their absence.”

The rector frowned ever so slightly—for his favourite daughter added to her other peccadilloes a decided penchant for flirtation. But like a wise man he said nothing, and by this time they had reached the gates of their pretty and cheerful-looking home.

Chapter Four.

The Rector of Wandsborough.

The Rev. William Ingelow, Doctor of Divinity of the University of Oxford, had, at the time our story opens, held the living of Wandsborough about fifteen years.

On the face of the foregoing chapter, it is needless to explain that Dr Ingelow was a very "advanced" Anglican indeed. He was even too advanced for the bulk of his clerical brethren of his own way of thinking, who were wont to shake their heads while declaring confidentially among themselves that "Ingelow went too far," and was likely to do more harm than good to "the Cause" by going to such "extremes" and so forth. He was a regular Romaniser, they declared. Instead of trying to re-Catholicise the Church on good old Anglican lines, he boldly adopted Roman ceremonial in every particular. And his teaching—that, too, was far too outspoken. Invocation, auricular confession, and the like, he taught too openly. English people were not quite prepared to swallow pills of this nature without such a coating of silver leaf as would completely and effectually disguise the salutary medicine within. Ingelow was an admirable parish priest in every way—but—a Romaniser. Thus his clerical brethren.

But the rector only laughed good-naturedly to himself. He candidly admitted the terrible impeachment—even owning that his sympathies, liturgical and disciplinary, were entirely with the enactments which proceeded from the City on the Seven Hills. Liturgical matters in the Church of England had been handed down to them in a state of hotch-potch, and the "restoration on good old Anglican lines" theory of his Ritualist brethren meant every man doing what was right in his own eyes. There must be some rule in these matters, argued the rector. The "Roman Use" was the rule of Western Christendom. Moreover it was teachable, fairly simple, dignified and impressive, he declared. Therefore he carried it out in its entirety in his fine parish church and was in every way satisfied with the result. His colleagues would fain have followed his example, but lacked the courage of their convictions—Anglican clergymen not uncommonly do. So they continued to shake their heads and declare oracularly that "Ingelow went too far."

Wandsborough Church was old, but in extremely good preservation; a few timely restorations carried out under the aegis of its present incumbent had consolidated this, and at the time of our story it was one of the finest parish churches in the land. The beautiful spire boasted a full peal of bells, whose cheery carillon could be heard for miles around, and every few hours would ring forth a sacred tune which, floating melodiously out over the pleasant downs, might on a still night even reach vessels passing far out at sea. The interior of the building was metamorphosed in a trice beneath the new rector's reforming hand. An imposing altar raised on many steps, and decked with tall candles

and shining crucifix and rich draperies, took the place of the old trestle-board table with its worn-out baize cloth. The old-fashioned "three-decker" gave way to a fine piece of sculpture and marble, and the bi-weekly humdrum parson-and-clerk duet found itself disestablished to make way for a daily chanted office rendered by rows of surpliced and carefully trained choristers in the carved chancel stalls. The chief service on Sundays and festivals was literally High Mass, being a judicious compound of the Book of Common Prayer and translations from the Missal; and on any day and every day the ringing of handbells and the gleam of lights at the side altars in the early morning told that the rector and his assistants were diligent in the execution of their daily offices. Lamps burned before shrine and saint; the pictured "Stations of the Cross" decked the walls, and altogether it was perhaps little to be wondered at that the Doctor's clerical brethren looked askew, and asserted that "Ingelow went too far."

Now all this was not carried without considerable opposition. There was a hubbub, of course. The parish raved about "the restoration of Popery." The rector smiled and alluded suavely to "a reversion to first principles." The parish protested—fumed—threatened. A section of it growled, and stayed away; a larger section growled, but continued to attend. The bulk of it, however, ceased to growl, for it discovered that there was, on the whole, nothing so very terrible about all this; then it entered heartily, and with not a little enthusiasm, into the new order of things.

Apart from any intrinsic merit underlying the new system there were many causes at work, all gravitating towards its general acceptance. The rector was wealthy, and did a great deal for the town. He was very popular and very persuasive, and it would be a mere question of time to carry the greater portion of his flock with him. He was a resolute man—not obstinate, simply determined—and where principle was involved he was adamant. Other considerations carried him through. Apart from his reputation for learning—though this involved a wide and general knowledge rather than erudition in any particular branch—he was a man of considerable means, and was open-handed to a fault. The other was his enormous personal popularity, for he was the most kind-hearted and genial of men. He had the same sunny smile, the same cheerful greeting, for those whom he knew to be in opposition to him—for those who went to chapel, and for those who went nowhere. So he was on all sides voted a "good fellow," "the right sort," "a charming man," or "a perfect gentleman," according to the station in life or the sex of his admirers.

A cheerful disposition, like a Grecian nose, is a natural gift, and not cultivable at will—all solemn old cant to the contrary notwithstanding. Given the constitution of an elephant, the physique of a gladiator, the absence of positive knowledge as to the location of a liver; added to absolute freedom from all possibility of pecuniary care, and a thoroughly congenial profession, and it is manifest that if a man is not cheerfully disposed, he

deserves to be hung without delay. But where the rector of Wandsborough differed from other lucky ones blessed with these advantages, was that he was perfectly sympathetic towards those who enjoyed them not, and therein lay the merit of his own cheerfulness. He thoroughly understood human nature. In his younger days he had been a great traveller, having devoted several years to nothing but seeing the world, and deferring to take holy orders until considerably later than most men who enter the clerical state. And the knowledge thus gained of men and manners in varying climes had stood him in good stead, and not least in acting as a counterpoise to a narrow and professional tendency, almost inseparable from “the cloth” in a greater or less degree. And this he himself was the first to own. At the time our story opens, he had turned his sixtieth year; but, on the principle of a man being no older than he feels, Dr Ingelow was wont to consider himself still in the prime of life.

His family relations were of the happiest kind. His children adored him—the three girls whose acquaintance we have just made, and his only son Eustace, a fine young fellow of twenty, now in his third term at Oxford. Left a widower at the birth of h’s youngest girl, Dr Ingelow had come to Wandsborough two years later, and sought solace in his bereavement in thus throwing himself into an entirely new field of labour. What was wanting in a mother’s care for the younger children was as nearly as possible supplied by Margaret, the eldest, who was so helpful, so thoughtful beyond her years, that it had never even entered her father’s head to import any such lame makeshift as an aunt or a governess into the family circle. Rumour whispered that more than one of the fair—whether maid or widow—in Wandsborough and its neighbourhood would gladly have consoled the rector for his earlier loss, but, if so, much disappointment wae unwittingly scattered by him among the gentle aspirants; or if any such stray whisper reached his ears he would laugh good-naturedly to himself over the absurdity of the idea; for, as things stood, there were few happier homes than Wandsborough Rectory.

Chapter Five.

The Wag of a Dog's Tail.

Wandsborough at the period of our story was what might be called an out-of-the-way place. The nearest railway station was fully three miles off, and even that only found itself on a branch line. It would be difficult to account for the existence of the little old town, but that at one time it rejoiced in manufactures of its own, and did a steady trade. Then the tide turned. Foreign products ruled the market, to the exclusion of Wandsborough goods. Factories closed; the stir and bustle of labour became a thing of the past; and the place was given over to a sleepy and respectable quietude.

From the point of view of those who love the latter, Wandsborough was extremely lucky in its remoteness, being almost unknown to tourist and holiday maker. Lucky, too, in having so far escaped the speculator's eye; for though more than a mile from the sea, it was near enough, and possessed attractions enough, to warrant its transformation into that foretaste of eternal punishment, a British watering-place—nigger minstrels, shrimps, donkeys, barrel organs, yahoos, and all. Its country walks were of the loveliest, whether you climbed the heather- and gorse-clad uplands, and drinking in the salt breeze, turned to look back upon the little town, with its red roofs and tall spire, nestling in a green hollow, while on your other hand, far beneath, danced and sparkled the summer sea; or whether, turning your steps inland, you strolled through shady lanes where the ferns and wild geraniums grew amid fresh cool moss, and little brown wrens hopped warily from frond to frond beneath the shade of a miniature scaur. Or if seaward bent, what a wild, picturesque, ever varying coast was there for you to explore!

Down one of the ways leading thither comes Olive Ingelow. It is a warm morning, almost too warm to be comfortable anywhere out of the shade, although the distant steeple is only chiming a quarter to ten; but one side of the road is overshadowed by tall elms, and beneath these the girl gracefully walks. She makes a very lovely picture, the lithe figure in its cool morning dress moving with the elastic step and ease of youth. A large light straw hat shades the delicate oval face, and the glance of her dark eyes wanders joyously over sunlit meadows where lambs are frisking among the buttercups. She carries a two-handled canvas basket, containing drawing materials, though, should she weary of reproducing Nature, yet another solace does the canvas basket contain, for is not that the corner of a novel peeping out? She is going to have a whole long morning all to herself on the seashore.

Leaving the road, she steps over a stile and strikes into a field path. Hot though it is in the open, there is a certain delight in the glowing warmth upon her cheeks. She wanders from the path and her dainty boots are powdered with yellow particles from the

buttercups which her feet displace. It is a heavenly morning, she thinks; one to make her feel lovingly disposed towards all the world—but—oh! and the girl catches her breath in a spasm of alarm, suddenly remembering that this field is wont to be the abode of a certain grisly terror to the unwary pedestrian, in the shape of a remarkably large and vicious bull. A quick furtive glance round reassures her. The field is empty. But all the same her heart beats pretty fast until she is safe over the next stile, and she is conscious of a lingering, if insane, apprehension that the enemy may peradventure arise out of the earth.

Then the last field is left behind, and a stony bit of barren ground grown with patches of gorse dips to a steep, narrow, staircase-like way, whose rocky walls rise abrupt on either side. Descending this, Olive finds herself on the beach.

She is in a small semi-circular cove shut in by perpendicular cliffs. At quite low tide it is possible to approach or leave it by a narrow strip of shingle at either end, at other times it is only to be gained by the way down which she has come. Settling herself comfortably at the foot of one of the great rocks which lie scattered capriciously about the beach, Olive pauses to rest and recover herself before beginning to draw. The sea is like glass, now and then the merest breath rippling over it in shades of blue and silver and gold. Brown rocks, left bare by the receding tide, upheave their slippery backs, heavily festooned with seaweed, and the broad level sands lie wet and glistening in the sun. Now and then a large gull, stalking along the extreme edge of the uncovered shore, rises with a scream, and wings its way to the lofty recesses of the cliff. Yonder three or four sturdy bare-legged urchins are busily plying their shrimping nets, and gathering in much spoil from numerous clear pools gleaming amid the green brown rocks. And so still is the air that their voices and laughter are borne distinctly to Olive's ears, though mellowed by distance.

She begins to investigate the contents of her basket. Nothing is left behind? No—colour-box, block, palettes, brushes—all are there; not even the water-bottle forgotten. She will just throw off the upper end of the little bay, and bring in those two great turret-like rocks—whose bases are covered except at the very lowest of tides—and the rough, jagged headland, from which they seem to have broken loose and fled to take up a position of their own out in the midst of the sea. Comfortably ensconced in her snug position, for half an hour the girl is very busy. The outline of her sketch is drawn, and she is ruminating on the laws of perspective previous to the first wash of colour, when lo! another factor appears on the scene—another living thing within the silent and secluded cove. It is a dog.

Careering to and fro over the firm level sands, his snowy chest and ruff gleaming in the sun, and his silky brush streaming out like a flag, he keeps looking upward at the cliffs,

uttering the while short joyous barks, as if to say to someone not yet in sight, “Aha—here I am—down first on this splendid beach. So come down after me as quickly as you can, for—it is fun?”

“Oh, what a love of a dog!” cries Olive, dropping her work to watch him. “Here—come here, you beauty—come and talk to me, and let’s have a look at you!”

The beautiful creature stops suddenly in the midst of his gambols, startled at the sound of a human voice where he thought himself quite alone. Then, wagging his bushy tail, he trots up to where she is sitting.

“You love! You perfect picture!” cries the girl ecstatically, throwing her arms round his snowy ruff and gazing into his soft, laughing brown eyes. “Where do you come from, and who do you belong to?” She kisses him in the middle of the forehead, and lays her cheek against his velvety ear. The dog presses affectionately against her, trying to lick her face with his hot panting tongue.

A low, shrill whistle. The unappreciative animal tears himself from her and stands for a moment gazing inquiringly around. But as he rushes from her there is a metallic sound, and lo! the little tin vessel containing her painting water rolls off the rock, upset by a stroke of his bushy tail, and the contents are swallowed, in a trice, by the thirsty sand.

Olive gives a little cry of dismay as she sees her morning’s work brought to a standstill. There is no fresh water anywhere about. She is gazing ruefully on the empty vessel, when a shadow falls between her and the sun. Looking up with a start, her glance meets that of another—not for the first time. Before her stands the stranger who gazed at her so attentively in the parish church on Sunday.

“I’m afraid my rascally dog has done serious damage. I don’t know how to apologise sufficiently on his behalf. Pray forgive him—and me—if you can. Is that absolutely your last drop?”

“I’m afraid it is. In fact—it is,” replies Olive, and her rueful smile changes to a brighter flash as she looks up at him. “But it was not altogether his fault—nor yours. I called him.”

“Oh! He is such a clumsy fellow sometimes, and yet he ought to have learnt manners by now. Here—Roy! Come here, you villain, and see what you’ve done. Now—what have you to say for yourself, sir!”

The dog walks slowly up with a downcast air and a drooping tail, though the latter is softly agitating in deprecatory wags. He looks very penitent beneath his master's stern tones, but there is no trace of cowering.

"Please don't be angry with him," says Olive. "It really was all my fault for calling him. But, then, he is such a beauty."

"There, Roy. Do you hear that—you bad dog? Come here and apologise. It isn't often you fall in with those who return good for evil. Here—give a paw—no, not that one—the other."

Sitting down in front of Olive, the dog lifts his right paw and gravely places it in her little hand.

"Now the other!" cries his master—and he repeats the performance with the left, looking up into her face with such soft, pleading eyes.

"There," says Roy's master. "You don't deserve to be treated so generously, you bad dog. And now"—turning to Olive—"will you let me try and remedy the mischief? There must be fresh water somewhere about the cliffs."

"Oh, I couldn't think of troubling you to that extent. Besides I am not bound to draw this morning. I have a book here, and would just as soon read instead."

But this does not meet the stranger's views at all. He intends to talk to this girl, now that a fortunate chance has put it in his power to do so. He can do so while she is drawing—hardly if she reads. So he answers, but without eagerness:

"It will be no trouble at all. And I think you ought to draw this morning, because it is just one of those days which are built for that purpose. You can read at home, but you can't reproduce this perfect bit of coast anywhere but here. So I'll start off upon my errand of reparation before you are angry with me for presuming to lecture you," and picking up the little canister away he goes.

Olive laughs softly to herself as she looks after him. He is so cool and self-possessed, and then his voice, too, is a very pleasing one. Who can he be? She hopes he will return soon with or without the water, and not be in a very great hurry to continue his walk. Then she is the least bit in the world frightened. What would Margaret, for instance, say if she could see her sitting in this out-of-the-way corner of the seashore, talking to a man who is a perfect stranger? And how the tongues of Wandsborough would clack—a phase of exercise, by the way, to which those unruly members were by no means unaccustomed.

Anyhow she can see at a glance that the man is thoroughbred. If he is making any stay in Wandsborough, as she is inclined to think is the case, she is sure to meet him sooner or later, so why not forestall the acquaintance? If he is not, why then in all probability she will never see him again, and in either case there is no harm done. She is thus musing, when the object of her reflections appears at her side, as suddenly as he did before.

"I have been successful," he says, setting down the canister very carefully. "But I am afraid you were waxing impatient."

"Not at all. I think you have been very quick, and I did hope you would be able to find me some water, for I feel in the humour for daubing just now."

"Good. And now allow me to arrange the necessary articles," and without waiting for an answer he opens her colour-box and sets her palettes and brushes in order.

"An artist," thinks the girl. "Of course that's what he is," and on the strength of this inspiration she ploughs away nervously with her brush, though shyness as a rule is not one of those sins which can fairly be laid to Olive Ingelow's charge.

"That won't do," presently remarks the stranger, who is leaning lazily against the rock watching her work. "Excuse me—but you must just round off this outline a little more—it is too hard and steely—so," as acting obediently on his directions the drawing begins to assume life-like shape.

"I suppose you paint a great deal?" ventures Olive deferentially. Who knows what R.A. of renown may be criticising her crude attempts!

"No, I don't."

"But you used to," she persists.

"Never wielded a brush in my life."

"But you seem to know all about it. How in the world could you tell me to make those alterations if you can't paint yourself?" she asks quickly, her incredulity giving way to a flash of not unnatural resentment.

"Pardon me. I didn't say I couldn't. What I said was that I never had."

"Isn't that the same thing?"

“No, because I could—if I tried.”

“How do you know you could?”

“Well, since you so mercilessly bring me to bay I am compelled to answer you with a woman’s reason. I know it—because I do.”

They both laugh heartily.

“And now tell me,” goes on the stranger. “What is the name of those two eccentric towers of rock you are drawing?”

“They are called The Skegs. There is a story attached to them, and a ghost.”

“Yes? What sort of a one?”

“Well, it’s rather an eerie affair altogether. Most family ghosts haunt the family seat. That of the Dorriens seems to prefer the open air. The story is a very old one. Two Dorriens fell madly in love with the same girl.”

“Not an uncommon circumstance. And did they fight—or play écarté for her?”

“Neither. One killed the other. It’s a long story, and I’m very bad at telling long stories. I always mix up the people and begin by telling the end first. But the end of this one is that The Skegs are haunted by the murderer’s ghost, and that it only appears before the death of a Dorrien. Then a black cloud settles down upon the highest of the two rocks, and those who see it can distinctly hear the wild baying of a dog. And it takes the shape of one.”

“A decidedly uncanny, though not original form, for there’s no part of the world without that very phase of apparition,” remarks the stranger, gazing thoughtfully at the two great rock towers. “Has anyone ever seen this spectre?”

“Yes. When Captain Dorrien was lost in the Alps three years ago, the fishing people in Minchkil Bay say it appeared. They believe in it implicitly. It was seen, too, at just about the time old Squire Dorrien, the General’s brother, died at sea.”

“And do you believe in it?”

“I don’t know. I suppose not. And yet if I were anywhere near the spot at night I’m sure I should be horribly afraid of seeing it. None of the fishermen like to go near The Skegs at

night, but I suppose we ought to rise above such beliefs. Even my father won't say he doesn't believe in it, but he always rather evades the subject, so I don't press it."

"Quite right. And who are these Dorriens for whom the laws of Nature condescend to alter their course?"

"Ah! Now you're laughing at my story. Never mind. They are the largest landowners hereabouts and their place is Cranston Hall. It lies in a line with that lofty headland—that's Minchkil Beacon—three miles from Wandsborough."

"What sort of people are they?"

The girl gives a little shrug of her shoulders and makes a distasteful moue. "Not nice. At least nobody likes them much. I don't, though I don't know them personally. It's a case of instinctive dislike."

"So you indulge in instinctive likes and dislikes," says the stranger with a queer smile. "A very feminine trait."

Then he relapses into silence. It is delightful to him to sit there in the golden summer morning, watching this beautiful girl with the oval face and expressive, ever-changing eyes. Roy, extended at full length on the shingle, is dreaming, his head resting on the skirt of Olive's dress. Afar off the smoke of a distant steamer streaks the horizon, but for all else the blue sea is deserted. The shrimping boys have disappeared round the rocky promontory, and save for the girl, the man, and the dog, not a living thing moves within the cliff-girt bay. Inch by inch the sun creeps up to where they sit, which spot in a few moments will afford shade no longer.

Then, faintly distant, rings out the chime of a church clock.

"Three-quarters!" exclaims Olive listening. "I must go. It is a quarter to one—already."

The last word slips out unconsciously. The morning has passed very quickly in the society of this man whom the merest chance has thrown in her way, and whom she may never see again; as to whose very identity she is in ignorance.

"Don't go yet," pleads the stranger. "I suppose the regulation 1:30 is the time you must be back by—and it won't take three-quarters of an hour to walk to Wandsborough—if that's your destination."

"Yes, it is—" She hesitates. He might as well tell her where he is staying.

“Well, have pity upon a homeless wanderer, and give him and this lovely spot another short fifteen minutes.”

Olive yields—but neither talk much. At length she packs up her drawing things and rises.

“Not ‘good-bye’ yet,” urges her companion. “Our ways lie together for a little distance. Allow me to escort you that far.”

Without waiting for a reply, he takes up her basket and they slowly ascend the cliff path. Roy, ever ready for a change, starts out of the land of dreams and trots briskly before them.

Olive is rather silent and inclined to give random answers to her companion’s occasional remarks. The fact is, she is a little bit frightened at her adventure, and her uneasiness increases the nearer they approach the town.

Just as they gain the road an equestrian trots by, a young man with a pale vapid countenance. He slackens his pace as he passes, and sticking up his eyeglass favours Olive with an admiring stare. Her escort’s hand instinctively clenches.

“Who is that—cub?”

“Yes, ‘cub,’ that’s just what he is,” answers the girl angrily. “It’s Hubert Dorrien.”

“Oh!”

Her companion keeps a strange silence for the rest of the way, and there is a slight frown upon his face.

“Here we are at Wandsborough,” he says at length, as they gain the outskirts of the town. “I ought to have relieved you of my company before, only there was no means of doing so, as our ways both lay along the same road. Now, good-bye. I shall remember this morning for a very long time. This is a small place, and we are sure to meet again. I shall look forward to the pleasure of improving our acquaintance.”

She flashes upon him a bright little smile, and trips away lightly down the empty street—thankful that it is empty. Then for the first time it occurs to her she has been talking to this stranger all the morning as freely and naturally as if she had known him all her life.

Chapter Six.

"Mr Rowlands."

Roland Dorrien paced slowly up and down the little garden in front of his lodgings, smoking his after-breakfast cigar, and making up his mind to the discharge of an unpleasant duty.

He had been nearly a week at Wandsborough, and was surprised to find how quickly the days had slipped by. The country was new to him, the weather delightful, and he thoroughly enjoyed his long rambles, with the faithful Roy for his sole companion. Venn's letter of introduction had been duly handed in at the Rectory, but hitherto no notice had been taken of it, a circumstance which did not trouble him, for he was by no means tired of his own company.

The unpleasant duty to which he was making up his mind, was the betaking of himself to Cranston. It would be a constrained sort of a meeting, and therefore unpleasant. He had gathered enough during his stay in Wandsborough to show that his people had not changed for the better. Well, it had to be got through somehow; but he would not betake himself thither straight from here. He would run up to Town, and come down as if for the first time.

His cogitations were interrupted by the voice of his landlady announcing in a tone of flurried importance:

"Dr Ingelow, sir."

"So sorry I was not able to look in upon you earlier, Mr Rowlands," began the rector in his bright genial manner. "The fact is, I am short-handed just now, and busy times are the result. And this must be my excuse for calling at such an early hour."

"Not at all—very good of you. Here, Roy—come away, sir—I am afraid that dog never will learn manners. Go and lie down, sir." For Roy, without even a preliminary growl, had made friends at once with the rector. Indeed so demonstrative had been his friendliness that that excellent priest's cassock bore token of the same, in the acquisition of many white and brown hairs.

"Don't send him away—he's taken to me at once—fine fellow?" said the rector, patting him. "And pray don't throw away your cigar, as I see you were about to do. I like smoke—too well, my girls tell me. And how is Venn? Let me see, it must be many years since I saw him. What's he doing now?"

“Something in the City—stockbroking, I believe.”

“Is he! His people tried ever so hard to make a parson of him, but he didn’t see it at all—nothing would induce him to become one—and he was right. Venn is the best of good fellows, but he’d never have done for a parson. His father sent him to me to try and get him hammered into Orders, and more than half quarrelled with me because I could take a horse to the water but couldn’t make him drink—ha! ha!”

“H’m! Queer people, fathers,” said Roland with a laugh, in which his visitor joined right heartily.

“You think so, do you? Wait till you get to my age, and you’ll be still more of that opinion. At least, if you’re not it’ll be for no want of telling.”

They chatted for a few minutes longer, and then the rector rose.

“I hope you’ll come and dine with us some evening,” he said in his easy genial way. “There’ll be only ourselves, and we shall be delighted to see you. Let me see—why not come to-night—that is, if you have nothing better to do?”

“Nothing will give me greater pleasure.”

“Very good. Then this evening at seven. Now I must say good-bye, for I have to rush about all the morning. So glad to make the acquaintance of a friend of Venn’s.”

When the rector had gone, Roland was so preoccupied with recalling the strong family likeness existing between his companion on the beach and his departing visitor, that he quite overlooked the fact that the latter had made no reference whatever to Cranston; rather a strange thing, under the circumstances.

“Well, sir, and our rector’s a nice pleasant gentleman, isn’t he?” remarked the landlady, while laying the cloth an hour later.

“He is indeed, Mrs Jenkins. Been here long?”

“Nigh upon sixteen years. Miss Margaret and Miss Olive were little then, and Miss Sophie were a baby. They do say as Dr Ingelow was dreadful cut up when he lost his poor lady.”

“Oh, he’s a widower then?”

“Yes, sir. His lady died shortly before he came here, I’ve heard tell. But law bless you, sir, Miss Margaret, she did for all the younger ones as though she was a grown-up young lady.”

“How many of them are there—daughters, I mean?”

“Three, sir. You must have seen them in church, in the front seat of all. Not on the side of the heagle—the other side.”

“Oh!”

“Yes, and they’re that good—although the two younger ones, leastways, are merry and fond of a bit of mischief. Why when Jenkins broke his leg”—and the good woman launched out into a dissertation after the manner of her kind, straying far away from the goodness of the parson’s daughters, which Jenkins’ broken leg was hauled in to illustrate—far away even from that fractured, but once more useful, member itself into a great cloud of reminiscence, wherein the speaker’s uncle’s deceased wife’s sister’s third cousin once removed and a certain tom-cat endowed with marvellous properties largely figured.

Her auditor gave a weary sigh. In the hope of finding out more about his new acquaintance, he had let the woman’s tongue run on, and found, like the ingenious Oriental who invented a steamboat, that having once set it going he was unable to stop it.

Roland ate his luncheon in a brown study. His landlady’s gossip had told him what he wanted to know. The girl by whose side he had sat and walked yesterday morning—the girl who had so strangely attracted him in the parish church, was the daughter of his late visitor—and to-night he was to dine at the Rectory. Things couldn’t have turned out better. Yet all this was in the highest degree absurd. What could it matter to him who she was—or indeed if he never saw her again! But that morning on the beach! Bosh! He had not fallen in love with her—not he. He knew better than that. Yet Roland Dorrien, gloomy of temperament and entertaining no spark of affection for any living soul, was obliged to admit to himself that he had thought and was still thinking a good deal about that oval-faced girl with the dark expressive eyes.

And here a new idea struck him. That assumed name had been all very well up to a certain point, but now that he had accepted the rector’s invitation it had an ugly look of entering a man’s family circle under false colours. He wished now he had never adopted it, but then his plan of staying in Wandsborough incog, would have fallen through, and

that he did not wish at all. Well, he would let it alone for the present. Perhaps during the evening he would find an opportunity of explaining matters to his host: at any rate to-morrow he would run up to Town for a day or two, and return to Cranston in ordinary and conventional style. That would put matters right.

Chapter Seven.

"I Told You We Should Meet Again."

When Roland Dorrien was marshalled into the Rectory drawing-room, he found himself, somewhat to his surprise, its sole occupant.

A glance around told him that it was a pleasant room to be in. The elegant furniture, the pictures on the walls, the innumerable knick-knacks bestowed about, were all in the most perfect taste. There was that about the room which made it unmistakably clear that its presiding goddesses were refined and well-bred women. It was a bright room withal, as well as a tasteful one. Wide French windows opened upon the garden, and a strong aroma of roses both from without and within hung heavily upon the air.

Suddenly Olive came in. With a start of astonishment she stopped short.

"You!" she exclaimed.

"My fortunate self," he replied, advancing to meet her. "I told you we should be sure to meet again, but I little thought how soon."

"To think of it being you," she went on, her face beaming with merriment over the fun of the situation, which, the first surprise past, she began thoroughly to enjoy. "Margaret told us father had asked someone to dinner, and we thought it was some clerical friend of his."

"I am afraid you must get over the situation, Miss Olive, and put up with only me."

"In that case, seeing that you have the advantage of me, and that there's no one here to introduce us en règle—you might—er—"

Voices in the hall, and the shutting of doors proclaiming the arrival of somebody, interrupted her.

"Well, how are you again, Mr Rowlands?" cried the rector cheerily. "I'm disgracefully late. This is Mr Turner, one of my colleagues," he went on, introducing a broad-shouldered young man, shaven of countenance, and in clerical attire, who had come in with him.

The conversation at table was brisk and lively, and what especially struck the guest was the spontaneity and utter absence of constraint with which the girls chatted away—now

keeping up a running fire of chaff among themselves or with their father, now poking fun at this or that local character. Then they would parenthesise an explanation for his benefit, endeavouring to sweep him into the fun: and succeeding—as though he were no stranger at all. It was delightful, he decided; and then, oh, horror!—a thought struck him which spoiled all. What if they were to turn the fire of their wit on to his own family, to start poking fun at the members of the same, in total ignorance of his own identity? He must really throw off this infernal pseudonym at the very earliest opportunity.

"How do you like Wandsborough, Mr Rowlands?" asked Margaret Ingelow, when they were seated at table.

"Oh, it seems a nice little place. One can go about as one likes, independently of everybody."

Sophie spluttered at this.

"Why it's the most gossipy place on earth, Mr Rowlands," she said.

"I suppose so. Most small places are. But the coast scenery is very fine."

"Isn't it? And the beach, too. Have you been to the beach yet?"

Fortunately Turner was not at that moment talking to Olive, or he would have met with random replies. She was thinking, "Oh, if Margaret should ever come to know of yesterday morning!"

Roland answered in the affirmative and then Turner struck in.

"By the bye, Mr Rowlands, that must have been you I saw down there yesterday. I was envying the owner of that splendid dog."

Olive was on thorns. Her accomplice, however, was equal to the occasion. Noting her uneasiness, he took up the subject at once, and the narrative of his acquisition of the faithful Roy soon directed the conversation to the wilds of the Far West, where the rector himself had gone through some stirring experiences in his younger days. During the reminiscences involved, Roland caught a rapid grateful glance from the bright eyes of his vis-à-vis. Then he began to study Turner's face, whose owner was listening attentively to his host's anecdote, and came to the conclusion that he did not like it. Moreover he was not sure how much concealed intent lurked beneath Turner's innocent remark. Turner was bumptious—most curates were. No, he did not like Turner. Confound the fellow! what did he mean by looking at and talking to Olive in that

familiar and appropriating way—as if she belonged to him, or soon would? But if she should, what the deuce was it to him—Roland Dorrien? Nothing—only these young parsons put on far too much side. Clearly Turner wanted taking down.

"I think you were in church on Sunday, were you not, Mr Rowlands?" said Margaret, dispelling his brown study.

"Er—Yes. Yes—I was. Very fine ceremony and music too. I never came across anything of the kind before."

The approval implied in this answer atoned for its absent-mindedness and brought a gratified smile to Margaret's face. The speaker had quite won her heart.

Then the conversation became general, and there was a vast deal of laughter and banter, and Roland found himself frequently appealed to, to act as umpire in some ridiculous point of debate, and in fact treated as an intimate friend rather than as a stranger who had not been two hours in their midst, and as he caught the bright, mischievous retort which Olive threw at him over her shoulder as the girls withdrew, he blessed the luck which had thrown him by the merest chance into such a delightful circle. Nor could he help contrasting the probable scene at Cranston at this moment, and a sort of mental shiver ran through him as he did so.

"Circulate the intoxicants, Turner—or, in plainer and more decorous English, pass the bottle," cried the rector, as the door closed on his daughters, leaving the men to themselves. "Fill up, Mr Rowlands. And now I want you to tell me about your travels. I was a good deal in the States as a young man. When I was out West, the Plains tribes were not exuberantly friendly. That was even before you were in long clothes, I fancy, ha! ha! but yet we had two or three grand buffalo hunts with them. There's a head upstairs in my boy's smoking den—where we'll go and have a cigar by and by—whose owner I turned over on one of those occasions. Splendid head, and well set up too."

Then these two—the old traveller and the younger one—plunged into a flood of reminiscence in all the delightful abandon of a common and welcome topic. At last the rector started to his feet.

"Hallo?" he cried. "This won't do. We mustn't sit too long, or we shall meet with a warm reception in the other room. As it is we shall, so let's face our troubles like men."

His prediction was verified.

"Father, what a long time you've been!" cried Sophie, as they entered the drawing-room.

“How men can sit and gossip!” struck in Olive. “Talk about us poor women! When a lot of men get together the sky may fall, but they won’t move. What have you been talking about all this time?”

“Rattlesnakes, buffaloes, scalps—nothing worse,” cried her father, throwing himself into an armchair. “Mr Rowlands and I have been counting up scalps, and we find he has lifted more hair than your venerable parent.”

Roland, manoeuvring towards a vacant seat at Olive’s side, was disgusted to find himself forestalled by Turner.

He felt more nettled than he cared to own to himself. The bumptiousness of these young parsons was overwhelming. So he took up the thread of their former conversation with his host and tried to pretend he rather preferred it to carrying out his original intention. Tried to, but it was of no use. Yet why should he care because another man sat talking about nothing in particular to a certain person with whom he had intended discussing precisely the same interesting topic? Why, because, dear reader, he was an ass.

But his innings were to come. A message came for the rector, and its purport concerned Turner too. Roland, in obedience to a scarcely perceptible glance from Olive’s dark eyes, at once took possession of the vacant seat.

“What have you done with that darling of a Roy?” she asked in a low tone.

“Left him at home. When I go in he’ll nearly eat me. It’s worth while leaving him anywhere, if only to see him go mad with delight when I come back. But then, you see, he’s only a dog, and doesn’t know any better.”

“I’m afraid we must defer our cigar together, Mr Rowlands!” cried the rector, re-entering the room. “I’ve been called out to a sick bed, and hardly know when I shall get home. But don’t hurry away. Turner, you’re in no hurry, I know. Good-night. We must have another sporting conversation before long. I’ve enjoyed a chat over old times immensely.”

Turner, however, did not remain long after his host’s sudden departure, and Roland, deeming it right to follow his example, also withdrew. But he strolled down the dark street in a brown study, when suddenly there rushed at him in the darkness something which nearly upset him outright, and lo! Roy, who had broken bounds on hearing his master’s step, now came springing upon and against him just in time to save that master from over-shooting his own door in a fit of absence, and wandering about half a mile too

far. And then there was such a rushing and scampering, such barks of delight, such leaping and bounding, that it took Roy a full ten minutes of exertion to work off the gladness wherewith his affectionate heart was overburdened. But then, you see, he was only a dog and knew no better.

It was long, however, before Roy's master flung away his last cigar end, and looking out into the silent, starry night, wondered what the deuce he had been thinking about. Affected to wonder, too, how it was that his thoughts were still hard at work within the bright home circle he had just left.

Chapter Eight.

The Heiress of Ardleigh.

“I sat, Nellie, the ancient couple are getting quite dissipated in their old age. What’s at the bottom of it?” And Roland Dorrien, lounging at ease in the stern cushions of the boat, gazed through a great cloud of smoke at his sister’s puzzled face, lazily awaiting her reply.

“I don’t quite see,” she began. “How do you mean, dear?”

“Why, your mother hoped I didn’t particularly want to go anywhere this afternoon, because some people were coming. In fact, a regular garden fight. Croquet and scandal, and much chatter.”

“Yes, there is. But as you say, they are getting quite lively. Why it’s more than a year since we have had anything of the kind.”

The two were seated in one of the most comfortable and roomy of the boats, on the ornamental water—whither they had betaken themselves, not to row about, but to get into a cool place and take it easy and chat to their hearts’ content. The boat’s nose was made fast to a stake driven into the bottom about fifteen yards from the shore and well within the shade of a great over-arching tree, whose boughs threw a network of sunlight here and there upon the brown surface. There was scarcely a breath of air, and at the other end of the lake the coots and moorhens disported themselves, uttering now and again their loud chirrupy cry, and little brown water rats glided from their holes beneath the slippery bank. Roy, whom his master had taken into the boat and treacherously flung overboard, was careering up and down the bank, looking like a great woolly bear, every hair in his body shaken out to its fullest length and standing on end—and barking his surprise and displeasure at his master’s treachery and his own involuntary bath, but feeling worlds the better for the last, while a couple of swans floated in the centre of the pond, looking the picture of ruffled and sullen dignity over the irruption of these disturbing elements into their own especial domain.

“Well, it’s rather a nuisance as far as I am concerned,” he went on. “As it happens I wanted to go into Wandsborough this afternoon—and over and above that, I hate things of this kind.”

“Roland dear, don’t go into Wandsborough to-day. Papa will be mortally offended if you do. I happen to know that he got up this affair solely on your account; he thought it

would be a good way of introducing you to all the people here. And there'll be several nice girls."

"H'm!"

"Let me see," she continued. "There are the Nevilles, who are coming to stay: the eldest girl is very pretty and the heiress of Ardleigh Court—make a note of that. And the Colonel is such a dear old man. Then there's Isabel Pagnell, she seems to take wonderfully with the men—and the Breretons and—"

"Bother the lot of them?" cried Roland, flinging the end of his cigar away in a sudden access of irritability. "Roy, don't make that confounded row, sir. Lie down. D'you hear? And now, Nellie, we shall have to quit this cool retreat, for there goes gong Number One. Yes, it's a nuisance; I particularly wanted to go over to Wandsborough to-day, but, hurrah for boredom instead!"

No more was said as they paddled back to the landing place and made their way along the shrubbery path. Did the girl in her heart of hearts suspect the reason of her brother's anxiety to ride over to the town? If so, like a wise counsellor she held her peace.

Roland had transferred himself to Cranston some three days after we saw him at the Rectory dinner-table—now more than a week ago, and even that brief period had been sufficient to convince him that in his former anticipations of the conditions of life there, he was not likely to be agreeably disappointed. The same constraint pervaded everything, the same latent antagonism seemed to underlie all intercourse, and in a hundred and one small ways, the more risky because so trivial, the general harmony seemed in a state of chronic peril.

One of his first acts had been to make a call at Wandsborough Rectory to explain the circumstances of the assumed name. At first his explanation had been somewhat stiffly received, but it was not in Dr Ingelow to keep up resentment; moreover, a happy remark to the effect that the incognito had been the means of beginning what the speaker hoped he might be allowed to call a valued friendship, which otherwise he might never have known, completed the turning of the scale, and he was absolved all round. Yet not quite all round, for Olive, remembering her free and easy utterances made on the beach that morning, found an early opportunity of taking him privately to task.

"I think you might have told me at the time," she had said, "instead of letting me run on with all sorts of local gossip as you did."

“Why? Oh, I see. But you didn’t abuse us a bit more than we deserve. I asked you a question and you answered it. And, between ourselves, the answer didn’t surprise me in the very least.”

“That’s all very well, but you ought to have stopped me.”

“How hard-hearted you are, when all the others have forgiven me!”

“Have they? Oh, well, then, for the credit of the family I suppose I must exercise the same Christian virtue,” had said Olive mischievously. “You may consider yourself forgiven by me too. There.”

“One thing more,” he had urged, “is wanted to make that forgiveness complete. You must continue to mete me out the same treatment as you did to the stranger, Rowlands; not categorise me as an obnoxious Dorrien.”

“That will depend entirely upon your future behaviour,” she had returned, with the same mischievous flash.

The lake was barely five minutes’ walk from the house, and as the two—the three, rather, for Roy, all the fresher for his ducking, was trotting along at their side—turned the corner of the garden walk, they came face to face with their mother and two young ladies, who were speedily introduced as the Miss Nevilles.

“We’ve been in the coolest corner of the county all the morning—on the water,” said Roland, catching his mother’s displeased glance at his sister. “Nellie wanted to go indoors half an hour ago, but I positively refused to let her land.”

“What a beautiful dog! Is it yours, Mr Dorrien?” said the eldest.

“Yes. Come here, Roy, and exhibit yourself.” Roy obeyed, but manifested no great effusion in response to the young lady’s somewhat timid caresses. His master decided that Clara Neville was at the moment thinking more of the fit of her gloves and the pose of her head, than of the dog or anything else. She was a tall, slight girl, faultlessly dressed, and in good style altogether; but in spite of the regular profile and wavy profusion of her golden hair, the face was not altogether a taking one—an unfriendly critic would have pronounced it a somewhat cold and ill-tempered one. But then she was the heiress of Ardleigh Court—whose place in the county ranked little below that of Cranston, and this would cover far graver shortcomings. Her sister, Maud, was a quiet, dark-haired little thing, with no pretensions to looks. Yet there were many who thought that a future lord might be found for Ardleigh Court much sooner were she the heiress.

Their father, a jolly, bluff veteran with an ever-ready laugh, was as complete a representative of one type of old soldier as his friend and erstwhile companion in arms, Reginald Dorrien, was of another. The Colonel was the kindest-hearted of men. Cheery, frank and full of life and humour, he was an immense favourite with the rising generation, and indeed with everybody. Everybody except his wife and eldest daughter, by whom—such is the irony of events—the old man's jovial and kind-hearted character went entirely unappreciated. They chose to consider it lamentably lacking in dignity.

"Dorrien," cried Colonel Neville to his host as they sat at luncheon, "is it true that your fellows have dropped down on that rascal Devine again?"

"Yes. Caught him in the act. Two hares, or three—I forget which. He was taking them out of the hangs when they dropped upon him."

"Ah! We must make it lively for him at the Sessions the day after to-morrow. The law ought to empower us to send a regular poacher to serve in the army. Why, when we were up country on active service some of our best men were ex-poachers. Why, Dorrien, you yourself remember poor Wilkins that time we—"

But the jolly Colonel's reminiscence was cut short by his eldest daughter, who appealed to him to settle a divergence of opinion between herself and Nellie. This was a regular tactic of Clara's. Her father was never to be suffered to launch out in reminiscence. Old men, she declared, old soldiers especially, with a mania for reminiscence were always bores. So the exploit of "poor Wilkins, ex-poacher," was destined to remain unnarrated.

Of all the more or less inane phases of entertainment devised by society with a view to doing its duty by its acquaintance, the garden party is not far from being the most tiresome. The Cranston one bore a striking family likeness to others of its kind.

Roland, who hated the whole thing, and wished all the people at the deuce, and through whose head was buzzing a confused string of names—belonging to people to whom he had been introduced—found himself, before he was aware of it, in a vacant seat next to Clara Neville, and almost felt grateful to her for being there. She would do to talk to, as well as anyone else, and he would be spared the trouble of opening up fresh ground. So an involuntary sigh of relief escaped him, which that young lady, for all her imperturbable calm, made a careful note of.

"Don't you play croquet, Mr Dorrien?" she said.

“I don’t. Nothing on earth would induce me to embark in the very feeblest attempt at amusement ever devised by a stark idiot for the scourge of civilised man.”

She laughed. “Do you know, between ourselves, I quite share your opinion. The game is, as you say, terrible boredom. But you have been a great traveller, have you not?”

“No. Nothing out of the way. I’ve knocked about a good deal, but only where everyone else has.”

“Ah, you must have seen some strange things. And I think every man who can should travel. Not in the beaten tracks—on the Continent—but in far wild countries where he is entirely dependent on himself. It must open up the mind a great deal, and do a world of good.”

“Yes, it has a very salutary and hardening effect; there’s no doubt about that.”

“I suppose now you are home again, you will settle down for good,” she went on. “And this is really a very beautiful spot, is it not? But you travellers are never happy for long in one place?” she added, turning to him with a very engaging smile, the more valuable on account of its rarity.

“Likely enough it’ll be my bounden duty to become moss-grown now,” he answered with a laugh.

“No, don’t move, Roland,” said his father, as he rose to give up his seat. “I’m not going to sit down,” and there was a cordiality in his tone, as well as in the light touch of his hand upon his son’s shoulder, which caused that worthy to marvel greatly. But Roland was glad to be left in peace, so he sat chatting with Clara Neville, heedless of the notes of invitation thrown out to him from many pairs of bright eyes, till at last, feeling bored, he seized upon some pretext to slip away and have a stroll round the shrubbery with Roy.

But the first person he encountered on turning into it was Colonel Neville, who started guiltily, and then burst into a hearty laugh.

“Aha!” he cried, “another defaulter! Come along, my boy, and we’ll have our smoke together,” and he puffed away at his half-smoked cigar. “We must bind ourselves not to betray each other, unless we are caught red-handed, as I thought I was just now, by Jove!” And the jolly Colonel gave vent to another of his ringing laughs, to the jeopardy of bringing about the very discovery he wished to avoid.

“Don’t let’s go towards the lake,” laughed Roland. “People are sure to wander down in that direction. This’ll be our best way.”

“But bother it! you’ve no business to desert the ladies, sir,” cried the Colonel, as they turned into an unfrequented path. “It’s all very well for an old soldier like me, but you’ve your time to serve. They’ll be raising the hue and cry for you.”

“Let them. Fact is, Colonel, I’ve been so long outside the civilised world that I was dying for a smoke up yonder just now. So the fragrant weed beat lovely woman clean out of the field.”

The old man laughed again. He had taken a great liking to this, as he thought, unfairly treated son of his old friend.

“Look here, Roland, my boy,” he said, suddenly becoming grave. “I can’t tell you how glad I am to see you here, safe home again. You mustn’t mind my speaking plainly to you—for, although we’ve never met before, your father and I fought in the same lines and quarrelled like fury together, over and over again, before any of you were born or thought of—so I don’t mind what I say to you. Your father’s a queer fellow, but I think he’s fond of you in his own way underneath it all, so don’t run more counter to each other than you can help.”

There was such genuine warmth in the other’s address that Roland was touched. He was about to reply, when voices were heard approaching, and almost immediately a footman hove in sight.

“Colonel Neville’s horse is at the door, sir,” he said, and from the expression of his face no doubt he added to himself, “and a precious long time he’s been waiting.”

“Ha! I’m afraid they’ve been looking for me far and wide. You must come over and see us, Roland, as soon as you can. My wife was hoping to have been here to-day, but she didn’t feel up to the attempt. So mind you come, for we shall all be very glad to see you.”

They had reached the party by now, and many a glance of reawakened interest was levelled at the younger of the truants, but in the slight stir attendant on the Colonel’s departure he escaped unscolded.

“Well, Roland,” said his father, entering the smoking-room late that evening. “How did the affair go off to-day? Pretty well?”

“Oh, I think so. It struck me that all the world looked contented with itself. And it made its fair share of row, a sure sign that it wasn’t bored, anyhow. Do you mind my lighting up, sir?”

“No, no. Light away. Why yes, I think the people seemed to enjoy themselves. By the bye, you were talking a good deal to Clara Neville. What do you think of her?” And the General stood with his back against the mantelpiece as though about to wax quite chatty.

“She seems a sensible sort of girl, on the whole, and can talk rationally. But she always gives you the idea that she is thinking more of her dress than of what you are saying to her.”

“Perhaps there is a little of that in her manner, until you get accustomed to her, that is. But after all, it’s a very pardonable fault; more than made up for by the corresponding virtue of neatness,” replied this veteran martinet, who had been wont to visit with the severest penalties a single speck on shining boot or pipe-clayed belt when parading his men. “And she is as you say, a sensible girl—a very sensible girl—and she will have Ardleigh Court.”

“Indeed?” said Roland, in an uninterested tone. “Are there no sons, then?”

“No. Only those two girls. Clara will come in for Ardleigh, as to that there is no doubt whatever. It is one of the finest places in the county, and adjoins this. You can just see the village away on the right as you come here from Wandsborough. Ah, Hubert, and have you come to do the ‘chimney’ too?” as that hopeful burst unceremoniously into the room, pulling up short at the unwonted vision there of his father. “Well, I suppose you two fellows will be able to entertain each other, so I’ll say good-night.”

For a moment Hubert sat in silence. Then he opened the door and looked out, and returning to his seat gave vent to a low, prolonged whistle of astonishment.

“By Jove!” he exclaimed. “What the very deuce is in the wind now, that the gallant veteran should condescend to honour this classic den with his high and mighty presence?”

“Doesn’t he ever, then?”

“Never; never by any chance. And so confoundedly affable as he was, too. Well, it beats me.”

“Perhaps he’s going to turn over a new leaf and develop a vein of sociability hitherto undiscovered. It’s never too late to mend, you know,” said the other nonchalantly.

Chapter Nine.

"You Here!"

"Before Colonel Neville, Mr Pagnell and the Rev. John Croft, Stephen Devine, a notorious offender, charged with snaring two leverets in a field on the outskirts of Cranston Manor Farm"—began the reporter for the local news, scratching away vigorously with his spluttering quill.

The hall in which Petty Sessions were held at Wandsborough was not by its imposing dimensions calculated to impress anybody with the majesty of the law. It was small, low ceiled and badly lighted. Prisoner and witnesses, constables and magistrates' clerk all seemed jumbled up together in the cramped space; while their worships themselves were only separated from the common herd by a long, narrow table. A most inconvenient room in fact, and times out of number had the Bench agitated for its enlargement, or better still, for the construction of another. All in vain. The justices had to go on sitting in the stuffy den, an infliction sufficient to bring them together in a state of ill-humour most unpropitious to the culprit. Even their genial and kind-hearted chairman, Colonel Neville, was wont to wax irritable under the circumstances—while constitutionally sterner stuff such as Mr Pagnell or General Dorrien was more than likely to err on the side of severity.

"Well, Devine, and what have you got to say for yourself?" said the chairman. There had been no defence set up; the prisoner had doggedly pleaded guilty. Indeed he could hardly have done otherwise, seeing that he had been caught red-handed in the act of taking one of the leverets out of the "hang," while the other was found upon him. The head-keeper of Cranston and his subordinate had just been stating to the Bench under what circumstances they had made their capture; moreover, that the culprit was an excessively leery bird, who had long dodged the sharp watch they had kept upon him—and now the justices, having conferred together, were prepared to pass sentence.

"Please your warshups," said the prisoner sullenly, "I'd bin out o' work for nigh three weeks, and rent owin', and nothin' to keep the pot bilin' at home. And I set the 'hangs' for rabbits, your warshups, which isn't game, an' I thowt as how that bit o' furze were common land, and didn't belong to nobody. And somehow when the hares got cotched, I took 'em, cos my gal had just come home, and there weren't nothin' in the house."

An eager look came into the man's swarthy hang-dog countenance. He was a heavy, powerfully built fellow of middle height, and his dark complexion and jet-black hair had gained for him the sobriquet "Gipsy Steve;" that, and the fact that no one knew where he came from, or anything about him. Among his own class he was popularly supposed to

be “a man who had committed a murder,” for no reason apparently, unless it were his foreign and uncommon aspect, and a terribly evil look which would come over his dark features when crossed or roused.

Again the magistrates conferred together.

“Gaol’s the word,” said Mr Pagnell decisively. “No fine this time. The fellow’s an out-and-out knave, and now he’s trying to humbug us into the bargain. Why he’s been up numberless times before us for one thing or another, and twice already for poaching.”

“But he was acquitted the first time, and the second there was a doubt,” expostulated the clerical justice—a kindly-hearted man who, although his commission of the peace was congenial to a harmless vanity, disliked punishing his fellow men. “I think we might give him another chance.” So two of the trio being in favour of mercy, stern justice was outvoted.

“Now look here, Devine,” said Colonel Neville, “even if we believed every word of your story—which you can’t expect us to do, considering that you have already been up twice before us on similar charges—it would be no excuse, and you know that as well as we do. If you can’t get work here—and it’s your own fault if you can’t, because you quarrel with everyone who employs you—the best thing to do is to go to some other place, where you can. Anyhow, you’ve broken the law this time and we can’t overlook it, but we are going to give you another chance, though at first we had fully intended sending you to gaol. You will be fined ten shillings, that is five shillings for each act of poaching, and costs; in default a month’s hard labour.”

The prisoner’s countenance, which had lightened considerably at the words “another chance,” now fell again.

“Please, Kurnel,” he began, “I haven’t got five halfpence, let alone ten—”

“Well, we can’t help that,” testily retorted Colonel Neville, who was feeling the effects of the close, stuffy room. “We have dealt with you very leniently as it is. Next case, Mr Inspector.”

So Stephen Devine was removed, and a yokel took his place, charged with cruelty to a horse, then came a couple of disputed paternity cases, the particulars of which, though highly instructive to the student of the manners and customs of the lower orders in rural districts, are in no wise material to this narrative; and so the business of the day proceeded, until at length the three magnates who had sacrificed themselves to the

cause of justice in Wandsborough were emancipated and free to return to their respective homes.

"Upon my word, Neville, you do let those rascals down uncommonly easy," observed Mr Pagnell to his brother magistrate, as the two rode homewards. "Poaching is the very thing we ought to stamp out ruthlessly in these days. Why, that ruffian Devine has simply got off scot free."

"Poor devil," answered the kind-hearted Colonel, who under the influence of fresh air and the prospects of no more Sessions for a month, had quite recovered his good humour. "Poor devil, I believe he's been trying to keep square since his daughter came back. But he'll have to do his month, for he'll never be able to pay his fine."

"Won't he! You'll see that he will, and we shall have him up before us again next Bench day. The fellow's an irreclaimable scamp. Well, our ways part here. Good-bye."

About half way between Cranston and Wandsborough, but in the latter parish, and in an angle formed by the footpath across the fields with a deep lane, stands a cottage—one of those picturesque, snug-looking nests which you shall see in no other country in the world—thatched, diamond-paned, and a bit of half garden, half orchard in front, and a background of elder trees and high hawthorn bushes. But, for all its external picturesqueness, an exploration of the interior of this abode would reveal a very poverty-stricken state of things. There is a neglected look about everything, and the rooms, bare of all but a few worthless sticks of furniture—too worthless even for the bailiffs or the pawnshop, seem to point eloquently to the sort of person their occupier would be—shiftless, hang-dog, ne'er-do-well, and not unfrequently drunken. It is the abode of Stephen Devine, alias Gipsy Steve, whose acquaintance we have just made.

At the moment when that worthy learns his fate in the Wandsborough Sessions room, there stands in the doorway of his abode a girl. Her dress, appearance, and the rough dusting-cloth in her hand seem to show that she has paused in the commonplace but laudable occupation of tidying up, and is there at the door for a breath of fresh air and a look round; and her coarseness of garb and surroundings notwithstanding, the girl would assuredly attract from the passer-by no mere casual glance, for she is of striking and uncommon beauty. Her almost swarthy complexion ought by all rules to go with jetty locks and dark flashing eyes, but it does not. The masses of hair crowning her well-carried head are light brown, just falling short of golden, and harmonise wonderfully with the smooth tawny skin, and her eyes are large, limpid and blue. The mouth, too, is not the least beautiful feature—full, red and sensuous. She is a tall girl, of splendid build and proportions, and the light, closely-fitting gown displays a figure which would have commanded a fabulous price in the slave-markets of old, and the easy, restful, leaning

attitude as she stands in the doorway defines the swelling lines of her finely moulded form. A magnificent animal truly, and withal a dangerous one. Such is Lizzie Devine, the poacher's daughter.

The passer-by referred to above would assuredly pronounce her to be no ordinary cottage girl, and he would be right. She had not inhabited the humble abode where we find her more than a fortnight; for she had only just returned from what the neighbours vaguely termed "foreign parts," which vagueness neither Lizzie nor her father were disposed to reduce to definition. Here she was, anyhow, beneath "Gipsy Steve's" poverty-stricken and highly disreputable roof, and the neighbours looked at her askance, as in duty bound. For this did Lizzie care not one rush. Her movements and pursuits were as mysterious as the antecedents of her father. The gossips hate mystery—therefore, said the gossips, she must have been after no good. Some thought she had been "a play-actress," some thought even worse. Some thought one thing, some another—but Lizzie didn't care what they thought. Neither she nor Steve mixed with their neighbours—she from choice, he from necessity; for he was disliked and feared as a quarrelsome and dangerous man. One thing was certain, whatever occupation Lizzie had been pursuing, she had returned home with empty pockets, and this ought to have told in her favour, for the ways of evil are lucrative.

She stands in the doorway looking out over the sunlit fields, and her thoughts are chaotic. At first she wearily wonders whether her father will be discharged with a reprimand, and if not what she can pawn in order to pay his fine. Then her reflections fly off at a tangent. Away in the distance, the chimneys of Cranston Hall appear above the trees, and on these the girl's clear blue eyes are fixed, while she indulges in a day-dream. Yet she is a hard, practical young party enough, for she is twenty-four, and has seen a very considerable slice of this habitable globe.

Suddenly her frame becomes rigid, and the blood surges to her face, then falls back, leaving it ashy pale. What has she spied to bring about this convulsion? Only a man, of course.

He is advancing along the field path with an easy swinging stride. As she gazes, a large red and white dog comes tearing over the further stile and scampers joyously past his master. The girl stands in a state of strange irresolution, her heart beating like a hammer. He has not seen her—one step inside and he will have passed by. But her chance of retreat is gone. While she is doubting, the man passes the gate, and as he does so looks carelessly up.

Roland Dorrien is not wont to exhibit wild surprise over anything, but the start which he gives as his eyes meet those of the girl before him, proves that his astonishment is genuine.

"Lizzie!"

"You don't seem overmuch glad to see me anyhow," says the girl in a hard tone, her self-possession now quite in hand again.

"I don't know about 'glad.' But what on earth are you doing here, and where have you dropped from?" And his eye ran over her from head to foot, taking in her rough, though scrupulously clean, attire.

"Ha! ha! You may well look astonished. Rather different to when we last met," she said bitterly. "But come inside and we can talk. Don't be afraid," seeing him hesitate; "I'm quite alone."

"Oh, that alters the case materially. You see, I never was one to mince matters. Therefore I don't mind telling you that this isn't New York, but a confoundedly gossipy little English provincial place. Moral—One must be circumspect. And now, Lizzie," he went on, sliding into a big wooden chair, "tell me all about yourself—and—and how it is you're trying the rôle of cottage maiden—and here above all places in the world."

"That's soon said. I'm keeping house for father."

"'For father'? I don't quite see. If it's a fair question, who the deuce is he?"

"Stephen Devine—and he's now up before the magistrates for catching some of your hares. Yours, mind."

Roland whistled. Surprise followed upon surprise. Surprise one—to find this girl here at all. Surprise two—that she should turn out to be the daughter of Stephen Devine, the greatest rascal on the whole countryside. He had known her under another name.

"Lizzie, I'll be quite candid with you. The fact is, this unexpected parent of yours enjoys the reputation of being—well, a 'bad lot.' Do you intend to take up your quarters here with him altogether?"

"That's as may be. Didn't you know I was here?"

"Know it? How should I?"

“I don’t believe you did. I’m pretty sharp, you see, and the jump you gave when you saw me was no make-believe. I’ve only been here a fortnight, no longer than you have. I came over in the ‘Balearic,’ the steamer before yours. It was queer that we should both have returned home at the same time, wasn’t it? And how do you think I’m looking?”

There was a world of mingled emotions in her tones. Distrust, resentment, bitterness, and a strong undercurrent of passion. A stranger would have been puzzled by this daughter of the people, who talked and looked so far above her station. Her auditor, for his part, was not a little discomfited. The first surprise over, the situation held out endless complications. It was one thing for the prodigal in a far country to pick up a beautiful nobody for his amusement—quite another for the future Squire of Cranston to return home and find that inconvenient young person domiciled at his very door, and owning parentage with a skulking, drunken and poaching rascal, at whom even his own squalid class looked askew. A unit in the crowd at American pleasure resorts was one thing; Dorrien of Cranston at home, quite another. He foresaw grave difficulties.

“How do I think you are looking? Why, first-rate, of course,” he answered. “Improved, if anything.”

“Thanks. I can’t say the same of you. I liked you better yonder in the States. I’m candid, too, you see. But you’re a very great person here, while I—well never mind. And now I had better tell you. I hadn’t the smallest idea that you belonged here when I came—so don’t think I came on purpose. I don’t want to trouble you or get in your way—no—not I. But I can’t quite forget old times.”

The summer air was soft and slumbrous, the place was isolated, and the stillness of the dreamy forenoon unbroken by the sound of voice or footstep to tell of the outer world. Roland’s strong pulses shook his frame with overmastering violence, and his temples throbbed as he gazed on the splendid, sensuous beauty and magnificent outlines of the girl, standing there talking to him in tones and words that contained three parts reproach. And she was gifted with an extraordinarily soft and attractive voice. In a second she was beside him.

“Darling!” she whispered, winding her arms round him, her words coming in passionate torrent. “Darling—I could call you that in the old times, you know. Do you remember those nights at the Adirondacks—the beautiful lake and the moonlight—and ourselves? I see you remember. Why not again—here? The cottage is out of the way—scarcely anyone ever passes even—at night, no one. Father is in trouble. I shall be alone here—perhaps for weeks. You are your own master, are you not—you can come—often, always? It was not so long ago—only a few months. You can’t have grown weary. No one need know—

and when it is dark this way is quite deserted—I don't want to keep you altogether—I don't want to injure you with anybody. But only one week—one short week if you wish it. Then I'll go away—right away."

Her words came in fitful, incoherent gasps, and there was something of the fierce grip of a wild beast in her tight embrace. Like lightning, a consciousness of this flashed through the other's fired brain, a consciousness of his very senses slipping from him. Would he still yield to the terrible fascination?

"Two's company, three's a crowd," is a sound proverb, even when the third is a dog. Roy, who had been lying in the doorway, suddenly sprang up with a threatening growl, and darted in pursuit of a passer-by, barking loudly. The incident was sufficient. It was a rude interruption, but salutary, so thought at least one of the two.

"This won't do, Lizzie. As I said before, this isn't New York, and one can't be too careful. Now I had better go, at any rate. Good-bye."

He spoke hurriedly, and acted on his words before she had time to remonstrate. It was a lame conclusion to a stirring interview. All the better—for him, at any rate.

Left alone, the girl stood rigid as stone. Here was the loadstar of her vehemently passionate nature. She had spoken truth in disclaiming all knowledge of Roland Dorrien's whereabouts when she came to Wandsborough. Pure chance had brought her there. Once there, however, she was not long in ignorance as to who dwelt at Cranston—and day by day she had watched that field path as we saw her watching it to-day. Now she was rewarded. Well, was she?

Roland, hurrying down the lane to recall Roy, who was attacking the pedestrian with unwonted savagery, discovered with no little surprise that the latter was Turner, the curate; and it struck him that his apologies for Roy's ill-behaviour were received very stiffly. Then it flashed across him—Roy had rushed out of Devine's cottage—that domicile contained an exceptionally handsome girl, and Turner was a parson and presumably knew everybody. Moreover, parsons were always suspicious fellows, apt to ferret out all kinds of things that didn't concern them—apt, moreover, to ride the high horse if permitted to do so. Thus reflecting, Roland cut short his apologies and left Turner, with a greeting every bit as stiff as his own.

Chapter Ten.

"Homo Sum."

It may or may not be the mission of the fiction-writer to point a moral, in other words to idealise. It assuredly is his function to adorn a tale; in short, to take the world-stage, and the actors thereon, as he finds it and them.

We have said that, in the unexpected reappearance of his former and fascinating acquaintance, Roland Dorrien foresaw a series of grave complications; yet, the first shock over, there entered into his misgivings a widening tinge of satisfaction, and that in spite of the cautious precepts of which he had just delivered himself. A weaker man would have started back in alarm at the turn events had taken and might take—would have persuaded himself that he had made an ass of himself—the male British formula, we take it, for owning that he has done that which he ought not to have done. Not so this one. Whatever he had done he was prepared to stand by, and not a shadow of misgiving entered his mind on that account. But there were other reasons which enjoined to caution. His position, his future prospects, all depended upon how he should play his cards now. And, too, there was another consideration.

He was of a strong, passionate temperament, this man, and the hot blood surged through his veins as he thought of the scene he had just left; thought of his life not so long previously; thought, too, of the opportunity thrust in his path, suddenly and unsought—he who had been trying to persuade himself that the old, wild, reckless times were of the past. But he was a very fatalist, prone to take things as they came, not philosophically it must be owned. Adversity left him gloomy and morose; good fortune, though not elating him, would fill him with a comfortable, if selfish, sense of satisfaction in that he had it in his power to indulge himself in any and every inclination; a power which he suffered not the smallest scruple to hinder him from using. Not very heroic, it must again be owned. But then Roland Dorrien was no hero, only a man.

Given his choice, he had rather Lizzie Devine were now where he saw her last, and three thousand good miles of Atlantic between them. More than that, he had much rather such was the case. As it was not, however, and she was located at his very door, so to speak, well, he must make the best of the situation. It had a best side, he reflected sardonically—which was more than could be said of all such situations. Anyhow, he was not going to put himself out about the matter. A thought struck him. He might cut the knot of the difficulty by paying Devine's fine and restoring that estimable rascal to his hearth and home. That would put temptation beyond his reach at any rate. But Roland Dorrien was not the man to confer gratuitous benefits upon anybody; let alone upon one of a class which, in his estimation, knew no such word as gratitude, and an unscrupulous

and ruffianly member of the same, at that. And who shall say that his reasoning was not in the main sound? Confer a benefit on a dog, and he remembers it till death; succour a fellow creature—a human being made in God's image, mark you—and the soul-endowed object of your benevolence will assuredly turn again and rend you on sight. Now no one knew this better than Roland, and with a sneer at himself for having suffered himself to entertain for a moment any such quixotic notion, he dismissed the subject from his mind.

Striking the high road leading into Wandsborough, who should he meet suddenly and face to face, but the rector's second daughter. But she was not alone. Walking beside her, carrying a basket—in a word, dancing attendance on her—was the objectionable Turner.

Many a man under the circumstances would have felt, though he might have shown no sign of it, some slight embarrassment, the result of the old cant "guilty conscience" again. Not so this one. He had rather a poor opinion of the fair sex, and although Olive Ingelow had attracted—partially fascinated him, to an extent which no one had ever succeeded in doing yet, and which he would not own even to himself—for all that, he could not be otherwise than perfectly at his ease in her presence, even under such circumstances as these.

"Well, Miss Olive," he said lightly, as they met. "On charity bent, I see. Much too fine a day for any such dismal errand."

"There's such a thing as duty, Mr Dorrien," put in Turner, in a tone meant to convey a lofty rebuke, but which only struck the other as divertingly bumptious. "And the parish has to be looked after, and our people must be visited, one might suppose."

"Oh—ah, I see—quite so?" asserted Roland, placidly and with a stare, as if he had just become aware of the curate's presence. "And I am sure, my dear sir, that no one performs that onerous task more assiduously and efficiently than yourself."

The curate bit his lip with suppressed ire. Here was a man whom it was not safe to snub, whom, in fact, it was not possible to snub. Olive, meanwhile, struggled hard to conceal her mirth under cover of somewhat exuberantly caressing Roy.

"Well, good-bye, Mr Dorrien," she exclaimed, with a bright, mischievous smile. "Duty calls; and that 'dismal errand' must be proceeded with."

"I never did take to that man," remarked Turner, as they resumed their way. "I don't care how little I see of him, in fact. The Dorriens are a bad stock, and sooner or later this one will prove himself no exception to the rule, mark my words."

“I don’t see why you should be so uncharitable,” retorted Olive. “We all think Mr Dorrien particularly nice. How can he help his family being detestable?”

A pertinent question enough, but hardly calculated to soothe the pious young apostle at her side. Rumour credited Turner with more than a friendly regard for his chief’s second daughter, and for once in a way Rumour was right. But as to whether the penchant was reciprocated by its object or no, rumour was divided in opinion, the balance of the said division being on the negative side.

“He can’t help that perhaps,” said Turner shortly. “But the man himself is objectionable. A scoffer, and I strongly suspect, an out-and-out infidel.”

“And what if he is?” rejoined Olive warmly. “The narrow-minded and uncharitable self-sufficiency of some people is enough to make an infidel of anybody. I vow I hate clergymen!”

The colour rose to the beautiful dark face as she spoke. Her companion, dismayed and offended, replied, looking straight in front of him:

“Not very flattering to your father, Miss Olive.” She rewarded him with a look of withering scorn. “Just the sort of answer I should have looked for from you. An infidel, for instance,” with cutting sarcasm, “would have vastly more gumption than not to know that I credit my father with being a very rare and noble exception to a most stupid and narrow-minded set of men. He takes people as he finds them. He doesn’t go out of the way to sneer at them because they don’t live in church, especially when he knows little or nothing about them.”

The curate would have liked to hint at the discovery he had recently made, or fancied he had made. But he only replied stiffly:

“If I have offended you I am sorry. But as my company seems unwelcome just now, I will relieve you of it at once.”

“By all means, Mr Turner. Good-morning,” and taking her basket from him, she passed on her way with a scornful bow, leaving her companion standing irresolute, very savage and sore at heart, looking and feeling not a little foolish.

Meanwhile the object of this tiff, far enough away in the contrary direction, felt more disgusted than he cared to admit. But for the presence of that whipper-snapper of a curate, he would have joined Olive, and in about two minutes would have persuaded her

to dismiss her errand of charity to the winds, substituting therefor a long delightful ramble on the seashore, or inland among cool shady lanes, or over breezy upland. And by no means for the first time, either. Now, however, it was probable that Turner would lose no opportunity of making himself a nuisance. Parsons, in Roland's opinion, were extensively given that way, and that Turner had got scent of that other business was extremely unfortunate. Then at the thought of Turner as last seen, he laughed sardonically. A transparently "spoony" man looked an ass at best—a transparently "spoony" cleric showed up as something extraordinary in the way of an ass—and that Turner was in that identical stage of asininity was obvious to our well-worn friend "the meanest capacity," let alone to so shrewd and clear-sighted an individual as Roland Dorrien.

Another meeting was in store for him that morning. In Wandsborough High Street he ran right against his sister and the Miss Nevilles, who insisted forthwith on carrying him back to Cranston. It was luncheon time and hot withal—a comfortable seat in the victoria was not to be sneezed at, so he submitted to capture with the best possible grace. But the incident reminded him that Wandsborough was a confoundedly small place, and that unless he meant to disperse all prudence to the winds it behoves him to be careful.

Chapter Eleven.

Concerning a Midnight Ramble.

“Quiet, Roy, old man! Don’t lift up that beautiful voice of yours, or your gallant grandparent will be for abolishing you altogether on the ground that you disturb his slumbers.” It seemed hard to restrain the affectionate creature’s delighted barks over the restoration to his master and temporary liberty. The dog pranced and squirmed; springing up at his master, and whining in suppressed glee. Then he would career up and down the sward, his white ruff gleaming in the moonlight. His master, however, strolled leisurely on. Leaving the ornamental water on his left, he turned out of the drive into a narrow secluded path through the shrubbery, which soon led him into the heart of one of the home coverts. The pathway lay in gloom overshadowed by black firs; the moonlight throwing a pale band across it here and there, when a gap occurred in the trees. Tangled bushes grew on either side right up to the pedestrian’s shoulder, and the air was heavy with a moist fungus-like odour, exuding from the dewy earth and luxuriant vegetation.

“Flap-flap.”

Away went a couple of startled cushats from their dark roost in the firs, followed by a dozen more, the flapping of their wings resounding like pistol-shots in the stillness of the covert. Then a faint rustle in the brake, as of a prowling stoat or weasel making off with stealthy glide. Rabbits scurried off down the path, and Roy, tremulous with excitement, looked up in his master’s face with an appealing whine, though he knew perfectly well that the least movement towards giving chase would be sternly checked. Suddenly the stroller stopped, and, as he gazed straight in front of him, a faint whistle of astonishment escaped his lips. What did he see?

Only a light.

He had reached a point where the ground fell away in front. Some thirty yards further the covert ended, and beyond lay the open fields. From where he stood the light was visible, and might be half a mile away. Seen through the focus of the narrow covert path it twinkled in the distance, looking like an ordinary candle placed in the latticed window of a cottage—which, in fact, it was.

But whatever it was, after gazing at it in astonishment for a few moments, the stroller turned and began to retrace his steps. As he did so the moon slowly soared over the tree-tops, flooding the narrow footpath with light. Suddenly Roy lifted his head, and uttering a quick, short bark, started off from his master’s side, growling ominously.

The path, being in moonlight, enhanced the blackness of the undergrowth. Roland, gazing eagerly in the direction of the cause of his dog's alarm, could discern nothing in the cavernous gloom.

"Poachers," he decided uneasily, with a rapid thought of the long odds against him in the event of his conjecture proving a true one; for only a large and daring gang of such marauders would venture to raid into the Cranston home coverts.

The dog's rage increased. With every hair of his thick coat bristling and erect, he darted forward into the darkness, baying furiously; and in a moment the snap-snap of his jaws, together with a continuous and savage snarling, proclaimed him to be at very close quarters with something or somebody, who had the greatest difficulty in warding off his attack.

"Cawl the dorg off, master," adjured a thick, gruff voice, not untinged with trepidation.

With some difficulty Roland complied, and in obedience to his peremptory mandate to come out and show himself, there stepped into the moonlight a powerful, thickset ruffian, armed with a cudgel. Mightily astonished, he recognised in the swarthy and scowling features no less a personage than Stephen Devine, the poacher, whom if he had thought of at all it would have been as in Battisford Gaol, doing a month's hard labour, less about ten days already served.

"Didn't expect to see me, eh, master?" said the fellow, with a grin, the other not breaking silence.

"Right you are—I didn't. And now, may I ask, what the devil are you doing here?"

"Thort I was safe in quod, didn't 'ee, young Squire?" rejoined Devine, advancing a step nearer, with the same evil grin. Roy, who had been crouching at his master's feet, keeping up a running fire of growls, sprang up at this move, and with his fangs fixed would have made at the intruder, but found himself held by main force.

"Down, Roy! Quiet, sir! I think you'll be safe in that institution again by this time to-morrow," answered Roland. "Meanwhile, how the deuce did you get out of it to-day?"

"Haw-haw! Mr Turner 'e paid my fine and got me out. 'E's a genelman, 'e is. 'E said I ort to be at home, lookin' after my darter."

“H’m! A fool and his money are soon parted. However, it’s a thousand pities the cash should be so utterly thrown away. Thrown away, because to-morrow you’ll return to your old quarters. For trespassing here, you understand.”

“Haw-haw! Oh, no, I won’t, sir—not I. You’ll say nuthin’ about to-night—not you?”

“No? And why not?”

“Because,” answered the fellow, lowering his voice, but speaking in an insolent tone—“because I should have such a nice little story to tell their warshups the beaks, and the laryers, and the parties wot comes to see poor coves tried. I should be able to tell how young Squire Dorrien wasn’t above steppin’ down to my cottage o’ nights to keep my gal company like, while her poor old dad’s in trouble. I could tell ’em how I went to get a breath o’ fresh air the night I come out o’ quod, and as how I see young Squire Dorrien a steppin’ along in the dark to see my gal. I could tell as how I follered him until he cotched sight of the bit of light my gal had stuck in the winder to let him know her old dad’s come home again, and young Squire wouldn’t be adsackly welcome that night—and as how ’stonished he looked when he seed it? Fine gal, my Lizzie, ain’t she, Squire?”

“Devilish fine girl! Since you ask my opinion, you’ve got it frankly, and for what it’s worth. And so that’s the little story you are going to amuse the court with, is it?”

“That’s the little story, Squire. No two mistakes about it,” retorted the other, with an impudent leer. “And strike me blind, but it’ll be worth doin’ another month for the fun o’ seein’ the old Squire’s face when I’m a-tellin’ of it.”

Roland laughed quietly, contemptuously—and there was something in his laugh that seemed to undermine the other’s self assurance.

“You may tell your story, Devine—and then—”

“And then, Squire?”

“And then—you may go and be damned.” The perfect nonchalance of this reply was disconcerting in the extreme. The growing uneasiness which it inspired in the poacher found vent in bluster.

“Blast and blind me!” he snarled. “You don’t seem to care over-much. Yer don’t seem to have heard of Gipsy Steve. But there’s them here as has, and there’s them elsewhere as has, and to their cost. So mind me, Master Squire Dorrien, I say, and you’ll hear more o’ me yet.”

Roland slowly emitted a puff of smoke, and watched it mounting in blue circles upon the damp night air. Then he answered with sneering calmness:

"You were perfectly right in saying I didn't seem to care over-much. I don't—and for these among other reasons. In the first place, you won't tell that story, because, if you do, it isn't another month you'll find yourself in for, but several years. Libel, with a view to blackmailing, means penal servitude in this country, remember. In the next place, if you do tell it your daughter will go into the witness-box and deny the whole thing on oath—for even granted the truth of your discovery, I needn't remind a man of your 'cuteness that she would rather see you hung than give a word of evidence likely to damage me."

He paused for a moment, noting with a sneer the fury depicted in his listener's convulsed features.

"Lastly," he went on, "such a tale told by a person of your well-known respectability, friend Gipsy Steve, wouldn't affect me in the slightest degree, since nobody would believe a word of it, or at the worst would pretend not to. By the way, Devine, were you ever in the States?"

The start, and the sudden lividness of the other's countenance plainly visible in the moonlight, were answer enough. With a slight smile Roland went on.

"Ah, I see you have been there. And that being the case you have an advantage over those who have not—that of knowing who's got the drop. I've got the drop on you, friend Stephen Devine, and I mean to keep it. So you shall be in quod to-morrow, and will have an opportunity of entertaining the Bench with your little romance next Petty Sessions."

The poacher was shrewd enough to recognise the force of every one of Roland's assertions. So he changed his tone to the inevitable one of the beaten rough. He cringed.

"Don't be 'ard on a pore feller, Squire. I only wanted to try your grit—and it's real grit it is. And yer won't 'ave a pore cove up afore the beaks jest as 'e's out o' quod, will yer, Squire. I won't give you any more trouble—I swear I won't. Blind me if I do! Say you won't 'ave me run in, Squire!"

Roland, who could hardly restrain his laughter, eyed the fellow for a moment contemptuously.

“Well, Devine, I’ll let you down easy this time, but don’t let me catch you loafing round here again. And don’t let me hear that you’ve made any capital or mischief out of this in any sort of way,” he added significantly.

“Carn’t ye spare a sovereign or two, Squire? I’m mortal ’ard up,” whined the poacher.

“Not a red cent. Now off you go, left foot foremost. March!” He was determined the other should never have it in his power to say he had given him money, were it but the price of a pint. “And no tricks, friend Gipsy Steve. Clear right away. Why, the dog here would throttle you in a minute at a word from me—and I’m not sure I hadn’t best let him do it—but he’d be certain to get a knock or two over the job, so that it’s hardly worth while.”

“Good-night, Squire,” said Devine sullenly, as he took himself off.

Roland watched the retreating form of the poacher for about fifty yards, and turned to resume his way homewards. With Roy by his side he had no fear of foul play at the hand of the baffled and exasperated ruffian, and his mind was free to think over the recent encounter. Turner’s motive in releasing Devine was clear, and if the curate turned out to be worth powder and shot he would be even with him yet. And the poacher’s release was not an unmixed evil—at any rate so it seemed at that moment; for, with this low rascal’s voice still fresh in his ears, he felt more than ever inclined to break free from the besetting temptation: as to which it was a case of “needs must”—unless he chose to retain that execrable blackguard in his pay—a thing that he would rather hang himself than do. It struck him, however, that during the short time since his return he had made two enemies, Devine and Turner—the last more powerful for evil, being his own social equal, and because as a parson any mischief he might work would be set down to motives of Christian duty.

Once out of sight, the poacher turned round and shook his fist in the direction of the man who had so thoroughly turned his flank.

“Wait a bit, master!” he snarled through a volley of curses. “Just wait a bit, and blast me dead if I don’t cut that fine cock’s-comb of yours one of these days. And if I don’t, call me a blanked sodger!”

Whether he did or did not earn that martial appellation will hereinafter appear.

Chapter Twelve.

"The Skegs."

"Father, I'm going down to Minchkil Bay to look up some of your ancient mariners."

"Are you, dear?" said the rector, glancing up with a pleased smile at Olive, as she stood in his study door attired for walking, and making the sweetest possible picture in contrast to the somewhat solemn and ecclesiastical fittings of the old room. "And are you going alone?"

"Yes, I am. Margaret says she has more than she can do this afternoon, and, besides, those dear old fishermen are my speciality, so I intend to get the credit of keeping them in the way wherein they should go."

"Ha-ha! The English of which is, that that basket which I see is going down there full of tobacco and snuff and tea, and coming back empty. You know the way to their hearts, you little witch," laughed the rector, in reality pleased that this volatile favourite child of his should of her own accord undertake a work of benevolence—for anything in the shape of visiting was not her forte. "But I predict that you'll get a soaking before you're home again."

"Now be quiet, you dear old 'croaker.' I shall get nothing of the kind, for the afternoon is turning out quite fine," she answered, leaning over him with her arm on his shoulder and looking down on his desk. "And now I'll leave you to your sermon-brewing—but oh!—this'll never do. You really mustn't write so badly, dad dear, or you'll stick hopelessly, as you did last Advent—and everyone was making merry over the notion of the preacher not being able to read his own notes."

"Out upon you for a profane person who dare to invade my sanctum sanctorum," cried her father gleefully, as leaving a shower of kisses upon his forehead the girl sped from the room.

Left to himself the rector unconsciously let fall his pen.

"God keep my darling—and grant her a happy future," were the words his thoughts would have taken. But with him we have no concern at present, so shall leave him to his meditations.

The little fishing colony in Minchkil Bay lay distant a mile and a half from Wandsborough. Its main features were roughly built cottages, sorrily kept potato plots,

pigsties, and smells. The place seemed to have been dropped in a little hollow at the mouth of an attempt at a river, whose chronic state of "draininess," combined with a whiff of fish in every stage of staleness, not to say putrefaction, engendered the savoury atmosphere aforesaid. There was a good beach, of course, with the regulation complement of weatherbeaten craft, when the latter were not at sea, that is—eke the regulation nets, corks and other fishing gear hanging about on poles. On one side, the high ground beyond which lay the town of Wandsborough; on the other a bare, turfy slope rose abruptly to the summit of Minchkil Beacon, nearly four hundred feet in the air, and whose rugged face to seaward consisted of a succession of almost perpendicular cliffs, broken by many a ledge, where the gulls had everything their own way.

The task which Olive had set herself was anything but congenial. However, she went through with it bravely, and for upwards of an hour she steeled herself to endure the smokiness of the cabins and the ancient and fish-like smells, the maunderings of the old crones and the distracting yells of the babies, without flinching. She had a bright smile and a cheerful word for all as they grumbled or whined—according to temperament—that it was "mortal long since she'd bin near them," and pretended to think it was not one word for herself and six for the basket she carried, but the other way about. She endured all this right manfully, and when it came to an end, with a sigh of relief, she tripped lightly down the beach to revel in the fresh sea air and a sense of duty done.

"Well met!"

She started at the voice—a genuine start. Truth to tell she coloured.

"This is a piece of luck," went on the speaker. He had been talking with one of the men, and both being behind a large fishing boat, Olive had not noticed them. "I had no idea any of your flock pastured here."

"Yes, they do. But it isn't often I do anything in the way of shepherding them. That isn't in my line at all. In fact—I—I hate it."

The candour of this avowal was delicious. They both burst out laughing.

"I can more than half believe that," he said. "But then why don't you delegate the rôle of Lord High Almoner to someone else? There's Turner, for instance. It would be just in his line, I should think."

A queer look, a wicked look, came into the girl's face at the mention of Turner.

“He wouldn’t undertake it for me. He’s angry with me. Mr Dorrien, don’t you hate clergymen?”

“Truth compels me to state that I’m not partial to them as a rule.”

“Oh, indeed? And why don’t you look shocked at my question and say, ‘Er—not very flattering to your father, is it?’ or something to that effect? That’s how you ought to retort, by every known rule,” said Olive, wickedly demure.

“And why don’t you look shocked at my answer and say, ‘Er—kindly remember that you are reflecting on my father’? That’s how you ought to retort, etc, etc.”

“Because,” answered Olive, when she had recovered from the laughter into which his quizzical reply had launched her, “because I know you were making an exception in his favour as well as you knew I was. So we are agreed on that head.”

“Quite so. There’s nothing like a good understanding to begin with. And now by way of trying whether it’ll continue, let’s see if you’ll fall in with my idea. We must go for a sail. How does that idea strike you?”

“As perfection,” she rejoined, looking up at him with a light laugh. “Jem Pollock has the lightest boat here, but even that’s a shocking tub.”

It was. By the time they had put a couple of hundred yards between themselves and the beach Roland was fain to admit the justice of the stigma.

“Where are we going to?” asked Olive, as he suddenly turned the boat’s head and coasted along the shore.

“The Skegs. I’ve set my heart on exploring that pinnacle of scare, and was waiting until you could go with me. You were the first to unfold its dread mysteries, and you shall be the first to aid me in braving them.”

“Oh! But—I’m just the very least little bit afraid.”

“Naturally.”

“It’s fortunate—or unfortunate—you didn’t say where you intended going, or Jem Pollock wouldn’t have let us have his boat for love or money.”

“He wouldn’t?”

“Not he! They’re all in mortal terror of the place. To land there would bring them ill-luck for life. They even think they would hardly leave the rock alive. A boy was killed there once trying to get at some sea gulls’ nests. They put it down to his temerity in landing there at all.”

“A set of oafs! Well, we are going to land there—the tide is just right for it—and I wager long odds we don’t come to grief in any sort of way. Village superstition will receive a salutary check—and I, even I, shall place your father under a debt to me for my share in exploding such a pagan relic. Look,” he broke off, “there would be a good drop for a runaway horse or anyone tired of life.”

A bend in the coastline had shut out the fishing village behind them, for they had come some distance along the shore. The face of the cliff at this point rose sheer for a couple of hundred feet, where its surface was broken by a narrow ledge like a mere goat-path. Above this it slanted upwards to nearly twice that height.

“It would, indeed,” assented Olive. “That rejoices in the name of Hadden’s Slide.”

“Does it? And who was Hadden, and what the mischief possessed him to try his hand at tobogganning on such a spot?”

Olive laughed. “Nobody knows. It is an old landslip, and it is supposed that a cottage belonging to one Hadden was carried away with it. But that is very old tradition.”

“A pity. I had quite thought another spectral wanderer had lighted on the place for his posthumous disportings, like my ancestor yonder at The Skegs.”

“Well, he would have a better right, for that is your property.”

“My property!”

“Yes. It is a part of Cranston,” answered Olive, looking surprised.

“Oh—ah! I see. But you said my property. Now Cranston is not my property, and very likely never will be.”

This remark was made with a purpose. How would that strike her? he thought, and he watched her narrowly. But, however it happened to strike her, she took care that he should be none the wiser.

“Why do you take me up so sharply?” she expostulated with pretty mock petulance. “Really I shall become quite afraid of you if you are going to be so precise. One can’t always think for five minutes or so before making every innocent little remark. Now can one?”

“Of course not. What’s that extraordinary looking fissure there in front? It seems as if a stroke of lightning had split the whole cliff from brow to base.”

“That is Smugglers’ Ladder. It is well worth seeing. I’ve only been there once. We must make up a picnic and go there some day. Are you fond of picnics, Mr Dorrien?”

“Passionately—under some circumstances. But can’t we get as far this afternoon?”

Olive looked dubious.

“It’s a long way. Further than it seems. And father was right. It’s coming on to rain.”

“So it is. Here we are at our destination, though, and we can shelter under the rock.”

Great drops began to plash on the water, and the cliffs above looked dim as through a mist. The tallest of The Skegs reared up its lofty turret overhead, the sea washing over a narrow sloping ledge of rock at its base with a hollow plash. This was the only landing place.

The landing was a good deal more difficult than it looked. There was something of a current swirling round the rock, and the boat, as it got within the recoil of the waves, danced about in lively fashion. Olive, a little overawed at finding herself for the first time in this uncanny place, looked about her in a half-scared, half-subdued manner, as if she expected to behold the spectral hound start open-mouthed from the waves. Then enjoyment of the adventure dispelled all other misgiving.

“Just in time,” she remarked gaily, as, her companion having secured the boat, they gained the desired shelter. A violent downpour followed, beating down the sea like oil. Not a soul was in sight on the lonely and desolate beach, and away on the horizon great cloud banks came rolling. Our two wanderers—three rather, for Roy was not slow to assert his claim—made the best they could of the limited shelter, contemplating the rushing deluge a yard in front of them with the utmost equanimity.

“May as well make ourselves snug while we can. I shall venture to smoke.”

“One of your many advantages over us poor women. Well, why do you look so astonished? Isn’t it?”

“Why do I look astonished?” echoed her companion lazily and between the puffs as he lighted up. “Oh, only because one seems to have heard that sentiment before.”

“Well? And then?”

“And then? Oh—and then—I suppose it astonished me to hear a threadbare sort of a commonplace proceed from you. That’s all.”

Olive tried to feel angry. She could not even look it, however. The tell-tale laugh rose to her eyes, curved the witching little mouth—then out it came.

“Do you know—you are very rude? At least I ought to tell you so—”

“Another commonplace.”

“Why you deliberately snubbed me?” she went on, taking no notice of the murmured interruption. “Snubbed me like a brother. Shut me up, in fact.”

“Cool hands, brothers—stick at nothing. Ought to know. One myself. But, I say, wasn’t it odd how we first ran against each other that morning—you and I—when you were drawing?”

Now there was nothing in the foregoing conversation as set down on cold-blooded and unfeeling paper which all the world and his wife might not have heard. Nothing in the words, that is. But were that conjugal impersonality within earshot of these two people coasting along a dismal and desolate seashore at imminent peril of a wetting through, or crouched under the rock to avoid it, much gossip might it have chucklingly evolved, merely from the tone of their voices. For the said tone had that subtle ring about it which meant that the owners of these voices were fonder of each other’s society than either would admit to the other—or possibly to him or herself. And it happened that they had enjoyed a good deal more of that society than was known to anyone outside the mystic circle of three, that mystic three bound together in a tacit bond of fellowship—the safer that the third factor in this sodality was by nature denied the gift of human speech. The summer weather was delightful. Meadow and down, country landscape and breezy seashore, were open to all. A chance meeting, such as that of to-day, developed into a ramble more or less protracted, in the most natural way in the world. What more natural either, than that such chance should by some occult and mysterious process have a way of multiplying itself until matters should have reached such a point that the

issue would be momentous for weal or for woe to one or both of these two? And then to think that all this should have dated from the too exuberant wag of a dog's tail.

"And wasn't it a shame that you should have led me on to talk about your people—and—and—'kept dark'—isn't that what you call it?"

"It was rather a sin," he answered languidly. "Good discipline, though. Won't do the confidence trick again to divert the insinuating stranger."

Olive made no reply. She was thinking what pickle she would get into if her afternoon's pastime should transpire. But there was a strong spice of the dare-devil in her composition, and life at Wandsborough was apt to strike her as dull at times. And—

And what?

Never mind what—at present.

So they sat there and talked, heedless of time, and suddenly a gleam of sunshine straggled through the curtain of cloud. The rain had ceased, and behind them, to seaward, the squall, which had now passed, rolled further and further away.

"Now I shall go and prospect for the relics of my ghostly ancestor," said Roland. "If you don't mind waiting, I'll be with you again in a few minutes."

"Why? Where are you going?"

"To ascend this—er—Skeg."

"But I want to go too. You must not expect to keep all the honour and glory of this hairbreadth adventure to yourself."

"You want to go, too! H'm! You'll slip or turn giddy. The way is infamous."

Both stood gazing at the wretched slippery path that wound up and around the great rock.

"Oh, don't be afraid," she said. "It isn't the first time. I crossed Hadden's Slide once, and that's far worse than this."

"You, never having seen this, are of course an authority."

“Rude again,” she laughed. “Now let me have my way.”

Shaking his head dubiously, he allowed her that privilege. But more than once as they came suddenly upon a great yawning rift where the path had fallen away, revealing a perfect abattis of jagged rocks beneath, which, although at no great depth, were sufficiently far down to dash either of them to pieces like an egg-shell, in the event of a slip, he began to wish he had never allowed her to come. Olive, however, seemed to revel in the danger. Her face was flushed with the glow and excitement of the adventure, and her dark eyes shone and sparkled with exhilaration.

They had attained a height of some fifty feet and were stopping to rest. Roy had been left below, his master having entrusted him with something to keep watch over. Two email craft were tacking to and fro on the dull, leaden waters, at some distance off, and a grey-backed gull or two floated stationary against the wind, which, increasing in threatening puffs as they rounded a projecting angle of the rock, tended not to render their perilous foothold any the more secure.

The sky was again growing overcast, and the melancholy and hollow moaning of the waves beneath, swishing and swirling round many a submerged reef, produced a most dismal and depressing effect. Olive, with the dour legend running in her mind, now longed to get away from the place. Her companion seemed in no such hurry.

“This is about as far as we shall manage to go,” he remarked, scrutinising the rock overhead. The ledge on which they stood was barely a yard in width. Olive, peering over, noted that at that point the drop was sheer, and looking down upon the pointed reefs with the milky foam seething through and over them—shuddered.

“Take care!” he warned, holding her hand to steady her. “Better come down now, before you begin to feel nervous.” He had felt her hand tremble.

“Perhaps we had. Hark! What is that?” she broke off in an awed whisper.

Even her companion could hardly repress a start of astonishment. Apparently from within the rock itself came the deep-mouthed voice of a dog. Olive turned as white as a sheet. The terrible spectre of The Skegs was her only thought.

To her surprise the other burst out laughing.

“Not the ancestor this time,” he said. “It’s only good old Roy. He’s getting tired of his own company down there, and is remonstrating. Possibly, too, he has an eye on some stray crustacean which invites assault, but that he will not desert his post.”

Olive was immensely relieved. The colour came back into her pale cheeks and she tried to laugh, succeeding a little hysterically, it must be owned. She had been a good deal scared, and, all things considered, there was some excuse for her. This lonely rock, banned by popular superstition, was dread and forbidding enough in itself. Add to this the gloomy sky and the moaning sea; the rather precarious descent yet lying before them; and remember that the spectral hound wae believed in as firmly among the seafaring population as the Deity Himself, and a great deal more feared; that disaster, more or less grave—and sometimes, according to that belief, fatal—had overtaken those upon whose ears the spectral voice had fallen; and it follows that if the girl was momentarily unnerved by a weird and mysterious howl, which, owing to some acoustic peculiarity in its formation, seemed to come from within the haunted rock itself, there was every excuse for her.

"How ridiculous of me to forget all about Roy!" she said. "But anyhow, let us go down now."

"We had better," assented he quietly. A very uncomfortable misgiving had flashed across his mind. Far away over the sea a black curtain of cloud was approaching rapidly, its advance marked by a line of troubled water breaking into white foamy crests. He knew that a violent squall would be upon them in a few minutes—and if it caught them on that wretched ledge their position would be horribly dangerous.

"Let me get past you!" he said in an unconcerned voice.

"There; now if you should chance to slip I can easily catch you. We had better get back to Minchkil rather soon, in case the wind rises."

"Oh dear, I forgot that. It looks dreadfully rough already. I feel almost afraid to get into the boat again. Couldn't we wait until Pollock comes to look for us? He is sure to do so when he finds we don't come back."

"Not to be thought of. In half an hour the tide will be all over the landing place. To use a succinct and expressive metaphor, it's a case of 'between the devil and the deep sea.' Careful here!" he enjoined warningly, holding out his hand to help her over a place where the path had fallen away, leaving an ugly and formidable gap, up which the waves were now shooting in clouds of misty spray.

All would have gone well, but just at the moment of stepping across this gap, a piercing, unearthly shriek rang out in their very ears, as something cleft the air with a swirl and a rush almost between their faces. Olive, already unnerved by her former alarm, uttered a

quick gasp, and an ashen pallor spread over her features. For a fraction of a moment she stood tottering; then her eyes closed, she swayed heavily and—a strong arm was flung round her and she was held firmly against the cliff.

"Don't look down, Olive. You're quite safe now. Keep perfectly cool and do exactly as I tell you."

The prompt, commanding tone was effectual. And even then, in the moment of her peril, the girl realised that he had called her for the first time by her Christian name. The convulsive shuddering left her frame, which relaxed its terror-strained rigidity. Obeying his directions implicitly, she kept with him step by step, supported by his ready arm, till they reached the slab of flat rock on which they had landed. Meanwhile two great gulls, the cause of what was within an inch of being an awful catastrophe, circled around and around their disturbed eggs, uttering their harsh and peevish shrieks. Roy, whom they found whining uneasily, jumped up in delight. Once in the boat, however, he lay perfectly still. He was not at his ease though, poor fellow, and began to feel uncomfortable, like a Frenchman crossing the Channel.

"There, it's even as I told you," said Roland, as having with some trouble effected a successful embarkation, he rested for a moment on his oars. "The 'landing stage' will be entirely covered in a few minutes. We were scarcely half an hour on the island, and it was as long as we could have stayed. It's an abominably dangerous place, all the same, and I don't wonder the people funk it. The little 'Skeg' isn't landable on at all."

He had hoisted the sail and they were scudding rapidly before the wind. Olive, looking back at the great rock towers, shuddered. The sea was rising momentarily, and long hillocks of dull green water swept on—line upon line—gathering into knife-like crests to roll and break into surge upon yonder shore. From seaward came the moan of the rising gale, and already the faces of the great cliffs were dim and misty. A dire and blood-curdling suspicion was in her mind. What if it had been the terrible spectre voice after all—and not poor Roy's honest bay? Her own narrow escape, immediately afterwards, looked ominously significant. She heartily wished they were safe home again.

Splash! Whish!

The boat careened over, dipping her gunwale. The squall was upon them. Roland, with one anxious glance to windward, turned all his attention to the little craft, controlling the tiller with a firm and judicious hand. White crests leaped around them with an angry hiss, the stunning whirl of the blast was in their ears, and overhead the mast danced madly against the wrack-driven sky. Either the gear must carry away or they must capsize. Great streamers of cloud, like horizontal waterspouts, darted across the sky,

and there was wild exhilaration in the breath of the salt scud driven before the squall as they stormed along through the white and seething crests. He had dreaded this squall. Now it was upon them he enjoyed the fierce excitement of it. Suddenly the boat careened again, shipping something of a sea. Olive uttered a cry of dismay.

“Don’t be frightened, Olive,” he said, throwing an arm round her in support, for she nearly lost her balance in the furious rocking of the boat. “Why, I could land you on shore at any point I chose, even if we did capsize. I should rather enjoy the swim than otherwise, and I believe you would, too.”

A blush came into the girl’s face. She had caught some of his exhilaration, and gazed fearlessly at the tumbling seas. Her cheeks were wet with the salt spray, and a soft, dark tress which had escaped from its fastening kept blowing across her eyes. Very beautifully did the excitement, dashed with a tinge of apprehension, become her.

“No—I am not afraid,” she answered—“with you.”

These two young people were getting on, you see.

A whirr overhead—a hurtling rush—and a wild hailstorm swept down upon the sea, curbing its fury slightly, and rendering the inmates of the boat very uncomfortable. Poor Roy, whom his master had disposed in such place as to afford the best ballast, looked simply piteous. He shivered, and in his wistful, patient eyes there was a mute appealing look, which his master noticing, could not restrain a laugh at.

“Never mind, Roy, old chap. You’ll be as right as nine-pence directly! Now for it! Kill or cure!” he cried, bringing round the boat’s head a point and a half.

A confused whirl, an upheaval as if they had left the water altogether; and—they were in the comparatively smooth water of Minchkil Bay, and running comfortably for the little fishing village. A few moments later and half a score of stalwart hands had hauled them up high and dry on the beach.

“All’s well that ends well!” cried Roland, helping his companion to alight.

“You’re in tremenjious luck, sir, that’s all I’ve got to say about it!” said the owner of the boat dryly. “Never thought you’d have got back without a bath.”

“Ha-ha! In luck are we, Jem Pollock? Glad to hear you say so, because according to all the rules of that humbugging old superstition of yours we ought to have come to mortal grief. We’ve been exploring The Skegs.”

The man started, and queer looks were exchanged among the group.

“Did you land there, sir?” he asked uneasily.

“Land there? I should rather think we did. Climbed nearly to the top of the rock—as far as we could get. Then ran home at a ripping pace in a thundering squall and a good deal of a sea. So you see, Pollock, on your own admission, the spectre of The Skegs is a fraud of the first water. No ill luck has ensued to us from it—has it now?”

“I devoutly trust it never may, sir,” answered the fisherman in a queer tone.

“And by the way, Pollock, that’s a first-rate little craft of yours. She behaved grandly. You should have seen her run just before we rounded the point yonder. Perhaps she was eager to get away from The Skegs, ha-ha! Well, good-day, my men. Now drink my health, and confusion to my ancestral ghost,” and leaving a substantial largesse with them, he turned and joined Olive.

Was there yet time before they reached home for some foretaste of that ill luck predicted by the superstitious fishermen? Let us see. They were in great spirits as they struck across the down, turning now and again to look back at the storm-lashed sea, and mark how The Skegs were now almost hidden in clouds of spray as the flying waves leaped high against their slippery sides. At length, as they reached the last stile a rumble of approaching wheels was audible on the high road. Now this stile was in a shaky condition, consequently a piece of the woodwork gave way as Olive was in the act of crossing. She must have had a nasty fall, but for the two ready hands prompt to set her securely on her feet. Just then an open carriage swept round the bend of the road from the direction of Wandsborough. So rapidly did it whirl past that Roland had not time to do more than recognise its occupants; yet in that brief moment he took in everything—the pair of high-stepping bays, the silver crest on the harness, even the identity of the men on the box. But what he took in most surely of all was the expression of furious anger through which his father had regarded him, and the no less hostile look on the cold impassive face of his mother.

Chapter Thirteen.

Breakers Ahead.

“I sat, Nell,” said Hubert Dorrien, coming into the morning-room, where his sister sat alone. “What the very dickens is wrong now? The veteran’s in an exemplary state of grumps.”

“Well, he isn’t particularly amiable this morning; but then he isn’t always, you know,” answered Nellie.

Hubert shook his head moodily.

“Ah, yes, but there’s something in the wind. He’s far worse than usual, and now he and the missis are hobnobbing together in the library. Now, Nell, be a good girl and tell a fellow what it’s all about.”

“But, Hu, I give you my word I haven’t an idea. It may be nothing, after all.”

“Pooh!” exclaimed her brother irascibly. “I believe you do know, though. You women dearly love beating about the bush and all that sort of thing,” and throwing his leg over the arm of a chair, he flung himself back, his face a picture of unreasonable peevishness. Nor could he afford to await with indifference the paternal storm, for Master Hubert’s conscience was a tolerably blemished article, and now he was speculating with a troubled mind as to which of his peccadilloes might have come to the paternal knowledge.

The girl made no reply, as she bent over her work, while her brother sat uneasily swinging his legs, the apprehensive frown deepening on his brow. Then they heard the door of the study open and their father’s voice saying:

”—And send Hubert here; I want to talk to him. If he is out, he had better come directly he returns.” And the door closed as Mrs Dorrien replied in the affirmative.

“Oh, Lord!” groaned Hubert. “Well, it’s of no use putting off the evil day. Here goes. Oh, it’s nice to have a father! Well, mother, and what’s it all about?” as Mrs Dorrien entered the room.

“I don’t know for certain, dear,” she said anxiously. “But I think your father only wants to talk to you about your allowance.”

A very blank look came into his face. “Couldn’t be much worse,” he muttered, and went to meet his fate.

And soothly, a bad quarter of an hour was in store for him, for it happened that the General had received certain bills on his account—not University duns, but long outstanding London debts, and, as to one, a letter of demand. Cold, sarcastic and incisive was the lecture he poured forth on the head of the luckless Hubert. He reminded him of former scrapes of the kind, of the fact that he would have little or nothing hereafter but what he obtained by his own exertions, and wound up by recommending him to apply himself to his reading with renewed determination.

Hubert, who thought he was getting into smooth water again, began to promise, but once more his father cut him ruthlessly short.

“And now, for the third time,” he said, “I shall have to get you out of the embarrassment into which your own folly has plunged you—but I shall not do so without exacting some guarantee that you will make a good use of your time in return. Your mother tells me that you and Roland are invited to spend a fortnight at Ardleigh Court.”

“Oho!” thought Hubert, noting a slight frown which came over his father’s face at the mention of his brother. “Oho!—so Roland’s in the veteran’s black books, too! Wonder what about.”

”—This invitation you will decline,” went on the hard, condemnatory voice. “Amusement and work in your case don’t agree—and work you must. Every morning from breakfast time till luncheon during the next six weeks I shall expect you to be at your books, unless I see special reason to make an exception. You have done literally no work at all since your return home this vacation, and it is high time you began. And for the last time these”—tapping the bills lying upon his desk—“shall be paid. Are there any more of them outstanding, by the way?”

Now why had not Hubert the courage to make a clean breast of it. Here was an opportunity such as would not occur again. Ah I that slightly receding chin.

“Only two or three, for small amounts,” he faltered.

“Very good. Make a list of them here,” handing him a piece of paper.

”—And that is all? Yes? Then I need not detain you here any further—except again to impress upon you the necessity of attending to what I have been saying.”

Hubert went out of his father's presence with hot, seething rage at his heart. He to be confined to the house every morning like a schoolboy, with a set task to do. "Gated," in fact—and that by his own father, and in his home. It was humiliating in the extreme. And there was no way in which the devil within him could find vent.

"Well, dear?" said his mother enquiringly, as he burst into the morning-room, where she had been anxiously awaiting the result of the interview. "And now I hope things are all right."

"All right?" echoed Hubert, his countenance ablaze with wrath and disgust. "All right? No, they're not, they're as wrong as they can be. Here am I set down to work every morning like a wretched schoolboy. I swear, it's damnable the way in which he treats me."

"Oh, Hubert—hush!" cried his mother and sister in one breath, both horror-stricken.

"Hush? Oh yes! Aren't we horrified?" he said jeeringly. "Women are so very easily shocked, I know. Faugh?" and he flung himself from the room.

But it was not on his younger son's account that General Dorrien had come down that morning "in a state of thundercloud," as that graceless delinquent had facetiously put it; and to let the reader into the real cause, it will be necessary for him or her to assist in the discussion which took place previous to the unlucky Hubert being summoned to the library.

"I don't really know what to think, much less what to Bay or do," said the General. "You saw for yourself, Eleanor; you saw them together. Now, what do you make of it?"

"Well, I do think it's too bad of Roland, and shows a great want of proper feeling on his part. After all these years he has been away he does not give us much of his society. He seems to be quite taken up with those—people," answered Mrs Dorrien, though, to do her justice, she answered with some reserve. Her heart was cold towards her eldest son, and not one spark of love had she for him; all was lavished on the younger. Yet, she told herself, she hoped she had a conscience.

"You are right," said the General decisively. "It shows a complete want of proper feeling. To be hanging about the public roads like that with the girl! Why, I believe he was about to—pah! It is disgraceful—disgusting and disgraceful, absolutely. Who are these Ingelows, by the way, Eleanor?"

“Oh, I’m sure I don’t know,” she answered loftily, as if the bare suspicion of her knowing anything about them was an imputation to be resented. “I believe they are well-connected and all that. But that anything serious should be the outcome of this would be most deplorable, I should think.”

“It would, indeed. Highly deplorable, and in fact I won’t entertain the idea of anything of the kind. Moreover, if what I hear is true, Roland spends a very great deal of his time in the society of this girl.”

By which remark it will appear that the town of Wandsborough was in no way behind its provincial contemporaries in its passion for gossip.

“He may be only amusing himself. There may be nothing serious in it, after all,” hazarded Mrs Dorrien, her conscience prompting her to try and urge a plea for the absent one. But she could not have struck upon a more unlucky chord.

“Amusing himself! Well, I am surprised at you, Eleanor,” cried the General, firing up. “Amusing himself? And do you remember what came of it on the last occasion of his similarly ‘amusing himself’? Disgrace—pure and simple. Is that a prospect to contemplate with ordinary coolness, I ask you?”

“It strikes me forcibly that this young woman is well able to take care of herself,” was the acid reply. “And I don’t see what we—what you can do in the matter. Roland is different now and, I fear, terribly difficult to deal with.”

“As to what I can do—well, never mind,” answered the General very grimly. “But it seems to me that Roland has not left off his old ways—or, at any rate, is fast returning to them. Why, we shall have another action for breach of promise threatened before we know where we are; these professional people are keen upon the main chance, and that Jesuitical brood above any,” he continued, with a sneer. “And what I now say is that Roland had better be careful—for I will not be disgraced through him a second time with impunity. He has his own means, of course, but if he intends to take up his ultimate position in the county, let him show himself worthy of it.”

Very decisive and stern and uncompromising was the General’s tone and attitude as he concluded this last remark, and his wife, listening, was conscious of a warring tumult of feelings. Yet she dared not sacrifice right and justice to the cause of the one ruling passion of her life—her love for her younger son. So again she spoke in extenuation.

“It is a pity. But he will be going to Ardleigh Court next week—and there’s no telling what change in his fancy his stay there may effect.”

This time she touched the right spring. For she knew that her husband ardently desired a match between his eldest son and Clara Neville—a match that would bring about the union of the two fine old estates into one magnificent property. Hence he had “sounded” Roland on the subject, as we saw earlier in this narrative.

“There may be something in that,” was the mollified reply. “Clara can be exceedingly engaging when she likes, and I know Neville would be delighted. He seemed to take a great fancy to Roland.”

“I think he did.”

“And if only Roland would throw himself into his future interest here. He ought to live here and help to look after things, but he seems to prefer an idle life, and the society of those Rectory people to that of his own family,” said the General, relapsing again into ire over the thought.

“It is most unnatural of him, I must say, to dislike his home as he does,” assented Mrs Dorrien. Yet they forgot, did that worthy couple, how it would have been difficult indeed for anyone to feel any love for a home thus constituted.

“Well, it is useless discussing the matter further at present,” was the decisive rejoinder. “But mark my words. Never—never, I say—while I can prevent it, shall Roland bring into this house a daughter of that despicable popish renegade. So he can act as he thinks fit. My mind is made up.”

Chapter Fourteen.

"The Ban of Craunston."

"Well, Miss Ingelow. All alone and wrapped in meditation! Hope I haven't disturbed the solution of some knotty problem."

"Oh, no, Mr Dorrien," answered Margaret gaily, turning away from the window. "I haven't been long back from evensong, and the only problem I was trying to solve was, what can have become of father. He ought to have been back by now. And it has set in wet, and he didn't take an umbrella."

"He will be sure to borrow one, I should think. But are your sisters out in the rain, too?"

"I'm afraid I can't answer for that, they're too far away," said Margaret, with a laugh. "They went up to London yesterday, to stay with an aunt of ours."

"Went up to London? I had no idea of that," echoed Roland, with a momentary flash of surprise, strongly dashed with disappointment, crossing his face. "And do they make a long stay?"

"About a fortnight or three weeks. Ah—there is father!"

"Upon my word, Dorrien," began the rector, as Roy unceremoniously pushed past him while entering, "I must again impress upon you the slur you cast upon my hospitable gates by leaving this chap outside the same. Now, Roy, old man, make yourself at home."

"No fear of his not doing that," laughed Roy's master, as the dog deliberately curled himself up on the softest rug in the room. "But he was rather wet, so I thought he'd better wait outside."

"Father, go at once and change your cassock," interrupted Margaret. "It's wet through."

"Not a bit of it," replied the rector, stooping to inspect his flowing skirt. "Brown lent me the very father of all ginghams. He buttonholed me in his dim, mysterious way, and said he hoped I wouldn't be above, etc, etc. I told him I should be more than glad to be beneath it, and accordingly came along the street under full sail and a complete shelter. Brown is the prince of opportune and considerate vergers. And now, Dorrien, don't hurry off. Stay and have a chop with us, and cheer an old man in his loneliness. My two

youngest girls are away disporting themselves in the gay metropolis, so I can promise you a little less noise than usual. You've got your bicycle, I see, so you're independent."

Roland accepted with pleasure. He and the rector were great friends, and he was quite upon the "dropping in" footing by this time.

"Right. Margaret, take care of him for half an hour or so, during which period inexorable duty will keep your humble servant in his study chair." And the rector left the room, humming a bar or two of the old plainsong hymn, whose melody lingered in his mind fresh from the dimly lighted choir at the close of the evening office.

If disappointment as to the absent was weighing upon Roland's mind, he was unconsciously exemplifying the axiom as to a compensating element in all things. It was a few days after The Skegs exploration episode, and he had been making up his mind to take an opportunity of getting the rector to tell him the whole story of the legendary Ban, not that he believed in it himself, or was inclined to, but it would be interesting to hear the so-called facts. Here was just such an opportunity, as they would be alone together after dinner.

"You'll have a wet ride back, Mr Dorrien, I'm afraid," said Margaret, as they sat down to table. "It's coming down harder than ever."

"Oh, that's nothing to some of my old privations," he laughed, "except that the very snugness now will make it all the rougher to turn out."

And snug it was. The drawn curtains only deadened the constant patter of the rain upon the windows, and the suggestion of the sort of evening outside thrown out by the sound, enhanced the sense of comfort and restfulness within. Under these circumstances, three people, sufficiently well known to each other to be able to converse without restraint, are in a position to pass a thoroughly pleasant evening. Yet to one, at any rate, of these three there was a sense of something wanting—a vacant place, perhaps, as of somebody absent, whose absence was really missed. Roy, the irrepressible, with his wonted off-handedness, was begging impartially from everybody in turn.

"Bother that post!" exclaimed the rector, as a sharp double knock cut across the conversation. "A man can't dine in peace without this age of progress chucking its reprehensible invention into the flavour of his sirloin. Here we are—a whole stack of hopes and fears"—he went on, contemplating, with a whimsical expression, the sheaf of letters at that moment brought in. "First, diocesan—that'll keep. Item—invitation to preach—ditto, ditto. That's yours, Margaret—and—this is mine—from Olive. No, it's for me, all for me," he cried gleefully. "Not for you at all, Margaret, this time. Let's see what

she says. Excuse me, Dorrien—sink ceremony. By the way, I promised you a quiet dinner in the absence of those two chatterboxes, and one of them sends us two sheets of clatter by post—ha-ha!"

It was very pleasant to watch the affectionate delight with which the old man read through his favourite child's letter.

"Why, they're only going to stay ten days after all," he cried in astonishment. "The child isn't generally so eager to get back to her old dad, after the joys and glories of the metropolis. Here's a message for you, Dorrien: 'Tell Mr Dorrien, I saw a love of a dog the other day, that almost outshines Roy. Almost—not quite—mind you tell him almost or he'll never speak to me again.'"

Roland, who had been inwardly startled at the juxtaposition of ideas, quickly recovered himself, and made some pleasant remark. Two things occurred to him. It might be that there was some reason underlying Olive's anxiety to return speedily, and the message, innocent as it read, was to remind him that she did not forget him.

"Dad, Eustace is coming home next week," remarked Margaret, looking up from a letter she had been reading.

"Is he? The rascal! it's about time he did. Dorrien, you will have the dubious pleasure of making the acquaintance of my hopeful at the date just named. He has been away yachting with a friend, and by this time doubtless considers himself fully competent to take command of the Channel Fleet."

Thus conversation flowed on, and at last Margaret rose. No, she would not be lonely, she said, in response to an intimation to that effect. She had more than enough to do to occupy all her time.

"Draw round the fire, Dorrien—fancy requiring one at this time of year," said the rector, as the door closed upon his daughter. "Now to try and unearth some cigars," diving into a chiffonier in the corner. "Ah! here we are. Light up. Oh, and we'll put the decanters at the corner here, where we can reach them."

Roland blew out a long puff of smoke, and lay back in easy content.

"I wish you'd tell me something, Dr Ingelow," he said.

"And that?"

“Why, I want to know the true version of that ridiculous story attached to our family. You know—the ghost on The Skegs. You are sure to have it at your fingers’ ends.”

“Does not your father know it?”

“I believe he does, but he promptly shelves the topic if you moot it. And, you know, he isn’t the sort of man to get anything out of that he’s bent on keeping dark.”

“H’m! Well, the original version of the tradition is to be found in Surinn’s ‘Legends and Myths of Baronial Europe,’ a very scarce and bulky book, which came out between forty and fifty years ago, and the incident occurred, if I remember rightly, in the middle of the last century. The narrative is entitled ‘The Ban of Craunston.’ It was a wild and lawless period in out-of-the-way parts, and this corner of the world came in no wise behind the spirit of the age, for the coast was the happy hunting ground of wreckers and smugglers, and the roads of highwaymen and other freebooters. At that time, one Richard Dorrien was Squire of Cranston. He was a bachelor, and his younger brother lived at the Hall with him. The latter, Hubert by name, was an open-hearted, bright-spirited youngster, immensely popular with both sexes; whereas Richard, the Squire, seems to have been a gloomy, violent-tempered man, disliked and feared on all sides. Well, the brothers got on rather well together—possibly on account of the total dissimilarity of their characters—until the apple of discord was thrown into their midst in the shape of a young lady who came to take up her abode in Wandsborough, then a straggling little place, consisting of a score of houses. She was a foreigner—though of what nationality the chronicle omits to state—of extraordinary beauty, and lived alone with a duenna of regulation age and hideosity. It is said that this young woman was a Jacobite emissary, and it was in that capacity that she and Richard Dorrien became acquainted, for he was an ardent Jacobite, and over head and ears involved in the plots of the day. But be this as it may, it was a case of love at first sight. The churlish and misanthropical Squire became violently enslaved; unfortunately, however, the lady declined his addresses. More unfortunately still, she did not decline those of his brother—quite the reverse. Well, now, this position of affairs could but have one ending, in a state of society wherein men ran each other through on far less provocation than would induce you in these days to knock a fellow down. But there was no open quarrel. On the contrary, the Squire was so studiously cordial to his brother that the latter was thrown quite off his guard. Not so one or two of his intimates, who went so far as to warn him—and nearly got run through for their pains. Matters went on in this way till the day before Hubert was to wed the fair unknown. On the afternoon of that day the two brothers put off in their sailing cutter to tack about the bay. They were alone together, and seemed on the best of terms. The afternoon closed in squally and rough, and the boat and its occupants were lost to view in the mist. Darkness came on, and still the Dorriens did not return. The seafaring people at Minchkil began to get anxious, and talked of going in search, but

there was a high sea running and every sign of a rising gale; moreover, they knew that the missing men were nearly as amphibious as they themselves. Then suddenly there sounded through the night the wild unearthly howling of a dog. Awed to the heart, it was some time before the superstitious seafarers could make up their minds to investigate further. The sound came from the cliff above them to westward, and thither at last they all proceeded. There, at the very extremity of the headland which looks down on The Skegs, stood a huge boar-hound, which they recognised as the Squire's favourite dog, Satan, a savage brute, of whom the whole neighbourhood stood in terror. The animal stood there on the brink of the cliff—his neck stretched out over the churning waves below—throwing out his long-drawn, deep-voiced bay into the misty darkness. Then the men knew that something had happened. And now mark this. At the very moment this discovery was made, Richard Dorrien appeared suddenly before the young foreign lady, dripping and soaked from head to foot, and told her, without the slightest warning, that her lover was drowned. She seemed turned to stone. She gazed at him for a moment with a wild stare, gasped out one word—'Murdered!'—and, still fixing him with that glassy stare, fell prone to the floor in a swoon. He never saw her again.

"A terrible gale raged all that night, and in the morning fragments of the missing boat were washed ashore. The craft had been splintered almost to matchwood. It was not till many days afterwards that Hubert Dorrien's corpse came to light. At first the survivor would hardly mention the subject, much less give any account of it. Eventually, however, it leaked out that the boat had been driven upon The Skegs by the gale, and its occupants, thrown into the water, were forced to swim for their lives. And now, although nothing can be more reasonable and probable than this solution of the matter, it was not long before dark rumours began to get about. Of course, there could be no vestige of proof either way; for the tragedy out there in the black and storm-lashed bay was witnessed by no mortal eye. Months went by. The survivor became more and more morose, shunned everybody, and took to hard drinking. The cause of all the turmoil left the neighbourhood the week following on the tragedy. One morning. Cranston was in a state of alarm. The Squire was missing. Enquiry at length elicited that he had put out to sea the previous night accompanied only by his huge hound. Richard Dorrien was never seen again, neither was his dog. The night was wild and tempestuous, and it was at first thought that his boat had been swamped. But days and weeks went by, and no trace of wreckage came to light—and finally all hope was abandoned.

"Then suddenly an awful state of scare arose among the seafaring population. Ghostly bayings began to be heard at night on the cliff in the neighbourhood of The Skegs. They were heard by fishermen in their boats at sea and by belated wanderers out on the down. Some had even made out the shape of a large dog resting on the summit of the loftier of The Skegs. Forthwith, the theory took root that Richard Dorrien had, beyond doubt, murdered his brother, and in expiation was doomed to haunt the scene of the tragedy

and take the shape of his huge and savage boar-hound. Those who have any idea to what depths of superstition the country population was in those days plunged, can easily imagine the frantic terror which such an apparition would have for the pliers of a dangerous calling. Why, to this day you can't induce one of the fisher folk to venture too near The Skegs—let alone land there."

"But wasn't there a death warning conveyed by the apparition?" asked Roland.

"Ah! now we come to the strangest part of the whole story. There got about soon afterwards a curious prophecy; no one has ever been able to tell with whom it originated. Perhaps you know it?"

"I know that this shape is said to appear whenever one of us had lived long enough, and that it is predicted that we are none of us to die in our beds, but yet bloodlessly, which is a consolation to any of us who may be engaged in a scrimmage. But the prediction has been falsified—on the last occasion at any rate. My brother Vernon tumbled into a crevasse, you know, and as the poor chap must have been dashed to pieces the tradition fails."

"Well, I don't want to encourage you in any uncomfortable apprehensions, Dorrien; but what you say does not necessarily follow."

"Now you mention it, no more it does. And it is undoubtedly a queer thing that we should all have come to grief by water. I suppose, as a glacier is frozen water, the last instance holds good. Then there was my uncle, who died suddenly on deck, and was buried at sea. My grandfather, again, was drowned while skating, and they say the tradition carries itself further back still. However, as we seem all born to be drowned we can none of us be hanged, so there's a bright side to even that situation. By the way, was the 'Ban' to the fore on the last occasion?"

"I only know that so it was reported. A shepherd came running in from Durnley Downs one night, with a white face and chattering teeth, and vowed he had seen and heard the dog on The Skegs. Two days afterwards the news of the disaster arrived. But I wouldn't trouble my head about the affair, if I were you."

"Not I. Life is a precious deal too prosaic and tangible a concern for a man to bother himself about local superstitions."

"Well, I should have imagined that would be your idea, or I would not have opened my mind upon a gruesome tradition which is supposed to concern you and yours," was the rector's reply, in a more careless tone than he had adopted yet.

One side of the prophecy, however, he withheld from his questioner. This was, that though every male Dorrien should under it meet with a bloodless death—presumably by water—the power of the "Ban" would at last be broken—broken by some terrible and tragic eventuality, obscurely and ambiguously hinted at.

"By Jove, Doctor, but you do know how to tell a ghost story," laughed Roland, when the other had done. "Why, you spun that yarn as if you believed every word of it yourself."

"Well? That's the right way to tell any story, isn't it?" said the rector carelessly. And then, as it was getting late, Roland got up to leave.

Later, as he was sending his bicycle through the pouring rain at a pace which should make short work of the three miles of smooth but hilly road which lay between the Rectory and Cranston—Roy, a draggled mass of woolly mud, galloping behind—the incidents of the strange and gruesome tale seemed to take hold of his mind in the darkness.

"Looks as if the prediction was going to be fulfilled again in my own case at the rate this infernal rain's coming down," he said to himself, half jocosely, half grimly.

Chapter Fifteen.

At Ardleigh.

In due course, Roland availed himself of the invitation to which we heard his father make reference, and transferred himself and his luggage to the ancestral home of the Nevilles.

There the cordiality of his reception surprised and pleased him. The Colonel was, as we have seen, very well disposed towards the son of his old friend and comrade-in-arms, and, moreover, was delighted to have a companion for the smoking-room and the morning lounge; one, too, who was such a capital listener; for to Roland the old man's stories were all new, and being good in themselves when not heard too often, the normal quiet of Ardleigh was apt to be disturbed by much uproarious mirth when the two got together. As for Clara, she seemed to have quite forgotten any little unpleasantness which had taken place when they last met, and had put on her most gracious and agreeable manner for their guest's benefit; and as she knew how to show to advantage when she chose, and was exceedingly clever and well informed, Roland found himself beginning to feel rather ashamed of his former bad opinion of her. Mrs Neville, who was somewhat of an invalid and of an argumentative—not to say contradictious—turn, forbore to snub him as she was wont to snub everything male under the age of fifty. "Young men want continually putting down, even when they are right"—was her creed, and, truth to say, she acted up to it most religiously. But in Roland's favour exception was made; whether it was that he was known to possess "a queer temper"—his father's own son, in fact—or that there was some ulterior reason for making his stay a particularly attractive one, his conversational remarks were allowed to pass unchallenged by his hostess to an extent which caused the girls to exchange frequent glances of surprise. Even Roy's presence was not only tolerated, but welcomed, and the woolly rascal, before he had been twenty-four hours at Ardleigh, ran in and out as he pleased, according to his usual way of making himself perfectly at home wherever he went.

"By the way, how does our reformed black sheep, Steve Devine, get on in the capacity of a thief set to catch a thief?" asked Roland, as he and his host were smoking their after-breakfast cigars on the terrace one morning.

"All right as yet," replied the latter, who being in want of an under-keeper, had, on Roland's representations partly, appointed the ex-poacher to that office a few days after his release from gaol—"in order to give him a fair chance of starting afresh," as the kind-hearted old soldier put it. The latter's friends, indeed, shook their heads over the arrangement, and prophesied that it would lead to no good—but the Colonel was not to

be upset in his benevolent scheme once he had made up his mind. So Devine found himself installed in a snug berth with good wages, and if, being in such a fair way to doing well, he did not do it, why, he would have himself only to thank for it as an ungrateful rascal.

Now the ex-poacher knew perfectly well that he owed this piece of luck largely to Roland's good word for him, for his employer had told him as much; and this being so, of course, by all the rules of that maudlin and slobbery optimism which usually characterises human nature in fiction—especially cad human nature—he should have become eternally grateful, and his former hostility straightway have been metamorphosed to lifelong devotion. But was this the case?

Not even a little bit. No idea of gratitude ever entered his head. It was only for his own purposes that the young Squire of Cranston had helped him, argued this ruffian, with the low suspicious cunning of his class, but he, Devine, would keep a weather eye open, never fear.

He was right in a way. Roland had acted to serve his own purposes, but in a directly opposite sense to that suspected by Gipsy Steve.

"By the way, Roland," went on the Colonel, "that daughter of his is a monstrously pretty girl, eh! By Jove, sir, but I don't believe you'd have bothered your head about them if she'd had a snub nose and a squint, eh?"

"No, I shouldn't. Beauty in distress appeals to the susceptibilities of man, whereas hideosity in similar case does not—unchivalric, even brutal as the confession may sound. But as the girl is only on a visit to her father—doesn't live with him—my character may be regarded as clear."

"Ha-ha! You dog!" laughed the jolly Colonel. "That reminds me of—"

But what it reminded him of did not transpire, for at that moment they were joined by Clara, basket in hand. She was going to gather some roses, she said. Roland, however much he might or might not have preferred his cigar and his host's more or less sporting stories, could do nothing less than offer to help her. Which offer was graciously accepted.

"Ha-ha! Roland, she'll make you do all the finger-licking part of the business," jocosely cried the Colonel after them.

“By the bye, what was the sequel to that unlucky smash in the conservatory?” said Clara, as they turned into the garden path. “The orchid, I mean. Did you get frightfully scolded?”

This in reference to a casualty which had befallen during the speaker’s stay at Cranston, when again the sweep of Roy’s blundering tail had wrought mischief, breaking a fairly valuable orchid.

“No—I was let down rather easily. The veteran said it wasn’t a very rare one, and only remarked in his glum way that he supposed dogs would be happier outside conservatories than in them.”

“Ah! I’m glad of that; I was afraid the General would have been dreadfully vexed. Can you reach that, Mr Dorrien? There, if I hold down the bough—so—thanks. Now that other one.”

Her tall, elegant figure showed to advantage in the light morning dress, as in easy attitude she reached up to hold the refractory bough—Clara Neville was not one to indulge in unbecoming exertions. Her voice was low and well modulated, and fell pleasantly upon the ear—around them blossoming rose-bushes and the fragrant scents of the garden—and in the background bits of the red-brick Elizabethan house peeped at them through the trees. In no wise was he insensible to the influences of the picture and its central figure, the graceful, handsome girl talking to him in easy, familiar manner and with her most attractive smile; and then for the first time his father’s words, spoken on the evening of the day he first saw Clara Neville, darted across his mind, “She will have Ardleigh Court”—and now it also dawned upon him that the words had been spoken with design.

Yet how many men would willingly have changed places with him! And, even as things stood, his father’s cherished scheme, for now he felt instinctively that such it was, would not have come adversely to him—if—ah! that little “if!”

“Oh, Mr Dorrien—there, look, you’ve splashed me all over by letting go of that branch too soon,” cried Clara, with a little shiver. “And it has all gone up my sleeve, and it’s rather cold. But never mind,” she added with a laugh, “you’ve come off second best. How you’ve scratched yourself!”

“Oh, it’s nothing,” he replied hastily, apologising for his remissness and feeling guilty. The branch which he had let go of was thorny, and had torn his hand at the same time as it had sprinkled his fair companion with the rain-drops which hung upon its leaves.

“I think we’ve picked enough now, so we can go in. By the way, papa warned you that you would find the thorns your portion, didn’t he?” she said, with a smile.

In his present train of thought the phrase struck him as prophetic. He feared that many thorns would encompass the path by which he was to reach his desired goal, yet none the less was he determined to reach it.

“Mr Dorrien,” said Maud Neville, at luncheon, “the Fates have ordained that you shall go to a tennis party with us at the Pagnells’ this afternoon. Now, don’t swear—secretly, I mean.”

“Maud!” ejaculated her mother.

“If you only knew how urgently Isabel entreats us to bring you, Mr Dorrien,” said Clara, “you would be far too much flattered—or ought to be.”

“Ho-ho! Roland,” laughed the Colonel. “No slipping away to smoke a quiet weed this time, no matter how heavy in hand the entertainment.”

“I don’t think it’ll be heavy,” said Clara. “Isabel generally manages to get together a lively enough set. Too lively sometimes, for it is a favourite trick of hers to ask all the people to meet each other who are most ‘at dead cuts.’”

“Very bad taste of her,” put in Mrs Neville. “But I don’t know what girls are coming to now-a-days.”

Bankside, the Pagnells’ house, was a pretty, old-fashioned box, perched on the side of a hill and commanding a lovely view of the Wandsborough valley. A snug, leafy retreat, all shrubbery and flowers and smooth lawns—it was just the place for open-air festivities. We have already made the acquaintance of its lord on the magisterial bench, which is as well, as we shall not see him here. He has a horror of social gatherings, and leaves all duties of entertaining to his eldest daughter, Isabel—a tall, handsome girl of five-and-twenty.

“So here you are at last, Clara,” was the latter’s greeting, as she came forward to receive the Ardleigh party. “You disappointing girl! I particularly asked you to come rather early, and so you wait until the last moment. How are you, Mr Dorrien? And now—come and have some tea.”

“You seem to have got together a good many new people, Isabel,” said Clara, as they made their way to the tennis ground. “First of all, who is that tall young fellow in white flannels over there, laughing as if he would never stop?”

“Where? Oh, that. That’s Eustace Ingelow. Nice looking boy, isn’t he? Odd you’ve never met him—and hasn’t he grown handsome? I’ll introduce him,” and in obedience to her beckoning signal, the subject under discussion hastened lip and was introduced in due course. Even Clara, who was not fond of the family, readily admitted that in appearance the rector’s son bore out her friend’s eulogium. Tall and well-made, his sun-browned, handsome face wearing the brightest and merriest of expressions, and his manner, though perfectly free and unaffected, devoid of all approach to bumptiousness, the young fellow had been winning golden opinions from everybody.

“Ah, Mr Dorrien, I’ve heard of you,” he said, turning his dark eyes upon this new acquaintance. “Awfully glad to meet you,” and a hearty hand-grip cemented their friendship on the spot.

“Now, Mr Dorrien, no shirking, if you please,” cried Isabel laughingly. “It has been my sole object in life this afternoon to let no two men hang together; so come along and be introduced all round, and do your duty. Can’t help it, Clara, must be done,” she added, with the faintest possible significance in her tone as she turned away.

Roland felt rather savage. He wanted to elicit some information from Eustace Ingelow, by dint of a few carelessly worded questions, but no opportunity was vouchsafed him. However, he descried Margaret on the other side of the lawn, and upon her presently he bore down.

”—Expecting them home? But they are home, Mr Dorrien,” said Margaret in surprise, answering a question as to her sisters’ return. “They came back yesterday. Olive is rather unwell to-day, and is staying at home. Have you met my brother?” as the latter passed them, talking to Nellie Dorrien, to whom he had obtained an introduction.

“I say, Margaret,” said the graceless youth, stopping a moment, “old mother Frewen seems as sulphurous as ever. Look at her over there, ‘testifying.’ You ought to have converted her by this time,” with a quizzical glance in the direction of an old lady, who was an “aggrieved parishioner” of a perfervid type.

“Don’t talk nonsense, Eusty. Someone will hear you.”

“Ha! ha! Let’s go and hear her, at a respectful distance, eh, Miss Dorrien?—it’ll be fun,” suggested crafty Eustace, with the object of beguiling Nellie for a walk round the

shrubberies—an object in which he succeeded; and judging from the frequency with which the fair, sweet face was convulsed with laughter, it seemed that they managed to make the time pass right merrily.

“Nellie, your mother has been looking for you everywhere. It’s time to go home,” said a cold voice at her elbow, and turning with a little start of dismay, she found herself face to face with her father, who was looking very stern and gloomy.

“Yes, papa. I’m so sorry,” and, with a hurried farewell to her companion, she proceeded to obey the implied injunction, her experience warning her that there were squalls ahead; while her late escort, disconsolately anathematising the lord of Cranston as a cantankerous old ruffian, betook himself once more to the assemblage of his fellows.

“Who was that boy with whom you spent the afternoon, Nellie?” asked General Dorrien, in the carriage on the way home.

“I didn’t know I had spent the afternoon with anyone, papa,” she replied, as gently as she could. “But if you mean who was I talking to when you came up, it was Mr Eustace Ingelow.”

“Was it? A most impertinent boy, I call him,” went on her father, with a very dark look. “Because he meets anyone in society, that seems a sufficient reason for monopolising them for the rest of the afternoon. An impudent, pushing, and most forward young cub, to come thrusting himself upon us, and you to encourage him! Who is he, I should like to know? We’ve never seen him before, and, if I can help it, we shall never see him again.”

Poor Nellie made no reply, beyond a weary little sigh. What had she done? Why, the duration of their harmless little walk had barely exceeded half an hour. And in her heart of hearts she owned to herself that the said half-hour had flown very quickly indeed.

“I say, dad,” cried Eustace Ingelow that evening at the dinner-table. “I like that man Dorrien. Rather reserved and—er—quiet at first—the sort of man who wants knowing, eh?”

“H’m, so that’s your opinion, is it?” said the rector, somewhat attentively. “Now I shouldn’t have thought he’d have been at all the sort of fellow you’d have taken to at first sight, Eustace.”

“Yes, he is,” replied the Oxonian decidedly. “He’s a man with a lot in him, I should think. Now that brother of his—the one that’s at Queen’s—he’s a—a—well, a scrubby sort, but I like this one. Roland, don’t they call him, eh?”

“It strikes me, from all accounts, that you like his sister a great deal more,” cried Sophie. “Why, Eusty, you disgraceful boy, you know you flirted outrageously with her all the afternoon.”

“Bosh! What next?” he protested, growing very red. “You girls think a fellow can’t speak to another girl without—er—without—. Besides you weren’t there, and you should never take hearsay evidence, Sophonisba, my jewel.”

“Never mind her, Eusty,” struck in Olive, who had recovered her spirits simultaneously with the return of her brother full of the doings at the Pagnells’. “Never mind her—Nellie Dorrien’s a dear, sweet girl, and you might do worse.”

“What do you think of that, dad? Just listen to them, how they badger a fellow.”

“No—no—I won’t come to your rescue,” cried the rector, with a hearty laugh. “You must fight them single-handed. What’s the good of going to Oxford if it doesn’t teach you to take care of yourself, and against a pack of women, too?”

Chapter Sixteen.

The Die is Cast.

"Rather perfect? I should just think it was," cries Olive, gazing around. "Confess now, you hardened cynic, that in all your wanderings you never saw anything so perfectly lovely as this."

"I'll own up readily enough. I never did," is her companion's reply.

"But—you are not looking at it," turning to find that his glance has been fixed upon herself while he spoke, and colouring softly at the discovery.

"Oh, yes, I am. I repeat, I never saw anything so perfectly lovely as this. What a distrustful little article it is, to require so much reassuring!" and his hand, which has been toying with her small fingers, closes upon them with a fond pressure, as looking straight into her eyes he repeats her words.

From their heathery resting-place on the summit of Minchkil Beacon, they gaze idly upon the glories of the panorama unfolded beneath and around. The great slopes of the downs are gorgeous with flaming gorse and crimson heather. A rich summer haze lying over the landscape adds distance to meadow and woodland, alternating in many an undulating roll—the latter just perceptibly assuming its first autumnal tints; and cosy homesteads, nestling among their sheltering trees, look doubly snug and prosperous as contrasted with their counterparts of the upland farms, whose corn-ricks and a few stunted firs form the only shade. Villages, too, and tiny hamlets, dropped about, as it were. Frondesham, beyond the lofty steeple of Wandsborough Church, which latter rises above that long, grassy ridge as if refusing to be hidden, and on the further side of the valley, the hamlets of Cranston and Ardleigh; the mile and a half of straight, dusty road connecting them looking like a mere streak of whitewash—and, higher up, Cranston Hall, half hidden in its noble park.

And turning to seaward—space. The broad expanse of limitless sea, far down, four hundred feet beneath—blue and placid as the firmament overhead. Two or three brown specks—fishing boats lying with listless sails—are the only signs of life upon its motionless waters. Not even a gull is on the wing, and the wavelets have forgotten to break on the shingly beach. The sun drives on his flaming chariot, slowly, slowly towards the west, and the great cliffs of the bold coastline reflect his lengthening rays in many a ruddy gleam—Hadden's Slide, and beyond, Smugglers' Ladder, a black fissure, rending the whole face of the cliff from brow to base. Then on the other side The Skegs, tranquil, and forgetting to look grim and dour, as they start sleepily from their setting of still, blue

water—and above them the lofty headland where looms the grey tower of Durnley Castle—a mouldering ruin. Farther and farther recedes the outline of the rugged coast, in rocky bay and bold promontory, with here a strip of shingle, there a line of seaweed-covered reefs, till it loses itself in a faint confusion of distant blue.

It is golden August now—rich, glowing, sensuous, lovely August—when summer, as if suddenly awaking to a sense of opportunities neglected and to the consciousness that her days are nearly numbered, would fain crowd all her accumulated glories into the few yet remaining to her, pouring out her choicest gifts with a lavish hand, as though anxious that we should think kindly of her when she is no more, by virtue of her sudden repentance and amendment at the eleventh hour.

Should you, while taking your walks abroad some fine summer's day, chance, unexpectedly, and in a secluded spot, to light upon about six foot of Young England taking it remarkably easy in a reclining attitude among the soft and fragrant heather; and should you, moreover, descry seated in very close juxtaposition to Young England aforesaid, a sweetly pretty girl, occupied mainly in dividing the shelter of her sunshade with the male and recumbent head, while listening attentively to words of wisdom—or the reverse—emanating from the male lips; you would, we trow, if of a kindly disposition, retire as you came, leaving the idyllic pair undisturbed. If of a cynical turn you would, we trow, chuckle, as you went, over one more instance of human fatuity. But whatever your nature you would decide that affairs between this particular couple had gone tolerably far.

Well—and so they had.

There are, we take it, about three ways which lead to what the provincial reporter delights to term "the hymeneal altar." The first is the ordinary "proposal," wherein John is conventionally supposed to sue humbly for the privilege of maintaining Mary for the term of her natural life, eke Mary's prospective lineal descendants in any number—not exceeding seventeen—peradventure with a mother-in-law thrown in, and to count life as not worth living, in the event of these multifold advantages—we will not call them liabilities—being denied him. The second may be termed the extraordinary "proposal," wherein the overtures are precisely the other way about, barring, it may be, the maintenance condition and the mother-in-law; and this, by the bye, is not so uncommon as Mrs Grundy affects to believe. The third differs in toto from the other two, in that it does not deal with "proposals" at all, but is the result of evolution—taking rise in a tacit and intangible understanding, and culminating in an arrangement neither more nor less definite than any entente à deux can be said ever to be. This way, on the face of it, is the most risky of the three, but it has its advantages.

Whatever its risks, however, just such an understanding exists between the pair whom we find alone here on the summit of Minchkil Beacon. Roy, curled up there among the heather and apparently asleep, will take good care that the intruding steps of any afternoon wayfarer shall not approach unsignalled—and meanwhile to all purposes these two have the world to themselves.

"Am I distrustful?" says Olive softly, in comment on her companion's last remark.

"No, you're not," is the vehement reply, "but I am. I thought you were never coming back, and was very nearly going up to Town myself. Now look here. I can't let you go again!"

"But I must go again," she objected demurely, but with a flash of mirth in her dark eyes. "I shall have to go soon, too."

"You shan't." His hand closes, on hers, as if the prohibition was to be put in force at that moment and by physical agency.

"Diddums teasums then!" says the girl in tones of mock soothing, passing her little hand over his forehead and hair caressingly. "You know, dear, I like sometimes to arouse the savage in your composition. It amuses me, because I can send him back into his shell in a minute. But it's all very well. You had a very good time of it while I was away. At Ardleigh, for instance!"

For all answer he laughs—quietly, almost inarticulately, as a man will laugh over some proposition manifestly, absurdly preposterous.

"That's all very well, but I hear the Nevilles are very delightful people, and—"

"Broomsticks."

"—And Clara and Maud, you know, were very sweet to you, and Isabel Pagnell—"

"—And Mother Frewen, and Miss Munch and Mrs Bunch. Go on. Run through the whole list—of broomsticks."

"And then you used to have snug talks with Margaret over the fire on wet afternoons, and I don't believe poor little me was missed a bit. Margaret can be very entertaining when she likes."

"A broomstick!"

“Mr Dorrien! That’s rude.”

“Excessively. But in evoking the latent barbarian, for whom you just now expressed—er—a flattering partiality—you have once more provided yourself with further amusement.”

Her only answer is a merry laugh, and for a few minutes neither speak. The whirr of a reaping machine—for the early harvest has already begun—and the sound of reapers’ voices is borne up from the valley, with now and then the barking of a farmhouse dog. The rallying note of a covey of scattered partridges, the distant cawing of rooks, and the hum of bees gathering their stores from the cells of the blossoming heather, all blend into a luxurious harmony, well in keeping with the still witchery of the waning afternoon. They are outside the world, for the time being, these two—away in a cloudland of their own, bounded by the purple heather around and the sapphire sea below, the ordinary considerations of mere prosaic, everyday life as far removed as the distant sights and sounds in the valley beneath. Stay, though. One of them cannot altogether shut out these obtrusive considerations. Roland, cool and cynical beyond his years, cannot forget that the brightest picture has its reverse side, and that there will be a morrow to this cloudless day of radiance and of love.

He has striven to cherish a vague and desperate hope that something may occur tending to smooth matters—yet it is hardly likely. That unlucky stay at Ardleigh—how far back it looked now—seemed somehow to have committed him to the fulfilment of his father’s wish; in the latter’s eyes, that is, for he stood committed in nobody else’s. Moreover, as General Dorrien’s hints on the subject grew plainer, so did his animosity towards the Ingelows increase, and this to such a pitch that more than once a terrible rupture was imminent, as Roland found himself compelled to listen to his father’s violent and unreasoning tirades. Still, he managed to conceal his feelings. But every hour confirmed him in the certainty that the day he decisively announced his intention of running counter to his father’s cherished scheme, that day would see him disinherited.

And now a sweet, serious look has come over Olive’s face, and it seems as if the bright, merry-hearted girl had been changed, all in a minute, into a tender, thoughtful, loving woman, who knew the world and its sorrows well.

“Darling?” she exclaims softly. “There is something I want to say to you, and I don’t quite know how to say it; however, I must try. I have been thinking so much lately whether you are not making a great mistake—whether I have any right to let you risk your future, whether it would not have been much better for you had we never met. Wait—don’t interrupt—let me say all, it’s difficult enough, Heaven knows. Why should

you imperil your interests and perhaps be for ever separated from others you love—and all for me? Why should I bring sorrow upon you? Roland, darling, think well of what I say. Remember it is not too late now. The day may come when you will look back upon this sweet—this beautiful time"—a quiver in her voice—"with nothing but bitterness. What then?"

Has her love for him at its climax given her a sudden and magical insight into the future? Is the time coming when he will remember her prophetic words—but their fulfilment, it may be, in a different sense to that in which they are uttered?

"What then?" is the vehement reply. "Only this, that—that"—(the strong, cool-headed man finds himself helplessly stuttering)—"that this understanding of ours—delicious as it is to have it all to ourselves—must become public property to-morrow. You must never be in a position to say such things to me again."

"Oh, my darling! I am only thinking of you and your happiness." Then, with a warm rush of feeling: "Can such a day as this ever come again in a lifetime? It is very foolish of me, but I have a presentiment that there is trouble before us, and that even now it would be better for you had we never met. I want you to do nothing in a hurry. Better to wait—to go on as we are—than to risk your prospects for me."

He finds no great difficulty in reassuring her as they sit there in their golden lotus-dream, with all the glories of earth and air spreading around them. The busy world lies far beneath; here, silence and the evensong of birds, and the flood of dazzling sheen on the purple sea, as the sun dips down nearer and nearer to his liquid bed. Just then, in silvery chimes, distant yet clear, the bells of Wandsborough steeple ring out the Angelus.

Then they descend the heather-clad slope, and make their way through the dewy, silent fields. And now a great orb of fire touches the farther edge of the glowing sea, tingeing it blood-red, and the horizon is all aflame. A passing gleam, as a ray from an enchanted world, strikes broadly over hill and lea, then fades, leaving the earth in shadow, and the fragrant breaths of gathering night fall thickly around. There is a scent as of crushed roses in the air, and the grass is already wet with dew. The distant bark of a sheep-dog from an upland farm, the lowing of kine wending their way to the milking yard, the whistle of the reapers leaving their labour—only these sounds breaking musically now and again upon this stillness of rural peace.

So ends the day. But what of the morrow?

Chapter Seventeen.

Check!

"Can I see Mr Dorrien?—Yes, certainly. Show him in here," and the rector, making a hasty note on the margin of his paper, laid aside his pen as Roland was shown into the study.

A nervous man, full of the errand on which he had come, might have felt his besetting weakness to a painful extent at the prosaic hour of 10 a.m., here, in this judicial-looking apartment, wherein multitudinous papers disposed about seemed to speak of the more serious side of life, while the shelves of heavily-bound volumes lent a somewhat severe air to the room—and that notwithstanding the real cordiality of his reception; for it is one thing to be on sufficiently intimate terms with a man to justify your dropping in upon him informally for a friendly chat, and quite another to offer yourself as his future son-in-law. But Roland was not of the nervous order. Even had he been, it is probable that experiences of tête-à-tête interviews with a far more formidable personage than Dr Ingelow would have eliminated from this one all its imaginary misgivings, if only by contrast. So after a commonplace remark or two he came straight to the point without difficulty.

Quietly, yet attentively, the rector listened to all his visitor had to say, and listening, felt no doubt as to the eligibility of the speaker. Possibly he was not wholly unprepared for the avowal, sooner or later. Anyhow, he showed little or no surprise. It was his wont to receive important matters calmly.

"And so I must give up my little Olive?" he said, with a pleasant smile. "However, I suppose the certainty of having to part with them some day or other is one of the disadvantages a man has to labour under if he owns pretty and attractive daughters. But may I ask, Mr Dorrien, whether you have informed your family—your father—of the step you propose to take?"

Roland stared. He was considerably taken aback by this question, and, in truth, not a little annoyed. And an unwonted formality about the other's tone tended somewhat to disconcert him.

"Well, no—I can't say I have. Naturally, I imagined that you yourself were the first person to be spoken to on the subject. To be candid with you, Dr Ingelow, I have knocked about the world long enough to dispense with the paternal sanction to any undertaking of mine. Moreover, you may possibly be aware that my family and myself are never on very good terms—unfortunately, I admit—but still it is so."

The rector did not at once reply. He was leaning back in his chair, one hand thoughtfully stroking his beard, while the other toyed listlessly with one of the buttons of his cassock, and his brows were slightly contracted.

“It is unfortunate, Dorrien, because the fact of things being so, rather tends to complicate the situation,” he replied at length, as the slightest possible movement of impatience, which Roland could not for the life of him suppress, did not escape his quick perceptions. “For it happens that I have certain old-fashioned ideas of my own on these matters. Wait—just hear what I’ve got to say”—laying his hand on the other’s arm with a kindly, reassuring touch—“and bear with what you think an old man’s unreasonable whims. Now go straight to Cranston and lay the whole matter before your father. Then come back here and tell me the result.”

“Am I to understand, then, Dr Ingelow, that you will only grant your consent subject to the contingency of my father granting his?” said Roland, in a tone whose bitterness it was impossible to conceal.

The rector felt puzzled by the directness of this query, but he did not show it.

“I haven’t asked you to do a very hard or unreasonable thing, Dorrien,” he said, with a quiet smile. “Now do oblige me in this. Can you not see that I am justified in requiring it? Then we can talk over matters further.”

Roland felt thoroughly outflanked. He could not tell his father-in-law elect that his own amiable parent would more readily give his sanction to an alliance of his house with the Prince of Darkness than with that of himself—yet he knew perfectly well it was so. Here, indeed, was a most formidable obstruction in the way; one, moreover, on which he had never reckoned. He could only agree mechanically to the rector’s proposal, but his heart sank within him as he took his leave. No, he had not bargained for this.

All seemed to augur badly for the successful outcome of his errand, for the General was out, and was not expected back till nearly dinner-time, he learned on reaching Cranston. But the General returned in such a state of ill-humour that it was obviously useless to broach the subject that night. On the morrow—well, it was just possible that some miracle might interpose on his behalf, but hardly probable. Never did it seem to him that he could remember a more thoroughly depressing evening than this one. His father scarcely spoke, and when he did address him it was in a tone of studied coldness; his mother would now and then make a captious remark, while Hubert sulkily plied his knife and fork, and made no attempt at conversation whatever. Heartily glad was he then to find himself at last in the smoking-room.

“Hallo! Roland—there you are,” cried Hubert, banging the door behind him, and flinging himself into an armchair. “Now one can breathe freely, at any rate. The veteran looks sweet to-night, doesn’t he?”

“Yes. What one might call re-entering the glacial period, eh?”

“Haw! haw! Rather. But ’pon my soul, you ought to thank your stars night and day that you’re out of this infernal house.”

“H’m! Why don’t you go abroad, or somewhere, during the ‘Long’! You’ve heaps of time.”

“Don’t I wish I may get it! He takes precious good care I don’t—that’s why,” rejoined Hubert, wrathful over the memory of his wrongs; and then he relapsed into silence. The fact was, he began to feel embarrassed, for he was trying to summon up courage to ask his brother a favour. He had been leading a life of terrible anxiety for the last few weeks. A bill was on the point of falling due, and he had not a notion how it was to be met. Result—another exposure. For what made it worse was the fact of his having denied further liability when his father had paid off his debts a couple of months back, and now it would come out that he had—well, stated what he knew to be contrary to fact. In his extremity, he thought of Roland, and now the moment struck him in a propitious light.

“Keeps you tight, I suppose?”

“Tight! I should just think he did,” replied Hubert, with alacrity. Surely the conversation was working round towards a favourable opening.

“Hard luck that. Try one of these weeds.”

“Thanks. And—er—I say, Roland, there’s something I rather thought—er—you might perhaps do for me. The fact is, you see, I’m in a devil of a fix just now—don’t know which way to turn. And if the veteran should find it out I’m clean done.”

Roland eyed him rather curiously.

“Well, what is it? Cash—or petticoat? Those being the two main sources of man’s difficulties.”

“Well, it’s a bill.”

“Been flying kites, eh?”

“Yes,” answered Hubert in desperation. Why the deuce was the other so infernally laconic and quiet over it—why couldn’t he show a little feeling? he thought—and then his heart sank, for he made sure Roland would put him off with the usual excuse. But the next words reassured him.

“H’m! That’s better. If it had been the other phase of the root of all evil, I don’t see how I could have helped you to avoid reaping the traditional whirlwind. But what’s the amount?”

Hubert named it—rather shamefacedly. It was a fair sum, just topping the three figures. More, a good deal, than Roland had expected, but he showed no surprise. He had made up his mind to help his brother in this, though Hubert’s deportment towards himself had hitherto been ill-conditioned enough—and row he speculated idly as to whether the other would feel any gratitude towards him or hate him all the more.

Hubert, meanwhile, felt his fears revive during the silence that ensued, and he thought enviously of all the advantages his brother possessed. Here he was, free from this wretched home, with a handsome independence of his own, over and above being the heir to the splendid family place. Surely he would help him. He lived very quietly, and could not be short of cash himself.

“What makes it worse,” he went on desperately, “is that I told the ‘Relieving Officer’ there was nothing else outstanding, when he pulled me through before, and now he’ll find out there was. I don’t know how the deuce I did it—but, you see, this was such a big thing, and he was so beastly satirical and sneering, that somehow I got in a funk and shirked it. Hang it all, Roland,” he broke off in a kind of irritable despair, “it’s all very well for you, you see. You’re independent of him, and are not driven to do these things; while a poor devil like me—oh, well!”

“My dear fellow, there’s not the least necessity for jumping down my throat, I assure you. I wasn’t going to offer an opinion on the matter. Nor am I going to lecture you—unless, perhaps, you don’t mind my advising you to square this up and have done with it. I’ll write you a cheque when we go upstairs.”

Even while he spoke it flitted across Roland’s mind that the time would probably come when, in a pecuniary sense, his own position would be insignificant in comparison with that of his younger brother. Would he have helped him, he wondered, were their positions reversed? But then Hubert was an extravagant young dog, and would in all likelihood go through life in a chronic state of “hard-up.”

“By Jove, Roland, it’s awfully good of you,” he cried, in such a tone of genuine relief as to draw that queer smile to his brother’s face. “Thanks, awfully. The fact is you’ve got me out of a deucedly deep hole—and—er—”

“How about by-by?” said the other, recovering himself from a stretch and a mighty yawn. “It’s waxing late. Better lay hold of that candle, I’ve got one in my room. Come along, and we’ll draw the cheque.”

Hubert took the hint to say no more about it, but he went to bed with a lighter heart than he had done for many a night. He had that cheque safe in his possession. Wiser thoughts might have prevailed in the morning—his brother might have thought better of it—might have discovered that he couldn’t spare the cash—what not? He need not have feared. Whatever his faults, Roland Dorrien was incapable of going back on his word, and had the amount in question reached the limit of his worldly possessions, he would still have parted with it.

Chapter Eighteen.

Father and Son.

"Do you mind coming this way, Roland?" said the General soon after breakfast the next morning. "Neville writes to say," he went on, closing the library door behind them, "that they are going to give a ball on a large scale on Friday—it's Clara's birthday—and is very anxious for you to go to Ardleigh to-morrow, and stay over it. This is Wednesday, so I suppose you may count upon nearly a week of it up there, to which, I daresay, you won't object," he added, with some significance.

"Well, I don't much care about it. I might manage the ball, but the fact is it will be rather inconvenient to go and stay there just now. Besides, I seem to have only just left."

The General frowned slightly.

"I hope you'll think better of it, Roland. You cannot really have anything to keep you from going, and Neville will take it ill if you refuse. You and Clara got on very well together when you were staying there before, didn't you?"

"Extremely well. Couldn't have got on better," assented Roland. They were coming to the point, he thought, but he would let his father work up to it in his own way. Let the adversary show his hand by all means, his own would be so much the easier to play.

For a few moments they sat in silence. The General's brows were knit as he sat thoughtfully balancing a paper-cutter between his fingers. Then looking up quickly, and speaking with the air of a man who has thought it out and quite made up his mind, he said:

"I don't know why we should fence any more with each other, Roland. It will perhaps be best, as we are alone together, to be plain and above-board. But, first of all, I may state that I have strong reasons for wishing you to accept this invitation."

"Indeed, sir. May I ask what they are?" The General made a movement of impatience. "Now, can you not guess them, Roland?"

"I might—I don't say that I couldn't. But guessing is at best unsatisfactory work, and apt to lead to cross-purposes," said Roland very quietly. "As you said just now, why should we fence? What is it you wish me to do?"

The General gave a slight shake of the head, half deprecatory, half perplexed. He had not foreseen the extent of the other's quiet self-possession, and there was a determination underlying his eldest son's tone which he did not at all like.

"Well, Roland, just listen to me. You have been back in England some months now, and, I presume, intend to remain. Does it never occur to you that one with your position and prospects might employ life better than by lounging through it aimlessly as you are doing now?"

"It certainly has occurred to me. Though in the matter of position, I do not feel particularly exalted—and as for prospects, with all respect, sir, I would remind you that I am without any at present."

"This is mere fencing," answered his father testily. "By the way, your talents in that line would be of invaluable service to you at the Bar. Now, you must be perfectly well aware that your position is one of considerable importance, seeing that you must one day occupy my place here."

"It's very good of you to say so, sir," replied Roland quietly. "But," he added to himself, "if you don't flatly contradict that statement before another hour has gone over our heads, why, the age of miracles is recommencing."

"Things being so," continued his father, "it is right that you should recognise your position as my eldest son. Now did you ever contemplate the contingency of marriage?"

"I have thought of it—yes."

"Ah!" and the General's brow cleared perceptibly. "Now, we are not so badly off about here in the matter of choice; we are fortunate in having for neighbours some good families—very good families, indeed. But I think it would be hard to find among them anyone more thoroughly suitable than Clara Neville. She is exceedingly good-looking, most accomplished and agreeable, and has plenty of sound common-sense; in short, any man might be proud of her as a wife."

"She is, indeed, all you say," assented Roland mercilessly, a sort of grim humour impelling him to draw his father thoroughly out.

"Ah! I should always have given you credit for being a man of taste, Roland," rejoined the General, with more kindness in his tone than he had used for a long time. "Then, too, she is the daughter of one of my oldest—I may say my oldest—friends, and she will inherit Ardleigh. You have seen for yourself what Ardleigh is. It is a splendid property,

and adjoins this. Such an opportunity of combining the two may never—will never occur again," he continued, speaking more to himself than to his son. "And, Roland, only think what a man with such a stake in the county as Cranston and Ardleigh might do. Why, his influence would be unbounded. Any career leading to the highest distinction would be open to him."

In spite of the knowledge that he himself would be the chief sufferer, Roland, as he sat listening to his father, could not help feeling a kind of pity for the disappointment which awaited the latter, when his ambitious schemes were ruthlessly shattered, as they were destined to be in a moment.

"So now you see why I wish you to accept this invitation," went on the General. "The alliance will be a most suitable one in every way, and most desirable."

"But aren't we getting on rather fast?" said Roland, thinking he saw a straw, and clutching at it instinctively. "What reason have we to suppose that Clara Neville regards me with any more favour than she does any other man?"

"I feel sure of this, Roland: if she doesn't, it'll be your own fault entirely," was the reply.

Well, that straw had gone down with him. There was now no alternative—he must declare himself. It is just possible that, in one of weaker calibre, the temptation to procrastinate might have prevailed. The moment was not a favourable one for making his statement—indeed, it could hardly be more unfavourable; what would be easier than to put it off for a day or two? But he entertained no such idea.

"You saw a great deal of each other, I believe," went on the General, anxious over his silence. "And you have just told me you got on excellently well together?"

"So we did, and I trust we always shall. And I am sorry to be obliged to spoil your very attractive plans. I have the greatest regard for Miss Neville, but as for thinking of her as my wife, why, I can't imagine the possibility of such a thing."

It was out. The bolt had fallen. For a few moments the two sat facing each other without a word. At last the General spoke, but his voice sounded very harsh and constrained.

"Do you really mean this, Roland, or is it merely the outcome of some passing fancy of yours? Now, do nothing in a hurry. Take time—think it well over. I cannot believe that a sensible man like yourself can be blind to all the immeasurable advantages that the course I recommend would bring."

“There is one advantage which has been left out of that course, father,” said Roland in a much softer tone than any he had yet employed. “That is—Love,” and he paused. “Ah! well, I am very sorry to have disappointed you,” he went on, as his father made no reply, “and on that account, and on that only, I wish it could have been otherwise. It is unfortunate, very, that you should have put this idea before me just now, for as a matter of fact this very day I intended to communicate to you my intention of marrying Olive Ingelow, the second daughter of the rector of Wandsborough.”

The trumpet had been blown, and that with no uncertain sound. War was declared. In declining to agree to his father’s plan, Roland had strayed dangerously far from his supports; in revealing his own he had burnt his boats behind him.

“So that is your intention, is it?” said his father in icy, cutting tones, when he had recovered from the effect of the audacity of the statement.

“Yes, it is. And I venture to hope, sir, that it may have your sanction.”

“Do you? But I have not the pleasure of the acquaintance of this young—lady, with whose relationship you are anxious to honour us,” was the satirical reply.

“I hope you very soon will have. Then you will see that she is in every way our equal as to birth, thoroughly well educated, and as sweet-tempered as she is beautiful. Now, father, you will not go against me in this,” he concluded, his face softening as he thought of Olive.

The General had risen from his seat and was pacing the room.

“My sanction?” he repeated, and it was evident that he was labouring to repress his strong excitement. “My sanction—that is what you want, is it? Then know this, Roland. As sure as you sit there you shall never have it—never. And what’s more, unless you give me your word, before you leave this room, to break off this affair unconditionally, now, at once and for all, you and I are strangers henceforth—total strangers. Do you hear?”

“I do.”

“Don’t think that I have been ignorant of your doings all this time. Don’t think that it has not been patent to us all how you preferred the society of these low adventurers to that of your own family.” There was a look on Roland’s face which would have warned most men to stop, but his father was not one of them. “And as for this—this young person you have chosen as an instrument for disgracing us, why, you must surely recollect that both

your mother and myself witnessed her disreputable, immodest behaviour, and that on the public high road—"

"Just stop, sir—stop. What the devil do you mean by talking like this? Remember who you are talking about, please." Roland had sprung to his feet, and stood confronting his father. His face was ghastly white, but his eyes glowed like two living coals, and his hands were clenched with the firmness of a vice. "Stop, do you hear? By God, if any other man had said that—" And he paused, restraining himself with an effort.

"So, so, sir," cried the General furiously. "So you dare to stand there and threaten your father! So you dare to talk to me in this tone! You dare to stand there in your damned strength and talk to a man twice your age in that strain—I wonder Heaven does not strike you dead as you do it. But go—get away out of my sight, let me never see you again. One who can so far forget all sense of duty is no son of mine. Go! Do you hear—go?" and he pointed towards the door, his hands shaking in a perfect palsy of rage.

Roland walked to the door.

"Yes, I will go," he said, "and that before I forget myself. Good-bye. I recall anything that may have sounded like a threat. Good-bye."

"Go—go!" articulated the General, almost voiceless with rage, shaking his hand at the door. "I'd call down a curse upon you, but it's needless, for you're sure to come to the gallows some day, and after that to hell. Go. Be off with you!" The other turned deliberately and went out. On the stairs he encountered his mother.

"What is it, Roland? What has happened? You and your father have had a dreadful quarrel, I'm afraid," she said, her cold nature roused to a state of unwonted anxiety. "Oh! dear! What is it all about?"

"Nothing, madam—except that the sweetly affectionate care and the pious home-training of my younger days is bearing its natural fruit," was his caustic reply, for he felt a very hell of fierce wrath blazing within. "And now, let me congratulate you upon having things at last exactly as you have long wished them to be."

He passed her. The hall door shut behind him with an angry slam, and thus Roland Dorrien went out from the presence of his father—never to look upon him again in this world.

Mrs Dorrien found her husband sitting in the study in a state of terrible exhaustion. He was a strong man for his age, but the frightful passion to which he had given way had seriously shaken him.

“Has—that—villain—gone?” he asked at length.

“Roland?—Yes. But wait—don’t be in a hurry to talk. Keep quiet for a little while,” she answered sadly.

“The deep-dyed scoundrel! Eleanor, if you had heard what he said to me as he stood there! Now listen to me. He is dead to us henceforth, stone dead. And tell the others—Hubert and Nellie—that if ever they mention his name in my hearing, or hold any communication with him whatever, that day they go after him.”

Mrs Dorrien assented sadly. She had got what she knew to be the secret wish of her heart. Her Hubert—her darling boy—would be Dorrien of Cranston; for she knew her husband too well to suppose he would ever relent. But it may be, furthermore, that her hard, cold nature felt a twinge of regret as she thought of this unloved son and realised that she would never see him again, and if her conscience cried loudly of maternal neglect and duties unfulfilled, we may be very sure she stifled it.

Yet this sin of omission was destined to bring upon her an awful retribution.

Chapter Nineteen.

"And Thus We Parted There."

Roland Dorrien walked from his father's door with quick, angry strides. Everything had turned out exactly as he had expected, and the halle of his ancestors would know him no more. Why should he regret it? Within them he had known nothing but coldness—had met with scant measure of affection—and now he was leaving them for ever. He passed out through the park gates with the Dorrien arms engraved upon the stone pillars—a mailed hand grasping by the neck a writhing serpent, which, with crest reared and fangs gaping wide and threatening, was in keeping with the motto underneath, "I strike"—and reached the high road. Even then he smiled satirically as he reflected that the lodge-keeper's obsequious curtsey would probably be much less profound were the good woman aware that it was only Roland Dorrien, the disinherited heir, who walked past, instead of, as she supposed, her future lord.

Suddenly he became aware of a scuffle in the park behind him, and, turning, he beheld the deer look up from their feeding and trot away in alarmed groups. Then the cause of this appeared—something red and white, tearing at full speed down the drive. A moment more, and the object dashed against him, panting, and nearly knocking him down.

"Why, Roy!" he cried in concern. "Dear old Roy! I had clean forgotten you. And they were quite capable of having you knocked on the head if they had known you were there. Perhaps he did try, as it was," he went on, with a dark look in the direction of the Hall.

But his reflections on the General were in this case unmerited. What had happened was this. Roy, who had been incarcerated in a disused coach-house, finding that his master did not come to emancipate him at the usual time, had raised his voice in doleful protest, but when his subtle ears detected the sound of his master's receding footsteps, whose firm tread could mean nothing else than "gone for good," his piteous howls increased tenfold, emphasised by a series of frantic plunges against the large double doors. Now, it happened that Johnston, the head-gardener, who hated Roy's master with an undying hatred on account of more than one snubbing which his own impudent presumption had earned for him, and by an inverse rendering of the proverb, likewise hated Roy, thought it an excellent opportunity of wreaking his spite on the dog. So, arming himself with a broomstick, he proceeded to the scene of poor Roy's restraint.

"Hold yer rouw, ye beast—wull ye!" said Johnston spitefully, just opening a crack in the door and raising the stick cunningly. But Roy was not quite such a fool. He had withdrawn from the door and crouched away at the back of the room, growling savagely.

“Aha, ye cowardly beastie,” jeered the man. “Iss-ss!” and he poked at him with the stick.

Roy wae now walking to and fro, growling, and every time drawing nearer and nearer to the door, but keeping carefully out of reach of the blows which the biped brute every now and then aimed at him. Suddenly, with a terrific snarl, he made a rush. The trap-door let into the large ones flew open as he flung himself against it, and Johnston, knocked aside by the unexpected weight, rolled sprawling in the dust, and the dog was free. Pausing a moment to make his teeth meet in the thigh of his enemy as he lay, now thoroughly frightened, Roy darted off like an arrow on the track of his master, and came up with him, as we have seen.

“My dear old beauty!” said Roland, passing his hand lovingly over the smooth head, and looking down into the soft, faithful eyes. “You’re worth a regiment of mere human animals! And yet they call you only a dumb, soulless brute. Well, you won’t be sorry to shake the Cranston dust off your paws, anyhow. Come along!”

He turned into the footpath across the fields, which saved a mile of hot, shelterless high road, and his face never relaxed its hard frown as he went over that terrible interview again. “Well, the old man and I opened our minds to one another with a refreshing candour, at any rate,” he said, half aloud.—“Hallo!”

He stood staring blankly, not quite certain whether he was dreaming or not. For there, as if she had started out of the earth itself, was Olive—Roy meanwhile leaping around her and thrusting his importunate nose into her hand, and otherwise claiming his meed of attention.

Roland paused for a moment, staggered. She was looking very lovely, in the neatest of cool walking-dresses, and the blood rose softly to the bewitching face as she met his astonished gaze. She had seen him long before he had caught sight of her, and half shyly, half mischievously had noted the effect of the surprise. But overhearing his last reflection, the glad look changed into one of concern.

“What has happened, dear?” she began.

Instead of immediately replying he gave a couple of quick looks around, and—a few seconds afterwards Olive was readjusting a somewhat displaced hat, a soft, bright blush suffusing her face.

“There! I feel better now?” cried he who had treated her so unceremoniously, speaking with quick vehemence. “What has happened? Squalls—breakers—high seas—everything.

To put it tersely, my venerable ancestor and I have been exchanging opinions of each other in terms far more forcible than polite." But Olive looked very grave.

"Oh, Roland. Was it about—about—I mean anything to do with ourselves?"

"H'm! H'm! Well, as to that, it was about things in general. But don't distress yourself, darling. It was bound to come sooner or later, and for some time past the South Cone has been hoisted on that particular coast. And now we have agreed to keep carefully out of each other's way henceforth."

"But you'll make it up again, dear. People get in a rage with each other and quarrel, but it doesn't last for ever. It would be awful if it did."

"But this will. Olive, you don't know him, and I'm afraid, darling, you don't half know me. He would have to sing very abjectly small indeed, before I could forgive what he said—certainly no consideration of loss or gain would induce me to do so. So here I stand—as here I came—nobody."

"You are everybody to me, love," she answered bravely and cheerfully. "All will come right one of these days, and even if not, we cannot do without each other, whatever we can do without."

Sunshine after storm: balm to the wounded spirit. It is probable that, for the time being, all considerations were forgotten, except that they were alone together. The summer air breathed warm and free around them. Underfoot the grass, recently mown, was short and turfy, beneath the shade of the trees couched a few lazy, ruminating sheep, and the drowsy roll of a mill-wheel, with its accompanying drip-drip of water, was just audible, but everything was soft and slumbrous in the silent meadows. They were alone—and he who had just bartered away his splendid birthright for the love of this girl beside him, felt that he had his reward. He could hardly believe that not an hour had passed since that tornado scene of wrathful passion in yonder Hall, which they could just discern through the trees.

"But, Olive, how on earth did you put in an appearance here just in the nick of time?" he asked presently.

"Pure accident. I had been visiting two bed-ridden crones whom Margaret had promised to go and see, but couldn't. The path leading home struck into yours—so—so I couldn't help being behind you and hearing your wicked words—and they were dreadfully wicked," she answered mischievously. "But—hark!"

A male voice was heard approaching, alternately whistling and singing snatches of a popular song of the day, then a tall, active figure cleared the stile in front of them and drew up short.

“Hallo!”

“Oh, Eusty, you disgraceful defaulter. Is that how you keep your promises?” cried Olive. “Didn’t you vow you would come and meet me, and now I’ve had to walk through two fields full of horrid cows all by myself—and it’s no thanks to you that I haven’t been frightened to death.”

“Oh, here—ahem—I say, hold hard!” cried the Oxonian, quizzically surveying the pair. “All by yourself—eh? Well, it strikes me, young woman, you’ve fallen in with a pretty substantial escort.”

“But not until I had passed the cows, you detestable boy,” replied she, with a tinge of colour in her bright, laughing face.

“I say, Dorrien, she implies that you’re nobody,” went on her brother, without heeding her. “Says she had to come along all by herself. Rough on you, that—eh?”

Roland laughed, and coming to the rescue turned the scale of “chaff” against Eustace, who was fain to acknowledge at last that he was in a minority, and to cry quarter.

“Hallo, Dorrien, don’t sheer off,” cried Eustace, as, having reached the town, a halt suddenly took place. “Tack in and get your eye-teeth into some cold sirloin, anglicè—lunch!”

But the other shook his head.

“Oh, stow all that,” went on the reckless youth in response to some excuse. “Now, don’t let’s have any more talk over it, but ’bout ship and steer for the ecclesiastical hang-out. There are only our two selves. The reverend Padre won’t be in till this afternoon, and the other girls have gone out to lunch at the Gaskells. Olive, tell him he must. He’ll obey orders from you.”

Roland hesitated. He had frequently dropped in in this informal way, and now the temptation to sit for an hour at the same table with Olive, with the prospect of a whole afternoon of her society, was strong. But he remembered that his negotiations with her father were still pending, and he had a shrewd idea that the next interview might not go off quite so pleasantly. Meanwhile, it might strike the rector in the light of a shabby

thing, were he in a sort of way to steal a march upon him in his absence. So he heroically and steadfastly refused. Had he known what was to happen within the next twenty-four hours he would probably have yielded.

“I’ll look round later,” he said. “I want to see the rector as soon as he comes in. That’ll do instead, Eustace, won’t it?”

“Hang it! I suppose it must!” was the careless reply.

And then he bade good-bye to Olive. Only a pressure of the hand, and a look into each other’s eyes—no sweet, clinging embrace. An unceremonious good-bye, as between people who expect to meet again in the course of the same day, no murmured word of love and trust and moving farewell. Yet perhaps it was better so. A little nod and a bright smile as she turned away, and thus they parted, these two. Little recked they how and where they would meet again.

Roland turned away in a very restless, dissatisfied frame of mind. Everything seemed to be working round unfavourably. The rector might not return home till late, and meanwhile he was condemned to these hours of waiting. Though cool enough in an emergency, he was of a nervous disposition, and uncertainty and inaction in a matter of this kind was intolerable. Everything assumed an exaggerated aspect. What if the rector should, after all, refuse his consent? Hitherto he had not believed Dr Ingelow would offer any serious opposition; now, on turning things over, it seemed first possible, then only too probable, that he might. And Olive—he felt pretty certain she would, however reluctantly, refuse to disregard her father’s wishes, once they were clearly laid down; nor in his heart of hearts would he have desired that she should, paradoxical as it may seem. Lovers are proverbially selfish, and it might be that Roland Dorrien was less so than the general man. He had lived his life very much alone, with the result that he had thought much, and developed a maturity of judgment considerably beyond his years. How could he expect this girl to give up her bright, happy home—how happy he himself had had ample opportunity of observing—to wound, beyond all healing, those who had surrounded her life with every tenderness and care, at the bidding of one whom, six months ago, she had hardly heard of? He knew that he had won her heart as no man would ever again win it, yet he would despise himself were he to require such a sacrifice of her. No, the only thing would be to wait for more favourable times.

So the afternoon wore on, and his restlessness increased more and more. He could not read, thinking was worse, and there was no one to talk to. Well, he would stroll round towards the Rectory again. This time luck favoured him. As he approached it he caught sight of Dr Ingelow coming from the opposite direction, and the two met at the gate.

“Ah, I was half expecting you yesterday,” said the rector, as they shook hands. “But come into the study. There we shan’t be disturbed.”

“And I fully intended to have returned yesterday,” replied Roland, when they were seated. “But the fact is, my father didn’t get back till late, and I had no opportunity of speaking to him until this morning.”

“Yes. And—”

“The result was precisely what I expected. He was utterly unreasonable and impracticable. In short, Dr Ingelow, I don’t see how I can avoid explaining that he has a violent prejudice against you and yours. That may have had a great deal to do with it, but he had reasons of his own, which, as they concern others, I am hardly at liberty to mention. Anyhow, I could not for a moment think of falling in with his views, and the result was a regular row.”

“Do you mean that you quarrelled?” asked the rector.

“If a tolerably brisk interchange of compliments, and a mutual agreement to keep carefully out of each other’s way for the rest of our mutual lives constitute a quarrel—and I rather think they do—why, then I must admit we did,” was the grim reply, and his face grew dark over the recollection thus revived.

“Excuse me, Dorrien—you see I always consider myself to a certain extent privileged—but I can see at a glance that you’re a quick-tempered man. Now, isn’t it just possible that you were rather hasty?” said the rector, in his kindest manner, bending a searching glance upon the young man. “I mean,” he went on in response to a decided shake of the head, “you may have forgotten that, however harsh—even unjust, as you think—your father may be, you still owe him a certain amount of respect—of duty. Nothing can get rid of that fact.”

Roland looked up quickly.

“Duty?” he echoed, with an intensity of bitterness which was not lost upon the other. “Duty! My dear sir, I can assure you that that very word formed subject matter for a pretty lively discussion between us, ending as I have described. However, to drop these wretched family details, which must be most tedious to you, you see now I have done my best to meet your wishes, and if I have failed it has been through no fault of my own—that I can say with a perfectly clear conscience.” He spoke with a suppressed eagerness which had been absent from his speech in their first interview. Then the last thing he had anticipated was failure in this quarter; now it was different.

The rector shook his head deprecatorily.

“I don’t like to hear you take that tone. I fear your view of the relation between father and son cannot be borne out. The Fifth Commandment is explicit on the point. But there, this isn’t the time for sermonising, you’ll say,” he added with a grave, kind smile. “Only, the idea of a breach of this relationship is, to my mind, one of the most painful things in the world.”

Roland looked unconvinced. He conjectured rightly that the good priest’s early youth had been fortunate in its natural guardians, and now his own children adored him, which made all the difference.

“You will think me bold in stating that the religious side of the question does not weigh with me in the least—circumstances alter cases,” was his reply. “And at any rate, Dr Ingelow, you will allow that I have never tried to win your favour by feigning a religion which I did not feel. However, to confine ourselves to the matter in hand. I have tried my utmost to satisfy you in what you asked, and have failed. But as I am perfectly in a position to marry independently of my father’s consent, I trust your answer will be favourable.”

Outwardly calmness itself, the rector was in reality much perplexed. A terrible family quarrel had taken place, indirectly owing to him and his—a reflection sufficiently distressing to one of his refinement of feeling. Then, again, this young man must not be allowed to throw up his prospects for life in a fit of rash impulse and hot temper. No—at all costs this must be prevented.

“We will waive the question of duty,” he said. “But is there no chance of a reconciliation? Surely there is. When you get to my age you will realise that life is too short for these prolonged feuds; quarrels between blood relations are of all things the most heart-rending, and the day may come when you will bitterly regret this one. And then, to take a lower ground. How can you, in a moment of anger, and all for the sake of a few hasty words, throw up your really splendid prospects? And how can I be a party to your doing so. Surely you must see that it is impossible.”

“There is no chance of any reconciliation,” answered Roland deliberately. “I would hardly forgive one or two of the things he dared to say, even if he were to go down on his knees and beg me to—and I think even you would hardly expect him to do that. As for what you are good enough to call ‘a few hasty words,’ I tell you we exchanged opinions of each other that would have made your hair stand on end could you have heard us; nor was that all. In the matter of prospects, I have always considered my chances of ever

possessing Cranston to be so very vague and shadowy as not seriously worth reckoning in the light of prospects. And then, look what such 'prospects' would involve. Perhaps twenty years of absolute slavery to the whims and caprices of the hardest and most unloving of masters. Only think of that! And at fifty I might find myself in possession, and Heaven knows I should deserve to. So, in renouncing these most shadowy prospects, this morning, I could not feel that I was actually undergoing any real loss. But I thought I had made all this clear to you yesterday—I mean as regarded the uncertainty of any prospects beyond the actual means in my possession," he added in an anxious tone.

"I don't think you understand me, Mr Dorrien," said the rector, rather stiffly. "I might have hoped you would have known me better than to suppose that I was reasoning otherwise than disinterestedly in this matter of your eventually possessing Cranston or not; or that the latter contingency would detract in my eyes from your eligibility to become my daughter's husband, you being otherwise in a satisfactory position. What I did mean to convey was this. You are young now; all your feelings and aspirations are strong, and warm, and healthful, and you are capable of self-sacrifice; you dearly love my child. I can see that readily enough, although you are not one of the effusive order of lovers," he went on, his tone softening, and a quiet, kindly smile gleaming in his eyes. "You would make any sacrifice for her—and for all this I honour you. But, as I said before, you are young. Well. You give up this inheritance, and you do so cheerfully. Middle age comes on, and you see what should have been yours in other hands. You are a stranger in the home of your ancestors—you have the cares and vexations—ay, and the disappointments of life crowding upon you, while another enjoys in ease and luxury your noble birthright, which has then passed away from you for ever. How will you feel then? Will you have the strength resolutely to bear up against this most mortifying contrast, to banish the thought of it far from you—or will it embitter—eventually perhaps crush the remainder of your existence? This is what I have been thinking of while we have been sitting here. Now have you thought of it?"

He laid his hand on the other's arm with an affectionate gesture, and his dark eyes were full of sympathy as he bent his glance upon the young man's face, awaiting the answer.

"I have thought of it, Dr Ingelow," was the quiet reply. "I had already done so—had weighed the pros and cons most carefully before I spoke to you yesterday. And—"

He stopped short. He was nearly giving the rector an inkling of the other insurmountable obstacle which stood in the way of reconciliation, and any material advantage it might bring with it, but with a natural distaste for discussing family matters with an outsider—however sympathetic—he forebore. Had he not done so, it is possible that the answer to his wishes might have been different; as it was, Dr Ingelow would not

give up the notion that the quarrel between Roland and his father, however grave, was yet capable of being healed, and it was not for him, a Christian priest, irrespective of other considerations, to be the means of widening the breach.

"Well now, Dorrien," he went on, after pausing to allow the other to continue the remark if he wished, "you must see yourself in what an extremely difficult position I am placed. How can I allow my child to marry into a family which positively refuses to receive her? I cannot do so, I fear, with any consideration for our own self-respect. Then, apart from that, you are man of the world enough to know that nothing remains private for long, and that this family quarrel of yours will soon be in everybody's mouth. Now, I ask you, how can I and mine accept the position of arch-mischief-makers, feud fomenters, schemers—call it what you will—in which common consent will place us when it becomes known how you have renounced your brilliant worldly prospects for Olive's sake? Put yourself into my place for a moment—that may bring it home to you. No, Dorrien, surely you must see that this is a position we cannot consent to occupy, and, honoured as we are by your proposal, I fear we must pain you by declining it—for the present, at any rate."

Roland did not answer at once. In the rector's decided tones he felt that his fate was sealed. There was no getting over this opposition, and now, day by day, an insurmountable barrier would rise between him and his love. The room seemed to go round with him—the heavily-bound, solemn-looking volumes, the carved chairs, the still, white Christ upon the black cross in the niche, all passed in succession before his eyes.

"And yet I had thought, Dr Ingelow," he said at last, and his voice was thick and unsteady, "that you, if any man, would be above mere worldly considerations, when the life's happiness of two people was in the balance."

"My dear boy, don't—pray don't talk in that awfully desponding tone," said the rector, moved to the heart by the utter dejection set forth upon the other's countenance. "Now, listen," and going over to him he placed his hands upon his shoulders, in heart-felt, sympathetic touch. "Wait a little while, then do your best to make up this lamentable difference—who knows but what you may succeed far more readily than you think? Then you shall have my hearty consent."

"That will be never," came the reply, quiet, but decided. "The thing is impossible. So I suppose you will tell me that it's a case of resigning oneself to the will of Providence," he continued in a tone of indescribable bitterness, and with an approach to a sneer.

The other made no reply, and for some moments there was silence. There was not a spark of anger or resentment in the priest's heart at the implied scoff, and the compassion in his countenance deepened as he gazed upon the man before him, plunged in the depths of disappointment. He was no mean judge of character, and he had seen much in Roland Dorrien to like and admire—yet he felt sure that the course he himself had adopted in the present instance was the right—in fact, the only safe one.

And Roland himself? As he sat there he was going through a mighty struggle. He had tried fair means and failed, now he would be justified in employing foul, said the tempter. If he could induce Olive surreptitiously to link her lot with his, why then, when the step was irremediable, her father would soon forgive her. The rector was the very last man to bear rancour, especially towards his favourite child. He would soon come round, and then how happy they would all be! The end in this case would amply justify the means, and then—was not all fair in love and war? No, it was not. Roland Dorrien had a code of honour of his own. Had Dr Ingelow been such a man as his own father, for instance, he would have felt abundantly justified in throwing all scruple to the winds, but now he could not do it. He had sat at this man's table and been treated by him in every respect as a trusted friend. His doors had ever been open to him to come and go as he listed, he had been admitted unreservedly and welcomed in this family circle at a time when in his own home he was a stranger. Months had passed in this pleasant, trustful intimacy, and now he felt that he would rather die than betray the confidence of this kindly, open-hearted friend, for whom, in spite of what had happened, he felt no whit less of warm regard. It would be a mean and shabby trick, the very thought of which he would strive to put far from him.

"Forgive me," he said at length. "I am an unmannerly brute to talk like that. A cad, in fact."

"Roland, my dear boy," answered the rector in his most affectionate tone, casting all ceremony to the winds. "Believe me, I have already forgotten it, whatever it was. Now try and face your trouble bravely—you are not alone in it, remember. And, Roland, you will not—not attempt to see Olive alone until—at any rate until I have spoken to her. You are too honourable for that, I know."

"I will not. But, Dr Ingelow, I cannot promise to give her up altogether. It is only fair to tell you that."

The rector shook his head sadly.

"I am afraid you must bring yourself to face facts," he replied, as they clasped hands. "Good-bye. We need not look upon each other as enemies on account of this, need we?"

he added, laying an affectionate, detaining hand on the other's shoulder. "Good-bye for the present—and, God bless you!"

Chapter Twenty.

Darker Still.

"Things are never so bad but that they might be worse," is a clap-trap disguised beneath the gold leaf of philosophy. When a man's leg has to come off—without chloroform—it doesn't make the impending "bad quarter of an hour" a bit less redoubtable to impress upon him the indisputable fact that he might have had to lose an arm as well.

When Roland awoke the next morning—he had engaged a room in the principal inn at Wandsborough—it seemed as if the outlook before him was about as black as it could be. He had made an enormous sacrifice for love, and all in vain; the fruition of that love was denied him. Wrapped in gloomy reflections, he hardly noticed a letter lying beside his bed. It had come the previous evening, but he had chucked it aside as not worth bothering about. Now he took it up and carelessly tore it open. Suddenly an alarming change came over his features, an awful, rigid, grey look, as if he had been suddenly turned to stone. This is what he read:

"My Dear Dorrien—

"I am rather afraid that I shall be the first to make known some confoundedly bad news. In a word the Tynnestop Bank has 'gone,' and the smash is complete. Now the question is, have you got rid of those shares of yours or not—you know we were talking about it when you were up here? If not, I'm deuced sorry for you, for I fear there's no chance—the smash is too thorough, and it's supposed they won't pay sixpence in the pound. Bang they went! without a symptom of warning, and everyone's asking how on earth it was managed so quietly. If you think it'll be any good, run up here and talk things over.

"Believe me, old fellow,—

"Yours, etc, etc,

"John Venn."

"P.S.—I'm bitten myself to a small amount—trusteeship—damned fool's trade. But it's you shareholders who'll be most heavily shot, I'm afraid. I send a couple of papers with an account of the crash—in case you haven't seen it."

Again and again he read through the letter, which had been addressed to the rector's care, till Venn's large, business-like calligraphy seemed burnt into his brain; then he tore open the newspapers. The affair was plain enough. The Bank was an unlimited concern,

and every farthing he had in the world except his last half-yearly dividend was invested in its shares, and now it had fallen with a crash. Roland Dorrien was a ruined man.

A groan escaped his dry, set lips.

"Good God! Nothing like piling it up," he muttered. "If this isn't a day full of happiness! Well, this must have happened before yesterday morning, otherwise I might be induced to believe in the efficacy of curses, and that my very affectionate parent's influence with the Devil stands higher than mine; but it came about too early for that to have anything to do with it."

He laughed—a horrible, blood-curdling mockery of a laugh—as the thought crossed his mind that he might have occasion to decide whether, under all the circumstances, life was really worth living any longer.

Two hours later, and he is on his way to London. Every familiar landmark is out of eight, but imagination carries him back. Had he known what fate held in store for him, was it possible that that stormy interview might never have taken place? The temptation would have been great. Yesterday, at that hour, life had looked very fair, very promising to him, and now, in less than twenty-four hours, he had lost his inheritance—his love—and his means of existence.

And now how light seem the first obstructions which lay in his road yesterday, compared with this last terrible disaster! His renunciation of his birthright—the rector's opposition—now appear to him as very trifles. The first he had made up his mind to—the second could in time have been got over—but now? Love was a luxury he could not afford to indulge in—even life itself must henceforth be dragged out in labour and sorrow and desolation, that is, should he ultimately decide that it is worth dragging on at all on such terms. For now, of course, he must give up Olive, release her from all in the shape of a promise or understanding. It might be years and years before he could even keep himself decently, how then could he in honour hold her bound to him, condemn her to spend the best and brightest years of her life in weary waiting; and for what? For a broken, disappointed man, utterly without prospects and without hopes. Would she grieve for him? At first she would suffer—suffer acutely, he knew; but her bright, sunny spirits would carry her through, and she would—well, in time, forget him. And the unfortunate man almost groaned aloud as he leaned in the corner of the railway carriage, his eyes strained and distended upon the ceaseless downpour without, and the sodden landscape lying beneath its lowering veil of ashen cloud.

There is as a rule something exasperating about the way in which our friends take our misfortunes. If we are of a morbidly sensitive disposition they affect a facial elongation

and a tone of dismal sympathy; if, on the other hand, we are accustomed to present a careless front to the world, they overwhelm us with a cheerful light-heartedness which strikes us as brutally callous—as though, indeed, we could look for anything else in a thoroughly self-seeking world. “Every man for himself, and devil take the hindermost.” Are you in the latter category? “Awfully sorry, my dear fellow—only wish I could help you—but—well, perhaps you will find ranking among His Satanic Majesty’s acquisitions not quite such an uncomfortable berth as you think—and then, you know, you’re sure to get out of it soon—something’s sure to turn up. Well—ta-ta—old chap, sorry I can’t wait—” And the world rolls on.

Roland was conscious of a latent feeling of resentment as he noted the comfortable and even light-hearted expression on his friend’s face. “Looks as if the fellow hadn’t a care in the world, damn it,” was his mental comment.

“Hallo, Dorrien! I’m deuced glad to see you, but awfully sorry I can’t give you any cheering news,” began the other. “I know you’re the sort of fellow who wouldn’t thank me for trying to make things out promising when they’re bad as bad can be—and that’s just what I’m afraid they are. You see, the mischief of it is that it’s an unlimited concern.”

“Yes,” assented Roland drearily.

“By the way, I got your line this morning and would have met you at the train, but I’ve had an awfully busy day of it. I’ve been going into your affair too; you know, I do a lot in the way of share-broking.”

“And it’s all up?”

“It is. You would hardly credit the widespread ruin a smash of this kind involves. Why, there are people who were rolling in wealth yesterday, who to-morrow will be destitute beggars. And there’s no foretelling the extent of the calls which will be made on the shareholders. But I say though, Dorrien, don’t be so confoundedly down in the mouth, man. It’s rough on you to lose a snug little income, but then you’ve got Cranston to fall back upon. By Jove! I wouldn’t mind changing shoes with you this very day. Why, when you’re doing Squire of Cranston you’ll laugh at all this.”

He laughed now—a hollow mockery of a laugh, like a smile forced to the face of a galvanised corpse.

“Don’t you remember my telling you that Cranston wasn’t entailed?” he said abruptly.

“Yes, but hang it! it’ll come to the same thing in the end. And now your governor will—”

”—See me to the devil with all the pleasure in life,” was the sneering reply. “Why, man, we had the most infernal shindy yesterday ever kicked up between two full-blown lunatics. So now you may perhaps realise the exceeding roseate hue of my prospects in life.”

Venn gave vent to a whistle and looked grave.

“Oh, but—he’ll come round in time,” he began lamely.

“Deuce a bit. I tell you the brake of my coach has given way and that successful vehicle is starting down hill now—off to the devil as hard as it can lick. Even that mythical old humbug, Job, had his afflictions come upon him by relays; mine came all in one day, as you’d readily see, if you knew the facts.”

Chapter Twenty One.

Johnston at Fault.

Eustace Ingelow sat in the summer-house at the back of the Rectory garden smoking his after-breakfast pipe, and with him his youngest sister, Sophie, doing some needlework.

They were discussing a letter which the former had received from the absent Roland, also an eventuality concerning Johnston, the Cranston gardener, and the bite he had received from Roy.

“Do you think that abominable fellow really intends to bring an action against him?” the girl was saying.

“He does. He says he’s lamed for life. It’s an arrant lie, of course, on a par with that one about going into the coach-house to fetch a broom and Roy flying at him. However, he won’t get Dorrien’s whereabouts out of me, and I’m rather certain no one else knows it.”

The fact was, that Johnston, seeing a good opportunity, in the mishap which had befallen him, of being revenged on Roy and his master, and withal extracting from the latter’s pocket considerable compensation, had complained to his employer in the first instance. But to his surprise the General curtly and fiercely refused to listen to him, and the man, seeing that another word on the subject would gravely imperil his place, and not to be baulked, resolved to bring an action for damages against the dethroned heir.

Sophie plied her needle thoughtfully for a few moments. Then she looked up.

“Eusty, does Ro—er—Mr Dorrien, say anything about coming back?”

“N-no. He’s sure to be back though, soon. But, I say, you’d better apply to Olive for information on that score.”

The girl shook her golden head sadly.

“Eusty, can you keep a secret? Because, if you can—I’ll tell you one. Well then, I think there’s something wrong—in the first place, from odds and ends I’ve heard out of doors, in the next—er—well—one needn’t look far from home. And dad had a letter from Mr Dorrien this morning, and how awfully quiet he was all breakfast time?”

“There was a deuce of a row between Dorrien and his cantankerous old reprobate of an ancestor—he let out as much as that to me,” said Eustace. “Poor old chap—I hope he’ll turn up again soon.”

“So do I,” echoed the girl. “We don’t see many nice people here—at least not nice men—and he always was such fun.”

“Rather. Especially when you got him quietly over a weed. The quaint, dry sentiments of the fellow were enough to make a cat perish with laughter. Poor old Dorrien! I hope we shall soon have him back as jolly as ever. Hallo!—By George, there’s that rascal Johnston himself. Seedy looking cad with him—perhaps an attorney.”

They peered through the thick foliage of the arbour, and approaching from the other end of the gravel walk was the Cranston gardener and his companion, whom a servant was apparently directing towards their retreat.

“By Jove!” chuckled Eustace. “Now for some fun. Tell you what, Sophie. I’ll read them Dorrien’s postscript.”

“Better not,” objected his more prudent sister. “No, dear, don’t. There’d only be a row, and I’m so frightened of rows.”

“Pooh! I’d chuck the pair of ’em through the hedge.”

“And they’d summon you, and dad would be annoyed, and there’d be no end of bother. Now, Eusty, be a good boy, won’t you, and—” But she had no time for further remonstrance, for the two men had by this time reached the arbour, and stood looking sheepish and awkward, as if each expected the other to begin.

“Ah! good day, Johnston. Anything I can do for you? But—who’s your friend?” said Eustace with a careless nod.

“I ask yer pardon, sir, and the young leddy’s, for intruding, but I thought ye might a’ heard from Mr Roland. And ye said if ye did ye’d kindly let me know.” This was a fact. Eustace, intending to “draw” the Scot, had promised him that much.

“Yes?”

“And—have ye, sir?”

“Yes.”

And Eustace, taking out his pouch, proceeded with the utmost coolness to refill and light his pipe.

“And, if I might make so bold, sir, what does he say?” asked the man anxiously.

“Well, to be candid with you, Johnston, I think you’ll get no change out of him at all. He won’t even listen to your idea.”

“Begging your pardon, sir,” said the stranger, in response to an appealing look from his companion—“begging your pardon, sir, but wouldn’t it be much better that Mr Dorrien should come to some understanding with my friend, here, instead of compelling him to go to law? Now, wouldn’t it?”

“Begging yours—but I haven’t the pleasure of your acquaintance,” replied Eustace, eyeing the speaker with perfect coolness. “Is this your legal adviser, Johnston?”

“Eh, no, sir. It’s just my cousin, who knows the law as well as most lawyers, and—”

“Well, it can’t possibly be his business, and I shall decline to discuss it with him,” decisively went on Eustace, who had a dim recollection of having seen the seedy, ferret-nosed individual before him in the office of a Battisford attorney, where he occupied a position, half clerk, half errand-runner. “And for the matter of that, Johnston, it’s none of mine either, and I may as well tell you so. So I’m afraid I can’t help you any further.”

“And ye won’t give me his address?”

“Whose?”

“Meester Dorrien’s.”

“No.”

“But perhaps we can mak’ ye,” answered Johnston, whose tone was gradually becoming less respectful and more threatening.

Eustace turned slightly in his chair—his tall, fine frame the picture of listless ease, and cool self-possession in every feature of his handsome face.

“Eh? I didn’t quite catch?” he said suavely, merely lifting an eye-brow.

The Cranston gardener, who had obtained his position of awe among the little community of his colleagues and dependents by mere bluster and bullying, was an arrant coward at heart, and simply dared not repeat his remarks.

“But, my dear sir,” began the other insinuatingly, cutting him short in the middle of a whining speech about poor men being denied their rights—“my dear sir, don’t you see—”

“I’m afraid not,” was the imperturbable reply. “At least I see this—that no good will come of discussing the concern any further. But—eh—by the way, Johnston, you didn’t poke at the dog at all—with a stick, for instance, did you?”

The man’s face changed colour, and Eustace, who was watching him narrowly, detected it at once. It was only a random shot, but it had evidently hit the mark.

“Ah! well,” he went on carelessly, “in any case it doesn’t much matter. And now, I suppose, we have nothing further to discuss. So I’ll say good-day—”

Both men stood irresolute for a moment. Then they turned to go.

“Aweel, sir, it’s a queer warrld,” said Johnston, “and, of course, we must just help each other. An’ if ever I get a chance o’ doing you a good turn I hope I’ll do it.”

“That I’m sure you will, Johnston,” carelessly assented Eustace, fully alive to the irony and veiled vow of vengeance in this speech, and hardly able to contain his mirth, so comic was the expression of baffled malice which the man strove to conceal. “Well, good-day, again!”

“Eusty,” said his sister, when they were out of earshot. “You’d better look out. I’m sure that horrid man will have his revenge, somehow.”

“Pooh! A couple of mean-spirited cads. For two pins I’d have chucked the pair of ’em into the fish-pond. The impudence of the dogs! The very sight of them evoked in me what old Medlicott defined in his sermon the other night as ‘a surging of the worst passions of our fallen human nature.’”

All the same he was destined to learn—and that before very long—that the Scotchman’s significant promise might not prove so harmless as he imagined.

While Eustace was making merry over his friend’s letter, the rector was cogitating over a very different style of communication, though from the same source. In it the writer set forth briefly and circumstantially the completeness of his own ruin, adding, that as a

beggar and penniless, he had now no alternative but to take as final the answer which the rector had given on the occasion of their last meeting. There was one thing more—an enclosure directed to Olive, and this the writer ventured to hope might be handed to her. He had purposely left the envelope open in case Dr Ingelow should prefer to peruse its contents, but in any event he trusted it might be delivered, as it was the last communication that would pass between them. It was characteristic of the old priest's honourable and generous nature, that his first act was to fasten down the flap of the envelope then and there.

Now the letter was curt, stiff and constrained in wording, but its recipient could "read between the lines." He knew the world thoroughly, and his insight into that most complex of machinery, the human heart, was all but exhaustive, and now, as he sat with the open letter before him, he could gauge with wonderful exactitude the state of mind of its unfortunate writer. Its very curtness was the outcome of a studied expression of feeling, as of one who should nerve himself to the numbing consciousness of sudden and overwhelming ruin. This man had lost all which made life valuable to him. It had fallen from him, one might say, in a single day. How would he bear it?

"Poor fellow—poor fellow! He is ruined, indeed?" broke from the old priest's lips, as he turned over the whole situation in his mind. "What will become of him?"

He thought of the mutual liking that had sprung up between them—of their many pleasant interchanges of ideas and experiences—their reminiscences of the Great Wild West, gone over together many a time during the cheerful evening meal—and how these things had carried him back to the life and spirit of adventure of his own youth. He thought of the unfortunate man now plunged in ruin and despair, and the picture thus conjured up moved and distressed him more than he cared to own. During the few months of their acquaintance he had accurately read Roland Dorrien's character, and now felt pretty certain that it was not of the sort to gain by such a blow as this last. He remembered remorsefully the dark, reckless face as he had last seen it, full of impatience, resentment and stormy passions, and knew too well that the owner of that face was not the man to accept misfortune as a thing to rise superior to and over-rule to his own ultimate good. No! for him he feared the worst.

Then his eye fell once more upon the enclosure. He took it up thoughtfully. It was not strange that the writer should have sent it to him first instead of forwarding it direct by post, but the act was highly creditable to Dorrien's sense of honour. He conveyed a covert hint, too, in the letter to himself that they would probably never meet again. It was all terribly sad, and now with characteristic scrupulosity the rector blamed himself severely for unnecessary harshness. Yes, he had been hard and unfeeling in that interview. The poor fellow was now overwhelmed in the bitterness of his ruin, to an

extent which he was too proud to show, and desperate. He was a man of little or no religion, consequently a man without hope—and thus thinking, a warm wave of pity swept over the old priest's heart. Could nothing be done for this lonely, uncared-for wanderer—nothing to raise him from where he had gone down beneath the rising tide of adverse fortune? Yes—it could and it should. He would go himself and seek him out and convey to him that he was not without friends; nor would he confine himself only to words of sympathy and friendship, but would think what offer of material aid he could make. Ah! but—would it be accepted? The man was proud. A man who had deliberately put away such a position as Roland Dorrien had done would be difficult to deal with. And for the first time it struck him that he had made far too light of that affair, and the conviction began to dawn upon him, that come what might, do reconciliation would ever take place now between General Dorrien and his son. And what would become of the latter? Again and again the rector's sensitive conscience smote him. Had he been a little less decisive in refusing his consent—had he left the other some ground for hope, it might be the saving of him now—might act as an incentive to him to rise above his troubles. Yes—he must see what could be done, and that without loss of time.

Then, taking the now sealed letter, he went upstairs to find Olive.

"Something for you, darling," he said in his tenderest tone.

"Yes, father. What is it? Oh!"

Her face paled and her hand trembled slightly as she caught sight of the well-known writing, and there was a terrible air of wistfulness in her eyes. Ever since the day her father had told her—with all the consideration and gentleness he could command, as well as with decision—that he could not consent to anything between Roland Dorrien and herself, and had so carefully reasoned out the matter that she could not in her inmost heart accuse him of harshness or injustice—ever since the day her lover had left the place suddenly and without a word of explanation, Olive had been as one metamorphosed. Her brightness and unquenchable flow of spirits had left her; she seldom smiled, never laughed, and spoke but little.

Now she gained her room, and having locked herself in tore open the letter. It consisted of several sheets, closely written, and as she read on, the girl's eyes were dimmed with tears, and at last she could go no further—great, choking, heart-broken sobs were all that she was conscious of. It was a strange letter—there was something solemn and awe-inspiring about it, for it was written as a man might write when certain that he has but a few hours to live, and yet every now and then, it would be traversed by a gleam of humour that was heart-rending, so obvious was it that this was brought in only when the anguish of the writer became too unbearable. Yet there was not a trace of self-pity in the

letter from beginning to end. It was all on her account that his misgivings were set forth. As for himself, well, he took a lot of killing, and supposed he must endure things as they were—and, for her, Time might work wonders, and she might live to be happy yet, far happier than she could ever be if tied to a thoroughly broken and disappointed man like himself; and so her father's decision was right after all. His day was done; ruin had come upon him, out of which nothing could save him, and if she could learn to forget him, all the better for herself, for henceforth to all who had ever known him he must be as one dead.

Then it all came back to her in a moment. She had resented his departure without a word—now she saw how he had been bound in honour not to speak it. She had felt proud, hurt and angry, while all the time he had been crushed beneath an accumulation of ruin and the woe that it involved. How she loved him now—how her heart went out to him in his adversity as it would never have done in his prosperity—how she longed and thirsted to be with him in this dark hour of his distress! All those bright, beautiful summer months passed before her, with their golden hours of love and sweetness and peace—and now! Those first furtive glances exchanged in the church, that accidental meeting on the beach, and the many rambles and long hours together, all rose up to mock her—and the moment when she had tottered between life and death on the slippery cliff path—with him. And now he was gone—gone for ever—and she was left.

Chapter Twenty Two.

What Wandsborough Said.

It may seem strange that to a man of Dr Ingelow's standard of principle and pronounced beliefs, such a cordial intimacy as that which had sprung up between himself and Roland Dorrien should be possible; still more so, that apart from the drawbacks we have narrated, and which were purely mundane, he should be ready to accept him as a son-in-law. Yet he was—and without prejudice to his own principles.

No man living was more thoroughly free from bigotry than the rector of Wandsborough. Principle was one thing—sitting on the judgment seat, quite another. So, although he suspected Roland Dorrien's private opinions to border very closely upon infidelity, yet he did not consider him a subject for social ostracism on that account. Indeed, had the man shown a devout disposition in the face of early bringing up and subsequent associations, he would have looked upon him in the light of a natural curiosity. Roland was just the sort of man whom the ordinary Anglican parson would have regarded with lofty disapproval. But then Dr Ingelow was by no means an ordinary Anglican parson.

Of course, Wandsborough was not long in finding out that Roland Dorrien's place in its midst would know him no more, and its curiosity once awakened, it caught eagerly at the few "straws" floating on the wind of popular report, and proceeded to piece together many romantic and preposterous stories therewith. Dark rumours as to that stormy scene in the study at Cranston Hall began to leak out. Servants have long tongues and still longer ears, and more than one virtuous domestic had stood on mental tip-toe, pausing in his or her then occupation, to listen intently as the sound of angry voices proceeded from the dread sanctum. Before night, the story had not only permeated Cranston village, but had been whispered in Wandsborough, and Roland's abrupt departure the next day seemed a direct challenge to all tongues.

What a good time of it had Miss Munch and Mrs Bunch et hoc genus omne! Now was the time for unearthing all the little bits of half-forgotten scandal and tagging them together, and weaving them into a deliciously parti-coloured whole, amid much head-wagging and "didn't I tell you how it would be?"—"and it wasn't likely that such a one as Roland Dorrien would bury himself in a dull place like Wandsborough, and hardly ever be with his own people, for nothing." First it was rumoured that the General and his son had had a stand up fight in the former's study, then that they had thrown all the chairs and tables at each other. The more oracular declared that nothing short of a duel had taken place, and least said soonest mended; and thus the ball rolled, until the bare facts that actually were known or guessed at, became quite too prosaic for credence.

But what had it all been about? “Ah! haven’t you heard?” And then the mysterious nods and winks would increase tenfold, and the whispered communication would be received in various ways according to the temperament or capacity for humbug of the hearer—but always with a thirst for more particulars. For instance, why should Mr Dorrien have interested himself on behalf of that precious rascal, Gipsy Steve? Must it not have been on Lizzie’s account, and, of course, all young men were desperately wicked, and anyone with half an eye could see through that brick wall; and so the matter had come to the General’s ears. But this story was very soon improved upon, and presently it was that Gipsy Steve had sworn to shoot the young Squire unless he did justice to Lizzie—and it was while Roland was making this announcement to his father, that the latter had hurled an inkstand at his head, and now he had made himself scarce, fearing the ex-poacher’s vengeance. Others again scouted this version. Roland Dorrien was not the man to be afraid of anyone—rightly or wrongly—not he. Besides, Lizzie had no more to do with the concern than they, the speakers, had. It was Olive Ingelow who was the real apple of discord. Couldn’t anyone see that the two were never apart, that the young Squire spent most of his evenings at the Rectory, and how he and the young lady wandered about the lanes together, or sat on the beach all day long!—and now, it turned out that they had been privately married, and that the General had sworn he would never recognise it or set eyes on his son again.

This rumour, once let loose, ranged at will, and these and a dozen other stories, each more preposterous than its predecessor, were circulated throughout Wandsborough, and all the region round about, and gained more or less of ready credence. Among those by whom they were accepted, opinions were divided anent the respective conduct of the General and his son in connection with the affair. Some held that the former was a domestic tyrant of the very worst order, and that the latter had, at last, justifiably rebelled—others again extolled the General as a model parent and a high-principled Christian man, while poor Roland, it was declared, had always been a depraved reprobate and an irreclaimable scamp; in short—and whatever had happened now, he had been rightly served. Then there were not wanting a few who held that between the two it was six of one and half a dozen of the other—that the Dorriens were at best an ill-conditioned, quarrelsome lot, and the less one had to do with them the better.

At Ardleigh Court the tidings of the Dorrien quarrel were received with surprise and dismay. The Colonel warmly espoused the cause of the absent, wherein his wife differed with him wholly. Young men were so intolerably self-opinionated now-a-days, she declared, that no doubt General Dorrien had not been unjustified in what he did. However, having so far vindicated her principles of contradictiousness, she was fain to admit that Roland seemed far more sensible than most young men of his age, and she liked what she had seen of him. Whatever Clara may have thought, she said very little, though on one or two occasions she had stood up—rather warmly for her—for the exile;

and Maud, albeit she had wrangled a good deal with him during his stay there, was really sorry for him, though being of a romantic turn she was inclined to feel very angry with him on her sister's account, her lively imagination having long since settled all that.

"A pack of infernal lies?" cried the Colonel with heat, referring to some of the reports which had come to his ears concerning the absent. "Pooh! I don't believe a word of them. Dorrien's a quick-tempered fellow—always was, by Jove! and Roland's a chip of the old block. I suppose they lost their tempers with each other, and came to high words. As for all that slander, and bringing girls' names into the concern, why, it's scandalous."

"Well, where there's smoke there must be some fire," suggested his wife, with characteristic originality.

"Fire be damned, ahem! I beg your pardon," exploded the good-hearted Colonel. "And I tell you what it is. That libellous old Jezebel—what's her name?—Frewen, for instance, will find herself in Court if she doesn't look out. Libel's a criminal offence, and if she comes before us, I'll commit her for trial—I will, by Jove, as sure as I'm Chairman of Petty Sessions!"

"I think you're rather hard on her," objected Mrs Neville, true to her colours. "She didn't originate these stories, remember."

"It's my belief she did!" retorted the Colonel. "She hates the Ingelows, and would move heaven and earth to injure them—spiteful, canting old harridan. I think Ingelow mistaken, and his vestments and candles and popish fal-lal great bosh—but hang it! he's a thoroughly good fellow in private life, and I'm not going to stand by and see him worried and his girls' characters taken away by that slanderous old Gamp, who probably began life in a chandler's shop—and I'll let him know that I'm not. I'll call on him this very afternoon, by George, I will?"

At Cranston, as may be supposed, cheerful times did not prevail. Always gloomy and constrained, the gloom and constraint deepened tenfold in the days following upon the rupture. The General's ill-humour was now chronic, and when he did speak it was usually to make some incisive remark calculated to render everyone thoroughly ill at ease. Mrs Dorrien was freezingly acid, and the household saw no one and went nowhere, and, needless to say, all reference to the erring one was strictly taboo. Hubert heartily wished the Vacation would be quick and come to an end, and being considerably bored, and proportionately irritable, his sister had to bear the brunt of his—among other—ill-tempers. As for poor Nellie, she felt the separation terribly. She had little thought that morning that she had seen the last of Roland, without even saying goodbye, too. And

now she was forbidden even to write to him. Life was very hard—would better times ever come?

Chapter Twenty Three.

Dorrien of—Nowhere.

A pair of dingy rooms in a dingy London street, communicating with each other by means of a folding door, which is at present shut. A table, decidedly unsteady on its pins and bedight in a chequered breakfast cloth, whereon is a war-worn tea-pot—which article, by the way, knives and forks, dish-covers and spoons seem to have been made specially to match—cloudy delf, cruets not guiltless of defunct flies, an uninviting loaf and a pat of butterine or oleo-margarine, or whatever is the London lodging-house equivalent for butter, and, perchance, when that cover is lifted, a brace of leathery fried eggs, undoubtedly not of to-day's or yesterday's origin, will be disclosed to view. And this appetising repast, and this glaringly-vulgar and soul-depressing abode must soon be exchanged for something more nauseous, for something more vulgar and soul-depressing still, for even this is somewhat beyond Roland's means—beyond the miserable pittance he has managed to save from the wreck. There had been an accumulation of interest on the capital in the fallen Bank, which in a fortunate moment, somewhat earlier, he had been induced to invest in a small speculation, and this, together with a little which still remained out of his last year's dividend, just availed to save him from immediate destitution.

He enters, and listlessly draws a chair to the table. There is a smell of escaped gas in the room, which, mingling with a vaporous whiff from the kitchen of unmistakable cabbage in process of boiling, nearly upsets him. Quickly he throws open the window, admitting a rush of air from the dark, misty street, that makes him shiver; but anything is better than the abominable atmosphere of the house, and again he draws his chair in and attempts to breakfast—attempts. Even Roy, who comes in for most of his master's share, and who has an especial weakness for bread and butter, feeds with a lack of enthusiasm which shows that he, too, is not unaffected by the change of circumstances. And why not he as well as his master? Here, no scamper over breezy downs, no life in the strong, pure air of the salt sea, no sunshine and green fields, and at other times no snug, cheerful rooms, where he may make himself thoroughly at home. His walks are taken in gloomy streets, where he is continually jostled and trodden on—his beautiful coat would seem to have been given him expressly for the purpose of collecting pailsful of metropolitan mud, and he himself is treated as the natural enemy of mankind. Sticks and stones are slily hurled at him from alleys and doorways; twice has a desperate attempt been made to steal him, only failing the second time by great good luck, the fastening of the muzzle into which his nose had been deftly betrayed, having given way, and he, taking prompt advantage of the casualty, had nearly bitten off three of the enemy's fingers, and made good his retreat. Park-keepers eye him with no benevolent glance when he indulges in a scamper in those elysian fields of public recreation, and, even there, other dogs resent

his intrusion, and would carry out the canine equivalent for "'eaving 'arf a brick" far more than they do, were it not that Master Roy, good-tempered as he naturally is, can make great and effective play with his eye-teeth when roused—as more than one quarrelsome bull-terrier or black retriever could testify in pain and sorrow for a fortnight after.

Roland Dorrien's reflections as he sits in this dismal hole, trying to imagine that he is breakfasting, are of the very gloomiest. More than a month has gone by since he learned the worst, and as yet he is without plans for the future. Of his own free will and by his own act he has cut himself adrift from all who might have befriended him in his extremity. No, rather he prefers to sink or swim—probably the former—alone. A few days after we last saw him, Venn received a few lines notifying that he thought it better under the circumstances to take himself out of everybody's way for a time—most likely he should go abroad, but anyhow, had settled nothing; and Venn, on receipt thereof, had repaired post haste to his friend's lodgings, only to find he had kept his word. He had disappeared, literally, leaving no trace. And the good-hearted stock-broker had been sorely apprehensive. Men had been known to do queer things with far less excuse than Dorrien might show, and his pulse would beat quicker more than once when he came upon newspaper reports of any of those ghastly "finds" only too common in the metropolis. And Dr Ingelow, too, who had run up to Town for the purpose, had enquired so anxiously, and seemed so distressed, that he, Venn, could give him absolutely no tidings. Dorrien was a queer fellow, to go and cut all his friends in that way, but then, he was always given to making the worst of things; however, it was to be hoped that some day he would turn up again, and things might come right; and so honest Venn, if he did not altogether dismiss the matter from his thoughts, soon brought himself to regard it with no great anxiety, and plied his daily avocations as if nothing had happened. "Every man for himself" is the world's motto—and vae victis!

And now, within a few streets of him—yet as completely hidden as if on a solitary rock in the Northern Hebrides—Roland sits, engaged in his usual occupation—brooding. What is there left that makes this wretched life worth dragging on any longer? Why should he not end it? Even if he will prolong it, he must toil hard at some uncongenial drudgery till the end of his days—harder than the broad-arrow-wearing wretch, wheeling his barrow in the quarries of Portland. He must sink into a mere machine,—lose sight of the fact that he had ever known better things, as completely as if it had been a dream. He must be prepared to place himself at the beck and call of others—of low, repellant cads, it might be—in order to earn a scanty wage, to put up with the bumptiousness, the insolence of some snob in authority, and be thankful for the privilege of existing. No—never! Better perpetual sleep—oblivion—annihilation. Then he would laugh bitterly to himself. Why, even such a mill-horse lot was barred to him. He was quite useless. His neglected, pitch-and-toss kind of "dragging-up" had been such as to fit him for nothing,

and here, in the fierce competition for the morsels that enabled men just to keep body and soul together, where would he be? Nowhere. He was not of the material to hold his own amongst the raying, hungry crowd competing for a starvation pittance. At times a plan would suggest itself as his thoughts turned towards the Western wilds, where five years of his life had been spent. There, at any rate, he might be free. There life might be just worth living. He was fond of shooting—might he not adopt the life of a professional hunter, supporting himself by the proceeds of his rifle? The rolling plains and the vast silent forests, the serrated ridges of the distant sierras crowned with their dazzling snowcaps, the blue sky and the free air of heaven—surely this would be a good exchange for the gloom and filth and indescribable desolation of the great, murky city! Twice he had been on the point of sailing, and both times he had thought better of it—or worse—at the last moment, and had stayed. An insane, yet overmastering, impulse made him cling to the land which contained his heart's shrine, and, although utterly without hope, yet he could not bring himself to place the ocean between them—not yet.

And now this morning the dingy room, with its glaring, vulgar adornments (!), fades from his gaze, as in imagination he is back at Wandsborough. Every one of those hours, too lightly valued at the time, he has mentally gone through again and again. Every tone of a certain voice—every expression of a certain very sweet and bewitching face, from the moment he first espied that latter in Wandsborough Church, is present in his memory now as vividly as though he were actually living through the bygone time all over again.

"Please, sir, Missus says can I clear away?"

The whole picture fades as suddenly as did its reality a few weeks ago, as in a rich cockney twang the unkempt, down-at-heel slavey prefers the above request.

He moves to the window. The outlook is about as inspiriting as that of a London by-street usually is. A barrel organ, grinding out a popular melody, as though it were a dirge, heaves in sight and sound; and a gang of woeful and decrepit bipeds from a neighbouring Union is discharging its burden upon the ratepayers by shovelling the mud and slush from the middle of the street in mechanical and dejected fashion. He glances at the clock, but there is relief rather than consternation in his mind as he awakens to the lateness of the hour—relief, that he should already have got through so much of the morning. How many mornings were to be got through on this side of—what?

"Come, Roy. Out!"

The dog jumps up and works himself into something like his usual state of excitement attendant upon the welcome summons, and they sally forth. The street is one of those in

the vicinity of Hyde Park, and thither they turn their steps. At any rate it is open—and away tears Roy, trying perhaps to imagine himself on the turfy slopes about Minchkil Beacon as he scampers over the grass, scattering the few sooty disconsolate sheep right and left. Entering near the Marble Arch, Roland walks straight across, nor pauses till the bridge on the Serpentine is reached. It is a dull grey day, and the air is steely and cold. He stands on the bridge, lazily trying to imagine that he is gazing upon a broad river with its green sloping banks shaded by feathery elms, away in the heart of the sweet, peaceful country. The leaves have hardly begun to fall, and save for the muffled din of traffic, there is little to betoken the proximity of a mighty city. Then he wanders on, and eventually reaches the Round Pond.

"That's a fine dog of yours, sir."

Quickly he looks up at the speaker, a man of about his own age, and who wears the appearance of most well-to-do English gentlemen with nothing remarkable about them, and assents. Then the other, who is evidently of a communicative disposition, launches out into a dissertation upon dogs in general and dogs in London in particular, and the drawbacks attendant upon their comfort and well-being in the metropolis; and Roland, nothing loth, finds himself conversing with something like zest. It is long since he has exchanged an idea with anybody, and now he finds a certain amount of diversion in this stranger's talk. Roy, too, seems to take to him, for he wags his tail and suffers himself to be patted in a way that is remarkable; for of late, like his master, though with different reasons, he has taken to viewing all mankind with suspicion.

"And so he comes from America, does he?" says the stranger again. "Do you know, I haven't seen a dog I fancied so for a long time, and I've often seen you and him here before to-day. Now, I hope it's no offence—and, if it is, I really beg pardon—but you wouldn't feel disposed to part with him, I suppose?"

Part with him! Part with Roy—dear, true-hearted Roy, his second self, the one faithful friend who shared his exile. The idea seemed to sting him like a lash! Yet, why should it? He need only answer in the negative, and there wae no harm done. But the question had seemed to come significantly at this moment, for of late he had been haunted by a growing conviction that the time for such a parting was not far distant.

"Oh, no offence, of course," he replied quietly, but there is a troubled look in his eyes which the other sees and makes a mental note of. "But I don't want to part with him."

"Of course. I can quite understand your not relishing the question," says the stranger good-humouredly. "I hate to be asked to sell a favourite dog myself. But—at the risk of being importunate—if ever you should want to sell him, would you mind giving me the

first offer? You shall name your own price. Fact is, I've taken an extraordinary fancy to him. Here's an address that'll always find me."

Under the circumstances Roland thinks there is no harm in accepting the card which the other tenders him, and which bears an address in Kensington, and the name of his new acquaintance, he learns through the same agency, is Frank Marsland. But he does not feel bound to reciprocate the confidence, and after a little more conversation they part: Roland, to dismiss the matter completely from his mind, as he makes his way back to his rooms, and the stranger to wonder who the deuce that good-looking fellow can be who seems to haunt the Round Pond with that splendid dog, and who always looks, by Jove! as if he had committed a murder or was about to commit one.

Chapter Twenty Four.

A Trespasser.

"Nellie," said Hubert Dorrien to his sister, as he was hurrying through an early breakfast on the morning of his departure for Oxford, "do you ever hear from Roland?"

"No—why?" said the girl, with a startled glance around.

"Because—well, do you know anything about the state of his affairs? I mean, had he any interest in this Tynnestop Bank? I've a sort of hazy idea he had, don't you see?"

Nellie turned very pale.

"Is—is there anything wrong with it?"

"By jingo!" replied Hubert with a whistle and stare of surprise. "Ra-ther! Why, it went up the gum—bang—smash. Heaps of fellows ruined—one that I know. But that was more than a month ago. Surely you had heard."

"Never—until this moment. Hubert, I wonder if papa knows. Why, every shilling Roland had was invested in it."

"No!"

"It was, though. Oh Hubert, and now he may be—starving perhaps!" cried the girl, choking down a sob. "What is to be done? We don't even know where he is?"

"By Jove!" muttered Hubert gloomily. "If the veteran knew he might arrange something, eh? It's hard luck on a fellow to be suddenly cleaned out."

He was thinking of that cheque which his brother had sent him on the very day of his ruin. Comparing notes, Hubert now saw that Roland must have heard the fatal news immediately after—probably the same day—yet he had made no attempt to back out of his promise. Hubert Dorrien was by nature bad all round, shallow, intensely selfish and thoroughly mean; yet even he felt uncomfortable as he thought of how sorely his brother might be in need of that very sum he had so generously lent—if not given—him. And yet to-day he was no more in a position to repay it than he had been at the time to satisfy the demand to meet which it was borrowed. But he strove to quiet his conscience. He would repay it some day; besides, now it was impossible, for no one knew where the deuce Roland was to be found—in fact, it was his own fault for hiding himself away from

everybody. Yes—that would do. It was Roland's own fault. And conscience slumbered anon.

But all further discussion of the wanderer's affairs was arrested by the entrance of their parents, and immediately the dog-cart drove round to the door to take Hubert to the station. A cold hand-shake from his father, and many final injunctions from his mother about avoiding draughts, sitting back to the engine, etc, all of which were somewhat impatiently received, and Master Hubert was bowling away at the rate of ten miles per hour towards Wandsborough Road Station, whence his brother had departed some weeks earlier, bearing with him a crushing load of heart-break and unexpected ruin. But no thought of this crossed the mind of this amiable youth, as he lounged back in a first-class smoking compartment, puffing at a choice Cabana. If he thought of his unfortunate brother at all, it was only with an uneasy fear lest he should ever be reinstated at Cranston, which would make all the difference in the world to his—Hubert's—prospects.

Poor Nellie was in a grievous state of woe, and yet she must stifle her feelings. More than once in the course of breakfast the General coldly asked her if she was unwell, and her mother, guessing her grief was not on account of the brother who had just driven away from the door, and resenting the fact, made one or two amiable comments thereon in her most withering of tones. But at last the dismal meal came to an end, and she was free to wander away and indulge her grief when and where she chose.

Assuredly she had known nothing of this last blow which had fallen upon her unhappy brother—until this morning. She knew of the awful quarrel between him and their father, of course, and she guessed that Olive Ingelow was the subject of dispute—but this last stroke of Fate she had never even dreamt of. Roland was apt to be close about his private affaire, and it was only by the merest chance he had mentioned to her that he intended some day to withdraw from the ill-fated investment, and that, just before the crash. Probably her father knew, but beyond themselves no one in the neighbourhood would have any idea that the rather sensational financial crash could affect her or hers, and as she seldom took up a newspaper the knowledge of it had escaped her.

She threw a wrap around her and strolled out of doors. How desolate the ornamental water looked on this chill, grey, autumn morning! The swans greeted her approach with a resentful croak, and floated ill-humouredly away to a reed-sheltered corner. The boats, drawn up high and dry within their shed, looked forlorn and neglected, and the rustic bench where she and the absent brother had lounged away many a sunny hour of sultry morning or drowsy afternoon, was bestrewn with damp, fallen leaves. All the surroundings combined to strike a cold and desolate chill to poor Nellie's heart. If only that brother were back again. She might have made much more of him, and now it was too late. The result of this dreadful quarrel was a foregone issue. Neither would ever

relent, of that there could be not the smallest doubt. She sank down upon the rustic seat, and, secure in this secluded spot from all intrusion, gave way to her grief.

But it happened that not so far from this spot, though concealed from it by a thick belt of shrubbery, ran a public road. It further happened, that on this particular morning, the figure of a tall pedestrian, a gun under his arm, might have been descried upon this road, clearly bent on reaching the arena of slaughter, wherever it was, at the rate of four and a half miles an hour. He was whistling, too, with all the light-heartedness of a healthy, energetic undergraduate, with whom Black Care has never yet shaken hands. Suddenly this pedestrian stopped short, and stood listening intently. A sound as of low sobbing—there could be no mistake about it.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Eustace to himself, transfixed with amazement. "Now what the deuce can this mean? Here goes, anyhow, for clearing it up!"

He vaulted over the low paling, advanced a step, and then stood irresolute. It occurred to him that he might be—probably was—intruding, and whatever was the matter it could not possibly be any business of his. It was a woman's voice, too, and somehow it struck him as that of a refined and educated one—in fact, a lady. Though not naturally shy, the Oxonian yet hesitated. He was quick to realise that his intrusion might prove unwelcome to the last degree. Again he paused, but now the distressed one, catching sight of him through the rapidly-thinning foliage, started up in alarm. The knot of the difficulty was cut.

"Miss Dorrien, pray pardon my intrusion," he began flurriedly. "The fact is I—I heard—er—I—I'm awfully grieved that anything should have happened to distress you. Do believe that?"

His tones, though stammering, were very feeling. His handsome face was thoroughly earnest and in his eyes was a tender sympathetic light. The first shock of his unexpected appearance over, Nellie experienced a feeling of satisfaction in his presence.

"You are very kind, Mr Ingelow; but really it is nothing," she answered confusedly. "But—No, it is nothing."

"Won't you give me a great pleasure, Miss Dorrien—the possibility of being able to help you, or, if not that, of being able to sympathise?" pleaded Eustace, all his former shyness put to flight. What a sweet girl Nellie Dorrien was! he thought; indeed, it may as well be confessed that he had thought about her a good deal since their meeting at Bankside, and also that the chaff with which his sisters had plied him on the subject, had partaken far more of the nature of the "true word spoken in jest" than he allowed to appear. And

now to find her again, like this! What susceptible heart aged twenty-two could resist such an appeal as beauty in distress, especially when strongly predisposed in favour of said beauty?

And Nellie? She had met the rector's son but once since that festive gathering, and then only for a few minutes in a room full of people. But she had greatly liked him, and her interest in him had not been decreased by the cutting, virulent remarks in which her father was wont to indulge from time to time when reminded of the obnoxious youth's existence. And now, as he suddenly appeared before her in grief, looking so strong and brave and handsome, and withal so gentle and sympathetic, she felt quite soothed by his presence.

"Mr Ingelow, I am in great distress about Roland," she answered, looking up. "I've only just heard of—of that last cruel blow, which happened to him." (A sob.) "He is ruined—he may be starving now—and we don't even know where he is. It is cruel to think of. And no one but myself cares a straw whether he is alive or dead," she added bitterly.

"Don't say that, Miss Dorrien," said Eustace gently, his heart somewhere in the region of his throat. "Indeed you are mistaken. We all liked him so much. In fact, my father went up to London to see if—if—we could be of any use to him, although Venn wrote to say it was quite useless, as Dorrien seemed to have made up his mind to cut himself adrift from everybody—in fact, had disappeared, and that it was impossible to trace him. And it was. But don't be downhearted. We are sure to hear from him soon."

"Your father did this?" said Nellie. "How good he is!"

"He is all that—the dear old 'padre.' I don't mean on this account," explained Eustace. "But he liked your brother very much, as, in fact, we all did."

Listening to, and sympathising with, Nellie's trouble, Eustace blessed the luck which had brought him that way this morning. She looked so pretty and engaging as, the first feeling of shyness over, she talked to him as freely as if she had known him all her life. And time went by so quickly that somehow or other he clean forgot about the tempting day's rabbit-shooting which awaited him at the goal whither his steps had been tending, and where two other ardent sportsmen were heartily anathematising "that lazy beggar, Ingelow, who seemed to think it was all the same, by George! if they didn't begin to put in the ferrets till the afternoon." Forgot everything, except that a sweetly pretty girl, with the most delicious blue eyes and brown wavy hair, was pouring her grief into his sympathising ear, and that he was pledging himself again and again to move heaven and earth to find the object of that grief.

Suddenly a sound of approaching footsteps, Nellie looked up, and turned as white as a sheet.

“Go—go!” she cried. “Quick! It’s papa.”

“Whoever it is it’s too late to go, for he’ll have seen me,” replied Eustace quietly, but fearlessly. “But keep perfectly cool, and don’t show any sign of alarm. It isn’t your father.”

Nor was it. It was, however, a personage who might, though vicariously, prove not much less formidable.

“Good-morning, sir. But it’ll be raining presently, I’m thinking!” said Johnston, the head-gardener, as he walked by the pair. And although his tone was civil, even good-natured, Eustace was not slow to mark a look of exultant malice in the Scot’s cunning features. His turn had come now.

“Oh, Mr Ingelow!” cried Nellie aghast, when the man had gone by. “What if Johnston were to let out to papa, that—that he had—seen you here?”

“But he won’t. Why should he?” said Eustace gaily. “No fear of that, I should think. And what a trespasser I am—here, with a gun.” All the same he was very uneasy in his own mind, remembering the fellow’s parting shot in the Rectory garden.

“I think I had better go in,” said Nellie, who was really frightened. “Good-bye, Mr Ingelow. Thank you very, very much for your kindness to-day. And you will let me know when you hear anything of poor Roland.”

“Indeed, I will,” answered the young man earnestly, taking both her hands in his, and pressing them very tightly. “And—Nellie—I shall not see you again till Christmas. I am going back to Oxford to-morrow. But you will let me see you then in spite of that awful parent of yours. Good-bye—my darling?”

It slipped out. A start. A tell-tale, blushing face—then—a kiss. But the colour faded from the girl’s cheek, which grew white again.

“Hark! Someone is coming. Please go—Eustace—and—good-bye.”

She was really alarmed, and it would be cruel of him to stay a moment longer. But his heart was light within him. She had called him “Eustace,” and had spoken affectionately to him. A hasty, murmured word, and he was gone.

And as Eustace Ingelow regained the high road, it seemed that five years had been added to his life since he leaped that low paling into Cranston Park, barely an hour before. He had gone in there a light-hearted, thoughtless boy—he returned a man, with a new purpose to engross his life.

That evening the rector received a note. He could not repress a start as his eye fell upon the Dorrien crest and legend stamped on the flap of the envelope. Had the wanderer decided to return to them at last! A second glance, however, showed that the letter was not a postal missive, but had been delivered by hand. Breaking it open, this is what he read:

"General Dorrien present his compliments to the Rector of Wandsborough and Mr Eustace Ingelow, and begs to remind the latter gentleman that no portion of Cranston Park is, in any sense, public property, and also to draw his attention to more than one notice-board there placed, which affects the question of trespass.

"General Dorrien takes the further liberty of remarking that gentlemen, having occasion to communicate with young ladies living under the care of their parents, would, in his opinion, be acting more honourably by obtaining lawful sanction prior to such communication, rather than by meeting clandestinely in secluded corners of the said parents' private grounds.

"Cranston Hall.

"Thursday."

A flush of anger came over the rector's face as he read this precious missive, which, though the sender had bare legal right on his side, was clearly intended as a studied insult. Then he dropped it, as if it were something loathsome, and quietly busied himself again with the work which he had in hand. But when the girls had gone to bed he called his son into his study.

"Eustace, turn in here and smoke your pipe. It's warmer than in that belittered den of yours upstairs."

"All right, dad. I'll just run up and put on a 'blazer.'"

"—There," as he returned in the oldest and most comfortable of loose jackets. "Now, dad, we'll be able to have our last smoke for a couple of months or so, in snugness and

quietude," he added, laying a hand affectionately on his father's arm, as he slipped past him, and made for his favourite easy chair.

The rector wheeled back his chair, and glanced with fond, trusting pride at his bright, strong, handsome son.

"Read that, Eustace," he said, with a slight sigh. "And now, my boy, tell me all about it."

The young man's face reddened as he took in the contents of the note, and he let fall one or two expressions highly uncomplimentary to the Squire of Cranston. Then he obeyed his father's request to the very letter.

The rector listened with clouded brow. There seemed to be a kind of fatality lying between his house and that of the Dorriens. First Olive, and now Eustace—both, by the way, his favourite children. He foresaw endless trouble in the circumstance. But trouble must be faced and overcome, not shirked—was his creed. If the boy was really in earnest, why, an early attachment of this kind might not be a bad thing for him; the more refining influences at work over a young man's life the better. He knew nothing of Nellie Dorrien, personally, but he had greatly liked her appearance, and as for the opposition of her family, why, Eustace was a man and must fight his own battles. It was different in Olive's case.

"You are sure you are in earnest about this, Eustace?" he said, when the young fellow had finished his recital. "But you are very young yet, my boy, just at the age for receiving impressions, and also for changing them. What if, later, you were to find out you had been hasty, and had come to think differently?"

Needless to say, the answer was conclusive and decided—vehement even. The rector smiled good-naturedly, as he encouraged his son to talk on this congenial topic to his heart's content, while he listened. It had always been his plan to cultivate his children's confidence to the very utmost, and these evening talks over the social weed between father and son, when the latter was at home, were of almost nightly occurrence. It would have been a very strange thing, indeed, that would have impaired the existing confidence between them. Certainly General Dorrien's ill-conditioned missive was powerless to do so.

"I'm afraid you must send him an apology, before you go, Eustace," said the rector. "You see, strictly speaking, you were trespassing in his grounds."

"Well, yes. I suppose I must. I'll apologise to the old curmudgeon for being in his park, but for nothing else," answered Eustace stoutly. "And that sneaking rascal, Johnston,

he’s at the bottom of the mischief. I could see it in his eye. Good-night, dad. Don’t let this affair worry you at all, whatever you do.”

Chapter Twenty Five.

His Last Friend.

Midwinter in the metropolis!

If you are blessed with a sufficient income, a snug club, a cheerful abode and a good digestion, there is nothing very terrible in the above. But, if your shillings are scanty in number, and each one disbursed with infinite reluctance, if you have been so long in a far country as to be unknown to, or forgotten by, every living soul, if you are condemned to pig it in a miserable slum, because needs must when the devil drives—then, O friend and reader—Heaven help you!

Midwinter in the metropolis!

Streets knee-deep in black, slushy, half-melted snow; a pelting, ceaseless rain falling from the opaque, lowering vapour above, which makes one doubt the existence of Heaven's blue firmament otherwise than in dreams; foot passengers with streaming umbrellas and muffled in vast wraps, jostling each other angrily, as, red-nosed and watery-eyed, they hurry through the rain and mire; then, as the short afternoon fades into night, the yellow light of gas lamps and the glare of shop windows reflects itself slimily on the sloppy pavements, and the breath of the cab and omnibus horses mingles in a steamy cloud with the prevailing dank and fog-laden atmosphere.

On just such a day as this Roland Dorrien sits moodily in his dreary, comfortless room, looking out into the darkling vista of rain and fog. A tiny handful of fire flickers in the grate, hardly enough to make itself felt twelve inches off, and though he is wrapped in a warm, thick overcoat he shivers from time to time. He is looking very altered from when we saw him last, three or four months ago, very pale, and haggard, and hollow-eyed, and a frown is seldom altogether away from his brow; but his clothes are not shabby, nor does his countenance wear the neglected and unkempt aspect of a man who had come down so irretrievably in the world as to be careless of appearances. His dark curling hair is as neat, but his face is no longer clean-shaven, for he has allowed a thickly-growing beard to hide it, in addition to the heavy, drooping moustache. From a vestiary point of view he would seem as prosperous as in the days when he was known to, and envied by, Wandsborough and its neighbourhood as the future Squire of Cranston. But as a set-off against this, he seldom indulges in more than one full meal a day, sometimes not that. Prevention is better than cure, he thinks, and if the pangs of hunger assail him, why, a crust of bread will stave it off for the time being. As a consequence, his system is rapidly falling to zero, and now he lives in a kind of lethargy which is half a waking slumber. He goes out and comes in, taking not the slightest notice of what transpires around him,

and of society or acquaintances he has none. In the intervals between his brooding fits, his pen affords him a solace, and at times he will sit down and by the hour confide his reflections to sympathising paper, strange, weird fancies and reasonings, so startling and bizarre in their wildness, that, but for the strong, logical sequence running through them, they might be taken for the ravings of delirium.

As with food, so with other bodily comforts. Firing costs money, of which he has but the scantiest store, wherefore he sits and shivers. Tobacco he has hardly touched since his ruin, for the same reason, and as for anything alcoholic he has almost forgotten what it was like. There is method in his madness, and against this temptation he has set a resolute face. It may be that he will soon find an unknown and nameless grave, probably he will—indeed, this is a contingency he has quite brought himself to contemplate with equanimity, but never will he sink to the level of a raving, drink-sodden beast. Yet another danger, more imminent still, he somehow overlooks. A little more of this morbid, brooding life in its frightful loneliness, and the man will go mad.

But if he himself overlooks the possibility, others do not. He has changed his lodgings no less than three times in as many months, in reality, obliged to do so by the fears of his respective landladies, who didn't like to "'ave a gentleman in the 'ouse as was that queer—no, not if you was to give them the whole Bank of England. Why, they might be murdered any night in their beds." So one after another politely hinted that they would rather have his room than his occupation, and to each and all poor Roy afforded a ready pretext.

And it is chiefly, in fact wholly, with Roy that his thoughts are concerned, as we once more look in upon him this dark, desolate afternoon. For it has come to this, that any moment, now, he may be called upon to part with this faithful friend, who has been with him in his prosperity, as through no inconsiderable portion of his adversity. Roy is sold.

Yes, sold, and his purchaser is the man who it will be remembered had shown great anxiety to possess him on the occasion of meeting with his master in Kensington Gardens.

And how comes it that his master has brought himself to part with him? The answer is simple. Necessity has no law. Hardly able to keep himself, how shall he be able to keep Roy. The ruined exile foresees the time when he must yield up the struggle which is not worth maintaining: what then is to become of this attached and more than human companion in adversity? And as, in imagination, he sees him the property of some brute or cad, beaten and starved, and spending his days chained to a miserable kennel, he makes up his mind to accept Mr Marsland's offer. At any rate, Roy will be well-treated by his new master, possibly so well that he may in time come to forget his old one. Never

mind, he must go; but it is with a very heavy heart that Roland scribbles off a few lines to the address the other man had given him. He purposely put the price low, he said, as that was only a secondary consideration, the dog's future comfort and well-being was the chief thing. If the other was disposed to agree, the sooner he sent for Roy the better.

A reply soon came. Mr Marsland was out of town, or would have called himself; as it was he would send for Roy at a stipulated time. He was sorry so little had been asked, as he himself would have been glad to obtain the dog at a far larger figure. In reality, of course, he understood the state of affairs, but being a good-hearted fellow and a gentleman he divined that the other would rather be left alone, and forebore to press the point.

And so we find the exile sitting here to-day, momentarily expecting the ring at the bell which shall summon him to deliver up his faithful companion. The afternoon wears on. It will soon be dark, and now he hopes that something may occur to delay the sad hour, at any rate until the next morning. Poor Roy sits unsuspectingly, with his head on his master's knee, his soft brown eyes watching his master's moody countenance with a wistful gaze.

Rat-tat, tat-tat-tat! goes the door knocker. Roy, who has become used to persons passing in and out, takes no notice beyond a slight cocking of his ears. A moment more, and the slipshod maid of all work appears, ushering in—

"A gentleman, sir."

With a sigh Roland looks up at the "gentleman," who might be a stableman or an under-keeper, but is a decent-looking, civil fellow enough.

"From Mr Marsland?"

"Yes, sir. Can I take the dog now, sir?"

"Yes."

He goes into the other room, and returns with a chain and collar. Roy, becoming alive to the import of the situation, backs under the table and whines piteously.

"Come here, Roy—come here, sir," says his master, in a voice that he vainly strives to render firm. "You dear old fellow, you must go, there's no help for it. Come."

The dog obeys, and stands crestfallen, with a world of sad reproach in his soft, pleading eyes, as his master fastens the collar round his white, silky ruff, and kisses him in the middle of his smooth, glossy forehead.

“Now, good-bye, old dog, and don’t forget your master too soon,” and he gives the chain to the man, who stands waiting.

“Thankee, sir—good-evenin’, sir. He’ll go quiet enough directly, bless him.”

They had reached the front door, Roy hanging back and tugging vigorously at his chain. Roland stands looking after them down the street, in order to see the last of his faithful friend. Suddenly Roy ceases his struggles and trots along quietly for a few steps. Then he stops short. A couple of sudden jerks and he is free. He has slipped his head through the collar and comes running back to his master, and presses against him, looking up into his face with such a piteous whine.

“Good God! There’s nothing like piling on the agony,” mutters Roland between his set teeth, as he readjusts the collar, drawing the strap tighter, the dog licking his face all the while. “Here—take him away—and—stop, there’s half a crown for yourself. And mind you take devilish good care of the dog if you have anything to do with him.”

Now, the man was an honest countryman, and, unspoiled by any taint of socialism, he still entertained a hearty respect for his betters, and “a gentleman down on his luck” was in his eyes an object for reverential sympathy. He had taken in the bare, mean vulgarity of the room in which its occupant looked so sadly out of place—and his natural shrewdness told him that the other would not have parted with the dog save under the direst stress of circumstances. So he stammered, and looked nervous, as he tried to refuse the proffered gratuity in a suitable manner.

“Thankee kindly, sir. But master, he don’t let none of us take anything from gentlemen, except when they’s down for the shootin’,” answers the man, hitting upon the only excuse he could invent. “But it’s thank ye kindly, sir, all the same, and I’ll take downright good care of the dog. Good-evenin’, sir.”

The now sole occupant of the room feels desolate and lonely indeed. There is Roy’s pan of water, and the few crumbs remaining from the dog-biscuits Roy had for his dinner. How silent and intolerable the room feels without him. His last friend!

And now a resolve takes root in his mind, a wild and desperate resolve, and it was partly with this idea that he brought himself to accept a price for Roy. Even now he had better dismiss it, and accept the situation, and hasten on towards oblivion. It is not too late.

Nebuchadnezzar, we read, was transformed into a beast of the field. There comes a time, or times, in most men's lives when they undergo a similar metamorphosis. Such a time had come to Roland Dorrien. He was transformed into—an ass.

Nature, however, was willing to do her best for him, by upsetting, if possible, his wise resolve above referred to. When he tried to rise the following morning, his head was throbbing with an agonising pain, and his consciousness only permitted him to realise one fact—that to move from his bed that day would be a stark impossibility.